

SEALS
ON
WHEELS

THE

Old
RIDE

ANYA SUMMERS

A STEAMY ENEMIES TO LOVERS MOTORCYCLE ROMANCE

SEALS ON WHEELS

THE *Cold*
RIDE

ANYA SUMMERS

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The Cold Ride

Anya Summers

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Thank You!

Also By Anya Summers

About Anya

ABOUT THE BOOK

Duty. Honor. Sacrifice.

My faith in humanity is all but gone. Whatever goodness I had in me was eliminated long ago.

All I know is war.

Then I meet her. My best friend's ex-wife. She lights up my darkness.

I crave her sunshine like an addict. I want to bask in it.

But she's forbidden. I can't touch her.

I can't love her – doing so would only drag her into hell with me, and betray everything I hold sacred.

I might have lost my humanity, but I refuse to sacrifice my honor...

Until a single misstep damns us both.

And now I can't let her go.

I'll fight anyone to claim her and keep her – even her.

Dive headlong into this grumpy/sunshine forbidden romance, where a Navy SEAL falls for his best friend's ex-wife.

War and death were my constant companions.

Funerals were a way of life in my career. But saying goodbye to someone you cared about was never easy. And this one was different. Regret swamped me. I should have told him. Confessed my sins and begged for absolution.

But it was too late.

As I parked my red truck on the street in front of Wyatt's house, a sedate blue ranch with ivory shutters the man kept in pristine condition, the memory of the moment Wyatt called me with the news of Evan's suicide filled me.

After I'd hung up, I stared at my phone while my brain and body were frozen. Before I answered his call, Evan had been alive and serving in Afghanistan. All it had taken were a few words from Wyatt to dispel that notion. Rage and grief mingled in a toxic concoction, and I hurled my phone at the wall, not caring that it had broken apart and landed in pieces on the carpet.

Inhaling a deep breath, I brought myself back to the present. In the days since, I tried to wrap my head around Evan's passing, but it felt surreal. He and I hadn't always gotten along, but that didn't mean I didn't love the ornery son

of a bitch. How the fuck could he do that? Why? It didn't make sense to me.

I grabbed my bag with a change of clothes. We were meeting at Wyatt's because he had informed us all at the funeral that Evan had sent a package. And we were going to eat, drink, and open the fucker up. I was one of the last ones here. Lucas's big chrome Harley was parked in the drive beside Aiden's black Mustang. And there was no missing Wyatt's ancient tan Ford. Which meant the only one missing from our impromptu gathering was Ben. But I knew he'd be along shortly.

I headed inside without knocking. For something like this, Wyatt left the front door open. It's not like anyone would mess with us. We were Navy SEALs and could take out any home invader with ease. And since we buried one of our own today, none of us were in the mood to be fucked with. I heard them out in the backyard but took my time and changed in one of the spare bedrooms, swapping my dress blues for jeans and a tee. We'd be spending the night since all of us would likely be passed out drunk before nightfall.

The moment I stepped onto the back patio, I was hit with the scent of grilling meat. My stomach grumbled. At least Wyatt had the foresight to make sure we had food for the wake.

"James." Aiden toasted me over with his beer.

I grabbed a cold one from the cooler and took a seat in one of the patio chairs. Aiden and I clinked our cans together. "It's been a fuck all of a day, hasn't it?"

"It has been that. Wyatt, when are we going to eat, man? I'm starving." Lucas asked, rubbing his stomach. But then,

Lucas was always hungry. You wouldn't know that by looking at him, but the dude ate like a fucking horse.

The cedar picnic table was already set for dinner. But the box on top of the table garnered my attention. It was the package from Evan. It had to be. And the guilt I'd lived with, the secret I'd kept for a decade, that I'd hoped one day to beg his forgiveness for, would always be a lead weight around my neck.

There would be no absolution for me. I would take my sins to the grave. At that thought, I chugged half my beer. There was no way I'd get through today sober.

"Look who finally decided to make an appearance." Aiden toasted Ben as he joined us on the patio. Jesus, Aiden was already halfway drunk. Just how many had he pounded already? His white boy skin was as red as his hair.

"Yeah, had to stop and grab some more so we could watch you puke your guts out later." Ben teased with a laugh.

"Just because Aiden can't hold his liquor—"

"Hey!" Aiden interrupted me with a scowl and gave me the finger.

I glanced at Aiden with an eye roll and a sigh. "Dude, you fucking know you can't. You've never been able to in all the damn years we've known you."

"You never know. One of these days, I will." Aiden drank his beer and glowered. I would worry about him with as much as he was drinking, but he only drank when we were together like this, so I wasn't worried.

"And then we'll be at *your* fucking wake," Wyatt spoke with his back to us. His black hair was buzzed short, and he had this stoicism that rippled off him. He didn't move from his

position at the barbecue pit to address us or even look our way. But that was Wyatt; he was a man of few words.

“Like what you’ve done back here, Wyatt.” Ben added cases of beer to the cooler and grabbed one before snagging a seat on one of the lounge chairs.

“Appreciate it,” Wyatt said, flipping the steaks. I was close enough to hear the greasy fat sizzle.

“So, what’s this package Evan sent us? And did he send it before?” I asked with a grimace. It felt fucking morbid. Opening a box he sent us now that he was gone.

“Of course he sent it before he put a bullet in his brain. Do you really think he sent it afterward?” Lucas shook his head with an eye roll.

“I know. That’s not what I meant. Shit.” I swallowed a swig of beer and studied the can. That wasn’t what I meant at all. I meant before he made the decision to do it. Because I wondered how long he had been thinking about it.

Wyatt finally said, “We’ll open it after we eat and find out together what the dude was thinking. It’s the only proper way to do it, I’m thinking.”

“And when’s that going to be? I’m starved,” Lucas complained.

“The steaks are almost done. If one of you Nancys wants to grab the potatoes out of the oven, we can eat in five.” Wyatt informed us.

“I’ll get them.” Ben rose and headed inside. I knew it was harder for Ben. He and Evan had been as thick as thieves.

Ben wasn’t inside long and returned carrying the pan with the potatoes to the picnic table.

Wyatt brought the pan of steaks over to the table. “Get ’em while they’re hot, boys.”

It wasn’t long before the five of us were chowing down on steak and potatoes. Fuck, it hit the spot too. Ribald stories flew around the table, courtesy of Aiden and me. But that box sat dead center of the table like a beacon, a constant reminder of Evan.

“You’re staring,” Wyatt said to Ben with a nod toward the box before taking another bite of steak.

“I want to get on with it. We’ve waited. I want to know why—just fucking open the damn thing already,” Ben snapped. His emotions were raw.

Conversation halted around the table. All heads turned in his direction.

Wyatt studied Ben, then glanced at the rest of us. We were the last of our original unit still serving. All the others either died or retired or had been reassigned and were scattered across the country and the globe.

Wyatt shook his head at Ben’s outburst. “Still no patience.”

“Still controlling everything. Just open the fucker,” Ben demanded. The guy looked ready to snatch the package off the table and rip into it with his bare hands.

With an agitated sigh, Wyatt moved his empty plate and put the box in front of him. Pulling out his pocket knife, he cut open the container. From inside the box, he withdrew a thick stack of letters in sealed envelopes. On top was something he started to silently read.

“No. Do not read it quietly,” Ben blurted with a snarl.

Wyatt handed the stack over to him. “You read it out loud, then.”

Ben snatched it from his hands. He became choked up for a moment, then cleared his throat and read.

Hey motherfuckers,

We’ve had quite a ride. And I wish I could stay, but after everything that happened, I just can’t. My story, my life, was always going to end in flames. I’ve seen too much. I’ve done too much. And I can’t stay.

I know it’s going to piss you fuckers off. But get over it. It’s my life and my death we’re talking about.

I can’t go on with the burden we carry. By the time you read this, I’ll be worm food. And I’m good with it. I’ve made my peace with it.

But I’m going to ask you all to do one final thing for me. It’s my last command. I’ve included five letters. The names and addresses are on the envelopes. Hand deliver them for me and make sure they each read them.

I don’t know that they will be happy to see you. Most likely, they won’t want to take the letter or read it. But make them. For me. I need them to know my failures were never about them and make amends from beyond the grave.

As for you fuckers, take care of each other. I consider you all my family. I know this is gonna piss you off and hurt you. And for that, I’m sorry. But we each have to go on our own way.

*Serving with you was the best thing I ever did.
Know that I will be waiting on the other side to greet
you.*

See you in hell, boys.

Your friend always,

Evan Ryder

Hooyah, bitches!

Ben glanced at us. We all had tears in our eyes as he said, “Let’s look at where he wanted us to go. Anyone who doesn’t want to go—”

“Like we’re backing out of this mission. We’ve all got the leave time. Just tell us where we’re fucking going,” Lucas stated. I nodded in agreement with him. No way I was backing out of this. It was the only way I could atone.

Wyatt handed over the envelopes, and Ben flipped through them first with a scowl.

“So we each take one and deliver it.” Ben passed them around the table.

When they reached me, I flipped through them, reading the names.

Moira Kelly.

Rory Ryder.

Beth Ryder.

Paige Ryder.

And Nora Ryder.

Fuck me. He wanted us to deliver a letter to Rory. I would literally rather go anywhere else in the world. I’d rather go

back to Afghanistan and be surrounded by the Taliban than stop by her place and give her Evan's letter, not after everything. But it's what Evan wanted, so I would do it.

"Did you not hear what he asked of us?" Aiden asked Ben like he was two beers shy of a six-pack.

"Yeah, to hand deliver them," Ben replied with a shrug.

"No, fool. He wanted us to go together, as a crew, one last time," Lucas stated and took a swig of beer.

"I've only got a month's leave before I start my new assignment." Ben studied us.

Aiden glanced up from the stack of letters he'd been thumbing through. "We've all got the time to take. I say we do it. I'm ready."

I didn't want to see Rory. But if that's what Evan had asked of us, I couldn't say no. I shrugged and rose from the table to retrieve another beer from one of the coolers. "We can do it in chunks, if necessary, between deployments and assignments."

Wyatt scowled fiercely. "Speak for yourself, numb nuts. My life is my own in three months' time. But I'm up for some government-paid leave."

"Okay, so the five of us are going to do this?" Ben asked, glancing around the table.

"Yeah. We travel light. Take the bikes. And hand deliver each one. We can leave tomorrow," Lucas said, all fired up, his enthusiasm palpable.

A final cross-country trip with these guys before we all headed off to our new assignments wasn't a bad idea. Hell, it could be fun, with one minor exception along the way.

Wyatt eyed us with suspicion. “Y’all sure you want to do this? I can take them once I’m retired in three months. I don’t mind.”

“No offense, but shut the fuck up. We’re all going,” Ben insisted, his resolve as clear as day, and held up his beer in a salute. “For Evan.”

Aiden, Lucas, and I lifted our beers in agreement. “For Evan.”

And we all glanced at Wyatt, who sighed in resignation and said, “Fuck it. For Evan,” and toasted us with his beer.

We were doing it. One final ride—for Evan.

Bangor, Maine

One of these days I'd accomplish everything on my to-do list and have time to relax.

Only it's not today. And tomorrow didn't look good either. There wasn't a time in my memory when I wasn't overworked and exhausted. Worn out didn't begin to describe how drained I'd become. I could sit on my couch and do nothing but stare at the wall for a month solid. Then at the end of that month, my brain would say something along the lines of, *Oh man, was it good for you too?*

Owning a small inn near the waterfront came with its challenges, some more difficult than others. But the hundred-year-old Victorian had seen better days. The Roseberry Garden Inn was currently closed due to repairs.

Three weeks ago, a snowstorm roared into the area with ferocious winds and multiple feet of snow. It was par for the course here in Maine. But the inn lost power and the generator shorted out. With below-zero temperatures, the ancient pipes had burst and flooded the basement and parts of the first floor.

While the destruction hadn't been catastrophic to the point the inn had to be demolished, the basement and main floor had

sustained significant damage. At least the foundation hadn't been harmed, which was some of the only good news I received during the insurance inspection.

This place would continue to be closed to guests until the remodel was complete. But with no money coming in without paying guests, I was waffling on whether I could continue holding onto the property or if I should sell it.

Everything would be all right. I would finish the remodel in time for the spring and summer tourist season to really kick in. This was just a minor setback.

I loved this old Victorian and would fight to keep her. This grand old lady was three stories with twenty guest rooms, a parlor, a dining room, and a library. The lobby of the inn was in the foyer. Currently all the furniture on the first floor that hadn't been damaged in the flood was covered with heavy drop cloths.

At least it was giving me an excuse to transform the kitchen since it had sustained massive damage. And I would finally have the multiple industrial-grade ovens and stove tops I'd always wanted.

Besides, at least the damage hadn't reached my living quarters. My home on the property had originally been a three-bedroom guest house with its own set of plumbing and electrical circuits that weren't connected to the inn. The inn's previous owners had linked the two buildings with an enclosed hallway. Our distance from the destruction had kept my daughter and me dry and warm as we rode out the storm and subzero temperatures.

At least it had happened in late winter before the onslaught of tourists this summer and not during the height of tourist

season. That would put the nail in the coffin of owning this place.

My anxiety over the sheer volume of repairs and my ability to do the majority of the work myself had reached epic heights. The insurance company, if I could call them that because they were more like thieves whose policies were barely worth the paper they were printed on, had lowballed me on what they were willing to pay. So I had to handle the bulk of the cosmetic repairs myself and only hire experts for things like the plumbing, electric, and HVAC. It would provide me with enough to purchase the new stoves and replace all the furniture and supplies that had been damaged. My biggest concern was the time it would take to get the inn back up and running.

At least the floors above hadn't sustained any damage, or I would have been forced to sell this place.

The previous owners of the inn had given me my start in hospitality management. But it had been my dream to own my own place. And this was where I'd landed during my divorce shortly after I discovered I was pregnant. God, I'd been so terrified, just out of college with a baby on the way and a broken heart. But the former owners, Henry and Sue Mercer, had taken me in like a daughter. They'd given me and Amelia a place to live, a place to work, and been more my family than my own father had been.

I missed them so much. When they'd taken ill, they'd sold this place to me fairly cheap since they didn't have any heirs. But I still had a rather hefty mortgage payment each month.

And it's why I had to repair the inn. It's why I didn't want to let it go. Because Henry and Sue Mercer had been the parents I'd always needed when I was growing up. They'd

treated Amelia as if she was their granddaughter in truth. And I couldn't sell this place to strangers who wouldn't care about it, who wouldn't love it the way I did.

The basement and first floors needed a metric ton of work.

Phase one of the inn remodel included removal of all damaged furniture and the demolition of the damaged walls and floors. I had to tear everything down and rebuild the two floors from the ground up. Out in the small parking lot in front of the inn was one of those huge trailer trash bins.

While the best thing to do would be to hire a company to handle the remodel, I couldn't afford it. And I refused to dip into my savings. Amelia's college fund and future wouldn't be sacrificed for the inn.

I'd learned long ago that sometimes one had to let go of some dreams to make way for others. And if my dream of owning and operating an inn had to be set aside to ensure Amelia's future, then that was what I would do.

As soon as my daughter boarded the bus for school this morning, I donned a mask and goggles, covered my hair with a bandana, and spent the better part of my day swinging the sledgehammer at the wall. On some levels, it was deeply satisfying to watch the wall crumble to the floor. On another, it was terrifying. What if I didn't get the inn fixed in time for the summer tourist season? I'd be sunk and I knew it. This place, my dream, would vanish overnight.

Before I allowed my emotions to get the better of me, I repeated the mantra—I could do this. It might suck while I was in the middle of doing it, but I would get it done.

But I only had a little time left to work on it today before Amelia got off the bus. Once my daughter was home for the

day, that's what my life revolved around. When the inn was full of guests, I hired part-time summer help. College students were some of the best for working the registration desk and cleaning rooms after guests checked out. As I swung the hammer, the chime alerting me that the front door had been opened sounded. What the?

Was Amelia home early? I didn't hear the bus. I laid the hammer on the floor.

On my trek through the debris to the lobby, I removed my mask and goggles. Four rather built men stood in the lobby with their backs turned, surveying the construction zone. From the back, they looked like a biker gang with their black leather jackets, jeans, and shitkicker boots.

I slid my hand into my pocket and gripped my phone. Please don't be vandals or guys up to no good. They had this aura of danger surrounding them, and it gave me pause.

"Hi. I'm sorry, but the inn is closed right now for repairs. I can direct you—"

My tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth when they turned my way.

Oh my god!

Recognition hit me harder than the sledgehammer I'd swung all day. I knew them. All of them. One much more than the others. All the air left my lungs in a rush, and it felt as if a fist had punched clear through my chest.

What was *he* doing here?

Sucking air back into my lungs before I passed out, my gaze drank in every detail. The cut of his leather jacket. The way his jeans fit his powerful legs. Time had hardened the man I'd known. He was still devastatingly handsome with his

mop of brown hair, the ends bleached by the sun. He had a full beard now, and it only made him appear more rugged and untamed. From the way his chest and shoulders stretched the leather jacket, he had gained more muscle—and he'd been a powerhouse a decade ago.

But then our eyes met. The power in his rich chocolate eyes rattled me to my core. After all this time, he still hated me. My stomach flip-flopped like a fish tossed onto dry land. Because that sentiment would only deepen before he left.

“Hello, Rory.”

That voice. His deep, growly baritone shivered through me. Memories of the sand and surf and an unexpected soul connection I'd never forgotten slammed into me like a rogue wave. The ground quaked beneath me, but then I realized it was just me, trembling at his reappearance in my life.

Oh god, what was I going to do?

My mistakes finally caught up with me. Hello, it was karma calling, and that bitch was here to collect. But in all the ways I'd imagined it playing out, I never wanted it to happen this way. They had to leave. Now. Before it wrecked everything.

I swallowed past the lump of panic in my throat.

“James. It's been a long time.” And he looked even better than I remember, even with his stony expression. But there wasn't an ounce of warmth there, not that I would have expected it from him.

But it was his eyes, the ones I'd dreamed about in the years since, that called me ten times a fool.

Drawing myself up and straightening my spine, I pasted a smile on my face. Because if I didn't, I would cry over what

we lost. We found something that night long ago. And in true me fashion, I messed it up. But I'd never gotten over him, not that it mattered now. But I prayed I could get them out of here soon.

Because if I didn't ... it didn't bear thinking about.

The three men behind him were all smiles as I rounded the counter. Lucas, Aiden, and Wyatt were much the same as I remembered them, if a bit older and rougher around the edges. But then, they were Navy SEALs, and it came with the territory.

"Hey, boys!" I'd always liked Evan's friends.

Wyatt reached me first. The guy was stoic as ever, and there were fine lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. I even spied a sprinkling of silver in his inky hair. And he enveloped me in a bear hug. "It's good to see you, Rory. It's been a while."

"You too." I hugged him back, feeling the years slip away as joy replaced my fear.

But then Lucas shoved him out of the way with a Cheshire grin, his hazel eyes dancing with mirth. "My turn. Rory!"

Lucas lifted me up as he hugged me until I laughed with him.

Aiden, with his shock of red hair, followed him with a tight hug and a, "Missed you, Rory."

They all greeted me enthusiastically. Everyone but James. He just stared with cold, hard eyes that were sharper than any blade and ready to cut me down. But I was already bleeding internally at his sudden reappearance. Being in the same space, breathing the same air as James, was like standing next to a downed electrical wire.

“What are you all doing here?” I tried keeping my panic under wraps. But it was like asking the sun not to shine. Amelia would be home far too soon. I couldn’t let it happen this way. It would make the destruction in the inn look paltry by comparison.

But it was Wyatt who answered my question, tearing my attention away from James. “We have something for you from Evan.”

“Oh.” I pressed a hand against my chest at the mention of my ex-husband. I’d heard of his passing and couldn’t believe he was gone. We might not have been forever and had our differences, but I always wanted the best for him.

“I wanted to be at his funeral, but this happened,” I gestured at the holy walls.

“What happened here?” Lucas asked, nodding at the walls I’d already torn down.

“We had a wallop of a storm. It knocked out the power. And it took out the generator for the inn. Then the below zero temps made the pipes burst. Water flooded this floor and the basement.”

“And why don’t you have someone helping you fix it?” Aiden asked.

“Because the insurance people are crooks,” I waved away the rest of what I was going to say. “But enough about me. That’s why you’re here? To deliver something from Evan. And you couldn’t mail it?”

I ignored James the best I could. But that would be like asking me to ignore a shark swimming by me in the ocean. His presence dwarfed the others and made me sweat. It also made

me very aware that I was in jean overalls, grimy and covered in dust.

“No. We couldn’t.” James interjected emphatically with a stern scowl.

The other three glanced at him because of the vehemence behind his words. They didn’t know our history, or they would likely feel the same. I didn’t know why James hadn’t told them. But then, he’d made it clear what he thought of me.

“What James meant to say is Evan requested we bring it to you personally. I know the timing blows since it looks like you’ve got your hands full,” Lucas stated, jerking his chin toward the walls.

“You wouldn’t know of a place nearby that we could stay for the night?” Wyatt asked, scratching his head.

I winced, knowing I shouldn’t, but I was going to do it anyway. Consequences be damned. It was a conversation that was long overdue. Maybe it would clear up my karma. “Well, technically, the inn isn’t open for business. However, the guest rooms upstairs weren’t damaged in the flood. I could put you up for the night.” Which was proof that James’s presence was harming my brain function.

Why would I offer them a place to stay? I didn’t owe them anything.

Except they were Evan’s friends. And once upon a time they’d been mine too. I might not have been able to attend his funeral, but I could put his friends up for the night.

Relief flashed across Wyatt’s face. “We’d appreciate it. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“None at all. Let me just grab your keys and you can head on up.” Once they were up in their rooms, then I could try and

figure out how I was going to handle the rest.

Lifting the drop cloth covering the registration desk, I selected four rooms on the second floor and grabbed keys off their designated hooks. “Your rooms are up on the second floor if you want to get your things. I—”

The loud rattle of the bus engine roared in front of the inn. Any chance for calm explanations and introductions flew right out the window.

Shit.

What was I going to do?

But the decision was taken from my hands when the front door flew open. My heart lodged in my throat. Amelia happily strolled inside in her purple coat and pale blue backpack.

“Hey, Mom.” She bounded my way, glancing at the guys like their appearance was no big deal, as if we had a bunch of Navy SEALs visiting every day.

“Hi, baby.” I hugged her tight, knowing her life would never be the same. Neither would mine.

“I didn’t know we have guests again.” She looked at the four guys with my arm around her shoulders.

My gaze landed on James. The poor man looked shell-shocked. But then, he had every reason to.

And I wanted to reverse time. Slink away in the dead of night. Anything to keep this moment from happening. Smiling at Amelia, I said, “These are some of my old friends who are going to stay at the inn tonight. Why don’t you go on back and grab yourself a snack while I finish getting them settled in their rooms?”

“Okay.” Amelia gave the guys a smile before she bounded down the hallway toward our quarters.

Steeling myself once she was out of earshot, I finally glanced at them.

And James blurted out, “She looks like my mother.”

*H*oly fuck! I had a kid.

There was no doubt in my mind she was mine. My head spun at the implications. It didn't seem possible. Had I died on the battlefield and entered some twisted hell dimension?

She'd always been the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen with her strawberry blonde hair that was currently covered by a blue bandana. If anything, she was even more beautiful than I remember, even dressed in dirty overalls and covered in a fine dust. There was a smudge of dirt across her cheek, and it only made her pale, luminous green eyes appear even larger.

Rory's hands shook. The earth trembled beneath my feet. Or maybe it was just me because my entire world had been rocked on its end. I stared down the hall where she disappeared. The girl with my mother's eyes, her brunette hair a shade or so darker than mine, and frankly, the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen.

My daughter.

Jesus Christ, I had a daughter I hadn't even known existed. Out of all the things I expected to find when we waltzed inside the quaint Roseberry Garden Inn, it wasn't my child. As the miles slipped away after leaving Moira Kelly's home in South

Carolina, I braced myself for the reunion I never wanted to have, unable to shake the memories of that night.

My mind churned at the implications. A noxious rage rose within me. How could she have kept my daughter's existence from me?

I flexed my hands. The woman deserved an epic fucking spanking.

“If you guys will give me a minute. I need to get Amelia situated. Then I'll show you to your rooms.” Rory headed off down the hall before I could find my voice and ask her, what the fuck?

Amelia. I rolled her name around my head. Amelia with the braids spilling over her tiny shoulders and a dash of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Amelia with the sweet smile and bright purple coat.

My daughter's name was Amelia.

And I was instantly, irrevocably in love with her. I wanted to know everything about her. Starting with her birthday and ending with a why the fuck her mother never told me about her.

Goddammit, she was so fucking gorgeous.

Emotions slammed into me fast and furious. Would I be a good dad? All I knew was war and death. Would she want me in her life? Was there another man she called Dad? And while I'd considered having kids at some point, I'd never found a woman I wanted to have a child with, that I wanted to be tied to for the rest of my life.

Except I had found her a decade ago, but fate intervened and drove us apart.

My fury knew no bounds. I wanted to thrash Rory for keeping my child a secret. How dare she do this? From this point forward, she'd be sharing custody. I didn't care if I had to take her to court and demand a paternity test.

Because Amelia was my daughter. She looked like the spitting image of my mother at that age. I knew because I had a stack of photos I carried with me in my knapsack when I was deployed and there was one of my mom when she was about Amelia's age.

"We'll be here," Wyatt replied with a nod, assuming command because it was what he did. Corral us into order when we couldn't or were unwilling to do it ourselves.

Rory gave us a tight smile and followed our daughter down the hall. I wanted to race after her and demand answers. I wanted to follow her and see if I had imagined it all.

The moment we were alone. My buddies lost their minds and fielded me questions left and right.

"When the fuck did you sleep with Evan's wife?" Lucas asked with a scowl. "And why the fuck did we not know about it? How did you two not come to blows over this while we were deployed?"

Because Evan didn't know about Rory and me. No one had except the two of us. That was why we never fought over it. A tidal wave of grief and guilt slammed into me. Not only had I slept with Evan's wife, I knocked her up in the process.

"You're a daddy, dude." Aiden smirked with a shake of his head and a dark chuckle. The guy was a sadistic motherfucker and always found humor in the unlikeliest of places. There was this one time in New Orleans when we accidentally wound up at a mass in the St. Louis Cathedral with the

Archbishop of New Orleans presiding. Fucker had laughed so hard, I had to drag his ass out of the church.

But then I glanced at Wyatt. His stoicism was still on display to the untrained observer. But I knew him and all his moods after serving with him this past decade. He was pissed at me because I broke the unspoken code of honor between us and had betrayed Evan. He glared like he wouldn't mind going ten rounds with me. "She's a vivacious little girl. And you're lucky, even if you don't realize it."

I caught the hint of jealousy. Out of all of us, Wyatt was the most ready to settle down to life outside the military. And I didn't fault him for it. His twenty was up in a few short months.

"I know. She's beautiful, isn't she?" I tried dodging their comments without an explanation. I'd discuss it with them later. But for now, my entire focus had shifted in a heartbeat. When I walked into this inn with dread churning in my belly at the prospect of seeing Rory again, I never expected my entire world was about to be thoroughly upended.

"Are you going to tell us when you fucked Evan's wife?" Lucas huffed with a stern glare.

Dude was like a dog with a fucking bone. All eyes were on me, waiting for me to admit when I betrayed Evan. When I'd spat on every vow of loyalty we swore as a unit and as SEALs.

I couldn't outrun the truth any longer. Not when she had waltzed in and changed everything.

"Rory and I hooked up at that beach party ten years ago. The one right after we returned from deployment. It was my first deployment with our unit after my transfer. I didn't know she was his wife. That came later. He'd said her name was

Lorelei in passing, not Rory. I didn't connect the two at the time. And that night she wasn't wearing her ring."

And I'd fallen for her. It was the most intimate, honest night of my life. And when I thought of Rory, of the sadness I'd first spied in her and how it had echoed inside of me. I had believed to my fucking core that I'd met the woman for me. One look at her and I'd been a fucking goner. And the moment we kissed, well, it just didn't bear remembering. Because it was proof of how much of a fool I'd been, believing in her and her lies.

But I mentioned none of that because it would make me sound pathetic.

She'd played me. Made me believe she was a free agent. Only to rip that notion to shreds once the ardor had cooled.

"Damn. The blows, dude. I'm sorry. Did Evan know?" Lucas asked with a pained expression.

The sympathy in their eyes was enough to make me crumble. I didn't want their fucking pity.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I glanced down at the floor, avoiding their pity and my remorse. "I never told him. It was one night. And then when I found out and discovered she was his wife, I wanted to say something to him. I wanted to confess, but then they got divorced shortly afterward, and I didn't see the point."

"And she didn't contact you about the kid?" Aiden asked.

I shook my head, and my hands flexed in my pockets, aching for an outlet for the rage blaring inside me. "No. I had no idea until ten minutes ago that she existed."

"I understand you're angry," Wyatt gripped my shoulder, attempting to steady me.

I shrugged him off and jerked away. “You don’t know the first thing about what I’m feeling right now. Unless you discover that a woman you hooked up with one night had your kid and kept it from you, then you’ll get it. But until that time, you don’t understand a fucking thing.”

“Your fury is warranted. All I’m asking is you let us deal with why we’re here in the first place before you turn this into a battleground.” Wyatt’s calm demeanor enraged me further. It took everything in me not to take it out on him.

“Noted,” I seethed, inhaling a steady breath. But I couldn’t let something this massive go as if it were no big deal. There was a reckoning coming the moment that letter was delivered.

Because I wouldn’t let Rory off the hook for this. She kept Amelia’s existence from me this past decade.

And I needed to know why.

The moment I reached our place, I leaned against the door and attempted to collect myself. I could barely wrap my mind around the disaster of epic proportions that had blown into my life. Of all the confrontations I'd anticipated arising today, James's sudden reappearance in my life and being forced to confront Amelia's father hadn't made it onto the list.

I knew this day would come—eventually—but I figured I had more time. And honestly, there were times I selfishly thought we could avoid it entirely.

I had ninety-nine problems before they waltzed through my door. And now I had so many I didn't know where to begin to deal with this. Nor had I a clue how to handle this one, because it was a doozy. My heart pounded in my chest. I was freaking out. The secret I'd kept all these years had been discovered.

I'd hidden my pregnancy from James. It had been the dumbest decision of my life. I knew that. Because it had been stupid and selfish of me to hide it from him. But I'd been young, scared, heartbroken, and hadn't known how to handle telling him the truth on top of dealing with my divorce.

Because I'd fallen for James the night we met. And I hadn't known how to deal with any of it. Not my divorce. Not

my feelings for one of my husband's best friends. Not the night we'd spent together. And certainly not my unexpected pregnancy. I'd known from the moment I realized I was late and missed a period whose child I carried. I'd been lost and alone, with no one to confide in or ask their opinion on the matter.

All I'd known from the moment I stared at the pregnancy test with the double pink lines telling me I was pregnant was that I loved them already, even though I was terrified. And that I would do whatever was necessary to take care of them.

Inhaling a deep, steady breath in an attempt to shield Amelia from my rioting emotions, I shoved away from the door, put the room keys in my front pocket, and found my girl at the kitchen table munching on yogurt and goldfish crackers. She'd already hung up her purple coat and backpack on the hooks in our entryway foyer.

Our home was a simple shotgun design. The foyer opened into the living room and dining room. Beyond that was the kitchen and a hallway leading to three bedrooms. In the basement was a family room, laundry room, and storage. It wasn't a lot of room, but I loved it because it was home.

Love for her swamped me. It never failed to amaze me that I could love someone this much, but I did. She was kind, intelligent, and had a curiosity about the world with this exuberance for life that awed me on a daily basis.

I leaned down and kissed the top of her head, inhaling her scent of coconuts and sweat. "How was school today?"

"It was crazy. Billy threw up in gym class. It was so disgusting and went everywhere on the gym floor. Mr. Abrams had to move us while the janitor cleaned up the puke."

Oh yuck! I winced, my already jumbled stomach roiling at the story. And I prayed he wasn't contagious. I loved kids, but they were little more than carrier monkeys. I could handle a lot of illnesses. I'd taken care of Henry and Sue toward the end. But a stomach bug with vomiting involved was another level. It'd take everything inside me not to toss my lunch. "That's unfortunate." To say the least. "Did you turn in your math homework?"

"Yep. But she gave us more math." Amelia sighed.

