

A.K. EVANS

# WHAT COMES AFTER

*Road Trip*  
romance  
book fifteen: Tennessee

---

# WHAT COMES AFTER

---

# **Road Trip Romance: Tennessee**

**A.K. Evans**

# WHAT COMES AFTER

*Road Trip*  
romance



A.K. EVANS

Copyright 2023 by A.K. Evans

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

**Cover Artist**

cover artwork © Sarah Hansen, Okay Creations

[www.okaycreations.com](http://www.okaycreations.com)

**Editing & Proofreading**

Mackenzie Letson, Nice Girl Naughty Edits

[www.nicegirlnaughtyedits.com](http://www.nicegirlnaughtyedits.com)

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-one](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Preview of Chase the Storm](#)

[Also by A.K. Evans](#)

[About the Author](#)

---

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

---

In case this is your first Road Trip Romance read, I wanted to offer a bit of an explanation about the inspiration behind this series. Some readers have come into the series expecting the couple to be on a road trip, and that's not the case.

If you've read my bio, you might have seen mention of how my husband and I are in the process of taking road trips across the United States with our two sons. Our goal is to visit all 50 states.

It was when we were getting ready to head out one of our trips when I was inspired to write this series. How cool would it be to take my readers on a road trip with me?!?! So, when you read the series title, Road Trip Romance, it's all about you. I'm taking you on a road trip with me, and together, we're going to find a happy ending in every state across the United States of America.

My plan is to wait to write a book set in a particular state after I've visited it with my family. In the end, I'm hoping to have delivered 50 unique love stories that capture some of the best things about each individual state.

I hope you'll join me on this journey across the country in search of some happily-ever-after endings. And if you're looking for a book about a couple on a road trip, I'm sorry, this isn't that book.

---

## PROLOGUE

---

### *Devyn*

“Son of a bitch.”

Twisting my neck to look behind me, I made sure nobody was around to hear what I’d just said.

This was just my luck, or lack thereof.

Returning my attention to the room, I let out a huge sigh of frustration. The open drawers with clothing hanging out, the barely visible carpet, the rumpled bedding, and the overturned bowl of ice cream sitting next to the open bag of Doritos on top of the dresser indicated that the bedroom hadn’t been cleaned in a long time.

That couldn’t have been further from the truth.

The first thing I did when I arrived at this house nearly five hours ago was clean this bedroom.

Per the owners’ request, I came here once every two weeks to clean. But with the way they refused to make their only child responsible for anything, I wondered why I continued to work for them.

Technically, that wasn’t true. I did it because I needed the money. At six thousand square feet with five bedrooms, four bathrooms, and extra services like laundry added into the mix, this house would net me a healthy chunk of cash that I couldn’t pass up.

But I didn’t exactly like having to do the same work twice in a day.

Unfortunately, the owners of this house weren’t the kind of people who seemed to care. Their only concern was having me do the job they’d hired me to do. And while I probably could have skipped over this room, since I’d



already done it once, or explained that I wouldn't be cleaning it a second time, I would never actually do that.

Because I didn't want to risk losing this house. Without it, I'd never be able to afford my monthly bills, let alone have any extra to set aside for special occasions.

That was probably the bigger reason why I was feeling so frustrated about the mess.

It was Friday, and I had plans for tonight. Given that my financial situation didn't offer me a lot of opportunity for splurging regularly, to say I was looking forward to what was in store for tonight would have been an understatement.

But if I continued to stand here, staring at this awful mess with the freshly cleaned and folded laundry in my arms, my night would surely be ruined. Roy's night would be ruined, too.

So, I took in a deep breath and let it out before I stepped farther into the room and got to work.

Keeping my mind focused on the task at hand, I managed to get the bedroom cleaned up rather quickly. When I finished, I immediately went in search of Karlee, one half of the married couple who owned the home.

After letting her know that I was finished and getting paid, I took off. Speeding home, I decided to keep my thoughts on what was ahead for tonight instead of allowing myself to pray that my car wouldn't have any more issues than it had already had this month.

Between needing to fix the air conditioning, which quit working in the middle of the summer and needing to replace the brakes, I'd sunk enough money into this heap.

Really, I needed a new car.

But I couldn't afford a new car.

Fortunately, I made it back to my one-bedroom apartment without incident and raced inside. Where I lived left a lot to be desired. My place was clean, relatively affordable, and gave me the very basics of what I needed for shelter. There wasn't much beyond that.

As quickly as I could, I took a shower and got myself ready. Then I picked up my phone, went to the last call I'd had, and tapped on Roy's name.

He picked up after two rings. "Hey, Devyn. Are you done at work?"

"Yeah, I just got home and showered. I'm leaving here in the next two minutes to get you," I replied. "Our reservations are in twenty-five minutes,

so hopefully you're ready."

"I'll be ready," he assured me. "Just text me when you get here."

"Okay. I'll see you in a little bit."

"Alright. I've got to go. I'm getting another call."

With that, Roy and I disconnected. I grabbed my purse, keys, and the gift, and I was out the door in a flash.

It wasn't until I was finally back in my car on the way to pick up Roy that I started to settle down. I wanted to have a good time tonight, and if I didn't at least try to relax, that was never going to happen.

That wouldn't be fair to Roy or to me.

Today was Roy's birthday, and I was taking him out to celebrate. We'd been dating each other for ten months now, and I wholeheartedly believed he might be the guy for me.

The truth was, Roy and I might have struggled in some areas with our connection to one another, but I had a feeling that had more to do with our respective personal financial situations. We both did our best to make ends meet, and Roy had been having an especially difficult time lately, considering he'd lost his job almost three months ago and hadn't managed to find anything else.

Not only that, but my car was only a slight step above his right now, because his stopped working two and a half weeks ago. With no job, he couldn't afford to get it fixed. I was doing what I could to help him out with rent, but being on limited funds myself, I couldn't do much.

But since it was his birthday tonight, I really wanted him to have a good night, and I thought he deserved to have some fun. I couldn't afford anything extravagant, but we were going to have a nice dinner out before we went to the movies.

I made it to Roy's place, sent him a text, and waited. A moment later, he came outside and walked right up to the driver's side door. He opened it and said, "Let me drive."

Figuring he was probably sick of not being able to drive anywhere and not caring if I drove, I unbuckled and crawled over the center console to the passenger seat.

The minute he was seated behind the wheel, I leaned toward him, placed a chaste kiss on his lips, and smiled. "Happy birthday."

He smiled back at me. "Thanks, Devyn."

After settling back in my seat, I put on my belt and asked, "So, how was

your day today?”

Roy had already started driving toward the restaurant. “It was okay. A lot of my friends reached out with birthday wishes.”

“That’s nice. Did you do anything?” I pressed.

Taking his eyes off the road, he glanced over at me and asked, “How would I have done anything? You know my car is out of commission right now.”

There was a clear edge of frustration in his tone. “I know. I just wasn’t sure if maybe someone stopped over to visit with you, or if someone picked you up to take you out for lunch.”

Roy didn’t look over at me again, but I could see something move through his expression. No doubt it was disappointment, and I suddenly felt horrible for him. “Nobody stopped over. Just you.”

Wanting to turn things around, I promised, “Well, I think we’re going to have a fantastic night. I’m looking forward to the movie.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, it’s been a very long time since we’ve been able to really get out and do anything fun.”

Hearing those words, I suddenly didn’t feel so bad about all the extra work I’d been putting in lately, so I could save up the money to do something special for Roy. We both needed to have this, and I was simply glad I found a way to make it happen.

We made it to the restaurant with just two minutes to spare before our reservation, and we were seated immediately.

Since I wanted to keep the positive vibes we’d both been feeling toward the end of our drive, as soon as Roy and I gave our dinner selections to the server, I reached into my purse and pulled out the small gift box.

“What’s this?” Roy asked as he reached for the box.

Beaming at him, I said, “Happy birthday.”

Curiosity, and perhaps a bit of caution, moved through his expression as he took the box and started to unwrap it.

With the wrapping removed, he opened the box and revealed what was inside. Roy inspected the gift, and I couldn’t quite tell what he was thinking, so I thought I’d speak.

“I wanted to get you something else, something more, but it’s been a little tough lately,” I started. “Anyway, I confirmed that this was a really good knife with the guy at the store. He said a lot of guys, especially hunters, buy this one, so I thought it’d be great for you.”

Roy was tough to shop for. I wanted to get him something he'd be able to use, and since he liked to hunt, I figured a knife would not only be practical, but very much appreciated, too.

Apparently, I was wrong.

"It's nice," he mumbled as he put it back into the box. "Thanks."

I tipped my head to the side and eyed him curiously. "Why do I get the feeling you don't like it?"

Roy placed the box off to the side and brought his eyes to mine. "It's not that, Devyn. It's just that I can't exactly go hunting anywhere when I don't have a working car."

"Well, hunting season hasn't exactly started yet," I reasoned. "I'm sure you'll have a job by then, and you'll be able to get your car fixed."

He shrugged. "For the money you're spending on dinner, a movie, and this knife, I could have just used the cash to get my car fixed."

Hurt moved through me. "I'm sorry, Roy. I thought you'd like having some time together and doing something special for your birthday."

I had to wonder if he'd realized how much his words had stung, because he quickly apologized. "No, I'm sorry. It was very thoughtful of you, and I'm looking forward to having a good time tonight. I'm just stressed about my current situation."

"I appreciate the apology, and I understand how you're feeling."

As soon as I got the words out, Roy reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He immediately started tapping away on it. I waited until he finished and set it face down on the table. "Sorry. I've been getting a lot of social media notifications and text messages today, and it seems they haven't stopped yet."

I shrugged it off and insisted, "It's okay. I'm glad you've had some friends reaching out to you today. I'm sure that has helped turn the day around a bit for you."

"It's been nice."

His phone buzzed again. Roy didn't hesitate to pick it up and start tapping away again. This time, I didn't wait until he finished before I started to speak again. "So, I've got good news and bad news."

"Oh, yeah?" he replied, not looking up from his phone.

"The bad news is that the job I'd been telling you about last week, the one with that five-thousand-square-foot house, didn't pan out. I think they've hired someone else," I shared.

Roy continued responding to messages on his phone for another few seconds before he looked up and asked, “Oh, you didn’t get it?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

He glanced down at the phone, back to me, and down at the phone once more before he started tapping on the screen again as he asked, “So, what’s the good news?”

“I’ve got two more consultations lined up for next week,” I told him. “I don’t know yet how frequently they’ll want me to come cleaning for them or the specific level of cleaning service that they’re looking for, but if I managed to snag both of them, it’s definitely going to be an extra couple hundred dollars a month,” I told him.

Long moments of me staring at Roy as he remained engrossed in his phone passed. I felt like a fool as I waited for him to finish. I didn’t want to begrudge him for simply responding to birthday wishes, but I wished he’d at least set the phone aside throughout dinner.

Eventually, he put it down, returned his attention to me, and said, “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

I let out a sigh of frustration and repeated myself. From that point forward, Roy had been mostly focused on the two of us and our conversation throughout dinner. He had picked up his phone only two or three more times, and he made the responses quick. We spent the better part of our dinner talking about my potential new clients and his job prospects. He was looking for something, but he still hadn’t had any luck.

Before I knew it, we’d made it to the movie theater.

I paid for our tickets, and we made our way in to grab seats. For a Friday evening, it was surprisingly empty in the theater. Or, at least, the movie we were seeing wasn’t crowded, even if there were still about ten or fifteen minutes before it was set to start.

We hadn’t been seated there for more than two minutes when Roy said, “Hey, I think dinner isn’t sitting well with me. I’m going to run to the bathroom quickly.”

“Are you okay?”