I ground my teeth. Because of course she kept on getting math homework. It had been my worst subject in school. And then they had to go and change math. Talk about epically dumb ideas. Which meant I spent my evenings after she went to bed reading her textbook and trying to learn the new math. And I know, it's supposed to be this easier and better way to learn it, blah, blah, blah. But it wasn't. Why someone decided we needed to change math was beyond me. I think I speak for every parent when I say change it back. "We'll tackle your homework after dinner. You can watch some tv until dinnertime."

"Mama, who are those men?"

I knew the question would come up. But I still grimaced when she asked me.

"Just some old friends of mine." And one of them I had been naked friends with, and that's how you came into being. But I couldn't tell her yet that James was her father.

I mean, I would.

It was unavoidable now. The decision had been yanked from my control. It would happen whether I was ready for it or

not. And I wasn't ready. But then, I doubted I would ever be ready for the upcoming conversation with James.

However, I acted like the queen of serenity with Amelia.

She didn't need to know how much I'd messed up or the mountain of inner turmoil suffocating me. Nor that the lies I'd told had been uttered with the best intentions. Because I'd wanted to protect her and myself.

My life had been in a precarious state when she was conceived.

Meeting James and being with him had upended my entire existence. I'd fallen and never quite gotten back up again. What I felt for him was unlike anything I'd felt before for anyone, and I handled the fallout poorly. Because it left me reeling. The one time I approached him to discuss what happened between us that night, he told me to never contact him again.

So I hadn't.

"I need to go show them to their rooms for the night," I explained, wishing I had ushered them out the door instead of giving them a place to stay. As if I could avoid the confrontation that was almost a decade in the making.

"But the inn is closed?" Amelia frowned in confusion.

"I know. But I'm not charging them to stay here. They're friends passing through town and need a place to stay for the night."

"You should invite them to dinner."

"Are you sure?" Please say no, baby. Mom doesn't want to stare at James over our evening meal. I was already having a difficult time holding my shit together.

“Yeah. I mean, they’re your friends, right? And if they need somewhere to stay tonight, we should make dinner for them too. It’s the right thing to do.”

I was making lasagna. There was always plenty. So it wasn’t like I needed to change what I planned to make for dinner. Pride filled me at her selflessness and desire to help others. It never failed to amaze me that she was mine, that she had come from me—and James.

Swallowing my misgivings, even though I knew it would be asking for trouble, I nodded in agreement with a smile I didn’t feel. “All right, baby, I’ll invite them to dinner.”

“Good.”

“Make sure you put your bowl in the sink when you’re done. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

She rolled her eyes. This child was on the cusp of being a pre-teen, and the sass was strong with this one. My dear god in heaven, she would give me gray hair by the time we finished her teen years. But I wouldn’t have it any other way.

But I couldn’t put off the confrontation any longer. Girding my loins, I left the sanctity of our home and headed back down the hall into the inn proper. Even under construction, the hallway and inn beyond held a charm that most places built today would never achieve.

When I entered the lobby, James glowered. He wore a thunderous expression laced with hatred. Under the circumstances, I didn’t blame him. If it were me, I’d be pissed too. He had every right to his anger. But so help me if he turned that anger toward our daughter.

Swallowing past the lump of fear, I pasted a smile I didn’t feel. All four guys turned my way with expectant expressions.

But there was anger I spied in their eyes too, and not just from James. Because they all now knew I cheated on Evan at the end of our marriage.

“Why don’t I show you where you’ll be staying. We’re not presently open for guests, so you’ll have the run of the place. Just be careful down here in the construction area.” I withdrew the keys from my pocket. We were real old-fashioned here. Although, I was considering making an upgrade to those fancy keycards. I’d already priced them out, but wanted to wait until the bulk of the rehab was completed before I went to the expense.

“If you’ll follow me.” I headed for the grand staircase. It was one of those sweeping wooden numbers that went straight up. On the second floor, there were thirteen rooms. And there were ten rooms on the third floor with two suites on the top floor. It was a small inn. But I loved being able to deliver a personal touch and truly get to know guests. We had couples that returned every summer for their anniversaries and such to the point I received Christmas cards every year from them.

It was a part of having this inn I would miss terribly if I was forced to sell it.

“Who’s doing the repairs for you? Because it looks like the contractor is taking forever.” Aiden stated as we reached the first of the rooms on the second floor they would occupy.

“You’re looking at the contractor. And well, I’m raising a daughter and trying to run a business at the same time. It means I’m working whenever she’s in school or asleep. I save the time between school and bedtime for the two of us.” If I could manage it. Most days were a hodgepodge of business and family life in a great big jumbled mix that left me exhausted by the day’s end.

“Just so you are aware, the exterior doors are all locked at eight, in case you go out. You’ll have to use the phone on the front porch to ring me. Then they’re unlocked at six every morning.” I gave them the spiel I gave all guests.

“That’s good to know. We hope we’re not imposing.” Wyatt smiled with a touch of sympathy in his amber eyes.

They were, but I wouldn’t admit it. This meeting between James and Amelia was a long time coming. And fate had intervened by sending them my way with something from Evan.

Even with my inner turmoil, I’d be damned if I was going to let it show. Instead, I played the part of gracious hostess. “Not at all. In fact, I wanted to invite you guys to eat dinner with my daughter and me. It should be ready by six. We’ll be eating in the dining room in our quarters. Just take the long hall downstairs and knock on the door.”

“Dinner sounds great,” Lucas said with a big, cheesy grin.

Wyatt nodded with a small smile. “We appreciate the hospitality, Rory. But after dinner, we need to discuss why Evan sent us.”

Evan. My heart painfully squeezed at the mention of my ex-husband. We’d been young and stupid when we got married. I’d barely been legal, and he’d been home on leave. I’d been on spring break when we met and wound up spending the week together. We called it love, but it had been hormones and alcohol. We had no business marrying each other. He rescued me from a dire situation, and we loved each other, but we weren’t good for each other. We fought constantly. And when he was deployed, it was easier to love him because I didn’t have to witness his infidelity up close and personal.

But Evan had sent his friends my way for a reason. And I owed him for the part I played in our marriage's demise. "It'll need to wait until Amelia is in bed. After eight-ish, we can meet down in the lobby so we don't disturb her while she's sleeping."

"We can do that." Wyatt agreed as I opened the first room and handed him the keys.

"Your rooms are side by side down the hall. Let me know if there's anything else you need. I've got to get dinner started. So I'll let you guys get settled." Then I turned and ran.

Okay, I didn't run because I wanted to act cool as a cucumber. But I sure as hell power walked back down the stairs to the lobby. Because I wasn't ready for what came next. I needed time to get myself centered for that next step.

A hand around my bicep stopped me in the lobby before I could make good my escape. I knew who it was without looking. The memory of his hands on me had never left. I would know his touch anywhere. But I'd forgotten how potent his touch could be as every nerve ending in my body sizzled to life. Inhaling a deep breath, I put on my happiest face and shifted in his direction. "What can I do for you, James?"

"Well, for starters, you could start by explaining why you never told me I have a daughter."



*F*rowning at the woman I once loved with every fiber of my being, I tried wrapping my head around why she'd kept something this important from me. I realized I'd been an ass when she came to see me that day with tears in her eyes. I'd

shut her out of my life. But that didn't excuse her actions and failure to tell me about something this important.

She was the mother of my child and my deepest regret. Almost a decade had passed since that sweltering Memorial Day weekend party, but standing with her in arm's reach, it felt like no time had passed. The years melted away.

Rory still took my breath away.

She was as stunning as ever with strawberry blonde hair that she had fashioned into a long braid that fell over a slim shoulder. She wore no makeup. But she had flawless, smooth golden skin with thick, inky eyelashes that didn't need makeup.

But the woman I remembered had never shown any fear. But I spied it in her eyes, the pale green a turbulent sea of emotions.

She winced and jerked her arm from my grasp. "James—"

Jesus Christ. Simply hearing my name in her throaty alto brought that night back. I'd touched the heavens only to plummet into the darkest hell afterward. My body hummed being near her again, and even my dick twitched. Stupid bastard. But I would never give in to her quixotic pull again.

And my fury knew no bounds. She'd fucked me, only to screw me even worse once the ardor had cooled. I didn't hold back my fury one bit and chewed out. "Don't try to deny that she's my daughter, Rory. She looks like the spitting image of my mother at that age. And I want to know why the fuck you didn't contact me? I had a right to know she existed. I cannot believe you kept me in the dark all these years."

"I wasn't going to deny that she's your daughter. But explanations will have to wait until later." She drew herself up,

her spine straightening, and stared me down without a hint of emotions.

How could she be so fucking cold?

“No. You need to explain right now. You’ve had ten years to contact me and inform me that we have a kid,” I shouted, sounding unhinged. My voice boomed in the lobby.

But I didn’t give a fuck. My hands flexed. I should take her over my knee and turn her ass red for what she did. When I think of all I missed out on—the first steps, her first words, her first day of school, when she lost her first tooth and experienced her first heartbreak. Every minute of the last decade. My fury knew no bounds.

A hand gripped my shoulder. I shot a furious glare over my shoulder at Lucas.

But he calmly said, “I know you’re upset, and you have every right to be, dude. But it’s not just about you. There’s a little girl in this house who doesn’t know who you are to her, and you don’t want to upset her by having her overhear you shouting at her mother. Take a deep breath.”

Instead of ripping him a new one, I sucked in a breath like he suggested. And then another to calm myself and rein my fury under control. Once I was reasonably sure I wouldn’t rip her damn head off, I directed my attention back to Rory. “Tonight, once she’s sleeping, we need to have a chat. And don’t try and dodge it. If you don’t come to me, I will come to you. Understood?”

“Yes.” She nodded curtly and glanced at Lucas with thanks in her eyes. And then she rushed down the hallway like the hounds of hell were after her. Maybe they were. Our unit hadn’t been dubbed the Night Terrors without just cause.

I shrugged Lucas off, left him in the lobby, and climbed the stairs two at a time. Strode to my room and went inside, slamming the door behind me. I didn't give a shit if I upset people with my direct questions. I was fucking pissed. And I had every right to be.

And I sat on the bed as the thought hit me. Fuck, I had no idea how to be a dad. Would Amelia even want me as her father?

10 years ago

Virginia Beach near Little Creek

*F*uck, it felt good to be home. Even if I found some of the antics of those in attendance rather childish. But then, I always had a hard time the first few weeks after I returned stateside from deployment.

A lot of guys drank to forget their time overseas. But for me, drinking made the memories worse. Not that I didn't plan on kicking back a few tonight, because I sure as shit was, but I didn't need it.

Although, sometimes, like now, I realize I should have avoided the party altogether. But I didn't want to seem standoffish with my new unit. And yeah, we'd served the past six months together overseas. But this was different. I'd become friends with them.

And I was trying to integrate and be part of the team. Even though I was still working through all the shit that went down with my last unit. Only a handful of us made it home. And I'd struggled with survivor's guilt. Because I didn't know why I made it back when they didn't.

But for a reason I couldn't begin to fathom, I had survived.

Grabbing four beers out of a massive bucket filled with ice, I headed down the beach for a breather, away from the bonfires and the drinking contests and stupid shit. I simply wasn't in the mood for that type of theatrics.

I walked a ways down the beach. The sun had begun setting in the west, and evening turned into a gray twilight before full night descended. There was a full moon rising on the horizon. It hung low over the Atlantic. Its bright light reflected on the black water.

When I was far enough away from the bonfires that they looked small, I was about to take a seat on the beach and drink when I spied her. Slender, with legs for days, she was curled on a small, colorfully striped blanket hidden by a massive piece of driftwood. Something about her essence, beyond her knockout form, drew me.

Shifting my direction, I walked toward her. Maybe tonight wouldn't be a total waste. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. Did you bring those extra for me?" She nodded toward the beers in my hand with a hopeful smile. The flash of straight white teeth biting her lush bottom lip reeled me in further like a fish on a hook.

I hadn't, but found myself nodding, liking her daring. "Possibly. It depends, though."

"On?" She tilted her head as she took my measure. And fuck, but she was cute in her flowery sundress with her feet bare.

"If there's a seat for me." I nodded toward the empty space on the blanket beside her, taking a few steps closer. But I didn't want to spook her.

Ethereal was the word that came to mind. She looked ethereal, like she was a mythical siren sent to enchant men and lure them to their doom. Long blonde hair fell in loose waves over slim shoulders. Her slender legs were bent, and her arms were laced around her knees.

She flashed a wide smile that had my gut tightening. “Well then, it seems you came to the right place. Because I just so happen to have a single seat available.”

And then she gestured at the open space on the blanket beside her in invitation. It was one thing I hadn’t done since we got back—found a woman to lose myself in.

Tingles churned in my belly as I sat beside her and finally got a closer look.

Stunning. She was the most stunning creature I’d ever met. Her heart-shaped face was smooth with luminous eyes. And in the last bits of light from the setting sun, I noticed her eyes were a pale mint green.

I handed her one of the beers. “James.” Our fingers touched, and electricity sizzled up my arm. Fuck yeah, now we were talking. This little beauty would leave the party with me tonight.

“Rory. Thanks for the beer. I really didn’t want to have to head back over to the party yet.” She popped the top and took a long swallow.

Fuck, even the way her throat worked was sexy as hell. “Parties not your thing?”

“Sometimes they are and sometimes they’re not. What about you? Aren’t you frogmen always up for a good time?”

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no,” I replied with a similar sentiment, grinning at her candor.

My response earned a laugh from her. And the sound was throaty and full of life. It electrified me. And made my dick twitch, thinking of whether she sounded like that during sex, promising myself I would find out before the night was over.

And then she shot me a cheeky grin. “Good to know. Are you glad to be back?”

I was, but, “It’s hard. Most of the time when I’m on a deployment, I can’t wait for the moment when I step back on United States soil. But here lately—” I shook my head. “You don’t want to hear this.”

She shifted, turning slightly toward me. “Yeah, I do. Here lately, what?”

I stared at her long legs for a minute, trying to decide how much to say. And I couldn’t put my finger on why, but I wanted to be honest with her. “I’ve only been with my new unit for six months. They’re awesome guys. The best at what they fucking do. But in my last unit, not everyone made it back.”

“Who did you lose?”

Rory was perceptive. But then, she was hanging around a bunch of military guys, so it came with the territory. And I wondered if she was here with anyone. “My best friend. Justin and I grew up together back in Knoxville. We went to school together. Graduated from the same high school. And we entered the Navy together. Then went through SEAL training together, the whole shebang. We might not have been blood, but we were brothers in the purest sense of the word.”

In her eyes was compassion and understanding. “How did it . . . Never mind, you don’t have to tell me.”

But I found I wanted to tell her about it, about that night. “We were on a night raid into a compound where suspected Hezbollah terrorists were holding some American hostages. We got in, no problem. Everything worked like clockwork. Stuff we’d done together hundreds of times. Only our intel was a few days old. The hostages weren’t there any longer. They’d already been moved. And what was waiting for us in that room was a nightmare. We had to fight our way out. But we hadn’t counted on the mines they planted. They knew we were coming. And our team had to split up. Justin stepped on a mine. I watched him die. One minute he was there, and the next, he was blown to pieces.”

She laid her hand over mine on the blanket and squeezed. “I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t ease the loss. But I’m sorry just the same.”

I stared at her slender fingers covering mine, feeling her touch beyond the surface level of wanting to get into her pants. I couldn’t remember the last time someone had offered me such simple comfort. Nor had she offered platitudes, like *at least it was quick* or *he’s in a better place*. And for the first time since that night, I felt like I could breathe. “No, but I appreciate the sentiment. And I haven’t felt right since that night. Even with my new unit and being sent back out again on deployment, I can’t seem to think—”

“That it’s all bullshit,” she murmured before taking another drink of her beer.

“Yes. Exactly. Have you served?” Because she understood my sentiments.

“Oh god, no.” She laughed with a shake of her head, tendrils of hair shifting around her shoulders, making me itch to see if they were as soft as they looked. “Not that there’s

anything wrong with being in the military. It's just not for me. I'm not a fan of camping or bugs or mud really or the outdoors if it's not a beach, if I'm being perfectly honest."

At her response, I tossed back my head and laughed until my sides hurt. God, this woman. She was a breath of fresh air blowing into my life. And I wanted to know everything about her.

"So what's your story?" I asked, nudging her with my shoulder.

"You think I have one?"

Oh, she was a sly one with her quips. "Everybody does. I showed you some of mine, and now it's your turn. Why is a gorgeous woman like yourself sitting alone over here instead of mingling with the party?"

The full moon cast shadows on her face as Rory regarded me before she responded, "Because I'm an extroverted introvert and would have preferred to stay home tonight."

"And your friends made you come tonight?" Yeah, I was fishing. I wanted to find out if she was single before I asked her out. The more I was coming to learn about her, the more I had considered she was worth far more than a simple hook-up.

"Something like that. I'm getting ready to graduate and was offered a position in my field, a really good one."

"But?"

"It's in Maine."

I whistled while feeling my heart drop. She couldn't move that far north when we just met. I'd never see her except when I had leave time. "That's quite a way north from here."

She snorted. “Tell me about it. I’m not a huge fan of winters. But it’s such a great opportunity that I don’t think I can pass it up.”

“Doing what?” I kept a smile on my face, even with the disappointment I felt.

“Hospitality management. It’s a position at this really cute family-run inn. They’ll provide me with a place to live and put me in charge of their front registration desk that will put me in the thick of running it, but I don’t know if I can see myself living in Maine.”

“Why not? Is your family here?”

She laughed, but it rang hollow. “No. I don’t really have any family. My mom ran off when I was two.”

“Sorry.” I didn’t know what I’d do without my family. They were one of the reasons I put on my uniform every day and took the risks I did—to keep them safe.

She shrugged nonchalantly. “Don’t be. She didn’t want me. My father said she decided being a wife and a mother just weren’t for her, and she left. I’ve never heard from her. I don’t really even remember her.”

“But what about your dad? Are you guys close?”

She sighed and looked at her beer. “Not even in the slightest. When I turned eighteen, he sat me down and told me he’d done his duty. And he would give me six months to find a place to live. But after that, he was done. Luckily, I’d gotten a full ride to college.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” The urge to hold her tight filled me. And I’d do it, but I wasn’t sure how it would be received.

“We weren’t close even when I was growing up. I don’t think he ever really loved me. I was more of a responsibility he didn’t want but did anyway because he had to.”

“And you didn’t have anyone else you could stay with when you were growing up or one you turned eighteen that would take you in?”

She gave me a lopsided grin and a small shake of her head. “Nope. My dad didn’t talk with his family, at least, not that I knew of. But from what I understood growing up, he wasn’t close with his brother or mom. His dad passed away when I was little. And as for my mom’s side, once she ditched us, they couldn’t be bothered. It was like I ceased to exist.”

Fuck it. I slid my arm around her waist and hugged her close. She didn’t fight me either. Instead, she melted against my side. And we sat there for a time, offering each other comfort. Her scent, a subtle rose, hit my senses. God, she was sweet and unassuming. Especially considering what life had tossed her way. I thought she was fucking amazing.

“So hospitality management? You want to run hotels and stuff?” She had yet to move from my side, and I wasn’t in any hurry to shove her away.

She chuckled. “It’s more than that. What I really want is to own my own bed and breakfast or small inn. I want people to come from all over to stay at my place. I want my inn to be the place where families make memories. Where couples return each year because it was such fun on their honeymoon. I want to host weddings and family reunions. And I want the place to be mine.”

What I heard was that she was aching for a home. Aching to feel like she was a part of this world, part of a family. It was a sentiment I understood well. Because as much as I loved my

family, I couldn't go back to Tennessee other than to visit. There were too many memories there that would swallow me whole. "Do you think the job in Maine will help you get it?"

"Maybe. I'm thinking of heading up and checking the place out to get a feel for it at least before I make my decision."

"You should if it's that great of an opportunity."

"It is. But I'm not sure if I should leave Virginia. I like it here. I've got friends here." She nudged me with her shoulder, meaning me.

"Well, I'll be disappointed if you move."

She glanced up at me with a smile. My arm was still around her shoulders. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Because then I won't be able to take you out on a proper date." Something flashed in her eyes but was gone in an instant before I could discern what it was.

She arched a delicate brow. "A proper date, huh? And what does this date look like?"

Deep in my soul, I knew she was different. Knew that I'd met my match. This was a woman who would keep me on my toes. She fit against my side like she belonged there.

And I had every intention of keeping her there.

Present Day

*W*yatt headed to the store to pick up some beer and grab a bottle of wine for our hostess. While I felt stuck in the past. The night Rory and I first met was playing through my mind on repeat. She'd blown me away that night.

I'd seen myself committing to her, and not just for the night, but for the long haul. Even if it meant I had to travel to Maine to see her when I wasn't deployed and had leave time. At my core, I had believed we could make it work. That there was much more between us than two people scratching an itch, only to experience a rude awakening that destroyed me. It had broken me beyond what any firefight or mission had ever done. Because it killed the last sliver of my soul that hadn't been lost on the battlefield.

I didn't know if I could ever forgive her for not telling me about Amelia. It killed me that I'd lost so much time with my kid.

The room was nice if a bit froufrou. The bed was softer than a marshmallow with a gray and ivory striped comforter with matching pillows. Granted, I was used to sleeping on the hard ground and on cots when I was overseas. The bathroom

was the best, though, with a walk-in soft gray tiled shower with a surfeit of water pressure.

The inn itself was exactly what Rory had mentioned wanting that night. The old Victorian had great bones. The exterior was tan brick, a nod to its Gothic undertones. And I'd noticed to the left of the house were gardens that weren't currently in bloom given the time of year.

Inside, it was a shame she had to tear down the dark mahogany wood-paneled walls. But the architecture was stunning, even with drop cloths everywhere on the first floor and the construction underway.

The guest room was spacious, with a huge king bed that dominated the carpeted room. The walls were eggshell, and there were exposed wooden beams on the ceiling in the same dark mahogany as the wood floors out in the hall.

After getting my bag inside, I took a long, hot shower. It didn't alleviate my fury. But it did help me get it under wraps. Or at least, I hoped it was. When it was time for dinner, I trudged down the stairs. This place showed real promise, even with the first floor under construction.

The guys were in the lobby waiting for me.

"Are you going to be civil?" Wyatt asked with a stern glare.

Only because I had to be. But having him pull rank had me grinding my teeth, and I nodded. "Yes. But don't fucking push me. I can't guarantee I won't go after anyone right now."

"Noted. Let's go." Wyatt led our pack down the hall.

After about thirty-five feet, the hall angled to the left. We followed it another twenty feet, where it ended at a heavy oak door that was locked. Wyatt knocked politely. I was glad he

was doing it because my knock would have been much more forceful than that. We weren't forced to wait long before the door was opened by Amelia.

My heart squeezed.

Damn. She was beautiful, with her hair in two thick braids that hung over her shoulders. Her hair was a shade or so darker than mine. But the shape and color of her cornflower blue eyes were all my mom. God, my mom was going to adore having another granddaughter to spoil. She wore a cotton candy pink sweatshirt with black leggings and thick pink socks on her feet.

Was pink her favorite color? And what was her favorite food? Did she have a best friend? What was her favorite subject in school? Did she love living at the inn? A multitude of questions tumbled through my mind.

She grinned, and it was like a ray of sunshine. I noticed she had some front teeth missing, with some of her adult teeth growing in. "Come on in. Mom says you should have a seat in the dining room, and dinner will be right out."

My buddies all chuckled because she was fucking darling, and they were goofballs.

Even stoic Wyatt couldn't repress his smile, and he replied, "Lead the way."

And so four hardened, battle-weary Navy SEALs followed a nine-year-old through a living room that looked lived in but was sparkling clean. The couches and tables were old, given the checkered pattern, but lovingly cared for. There were pictures on the wall of Amelia at different ages. I wanted to stop and stare at them. I wanted to see everything I missed.

But I didn't stop. There would be time for that later.

The dining room table was already set for dinner with plates and glasses. And as we took our seats, awaiting our hostess, I wound up in the chair beside Amelia. The guys might give me headaches with their antics sometimes, but they always came through when it mattered. Enticing aromas wafted into the room from the direction of the kitchen. And I accepted a beer that Wyatt passed me.

Before I could say something to Amelia, Rory bustled in with a huge wooden salad bowl. She set the salad on the table with a smile, but she didn't glance my way. "Glad you guys made it. I hope you're hungry because there's plenty of food."

"Here, we thought you might like this." Aiden handed her the bottle of wine that Wyatt picked up for her as our hostess.

"Oh, how thoughtful. Thank you, guys."

"We also have some beer, but don't know where you'd like us to put it," Wyatt stated, holding up the twelve-pack sans the four beers we'd already removed.

"Why don't you bring it into the kitchen. I think there's some room in the fridge. Guys, I want to introduce you to my daughter, Amelia. Amelia, these are my friends. This is Aiden, Wyatt, and at the end of the table is Lucas." And then her gaze landed on me. "And sitting beside you is James."

"We've met, Mom," Amelia replied.

"Yes, well, why don't you come help me get the garlic bread?" Rory told her with a nod toward the kitchen.

I gritted my teeth at her request. She couldn't possibly be trying to keep us separated still, was she? If so, we were going to have a massive blow out the likes of which would make the big bang look tame by comparison.

“Okay.” Amelia bounded up out of her chair and into the kitchen like it was no big deal. And Wyatt followed them into the kitchen with the rest of the twelve-pack.

They returned a few minutes later, with Wyatt carrying the main dish for Rory. Amelia held a basket full of piping hot garlic bread.

My mouth watered at the scent of the lasagna. It looked amazing and was a far cry from the MREs we ate on missions. It took a few minutes to get the meal dished out.

Aiden leaned in. “It smells delicious.”

Lucas held out his plate. “I’d like as big a piece as you can make it, because that looks divine.”

“Mom makes the best lasagna.”

“Oh yeah? Is lasagna your favorite dinner?”

“Um, well, Mom is a really great cook. But I think my favorite is her pizza,” Amelia said, garnering a bunch of chuckles from the guys.

When it was my turn, I pegged Rory with a hard stare. Without a word, she filled my plate and handed it over. Our gazes clashed, and she almost dropped my plate. If I hadn’t been holding it, it would have fallen and created a mess. Rory was skittish and worried.

Did she think I’d try to take Amelia away from her? Because that’s not the kind of man I was, and she should know better. But then, we’d only had one night together. How much did we really know about the other?

Not enough to make snap decisions.

No matter how angry I was over her failure to contact me, she’d given me a daughter. There was a part of me that was

relieved that should something happen while I was deployed and I didn't make it back, a part of me would live on in her. The moment I made it back to base at the end of my leave time before I was deployed again, I would update everything in my will. Everything would go to Amelia now, instead of my parents. They'd understand that I would want my kid to be taken care of in the event of my death.

"This is fantastic," Aiden proclaimed with a groan.

"What grade are you in?" I asked Amelia.

"Third grade, but only for another few months, and then I'll be in fourth grade."

She was so eager to grow up. But I wanted time with her while she was this age. "And do you like school?"

After she finished chewing, she replied with a thoughtful expression. "It's okay, I guess. I like learning things. I just wish I didn't have to go every day. But at least I get to see Molly."

"Is that your best friend?" I realized I was controlling the conversation at the table, but I didn't care. And the guys were only too happy to focus on their food and let me lead.

Even Rory smiled at my question.

"It's the class turtle. She's super cool. We each get a week where we get to take care of her and bring her home for the weekend to take care of her," Amelia explained, brimming with excitement.

Fuck, this kid was slaying me. "She sounds amazing."

"She is. Are you guys like a biker gang?" Amelia asked, tilting her head.

There were a few chuckles around the table, myself included. “No. Far from it. We’re Navy SEALs. The Navy’s special forces division. Right now we’re on leave and taking a road trip across the country.”

“My dad is in the military overseas, fighting for our country. It’s why he’s not here with me,” Amelia stated, her eyes bright, talking about her dad.

Holy shit, she meant me. She was talking about me.

I opened my mouth to tell her I was her dad, but caught Rory’s expression. She mouthed, *not yet*.

Grinding my teeth, I nodded. One more day wouldn’t hurt. And I didn’t care if I had to hire a fucking attorney to get visitation rights. Amelia was my daughter. I wanted her to know me, and I wanted more than anything to know her.

Instead I said, “You must miss him,” while wondering if there was another man that Rory had shacked up with who also happened to be in the military and was calling himself her dad.

“Oh, I do. I mean, I’ve not met him yet. But Mom says he’ll come for me one day.” She smiled with the blissful enthusiasm and innocence only children have. And she sounded so assured. She believed without a doubt I would come for her.

She wasn’t wrong. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for her. “He will. I guarantee it. And he’ll be over the moon to have you as a daughter.”

And I’d at least had my question answered. Rory hadn’t passed off another man as her father. I didn’t understand why, but it settled some of my rage.

Amelia blushed and preened at my comment, then asked, “Can I see the motorcycles? I’ve never seen one up close before, and they looked really cool.”

“If you play your cards right, I could give you a ride on mine.” I offered, but then I thought about her safety. I’d have to research how to safely ride with a nine-year-old on my bike. Worst-case scenario, I find a nearby Harley dealer and have a sidecar attached for her to ride in.

Her eyes went wide at the prospect. “Really? That would be so cool. My friends at school will be so jealous. Can we go as soon as we’re done with dinner?”

“Amelia, not tonight, honey. You’ve got homework to finish and need a shower before bed,” Rory interceded. A part of me wanted to argue because if I wanted to take her for a ride, then I should be allowed to do it, and I shouldn’t need her permission. But I was also feeling punchy. And this was my first foray into fatherhood. I had a steep learning curve, but I would figure it out as I went.

Amelia opened her mouth to argue, but Rory cut her off. “I’m not saying no forever, just for tonight. It’s already getting dark out. If they haven’t left already when you get home from school tomorrow, and James is still willing to take you, then you can go. And I’m sure James will be the soul of propriety when he takes you for a ride.”

Amelia sighed and speared some lettuce with her fork before glancing at me. “Okay. If I didn’t have stupid math to do, I could go with you. But no, Miss Davies loves giving us homework.”

I fought back a grin at her candor. Fuck, this girl was a pistol. And I wanted to applaud Rory’s parenting skills. She effectively squelched any bitching while leaving the door open

for Amelia and me to bond before I had to hit the road with these guys.

However, the thought of leaving left me cold. It was what Evan asked of us. But I didn't want to leave Amelia when I'd just found her. I wanted to spend whatever time I had left before I had to report back to base with her.

"If you need help with your math, I'm not so bad at the subject," I offered, thinking it might be another way to eke out more time with her.

"You can have at it. Because this so-called new math . . . whoever invented it, I'd like to give them a piece of my mind." Rory snorted and took a sip of wine.

"It can't be that bad."

It was Amelia who answered. "The only time Mom curses is when she's helping me with my math homework."

At that, everyone at the table, myself included, broke into fits of laughter. Rory toasted us with her glass of wine, and the mischief in her eyes reminded me of the woman I fell for all those years ago. The night she conceived Amelia.

I felt the same punch of desire I had all those years ago. I couldn't want her still, could I? I'd be an idiot to get started up with her again.

But it wasn't lost on me either that, unlike before, we were both single this time around.

But then I squelched that train of thought. I couldn't trust Rory, not after she'd hidden my daughter from me. I'd have to be an idiot to let myself fall for her again.

*W*ell, that wasn't as bad as it could have been.

Relief washed over me. Dinner went off without a hitch. Although, there was a moment there when I thought James was going to spill the tea and tell Amelia he was her father. And it's not that I wasn't going to tell her he was her father, I just . . . was being a coward. I wanted one more night where she was just mine. One more night before everything changed.

I made sure she was sound asleep before I left our place and headed into the main inn. The guys had grabbed some folding chairs and set them up in the lobby. It was as good a place as any for the upcoming conversation. What was so important that they had to travel all this way to deliver? What had Evan sent me?

"Did Amelia get off to sleep all right?" James asked with anger blazing in his eyes. And I didn't blame him. He was justified because I had withheld Amelia's existence.

But being near him again had awoken thoughts and feelings I'd not had in forever. We might have only been together for a single night, but it left its mark on me. And I wasn't strictly speaking about finding out I was pregnant either. To this day, it had been the most intimate, amazing

night of my life—until I messed everything up. And I'd give anything to have him look at me the way he did that night.

In all these years, there had never been anyone else. The moment he touched me, I knew no other man would ever measure up. So I focused on being a mom and businesswoman with no time for anything else.

It's tough carrying a torch for someone who wanted nothing to do with you. "Yes. She always fights it up until she gets into bed. And then she's out like a light. Unlike me. She definitely doesn't get it from me." I glanced across the space at James. And I saw the questions burning in his eyes.

He had every right to be pissed at me.

"That's good. She's a beautiful girl. You've done a hell of a job raising her," Wyatt said with a smile, trying to be a buffer and defuse the tension.

Ignoring James as best I could, I replied, "I appreciate that. What did Evan want you to bring me?"

"He wrote you a letter and asked us to hand deliver it to you," Wyatt explained, lifting a sealed ivory envelope.

"And he asked that we make sure you read it," Lucas added by way of explanation.

All this because Evan asked them to deliver a handwritten letter? My ex-husband always did have a sadistic sense of humor. I'd bet he was laughing his ass off over the pickle he'd put me in. My heart ached.

"A letter? Really? You guys drove all this way to deliver a letter?"

They all nodded. And Wyatt handed it over. It was a plain white envelope with my name, Rory Ryder, scrawled across it

and my address. I recognized Evan's handwriting immediately. Why would he do this?

I accepted it and opened the sealed envelope with their eyes on me. Withdrawing the folded letter, I noticed there was another envelope inside addressed to James, but I left it there. Why would he write a letter to James and put it in the envelope for me?

It didn't make sense. But perhaps he had a reason. Evan always did things strategically and with purpose. With my heart fluttering, I unfolded it and read it silently to myself.

Hey Lorelei,

I know it's been a hot minute. I'm sorry we lost touch these past few years. That's on me. I was pissed after the divorce. It wasn't you I was upset with, but myself. I know I failed you, and the bulk of the blame for our marriage going sideways was my fault.

We were kids when we got married. And I did love you, sweetheart. But I know my unfaithfulness hurt you. That's on me. And I didn't cheat because I didn't love you. I was messed up. There were things that happened on deployment that made me a bit crazy.

That doesn't excuse the fact that I cheated on you more than once. I know I drove you into James's arms.

My brave, sweet Rory, he needs to know his daughter. And I know you well enough that you won't do something about it. You need security too much. And you can hate me for rocking your boat, but it's what James needs. And in the end, you do too.

There's a letter for James in the envelope. Give it to him when you're ready. And it's okay if you never are.

I know I don't deserve it, but I hope one day you'll forgive me. Be happy, Rory. You deserve it.

All my love,

Evan

Damn him!

Blinking back tears, I folded the letter up and slipped it back inside the envelope next to the letter for James. Evan set this up to force my hand. Wasn't it just like that son of a bitch? Always pushing a person until they went in the direction he wanted them to go, even from beyond the fucking grave.

And I'd loved him. But I'd just turned nineteen, and he'd been twenty-three. We were babies, still finding our footing in the world.

Had Evan really believed I would give James the letter inside? I would, eventually. But Evan's high-handed approach in forcing a meeting between James and Amelia pissed me off. Even if it was just like Evan, always maneuvering people in the direction he wanted them to go.

His ability to manipulate a situation to his benefit was what made him so smooth with women.

“And that's it? Is there anything else you need from me?” I beat back emotions I didn't want to deal with. Because life with Evan hadn't all been bad. And I had loved him. A part of me would always love him. Because he gave me an escape route and a safe place to land when I had nowhere else to go. But our marriage had been an emotional roller coaster of Evan cheating and promising he would never do it again, when inevitably he would.

I had simply been the one to get off the ride first. And it had been James's entry into my life that woke me up and gave

me the courage to take that first step.

James opened his mouth. But Wyatt cut him off. “No. It’s what we needed. Thanks for not being difficult about reading it. We’re under a time constraint with our leave time and have others we need to deliver within that time frame, so we appreciate it.”

“Evan and I lost touch over the last few years, though I still sent him a Christmas card every year. I wish I’d known how badly he was struggling. Although I’m not sure a call from his ex-wife would have done any good.” Evan had always done things the way he wanted. And once he made a decision, there was no getting him to change his mind.

“I doubt there’s anything that any of us could have done. But it’s nice knowing you care,” Lucas stated. Their grief was palpable. And even though I knew they were all tough guys, losing Evan, especially by his own hand, had knocked them for a loop.

“Just because we weren’t great at being married doesn’t mean I didn’t still love the guy. Because I do, just not in that way. And I always wanted the best for him.” I held the letter against my chest, needing a good cleansing cry. Knowing that Evan thought about me near the end, to the point he orchestrated this reunion so James could meet Amelia, had my emotions in a tumult.

“Well, we appreciate the meal and the place to stay.” Aiden leaned back in his seat with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Wyatt nodded at the lobby with the tarps and construction. “You look like you’ve got your hands full with this place.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know. And if I can’t get it all fixed by the time the spring tourist season kicks into high gear, I’m going to be forced to sell it.”

“We could stay and help out for a few days,” James offered. But the offer was laced with ulterior motives, and we both knew it.

Lucas agreed with a nod. “He’s right. Besides, Evan would want us to stay and help you out. And if you’re offering free room and board, we don’t mind working for it. We have a few days we can spare.”

I eyed James. Tension riddled him while he waited for my answer. In all honesty, I desperately needed the help.

James was asking me for time to get to know Amelia. He deserved that time. And I wasn’t going to keep them apart. I’d done that for the first part of her life. It wasn’t fair of me to hoard her all to myself any longer. It was time she got to know her father. And perhaps it was time I laid old ghosts to rest. “I’d appreciate the help. You’re welcome to stay as long as you would like.”

Wyatt made the call. “We’re at your service for a few days. But then we’ll have to head off to our next destination.”

“Any help would be appreciated. I usually start once Amelia catches the bus at seven. You’re welcome to join us for breakfast at six and then again at dinner.” I’d put together that egg casserole and have it prepped so that I’d only have to pop it in the oven in the morning. And I could toss together the ingredients for biscuits tonight and refrigerate the dough so it will be ready in the morning.

“We’ll say goodnight, then,” Wyatt replied, rising from his seat.

Everyone stood and left, climbing the stairs to their rooms, except James. I steeled myself. This conversation was long overdue, and I couldn't run from it any longer. And we both knew it. If I tried to avoid it, he would remove the decision from my hands and introduce himself to Amelia as her father. As hard as the discussion would be, I remained seated.

We waited until they left before we began. Until it was just the two of us, staring across the expanse that felt wider than the Pacific.

God, she was beautiful.

That hadn't changed in ten years. If anything, she'd grown even more beautiful. Being near her again had me twisted up inside. Because the sad truth was, I still wanted her. I ached to touch her. And I knew it made me a pathetic motherfucker. Yet there had never been a woman who made me feel the way she did.

But it didn't excuse what she'd done.

"Why, Rory? Why didn't you tell me about her?" I didn't understand why she'd kept Amelia a secret from me. It made no logical sense. And I was all mixed up inside seeing her again, being near her again. I thought I had gotten her out of my system. But my body told a different story. It acted like a bloodhound scenting steak.

And it pissed me off further.

She clenched her hands together in her lap before responding. "Because it was complicated. I was in the middle of a divorce and didn't want to disclose my pregnancy until after it was finalized because I knew it wasn't Evan's child. I knew it was yours the moment I discovered I was pregnant. But by then, you were deployed overseas. I knew contacting

you would be tricky. I planned to tell you when you returned from deployment, but life got in the way.”

I didn’t know whether I should believe her. Because of her, I betrayed one of my closest friends. And I never told him, never admitted what I had done, and that was on me. I chose the coward’s way out. But that stopped now. “I want shared custody. I want to get to know her. And she needs to know I’m her father.”

“We’ll tell her together tomorrow when she gets home from school. I’m not trying to put you off or trick you. She knows your name and that you’ve been overseas fighting for our country and that is why you couldn’t be with her. If you want to be angry at someone, then be angry at me. But so help me, James, if you’re mean or cruel to her in any way, I will end you. And if you don’t want to be part of her life, I understand. But don’t you dare make her promises you don’t mean or intend to follow through on, because I will be the one picking up the pieces.” She pressed a hand against her chest.

“You really love her.” The fierceness behind her statement knocked me off my axis. I wasn’t sure why it surprised me. From the moment we met, she’d shocked me time and again. But her love for our daughter was tangible. And I hated that a part of me still yearned for her, to have her feel that way about me.

“More than life. And I will protect her from everything and everyone—including you. So don’t be an asshole. I know you’re angry, and you have every right to be. Just make sure to keep it directed at me and not at her.”

“I still can’t believe you kept my daughter from me.” And every time I tried to wrap my head around it, it left me grasping at paper-thin explanations.

“It wasn’t intentional, I assure you.” She leaned back in her seat and defensively crossed her arms.

“Yeah, well, your assurances mean diddly squat. I lost out on nine years of her life thanks to you.” But I was also floored that she had done it on her own because I knew it couldn’t have been easy.

“All I can say is I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t make up for the time you’ve lost. And I’m not about to ask for forgiveness when I know I don’t deserve it.”

“If we hadn’t come here to deliver Evan’s letter, would you have ever contacted me and told me about her?”

She hesitated with a slight grimace. But her hesitation was the only explanation I needed.

I exploded out of my seat, pacing away from her before swiveling around and pegging her with a furious scowl. “Son of a bitch! You wouldn’t have. Just when did you plan on telling me about my daughter?”

Tears rimmed her lashes as she shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve been a little busy raising a daughter and running a business.”

Her excuse was flimsy at best, and we both knew it. Flexing my hands, the desire to spank the fucking hell out of her rode me like a drill sergeant. “Likely story. But I’m not buying it. From here on out, I want full shared custody on everything. I’ll send support payments every month. That way, anything she needs, you’ll have the money for.”

“I don’t want your money,” she growled through clenched teeth.

“It’s not for you. It’s for Amelia. And we can either make an agreement between us, or we can get lawyers involved.

Take your pick. Because I'm not going to have you tell me to my face it will go one way and then the moment we leave, you decide you're not going to adhere to what we agreed upon."

She appeared hurt that I would even suggest such a thing. "I wouldn't do that."

"I don't believe you. Because the woman I thought I knew would have picked up the fucking phone and told me she was pregnant with my kid or emailed me if I was overseas. Anything but hide my daughter from me."

She tossed her hands up. "James, I wasn't trying to hide her from you. Life just got in the way. I wanted to wait until my divorce was finalized. But then she was here, and I was working and raising an infant. But I thought about contacting you all the time."

"You sure about that? I get you were ashamed of being with me that night—"

She jerked back like I struck her. "No, I wasn't—"

But I didn't want to hear her excuses and didn't need her platitudes. "I wasn't finished. But I never thought you would stoop so low that you would pull something like this."

Needing distance before I sat and pulled her across my knees, I headed toward the stairs. Because what I really wanted was to pull her over my lap and give her a fucking spanking. Something, anything to ease the heartache. I'd never gotten over her. I'd idolized her. Put her on a pedestal.

"James, I truly am sorry."

Glancing over my shoulder, I said, "I'm sure you are. Take tonight to consider whether you want to get lawyers involved to draw up a custody agreement. You can let me know your decision in the morning."

And I strode away, taking the stairs two at a time.

10 years ago

*O*h boy, did he smell good. I had no idea what cologne he wore, but there were notes of sandalwood and bergamot. And I wanted to rub my face against his chest and inhale him. Leaning against his firm side, tingles pinged low in my belly. But he was sweet with the way he'd put his arm around my shoulders to comfort me. It had been far too long since I'd been held this way. And it had never felt this good with anyone else.

I knew I shouldn't do this. It was so wrong. I didn't even know where to start. But I couldn't get past how right it felt. How right *he* felt. And I wasn't ready to let him go.

"Tell me about yourself?" I was insatiably curious about him. It had been a long time since anyone had held my interest, and never like this.

"What do you want to know?" He glanced down at me. Shadows played with his features, but god, he was handsome. His nose was slightly crooked, looking like it had been broken a time or two. But it fit his strong features. Thick, dark brows framed his eyes I knew were dark in color, and it felt like I could drown in them. That inside him was everything I'd ever

wanted in a man. And I didn't know how to wrap my head around that inconvenient truth.

He was clean-shaven with a proud jaw. But it was his lips that caught the bulk of my attention. Because I wanted them on me. They were firm and wide, curling up in a sexy smirk I felt all the way down to my toes.

Our meeting felt fated. Dumb, right? It was a stupid, childish sentiment. But I couldn't deny the feelings stirring within me. I wanted him, and it had been a long time since I had wanted anyone, and never quite this way.

What did I want to know about him? "Everything," I replied and got an even bigger smile from him. Because we were both feeling the inexplicable pull. I shivered when his eyes dipped down to my mouth like he was thinking about kissing me. "But we can start with your family and where you're from."

"I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. My dad is a cop. My mom's a middle school vice principal. I have a sister. Jenn's three years older than me and teaches fifth grade."

"And what was your home life like?" My home life had been bad. Although in a sick and twisted way, I enjoyed hearing about other people's experiences. Hearing their stories gave me hope that one day I would have a nice, normal family. One that loved and supported each other through everything.

"It was good. My sister and I fought growing up. Like there was this one time I accidentally decapitated one of her dolls. But in my defense, my army guys were trying to rescue the damn thing, but the enemy took matters into their own hands."

“I would have been pissed at you too. Don’t you realize you don’t mess with a girl’s dolls?” I playfully teased with a gentle nudge against his side.

He chuckled, and the rich, deep timbre hit me square in the chest. “I do now. But back then, the outcry was pretty substantial.”

“Do you two still fight like that?” I couldn’t help but wonder if life would have been easier, better even, with a sibling to survive my dad’s house.

“Nah. We’re the best of friends. She sends me care packages all the time. She even has her students make cards for me that she sends around the holidays, especially when I’m deployed.”

“That’s nice. And it’s something I want.” Family was the one thing I’d always wanted but had sadly lacked in my life.

“To be deployed overseas? You planning on enlisting?” He nudged my shoulder playfully, laying the flirting on thick.

But I ate up the attention. It felt as if we were in our own little bubble, far away from the outside world. “Ha, no. I want a family of my own. And to live in a big house that we restored and made ours, you know, really put our stamp on it. I want to bake cookies and do the whole mom thing.”

“And why haven’t you?” He seemed so serious. Like he was waiting for my answer with bated breath.

“Just waiting for the right guy, I suppose.” It was an evasive answer.

“There’s more to it than that.”

And he saw right through me. “Perceptive. There is.” I dropped my gaze and stared at my naked hands. “I worry that

I'll be like my mother. And that once I have a kid, it will be too much to handle, or I'll decide that it's not really what I want, ya know. And it worries me because I'd never want to do that to a child."

"You won't."

He sounded so confident in my abilities. I'd never had anyone believe in me like he did. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because it doesn't feel like you. I think you're more driven to succeed than your mother was, and far less selfish. The fact that you're worried about a kid who hasn't been conceived yet speaks volumes about your character. I've been in the Navy since I turned eighteen. Long enough that I can tell which new enlisted service members won't cut it in a fight, even with all their training."

"And do you like it? Being a SEAL and being dropped into dangerous situations you might not make it out of?"

He glanced out over the water. I thought he wasn't going to answer my question. But then he started speaking in a low voice.

"Becoming a SEAL was fucking hard as hell. The places my units and I are dropped into at times leave me wondering what the point is with all of it. Witnessing the horrors of war . . . it can mess with your head. I've taken lives. And I don't care what anyone says. That shit sticks with you. It changes you. It makes it so that I have to compartmentalize my life. When I'm on active duty and deployed, all the soft shit gets put away. It has to be. Otherwise the shit we do every day would cripple me, and I wouldn't be able to do it."

"So why do it, then?"

“Because it’s important, what we do. We’re the first line of defense against our enemies. And we have quite a few. Everyone wants what we have in this country, and they’re willing to kill to get it. I do it because it matters.”

“But you still didn’t tell me if you like it.”

James looked at me, and even in the moonlight, I felt the weight of his stare. “Being a SEAL isn’t what I do. It’s who I am. And yeah, I fucking love it, even with the stains on my soul.”

And while I knew it was wrong, I couldn’t help myself. I was drawn to James in a way I never had been with anyone else. Giving into desire, I leaned in and brushed my lips against his, craving the contact, needing him to understand that any dark spots on his soul didn’t bother me or make me think less of him.

But I wasn’t prepared for the buffet of sensations.

His lips were firm and tasted like beer. I started to retreat and end the brief kiss, but James cupped my nape to keep my lips prisoner. The rough callouses on his hands sent shivers cascading down my spine.

On a rough male groan, he slanted his mouth over mine. All my resistance faded away, and I was lost in him. His kiss reminded me of a shot of whiskey. It did this slow, smooth burn down my throat and into my belly, setting me aflame from the inside out.

And when his tongue plunged inside, tangling with mine, I went up in flames. The rest of the world ceased to exist. I began and ended with his lips on mine. Every part of my body responded and pulsed. I ached to feel his hands on me.

God, I wanted him.

I should stop this. I should back away. But how could I leave when it felt as if I'd been waiting for him my whole life?

Warning bells and alarms went berserk inside me, telling me I needed to put a stop to this. That I had to walk away right now. It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do.

But for once in my life, I was going to be selfish. Because the thought of leaving and never knowing him was unfathomable. And I kissed him like I never wanted to let him go.

Present Day

Groaning, I turned the alarm off. And blinked up at the darkened ceiling of my bedroom. It felt like I'd finally gotten to sleep seconds before my alarm woke me up.

All night long, I tossed and turned, replaying my conversation with James, being bombarded by memories, and trying to prep myself for today. But I'd gotten little sleep.

It wasn't my first sleepless night. Nor was it likely to be my last. Worrying came with the whole parenting gig. In fact, I think it was a requirement of the job.

How would Amelia react when she discovered James was her father? How would she react to me when we told her?

I didn't know, and that was the problem. It felt like I'd been tossed into shark-infested waters without a life raft.

Memories from the night Amelia was conceived had played on a recorded loop. I fell for James that night. The moment James touched me, I knew my marriage to Evan was over. I'd already been contemplating asking for a divorce, but meeting James had altered everything.

Because the two of us had been drawn together like magnets. And I'd fallen hard for the first time in my life. I

loved James with everything in me. What Evan and I had in our relationship hadn't come close. It wasn't that I hadn't loved Evan, because I had. I wouldn't have married him otherwise. But Evan wasn't remotely faithful. And by the third or fourth time I caught him during our first year of marriage, I'd already fallen out of love with him. We'd become uneasy friends and roommates who sometimes slept together.

He'd return from deployment, go out partying with his friends, and then come home smelling like another woman. There were times I'd hated him every bit as much as I had loved him.

And after my upbringing with a disinterested, distant father and a mother who'd abandoned me, his infidelity whittled away my confidence. It left me questioning if I was lovable.

But if it weren't for Evan, I never would have met James, nor had Amelia. And the thought of that was unfathomable. Amelia was the best thing I had ever done. I had James to thank for that. And I'd repaid him by keeping him out of his daughter's life.

I didn't deserve his forgiveness. I knew it. I knew what I'd done was shitty. But I wanted his forgiveness anyway.

Just like I still wanted him. He'd lost none of his potency.

Over the last decade, I'd forgotten what being in his presence was like. How he walked into a room and consumed every ounce of my attention. It was like standing near a downed electrical wire.

And damn him for not getting fat or going bald. I know he's a Navy SEAL and they're some of the most physically fit individuals on the planet. But god help me, he looked even better than he had ten years ago. His hair was still military-

style short, but the scruffy beard lining his angular jaw was new. And boy, did I want to feel it against my skin.

We'd only had one night together. But that night defined me. And I had another secret. One I hadn't admitted to anyone. There's been no one in my bed since. Because I fell for him that night, and although I tried, I never stopped loving him. How could I when I had a constant reminder of him?

There were so many nights I'd swear I would contact him in the morning only to chicken out. My self-confidence had taken too many beatings. And after his last words to me, I just couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone.

And while I might love him, we were different people now. I didn't even know if he was with someone. Besides, I doubted he would ever forgive me. Keeping Amelia's existence a secret had put the final nail in the coffin of our almost forever.

I knew it. But there was a part of me that still hoped he would forgive me, that we could move past it. Maybe not pick up where we left off, because that wasn't a good place, but perhaps start fresh and get to know each other again.

He'd been the comet streaking across the heavens, changing the direction of my life forever.

With an exhausted sigh, I finally rolled out of bed. Instead of prepping breakfast in my robe, which was my normal, I dressed for the day in a pair of jean overalls and a long-sleeved shirt with my hair pulled into a messy topknot. I didn't bother with makeup. They'd already seen me without, and all I was doing today was working on the house.

And introducing my daughter to her father for the first time.

For a hot minute in the kitchen, I considered making my coffee Irish, but decided against it. Wouldn't want to be swinging that sledgehammer a little tipsy. I might take out something important. Or proposition James. Neither of which would wind up working out in my favor.

Last night, when I was having a hard time sleeping, I prepped an egg casserole. It was always a winner when I served it to guests. And I figured the guys would love it because it's got both bacon and sausage in it, along with cheese and veggies. It's one of those great recipes that you can prep the night before and store in the fridge. The next morning, you just have to pop it in the oven for fifty minutes, and voilà, breakfast was ready. And as an added bonus, Amelia loved it too.

While the egg casserole baked in the oven, I worked on the biscuits. These wouldn't take long in the oven. But I still had to roll out the biscuit dough and use the stainless steel biscuit cutter to separate the dough.

And because I knew how much men liked to eat, I made two full cookie sheets of biscuits. My butter biscuits were always a hit. I made a special honey butter to go with them too. Always a crowd-pleaser with inn guests.

Once those were prepped and ready for the oven, I threw together some fresh berries and brewed a fresh pot of coffee. Then I set the dining room table. Checking the time, I popped the biscuits in the oven, then headed into Amelia's bedroom to get her ready for school.

But when I opened her bedroom door, she was already up and dressed, brushing her hair in front of her vanity mirror. She'd always been this way. When she was a baby, she would play in her crib until I woke up.

“Morning, baby.” I walked over to help her with her hair.

“Mama,” she hugged me before passing the brush over to me.

“How’d you sleep?” I asked, styling her hair in a French braid.

“Good. Am I smelling the egg casserole?”

I chuckled and set her brush down. “Yep. It should be out of the oven soon. My friends will be having breakfast with us.”

“Woo-hoo! It’s one of my favorite breakfasts.”

“I know. I’ve got butter biscuits baking in the oven as well, and plenty of them. Have you packed your backpack?”

“Yep. And I remembered my math homework too.”

“Good. Breakfast should be ready if you want to help me get the biscuits and honey butter on the table.”

“Sure, Mom.”

We headed into the kitchen. I donned oven mitts. But there was a firm knock on the door. They were prompt, if nothing else. “Would you go let them in, baby? I’ve got to get everything out of the oven.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ve got it.” She skipped out of the room.

I’d been blessed with the best daughter in the world, and I knew it.

Breakfast wound up being a lively affair. And I was right. They loved the casserole and biscuits so much they each had second helpings. Then I left them at the table while I ushered Amelia outside to wait for the bus, making sure she had her

backpack and lunch before sending her off to school on the big yellow bus.

When I headed back inside, James was in the lobby by the window. He'd been watching us. "And? Did you give it some thought?"

It was one of the many things that kept me up last night. But I saw through his anger and resolve to the aching hunger to be her dad. And guilt slammed into me again. There would be no future with him because what I'd done was unforgivable. I knew why I'd done it. But that didn't justify the hurt I'd caused him.

Which was why I wanted to make it as easy as possible for him. I wouldn't begrudge him any time he wanted to spend with her. "I think you and I can hash out what works for us both. We can type it up to formalize it. Make two copies, and then we take it before a notary to sign. That way we have everything spelled out, so there's no mystery or second-guessing."

His shoulders relaxed, and he nodded. "Good enough."

I opened my mouth to tell him I wouldn't fight him on his time with Amelia. That I would work with him, and we could figure out a schedule. And if he wanted her to visit him on base during the summer, I could fly down with her, and he could bring her back. We'd work it out. I knew with his job that I would need to be flexible.

But the stomp of boots as the others joined us in the lobby interrupted what I was going to say. Our discussion was best done without other ears present.

"Why don't you tell us what work needs to be done, and we can figure out where to get started." Wyatt nodded toward

the walls.

“Yeah. What do you need the most help with?” Aiden asked.

“After the insurance adjuster finished his inspection, I had a contractor give me an estimate. While his price was more than I could afford, he left me with an estimate that included a list of the work he recommended. And that’s what I’ve been doing. I’ve taken it a bit at a time while Amelia’s in school. But this is the list of things that still need to be done.” I pulled out the binder with all my plans for the remodel. It even had my paint swatches and the color of the Pergo wood floors I wanted to install.

“Game room? Library? Playroom? What are these for?” James asked with a furrowed brow.

“Since we’re starting over from scratch in the basement, I figured I would divide it. Use half of it for storage. But then use the other half to make the inn a bit more family friendly. Be able to advertise that it’s great for family reunions and the like.” They were all silent, reviewing the list and my plans. And I wanted their approval. Not that I needed it, but it would be nice to have someone tell me I wasn’t crazy.

“Clever. It’s a good angle,” Wyatt stated. James simply stared with an unreadable gaze.

I hated that he hid his thoughts from me. I hate that he hated me. When I could never hate him or fault him for his feelings. And I wanted to get on my knees and beg him to forgive me. But I didn’t have a right to ask.

The guys discussed the best starting points while I stood in turmoil, trying to listen to what they were saying. It was Wyatt

who finally said, “I think we should take a look at the basement first before we map out any strategies.”

“That’s as good a place as any. Follow me, gentlemen.” As a group, we headed into the basement.

This had been the worst hit. There were still shelves and furniture to get up the stairs and toss away. I’d been thinking about hiring some movers just to have them carry this stuff up the stairs and toss it in the dumpster outside in the driveway.

“All this stuff needs to go?” Wyatt nodded toward the furniture.

“Yeah, there was five feet of water in here. I carried up what I could handle. Amelia even helped me with a few items. But this stuff was too heavy for me to carry by myself. And it all needs to go.”

“We can handle this stuff easily. We can get the bigger pieces out first, then break the shelves down. Between the four of us, we should be able to get all this stuff out today,” Lucas said with a shrug, like it’d be a piece of cake. And for them, it likely wouldn’t be difficult.

“How long will you have the dumpster?” James asked, contemplating the room.

It was a lot, and I knew it. This area had been storage for most everything from extra sheets and bedding to rollaway beds and fold-up event tables and chairs. Once the remodel was complete, I would have to purchase all new. And that’s another reason I want to do the remodel myself. I earmarked part of the insurance money to replenish all of this stuff. “As long as I need it. I’ve already had them change it out once. But there should be plenty of room for all this stuff.”

“We’ve got this. You can go back to what you were doing yesterday. Is there anything down here you want to keep?” Wyatt asked.

“No. Nothing was salvageable, not even the washers and dryers. I’m going to have to buy new on everything, which is why I’m doing it myself.”

Rolling up his sleeves, Wyatt nodded. “Got it. We can get this stuff taken care of this morning. And then we can figure out what to start on next when it’s done.”

“Good enough. I appreciate the help. Truly. Lunch is at noon. I’ve got soup and sandwiches.”

“You don’t have to keep feeding us.” Aiden put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Y’all are saving me from having to hire movers to get this stuff up and out of here. The least I can do is feed you.”

“Hell, yeah.” Lucas grinned like he’d hit the jackpot. “You won’t see me turning down your cooking.”

Was he flirting with me? I smiled at his charming antics, only to glance at James and nearly blanch at his stony glare. He looked like he wanted to thrash me. Like he was worried I was about to take up with one of his friends.

If only he knew the truth. Because the only man I wanted was him. From the moment we met, he’d ruined me for other men.

A few years ago, I forced myself into the dating world. And I did it while chiding myself over the torch I carried for James. Calling myself a fool for mooning over a man who wanted nothing to do with me. But out of the fifteen first dates I went on during that year, not a single one made it to a second date.

Because they weren't James.

I couldn't remember the last time I watched the clock this intently. Rory told me Amelia was usually home from school by three. At noon, I skipped out on lunch to shower and then headed to the store. I wasn't going to be introduced to my daughter for the first time without having a gift of some kind. And I went a little overboard, but she'd never gotten a present from me. I even had the sales lady gift wrap the stuff for me.

Thank fuck I had the small trailer hitched to the back of my bike. Otherwise, I wouldn't have anywhere to store this stuff on the drive back.

I reached the inn with less than thirty minutes to spare. And I'd never been so nervous in my entire life. I'd infiltrated enemy lines, survived fights with Taliban and ISIS insurgents, jumped out of airplanes, and repelled out of a helicopter into enemy territory. But none of it had terrified me as much as this moment.

"Why don't you have a seat in the living room? I'll bring her back once she's off the bus. And we can tell her together."

"Good plan. Lead the way." With my arms laden with presents, I followed Rory back to her section of the inn.

“You didn’t have to buy her presents. She’s going to love you no matter what you give her.”

“I have a lot of birthdays and Christmases to make up for,” I replied with more venom in my voice than I’d intended.

Dark storm clouds entered her eyes. “Those weren’t your fault. They were mine. Have a seat. She should be home any minute.”

Rory left me in her living room without another word. I suspected the upcoming introduction was as hard for her as it was for me. Would Amelia be glad that I was her father? Would she reject me once she knew? Would she be angry and ask me why I hadn’t come to see her before now?

I didn’t have an answer to those questions.

Rory and I hadn’t discussed what my response should be if those questions came up. And I knew I was counting chickens before they hatched. But in my experience, it was better to be prepared because the chicken you didn’t want to hatch usually did.

Rory’s living room was warm and welcoming. The furniture was on the older side, but had been lovingly cared for and maintained. There was a mix of framed photos on the tan walls. A combination of candid and posed shots of the two of them. If nothing else, Rory had given our daughter a comfortable, safe place to grow up, and I couldn’t fault her for it. I wanted to, but that was my anger speaking.

The door to their quarters shut with a loud thump.

I went ramrod straight in my seat on the checkered couch. Sweat rolled down my back. This felt worse than waiting on the enemy to strike. At least I knew how to deal with that. But I was totally out of my depth here.

“And then, Mom, Carly laughed so hard milk came out her nose.” Amelia’s young, musical voice had my heart clenching.

“That must have been quite a sight,” Rory replied, her words tight, as they entered the living room.

Amelia spotted me on the couch first and frowned in confusion. “Mom, why is your friend on our couch?”

“Come have a seat, baby.” Rory steered her over to the couch and had her sit beside me so that she was between us.

And fuck, I hoped that my expression was calm and friendly when I felt anything but. Hell, give me insurgents any day of the week. Because I had no idea how to tell this beautiful creature I was her father.

“Am I in trouble?” Amelia asked with trepidation, glancing back and forth between us.

Rory put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. “No, baby, no, not at all. Unless you’re hiding a note from Miss Davies because you misbehaved in school. Then we’d be having a different conversation.”

“I’m not.” Amelia shook her head solemnly. “So then, what’s going on?” And she glanced at me with nerves in her eyes before turning back to her mom.

“Okay, well, you see . . . um, do you remember how I told you that your dad was overseas fighting for our country and one day he would be back to see you?” Rory asked, her focus completely on our kid.

Amelia nervously glanced between us again, ramping my nerves to epic heights. And I almost blurted it out, wanting to holler I was her dad from the rooftops. But I was out of my depth. Not that it had ever stopped me before. Except, I

wanted this first meeting between us to go off without a hitch. So I let Rory lead the introduction.

“Yes.” Amelia nodded nervously.

Rory caressed her head and nodded toward me. “Baby, this is your father, James Nolan.”

Amelia’s eyes landed on me. They were so much like my mother’s, it was uncanny. Her bottom lip trembled. “You’re my dad? And you came back for me? You really came?”

“Of course I came back for you. I’ve just been overseas.” Which was a lie, but I wasn’t going to make this harder than it was. “And I’d like to know everything about you. From here on out, you can call me anytime you want, and I’m going to give you my email too. When I’m deployed overseas, email is the best. You can write me and tell me about your days at school, your friends, anything you want.” I waited, wondering if I said something wrong. I had no idea what I was doing. I’d never been a father before. I held my breath as she stared with tears rimming her lashes.

And she floored me. With a cry, Amelia threw herself into my arms and hugged me. It was the most natural thing in the world to hug her back. Her hair smelled like coconuts and that sickly sweet scent of sweat. My heart came close to bursting out of my chest. Love more powerful than anything I’d ever felt before, even more than the love I had for Rory once upon a time, hit me like a rogue wave.

I held my daughter in my arms for the first time, blinking back tears. And in that moment, I knew I’d slay dragons for her. I’d defend her with my last breath. I’d lay down my life to save hers. A love purer than anything I’d ever known washed over me. And I glanced over her head at Rory. There were tears in her lovely eyes—happy tears.

While I wasn't ready to forgive her yet for keeping Amelia from me because I'd missed out on so much. But maybe, just maybe, we could mend fences—for Amelia's sake. We'd be connected for the rest of our lives because of the little girl in my arms. And I didn't want a war. My life had been consumed with it for the last eighteen years. I wanted peace and family. I wanted to be this girl's family.