He nodded. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

For the next few minutes, I decided to pull out my own phone. It had been stuffed in my purse from the moment I’d texted Roy to let him know that I’d arrived to pick him up for dinner.

Since the lights were still on in the theater, I figured it wouldn't be a problem.

Much to my surprise, there was a text message waiting for me when I lit up the display on my phone. Seeing it, something squeezed in my chest.

Then again, it always did every time I saw his name.

Theo.

Theo McCormick.

A man I'd loved all my life, but a man who was too good for me.

I slid my finger across the screen, opened the text conversation, and felt a pang of sadness move through me.

THEO

Tell me this view isn't gorgeous.

While I didn't know exactly where Theo was, it was apparent he was standing on a balcony somewhere, and he was looking at a spectacular view.

I'd become accustomed to these texts from Theo.

For as long as I could remember, he had sent them to me. Sometimes, especially in the beginning, I always responded quickly. I wanted to know all that he was experiencing, and I wanted to do my part to be happy for him. But as time went on, as I followed his career, I often found myself allowing time to pass between receiving his texts and sending a response.

He was who he was, and I was me.

We were at such vastly different places in our lives, and I always wondered why he'd continued to reach out to me. We no longer had anything in common, and I'd never fit into his life the way I had always wanted to when we were younger.

Moments.

So many moments had impacted our lives. Theo seemed to have gotten all the good ones. I loved that for him.

My life didn't have so many of the good ones. I tried not to dwell on the bad and continued to trudge along, hoping that one day, I'd get a good moment, too.

Just one.

My life wasn't awful, and I attempted to keep that at the forefront of my mind. No matter how bad things might have seemed for me, I knew there was someone else who always had it worse.

So, I had no problem waiting for my good moments. I knew one of them

would eventually come. One good moment would change my whole life, just like all the bad ones leading up to it had impacted it the way they had.

My eyes lingered on the photo Theo sent for a long time. But when the lights in the theater started to dim so the previews could start, I slid my phone back into my purse and looked around. The room was still mostly empty, only a few seats occupied.

I didn't want Roy to miss the movie, so I decided to go in search of him.

Making it to the front near the restrooms, I stopped a man who had just walked out of the men's room.

"Excuse me, sir?" I called.

The man stopped and looked at me. "Yeah?"

I smiled and tipped my head from one side to the other. "Um, was there anyone else in the restroom?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

My brows pulled together, and the man walked off. I moved toward the door, opened it, and called out, "Roy?"

No response.

"Roy?" I tried again.

Nothing.

Thinking he might have gone outside to get some fresh air, I walked toward the exit. And the moment I stepped outside, my eyes were pulled in the direction of where my car had been parked.

While I couldn't make out what was happening, I could see Roy. He was standing there with a group of guys around him, and I immediately assumed they had to be some friends of his.

Guessing he must have gotten sidetracked and lost track of time, I didn't hesitate to go toward him. But when I was a matter of a few feet away, I realized I was wrong.

The four men standing around Roy weren't his friends.

"I didn't know," Roy said, fear laced in his tone.

My belly began trembling, because it became obvious that Roy was scared.

"You didn't know?" one of the men asked, moving toward him. "Do you think I'm a fucking idiot?"

Roy shook his head. "No. Not at all."

"But you expect me to believe that you've been talking to my girl online, sliding into her DMs for months now, meeting up with her everywhere, and

expecting her to meet you here tonight, but you didn't happen to look at any of her pictures? You didn't see the photos of the two of us together all over her social media?"

My lips parted in shock, my heart squeezing in my chest. This couldn't be right. Surely, this man was mistaken.

I knew it.

Roy was going to tell him at any moment that he had gotten the wrong guy.

"If I had known she was your girl, I never would have touched her," Roy replied.

The man swung at Roy, his fist connecting with Roy's jaw. The sound I heard as that happened mirrored the sound I imagined my heart made when it broke.

"You fucking touched my girl, and you planned to meet up with her here tonight," the man shouted. "Nobody touches my girl."

"I'm sorry," Roy apologized.

He was clearly pleading with the man to believe him.

"Nobody touches my girl either," another man said, stepping forward to swing at Roy. "She was at your house today. I know everything that happened."

Suddenly, I was no longer focusing on the heartbreak I felt. I was sick, convinced I was going to vomit all over the parking lot.

Roy was cheating on me.

These men had found out.

Before Roy could respond, another blow to his face came. Then another and another.

Roy had fallen to the ground, and for some idiotic reason, all I could think was that I didn't want these men to kill him.

So, I tried to jump in.

"Stop. Stop," I shouted.

"Devyn," Roy groaned.

"Get out of the way, bitch," another man ordered.

"No. Stop this right now, or I'm calling the police," I fired back, digging my hand into my purse.

That was the wrong thing to do.

Because before I could even curl my fingers around my phone, a fist connected with my face, and I went flying backward.



I landed on the ground with a thud, my head smacking the pavement. By some miracle, I wasn't instantly knocked out, and I attempted to roll to my side. But before I could make any real progress, a foot landed in my belly. I fell to my back again, feeling the rage these men had through each of the blows I'd taken to my face and body.

Things started to get fuzzy.

Just before I blacked out, only one thought passed through my mind.

I had experienced a lot of bad moments that had impacted my life tremendously, and never once did they feel like this. That's when I realized that this wasn't a bad moment that would change my life.

It was the moment that was going to end it.

---

# ONE

---

## *Theo*

“I’m not sure if this is the right spot.”

“I completely understand the frustration you’re feeling right now, Mr. McCormick, but I’ve got a full day of showings scheduled for us today, and I’m certain we’ll find the perfect space for you.”

With my phone to my ear as I stood out on the balcony of the luxurious hotel I’d spent the night in last night, I took in the scenery.

The view was magnificent. Anyone who saw it would think I was crazy to not invest some time into more searching.

Considering how my night last night had been and the way I’d woken up this morning, I, too, was wondering if I’d lost a few marbles.

Granted, I’d spent the night in the hotel room and had every amenity at my disposal along with the coastal views, so it was difficult not to wonder why I was having this conversation.

But there was something nagging at me, telling me I was wasting not only my time, but the realtor’s as well.

“I just don’t think I’m going to find what I’m looking for here, and I don’t want to waste your time, Charles.”

Charles, eager to please, didn’t hesitate to respond. “It’s no trouble for me at all,” he insisted. “I think, especially after yesterday, I have a much better understanding of what you’re looking for, and I’m confident we’re going to have some success. I’ve got some exquisite properties for you to take a look at today.”

I took in a deep breath and let it out as I watched the waves roll in. I

wanted this, but my gut told me this wasn't where I was supposed to be.

I rolled my eyes.

To think that this was the worst of my problems.

As it turned out, I was making a life change. And just thinking about it felt a bit strange. The truth was, life had been good to me. I'd worked for years as an actor, and I'd seen great success in my career.

From the very first movie I'd filmed up until my most recent, I had a lot to be proud of.

Beyond the actual work I'd done, there really wasn't anything for me to complain about. I had plenty of money, more than I'd ever need in my lifetime, and could easily never work another day without having to worry. I had an amazing family and wonderful friends.

It seemed impossible that I couldn't just be happy with that.

While I felt extremely grateful for the life I'd lived, lately, I'd been considering what was next.

For the last several years, I'd been working on a major film franchise that had been wildly successful. We'd done several movies in the franchise, and when my leading co-star, Lily Mack, decided she wasn't going to sign on for any additional films following the end of her contract, it got me thinking.

Because Lily hadn't decided to end her time with the franchise to go on to do a different project. She'd decided to take some time off, to get out of Hollywood. About a month ago, Lily had packed up her things and moved back to her hometown in Steel Ridge, Pennsylvania.

Just recently, I'd paid her a visit. Seeing where she was living, realizing how much more relaxed she was, and having conversations with her, I couldn't deny that I felt a bit envious of her.

Lily was right where she was meant to be.

And it seemed she'd found happiness in another form, too.

Not only had she been able to put the pressures of work behind her, but Lily also found a guy she was interested in. From what I could tell, given that I'd sort of put him through the ringer, he was seriously into her, and I hoped it would work out for them.

But I had to admit that the life change I'd already been considering was solidified following my visit with Lily.

The end of the movie franchise and Lily's move out of Hollywood really allowed me to take stock of my life.

I'd accomplished everything I'd wanted to in my career. I'd loved what

I'd done, the people I'd worked with, and the friends I'd made. I was particularly proud of the work I'd done, and I wondered if staying in Hollywood, continuing to make movies, was really going to bring me any additional happiness.

I couldn't say it wouldn't, but I also knew that there was the possibility something else might make me happier.

Knowing Lily had found someone who made her happy, I started thinking about my future. I was even more determined to find a place to settle down, and I knew it wasn't going to be found in Hollywood.

Of course, I'd had my fun. Lots of it. But at the end of the day, none of that was something that would be permanent. I wouldn't be happy living that life forever. No matter how much I enjoyed acting, I wholeheartedly believed there would come a point when I needed to quit.

And how did the saying go? Quit while you're ahead.

That's where I was now. I felt I'd left my mark on the industry, and I could be proud of what I'd been a part of.

What I was struggling with was where I wanted to settle myself down now. More importantly, I wondered *who* I'd find once I did.

Unfortunately, unless I could figure out the first part of the equation, making the second happen was going to be nearly impossible.

I'd already been to several coastal towns up in New England, and while so many were beyond incredible, nothing was truly grabbing my attention.

I had a feeling if I turned him down, though, Charles was going to be thoroughly disappointed.

"Do you really think there's something that might work for me?" I finally asked.

"I do," he assured me. "There are a couple of estates I've got lined up, but there are two that I believe are going to be the ones you'll have a tough time deciding between. They're both exquisite. I can send over some preliminary information on them before we meet later this morning if you'd like, but even if you think you won't like them, I urge you to check them out in person."

"Alright. How about you do that first? Send those over to me so I can see what we're heading into, and we'll take it from there."

"I can absolutely do that for you, sir. They're both within the size range that you wanted, and they have not only the land that'll offer you the privacy you're seeking but the views you were hoping to have as well," Charles shared, truly doing his best to sell the properties to me ahead of time.

“You’ve sold me on the visits today,” I promised him. “Even if I don’t think they’ll work for me, I’ll still check them out. It’s not as though I had anything else planned for the day, so if you’ve got properties to show, I guess I’m going to go and look at them.”

I could hear the pride in his voice when he replied, “You won’t be disappointed, Mr. McCormick.”

“Sounds great.”

“I just sent the property listings over to you, so you can have a look before we meet. I’ll see you at my office at ten-thirty this morning.”

“That works. I’ll check my email after we disconnect here, and I’ll look forward to seeing you soon,” I returned.

With that, Charles and I disconnected our call.

I stood for another minute or two on the balcony, looking out at the view. It really was gorgeous.

A moment later, I walked back inside the hotel suite and pulled out my laptop. Opening my emails, I saw two of them waiting from Charles.

After opening both emails and evaluating the property listings, I realized that perhaps I’d jumped the gun. The first property looked incredible, seemed to have all that I wanted inside the house, and it certainly offered the privacy and seclusion I wanted and needed for the life I wanted to build moving forward.

Even better, there was a shot of the view from the east side of the house, and I was willing to go out on a limb to say that the view was even better than the one from my hotel.

The second one offered more of the same, but not so much of a view. At least, there wasn’t one pictured, even if the description said there were views.

Just as I finished viewing the listings, a knock came at the door, indicating room service had arrived.

Since it was a gorgeous summer morning in July, I figured I’d enjoy breakfast out on the balcony.

As I sat there, enjoying my food and the scenery, I made a mental note to contact my assistant, Hazel, later this morning. She’d just recently started working for me after my former assistant retired.