"I'm going to get started on dinner. You guys can hang out for a bit." Rory left me with Amelia.

I nodded in response, then leaned back a bit, still not ready to release my daughter just yet, and said to Amelia, "I brought you some gifts. I wasn't sure what you'd like. Would you like to open them?"

"You brought me presents?"

"Yeah." I grinned. "I figure I missed a few birthdays and Christmases and wanted to make good on it. Go ahead. Open them. And if there's anything you don't like, we can take it back."

Amelia squealed in excitement as she grabbed the first of the gifts on the coffee table, ripping into them with glee. She gasped at the black leather biker jacket.

"Why don't you try it on and make sure it fits?"

And she did. It was a mite loose, but that meant she would grow into it a bit. It would still work when I took her out on my Harley. But I was also thinking I needed to add a sidecar to my bike. I didn't want her in danger. Putting her in the seat behind me on the bike just didn't sit well with me, but I wouldn't break my promise to her.

"It's so soft. I love it." She hugged the jacket against her chest like it was the most precious thing she'd been given.

And it made me feel ten feet tall.

“There’s plenty more there.” I watched her open the box with the motorcycle helmet that should fit her and then the gloves with ribald enthusiasm.

But it was the last gift that had her gasping. She glanced at me with wide eyes and her mouth open in surprise. “Is that real?”

Chuckling at her endearing expression, I nodded. “Yeah. Do you like it?”

“I love it. I’ve never owned a real diamond before.” She pulled the gold necklace with the single diamond on it out of the jewelry box with reverence.

“Here. Want me to help you put it on?”

She nodded and handed it over, then turned around. My hands fumbled a bit as I undid the clasp and then looped it around her neck.

“I can’t believe you bought me a diamond.”

“My dad did the same for my sister when she was about your age. He believed a girl’s first diamond should come from her dad.” And I understood my dad in ways I never had until now. He’d been stern with clearly defined family traditions because they were important. Or at least that’s what he told my sister and me.

“I have grandparents?” She issued an amazed exclamation, like the thought never occurred to her.

“Yeah,” I chuckled, “And I know they can’t wait to meet you. You’ve also got an aunt, uncle, and a couple of cousins about your age.”

She spun around, brimming with enthusiasm. “Can I meet them?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Maybe not this leave time. But your mom and I will work out a time when you could go with me to Tennessee and meet them. What do you think about that?”

She tossed her arms around my neck. “Thank you, Dad. I’d love that.”

My heart rolled over in my chest. She called me Dad. Holy fuck! I’d remember this moment the rest of my life. Being called Dad for the first time had me fighting back tears—again. At this point, I could sink an aircraft carrier with the number of tears I kept from falling.

“Would you like to see my soccer trophies?”

“You’re into soccer?” Now that was something we could talk about. “What position do you play?”

“They still rotate us between positions, but my favorite is forward.”

“That’s the position I played in high school.” Damn, she was a chip off the old block.

“Really? Come see them.” She gripped my hand and led me through their home. We passed through the kitchen, where Rory stood at the huge kitchen island chopping veggies and gave us a smile as we passed by. But then my attention shifted back to Amelia.

We spent the next two hours talking. She showed me her soccer medal collection. Then I took her outside and showed her my motorcycle. When she asked about taking a ride, I explained that since it was already starting to get late and dark out, we’d need to wait until this weekend. If she wanted to go riding, I wouldn’t deny her, but I would get a sidecar installed.

For the first time in my life, I had the thought that a motorcycle just wasn't practical.

Then we had dinner with everyone. Amelia was animated with those knuckleheads and asked for stories about me. Her enthusiasm was addicting. And fuck, but I didn't want to go back. For so many years, I'd donned my uniform and done the job without question. I went where I was needed, no matter how bad the hell hole was. I hadn't blinked over six-month and nine-month deployments. It was part of the job. I packed my bag, said goodbye to my family, and then boarded a plane or ship or whatever manner of transportation I'd been assigned to and left.

In eighteen years of putting on that uniform, I'd never questioned going back. When it was time to report for duty, I showed up. But staring at my daughter, I didn't fucking want to head back. Not until we had time to build our relationship.

With my retirement coming up in two years, I'd be looking into relocating to Bangor. I never considered Maine a place I'd live. I had always figured I would either head back to Tennessee or stay in Virginia and get a job with a government contractor. They were always hiring former SEALs.

But Amelia changed everything. Granted, I had no clue what the fuck I would do here when I did retire except be close enough to be here whenever Amelia needed me.

After dinner, I helped her with her math homework before she had to get ready for bed. Rory even let me tuck her into bed for the night.

"Dad?" she said when I was at her bedroom door. It was still a jolt being called that.

"I'm so glad you came for me. I love the presents."

My heart swelled with love. “I am too. Now get some sleep, or you’ll be tired at school all day.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Night, Amelia. I love you.” I left her room in a daze. Today had gone better than I could have ever dared hope.

I headed down the hall and found Rory in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with her hands over her face, sobbing her heart out. These weren’t feigned tears to get my sympathy. They were real and her pain deep. They weren’t happy tears.

The years and strife between us melted away. My feet carried me of their own accord until I stood in front of her. And I did what came naturally. I wrapped my arms around her and held her. And she didn’t fight me, which meant she was really upset. She clung to me as she cried.

“Hush, it can’t be that bad,” I murmured against the crown of her head, stroking a hand down her back. And I was struck again at how well she fit in my arms. I hated how right she felt. And that my body came to life holding her close again after all this time.

“I knew how much she wanted her father in her life. I just never realized . . . and it’s all my fault. If I would have just gotten over my issues. I really didn’t mean to keep her from you. That was never my intent, and I know it doesn’t make up for it.” She sniffled and then gave me a small nudge to release her.

And fuck, but I didn’t want to because it felt like she belonged there. I’d forgotten how she felt in my arms. How her scent wrapped around me, and every dip and curve aligned with me. But I did. Only to have her stare up at me with those

pale green eyes, looking lost and fragile. Eyes that made me want to sink into her and never let her go. And I didn't mean just for the night.

“For what it's worth, I'm so sorry. And while I can't make up for the time you lost, maybe I could help you see the time you did lose.” She nodded at the table behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I sucked in a breath at the photo albums stacked on top. There were nine total, and they were as thick as my wrist. In a trance, needing to see what Amelia looked like as a baby, I walked over to the table.

Rory followed me. “It starts with her baby book. I did one book a year. Although this year isn't finished. I know it's not traditional, but after I started with the baby book, I was hooked. And Amelia helps me now with it. Any of the pictures you want, just note them, and I can make you copies. I'll make you copies of whatever you want, including her birth certificate.”

“When's her birthday?” It was one thing I didn't know. Like so many things.

“March first. Amelia James Nolan was born at 4:57 a.m. during a blizzard with thundersnow, at the hospital in the next town over. She was six pounds, nine ounces, with the angriest cry. The poor thing was so pissed off at being born.”

“You gave her my name?” My daughter had my name.

“Yes. Because she's yours.”

On autopilot, riding high on my emotions, I kissed her. I kissed her just like I had back then—the night we made Amelia.

The moment our lips touched, everything, and I meant every single fucking thing about that night, all my thoughts

and feelings came rushing back. Our kiss transported me. Suddenly, I was back on the beach, holding a woman in my arms that I saw a future with. That I ached to have a future with. And it rocked the foundation of my world for the second time in my life.

Because I knew with a single fucking kiss that Rory was the only woman on this planet who would ever make me feel this way.

I broke the kiss. I had to. Otherwise, I'd take her up against the counter and damn the consequences.

But we couldn't go there again. I couldn't. Anger and desire mingled into a potent connection. I didn't hate her. I could never truly hate her. But I was still pissed. And it was best if we didn't cross these lines again.

She pressed her fingers to her lips and backed away. "If you'd like to take those up to your room, you're welcome to."

I opened my mouth and then shut it. Any excuse for why I kissed her sounded feeble, even to my ears. Instead, I conceded with a nod and scooped the first few up. "I'll look at the rest tomorrow."

Her smile was tight. "That's fine. And thanks for all the gifts. You didn't need to do that, but you made Amelia's day. Hell, her whole month."

"It wasn't a big deal."

"James, for your first day of fatherhood, you passed with flying colors. Enjoy the rest of your night."

Warmth spread through me at the unexpected compliment. With a final nod, I headed back to the main part of the inn.

I went upstairs, eager to get to my room and go through the books. I wanted to see everything. Aiden's door stood open, and my buddies were in his room, drinking beer.

"How'd it go?" Wyatt asked as I passed the room.

"Fine." I shoved the door open, juggling the photo albums.

"Come, have a beer with us," Lucas hollered, already well on his way to being drunk.

"Can't tonight. See you in the morning." And I shut the door and locked it. I was too invested in the photo albums to care about having a beer with my friends. I didn't care that we were all being reassigned and that Wyatt would be out for good in a few months. Over the years, I'd had hundreds of beers with them.

But this was the first time I would see what my daughter looked like after she was born. And I sat on the bed with Amelia's baby book and cried.

*A*t the blare of the alarm, I silenced it and stared at my ceiling. How had we gotten here? The path to getting to this point was so complicated.

James kissed me last night. I pressed my fingers against my mouth at the memory of his lips on mine. Because he'd really kissed me. The moment he did, his kiss swept me back ten years. It felt like there were no hard words between us. And I couldn't avoid the truth no matter how inconvenient.

James was the only man for me.

I tried dating and doing all the things to move on once Amelia was old enough. But in the back of my mind, I compared everyone to James.

Last night proved why. Because no one kissed me like James. He kissed me and the world around me dissolved until he was all that was left.

And I couldn't help the errant thought. What if this was our chance? What if he could forgive me?

I knew it was a long shot. But I saw the way he looked at Amelia, the wonder in his eyes. The shock on his face when she hugged him.

He had family in Tennessee who loved him. Although they rarely visited, if my memory serves.

He was a hard man who had seen the worst of people. But maybe if I showed him how good it could be with us, he'd stay. Granted, I knew he had to report back to finish up his twenty years to get his retirement. We could be his home base. The place he came whenever he was on leave.

Amelia and I had everything we could want: a great place to live and the job of my dreams. She went to a great school and had loads of friends. We had it all. Everything except James. He was the missing piece of our puzzle. And now there was nothing but our past and my failures standing in the way.

With a new sense of purpose, I rose and started breakfast. While the quiches were in the oven, I checked on Amelia. She was already up and wore a smile that could light up the sun.

When the guys arrived for breakfast, James's pleasure was evident because Amelia had the leather jacket he'd given her slung over the back of her chair. She'd already told me she was wearing it to school to show her friends what her dad had gotten her.

Amelia was soaking up having her dad in her life for the first time. And I shoved away back the guilt. It was a mistake I would carry. I only hoped she wouldn't resent me as she grew. Because eventually I would have to tell her the truth.

I was the reason she hadn't known her dad until now.

But I wasn't going to worry about that now. I could only put one front in front of the other.

After breakfast, James went outside with us while we waited for Amelia's bus. When it came rattling down the street, she gave me a hug and then James. And before she let

him go, she asked, “You’ll be here when I get home from school? You’re not leaving yet, right?”

“I’m not going anywhere. Maybe you could show me some of your soccer moves when you get home.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now get going. The bus won’t wait forever,” James said.

“I know. Bye.” She raced over to the bus and bounded up the stairs. My heart felt light at seeing how happy she was.

We waved as the bus drove away.

“Does it ever get easier?”

“What?” I glanced at him.

“Watching her head off without you there to protect her.”

“Absolutely not. Until she was born, I never knew what true fear was or that I would second guess every single decision I made. I’m not saying it gets easier. I think you just get used to the discomfort. But the worry never fully goes away.”

“And here I used to tease my mom when she’d get teary-eyed every time I’d get deployed.”

I laughed. “Yeah, a kid has a way of bringing things full circle. But there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.”

James rubbed at his chest. “The next time I’m home from deployment, I’d like to take her to Tennessee. Not on my Harley. I’ve got a truck back at my place on base. I’d like her to meet her grandparents and cousins.”

“As long as it’s not during school, I would be fine with that.”

“You won’t worry?”

“Of course I will. But I also won’t begrudge you the time you want to spend with her. If it’s during the school year, you’ll have a free room at the inn—or wherever we are. When she’s not in school, if you want her to come stay with you. I could fly down with her and you could fly with her back up. We’ll figure it out.”

“Huh.” He shook his head.

“What?”

“I didn’t think you’d be this amenable.”

“James, she’s your daughter too. It was wrong of me not to tell you about her. It was a decision I made at the time.”

“Why did you? I know I said some things to you the last time we spoke. But I can’t wrap my head around you keeping this from me. And I’m not trying to start a fight. I’m just trying to understand.”

“Once I realized I was pregnant, I came to see you. I went to that bar you guys always liked to go to. You were with your friends. You had your arm around some woman, and it looked like you were having the time of your life. I wanted that for you, even though it broke my heart to see you with another woman. And I didn’t know how to take that away from you. Being married to Evan all those years, I knew some of what you guys experienced on deployment. Not the classified stuff, Evan never divulged that, but he did tell me about some of the firefights. And I knew my pregnancy would have been a burden. So I left and came here. And I didn’t tell you.”

“Was it your way of getting back at me for being with another woman?”

“If you really think that of me, then you never knew me, James. Yes, it hurt. But I’m the one who messed things up with us. I know that. I’ve paid for it. And that night, I should have told you I was married to Evan. Even if I was on the cusp of asking him for a divorce. But I didn’t. I made a mistake. But I don’t regret that night, nor would I want to take it back. Because that night, Amelia was conceived, and I can’t imagine my life without her.”

James stared down at the concrete. “I don’t know that I can ever forgive you for keeping her from me.”

“That makes two of us,” I said, as my heart painfully squeezed. “And if you don’t, then you don’t. But I won’t begrudge you any time you want to spend with her. And when you retire from the military, if you retire, I should say, and if you want her to come stay with you for the summer, we can work that out.”

“I still don’t know what I’m doing,” he admitted glumly.

I really laughed then. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. None of us do. It’s a crapshoot every damn day. Some days you earn those gold stars. And then other days you think you shouldn’t be entrusted with a Beta fish, let alone a human child. It’s hard, and it’s every day, but you figure it out as you go. And if you have any questions about how I’ve done things with her when it comes to discipline, responsibilities, play time, favorite meals, just ask. I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

He nodded. “I just don’t want to screw it up.”

“You will. It’s part of being a parent. You’ll make mistakes. I know I certainly have over the years. And I’m sure I will make plenty more before she heads off to college. But here’s something that might help—she already thinks you’re

amazing and loves you. Focus on the love portion, and the rest will come.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. And it looks like taking the job up here worked out for you.”

“It did.” I remembered when I first pulled up to the inn all those years ago. I’d been heartbroken and disillusioned by life. And I’d fallen in love the moment I looked at the place.

“How did you wind up owning the inn?”

“The original owners sold it to me three years ago. When Sue was diagnosed with dementia, Henry knew he couldn’t run the inn and take care of his wife. So he offered me a bargain price to buy the place and take it off their hands with the stipulation that they could continue to live here because he didn’t want to move Sue from the only home she’d known for fifty years. But then, Henry got sick right after he sold it to me. Cancer. I took care of them until they each passed.”

“Why? Why did you take care of them? Didn’t they have family?”

“No. They had a son who died years ago, and he didn’t have any kids. They took me in and gave me a job doing something I love. And when I told them I was pregnant, it was Sue who went to Lamaze classes with me. It was Henry who drove me to the hospital when I went into labor. They took care of me and became my family. They adored Amelia. Treated her like she was their grandchild and she loved them back.”

“I’m glad you had help. And I’m sorry for being such an ass back then. Maybe ... it doesn’t matter now. The past is done.”

“Why did you kiss me last night?”

He stared as if he was weighing how to answer. His gaze dipped to my lips and back up. For a second, he looked like the James I'd met that night, but then he shook himself and was a total badass stoic warrior, closing himself off from me. "I don't know. It was an emotional day, and I just—sorry, it won't happen again."

I stepped closer, invading his space. "Or maybe you kissed me because you wanted to. Maybe you did it because there's always been this pull between us."

He scoffed. "That's preposterous. And like I said, it won't happen again." But he didn't back away. He wouldn't, though. It wasn't in his makeup to back down or retreat. It was one of the things I loved about him.

"Have you stopped to consider that maybe we're being given a second chance to make it right? Because I have. I never stopped thinking about you or wanting the best for you. How could I when every day I had a tiny reminder of you?"

"You don't even know if I'm in a relationship or not," he argued, but I noticed the battle within him.

"Are you?" Please say no. If he said he was, I would back away and let him go.

"No. If I was with someone, I never would have crossed that line last night."

I winced at the dig. "Well, neither am I." I stared at him for a moment, letting him see everything I felt. And then I retreated under his watchful glare. "All I'm saying is think about it."

And then I left him standing on the driveway. When I reached the front door, he said, "Rory."

My heart thudded as I turned around. "Yeah?"

“I never stopped thinking about you either.” And there he was, my James. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

Hope bubbled inside me. He’d given me an opening. And I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading over my face if I tried. But I didn’t want to stop it. I needed him to understand I still carried a torch for him. And had never stopped wanting him.

He inhaled deeply, shaking his emotions off like a wet dog. “I’m going for a ride. Be back in an hour to help with the rest of the demolition.”

Even though there was a small flutter that he was taking off and not coming back, I beat back the fear. “All right. We’ll see you when you return.”

And then I headed inside. We hadn’t necessarily cleared the air. But we’d called a truce. And while there were no declarations or commitments, it was a start.

Maybe this time, we wouldn’t screw it up.

The ride did me a world of good. There were some amazing scenic back country roads through Acadia National Park. And even though winter still had its hooks in the area, there were also signs of spring on the horizon. I was gone longer than I intended. I had to get my head on straight. I was all tangled up with my emotions after the conversation with Rory.

God, just knowing she never stopped thinking about me spun me for a loop.

When I walked through the front door, Rory glanced my way, and relief entered her eyes. She smiled like she was happy to see me. And then went back to work.

Woman worked like a stevedore from early morning until night. And I wanted to help her and Amelia out as much as possible, take some of the load off her shoulders. When I retired, I'd move here and do just that. Until then, I would be here whenever I was on leave. Maybe I could even have my parents come up here and stay at the inn.

Being near Rory again, knowing she still wanted me, god, I didn't know what to think or feel.

I wanted her, though. Fuck, I never stopped wanting her.

But she'd given me a mountain of information to digest, and I still hadn't worked my way through it all. Especially not with the bomb she'd dropped. Did she really want us to try again? Should we?

We were both single. And we had a kid together. What if we could make it work this time? I couldn't believe I was even considering it. We had so many things standing in our way. Mostly my hangups.

With good reason.

I was glad she told me about their lives. That the people she'd worked for had treated them like family. It did my heart a world of good.

As for the rest, fuck if I knew what to do.

For now, I wasn't going to do anything other than help tear out the rest of the basement floor.

We spent the rest of the day until Amelia arrived home from school finishing up the demo and carting everything out to the dumpster. And now the inn was ready for the next phase, the plumbing, the electrical, and the HVAC system.

Rory had professionals slated to handle those tasks, which I figured would be best. I could demolish, put up walls and flooring, and paint, but the more intricate stuff was out of my wheelhouse. The plumber would be here in the morning. From what I understood, the company had already fixed the pipes that burst. But the rest were old and needed to be replaced. However, the electrician and HVAC specialists wouldn't be here until Friday.

I'd help as long as I could. I hadn't told the guys I wasn't going to finish the trip with them yet. It was another

conversation I didn't want to have but was staring me in the face.

Amelia bounded up to me after her snack. "Mom says since I have a test to study for, whatever we're doing can only take an hour."

"She's right. School's important. Why don't you show me your soccer skills?"

"Really? You want to play soccer with me?" She was bouncing on the balls of her feet. The excitement rippled off her.

"Sure do."

"We'll come too." Lucas sidled up to us with a stupid cheesy grin. "Maybe we can have a scrimmage match in the backyard."

Amelia squealed. "Really? Okay. Let me grab my ball." She raced off down the hall.

I shook my head. She was priceless in her exuberance. And I wanted to bask in it. I didn't think I'd ever had anyone this excited to spend time with me. I mean, my parents and sister loved when I made it back home on leave. But this was different.

Amelia returned in a flash with a soccer ball clutched in her hands and a jacket on.

We headed into the backyard. It was huge. A good acre of real estate. There was a patio with outdoor tables and chairs that were currently covered. The manicured lawn needed care. The trees around the edges of the property needed to have the dead branches trimmed and the bases mulched.

Around the side was an area that was a great location for a pool. In fact, there was an untapped goldmine in the backyard with this much property. And on the other side was the garden that led to a gazebo. I'd bet in the spring and summer, with all the plants and flowers in bloom, that it looked picturesque.

There were plenty of improvements Rory could make that would turn it into a showstopper of a yard. Maybe before I left, I could leave her a list of things to look into doing. She had enough space back here to put in one of those fancy barbecue pits with the stone enclosure and expand the patio so she could put a bunch of tables out here for guests to eat when it was nice out.

Dammit. They were my ideas, not Rory's. This was her place, not mine ... unless I wanted it to be.

I shook off my musings as we broke off into teams. It was me, Amelia, and Aiden on one side, Lucas and Wyatt on the other. And for all her bubbly personality, Amelia turned into a beast on the field. She was surprisingly good. I could see her playing in high school and college. She was focused and driven.

And she ran circles around men who were used to running with a fifty-pound pack on their back. I think we were all surprised at how quick she was on her feet and the way she darted in and out, dribbling the ball down the field or through the backyard.

Jesus, my kid was astounding. I know I didn't have a hand in raising her, but I definitely spied my genes in her attitude as she dominated the game. We were out of practice, and she ran circles around us. Our team won three to one.

"Great job." I high-fived her. "I'm really impressed."

“Thanks. This summer I’m trying out for club soccer. Mom says if I work really hard and practice, I might get a spot on the team. But it’s okay if I don’t too.”

“She’s right. I could show you some things to help you if you’d like. Just some techniques I learned when I played in high school that made all the difference. And there are some exercises you can do to help you get stronger. It’s just some basic body movements that, if you work on, will make a difference in your performance on the field.”

“That sounds amazing. Thanks, Dad!” She tossed her arms around me. I didn’t know if I would ever get used to the joy that suffused my being every time she called me Dad.

I hugged her back. “Then that’s what we’ll do. Now get on inside and study for that test. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Okay. Thanks, guys,” she said with a small wave and headed inside.

And then I glanced at them. Lucas and Aiden had smiles on their faces. But Wyatt appeared pensive. A small frown marred his brow.

“Spit it out, Wyatt. What’s churning in that brain of yours?”

Wyatt sighed with a wince. “Dude, you’re not going to like it. We have to leave by Sunday if we’re going to make the last three stops in time. I sat down and calculated the mileage and travel time.”

“What about Ben?” We’d left him back in South Carolina with Moira Kelly. He was helping her out with a stalking issue.

“He messaged me that we should head to the next stop without him. From what I’m gathering, he’s not going to make

the rest of the trip.”

Fuck. We were supposed to do this together. But life was intervening and pulling us away one at a time.

I stared at them with my heart aching because I knew, and I think they did too, what my response would be. “I can’t leave. I’m sorry. I know we’re supposed to deliver all the letters together. But I can’t leave Amelia just yet. We’re just getting to know each other, and I need more time with her. I think I’m going to stay until I have to report back to base.”

“Or Rory? You’re not ready to leave her either,” Wyatt surmised.

When it came to Rory, my feelings were a quagmire. I didn’t know what to think or feel about her. Not after the kiss we shared the other night. Nor the progress we’d made toward mending fences. And whether Rory and I wound up together wasn’t the point. I wanted us to be co-parents. To do that successfully, we had to mend the rift between us. But I nodded in agreement because he was right. “Or Rory.”

Wyatt glanced at the house with a calculating look in his eyes. “You know, this would be a great place to retire. It’s going to need a lot of upkeep over the years. The yard has a lot of potential.”

“You think I’m going to go from challenging life-and-death situations to running an inn? I don’t know the first thing about it.” But I understood what he was getting at. Because I’d looked at the yard and saw the possibilities.

“No, you don’t, but she does. And that woman has plans for this place. It’s up to you if you want to be part of those plans.”

“She hid my daughter from me for nine years,” I argued, unable to keep my anger from my voice. It was a bone of contention I couldn’t seem to get past.

“That’s true. And you have every right to be pissed.” Lucas clapped me on the shoulder.

Wyatt said, “She did. But she’s not begrudging you any time with her. In fact, she’s been overly generous.”

And she had cried desolate, guilt-ridden tears the other night. She knew it had been wrong and was trying to atone. I just needed time to work through my anger. But I didn’t know what things would look like once I did. Could we start over? This time from a place of honesty with clear intentions on both sides. “I don’t know if that’s the right direction. Honestly, I’m making it up as I go along because I don’t know what to do.”

I knew what I wanted. And it was a terrifying prospect opening that door again. Because ten years ago, I thought she was it for me, only to have the rug yanked out from under my feet.

“You want to know what I see?” Wyatt asked with that calm demeanor of his. It didn’t matter where we were; he never faltered. It drove me bug fuck half the time.

“What the hell, why not? Lay it on me.”

“You’ve got a ready-made family inside that inn. One any man would count themselves fortunate to have. They’re waiting for the right man to step up. You need to decide if that’s going to be you. And if it’s not you, then you need to be prepared for the day another man will step into that role.”

The thought of any man raising Amelia, or being with Rory, brought all my demons rushing hell bent to the surface. And those fuckers were foaming at the mouth to claw their

way through my life. “Rory lied about being married when we first hooked up. How can I trust anything where she’s concerned?”

Lucas and Aiden just shook their head. Wyatt rolled his eyes. “And here I thought you were smarter than that. If I’m understanding the timeline correctly, she divorced Evan shortly after you two hooked up. Don’t you think that means something? Because I sure as shit think it does. I remember Evan talking about how much he fucked up with Rory after he got the divorce papers. Don’t you?”

I sucked in a breath at the memory. It had been the night before we were being deployed. We went to a local bar not far off base, and Evan had been crying into his beer over how much he’d fucked things up. I remember how much I’d wanted to shout that they were the perfect pair, cheating on each other and making other people believe they were available when it was all lies.

I’d been in my own personal hell that night. So terribly jealous of Evan because he hadn’t known what a prize he had. But it still didn’t mean anything. It couldn’t. “It could mean nothing.”

“Your mind is fucking with you. You and I know that anything is possible. That if we work at something and go after it with all we’ve got, we make it happen. Because what if it does mean something? What if those two are everything you’ve been searching for? Because I’m here to tell you, James, this is the first time I’ve seen a spark of life in you in years. And it’s not because of our road trip, but because of those two.”

Fuck. He was right. But then the fucker usually was. Being near her again, all my feelings, the ones I had buried way

down deep had resurrected. And I'd been avoiding my feelings. Compartmentalizing them because it was the easier route than taking a hard look at how much Rory had hurt me. Her betrayal was acid on my tongue. "I don't know if I can trust her."

To me, trust was everything. It was the bedrock foundation of any relationship, romantic or otherwise. And once you lose that trust, even if it's only doubt cast upon that trust, then all you were doing was building castles in the sand. There was nothing firm backing it.

"Jesus. You need to deal with your issues. I'm ordering you to stay behind. Because don't you think it's worth finding out?"

"You're ordering me? Are you fucking kidding me?" Why was I arguing when it was what I wanted anyway?

"Do I look like I fucking kidding? I'm still your commanding officer until you join your new unit at the end of the month. And I'm telling you that your place is here sorting your shit out. We'll handle the last three letters. If nothing else, you stay here and get to know your kid."

I grimaced. But I wouldn't buck his orders. Wyatt never issued orders lightly. When he did, if someone tried to buck them, he made them pay for it. "Fine. I'll stay and deal with my shit. But you guys are staying through Sunday?"

Wyatt slid his hands into his pockets with a wince. "No. That was only if you were dead set on going with us and we couldn't talk you out of it. We'll give it another day and then leave Friday morning."

In two days, I would be alone with Rory and Amelia.

The prospect terrified me. Because without them here as a buffer, there was no telling what I would do.

On Friday morning, I woke up extra early because I wanted to do something nice for the guys. I'd already baked cookies for them last night to take on their drive. But I wanted to do more because they'd done so much for me in the few days they stayed. They'd put me weeks ahead on the inn rehab with all their help.

That's why I found myself in my kitchen at five in the morning, baking muffins for them to take with them. I knew they didn't have a ton of room and were traveling light, but I could give each guy a few for their bag.

It was the least I could do. They'd helped the plumbers get the job finished yesterday. The remodel was so much further along that it looked like the inn would be ready to accept bookings and host guests starting in mid-May, just as the spring and summer tourist season really kicked off. It was such a relief.

We had plenty more to accomplish in the weeks ahead, but I felt hopeful for the first time in weeks. Plus, James was staying behind to help and spend the rest of his leave time with Amelia.

It was good. Amelia had been aching for a father's love, and James delivered in spades. He was so good with her. It

made my heart happy and sad all in the same breath. Happy because Amelia adored the attention, soaking up everything he said and did like a sponge. She was already talking about how her dad was going to take her to Tennessee to meet her grandparents. And her dad was going to do this and that.

But it also made me incredibly sad because I'd cheated them out of nine years together. No one made me keep the knowledge of Amelia's existence to myself. No one told me I'd be better off keeping my pregnancy quiet. That was all me.

Would Amelia hate me for this one day? Would James retaliate and tell Amelia the real reason he hadn't been around?

Because he could. And it would destroy everything.

It wasn't like we knew each other anymore. Yes, I had feelings for him. I would always have feelings for him. He had given me the best part of my life. I wouldn't give her back for the world.

But as crazy as it might sound, I wanted a chance with James. The chance we didn't get the first time. I know how majorly I messed up back then. I should have told him I was married to Evan. But god, he waltzed into my world, and I felt as if I'd been struck by lightning. And Evan and I had fought before the party over another infidelity on his part. It's why I was down the beach away from the party—I was angry and upset and knew I was done, that my marriage was over. Because I couldn't continue pretending I was fine with his philandering.

It didn't excuse what I did. But in my mind, I felt justified. Righteous, even, and had tossed convention out the window. Because the way James looked and treated me had been like a

comet streaking through my personal hell. And the sun had shone on me for the first time in years.

Once the muffins were in the oven, I popped in an egg casserole. It was identical to the one they'd loved their first morning here. I figured it was a good, hearty send-off for their road trip. While it was cooking, I went and got Amelia up for school. She helped me set the table before the guys came in.

And I would miss them. I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed hanging out with these guys.

After breakfast, they said goodbye to Amelia before she boarded the bus. My daughter didn't realize it, but she had a bunch of the toughest guys on the planet as bonus uncles. They'd made her feel special, even going so far as to give her their emails so she could stay in touch with them.

But then they were packed and ready to depart.

I joined them outside. It was a blustery morning with lots of cloud cover. I had sealed bags with the goodies for them. "Here's some muffins and cookies for the road."

Lucas put a hand over his heart. "Seriously going to have to come back here. I'd propose, except this one would murder me in my sleep." He grinned, pointing his thumb at James.

"Ah, ah, move out of the way. I'll fight you for her." Aiden nudged him out of the way with a big, cheesy grin and gave me a hug.

"All right, you bozos, my turn." Wyatt shooed them off and gave me a big bear hug, whispering in my ear. "If you want him, you're going to have to be honest about everything. Don't hold back. You understand?"

"Yes," I murmured and hugged him tight, never expecting he would help me with James.

Wyatt released me with a kind nod. Then he, Lucas, and Aiden mounted their Harleys, putting their helmets on before starting the engines. And when they did, the loud roars disrupted the silent morning. James and I stood in the driveway, waving as they motored off.

“What’s next on the remodel?” James asked the moment it was just the two of us.

“The electrician should be here in about an hour. The HVAC guy will be here before noon. And I’m expecting a delivery from the hardware store this morning too. Since we’re speeding along and making progress. After that, the next step will be putting drywall up.”

James shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. “I’ll help out wherever you need me to.”

“I appreciate it. Truly. I know you’re on leave and deserve time to kick back and relax.” And I didn’t want to take advantage of his generosity.

“I’d rather stay busy. Besides, you need the help.”

I did need his help, more than I wanted to admit. “Thanks just the same.”

“Where do you want me?”