Hazel used to be Lily’s assistant, and when I’d learned that she was available, I didn’t hesitate to scoop her up. She was still in L.A., and since I’d been gone for quite some time now, I wanted to check in. Normally, my assistant would be reaching out to me regularly, but I’d spoken with Hazel

yesterday, and she'd asked me if I'd have a problem with her making a trip out to visit Lily, since they'd become best friends when she used to work for her.

I didn't mind at all. In fact, I'd encouraged her to make the arrangements to go and have a good time. She wasn't planning to leave immediately, so I wanted to catch her up on these properties, especially considering I'd told her yesterday that I was thinking of moving on from New England and heading down the coast. There was no doubt she had already worked out the flight plans for me.

I lifted my coffee mug to my lips to take a sip, and my phone buzzed on the table, indicating I'd received a text message.

My lips twitched.

It was as though she knew I'd been thinking about her.

HAZEL

This is just a note to let you know that I've got the flight crew on standby for whenever you're ready to leave.

THEO

I might need a couple more days here. I have a few more properties I'm looking at today that seem promising.

HAZEL

You're considering staying now?

THEO

I haven't quite made up my mind. I should know more later today. In the meantime, check your email. I've forwarded the two best listings to you.

HAZEL

Can't wait!

I exited out of the conversation with Hazel and was about to get back to my breakfast when I saw the last text I'd sent before the conversation with my assistant.

It was a text I'd sent last night to Devyn.

Devyn Jade, my best friend in the whole world. I'd known her all my life, and no matter the physical distance between us all these years, we'd remained great friends.

Of course, I hadn't talked to her as often as I liked, especially when I was working on set over the last several years. I hadn't even gone home to

Tennessee in years.

At that thought, I went to my camera roll and opened the folder I'd made years ago and had transferred to my new phone every time I replaced it. The folder was labeled *Home*. Interestingly enough, the only photos in that folder were pictures of just Devyn or of Devyn and me. I hadn't added a new photo to the folder in years. I hadn't seen her in years.

I couldn't even remember the last time I'd heard her voice; it had been so long since we last spoke on the phone, too.

And what really struck me as odd was that I hadn't heard from her after I'd sent that text to her last night. Granted, she didn't always immediately respond, but within a couple of hours, Devyn always said something.

She hadn't said anything.

It took me almost no time to make an immediate decision.

I didn't know where things were going to go today with the property listings or if I'd decide to purchase one as a permanent home for me to settle down in, but after my appointment with Charles today, I knew exactly where I was going to go.

It was a good thing Hazel had the flight crew on standby, because we were going to be in the air before the day was over. And with any luck, I'd be back in Iris, Tennessee before dinner. Maybe I'd be able to surprise my best friend and take her out, so we could catch up.

On that thought, I felt a wave of excitement I hadn't felt in a long time move through me. Perhaps, especially now that I was considering taking an extended break from movies, I might be able to convince Devyn to take a trip and go house hunting with me. There was no question she'd be the best person to ask, not only because I valued her opinion, but because, with the exception of my parents, she was the one person I trusted to have my best interests at heart.

With my mind made up, I got back to my breakfast, eager to get this day started, so I could get on a plane and head back home.

But no sooner had I finished eating and gotten myself ready to leave, so I could meet Charles, when my phone rang.

It wasn't a name I'd expected to see this morning, but it was one that made me smile all the same.

Lifting the phone to my ear, I said, "Good morning, Mom. How's it going?"

There was a long stretch of silence before she spoke. With her voice just

barely a touch over a whisper, she said, “Theo.”

My body froze. “Mom?”

She didn’t respond.

Growing more and more concerned with each passing moment of silence, I couldn’t wait any longer. “Mom, what’s going on? Is it Dad?”

“Oh, Theo,” she cried.

My stomach clenched painfully as my fingers gripped the phone tightly in my hand while I prepared to hear the worst news about my father or another member of my family.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I urged gently.

“You’ve got to come home,” she pleaded with me.

Frozen to the spot, needing to know before I moved, I begged her to give me the news. “Did something happen to Dad?”

“No, baby. Daddy’s fine. It’s Devyn.”

A painful burn hit my chest, and a boulder lodged itself in my throat. “What’s wrong with Devyn? What do you mean? What happened to her?”

“She’s alive. She’s in the ICU, and she’s alive, but…” My mom trailed off, clearly unable to say anything else.

“But what?”

Seconds of silence that felt like decades stretched between us. My mother said nothing, and I felt like I was crawling out of my skin.

“Mom?” I called.

If I’d been anywhere else, if I’d been standing out on the balcony with the sounds of summer surrounding me, I wouldn’t have heard anything. But because I was alone, inside, and could have heard a pin drop, I made out the words my mom said when she rasped, “She’s alive, but they don’t know if she’s going to make it.”

I could feel the blood drain from my face.

*She’s alive, but they don’t know if she’s going to make it.*

Not Devyn.

Oh, God.

Suddenly, it was my mother’s turn to be concerned about the silence. “Theo?” she called.

*It’s Devyn... She’s alive, but they don’t know if she’s going to make it.*

“Theo?” my mom called again. “Are you there?”

I swallowed hard past the painful tightening in my throat. “I’m coming home.”



Before she could get out another word, I disconnected the call and sprang into action. I called my pilot, told him to get the plane ready, and gathered up my things.

Then I was out the door and on my way to the airstrip.

I didn't care about appointments to see houses or movies to be filmed.

The only thing that mattered to me was Devyn.

And if something happened to her, if she didn't make, I didn't know what I would do.

---

## TWO

---

### *Devyn*

*Twenty-two years earlier*

“They’re coming, Mom!”

“Okay, Devyn. I already told Mary that I’d have the door unlocked. They know to come right inside,” my mom called out from the kitchen.

I stayed where I was, leaning over the back of the couch, watching the rain fall as I waited for Theo to get here.

Theo was my best friend. He was my best friend, just like his mom was my mom’s best friend.

The coolest thing about it was that we all lived close to each other. Theo lived with his mom and dad across the street from my parents and me. There were other kids in the neighborhood that we sometimes played with, but Theo and I liked hanging out with each other the best.

Neither one of us had any brothers and sisters, so we always got together to play while our moms talked about adult stuff.

Ugh.

That was so boring.

Theo felt the same way. We’d hear our parents talking, and if it was possible, we’d find a way to leave the room. They’d always talk about the news or the weather or something they’d heard happened to someone in the neighborhood.

No eight-year-old wanted to listen to any of that.

Today was Saturday, it was the beginning of April, and Theo and his mom were coming over for a couple of hours. There was a girl at our school

who'd gotten cancer. I didn't really understand much about it, but I knew it meant that she was very sick, in the hospital a lot, and wouldn't be at school for a while.

She was nine and in the grade above me, so I didn't know her. The PTA had come up with an idea to help raise money for her family, though. There was going to be a bake sale tomorrow, and that was why Theo was coming over with his mom.

Our moms were going to spend the day baking stuff to be sold at the bake sale while Theo and I would get to hang out and play.

I started giggling as I watched Theo and his mom make their way over to our house. Mary had her umbrella open and was carrying a bag on her other arm. Theo was walking beside her, holding a bag in each of his hands, but I could see he was torturing his mom. She was trying to get them across the street quickly, and Theo was pretending to head for the puddles in the road.

He never actually jumped into any of the puddles, but based on her reaction, his mom obviously believed he might do it.

As soon as they crossed and stepped onto the sidewalk, Theo looked up at our house. I waved excitedly from the window, and he smiled back at me as he said something to his mom. She looked up at the window and smiled at me, too.

Since I couldn't wait any longer and their hands were full, I hopped down off the couch and ran to the front door.

"Hi, Mary. Hi, Theo."

"Good morning, Devyn. Thanks for opening the door for us. We've got our hands full," Mary said.

"You're welcome."

As she worked on closing her umbrella, I looked at my best friend. "Did you see me trying to jump in the puddles on the way here?"

I started laughing again. "Yeah. You looked like you were about to be in big trouble."

"Nah. I was just having fun. Mom knew that. Right, Mom?" he asked, looking up at her.

She lifted one of her eyebrows and sent a stern look his way, that same look that my mom would sometimes give me.

While she didn't really seem mad at him right now, I knew that Theo and I both understood what those looks meant. Playing around and testing our parents wouldn't be a smart idea whenever we saw that look.

My mom finally joined us at the front door.

“Hi, Rhonda. Sorry about the water. This rain is just crazy,” Mary said to her.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I was just talking to David about it this morning. I hope it clears up before the bake sale tomorrow,” my mom replied.

See?

They immediately started talking about the weather.

Having already had enough, I looked at Theo and asked, “What do you want to do today?”

He held up one of the bags in his hands and answered, “This.”

I looked inside and was so excited about what I saw. “You got a new set?”

Nodding, Theo revealed, “And it’s over two thousand pieces.”

“Wow.” My eyes almost fell out of my head. “We’ll be busy all day. Come on. Let’s go get started.”

After handing his mom the other bag he’d carried over to my house, Theo and I took off to get started on his brand-new Lego set. It might have been labeled for someone who was older than us, but the two of us had been building Lego sets together forever. The smaller sets took us almost no time at all.

Once we opened the box, dumped out the bags and instructions, and organized everything, I asked, “When did you get this?”

“I got it a couple weeks ago from my aunt who lives in Ohio. She didn’t get to visit us at Christmas, and she kept forgetting to ship it out to me,” he explained.

“And you didn’t build it right away?”

Theo shook his head.

“Why not?”

He smiled at me. “I wanted to wait to build it with you. I thought it would be much more fun to do together.”

Hearing that made me so happy. “You know you’re my best friend in the whole world, right?”

“I know. That’s why I waited. You’re my best friend, too.”

At that, the two of us dove in and built the new set. Just like always, we had the best time with each other.



*Theo*  
*Four months later*

“One, two, three...”

I reached out for Devyn’s hand, and the two of us took off running in the opposite direction.

It was a few hours after dinner, late in the summer, and Devyn and I were outside playing hide and go seek with the other kids who lived in the neighborhood with us.

All of us did this a couple of times each week while a handful of our parents sat outside overseeing the game.

Devyn and I were some of the youngest to be playing, and there were kids who were as old as fifteen that were playing, too. Even though we were young, my best friend and I always did very well at the game.

While part of that might have been because we were smaller and could easily fit into hiding spots that others couldn’t, the bigger reason was that we looked out for each other.

The two of us didn’t always hide in the exact same spot. We usually would go to the same area, and then we’d find good hiding places that were close to one another.

That’s exactly what we did tonight.

Since the parents didn’t want us going all over the neighborhood, we had to stay within certain bounds to hide, but that didn’t mean we didn’t have a ton of spots to hide still. There were a lot.

We’d gone behind houses, up trees, in bushes, or inside sheds in someone’s backyard. Some of us hid inside the outdoor storage bins on a few of the decks in the neighborhood. Others used the parents watching over us as a safe place, assuming nobody would look near the adults.

Devyn and I were rarely ever *it*, because we always had good spots to hide, and we did what had to be done to protect the other from being found.

“Where do you want to go?” Devyn asked as I continued to hold on to her

hand while we ran away from home base.

“All the way to the edge, just before we would go out of bounds,” I told her.

“We’ll be so far away,” she said. “Do you think we’ll be able to make it back?”

The two of us ran all the way to the farthest edge of the boundary line. When we got to the spot I’d noticed earlier today, I finally answered. “Yes, we’ll make it back. We always make it home.”

Devyn looked around the area and asked, “Where are we hiding, though?”

I lifted my hand, pointed to the side, and said, “In there.”

The look on her face changed. Devyn seemed to be excited about the hiding spot.

“Nobody is going to find us here,” she said. “We could probably spend the rest of the game here without being found.”