In my bed probably wasn’t the answer he was looking for as we headed up the walkway to the house. But it was where I wanted him most. It likely was a bad idea to even consider it. And instead of dragging him inside and having my way with him, I said, “If you could grab the boxes of electrical outlets and light switches. They’re in the garage. And then help with the electrician while I deal with the HVAC guy. The whole furnace needs to be replaced because of the water damage.”

“Got it. Lead the way.”

He followed me into the garage. “Where are you planning on storing the drywall? It needs to be kept away from moisture.”

“I figure here in the garage will be the best place for it. Before the delivery gets here, I need to move my car out into the parking lot.”

“I can do that once we get these inside,” James offered without hesitation.

He was being so agreeable. It was freaking me out a bit. But then, I’d noticed the chip that had been on his shoulder when he first arrived was gone. In its place was my James. The one I’d leaned against on the beach after telling him my sad life story. The one I’d fallen in love with and never gotten over.

“All right. That would be great.” I wasn’t going to turn down the help. I might be experiencing inner turmoil with my existential crisis, but I wasn’t stupid. If he didn’t want to do it, he wouldn’t offer.

We carted boxes with the electrical stuff into the lobby. That seemed to be the best place to store items we needed to work on the rest of the house. And it would be easy for the electrician. James moved my car out of the garage.

After that, the morning sped. James worked with the electrician as he went through testing lines and replacing wiring in the basement. They replaced all the outlets and light switches that had been damaged and installed the new ceiling lights in the basement.

While he was occupied, I handled the HVAC guy. Luckily he was able to get in and install the new furnace before lunch.

But my mood had soured. I made us lunch, just some quick sandwiches and salad.

“Something wrong? You’ve been awfully quiet.”

Sighing, I took a seat at the table across from James. “Yeah, we’re going to have to wait to get started on the walls in the basement. The HVAC guy showed me the vents in the basement. They’re all going to have to be replaced with the crud in them from the flooding. The ones on the main floor and above are fine. But all of them in the basement have to be replaced.”

He winced. “Sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“Not unless you can go back in time, change Mother Nature, and ensure the damage never happened in the first place.” I laughed sarcastically.

“Huh.” He kept munching on his roast beef.

“What? Spit it out, James. I’ve never known you to hold back.” He was staring as if he’d never seen me before.

“I’ve just never seen this side of you before. You’ve always been passionate and thrilled to be alive. But you’re down, and it’s throwing me for a loop. Even when I would think about you, it was always as the former and not the latter.”

Shows what he knew. “I can have bad days too, you know. You’re not the only one who can be a grump.”

“Is that a fact?” He regarded me with a strange light in his eyes and followed me over to the sink with his plate.

After setting the dishes in the sink, I rounded on him. I didn’t understand why, but his calm demeanor pissed me off. Or maybe I’d taken one too many blows in my life, and they

had all stacked up inside me. And now I was like a geyser, fuming mad.

“It is.” I poked him dead center of his chest. Which was much like poking a sleeping lion in the chest.

His eyes narrowed into angry slits, but he didn’t back down. He never backed down. It drove me nuts. And he quietly murmured a warning, “Careful.”

That one word dropped between us like a grenade with the pin removed, liable to blow at any minute. I was testy after the disaster with the HVAC guy; I was ready to go ten rounds with him. And being near him again, I didn’t know if I was angry or horny or a combination of both. I spat, “Or you’re going to do what?”

James glowered. He was every inch the hardened soldier. And my body got its wires crossed. Because it fucking purred at the testosterone pulsing off him. His jaw was tight. He didn’t utter a word in response. But there was an angry tick in his jaw. He was holding back.

I didn’t know why, but his stalwart composure burned and fueled my rage. And this time, I got up in his face. I was tired of fighting every damn day. I was tired of apologizing. Because I was done with being the scapegoat. Yes, I made mistakes. But he had too. When I tried talking to him after our night together, he shut me out and wouldn’t even talk to me. Maybe if he’d given me five damn minutes ... fuck, we would never know. But I was done with being his emotional piñata.

I poked his chest again, drilling my finger against his chest. Not that it moved him at all. “I asked you a question. Or are you just going to shut me out again?”

My actions were akin to waving a red flag in front of a pissed-off bull.

He glanced at my lips. The hunger in his gaze rocked me to my core. I'd never had any other man look at me the way James did, not even my ex-husband. He stared at my lips like they were his oasis in a desert.

Need gripped me in a stranglehold.

It had been years since I'd been touched. And his lips beckoned me. The stern firmness twisted me up inside. Because I understood his darkness. He was done pretending life was anything more than shit. Just like me. I might act like everything was sunshine and daisies, but it was all an act. My life had been a series of hard choices and crushing defeats, with the exception of two bright spots: Amelia and the night I spent with James.

People had underestimated and misunderstood me my entire life. I'd been discarded by a mother who didn't want me. Left to fend for myself by a father who didn't care and considered me nothing but a burden.

But not James. He saw me, the real me. The one with no makeup or elegant veneer, who'd rather spend the night at home than out on the town. The one with grit in her heart and a tarnished soul that would never be fully cleansed.

And it's why I couldn't resist the lure that drew me inexplicably to him. Gripping his shirt, I stunned us both for half a heartbeat. His hot breath fanned over my face. My pulse rate spiked. With need urging me on, I laid my lips upon his and sucked on his bottom lip. An electric current shot through me. It felt like I'd taken a few shots of tequila.

I kissed him, teasing his lips with my tongue, aching for entrance. Had I made the wrong call? Did I need to back off before I messed things up further between us?

Dammit, I didn't want to. A part of me would die if I stopped. Because I'd waited ten years to kiss him again. But he wasn't responding and acted like a statue, frozen and immovable.

My grip on his shirt slackened. Disappointment flooded me. He wasn't going to kiss me back. Had I ruined things further? Would this harm his relationship with Amelia? How could I be so fucking selfish—

His dark groan slid through me. My pussy clenched at the deep rumbling. It sounded as if it had been ripped from his soul.

James's hands framed my face. The sheer power in his touch was like touching a downed electrical wire. He changed the angle of our kiss, slanting his mouth more firmly, and I opened for him.

And he fucking devoured me with his kiss. Every part of my body lit up. Pleasure engulfed me. His plunging tongue caused answering tugs deep down in my core.

This was what I had been missing in my life all these years. But it wasn't just the kiss I'd been missing, but the man. No one kissed me like James.

I slid my hands up his solid chest, his muscles flexing beneath my fingers. His body had been powerful a decade before, but now he had honed it further and was more solid than a tank. My hands clasped his neck and held on. I never wanted the kiss to end. He was the only man who made the rest of the world disappear the moment his lips touched mine.

We could be anywhere. Standing on a beach, on top of a mountain, or about to fall off the edge of the world, but none of it mattered. All that mattered was that he never stopped.

And he was as caught in the trap of our desire.

But I wanted more. I wanted all of him. Those hands I loved so much slid slowly down my back, my skin burning in the wake of his touch. I felt an answering tug, my core clenching as pleasure enveloped me. He cupped my ass and tugged my body until I was plastered against him.

The man was solid, steady as a fucking rock, and everything I ever wanted. He made me feel like I could hand him all my problems and simply lean for the first time in my life.

But even pressed against his rock-hard body wasn't close enough. I wanted us skin to skin. I ached to feel him inside me, to erase the past ten years as if they had never been and let the tide of pleasure swirling around us carry us out to sea.

I lifted my leg around his waist. He growled into my mouth. Actually growled, and my pussy pulsed in response. His wicked kiss turned depraved, like he had every intention of owning my soul by the time he was done. And he could have it because it was useless without him anyway.

I moaned when he lifted my other leg so that both were wrapped around his waist. His hands gripped my ass and held me tight.

And then he moved, never lifting his mouth. He pressed my body against the nearest wall and obliterated me with his kiss. I yanked at his shirt, needing him naked. Craving him, aching to lose myself in him.

“Hang on to me,” he ordered, striding down the hall to my bedroom.

I sucked on his neck, hungry to taste him everywhere. My entire being was attuned to his every move. He shoved my bedroom door open and entered. The four-poster king bed with its numerous pillows had never been for anything more than sleeping.

Then he slammed the door shut with his boot, not stopping until he reached the bed with its floral bedspread totally not in keeping with the tone.

He lowered me onto the edge of the bed. I reached beneath his shirt to his criminally rock-hard abs. His skin was smooth and warm to the touch, branding my skin with the flames. James disconnected his mouth, much to my chagrin, and I whimpered at being denied. But he rose to his full height. His eyes were black with dark lust that engaged a resounding ache in my belly. He did that manly, single-handed, over-the-shoulder removal of his shirt. Did men do it on purpose? Did they know that having a guy do that practically made our panties disintegrate?

But after the shirt was removed, I stared, my mouth rounded on a gasp. Because Jesus H. Christ, he was ripped.

Since we were together last time, he had piled on muscles. And there were new scars. I scowled at what looked like a knife wound on his side.

Nothing more than a moth entranced by a flame, my fingers grazed his abs in wonder. Sliding my fingertips over the firm ridges, I committed his body to memory. Because I had no idea what the future would bring. And I wanted to remember this moment. My gaze dipped, and I swallowed a moan at the enormous bulge pressing against his jeans.

My hands sought the clasp and lowered the zipper. He threaded his fingers in my hair and tilted my head back until our gazes clashed.

“Make sure this is what you want. Because we go any further, I doubt I will be able to stop,” he warned in a husky tone that shivered through me.

Nothing could drag me away from him and this moment.

In response, I shoved his jeans down over his lean hips and muscular thighs, cataloging every scar and promising if he let me, I would kiss each one. And with my gaze trained on his face, I dipped my fingers beneath the waistband of his black boxer briefs, circling his thick cock and slightly squeezing.

He thrust into my hand as ecstasy etched itself over his features.

With an impassioned snarl, James reached down and yanked my top off, tossing the garment behind him without a care for where it landed. He could rip it to shreds for all I cared about it.

And then we attacked each other's clothing as our lips met in a hungry clash. We fought and tugged, removing every stitch of clothing until we were naked and panting.

I reached for him, needing him more than I had ever needed anyone.

But he knelt and yanked my hips to the edge. I moaned as he spread my thighs to fit his broad shoulders.

On edge. Desperate. Aching.

And then his tongue flicked over my clit. The pleasure bowed my back. And he gave my pussy slow, thorough licks as he savored me.

Our initial torrid rush morphed. James gave my pussy long, slow kisses that left me writhing and gasping for more. My fingers threaded into his dark hair and gripped tight while I ground my pussy against his lips.

“Please,” I panted.

James lifted his mouth and scowled. “I’ve been waiting ten damn years to taste your sweet pussy. And I’m going to take my time and fucking enjoy it. Just lay back and let me love you. You’ll come when I want you to and not a moment before.”

His dominance poured fire into my veins. Why did I think his overbearing attitude was so hot? What was wrong with me? My body purred, melting under his control.

He resumed his thorough licking. Pleasure spiraled through my veins. He lapped at my pussy as if it were his favorite dessert. Time ceased to have any meaning.

I writhed, quaking with need. I yanked at his head, needing surcease. But I didn’t budge the guy. His mouth sucked at my clit until I almost levitated off the bed. And my attempts to move him didn’t so much as shift him an inch because the guy was a wall of solid muscle.

I uttered my demand. “Fuck me, James.”

He rose and stood between my thighs. All six solid feet of battle-hardened warrior. His face dripped with carnal hunger, and I almost came on the spot.

Oh god, what was he waiting on? A sign from above? The second coming?

I snarled because I had waited far too long. This moment was ten years in the making. And I refused to wait another second. I gripped his length and pressed the tip against my

slick opening. My pussy was soaked and so primed, the head slid right inside.

James held still as a statue. His gaze dipped to where we were joined. His cock spread me obscenely. “Fuck, that’s a beautiful sight.”

Gripping my thighs, he plowed inside with such ferocity it bowed my back. He’d buried his cock so deep I felt him in my soul. And god, the way he stretched me. It’d been a hot minute, and there was a sharp slice of pain combined with the pleasure. I fucking loved it.

My mouth dropped open on a throaty moan that echoed in the bedroom.

“Fuck. Fuck! Look at me,” he demanded with a passionate grumble.

I lifted my heavy eyelids. Our gazes connected, and emotions swelled inside my chest. There was no one else who had ever made me feel the way James did. He made me feel like I could do anything as long as he was at my side. The moment our eyes connected, he withdrew and thrust, driving into me with a power that stole every thought, dwindling my existence down to the here and now with him. He looped his arms around my legs. His hands held my thighs prisoner and put me at his mercy.

Pleasure engulfed me. I writhed, rocking and meeting his thrusts. There had been no one since him. Because when the right person touched you, it made all the others pale imitations by comparison. And if I couldn’t have him, I didn’t want anyone else.

He leaned over me on the bed, planting his hands beside my shoulders, and increased his tempo to just below hanging

on for dear life as he fucked my brains out. The new position shoved my legs up, and my ankles now rested against his shoulders. It changed the angle of penetration as he fucked me with single-minded determination.

“More,” I demanded with a moan as my eyes crossed at the ecstasy.

With a grunt, he pulled out and shoved my body back further on the bed, following me down until he was back between my thighs. I wriggled until I felt his crown pushing back inside me. My arms circled his torso. I gripped his back and wrapped my legs around his waist.

His face was inches from mine as we moved together. The years fell away as we moved. It was like we were back on that beach. Two people caught up in the other. And I hated all the time we’d lost.

Because deep down, I knew there would never be another man who touched me like James did. This was no fly-by-night deal for me.

I had loved him from the moment we first kissed on that beach ten years ago. And I’d never stopped. I’d set it aside for a time. It had been an issue of survival. With an infant to raise, an inn to run, and then taking care of Henry and Sue, I didn’t have time to walk around crying at what I’d lost. There’d never been any time.

But being with him again drove home just how spot-on I’d been.

James was the only man I had ever truly loved. And I wanted him to stay this time. I wanted us to be a family for real. Although I knew it would take some convincing on my

part. If I had to tell him I loved him every single day for the rest of our lives, I would do it.

Because nobody touched me the way he did.

And I knew, as his mouth closed over mine and he drank down my moans, that regardless of what happened, there would be no one else for me.

We moved together like we'd been doing this together our whole lives. There was no awkwardness or missed step. We were in sync the whole time. My nails dug into his back as we rocked together.

And I didn't know that I could live without him again. Not when I breathed, and he was there to fill me with air. Not when I gasped as he plunged so deep that I didn't know where he ended, and I began. Not when I knew he was the only man I would ever love.

Need eclipsed all else. At the first flutters of my orgasm, I flexed around his cock, dragging a groan out of him. He rammed so deep he hit my cervix. And the pleasurable pain shoved me into bliss. My climax ripped through me with teeth. Shudders enveloped me, and my toes fucking curled. I wailed, "James."

He grunted, hammering wildly inside me as he came. And he poured himself inside me, filling my sheath with his come. He slumped down on top of me as the errant thought hit me—we'd not used a condom again. It seemed to be par for the course for us. I was on birth control, so it didn't matter to me. I'd rather there be no barrier between us. But I held him close. I never wanted to let him go. This was where he belonged. Here, with me. Except I had no clue how to convince him we belonged together.

But then the familiar deep rumble of the school bus filtered in through my bliss-infused haze. I jolted at what it meant.

“Shit.” I shoved at his chest.

“Something wrong?” His lips moved against my neck while his body was a dead weight atop me. And normally, I would love to stay and cuddle like this. Perhaps go for a round two. But not now.

Still shoving at his chest, I nodded. “Yes. That’s the bus. Amelia’s home. Get up and get dressed. Hurry.”

James bolted up like we were under attack. We acted like two teenagers about to be caught in the act by our parents as we rapidly dressed.

“Go. Sit at the kitchen table and pretend you’re eating lunch.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked, shoving his arms into his shirt and yanking it down over his head. His hair was messy from my fingers.

“Straighten my just-fucked hair.” He flashed a satisfied male grin my way as I shoed him out of my room. The moment I was alone, I raced into the bathroom and brushed my hair into a semblance of order. After taking a few calming breaths, I headed into the kitchen.

I had just sat down when Amelia came bursting through the door with a, “Hi, Mom. Do you know where—”

She waltzed into the kitchen, where it looked like we were both eating sandwiches. “Hi, Dad. I didn’t expect to find you in here.”

“Yeah, your mom and I are having a late lunch. We were working on the inn all day.”

“I can tell. You both look sweaty.”

I just about died on the spot. But I swallowed down any embarrassment. “Um, why don’t you go put your backpack in your room. I’ll grab you a snack.”

Amelia grinned, “Okay, Mom.” And then she skipped down the hall past us.

I started laughing. Then I made the mistake of glancing at James. His chest was shaking with silent laughter.

We both lost it. When Amelia returned to the kitchen, she found her parents laughing like lunatics.

The rest of the day passed in a normal fashion. Or as normal as it could get with the fact that I had sex with James—in the middle of the day, no less. And we were almost caught in bed together by our daughter.

Never in a million years would I have thought we'd act like teenagers.

Over dinner that evening, I offered James the spare bedroom in our place. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. With the others gone, it just makes sense. And I don't have to worry about you over there with all the construction."

After dinner, James packed his things and moved them into the spare bedroom. It felt right, having him here. And I didn't mean because of the two of us. It would give him and Amelia even closer bonding time.

Although it was also going to make it harder for me to keep my hands off him. Again.

I allowed Amelia to stay up past her bedtime. She and James were in the living room playing a board game. I didn't want to spoil their fun since it was a Friday night. Amelia didn't have school in the morning and could sleep in a little.

Once I had my grocery list written up, including beer and the nuts I'd seen James devouring at every opportunity, I headed in to corral Amelia for bed. They were playing *Monopoly*.

"Mom, I'm winning." Amelia grinned from her spot on the floor. James sat on the couch with the coffee table and board game between them.

"That's great, baby. But you guys are going to need to put the game on pause until tomorrow. Because it's way past your bedtime."

"We were talking that if you didn't have any other plans for us tomorrow, I'd like to take Amelia for her first motorcycle ride. But only if we don't need to work on the house." James studied me like he was waiting for me to yank the rug out from under him and his time with Amelia.

"Can I go, Mom, please?" Amelia gave me her puppy dog eyes look.

It did worry me. But I also knew that James would take care of her and ensure she was safe. If there was nothing else, he was the best protection any little girl could ask for in a dad. "As long as your dad is the soul of discretion and makes you wear a helmet, you can go. I've got grocery shopping and laundry to do tomorrow anyhow."

"Only if you're sure," James said, his eyes heated, bringing up the memory of this afternoon. And I couldn't help the blush that crept into my cheeks. It felt like they were blazing with heat.

I dropped his gaze, shifting my focus to our daughter. Because when he looked at me that way, I couldn't be held accountable for my actions. Not when it made me want to drag

him right back into my bedroom and pick up where we left off. “I am. I think that’s a fabulous idea. As long as you’re both back for our pizza and movie night.”

“Pizza and movie night?”

“Dad, it’s so much fun. Mom makes the best pizza ever. And then we watch movies and eat popcorn and candy. We do it every Saturday night. It’s our family tradition.”

“Is that a fact?” he asked, his brow arched in surprise. Because it was something he’d told me he and his family back home did. We’d sat under that full moon shooting the shit and talking about our families. And I’d been so jealous of how close he was with his family.

“It is. And since you’re staying, I insist you come. Especially since it’s my night to pick the movie.” I knew he’d ask about it later. But that’s okay. He should know. Maybe it will help me mend that which I broke.

“Should we give Dad a turn picking out the movie?” Amelia asked beside me.

“If he’s still here next Saturday, he can pick. But I’ve had my heart set on *The Sandlot* forever.”

“That’s a great movie. If I had a pick, that’s what I would go with,” James agreed with me.

“It’s settled then. Say goodnight to your dad. Then let’s get your teeth brushed and into bed.”

“Could Dad read the chapter tonight?” Amelia asked, her face brimming with hope.

My heart ached at how much she wanted her dad around. It shouldn’t surprise me. But it made me want to hug her close and apologize. “If he’d like to read with you tonight, I don’t

see why not. But you need to brush your teeth and get into your pajamas first.”

“Dad, will you?” Amelia asked, her face beamed with such hope.

“Of course I will. But do as your mother asked first, and then come get me when you’re ready. And I’ll come read the chapter.”

Amelia whooped, her fists pumping in the air. Then she raced from the living room toward her bedroom. She was just like me and exuberant over everything she did. She was a mini version of me in many ways. But seeing her with James, she was a lot like him too.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the seat beside him on the couch.

James tilted his head. “For what? Earlier today? That’s not something you need to thank me for. If anyone should be thanking anyone, it should be the reverse with me thanking you.”

At his heated look, I blushed and playfully smacked his leg. “No. Not about that, silly man. For everything you’ve done for Amelia. She’s over the moon and happier than a fly on shit.”

“You’ve done a spectacular job with her, Rory. She’s smart, has a thirst for knowledge and curiosity about the world. She’s kind, engaging, funny, and I simply adore her. I never thought I would ever get so lucky.”

The unexpected compliment slid inside my heart. And it took everything inside me not to lean against his shoulder and sigh. “Well, thank you, just the same.”

“If you’re not sure about us going for a ride tomorrow, we can always stay here and help out.”

I waved him off. “Please. Going to the grocery store without having to take Amelia is like a field trip for me. It doesn’t matter that I love her more than life itself and would give her both my kidneys if she needed them. Shopping with a kid is a whole other experience and makes it take twice as long. So you guys can go have fun. I might even do something crazy like get a pedicure before I go shopping.”

“You should. I’d bet your toes would look real pretty.” He looked at me up and down with fire blazing in his eyes. It was so hot I was surprised my panties didn’t spontaneously combust.

Oh my god, he was flirting! I should mark this day on my calendar. Because James Nolan was flirting with me. Like we were a real couple.

He inexplicably drew me in with the underlying magnetic pull that surrounded him.

“I just might.” I beat back the fluttering wings of hope. Just because we’d had a midafternoon romp in bed didn’t mean we were destined to wind up together, no matter how much I wanted it and him. But I flirted back, leaning close. “And honey, they’ll look awesome.”

His nostrils flared and his eyes went black. The fact that a few words from me could do that to him was heady. It meant he was just as affected. Hope surged inside my chest. Because we might really have a shot this time around.

“Dad!” Amelia yelled from her room.

“I best get in there.”

“You should. You don’t want to see what happens when the native gets restless.”

“Maybe I’d like to see them restless.”

Air clogged in my lungs. And then he playfully bit his bottom while eyeing me like I was a snack he had every intention of indulging in later. He rose, breaking contact, and headed down the hall.

I pressed my hands over my heart. He was flirting. I didn’t even know how to handle this. My heart felt lighter than it had for an age. But in the next breath, the sharp slice of fear burst my happy balloon.

I had to be extremely careful here. Because it wasn’t just me who would pay the price if things went belly up between James and me.



I finished the chapter of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. Amelia was tucked beneath a pastel purple comforter on her twin bed with a sleepy smile on her face.

“That was great. Do you think you could read to me tomorrow night?”

Every night. It’s something I wanted to do every damn night. “Any night you want, I will. But you need to get some sleep if we’re going for a ride tomorrow. Riding on a motorcycle isn’t like a car. You need to be awake and alert for it.”

I leaned down and gave her a hug. I opened my mouth to tell her goodnight, but she said, “I love you, Dad.”

My world rocked at her declaration. I'd hoped for it, but I never thought she would say it this soon. And there was nothing I wouldn't do for her. I embraced her tighter. "I love you, too."

Blinking the moisture from my eyes, I kissed her forehead. "Now get some sleep."

She saluted me. I chuckled as I left her room. The kid was a pistol. And I was totally gone over on her. While I'd been in with Amelia, Rory had turned the lights off in the living room. I found her at the kitchen table.

"She's in bed." Rory smiled, and my heart turned over in my chest. Was this a path I could tread? This afternoon had changed things, but I wasn't certain what it had transformed into. Had Rory just been scratching an itch? Or was there more behind it?

"That's good. She'll be out quickly. Any meal requests? I'm adding more to my grocery list, things I forgot earlier."

"You don't have to keep on feeding me." It rubbed me wrong that she was taking care of me this way. When it should be the reverse. I should be taking care of my girls.

My girls?

Jesus, we get naked once and have sex, and suddenly I turn into a girl painting hearts and roses around our names.

But it felt right. That's what it felt like they were—my girls.

She held up a hand, stopping me. "James, think about it as payment for helping me with the inn. So I'll ask again, any requests?"

“My mom always used to make meatloaf with peas and those tiny onions and mashed potatoes. It’s a meal I haven’t had in forever and would love more than anything to eat, but I can’t get to Tennessee during this leave.”

“Done. It might not be exact, but we’ll have it this week. I’m going to leave my list here on the table. If there’s anything else you think of that you want, just write it down, and I can pick it up.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” I wasn’t expecting to come here and be moved. I figured it would be pure, unadulterated torture. And it was, but only in the best way imaginable. Because Rory and Amelia had put their grappling hooks in me. The longer I was here, the less I wanted to go back.

Perhaps Wyatt was right. And I was being an idiot when it came to holding on to the past and my anger.

“Well, I’ll say goodnight.” The chair scraped against the tile floor as she stood.

“Are we going to talk about today?” I blurted. Jesus, I really had turned into the woman in this equation.

“What do you want me to say?” She looked at me without any walls. And her honesty almost did me in. “I’m not sorry it happened, James. But I don’t know where we go from here. And I know I initiated things, but we have to be careful. There’s a little girl down the hall who thinks you could lasso the moon. I don’t want anything we do to spoil the relationship you have with her.”

I opened my mouth to argue that it wouldn’t, but she cut me off.

“We can say it won’t cause issues down the line. We can make promises and agree to be civil no matter the outcome.

But we need to be careful.”

“So then, you don’t want me to come to your room tonight?” I didn’t know whether I wanted her to say yes or no. Because a part of me wanted both options.

She blushed, her cheeks turning a becoming shade of pink. “I didn’t say that. Just that we need to be careful.”

“Noted.” I closed the distance and trapped her body against the kitchen table. My anger still simmered under the surface. But it had been overtaken by the startling amount of need I had for Rory. Although desire had never been lacking between us—honesty had been.

“I need to know if I’m trespassing on another man’s territory.” It was a bone of contention for me and likely always would be.

She scowled. “No. Do you really think I would—”

I cut her off with my lips. I hated that I had to ask. But I’d been burned before, believing she was a free agent when she hadn’t been. And I couldn’t start up with her again if she had another man waiting in the wings. I’d barely survived it the first time.

She moaned, then wrapped her arms around my neck. I growled and closed the distance. This woman did something to me, more than any other. Because one taste of her wasn’t enough. This afternoon had only whetted my appetite. From the moment we met, she’d emblazoned herself across my soul. And holding her in my arms again, it felt like a puzzle piece I’d been missing finally clicked back into place.

And all the horrors I’d lived through. All the firefights and raids, all the classified missions in remote locations, all slipped

away. Holding her revived the soul I figured eighteen years of duty had stomped into dust.

I lifted my mouth long enough to ask, “My room or yours?”

“Yours.” And then she kissed me before I could respond. But words were no longer necessary. This was what we excelled at. Over the past decade, I’d done everything within my power to expunge the memory of her.

I spent months drinking far more than was wise. I tried fucking her out, cutting a swath through the ladies in Norfolk that had even made Evan jealous for a time. But nothing had made her go away. And I tried my damndest. And it all failed. Because in a single night, she had wiggled her way into my fucking soul.

And I didn’t know if being with her again was the right thing to do. In that sliver of my soul she’d resurrected, I wanted it to be right. I wanted this to be my place for good.

But she was right in that we had Amelia to think about this go around. And I didn’t want to damage our relationship in its infancy. But there was no turning from Rory. Now that we’d ripped the bandage off, there was no stopping it. It was like trying to refold sheets and put them back in their original packaging. It couldn’t be done. At least not well and without a lot of wrinkles and cursing.

Holding her prisoner in my arms, I walked us toward my room, unwilling to lift my lips for a second. Because if all we would have were stolen moments, I didn’t want to waste any of them.

Ushering her into my bedroom, I flipped the light on. Then she surprised me by tearing her mouth from mine and shoving

me toward the bed. “Clothes off, sailor.”

“You first.” She was the sexiest woman I’d ever known.

A small smile played about her lips as she drew her top up and over her head. Her bra was just a simple white one with lace, but I found it sexy as fuck. She undid the clasp and let it slide down her arms before discarding it. Her breasts spilled out without the support.

I reached for her, eager to cup those beauties. Because fuck, her tits were glorious. Big enough a man could drown in if he so chooses. But she backed away, shaking her head. Pointed to the bed. “Naked and on your back.”

My cock jolted as she shimmed out of her jeans. And I couldn’t get my clothes off fast enough. If she wanted to be dominant in the bedroom, who was I to stop her? Besides, the sooner we were both naked, the sooner I’d be inside her again. My cock ached. I was so hard I was sure I could cut glass with my dick.

When we were both naked, I glanced at the bed, eager to comply with her request, but fuck, I *had* to touch her. It was a sickness, I knew. But she was so beautiful she stopped my fucking heart. It should be criminal how gorgeous she was. She was my own personal Aphrodite.

Instead of climbing into bed like she wanted me to, I grabbed her and shoved her facedown with her legs hanging over the side.

“James,” she gasped.

I held her pinned with one hand, her arms above her head, and slid my other down the slope of her slender spine to her gorgeous ass. Fuck, I wanted to bite those plump globes.

I leaned over her back. “Next time, you can have your way with me. But I need to be inside you too fucking bad to play.”

My fingers sought her pussy. I groaned. She was fucking drenched. “Fuck, babe, you’re so wet for me.”

“Please,” she groaned, tilting her hips up.

“You’re going to have to be quiet, or you’ll wake Amelia,” I murmured and slipped two fingers inside her, thrusting them deep. Her pussy clamped down on my fingers. And it was all I could do not to replace my fingers with my dick.

“I need to know if you’re on birth control. We didn’t use protection earlier in our hurry.” And I didn’t want to knock her up a second time. Even though the idea of Rory ripe with my child inside her again didn’t repulse me or even scare me.

She jerked her head. “Yes. I’ve got the implant. We’re good, and I’m clean.”

“I am too. We didn’t use protection earlier. It’s something we seem to always be in too big of a rush to use. But if you want me to wear it, I will.” If she wanted my soldier suited up, I would oblige.

“No. I want all of you without anything between us.”

“Thank fuck.” And I fit the head of my shaft against her opening. Holding her hips steady, I pressed forward, watching my cock disappear inside her pussy.

“James,” she moaned when I was balls deep and clenched around me.

I gritted my teeth because I loved the way my name sounded on her lips in that breathy voice. It took everything in me not to blow my wad. The two of us were a lock and key.

Fitting each other in a way that no one else ever did. I know I tried.

Sliding inside her again was like coming home. And I didn't know how to handle it, so I shoved the errant thought away. Instead I focused on the pleasure, on driving her out of her mind with need.

Grasping her hips, I set a slow, leisurely pace. "Fuck, you feel good."

She undulated, her body begging me for more friction. I smacked her ass when she clenched around my shaft. She gasped, and her pussy rippled around my dick. God, she liked that. Liked being manhandled while I screwed her.

"There'll be none of that. We're going to take this nice and slow until you're begging me to come." Because I wanted to make this time last.

She glanced over her shoulder. Her face dripped with lust in her hazy gaze. "That's not what I want. I want you to fuck me like you hate me. I want you to fuck me like you're punishing me."

My dick jolted in her pussy. Her dirty words and the picture they painted enflamed my senses. I slid my hand around her throat and drove brutally deep with enough force the mattress moved a little. "Is this what you want? To be treated like a dirty girl and fucked raw?"

Her pussy clamped and fluttered around me, telling me without words that it was exactly what she wanted.

"Yes," she whimpered.

Jesus. This was a side of Rory I never thought existed, but I liked it. Ten years ago, we'd been all hot hands and speed. And we'd not had time to explore each other's depths and

desires. But taking her this way, making her bend to my will, was a heady fucking experience that went straight to my dick.

And I discovered it was exactly what I wanted too.

Holding her, wrapped around her, I let go of my control, pouring all my wants and desires into fucking her, pummeling her pussy as I brutally thrust. My balls slapped against her ass. And I wondered if she'd ever had a man in her ass.

I grunted as I thrust, enjoying all the sounds she made. They were sexy as hell. And fueled my lust to epic heights. How had I lived without this woman? How had I existed without having her in my arms?

I'd not done it well. Not when it felt as if the last decade had been a bad dream and this was my real life, here with her and Amelia.

“More, James,” she begged with a throaty moan.

Releasing her neck, I rose to my full height and gripped her hips tight. And I cut loose. I held nothing back, power driving inside her heat with hammered thrusts. She clamped down on my dick. Bolts of lightning sizzled along my spine.

I loved fucking this woman.

She gripped the bedding and moaned, tilting her hips and thrusting back. She was lost in her need. And I was right there with her. No one else had ever made me feel this way, made desire grab me by the fucking throat and not release me until every ounce of pleasure was spent.

And I didn't know if being with Rory was the right call. I had no idea if walking down this path was going to blow up in our faces. All I knew was that I couldn't walk away from her. It was messed up.

I still didn't forgive her.

But I'd never stopped wanting her. I ghosted my thumb over her back channel entrance, and she bucked, writhing for me. Oh yeah, before I headed back to base, I was taking her ass.

Going on instinct, I drew some of her cream up to that tiny rosette, coating it, and slipped my thumb inside.

Rory went wild. "Please let me come. Oh god, that feels so good. Don't stop."

"Ever have a man in your ass, babe?" I asked, thrusting my thumb in and out, imagining it was my dick her ass was squeezing tight.

"No. Never," she gasped and groaned into the bedding.

"I'm going to fuck it. Not tonight, but soon."

She whimpered. "Yes. Whatever you want. Just don't stop, please."

And her desire sent me into overdrive. I peppered her pussy with ferocious thrusts that moved the mattress. That had her clutching at the covers and moaning loudly into them. That even made my fucking toes curl at the intensity of pleasure swarming me.

Rory jerked against me, her legs flailing, and then she wailed, "James."

Her pussy nearly flattened my dick as she came. My balls drew up. Her spasms launched me over the edge into ecstasy that stole the breath from my lungs. My knees trembled as my climax struck. I worked myself inside her until every drop had been expelled from my balls.

Lowering my torso until it met her back, I gathered her in my arms.

When we hit the road to bring her Evan's letter, I never imagined we'd be back here again. That either of us would be willing to open that doorway again. But Wyatt's comment resurfaced.

I had a ready-made family here, just waiting for me.

But could I trust her? Could I forgive her?

I didn't have an answer to those questions. But I wanted to forgive her. Being with Rory again felt right. Over the past ten years, I'd been rather cavalier with women, never committing to anyone because none of them compared to Rory.

Turning her face, I gently claimed her lips. Twisted up inside, my feelings were in a riot. But for now, I wasn't going to make a decision. I'd enjoy having her in my arms again while getting to know our daughter.

It had to be enough for now.

And then I withdrew and hefted her into my arms, depositing her on the bed.

"James! What are you doing?" She laughed as she scrambled to sit up.

I followed her into bed. My cock jolted. I had years of pent-up frustrations because no woman had ever measured up.

"I'm not done with you tonight." I gathered her close, ready for the next round. Ready to show her what it was really like when a woman took a Navy SEAL to bed.

"Well, don't let me stop you." She wriggled beneath me.

“Just hold on to me, babe.” I claimed her lips, dragging her back down into the pleasure-infused abyss with me. Surrendering to the fire that had always burned between us.

The next morning after breakfast, I left the inn and filled up the tank on the bike while Amelia readied for our ride. But I also stopped by a dealership and had them install a sidecar. The more I thought about Amelia unprotected, with no seatbelt and nothing to catch her if she fell, the more I started to think taking her out on the motorcycle was a bad idea. But I had also made her a promise and didn't want to disappoint her.

Beset by nerves that were worse than my first day of SEAL training, I headed back to the inn. This was my first time being a solo parent, and I didn't want to mess it up.

Rory left my bed early this morning. I recalled her whispered words telling me to go back to sleep and how much I'd wanted to keep holding her until the sun was up. I never thought we'd be here. But fuck, holding her all night long kept my demons at bay. For the first time in more years than I could remember, I slept like a fucking baby, only jolting awake when she shifted my arm from around her waist.

It was the most peaceful night in eighteen years. And I couldn't help but consider what might have happened between us if I had listened to my heart instead of my head back then.

But then, when I really thought about it, had Rory and I gotten together right after she and Evan had divorced, I would

have needed to request a transfer out of our unit. Evan had been too volatile. We would have come to blows.

It was an unwelcome thought, and I wasn't a big believer in fate, but maybe everything happened precisely as it was meant to occur. That thought, more than anything else, rattled the basis of my anger.

And it didn't mean I wasn't mad, but perhaps if I gave us a chance, we could really make a go of it this time around.

When I pulled into the driveway, Amelia raced out the front door with her jacket and gloves already on. Her hair was styled in a French braid. And she carried the helmet I'd gotten her with pride.

God, I didn't know I could love anyone this much. Nor had I ever realized how much I yearned to be a dad. I loved being an uncle to my sister's kids. But I'd never been a hurry-up-and-have-a-family kind of guy. But now, fuck, I couldn't wait to see how Amelia would grow up and who she was going to be.

"Ready?" I asked, glancing at Rory for confirmation. Emotions and desire churned. Damn, all I had to do was look at her, and I wanted her. Even wearing jeans and an oversized sweatshirt, her hair done up in one of those messy top knot deals without makeup, the woman was a knockout. She took my breath away by simply existing.

And god, but I felt like I had hit the jackpot, that she allowed me into her bed and her life without qualm. The way she looked at me left me aching for the next time we were alone.

Amelia bounced on her toes, excitement rippling off her. "Yes. This will be great. Is that for me to ride in?"

Rory crossed her arms with a slight nod. “She’s ready. I don’t know if I am. But I think you guys will have fun together. Be safe, and call me if there are any issues.”

“Yep, it is just for you. That way I don’t have to worry about you falling off.” I shifted my gaze to Rory. “We’ll be careful. I promise.”

Rory nodded, her shoulders relaxing as she checked out the sidecar. I knew the purchase was the right choice. We’d both feel better with Amelia in the sidecar. And given I wanted Rory to trust me alone with our kid, it was better to err on the side of caution.

“Here, squirt, let me help you get in.” Amelia held out her arms so trustingly, gazing at me as if I could do no wrong. She made me feel ten feet tall as I helped her into the seat. I bought one with a seatbelt too. And yeah, I had the minivan of Harleys now, but I wanted my kid safe. It was worth losing some of the coolness factor.

“Let’s get that helmet on, shall we?” I helped her secure the strap and put the visor down. “How’s that feel?” I studied her eager eyes brimming with enthusiasm.

“Good, Dad. It makes me feel like an astronaut.”

God, this kid. She had a daredevil streak inside her, just like her old man. And I heard my father’s voice telling me how dangerous a motorcycle was, listing off how many accidents he’d been called to investigate with one and what the tally was on whether the driver survived the crash.

I finally understood it. The overwhelming desire to keep her safe, even from the things I enjoyed doing that weren’t safe. Granted, I had one of the most dangerous jobs in the

world. And I knew that no matter what, I would never be a lifer. I didn't want my kid to grow up without me.

Once I was confident her seatbelt and helmet were secure, I climbed on the bike. Winked at Rory, then glanced at Amelia. "Ready?"

She gave me a thumbs-up with a grin that split her face wide open. Starting the engine, I rolled us to the end of the driveway. We waved at Rory, and then we were off.

I drove slowly through the neighborhoods and within city limits. There was too much traffic, and I didn't want to risk opening it up just yet. But Amelia wore the biggest grin. A few times, she put her arms up like she was riding a roller coaster. I took her on a scenic drive through Acadia National Forest, but we were going farther than I had driven the other day. I drove at a decent clip while keeping an eye on her for any signs of distress.

She definitely had a daredevil streak that she got from me. There was a lot of Rory in Amelia with her mannerisms and way of speaking, almost like she was a miniature version of her. But the more time I spent with her, I began catching a few things she did that reminded me of me. It left me proud and frightened all in the same breath because I didn't want her to have to face the same challenges I did.

And sometimes she would cock her head in a way that reminded me of my mom.

We'd have to watch that daredevil streak as she got older. Because I knew all about pushing the limits of what was safe and riding that line of danger.

All morning long, we twisted and turned along a two-lane highway. And she did amazing. Laughing and whooping when

I went faster. She looked at me like I was a hero. It's something I'd been called before as a SEAL. But with some of the stuff I'd done, I didn't always feel like I was. I was just a guy trying to do the right thing and make the world a safer place while protecting my country.

And yet a single glance from Amelia and I felt like a gladiator stepping out of the lion's den without a scratch.

The morning blew by in a flash until I figured it was time to stop and stretch our legs. We stopped at a roadside diner where we could grab a bite to eat.

"What do you think so far?" I asked the moment we were seated in a booth. This place looked like it had come straight out of the 1950s with its long Formica countertop and all the booths. The air was thick with the scent of grease and fried food. I figured it was the perfect place for a nine-year-old.

Her elbows were propped on the table. Exuberance vibrated from her tiny form. "It's the coolest thing I've ever done. Although, Mom promised to take me to the beach next year. So that might take the top spot away from this."

"You know, when I'm not deployed overseas, I live about twenty-five minutes from the beach."

Her eyes got big. "You do? Really?"

"Yep. In fact, I live very close to the beach where I met your mom." The beach where this little girl was conceived.

"But you didn't want to get married?" she asked, her face full of curiosity.

And I found myself sweating over her question. In the military, I knew exactly what I was doing. But here I was a babe in the woods. I internally debated how to answer her

while studying the menu. It was a question I'd wondered if it would come up. And it did, right out of the gate.

Before I had a chance to respond, a waitress with big eighties hair and bright red lips appeared beside our booth. "Hi guys, welcome to the Maple Leaf Diner. I'm Darla, and I'll be taking care of you today. Can I get you something to drink to get started?"

"I know what I want. Are you ready?" The menu was pretty basic. And I wasn't really here for the food anyway. This was just an excuse to spend time with my kid.

Amelia nodded and asked, "Can I get a cheeseburger and fries? And is it okay if I get a chocolate shake?"

"Absolutely. Whatever you want."

She smiled so big I knew I hit the fucking jackpot. Then she said to the waitress. "I'll have a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake with whipped cream and sprinkles."

Darla wore a toothy grin and glanced my way. "All right, honey. And for you, sugar?"

Shifting in my seat, the woman was a good twenty years older but was staring with rabid interest. "I'll have the same, but make my cheeseburger a double with all the toppings."

"You got it. I'll bring some waters out for you while your meal's cooking and get those shakes out to you on the double." With a wink, she took our menus and left us alone. That woman was a walking cliché. The only things that were missing were gum and a cigarette.

The moment we were alone, I asked, "What's been your favorite part of the ride so far?"

“Oh my god, it’s so much fun. I feel like I’m on a carnival ride with the wind. But it’s so much better. I like the way the motorcycle moves and being even closer to nature. When I’m eighteen, I want to get a motorcycle and learn how to drive it. I know Mom won’t let me until then.”

“That’s because motorcycles can be dangerous. And they are something you have to respect and be careful with whether you’re riding in a sidecar or driving one. But if they’re still something you want to learn when you get older, I’ll teach you.” In fact, there was a lot I wanted to teach her.

Like how to defend herself, how to shoot a firearm, situational awareness, how to survive out in nature, and a plethora of other things I’d picked up in the military. The self-defense was a must. We’d start soon. One of the best things was running. She was already super fast, but we would start to work on her endurance. For the time being, I would play it off as helping her get better with soccer.

“Really? That’s awesome. I can’t wait.”

“I’ll teach you anything you want to know, Amelia. There’s a lot of things I want to teach you and show you how to do. Motorcycles can be one of them.”

“Why do you wear those?” She pointed at my dog tags that had slipped free of my shirt.

I grimaced. Because I didn’t know how Rory would want me to answer this question. Honesty was the best policy, but I also didn’t want to upset her with just how dangerous my job could be. I held them out for her to look at. “These are so if I get injured while I’m deployed overseas and am unconscious, the medics and doctors will know who I am.”

“Is your job really dangerous, Dad? Some of the kids at school were saying that soldiers die a lot.”

Fuck. I didn't want her to worry about that, even though it was the reality of my profession. “It is dangerous, squirt. I'm a soldier, and it comes with risk involved. And there are lots of bad people in the world who try to hurt other people. My unit and I are sent in to try and help those people from being hurt and protect other Americans.” I did my best to soften what my job entailed. She didn't need to know about the raids I'd been part of or the lives I'd taken. Or the fact that at any given moment, my number could be up. But it also reminded me that the moment I returned to base, I needed to change the heirs listed on my will and my life insurance policy. My parents will understand that I want everything to go to Amelia. “But I promise you, I will do everything in my power to come back to you. I've only got two years left before I retire. And I'm super careful. So I don't want you to worry about me.”

But I could surmise from her furrowed brow she was concerned. “What are you going to do when you retire?”

“I was thinking of moving up here and living close to you. What would you think about that?”

“Really? You want to live by me?”

“Sweetheart, if I hadn't made a promise to the government when I re-enlisted, I would already be making plans to move up here. But I did make them a promise, and I don't give anyone my word unless I plan to follow through on that promise.”

“And if I asked you to promise me that you'll move here in two years?”

“Done. Two years from now, this is where I will be. And I’ll come to visit whenever I’m on leave. I promise.”

The smile that spread on her little face struck me straight through the heart. Every moment I spent in her presence, my love for her deepened.

“Here you go. I’ve got a couple of cheeseburgers, fries, and milkshakes for ya.” She set our meal on the table. “Is there anything else I can get ya?”

“We’re good for now, thanks.”

“Well, enjoy. And just holler if you need anything.” She walked away without a backward glance, stopping by another table with her spiel.

We sat in that booth for over an hour, eating cheeseburgers and fries, enjoying our milkshakes, and finding common ground. Amelia gave me the lowdown on all her friends in school, her favorite subjects, the books she liked to read, the movies and TV shows she enjoyed, and even her favorite music.

“Dad, you’re just going to have to accept that I’m a Swifty.”

“But there are some great bands.”

Amelia held up a hand. “And I’m happy to listen to them. But I love Taylor’s songs, and you’re just going to have to get used to it.”

Jesus Christ, I loved hard rock and heavy metal, and sometimes rap and country. But pop music? My new unit would laugh themselves into a hernia, but I didn’t give a fuck. If that’s what my daughter listened to, I would do it for her. “I’ll let it rest for now. But I still want to introduce you to some of my favorite bands. I think you’ll enjoy them.”

“Maybe. But aren’t they all like, old?”

Holy fuck! I’d never felt more ancient than I did in this moment. “Brat,” I chuckled, “Come on. Let’s hit the road. I’m sure your mom is starting to wonder where we’re at. If you need to hit the restroom, now’s your chance.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

I paid the check while she went to the bathroom. And then we were speeding down the two-lane highway, headed back toward the inn. I went a direct route on the return trip. We’d been gone for quite a few hours, and I didn’t want Rory to worry.

We made it back and found Rory in the kitchen kneading dough. Her smile was bright as she asked, “Hey guys, did you have a good time?”

“Mom, it was so awesome. You should go riding with him sometime.” Amelia bubbled over in excitement.

“Yeah, Rory, you should go for a ride with me.” I’d love to feel all her curves pressed against my back.

She blushed at my innuendo. “We’ll have to see about that. Maybe.”

“Do you need any help getting dinner made?” I asked, even though when it came to the kitchen, I was good at reading the instructions on the back of a box or grilling, but that was about it.

“Nah, I’ve got this. Unless you want something other than pepperoni on the pizza. Oh, and I picked up some of that beer I saw you and the guys drinking. There’s some in the fridge in here and then more in the fridge in the garage. And I washed your sheets and towels. If you have clothes that need to be

washed, I put a basket at the end of the hall. Just dump it in there.”

“Uh, sure, that would be great.” I was starting to run out of clean clothes, especially with the work I’d been doing on the house.

Touched that she would go to such lengths, I headed into my room to grab my laundry and drew up short. On the bed was a photo album with a note on top.

To start your collection.

Rory

Lifting the book, I flipped through the pages. Images that I’d liked in the baby book stared up at me. I sat on the bed and thumbed through it. The pages progressed from when Amelia was an infant to today.

God, this woman.

She’d always moved me. And I couldn’t help but wonder if I had gotten over my issues and not been such an ass when she’d come to me if things between us would have been different. It was one of those little things I would always wonder about.

At the knock on the door, I said, “Come in.”

Amelia poked her head in. “Hey, Dad, do you want to go kick the soccer ball around in the backyard while Mom’s working on dinner?”

“Sure. That sounds like fun. Let me get my laundry together for your mom, and then we can play. I’ll be right out.”

“Okay, great. I’ll go get ready.” And then she rushed away.

It struck me again how right this felt. Even with the years I missed, it felt as if I had slid seamlessly into family life. Into this family's life because they treated me as if I had always been a part of it.

And I liked it. But I didn't know where Rory and I were headed, leaving my path forward a mystery.

10 Years Ago

I was adrift in him as he deepened the exchange. I'd never had anyone kiss me this way, as if I was their reason for being. It spun my head and engaged my heart. I couldn't allow it, not with everything else in my life, but my heart wasn't listening. Everything diminished around us. The party down the beach disappeared until it was just us in the sand with the pounding surf as the tide rolled in.

Time spun out and ceased to have any meaning. Our kiss turned darker, greedier. With his arms around me, he laid me back against the blanket and followed me down. Our conversation forgotten, we lay side by side on the blanket with the ocean serenading us.

Full dark had risen. People would be wondering where we were, but I was blind to anything but James.

Warning bells rang in my mind, cautioning me, blaring that being with him like this was wrong. But it didn't feel wrong. For the first time in my life, it felt as if I was right where I was meant to be. Like our meeting was predestined.

And I understood our coming together might only be for the night. I knew we hadn't made any promises to each other.

But if I pushed him away, I would regret it forever. I wanted him. More than I had wanted anyone or anything in a long time. His touch ignited my soul. He kissed me, and I never wanted any other man's lips on mine. I felt alive for the first time. And suddenly, all the dull gray in my life had been exchanged for color and infused with life.

He planted a trail of open-mouthed kisses down my neck, scorching a trail in their wake, and breathed my name like an invocation. "Rory. Come with me." He peered down at me. His eyes were black pools in his serious face. "Let me take you home so I can love you properly. I know it's cliché, but I've never felt this way before, and I don't want tonight to end."

This was moving too fast. I should put a stop to this now. I should tell him this could never be. And yet no one had ever looked at me that way—like I was the most important person in the world to them. No one except James. "I don't want it to end either."

At my response, he swooped in and claimed my lips, holding me close like he never wanted to let me go. I knew it was wrong. But I'd never wanted another man this badly. It had never felt as if my entire future happiness depended on this moment. And I released what I thought I should do. For once in my life, I was going to be selfish.

His hardness pressed against my hip. But I couldn't go home with him. I was already crossing a major line.

James lifted his mouth, gently running a knuckle down my cheek. "Then you'll come home with me? We can leave right now and be at my place in minutes."

Doing my best to deter him from that course, I hitched my leg around his waist and ran my hands over his chest. He was

so fucking powerful. “I need you right now. I don’t want to wait.”

“But the party?” He glanced in the direction of the music and party.

Cupping his face between my hands, I turned his face back toward me. Looking deep into his eyes, my heart beat wildly in my chest. I couldn’t believe I was about to even suggest it, let alone do it. But I was. “No one can even see us. No one is looking for us or knows we’re here. Please, James, I want you right here, right now.”

I’d made my decision. I wanted him with a fierceness I couldn’t deny. It felt as if I’d been waiting for him my whole life.

His handsome face darkened with lust. “Fuck, woman, where have you been my whole life?”

He didn’t give me the chance to answer. Because he surrendered and slanted his mouth over mine. The moment his lips touched mine, I was lost in him. He kissed me, and my world whittled down to the two of us. We could be marooned on a deserted island, and I wouldn’t notice. He shifted and rolled us, wedging his body between my legs. I moaned into his hungry mouth, and I welcomed him. I adored the weight of him. Our bodies aligned perfectly with one another. The move shoved the skirt of my dress up to my hips.

It had never felt this right before.

My hands skimmed down his criminally hard chest and slipped beneath the material at his short-sleeved Henley. At my touch, he growled and ground his hips, the firm ridge of his shaft pressing against my sex with only his pants and my lace thong between us. But even that was too much. I caressed

his obliques, my fingers tracing all the hard lines and sinew. I drew the material up slowly, yearning to see him and feel every inch of him.

When I reached his shoulders, he lifted himself up and helped me out. He reached over his shoulder and yanked it off over his head one-handed. The moonlight reflected off his chest. Oh my god, he was beautiful. His chest muscles flexed and rippled. This man was pure perfection, and I pressed my hand over his heart.

“It beats for you now,” he swore.

“Don’t say that. You hardly know me.”

“I know my mind well enough. And I know what you make me feel, Rory.”

My mouth opened on a ragged moan. “James.”

My heart tripped over itself, rolling within my chest. Because I felt it too. I couldn’t admit it. But my heart beat a drumbeat just for him.

And then he swooped down and kissed his way down my neck. His hands drew the straps of my dress down my arms. I hadn’t worn a bra, but it had one of those built-in shelf deals. And the moment he lowered the dress, my boobs spilled out.

“Pure perfection.” He groaned, and it sounded as if the words had been ripped from his soul.

He captured a bud in his mouth. I gasped and arched my back, feeding him the mound as he worshipped my body. But he didn’t rush suckling at each one. He teased and flicked his tongue against the beaded peaks. But when he nipped the hard points, the pleasurable pain dropped my mouth open with a moan. “James.”

“You’re so damn beautiful, Rory. I doubt I’ll ever get used to it.” Then he kissed his way down my body, drawing the dress off my form until I lay under the moonlight in nothing but my panties.

I knew what we were doing was dangerous. At any moment, someone from the party could come along and find us together. But I didn’t care. It added an extra layer of forbiddenness that was intoxicating. There was no turning from him and this moment. Not when he felt like my destiny. I surrendered to the flame growing brighter and hotter between us with every touch.

He scooted down far enough that his dark head was between my thighs. He hooked my panties to the side, exposing my sex. I shivered as his mouth descended. He kissed my inner thighs first, teasing me, until he planted long, slow kisses on my slit. When he dragged his tongue through my folds, I shivered at the buffet of sensations flooding me one right after another.

With every swipe of his tongue, profound ecstasy suffused me.

Oh god, did James know his way around a pussy. Needing something to hold on to, I threaded my fingers into his hair. I rocked my hips beneath his mouth as he pushed my body toward a glimmering peak of ecstasy.

“Please, James, I need you now,” I begged, tugging at his hair.

He lifted his mouth, and the hunger in his eyes stole my breath. He army crawled up my body. My hands went to his cargo pants. Undoing the clasp and zipper, I shoved them down over his lean, muscular hips. His black briefs followed.

And then I circled his broad shaft in my hands. He was firm but satiny smooth, and so wide I momentarily worried whether he would fit. But I wouldn't be deterred. My need was too great, and I drew him where I wanted him most.

I positioned him at my entrance, feeding his head inside. Oh my god, it was a tight fit. He stretched my slit obscenely. If someone came along, there would be no doubt what we were doing. And the thought was akin to dropping an incendiary grenade on my hormones.

“Jesus, Rory, I—”

Too greedy to wait any longer, I rocked my hips and impaled myself on his dick. We groaned in unison. He stretched me near the point of pain. But he felt so damn good. And we held steady, our gazes locked on each other. In the deep recesses of my soul, I knew I'd been waiting for him my whole life.

He groaned, his eyes full of worship. “Shit woman, I've never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

“Prove it,” I dared him.

Propping himself up on his elbows, he flexed his hips, withdrawing and slamming home, bowing my back.

“Again,” I cried.

I moved with him, undulating and reaching for the pinnacle of ecstasy. But for the first time, I didn't feel alone during sex. Until James, it always felt like my partner wanted me to get off, but they were more invested in their pleasure. It didn't mean I didn't enjoy them. But this was more.

We were connected in a way I had never been with another man.

And I yearned for more than tonight with him. I wanted to be the person waiting for him to come home from deployment. I wanted to be the woman he looked for in a crowd, a huge grin splitting his face the moment he spied me. As I stared into his eyes, I could see it all play out. And I wanted a life with him more than I had ever wanted anything.

Because it felt as if I'd known him my whole life. And all I had been doing was waiting until he appeared on the horizon.

And by the look in his eyes, he was right here with me. This was our event horizon. I knew I would never be the same after tonight.

Our passion swept us up and held us within its grasp as we moved as one, like an ocean riptide pulling us along for the ride. In his eyes, I saw my future. It thrilled me and terrified me all in the same breath.

“Rory,” he breathed my name as his lips sought mine. And I kissed him back with no pretense. My heart was his for the taking.

Could I have fallen for a man I just met? I wasn't a woman who believed in love at first sight. But I felt my heart tumble over that cliff. And I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know how we would make it work.

But I had to have faith because nothing in my life had ever felt so right.

We moved as one, surging together. I loved the way he felt inside me, surrounding me with his arms. And he gave me hope that we had a future together, and it was one worth fighting for.

Oh god, he felt amazing. Bliss grew in intense lacerating waves. His breath became mine. We shifted, oblivious to

anything but the two of us, driving toward that glistening peak.

My back bowed. My climax shredded every preconceived notion. We came together, gasping. Our bodies trembled. Ecstasy crashed over us in ceaseless waves. The pounding surf drowned out our cries. We moved until the last quiver was spent.

And then James stared, awe etched upon his face. “You’re her, aren’t you? You’re the one.”

My bottom lip quivered. Because he was the one for me too. But the reality of what I had just done slammed into me like a category-five hurricane.

Oh god! What had I done?

Panic gripped me by the throat. I shoved at his chest, trying to get him to move. I had to get out of here. If anyone saw us? Fuck, I didn’t even want to consider the fallout. But I had to leave. Right now. Before things were said.

“Babe, what is it? What’s wrong?” He withdrew, shifting his body beside me. A concerned frown marred his brow.

I bottled up the urge to cry. I couldn’t let my tears fall. He would keep me here. I knew it as well as I knew my own name. Because there were things I hadn’t told him. Things he would surely hate me for. How could I be this careless?

“Nothing. I just have to get out of here,” I said, yanking my panties back on. We hadn’t used protection. I’d been so twisted up inside over what he made me feel that I didn’t even consider it.

We dressed. Me more hurriedly than he. “I’ve got to go.”

He was adjusting his pants when I started walking away. He held out a hand, trying to stop me. “Wait. Talk to me, Rory.

What's going on? Did I hurt you? Please come with me, and we can talk about this. I know it's a lot, but I know you feel it too. Please don't leave."

Tears filled my eyes. He was everything I'd ever wanted. And he couldn't be mine. I shook my head, and with my bottom lip trembling, I said, "I can't, James. I just . . . can't. I'm so sorry."

Hurt and confusion painted his face. And it slashed through my heart, tearing it to pieces.

Feeling as if I was bleeding out, with his semen staining my thighs, I raced away. I ran through the sand like my life depended upon it. But I was leaving my heart behind. It no longer belonged to me. In the short time we were together, he'd unknowingly taken ownership of it.

The unfairness of it struck me. I wanted to rage at fate and curse them.

Because I'd touched heaven only to be reminded that girls like me didn't get the happily ever afters.

Present Day

J enjoyed the hell out of our pizza and movie night. Rory was an amazing cook. I admit I was skeptical about homemade pizza. But it was one of the best pizzas I'd ever eaten. We demolished that pizza.

We ate pizza and popcorn that night and watched movies. It was a perfect night filled with laughter. And I couldn't get over how easily I slid into life with them here. The longer I was here, the more this felt like it was my real life.

By the time Friday morning rolled around, I was more settled and at peace than I had been for an age. And for a man like me, who had been consumed by war for eighteen years, the peace, the comfort, and hell, the sex, were addicting.

"This is a good color."

Rory and I were in the basement mid-morning, painting the new walls. The plumbing and HVAC didn't take as long as we thought. Rory was over the moon. A lot of the tension that had been present when I first arrived was now absent. I know she had been worried about getting the inn fixed up in time for spring. We had done a ton of work on the place this week,

getting the new walls installed on both floors. Before we installed new flooring, we had to paint the walls.

Rory had chosen a warm, rustic blue that would look exceptional once the new Pergo floor was installed and the ivory crown molding added. Rory had a good eye for décor. The blue was soothing. Combining it with a light gray stained Pergo and the ivory crown molding, this place would look exceptional.

“Yeah, I think it’ll look great.” She nodded, wielding a paint roller.

We were both working in our section with paint rollers. She looked damn cute in her coveralls, with her hair in pigtails and covered by a bandana. She wore paint goggles too. And fuck, but just looking at her gave me all sorts of naughty ideas. There hadn’t been a night or a day, for that matter, that I hadn’t taken her in her bed or mine or up against the kitchen counter or in the shower or anywhere else in the house.

Rory had infused my life with a spark that hadn’t been present in so long that I’d forgotten what it felt like to be alive.

And while I still struggled with the events ten years ago and that she kept Amelia a secret, some of my anger had softened. Don’t get me wrong, it was present. But the further entangled I became with my girls, the less those things mattered.

My girls.

That’s what it felt like they were—or what they could be. Rory and Amelia had accepted me into their lives as if I had always been in it. And it was up to me to decide to make it permanent. I could see how it would be between us. I saw

myself coming here time and again, imagining the welcome home I'd receive.

But I sat on the fence, telling myself I didn't need to make any decisions today. That there would be time for that later.

I joined her over at the paint station we erected in the middle of the basement. Rory was adding paint to her tray. And because I felt the devil on my shoulder and any time she was within arm's distance, I wanted her, I picked up a small sponge and dipped it in the paint.

"Rory."

She'd pushed the goggles onto the top of her head. And when she turned my way, I couldn't stop myself from doing it. I lifted the small sponge and bopped her on the nose with it, leaving behind a small blue streak of paint on her nose.

Her mouth dropped open. Laughing, she sputtered, "James."

I chuckled at the cute picture she made. And before she could retaliate, I slid my arms around her waist, pulling her in close until our bodies were pressed together, and kissed her. God, she tasted sweet. I wanted to kiss this woman forever. It never failed to amaze me how a simple kiss with Rory was more intimate than sex with other women. But then, our kisses had always been this way, chock full of lust with a side heaping of heart.

Because she kissed me back with such aching passion that no matter what happened, I was glad we had this slice of time together. But I would always want more of her. I couldn't get enough. And my heart whispered that I never would.

She broke our kiss and drew back, only to bring her paint-covered hand up and caress the side of my face, leaving a wet

trail of paint in her wake.

Paint dribbled off my cheek. “Oh, it’s going to be like that, huh?”

“You started it.” Her laughter bubbled out of her with a joy that lifted my soul up from hell. She tried dancing out of arm’s reach, but I caught her and reeled her in. She playfully struggled.

“You’re going to pay for that.” I held her trapped against me with one arm, then I dipped two fingers in the paint and swiped them over her collarbone, tracing a thick streak of blue on her skin.

She squealed and smacked her hand against my chest, leaving her handprint in blue paint.

And then it was on. We were in a race to get the other and cover them in paint. We laughed like lunatics until we were both sporting blue paint fucking everywhere. It was on our clothes. It was in our hair and on our faces and hands.

And Rory had never looked so beautiful.

“That’s it,” I growled, trying to act menacing and failing because I couldn’t stop grinning. This woman made my soul feel light.

She retreated, stepping away from the paint. There was a look in her eyes like she planned to make a run for the stairs. She wasn’t fast enough. I stalked after her. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

“Now, James, be reasonable. We’re both a mess. We’re—”

“About to get even messier.” I caught her before she reached the bottom of the stairs. Tackling her onto the drop cloth, protecting her with my body, I fused our lips together.

And fuck, but this woman kissed me back like I was special, like I was hers.

Growling and panting, we rolled haphazardly around the floor, tugging at clothing and removing it, paint smearing everywhere. But neither of us gave a damn. We were too hungry for each other. Our need was a drumbeat driving our actions. It left me panting and aching to be inside her.

Until we were naked on the floor, paint covering our bodies. But it didn't matter what she wore. Rory would always be the most beautiful woman in any room, in any manner. And we didn't need any foreplay. The paint war had been our foreplay. Because I found her drenched and aching for me.

It had been this way between us from the start.

Holding her gaze, I slid inside, and her pussy clenched around my shaft. Passion lit her gaze. And even through the lusty haze that had descended over us, she saw through every barrier into the very heart of me. She'd always seen through every shield I wore as battle armor to protect myself.

Because she saw me. She saw past my scars, both physical and soul- deep. She saw past my bullshit. And I saw her too. The beautiful light in her soul was a balm and a beacon, drawing me back to her again and again.

When I removed all the bullshit and the ego, when it was just us like this, everything clicked into place. This was where I was supposed to be. This was what mattered. She mattered. Fuck, she was imprinted on my damn soul.