I was nodding my head when I replied, “That’s exactly what I thought, too. Come on.”

As quickly as we could, Devyn and I climbed down into the concrete culvert. We went into one of the three tunnels and sat down.

“How did you find this spot?” Devyn asked.

“I asked my dad about it today when we were coming home from the hardware store,” I explained. “He said it’s called a culvert.”

Devyn looked around the tunnel and out in the big open space in the middle. “What does it do?”

“My dad said it’s meant for water drainage, so everything doesn’t flood.”

My answer made Devyn’s face look worried. “We aren’t going to drown down here, are we?”

I shook my head. “No. Why would I bring you somewhere that wasn’t safe for us?”

“You just said it was for the water to go so everything doesn’t flood.”

“Yeah, but there’s no rain right now, so we don’t have to worry.”

Once she had that explanation, Devyn seemed to relax a little bit. “Okay. So, what are we going to do?”

Now I was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Nobody is going to come looking for us in here, so I’m wondering what we’re going to do. Will we just wait a long time and eventually go back?”

I hadn’t really thought that far ahead.

All I knew was that I'd asked my dad about what this place was and decided it should be a hiding spot I brought Devyn to, because I wanted to impress her. I already knew I was her best friend, but I thought it would be a good idea to give her more reasons to keep me as that. There was no doubt she'd stick around if I could guarantee the best places to hide, so we'd always win the games together.

"I think we should wait everyone out and see how long it takes them. We might be some of the youngest kids playing, but I think, especially when we work together, we're some of the smartest in the game," I told her.

"Yeah, I think so, too," Devyn agreed with me. "So, we'll just have to sit here and talk about something while we wait."

I shrugged. "That's easy. We have tons of stuff to talk about."

"We see each other all the time, Theo. What is there to talk about that we haven't already?" she asked.

I thought about it for a few seconds and finally asked, "If you were at the grocery store right now, what would you want to buy?"

Devyn's whole face changed, and her smile grew really big. "That's easy. Gummy candy."

"Gummy candy?"

"Bears, I think. They're my favorite. And if I could pick the flavor, I want all pineapple ones."

"Those are the clear ones, aren't they?"

She nodded. "Yes. They're the best. What flavor would you pick?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'd eat any of them, really. Except the green ones. I don't like them."

"Oh, those are the worst," she said, agreeing with me.

The both of us burst out laughing.

"I think I hear something over here."

The second we heard that voice in the distance, Devyn and I both stopped laughing and moved ourselves deeper into the tunnel, so we wouldn't be seen.

For a few minutes, we kept ourselves hidden from view, and when we didn't hear anyone moving around or talking, we moved to the edge of the tunnel and looked out.

"I think we're safe now," Devyn said.

"That was close," I replied.

"Do you want to try to start heading back to home base?" she asked.

I was having fun just hanging out with her, and I thought it would be awesome for us to stay hidden as long as possible, so I answered, "Let's stay here a bit longer."

Devyn seemed completely fine with it, because she sat down at the opening of the tunnel. I did the same, sitting across from her.

"Have you thought about it?" she asked me.

"Thought about what?"

"What you want to be when you grow up. We're starting school again very soon, and I know that question is going to come up at some point. I never know how to answer it."

"I have no idea. I'll probably do construction work like my dad. You don't have any idea?"

Devyn shook her head. "No. I'll probably just say I want to be a teacher or a doctor or something that they expect me to say, but I don't want to do either of those things."

"You still have a lot of time before you have to figure it out," I told her.

"What if I don't? I like doing so many different things, but none of the things I like to do are jobs. Or, well, I don't think they are. Like Legos. We have so much fun building them, but I'm pretty sure you can't build Legos your whole life."

That would be a pretty cool job. Devyn always had such good ideas, and I was a little jealous I hadn't thought up something that cool. "Somebody has to make them, though. Don't you think?"

"What?"

"Well, I don't know how it works, but I think somebody would have to put them together to make sure they've got all the right pieces for the build."

"I didn't think of that. You're probably right."

I smiled at her. "We'll both build things when we're older."

"Yeah, but everyone will think I'm just a big kid, because I grew up to play with toys," she said.

Shaking my head, I replied, "I think people who have anything to say will just be jealous that you get to do something you like to do every day."

"Kind of like how everyone is probably jealous we've got the best hiding spot right now?"

I laughed. "Exactly like that."

For a long time, Devyn and I stayed in the tunnel talking with each other, and we lost track of time. Obviously, neither one of us actually knew what



time it was, but we realized it must have been a long time when we were both startled by the sound of police sirens.

“What do you think that’s about?” I asked her.

Her eyes widened, and she looked scared. “I don’t know. We should probably head back.”

Devyn and I didn’t waste any time. We climbed out from our hiding spot and jogged back toward home base. As we got closer, we could see the police car had stopped in the middle of the road right between our houses, and both my parents and Devyn’s parents were talking to the officers.

“Uh, oh. I think we’re going to be in trouble.”

“Yeah, me too.”

When we were a few feet away, my dad looked in our direction and said, “There they are.”

“Oh, thank God,” Rhonda said.

“Are you okay?” my mom asked.

“Where were the two of you?” David questioned us.

I didn’t know who we were supposed to answer first, but luckily, we didn’t have to. “This is them?” one of the officers asked.

“Yes. Yes, we’re so sorry,” Devyn’s mom replied.

Devyn and I had stopped walking when we were standing a few feet away, and the officers looked at the both of us. “Are you two okay?”

We hadn’t done anything wrong, but I was still scared, thinking we were going to be arrested or something.

“We’re okay,” Devyn answered. “We were playing hide-and-seek, but nobody found us. We decided to come back when we heard the sirens.”

“How long were you hiding?” he asked.

Both of us shrugged our shoulders.

“Didn’t you hear us all calling for you?”

My mom’s voice told me she was angry but trying not to be too mad in front of the policemen.

“We were talking to each other the whole time. We didn’t hear anyone calling us.”

“I’m just glad you’re both alright,” my dad said.