And was the only woman I had ever loved.

And I knew, holding her close, our limbs intimately entwined, that I was still in love with her. I doubted I ever

stopped loving her. Even when I tried to forget her, she etched herself on my heart and soul.

“What is it?” she asked, undulating beneath me and biting her bottom lip as pleasure stole over her features.

I wasn't ready to discuss my feelings. I needed time to think before I confessed. Because I was still churned up inside over everything. Instead, I deflected and gave her a seductive smirk full of mirth. “Just thinking you sure do look cute with all the blue paint.”

She chuckled and then clenched her pussy around my dick. “Enough talking. Are you going to screw my brains out? Or do I need to go find someone else to—”

The sweet vixen would be the death of me. Growling, I reared back and thrust so hard our bodies scooted over the floor. She arched her back with a gasp. “You know that no one else will ever fuck you this way. That no one will ever understand the kinky woman you are but me. Don't threaten me with other men. Ever. Especially not when I'm buried inside you.”

She cupped my face, unmindful of all the paint. “And what are you going to do to me if I do?”

Her challenge slid through me. I grunted and withdrew. She opened her mouth to argue. But I didn't give her the chance to speak before I flipped her onto her hands and knees and nudged her thighs apart. I brought my hand down against her butt with enough force it left a red handprint on the milky globes.

“James.” She yelped and tried to scoot away. But I was having none of it.

We needed this to cleanse us of the past. So I swatted her ass again. “This is what will happen if you mention another man when I’m buried in your sweet pussy again. You will be punished. I’ll turn this ass of yours fucking beet red. Do you understand me?”

I landed another harsh blow on her ass. My palm stung from the force, but I wasn’t finished.

“I’m sorry.” She gasped and wriggled, like she wasn’t enjoying it. But moisture seeped from her slit. My cock jolted at the sight, aching to be back inside her again.

“No, you’re not. You wanted me to spank you. And fuck, but you’re fucking drenched, babe. I think I’m going to have to punish you more often.”

“Do it. I want you to,” she moaned, tilting her hips up in invitation and arching her back like a cat in heat.

And as messed up as this was, it was oddly cathartic. I peppered her behind with another half a dozen swats until both globes blazed red. I would have stopped earlier, but her moans increased. My woman fucking loved having her ass spanked. And I obliged her.

My woman.

Fuck, she was—and had always been.

And I needed to fuck her. A haze descended over me. I gripped my dick and rubbed it through her soaked slit. She emitted a low moan full of need.

“Yeah, you like it when I’m rough with you.” Positioning my dick at her entrance, I gripped her hips. And snarled, “Tell me who this pussy belongs to.”

I needed to hear her say it. I needed to claim her body just as she'd claimed all of me.

"It's yours, James," she sobbed.

With a growl that rumbled low in my chest, I plowed inside her tight heat with a single thrust. She tossed her head and issued a throaty moan.

"That's right." I brutally thrust, digging my fingers into her hips that I bet would leave marks. And I wanted to see my marks on her body. "This pussy is mine."

And then I proved it, pounding my fury and my agony inside her. Taking her with such intensity, there could be no doubt that I had imprinted myself on her body and soul. I plundered her pussy with a single-minded determination to own every part of this woman.

My woman.

"James," she whimpered, slamming her hips back, as caught up as me in the fury of our lovemaking.

I skimmed my hands over her toned back. She arched into my touch like a cat. I gripped her shoulders, pummeling her cunt. The wet smack of our flesh echoed in the basement. I drew her torso up until her back pressed against my chest, but never stopped fucking her. I wanted to live inside her pussy. I wanted it to be my sanctuary. Because she was mine.

That also meant that I was hers.

Her moans fueled my lust. But I needed even more connecting us. I cupped her cheek and turned her face my way, claiming her lips for a devastating kiss while my free hand cupped her pussy.

She clenched around my shaft, and I groaned. No one else had ever made me feel the way Rory did. After ten years without her, I knew no one would ever take her place. She was the light to my darkness, the part of me I didn't know was missing.

I didn't know if I had it in me to forgive her. I didn't know if I could move past all the hurt and lies. But in this moment, I wanted to with everything inside me.

I smacked her pussy.

She jolted in my arms. And her pussy squeezed my cock. I ate her passionate groan. Her moisture dripped over my fingers. She liked it rough. She let me be as rough as I needed to be, and in turn, exorcising my demons. In her arms, I forgot the horrors of war, the friends I'd lost, all of it. Because here, holding her in my arms, none of it mattered. She was all that mattered.

And she couldn't know what it meant to me. Sliding inside her, I found peace.

It's why as we came together I vowed to try. I vowed that I would work to leave our past behind us. We had been given a chance to start over fresh. And I wanted the promise of a future with her. The same future I'd envisioned all those years ago but had been cut short.

But it had morphed into something even more tangible. Because instead of merely hoping for certain outcomes, I could see what our future would entail and felt as if my heart would burst from the emotions swamping me. I held my future in my arms.

When wound up spooning, still connected, on the floor.

“We should go take a shower and get all the paint off,” she murmured.

“In a minute. I’m not ready to let you go yet.”

The smile she gifted me stole the breath from my body. I would never tire of having her look at me. And I made another vow. I wanted to be the reason she smiled. Because when she smiled that way and looked at me, I finally felt sunlight on my face when I’d been walking in the darkness for so long I’d almost forgotten what it felt like.

The next morning, I left Rory's bed before dawn. I would much rather stay in bed with her all day long, or at least stay with her until she got up. But we had agreed, for Amelia's sake, that we would not be seen together in her room or mine.

I rose and left her room, but I was too keyed up to sleep. I had a little over a week before I needed to head back to base and report in. But I didn't want to go back. Not with everything we hadn't resolved. And I wasn't ready to leave Amelia yet either, not when I just found her.

But I was a man of my word. I'd sworn an oath to serve out my time for another two years. So that was what I would do. But I would be leaving my heart behind. Although perhaps I was only leaving it temporarily. Because it felt like this was my future. That they were my future.

What if I could make this the place I came home to? I knew it wouldn't be all sunshine and daisies. And that Rory and I would fight. It was bound to happen in any relationship. But I couldn't get past the feeling that we were meant to be, and that the universe had conspired to put us back together again—with a little help from Evan.

He was the elephant in the room. The crux of why we hadn't gotten together ten years ago. And I struggled with

mourning him while simultaneously cursing him. In retrospect, I wish back then I had had the balls to come clean about Rory and me. But I kept our night together a tightly guarded secret.

I blew out a breath. I wanted to do something special for my girls. For a change of pace, I made breakfast. This way Rory wouldn't have to handle it. She was always cooking, cleaning, and taking care of everyone else. It was time someone took care of her for a change. It's why I'd stripped my sheets and tossed them in the wash already too since I had begun learning her routine.

When a sleepy-eyed Amelia ambled into the kitchen in her pale blue pajamas, her dark hair askew, I grinned. The kid never failed to amuse me.

“Hiya, squirt, hungry? There's pancakes and bacon.” I might not be nearly as skilled as Rory in the kitchen. But I had no trouble frying up a pound of bacon and flipping pancakes on a griddle.

Amelia glanced around the kitchen and frowned. “Where's Mom?”

“Sleeping. She had a long day yesterday.” And an even longer night. We'd spent the night taking each other until our bodies plum wore out. Even thinking about our sexual escapades had my dick twitching.

“And you cooked?” She looked skeptical. Like she didn't believe her dad could do something like make her breakfast.

“Yeah, I can do that too. Your mom isn't the only one with a few skills.” I winked at her and spun the spatula in my hand.

She grinned and rolled her eyes. Boy, was the sass strong in her. “Can I have three pancakes with maple syrup on them?”

“Yep. And do you want any bacon?”

“Like you really have to ask, Dad. Of course I want bacon.”

“That’s my girl.” I loaded up a plate for her and poured syrup over the pancakes.

“That’s more than Mom would give me.” She worriedly glanced toward the hall as if she thought her mom would come strolling out and she would be in trouble.

After setting the syrup bottle back on the counter, I put my finger up to my mouth. “Shush, it can be our secret. And it’s a bribe so you’ll help me outside.”

“What are you doing outside?” She sat at the table with her plate and started munching on bacon.

I made a plate for myself and put the rest in the oven to keep it warm for Rory. And sat at the table with my kid. Fuck, I was going to miss sitting down with her like this. “Well, there’s a lot of dead branches and leaves that need to be raked up and cleared out of the way. I’m planning to rake it all up and put it in the big brown yard bags I found in the garage. It’ll give you more space to practice soccer.”

It was a bribery attempt to get her to spend time with me, but I didn’t care. I wanted to soak up as much time with her as humanly possible. It would be months before I saw her again.

“Okay, sure. That’s a great idea. It will help me prepare for club soccer try outs. But Mom says she’s not sure about it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a lot of practices. And Mom doesn’t know if she’ll be able to get away enough. Maybe if she can afford to hire

someone part-time. But she won't know until after we get the inn back up and running."

Fuck. I knew Rory was struggling, but I didn't know how badly. Although with the inn currently closed to guests, it made sense that she would be short on cash. I didn't know what tourism was like this time of year. "Let me see what I can do to help out."

"Will you be here this fall?" she asked with such hope shining in her eyes it fucking crushed me. Because I knew I wouldn't be here. If I was a betting man, I figured I would be halfway around the world this fall.

I hid my wince as best I could. "I might have some leave time. But I can't guarantee it, and I know that's not what you want to hear. My job requires a lot from me and takes me away often. But the good news is, I'm up for retirement in two years."

"You're that old."

I ruffled her hair. "Retire from the Navy. I'll still need to work. And I'll move here."

"Will you live here with us?"

No. That wasn't what I meant. "Um, perhaps. If not here, I'll find a place close by. That way we can see each other as much as we want. Sound like a plan?"

Her smile took my breath away. "That would be amazing. You could come to my soccer games."

"I could do a lot more than that. But this is where I want to retire." Because I wanted to see her grow up. I wanted to see who she would turn out to be.

“So Dad, are you going to ask Mom to marry you?” she asked, pegging me with an earnest expression.

I choked on my coffee, inhaling it down the wrong tube. My eyes watered as I sucked in air and coughed. I pounded against my chest and loudly cleared my throat. “What? Why would you ask that question? Where would you get that idea?”

“Well, because I saw you leave her room this morning. It’s the same thing my friend Kelly’s stepdad used to do before Kelly’s mom and him got married. So are you?” There was such eager hope in her eyes. I didn’t want to squelch it.

But I also didn’t want to lie to her. It put me square between a rock and a hard place. Difficult positions were my forte. “I’m sure this isn’t the first time you’ve seen a man coming out of your Mom’s room.”

And yeah, I was fishing. Was it wrong that I was asking my nine-year-old if her mom had other men over? Most likely. But I still asked anyway. I was too curious about her life. And I realized I was acting like I didn’t trust Rory. Yet there was a part of me that didn’t fully. Given our track record, I figured it was an understandable position.

Amelia shook her head. “Yes, it is. She’s never had a man in the house. I mean, she’s had men come in to fix stuff at the inn and all. But they never came in here.”

There’s no way Rory hadn’t had a man over in all this time. She wasn’t a nun, nor had she taken a vow of chastity. “I see. It’s complicated, squirt.”

And I realized that Rory and I needed to sit down and talk—like adults. What a novel concept. We needed to clear the air and figure out where we wanted to take our relationship. Because we were in one, but we couldn’t keep sneaking

around. Rory warned me we had to be careful because of Amelia. At the time, I thought she was feeding me a line because she was ashamed of hooking up with a past one-night stand and preferred keeping me her dirty little secret. But maybe not. I wouldn't know until I could talk to Rory.

“So, you don't want to be with Mom?” she asked with a frown.

Shit. I was bungling this. I never realized how hard it was being a parent. Because the way Amelia was studying me broke my fucking heart. Disappointment swam in her cornflower blue eyes. And it was the absolute last thing I ever wanted to do. “It's not that. We've just got some grownup stuff we're working through. But you'll be the first to know what we decide, okay?”

“Just don't hurt her. Mom's not as strong as she pretends to be.”

“No? Cause I think your Mom is one of the strongest people I know.” Even though I disagreed with her choice in not telling me about Amelia, I was beginning to understand just how much work raising a kid could be. And it floored me that she'd done it all by herself. Because she had done a fabulous job with Amelia.

Amelia snorted and rolled her eyes. “That's because you haven't heard her in her room crying. She doesn't do it often. But I know she worries a lot.”

Oh boy, was the sass going to be strong with her when she hit her teenage years. But the thought of Rory crying alone had my heart aching. Why had she been crying? I was at a loss over how to help since I would be so far away.

“I'm not going to hurt her.” Or I would do my best not to.

“I’m going to clean up breakfast. If you’re done, why don’t you get dressed so we can head into the backyard. Dress in layers because it’s cold out.”

“Okay, Dad.” She rose and carried her plate and cup to the sink.

And when she left me alone in the kitchen, I leaned against the counter, praying Rory and I could figure our shit out. Or we were going to hurt Amelia. And it was the absolute last thing I ever wanted to do.

10 Years Ago

*Y*anking my shirt on over my head, I took off after her. But she was fast. And she had gotten a head start. Normally I was much faster, but my body still rode the endorphin high from being with her. The last hour or so with Rory had been the best of my life. I'd never connected with another woman that way. It hadn't been just sex for me. It had been the promise of something more, the potential for an amazing future. And I believed in my soul she was meant for me.

But how had a night that started with me touching heaven end in hell?

Fuck! What happened? Why had she freaked?

I searched through faces as I rejoined the party at a sprint, slowing my stride because I didn't want to alarm anyone. They were all servicemen and women, and my hurry would arouse suspicions.

Beautiful Rory had sprinted away from me, from us, like she'd left the oven on at home and only just now realized it.

Trudging through the sand, the ceaseless crash of waves against the shore couldn't drown out the party. People laughed in groups, everyone still drinking. I'd bet the party would go

until the early morning hours or whenever the cops made us leave. And given the proximity to base, most police just looked the other way. This beach was where servicemen and women came to blow off steam. And tonight's party was a rager.

Where had she gone? What had spooked her? Had I hurt her? Because it seemed she had enjoyed it as much as me. I couldn't remember being with a woman, sliding inside them, and feeling deep in my soul that this was the woman for me.

Because it had never happened before.

Panic engulfed me. What was I going to do if I never saw her again? That couldn't happen. Surely fate wouldn't be that cruel. But then, I knew firsthand just how cruel it could be. I'd watched my best friend die. Torn apart by a mine. There hadn't even been a body to ship home to his folks.

I shook off my malaise. I had to focus on the present and not the past. Because Rory, hopefully, was my future. I just had to find her.

I scanned every group I passed, searching for strawberry blonde hair and luminous pale green eyes.

The moment I spied Rory, she pulled me in with her sunny nature. The way she'd sat apart from the crowd near a piece of driftwood, sipping on a beer and staring out at the ocean with such aching stillness. I'd been drawn in, the proverbial moth to a flame.

And the moment she shot me a smile, I was a fucking goner. I'd not intended for the night to take such a wild and unpredictable, but thoroughly enjoyable, turn. Everything inside me demanded I lock her down and make her mine. And

not just for the night. I'd never been clobbered by a desire so hot it burned.

I used to write off love at first sight as a young girl's fantasy. Until I was smacked upside the head with it. For the first time in my life, I'd met someone and saw a future with them. And for me, that meant marriage, kids, the whole deal.

It was tricky with my deployments, but we could make it work. Even if she took the job in Maine, we could figure it out as we went along. I just had to figure out where she ran off to and why.

My buddies stood around the biggest bonfire, laughing and joking. Aiden clapped Roman on the shoulder, both grinning from ear to ear as they flirted with a pair of brunette coeds. Even Wyatt, who was normally stoic as ever, wore a smile as he sipped his beer.

And then it felt like all the air had been sucked from my lungs. There she was—the woman meant for me. I knew it into the furthest reaches of my soul.

Yet something was off. She stood there stiffly, her calm demeanor a thing of the past. I opened my mouth to yell her name. And suddenly, it felt like I'd taken a punch to the gut. Because she wasn't alone. There was an arm around her shoulders. And then I finally glanced at who that arm was attached to.

My heart fucking dropped.

It couldn't be. I had to be seeing things. I blinked, trying to clear my eyes. But the scene before me remained the same.

She never said a word. And she had ample time to tell me. The budding sense of rightness turned to acid. My heart floundered at her unquestionable betrayal.

And I was shredded by an undeniable truth—I'd slept with my friend's wife.

“*H*ey guys, thanks for getting all that done outside. Baby, I want you to go take a shower and get dressed.” I stood at the kitchen island, peeling potatoes.

“Are we going out tonight?” Amelia asked.

“Actually, Jenna’s mom called and asked if you could spend the night.” I grinned and wiggled my brows at her. She was all sweaty and dirty from being outside with James.

Amelia whooped. “And I can go?”

“We’re not having pizza night?” James asked with a small frown.

Dammit, I didn’t want to disappoint him. I wasn’t trying to keep Amelia from him. But I wanted a night where it was just us.

“No. It’s Jenna’s birthday sleepover. We’ve been trying to schedule it for weeks. And I thought we could have a night,” I explain, giving him a stare laced with meaning.

I knew his time away from the military dwindled. We needed to have a frank discussion without Amelia around. If our conversation went south or didn’t yield the result I hoped for, I didn’t want her affected by it. And while I didn’t want to rock the boat, we couldn’t continue down this path without

clearing the air. We had to bury the past if we had any hope of a future together. And I didn't even know if he wanted a future together.

“I hope that's all right.”

He glanced at Amelia. And in his eyes was love for our daughter, so much love it was damn near tangible. But I knew what he was thinking. He had to head back to base soon. He didn't have a choice. And he wanted as much time with her as possible.

“Yeah, that's fine.” But he wasn't thrilled. Maybe I should have talked to him about it. In my defense, I was new to the co-parenting gig. I was used to making decisions for Amelia without input from anyone else. It would take adjustments on both our parts.

“They're going to drop her off in the morning before church. We've got a snowstorm forecasted for tomorrow night. From what the weather channel is predicting, it's going to be a doozy of a storm. So I think someone will be off school for a day or two.”

At my explanation, James smiled and his gaze landed on me and heated. “Understood.”

Inhaling a steady breath, I said, “Amelia, go take your shower, baby. I've already packed your bag. And I've got some snacks for you to take with you to share.”

“Okay, Mom. This is great.” She raced down the hall to her room without a backward glance.

James swaggered over. Flutters swirled in my belly. It never failed to amaze me how much a cocky stare could make me agreeable to anything he wanted. “So that means we're going to have all night together, just you and me?”

His dark gaze traveled down my body like a slow, lingering caress, lighting every molecule up inside me. “Yep.”

He caged me against the kitchen island. He skimmed his nose along my neck, then murmured in my ear. “Tonight’s the night then, babe. I’m going to take that ass.”

Pleasure spiraled through me. I shifted at the thought of his cock there. But I put a hand on his chest and shoved him away. We couldn’t do this with Amelia in the next room. Not that I budged him one bit. He was too solid for my slight pushing to have any effect. “Later. When it’s just the two of us.”

“She’s taking a shower.”

“And you think that will give us enough time? She’s going to be too excited to do more than a perfunctory wash. She’ll be out here in under ten minutes. You just wait.”

“I can do a lot in ten minutes,” he said in a growly bedroom voice that never failed to send tingles racing along my spine.

“Not if you want to eat tonight.”

“If we’re having pizza, we can order in. It will save time for other things.”

I pressed my thighs together to contain the throbbing. This man, with his testosterone-laden smirk, was seriously testing my willpower. “We’re not having pizza.”

“We aren’t? Then what are we having?”

“Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and peas with the pearl onions.” It was the meal he’d really wanted. And I couldn’t let him head back to base without making it for him. He’d done so much for Amelia and me.

“We . . . wait, really?” James’s shock quickly bled into pleasure. “You’re making that for me?”

He seemed so surprised that I would do this for him. “I told you I would. I didn’t until tonight because it’s not something Amelia would like.”

James cradled my face between his hands and kissed me with such startling ferocity I moaned. My heart tripped over itself. And I knew I still loved him. In fact, I loved him more than I did back then. More than the torch I’d been carrying for him all these years.

There’s a reason it never worked with anyone else.

Because they weren’t James.

He was the only man for me. The only one I wanted beside me. The only one I wanted a forever with. And I didn’t know if he would stay. He had to go back to base and do his duty. I knew that, and I was damn proud of him. He was loyal and braver than any man I knew.

When he was on leave, I wanted this to be the place he came home to. I wanted to be the woman he considered his. And I wanted us to be a family for real. Since he arrived, it felt like we were a family.

It wouldn’t be easy. There would be times when it would be damn hard. When I would lie awake at night praying and worrying because he was half a world away with danger all around him. But I would do it for him.

“You guys are kissing! Ew!” Amelia exclaimed and made fake gagging noises.

James finally lifted his mouth. He winked at me and then gave our kid the stink eye. “How do you think you came along, squirt?”

Amelia continued making the gagging sounds. “It’s weird and icky.”

James left me standing against the counter. He strode over to Amelia, pulled her into a bear hug, and pressed a kiss against her forehead. “You get a kiss too, squirt.”

My heart sighed. James and Amelia had really bonded. They were grinning with such love and affection it gave me hope that this could really work. Granted, Amelia had been on her best behavior since her dad had arrived. But it was a sweet moment I would remember forever.

Yet it also made me sad because I knew how badly I messed up. I should have fought harder, should have made him listen to me that day. But I didn’t. And that’s on me.

Because he stepped into fatherhood like he’d been doing it forever. He hadn’t dropped the ball or taken a back seat. And he couldn’t know what it meant to me. I’d been laden with fear that Amelia would wind up disappointed, that James wouldn’t be interested in being her dad. But those were my hangups because of my experience with my father.

In between grocery shopping, cleaning, and laundry, I’d seen them out in the backyard together. He’d been teaching her how to rake leaves. And Amelia had been soaking up everything he was saying like a sponge. She had a huge case of hero worship with her dad.

And well, he was the best man I’d ever known and more than deserving of that worship. I had a slight case of it myself. I couldn’t be near him without wanting his hands on me.

At the sound of the doorbell, I said, “Amelia, go get your coat and bag that I packed for you. I’ve got the snacks right here.”

“Okay.” She raced down the hall to her bedroom. She came sprinting back with her coat on but unbuttoned, her pack slung over her shoulder and her stuffed pig.

“I’ll be right back. And then I’ll get dinner cooked.”

“I’m going to hop in the shower. See you tomorrow, squirt. Maybe tomorrow you can help me get the inn ready for the snowstorm.”

“Sounds great, Dad. Bye.” Amelia hugged him quickly. The bond they were building gave me a smattering of hope. Because we might really be able to make a go of it.

My heart light, I walked her out, then waved her off as she climbed into Jenna’s mom’s SUV. Those two had met in preschool and had been friends ever since.

Back in the kitchen, I finished prepping the meatloaf and popped it in the oven. It’s a recipe I used a time or two with guests that had gotten great reviews. While the meatloaf cooked, I worked on the mashed potatoes and peas.

“You really are going all out tonight.” James padded into the kitchen, and my entire being lit up. It had been this way from the moment I met him.

“I want to thank you.”

“For what?” James asked as he leaned back against the kitchen island, watching me work. His feet were bare. His hair was still wet from his shower. He wore a simple pair of jeans and a long-sleeved Henley. And he was the sexiest man I’d ever known. If I wasn’t in the middle of cooking, I’d be tugging him into the bedroom to have my way with him.

“Being so good with Amelia. She loves you.” And she’s not the only one.

James flashed a warm grin. The lines around his eyes crinkled, and I found it sexy as hell. “The feeling is mutual. She’s a phenomenal kid. You’ve done a wonderful job with her.”

I flushed at the unexpected compliment. “Thanks.”

“You’re a great mom, Rory. I only wish—”

“I know. As long as I live, James, I’ll always regret not telling you sooner.” He dropped his head down. I didn’t know what else I could say or do to help him, to show him how sorry I was. And I knew nothing I did would ever be enough, that my excuses and reasons behind my actions would never atone for the hurt I’d caused. I shifted my focus back to the meal. If nothing else, I could give him a great dinner and show him how much he meant to me tonight.

And then, we would see.

“Can I help with anything?”

“If you want to set the table, that would help. There’s a bottle of wine in the fridge. If you wouldn’t mind opening it and pouring me a glass, I’d appreciate it.”

“Coming right up.”

Dinner took a hot minute. This was one of those meals where coordinating the side dishes took finesse to get everything finished at roughly the same time. But once I did, we sat and ate, just the two of us.

“You know, I was just thinking that we’ve never been on a proper date,” James murmured as I dished up the mini meatloaves onto our plates.

“No, we sort of skipped that phase. If it is a phase. But then, I’ve never been any good at dating.” It was kind of hard

to date when you're carrying a torch for another man.

"No?" James took a bite of the meatloaf and groaned, emitting a deep rumbling sound of satisfaction. "Holy shit, Rory. This puts my mom's meatloaf to shame."

"Ah, thanks. It's a recipe I've used for inn guests. It's always a hit. But I'm thrilled you like it." And his pleasure over the meal made all the work worth it.

"I can see why. Thank you for doing this for me."

"You've been helping around here since you arrived. And since you're spending your leave time here with us and can't get down to Tennessee to see your folks, it's the least I can do."

"I appreciate it. Truly."

"When do you have to head back?" It was a topic I hadn't broached but one of the many we needed to discuss while Amelia was gone.

He sighed. "Twelve days. I'll start with a new unit when I return. I'll be with them until I hit my twenty in two years."

"So you're planning to retire from the Navy?"

With a contemplative expression, he nodded. "Yeah. As much as I've enjoyed it and it's been the right career for me, I don't want to be a lifer. I've got two years left, and I'm done."

"And what are your plans after that?"

"Well, I'm considering relocating here. I want to be close to Amelia. Regardless of what happens between the two of us, I want to be here to help you raise her."

"She'll love that. I will too. It's been nice having you here." Hope grew and expanded inside me. We might really

have a shot this time. Maybe we could move past our failures and make this work.

“I should tell you that Amelia saw me coming out of your room this morning. I know we agreed to keep it a secret. But I don’t want to lie to her.”

He wouldn’t. Nor did I want him to feel like he had to. “Well, we knew we couldn’t keep our relationship a secret forever. How did she take it?”

“She wanted to know if I was going to marry you.”

My heart stopped and kickstarted into overdrive. He wasn’t going to propose, was he? Was that what that look in his eyes was all about? “Oh, she did? And how did you respond?”

“I explained that it’s complicated and that we’re working things out. I hope that’s okay.” He looked at me for approval.

Our kid had no idea how lucky she was, because her dad would do anything for her. Even ask for my guidance in how he parented her. “Yeah, sure.”

“She also said something else that I’ve been trying to wrap my head around.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” Oh god, what had she said? Because I knew that kids could say the darndest things.

“That I was the only man she’s ever seen come out of your room. That you’ve never had a man in your house who wasn’t a repairman. Is that true?” He pierced me with his stare.

My belly churned, and I felt as if my heart was on display. I drank a huge gulp of wine, needing a dose of liquid courage. “And if it is?”

He frowned. “Rory, it’s been ten years. Surely you dated.”

I took Wyatt's advice and gave him complete honesty. "I've been on a handful of them. But I was busy raising a kid and running the inn. Dating took a back seat. And nothing ever manifested into anything serious."

"How many men have you slept with since we were together on the beach? The night you conceived Amelia?"

This one was harder for me. I didn't want to answer his question, but only because it made me appear pathetic. But I promised myself that I wouldn't lie to him. Drawing up my courage, I looked him square in the eyes and said, "James, you're the only man I've been with. There's been no one since you that night."

Silence descended. He didn't say anything. But the warmth in his eyes deepened, turned darker, greedier. Until the air backed up in my lungs and I shivered, frozen in place under the weight of his stare. Then he shoved his chair back. It scraped against the floor, shattering the silence.

He held out his hand. "Come with me."

The simple demand fell over me, and my entire body vibrated in response. "But what about dinner?"

"We can heat it up later. Come with me now."

I didn't hesitate a second time. I slid my hand in his. Without saying another word, he led me into the bedroom. We'd stopped going to his bedroom altogether.

But then, his place had always been in my bed. My heart pounded. This felt momentous. Like we'd turned a huge corner. Before the door had shut, he tugged me into his arms. This was where I belonged. His arms were my home. It was the one place I felt whole. Where I knew as long as he held me, nothing would ever go wrong. And that I was no longer

alone. He was the other half of me. And then he cradled my face between his large palms. He stared at me with a light in his eyes I didn't know.

And my nerves kicked into high gear.

But before I could hide, feeling awkward after my admission, he lowered his mouth until it was an inch away. "I never stopped thinking about you."

And then his lips were on mine. But his kiss was different. Before, we'd been all hot hands and hormones, but there was no rush now. He savored me. Like I was a fine wine he'd been longing to sample.

I sighed into his embrace, gliding my hands up his chest. They found their place on the back of his neck. He lingered over my lips. Tasting me. Dragging his tongue along my upper lip. I sighed, opening for him. He delved inside, teasing my tongue with long, smooth strokes of his. And he made me feel cherished.

With feather-light strokes, he caressed my sides. Hands that had known such brutality were tender and gentle. They snaked beneath the hem of my shirt and grazed my flesh. He slowly lifted my top, drawing the material up gradually, only breaking the kiss long enough to pull it over my head. I wanted to protest, missing his lips on mine. But then he claimed my lips, still in no hurry.

With drugging kisses, he walked me back toward the bed until the mattress brushed the back of my thighs. Oh god, I loved his hands; they were infinitely gentle. He was incredibly strong, capable of inflicting such pain.

And his tenderness was my undoing. I had never loved him more than I did in this moment. His touch slayed me. He

swept me up in a tide. Everywhere he touched sparked and sizzled. He undid my jeans. Breaking the soulful kiss, he left my lips just long enough to drag my pants off before hoisting me into his arms and tenderly laying me on the bed. He yanked his shirt off and dropped his jeans before he joined me.

And I welcomed him.

If I had my way, I'd be welcoming him to my bed for the next fifty years. I didn't know why we'd been given this second chance. All I knew was that I never wanted this—us—to end. And perhaps it's why the universe gave us another shot.

Because our first was cut short by my own stupidity. I kneecapped our relationship before we had the chance to really make a go of it.

Every single thought fled as he shifted on top of me, his hips spreading my thighs wide. And I moaned at the sensation of his stiff erection pressing against my sex. He planted open-mouthed kisses down my neck, nipping me gently. I gasped at the tingles racing through my veins. He reached behind my back, undid my bra clasp, and slid it off. Tossing the material off behind him, he cupped my breasts before dipping his head and sucking a pert bud into his mouth. He kept his gaze on my face. Entranced by him, I couldn't look away.

I ran my fingers through his hair and clutched him to me. The sinful tugging at my nipple set off a throbbing ache in my pussy. He switched between breasts, administering the same heady caress that had me writhing, arching my back, and feeding him more of the mound. Yet his eyes never left my face. He was cataloging all my responses.

“James.” I breathed his name like a benediction as my body went fluid beneath him. I floated in a sea of bliss. My

eyelid grew heavy as desire spun around me. And it was all his doing. The moment he touched me, he was all I could see.

“Just let me love you.” He murmured the quiet demand. His words shivered through me as he resumed worshipping my breasts. He lapped at the stiff peaks, then sucked each bud deep into the hot cavern of his mouth, bowing my back at the intensity of pleasure shooting from my tits directly into my core.

But then he traveled south, pressing open-mouthed kisses along my belly, dipping his tongue in my belly button, making me laugh. He shot me a seductive grin that had my heart rolling over in my chest. Because I knew there would never be anyone else for me. Whether or not this lasted, he was it for me.

He had been from the moment we met. James was the love of my life. And he was doing what no man had ever done before.

He was making love to me. If I wasn't already head over heels for him, this would have been the moment I fell for him.

When he reached my hips, he dipped his tongue beneath my lace panties, teasing me. I trembled beneath him. Aching for his touch. He hooked his fingers around the lace and drew my panties down my thighs.

And then I was bare.

“You're so fucking beautiful, Rory. When I return to base and get shipped off somewhere around the world, this is what I'll remember every night.” He caressed my inner thighs, spreading them wide, exposing my slit to his hungry gaze.

His face descended until he hovered an inch above the promised land. With a deep rumbling groan, he planted a long,

slow kiss against my pussy. He acted like he had all the time in the world as he thoroughly kissed me. Lapping at my clit, causing it to swell, he spiraled the pleasure higher. I gripped his head, grinding my pussy against his mouth.

“Oh god, James.” I gasped as he treated my pussy like a five-course meal, and he intended to devour every bite.

“That’s it. Just let go and trust I’ll get you there.”

“I do trust you. I—”

The slow glide of his tongue effectively cut off my admission. He slipped his tongue inside me, thrusting deep. I lost all sense of time, floating in a sea of ecstasy. James lingered, giving my pussy these long, slow thrusts that made me lose my mind from the bliss.

Mewls spilled from my lips. I writhed, aching for more. With each lap of his tongue, my body coiled tighter and tighter still.

“James, please,” I whispered, pleading for release.

“Nuh-uh. Not yet. I want to remember this. Tonight is going to get me through the long nights ahead when I’m halfway around the globe. You’ll come when I’m good and ready to allow it.”

I moaned, my back arching at the pleasure. And I didn’t know if I could take anymore, but I would try—for him. Because he was everything to me.

He swished two fingers through my slit and then slowly pushed them inside me while his mouth sucked at my clit. The wicked invasion had me clutching at his shoulders. I writhed, gasping. He drove my body up, pumping his fingers while he sucked on my swollen bud. But when I was right at the edge, seconds from toppling over the edge, he backed off.

I whimpered, and he grinned. “Just a little more, babe.”

And then he was back at it, lapping at my pussy like he couldn't get enough. Time lost all meaning. I descended into ecstasy-infused bliss, where even the air shifting against my skin made me cry out at the pleasure. Every molecule in my body was on fire.

But then he was there, kissing me like he would never get enough. I tasted myself on his lips. It ignited a maelstrom of sinful desire.

His cock nudged my entrance. And then he pressed inside, driving his cock deep and deeper still until he buried himself fully. James held still, giving my body time to adjust to the fullness.

Rocking my hips, greedy for friction, he moved. Flexing his hips, he glided deep, our hips smacking together. He thrust slowly, letting me feel every inch. He surrounded me with his big body, and I hooked my legs around his waist, pulling him even deeper inside.

My hands slid to his back. I loved the way his muscles flowed beneath my fingertips. And he loved me, telling me with his body what his mouth had been unable to profess.

He cared about me. Maybe even loved me.

And just how much tonight mattered.

He never increased his pace, just kept pumping with slow rocking thrusts. And it's why when the climax rose up around me and swept me out to sea, I was a writhing, gasping mess. He joined me in bliss, following me over and filling me up. And I wished I wasn't on birth control. Because I wanted another baby with him. I wanted everything with James.

James looked at me then. “Rory, I—”

I cut him off, needing to clear the air completely before we went any further. Because I promised myself if I ever got the chance to love him again, there would be no more secrets between us. “No, before you say anything. I need to show you something.”

“All right.” He rolled to my side, his gaze heavy and sated.

I slid off the bed. Then I padded over to my dresser and withdrew the envelope from Evan. It was time. Because if we couldn’t move past his reservations about me, about us, there was no future. And I couldn’t continue to hope for a future that might never be.

With my heart racing, clutching the envelope, I headed back to bed. “I want you to read the letter Evan sent me.”

*T*repidation filled me as I sat up. “Are you sure? That was a private letter for you. I don’t want to encroach unless you’re one hundred percent certain.”

She knelt beside me, her hair disheveled, looking lovelier than any woman had a right to. “James, I know I messed up with us. And I did it because I wasn’t honest with you that night and then freaked out afterward because I’d omitted that I was married to Evan. But I want us. I want us to try for real this time. And not for Amelia, but because *we* want to make it work between us. But to do that, there can’t be any secrets between us, especially not about anything this big. I want you to read it.”

My heart expanded. Love for her filled the dark corners of my soul. How could I say no? She had her heart in her eyes. And after confessing that she hadn’t been with another man since we first slept together, I wanted everything she had said and more. “I want that too.”

She pulled it from the envelope and handed it over. Unfolding it, I began to read.

Hey Lorelei,

I know it's been a hot minute. I'm sorry that we lost touch these past few years. That's on me. I was pissed after the divorce. It wasn't you I was upset with, but myself. I know I failed you, and the bulk of the blame for our marriage going sideways was my fault.

We were kids when we got married. And I did love you, sweetheart. But I know my unfaithfulness hurt you. That's on me. And I didn't cheat because I didn't love you. I was messed up. There were things that happened on deployment that made me a bit crazy.

That doesn't excuse the fact that I cheated on you more than once. I know I drove you into James's arms.

My brave, sweet Rory, he needs to know his daughter. And I know you well enough that you won't do something about it. You need security too much. And you can hate me for rocking your boat, but it's what James needs. And in the end, you do too.

There's a letter for James in the envelope. Give it to him when you're ready. And it's okay if you never are.

I know I don't deserve it, but I hope one day you'll forgive me. Be happy, Rory. You deserve it.

All my love,

Evan

“That son of a bitch knew about Amelia and didn't tell me. Where's his damn letter?” I snarled as rage filled me. How could he have kept this from me? Rory, I understood. But Evan?

She handed it over and crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her hands were shaking. My heart squeezed at her fear.

But my anger overrode my good sense. I couldn't focus on that right now. My head spun over the knowledge that Evan knew about Amelia and didn't fucking tell me.

Practically ripping the envelope with my name on it from inside the other. I opened it, tensing at whatever revelations this letter was about to drop in my lap.

James, my dude,

I knew about the two of you. She confessed everything after we finalized the divorce. She explained how you two met and that it was cataclysmic.

I need you to know I never hated you for being with her that night. That's not to say it didn't hurt or piss me off, because it fucking did.

And I certainly gave you a hard time about it by riding your ass, especially at first. But the thing is, while I loved Rory and she me, it wasn't deep. We met and had an affair that should have ended when she headed back to college after her spring break. Instead we got hitched. It was a natural step when we didn't really understand how wrong we were for each other.

And I was unfaithful many times over. I didn't know how to be faithful that way. And I know you well enough to know that you're likely reading this and steaming mad over it. Dude, you need to get over it, though, and here's why.

Because I never once saw her look at me the way she did when she talked about the two of you. Rory was and is completely head over heels for you.

And I was fucking jealous, not because she loved you, but because I'd never experienced such deep affection with anybody. Don't let your anger destroy the two of you. Because she's the best there is. I should know because I lost her over my negligence.

Don't take her for granted or underestimate her. She's stronger than anyone gives her credit for after everything she's survived.

If you still feel like you need to atone for sleeping with my wife, then do me this solid. Love her fiercely, dude—for me.

You're one of my brothers from another mother, and I'm going to miss you fiercely, dude.

And one last thing. Forgive her. You won't regret it.

Your friend,

Evan

I lowered the letter. Rage filled me so completely that my entire body shook with it.

“Are you fucking kidding me? He knew about us, about Amelia, all those years and never fucking told me? He's as bad as you.”

I hopped out of her bed and paced, fighting my anger and losing. “All this time, one of you could have been fucking honest with me. But no, you had to continue keeping secrets.”

“I always thought he would tell you about Amelia,” she murmured quietly.

My eyes sliced her way. She hadn't moved from her spot on the bed. “But neither of you did. Was it all some joke to

you two? Hiding my kid from me?”

Rory climbed off the bed and marched my way, unmindful of her nudity, and poked me in the chest. “Don’t you get it? I left him after we were together. I know the divorce took some time. And after everything that night, I never let him touch me again. I couldn’t. I knew what a mistake it was that I didn’t tell you. I didn’t know how. But I never slept with him after that night. We were over from that night on.”

“Why?” I croaked out, my emotions a turbulent sea. Love and rage and betrayal swarmed in my chest.

Tears trailed down her face. She pressed her hands against her chest. “Because I knew from the moment you touched me, I was yours. And it was while I was away thinking about everything that happened that I found out I was pregnant.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” I shouted, shaking over the revelations tonight.

“I thought about contacting you. Until eventually I convinced myself that you would have chosen him over me. You guys were friends, James. Family, even. And I couldn’t be the one to tear that apart. I just couldn’t. I loved you too much to do that to you. Because I never would have forgiven myself if something happened to your unit because people were pissed at each other and not thinking clearly. And I wanted you guys to come home, but you especially. Then, when Henry and Sue got sick, I took care of them. Jesus Christ, I was juggling raising a child, running the inn, and taking care of them. I barely had time to think, let alone sleep. But even without all that, it would be the same. Because I’ve been with nobody since you. You were it for me from that first night.”

Her words hit me square in the chest. “I loved you that first night too. Before you shoved me away and ran, I was all in.

Fuck, I wanted to marry you, Rory. But you lied—and not about something little. You were married to one of my friends. Don't you understand you betrayed everything I thought we could be? And then you did it again by not telling me about Amelia. How can I trust you?"

She jerked back like I struck her. Tears slid down her cheeks. "Because I've loved you from the moment I saw you. And these past few weeks have only deepened what I feel for you."

Her betrayal was like thick sludge, and she was asking me to ignore it. But I couldn't keep my head in the sand any longer. I shook my head and started grabbing my clothes off the floor. "I have to go."

"You're leaving?"

"I never should have stayed. I should have gone with my unit on our last ride together. I can't believe I let you make me think—"

"What, James? That we could be a family? Because we could," she sobbed.

I was at war with my desire to comfort her and my need to escape the pain slicing through me. The betrayal I felt was absolute. "No. I just can't. There's too much here."

"And what about Amelia?" she asked. Her bottom lip quivered, and her body shook with her sobs. "Are you just going to desert her?"

Amelia. Fuck. I didn't know what to do. But I had to escape this tearing, horrible grief. The betrayal clogged my throat. Backing away from her, I shook my head, denying us any future. "No. But I can't stay. I'll call her and explain. She and I will be fine. Kids are resilient."

Rory spat, “That’s just it, James. You’re lost in your anger and pain. And you’ve got to fight your way out of it.”

“Like it’s that fucking easy for you?” I roared.

She sputtered. “Are you kidding me right now? You, of all people, know it’s a mental game. You have to want to get better. You have to fucking fight for it with your every last breath. You have to be willing to slice open every wound and battle scar. But you’d rather stay lost in your anger and heartbreak.”

I’d never seen this side of her. She swiped at her tears and stiffened her spine. “Get out. You have one hour to pack your things, and then I want you gone. You can do whatever you want to me. I’m tough, and I can take it. But I warned you, James, not to hurt her. And you’ve ignored my request. If this is some sick, twisted payback, then you really are fucked up beyond redemption. Get out of my home and out of my town.”

“I’m still Amelia’s father. I’m going to see her again.”

“Not without a lawyer, you’re not. Because I’m the one who gets to watch her heart break when I tell her that her father just couldn’t stick around.”

“We’ll see about that,” And then I walked out of her room and out of her life. Again.

10 Years Ago

Unease filled me as I headed over to his place on base. But it was mingled with excitement too, because I was going to see him again. He lived in one of the townhomes on base. I stood in front of his black front door, trying not to panic. I knew how badly I messed up. I should have been honest with him from the get-go. I prayed he would listen and allow me to explain.

Drawing every ounce of my courage, I rapped my fist against the solid wood.

James answered the door in a tee and black basketball shorts. He took one look at me and scowled. Dark thunderclouds entered his eyes. He snarled, “What the fuck are you doing here, Rory? Why aren’t you at home with your husband?”

Swallowing past the lump of fear in my throat, I pleaded, “If I could have just a few minutes of your time. I need to explain.”

“Explain how you lied when I asked if you were there with anyone? Explain that you are married to one of my friends? Just exactly what do you have to explain?”

I didn't want to have this conversation on his front porch, but he wasn't going to let me in. At the hard set to his shoulders, I knew he would bar me from entering.

“Evan and I are getting divorced, James. And I didn't tell you because I was pissed at Evan and myself. I walked in on him cheating on me in our bed, and I lost it. He forced me to go to the party, but it was the last place I wanted to be.”

He scowled in disbelief. “Is that it? Because I saw you with him after we fucked. You guys looked cozy. I didn't see someone who was remorseful about their infidelity.”

“James, I'm sorry. Please forgive me,” I begged as he slipped away from me, the future I'd hoped to have with him crashing and burning before my eyes.

“I have a hard and fast rule, Rory. I don't put up with liars. So whatever this was or could have been, it's done now. If you don't mind, I was just getting ready to sit down and eat dinner.” He turned to head back inside.

I gripped his forearm. “So that's it. You're not even going to give us a chance?”

He shook me off with ease. “If the shoe was on the other foot, would you give me a chance?”

He threw me a curveball that I wasn't ready for. I opened my mouth and moved my lips like a guppy tossed on land. If I discovered he was married, it would have crushed me. Totally destroyed my heart and soul.

Disgust filled his features as he shook his head. “I thought so. Have a nice life.” And he left me standing alone on his front porch.

In a daze at the catastrophic destruction, I stumbled off his porch, walking on wobbly legs to my car. With tears in my

eyes and my hands shaking, I drove away from his place with my heart bleeding out. But I grabbed my phone and called the number I had programmed into my phone earlier that day.

“Hello,” a male voice answered on the third ring.

“Hi Henry, it’s Rory Ryder. I’d like to accept the position if it’s still available.” I had to get away from this place and all the memories. I’d loved and lost the one man I could see myself with forever over my own stupidity. And I had to get as far away from this state as possible.

Otherwise, I’d be on his doorstep every day, begging him to forgive me. And I knew, in the dark depths of my soul, that he never would.

The moment James left the house, I crumpled into a pile of tears. I really thought we had a chance. I should have destroyed those letters. I should have kept that knowledge to myself. Because then at least he would still be here. And it shocked me that I could feel pain this intense and not die. I sobbed my broken heart out.

Shattered. My heart fractured in a million jagged pieces. My soul obliterated. And when I thought about the desolate future ahead of me without him, I didn't want to get out of bed ever again. I didn't understand why my life had been nothing but a series of difficult, impossible choices. Because I knew if I had told James back then that I was married to Evan, he never would have touched me. And without that night, Amelia wouldn't exist.

And that was unfathomable.

In the morning, the picture didn't look any better. It looked worse. I knew what my lonely future looked like because I'd been living it these past ten years. And the worst part was that I did everything he accused me of. My eyes were gritty from the tears I shed. I moved like a zombie on autopilot, tossing out the ruined meal and cleaning up the kitchen. The special

meal I'd cooked for him went into the garbage. I wish it was that easy to fix me and my life.

Because I knew he wouldn't be back. And I wanted to hate him. He couldn't see past the end of his self-righteous fervor to what was right in front of him. Yes, I'd hurt him. But that didn't give him the right to hurt Amelia.

Maybe I didn't deserve a second chance. Maybe too much damage had been done. And perhaps I needed to thank my lucky stars for the time I did get with him. And one day, years from now, maybe I could move on and wouldn't love him.

But it would be a long time coming, if ever.

James's appearance in my life had been like a comet streaking across the sky. He'd indelibly changed me. And he gave me the best part of my life. I would take comfort in that and ignore the broken shards of my heart until I didn't notice them anymore.

While I cleaned, I watched the clock. Amelia would be home from her sleepover soon. And I was terrified. What would this do to my girl? Would she recover from her father's absence? Or would this be a wound that she carried all the days of her life?

I didn't know. And the unknown quotient set me on edge.

I prayed she didn't ingest this hurt. That she wound up recovering from this heartbreak in time. But I also knew her, knew what a sensitive soul she was and how happy it had made her having him in her life. His leaving without saying goodbye would destroy her.

It was my fault. And I would have to own up to my part in it. Would she hate me too before the day was over?

At the sound of the door opening, I tensed. Damn you, James.

“Mom. Dad. Where are you guys?” Amelia’s melodic voice called out. She slammed the door shut behind her. I heard the enthusiasm in her voice.

“I’m in the kitchen, baby.” And I wanted to vomit. I blinked back the sudden onslaught of tears. Smoothing my hands on my jeans, I inhaled a deep breath.

Once she was in bed tonight, I’d treat myself to a drink and a good cry. Until then, I was on mom duty. And my wants and needs had to take a back seat.

She skipped into the room with a thousand-watt smile. She glanced around. “Hey, where’s Dad?”

“Baby, have a seat.”

At my tremulous smile, she asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, baby, you didn’t.” I sat beside her, holding her hand.

“Where’s Dad?” Her bottom lip trembled.

“Baby, your dad got called into work and had to leave. He wanted to tell you goodbye himself, but he couldn’t stay.” Her face fell. And I cursed James. How could he do this to our daughter? I was going to call him and give him a piece of my mind after this. He can be done with me, but to abandon Amelia like this was a million shades of wrong.

“He’s gone? But when will he be back?” Her eyes filled with tears.

“I’m not sure. He didn’t have an idea. He’ll be back to see you again, though.” And if he didn’t, I would hunt him down myself and give him a piece of my mind. Because no one

treats my kid with such callous disregard and gets away with it.

“How can you be sure, Mom? What if he doesn’t want me? What if I wasn’t good enough?” Her tears were flowing freely now.

At that, I lifted her onto my lap and hugged her tight, my heart breaking all over again while cursing James at the same time. “Now you listen to me. You’re more than good enough. And he’s your father. He will call you. But baby, he’s in the military and will be away a lot.”

“I love him, Mom. I didn’t want him to go.” She sobbed against my shoulder. Her little body shuddered with the depth of her sorrow.

“I know, baby. I didn’t either. I love him too.” A few tears snuck down my cheeks while she burrowed against me. I consoled our daughter, reassuring her that her father loved her and he would be back to spend time with her.

But I didn’t know if he would ever come back. Not when he assuredly hated me now.

*H*ow the fuck could he have known and not told me?

The two of them had cheated me out of years of Amelia's life. And I didn't know how to reconcile my feelings for Rory with the sting of betrayal.

My anger kept me on the road until midnight. I stopped at a roadside motel and picked up a bottle of Jack. And sat in the room, trying to wrap my head around everything that happened, the revelations in those damn letters.

Drinking straight from the bottle, I toasted Evan like he was sitting in the room with me. "We certainly made a fucked up pair of friends, didn't we? I betrayed you, and then you turned around and served my comeuppance by keeping my daughter's existence a secret."

I took another long pull on the bottle. "You were my fucking brother, and I betrayed you. I'm so sorry."

I sat, contemplating the letters and what he said. Until it struck me between the eyes. He'd forgiven me. Evan had known and forgave me. How could I not do the same for him and Rory?

Was it a fucked up situation? Yes. But I was done with the self-loathing. The weight I carried around my neck for a

decade fell away. I was finally free. In my soul, I knew where I belonged. And it wasn't on the road to join the others in St. Louis.

It was with my girls.

They were my reason for being. They were why I would wear my uniform with pride, knowing I was doing everything within my power to keep them safe.

While I hadn't needed his permission, receiving it unlocked everything inside me. It was time I took the one thing I'd always wanted.

My Rory.

She made life worth living. She was my reason and my love.

They both were.

And with my head clearer than it had been in years, I stopped the drinking and my pity party for one. I needed a few hours of shut-eye, then I was going home.

When I woke in the morning, there was a missed call and a voicemail from Rory.

God, Rory. She loved me. And I'd been a fucking idiot, tossing her love aside over my wounded pride. We both had a hand in how everything happened between us. I was done blaming her for her past mistakes. I brought up the message and pressed play.

"Hi Dad, Mom would kill me if she knew I called you. But she's really upset that you left. And I just want to say I love you and I promise if you come back, I will be good. I won't disappoint you. Please come back when you're done with work."

Oh, Jesus fuck!

My eyes filled with tears. Rory was right. I'd hurt our daughter. The one thing I swore I would never do. And it slammed into me how completely I had fucked up. I didn't want to leave my girls ever. And make no mistake, they were both mine.

More resolved than ever, I left the motel with the first rays of sunlight streaking across the sky. With my head clearer than it had been in a decade, I climbed on my bike and revved the fucker to life. Then I peeled out of the motel parking lot without a backward glance.

There was a storm coming. I just had to outrun it and pray I made it back in time. I was close enough I could make it there by noon.

All I had to do was outrace the storm heading into the area. The empty sidecar was a stark reminder of how thoroughly I fucked up. The past didn't matter. Maybe if I had listened to Rory when she came to me that day and told me she was divorcing Evan and not been such an ass, she would have told me about Amelia.

I wasn't blameless in this situation. Our relationship difficulties weren't all Rory's fault, and I was done blaming her.

I wove in and out of traffic at unsafe speeds. If I lost her because of my stupidity, then she was right. I was an idiot and too lost in my anger to see what was right in front of me the whole time. They were my good in this world. And it was time I fought for them. Fought for us.

And I was going to fight for it. Fight for her with the last sliver of my soul because she was its keeper. Without her, I

didn't know if I could stem the tide. She gave me strength to return, to continue fighting—for her, for my brothers, for my unit, and for my country.

And even for my fallen commander, Evan.

The further north I drove, the colder it got. The temperature kept dropping. Angry, heavy clouds rolled in. The storm approached. Gritting my teeth, I laid the speed on as fast as I dared, weaving in and out of traffic in my hurry to reach them.

When I was thirty minutes out, the snow began falling fast and furious. Entering the outskirts of Bangor, I navigated increasingly slick roads. But I wouldn't allow anything to deter me from my quest. Road conditions deteriorated the further I drove as the brunt of the storm barreled into the area. But I didn't let it stop me even as the roads grew treacherous. I'd been in worse situations on missions and made it out alive.

Nothing was going to stop me now.

When the Roseberry Garden Inn came into view, relief flooded me. I drove right up and parked in the drive, then damn near vaulted off the bike. I didn't worry about my bag. My only concern was reaching them.

I still had the key she gave me so I could come and go as needed. In my fury, I forgot to leave it behind. The inside of the inn was dim, but I noted all the work we'd done together. The work we had yet to do. In the short time I'd been here, I had fallen for the inn's charm as well. I could see us running this place together. Just the thought of capitalizing on the possibilities for the backyard, all the additions we could make, filled me with excitement. It was a total one-eighty from what I'd known these past eighteen years. And I knew I was home.

But I didn't stop in the lobby. I took the hallway to their place. The door was unlocked, and I walked right into her place.

I found them in the kitchen. Rory was at the kitchen island with a crock pot of what smelled like chili. Amelia was at the table doing homework. But the moment I entered, her head shot up and she grinned.

"Dad!" Amelia exclaimed, jumping up from her seat and racing over to me. There were tears in her eyes.

I knelt and hugged her tight, my heart mending from all the mistakes. Then I held her and stared her in the eyes. "I'm sorry for leaving, squirt. I love you. Don't you ever think that you're not good enough for me. You are the best girl a father could ask for. It's me who doesn't deserve you. I'm incredibly proud and humbled to be your dad. But could you give me and your mom a few minutes? We need to talk."

I glanced over Amelia's shoulder at Rory. She stood rigidly beside the kitchen island. And there were tears in her eyes. If she forgave me, I would spend every day the rest of our lives atoning for the pain I caused her.

"Sure. But you're not going to leave again?" Amelia asked with a dose of fear, like she expected me to disappear at any moment.

It pained me, her doubt. And I would work to earn her forgiveness and reinstall trust. "Not yet. But I will have to report back to base at the end of next week. And I have to go, sweetheart. But I will always come back here for you."

The smile she gifted me stole the breath from my lungs. "Since they already called off school tomorrow, do you want to watch a movie tonight?"

Her resiliency gave me hope. “I’d love to watch a movie. Whatever you want to watch, I’m game.”

“I love you, Dad.” Amelia hugged me again before heading into the living room.

Once it was just the two of us, I strode over to Rory. She had her arms wrapped tightly around her midsection. I cupped her gorgeous face in my hands. “I’m sorry. I should have listened to you back then. If I had, maybe you would have felt more confident in telling me about Amelia. We both were wrong back then. And I’m sorry for everything I said last night and walking away.”

“Why are you here, James?” Her voice trembled. Moisture rimmed her lashes. I wanted to take all her tears away.

And I held nothing back. “I need to explain a couple things. Back then, I had to hate you. Because it was better than hating myself. Because that night, after you ran from me, I found you at the beach party. Evan had his arm around your shoulders. And when you saw me, you turned into him and turned your back on me. But I crossed the line in wanting you to choose me over him. I died a little that day because I knew you were it for me. And I knew loving you wasn’t a choice for me. I was sunk the moment I laid eyes on you. But you turned away.”

She cried, shoving against me, but I wouldn’t let her go. “Because I was ashamed, James. Not because I had been with you that night, but because I knew the moment you kissed me how big of a mistake I made marrying Evan. And I knew with perfect clarity that I would regret not choosing you. But if I did that, it would have caused a rift between you. And then one of you wouldn’t have come home. And it was you I

couldn't lose, James. Because even if I couldn't have you in my life, just knowing you were alive was enough for me."

The clouds parted, and I was sure I heard choirs of angels singing. "I'm so fucking sorry for everything. Please forgive me. I love you, Rory. I'm fucking devoted to you. You're it for me. You've always been it for me. There's no one I'd rather spend forever with than you. And I want it all with you. No more half-measures from either of us. I want to marry you, Rory. And I want more babies with you."

"You want to marry me?"

And I spied the glimmer of warmth in her eyes and smiled. "Yep. If I could, I would take you before a justice of the peace right here and now if you say yes."

"I need you to understand, James, that I don't regret marrying Evan. Because he brought me to you. Without him, we never would have met."

And she was right. "I know. God, I loved that bastard. But I think he knew we would work it out, or he never would have put that letter in with yours for me." I wiped the tears off her cheeks. "So what's it going to be? Are you going to marry me?"

"James, I've loved you from the first and knew you were it for me then. Of course, I'll marry you. Welcome home."

Home. *She* was my home. My heart and soul beat for her now. Overcome with my love for her, I kissed her. How could I not? This woman was my reason for existing. The career I loved, everything took a back seat to the woman in my arms. It had been a long, cold road lined with heartache to get here.

But I would never let her go again. This time, it was forever. I would never take the love we shared for granted. Not

after coming so close to losing her for good.

She was my lighthouse in port. The one guiding me safely back into her arms. And I had finally found my way home.

EPILOGUE

9 Years Later

The school auditorium was full of proud parents and families as we watched our Amelia rise and walk to the podium to give the Valedictorian speech at her high school graduation ceremony. I couldn't be prouder of our firstborn. She was attending Brown University in the fall on a full academic scholarship where she planned to study mathematics.

I looked over the head of our four boys and caught my Rory with tears in her eyes.

She married me before I had to report back to base all those years ago. We had a simple wedding at the local courthouse, with Amelia, her best friend from school, and her parents in attendance as our witnesses. I hadn't wanted to leave without Rory being my wife. It was one of the best days of my life, the day they officially became my girls.

But Rory—god I love that woman—she married me a second time on the beach in a sunset wedding. It was the same beach where we first met. Where Amelia had been conceived.

When I returned from my final deployment, Rory, Amelia, and baby Henry had been there to welcome me home. And I

left the only career I'd known for a life of domesticity that I slid into with relative ease. There were a few bumps and upsets along the way, but such was life.

But god, it's been a ride. One I would do a thousand times over.

Our two-year-old, Evan, laid his head on my shoulder.

It took me longer than I wanted to admit to fully move past everything in that letter. Because the truth was, I was furious with myself. If I'd taken my head out of my ass sooner, Rory, Amelia, and I wouldn't have missed out on all those years.

And we had Evan to thank for putting us back together, and in his way, give us his blessing.

But staring at my wife, the love I have for her had only grown and deepened over the years. I used to think my life would be nothing but a dogfight all the way to the end. But coming here led me to finding my purpose.

Loving Rory. And the life we built together.

Even if I had to live a hundred lifetimes until she could be mine, she would still be worth the wait.

THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading *The Cold Ride*! I hope you loved reading James and Rory's love story as much as I enjoyed writing them. If you did, please consider leaving a review!

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THE NIGHT RIDE

SEALS ON WHEELS, BOOK 3

Releasing January 30th, 2024

No amount of military training can prepare you to fight for love.

Beautiful. Intoxicating. Utterly forbidden.

Years ago, when I first laid eyes on Beth, I wanted her more than I've ever wanted anyone. But she's my best friend's little sister, and there are some boundaries even I won't cross. I forced myself to spurn her advances, even though I hated doing it.

And I never forgot her – or the hatred blazing in her beautiful eyes when she walked away from me.

I didn't expect to see her again. Nor was I prepared for the desperate desire she'd ignite in me. I crave her. Want her. Need her.

I can't stay away from her this time. Not when her touch mends all my broken pieces.

She doesn't trust me to stick around but I'll do whatever it takes to prove my devotion. After all, I thrive on adversity. And I'll draw on every ounce of strength I possess to win her heart because now I'm convinced:

She was always meant to be mine.

Grab this steamy, forbidden, stand-alone romance where a Navy SEAL falls for his best friend's sister, as they face an attraction they cannot deny.

Wanna go for a ride? [Read it now!](#)

MIDNIGHT DISSONANCE

DUNGEON SINGLES NIGHT SERIES, BOOK 13

Releasing November 28th, 2023

Seduced by the Irishman...

Lexi is over the players, the creepy lowlifes, and the narcissists. Who needs men, anyway? All she wants is her music, and freedom to be true to herself.

On a whim, she signs up for a singles event in one last-ditch attempt to resuscitate her woeful dating life, praying she'll get matched with an understanding, loyal, caring Dom.

No such luck. To her horror, Lexi gets paired with Josh Ryan. The sexy Irishman goes through submissives like he changes underwear.

Disillusioned and defeated, she refuses to spend the evening with him, and walks away.

Josh can't believe it. Nobody ever rejects him. Why won't Lexi bend to his desires like a good little sub? Other women fall over themselves to spend a night in his bed.

He and Lexi are polar opposites. She's far too young for him. But her denial ignites a sadistic need in him to see her on her knees, begging him for pleasure.

When he finally tastes her, he understands why. She was meant for him. She belongs to him.

Josh will stop at nothing to make Lexi his. But his sordid past could ruin everything...

Fall head over heels into this steamy, age gap, opposites attract, stand-alone romance between a sexy Irish attorney and a free-spirited songstress as they traverse the rocky road of love.

Head back to Eternal Eros! [Read it now!](#)

BLOODY SERENITY

URBAN GLADIATOR SERIES, BOOK 2

Releasing July 23, 2024

For fourteen hundred years, I've walked this earth alone.

I've become that which I despised long ago...

Depraved. Desolate. Insatiable.

And yet, one taste of her alters my fate.

She's mine.

My mate. My salvation. A witch of incomparable beauty.

And she wants nothing to do with me.

But I am not an honorable man.

The mating fever won't be denied.

I must claim her. Bend her to my will.

Make her my bride for eternity...

Or I will descend into the beckoning madness and destroy
Avalon.

Return to Avalon! [Read it now!](#)

ALSO BY ANYA SUMMERS

SEALs On Wheels Series

[The Last Ride](#)

[The Cold Ride](#)

[The Night Ride](#)

Urban Gladiator Series

[Urban Gladiator](#)

[Bloody Serenity](#)

Dungeon Singles Night Series

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[Midsummer Night's Dream](#)

[Midnight Renegade](#)

[Midnight Rendezvous](#)

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[Midnight Highlander](#)

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[How To Rope A Rough Cowboy](#)

[How To Rope A Loyal Cowboy](#)

[How To Rope A Valiant Cowboy](#)

[How To Rope A Savage Cowboy](#)

[How To Rope A Naked Cowboy](#)

[How To Rope A Barbaric Cowboy](#)

How To Rope A Ruthless Cowboy

Dungeon Fantasy Club Anniversary Series

Her Highland Master Anniversary Edition

To Master & Defend Anniversary Edition

Two Doms For Kara Anniversary Edition

His Driven Domme Anniversary Edition

The Manor Series

The Man In The Mask

Torn In Two

Redeemed By Love

Box Sets

Dungeon Singles Night Collection Part 1

Dungeon Singles Night Collection Part 2

Dungeon Singles Night Collection Part 3

How To Rope A Cowboy Boxed Set 1

How To Rope A Cowboy Boxed Set 2

The Man In The Mask: The Complete Manor Series Collection

ABOUT ANYA

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Anya grew up listening to Cardinals baseball and reading anything she could get her hands on. She remembers her mother saying if only she would read the right type of books instead of binging her way through the romance aisles at the bookstore, she'd have been a doctor. While Anya never did get that doctorate, she graduated cum laude from the University of Missouri-St. Louis with an M.A. in History.

Anya is a bestselling and award-winning author published in multiple fiction genres. She also writes urban fantasy, paranormal romance, and contemporary romance under the name [Maggie Mae Gallagher](#). A total geek at her core, when she is not writing, she adores attending the latest comic con or spending time with her family. She currently lives in the Midwest with her two furry felines.

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