He didn’t seem angry at all, so I thought I might not get into too much trouble later.

For the next few minutes, our parents spoke with the officers before they left. The game was over for the night, and Devyn and I each went with our

parents into our own houses.

I didn't get into too much trouble that night, but my parents did sit me down to talk to me about what Devyn and I had done.

And when I got in my bed that night, I realized it didn't bother me that I'd gotten into trouble. I'd had so much fun sitting in that tunnel, talking and laughing with my best friend.

---

## THREE

---

*Theo*  
*Four years later*

“I think that’s it.”

I knew we were close, but I hadn’t realized I was going to hear those words from my dad today.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. What else do you think we need to do?” he returned.

Shaking my head slowly, I marveled at what we’d just accomplished. My dad and I built a treehouse in our backyard. It had taken us weeks to accomplish it, and I was convinced we were never going to get to this point.

But it seemed we finally made it.

“I don’t know. I thought you were going to tell me there was something else that needed to be done. This felt like a never-ending project.”

My dad came to stand beside me. He placed his hand on the top of my head and said, “We could have gotten it done much sooner, but it wouldn’t have been done right. That’s one of the hard lessons you’ll learn in life. If you try to take shortcuts, whatever you’re trying to build will eventually fall apart. Then you’ll have to start all over again. It’ll cost you a lot in the end.”

“Money?” I asked.

“Sometimes. But that’s usually not the worst of it. More often than not, you lose time you can’t ever get back, and time is your most precious resource,” he explained.

I had a feeling my dad was imparting some great wisdom upon me, and although I heard what he was saying, I don’t think the lesson was penetrating

the way he might have hoped.

I merely shrugged my shoulders, looked up at my dad, and questioned him, "Since it's done, can I go and get Devyn? I want to show her it, now that we've completed it."

He let out a laugh before he replied, "Yeah. But I'll tell you right now that there is one more little thing you'll want to take care of with this treehouse."

I felt the confusion in my face. "You said we were done building it."

"I know, because we are. But if you're planning to have Devyn come over, you need to make it a place she'll want to be."

"Why wouldn't she want to be here?" I asked, needing more of an explanation for something I didn't seem to understand.

I could tell my dad had something going through his mind after I'd asked my question that he didn't plan on telling me, because he had the same look on his face that he'd get whenever my mom asked him if he'd eaten any of the chocolate chips she needed for the Christmas cookies.

Instead of giving me a straight answer, my dad asked, "Theo, how do you think our house would be if we didn't have any furniture in it?"

"I don't think I can get a couch up there, Dad."

"You don't need a couch. Although, we could probably find something smaller that would fit up there. What I'm trying to say is that you need to figure out how to make the place into more than just a box made out of wood. You need blankets, pillows, games, or Legos. Maybe you'll want a table or some books in there. Think about it, decide, and I can help you get anything up there that you can't manage on your own."

I nodded. "Okay. Thanks, Dad."

He smiled at me and jerked his head to the side. "No problem, kid. Go get Devyn, so you can show her what you built."

Not wanting to waste another minute, I took off across the street and made it to Devyn's house. I didn't wait at the door for very long when she opened it. "Hi, Theo."

"It's ready," I declared.

"Really?"

"Yep."

"Does this mean I can finally come over and see it?" she asked me.

"That's why I came over here to get you," I told her.

She was so excited. "Okay. Come in and wait for me for a second. I have

to put on my sneakers.”

I walked inside and waited. Then she called out, “Hey, Mom, I’m going over to Theo’s to see his new treehouse.”

“Okay. Make sure you’re back by dinnertime,” her mom replied.

“I will.”

A minute later, Devyn and I were walking past my house into the backyard. As soon as it came into view, she looked up and said, “Wow. It’s magnificent. You built this?”

“Well, I did it with my dad, but yeah, we built it.”

Devyn gave me a funny look before she returned her attention to the treehouse. I watched her as her eyes moved all over the outside space. “You have a tire swing hanging from it. I think that’s so cool.”

“I also have a zip line,” I revealed.

“What?”

I reached out for her hand and tugged on it, wanting her to follow me. “You can climb up this rock wall we put in to get up onto the deck. Once you’re inside, I can show you the zip line.”

Devyn quickly and easily climbed up the rock wall to the deck and waited for me to join her. Then I led her inside the house.

“You are so lucky. I wish I had something like this.”

“You do.”

“No, I don’t. Trust me, I’d never leave my treehouse if I had one.”

How could she be my best friend and not understand that this was just as much hers as it was mine?

“You have this one,” I explained. “Whenever you want to come over and hang out, you know I’m not going to care.”

Devyn stared at me for a few seconds without saying anything. Finally, when I thought I was going to have to say something else to get her to speak, she said, “Okay, maybe I’m lucky, too.”

As soon as she said that, especially when she was looking at me like she was, I felt really hot. I didn’t understand why and decided to ignore it.

“So, over here is the zip line,” I said, moving to the opposite side of the house.

I showed her the handles, where the line went to another tree in the yard, and the way to get down once she made it to the opposite side. Of course, I also explained how to bring the handles back into the treehouse, so the next person could go.

“Can we try it?” she asked.

“Yeah. Do you want to go first?”

She shook her head. “No. You go first, just so I can see what I need to do.”

So, that’s what I did. I grabbed onto the handles, walked to the open edge of the deck, and stepped off. When I made it safely to the opposite tree, I let go of the handles and told Devyn to reel them back to the treehouse. While she did that, I climbed down from the tree and waited for her. Within seconds, she was laughing as she soared through the air on the zip line. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d seen her so happy.

When she climbed down from the tree and met me at the bottom, she declared, “That was so much fun!”

“I thought it was a good addition to the treehouse,” I replied as we started walking back toward it.

“What else are you going to do there? What are you planning to put inside?” she questioned me.

“I was kind of hoping you’d help me figure that out.”

“Me?”

I nodded. “I expect you’ll be spending a lot of time hanging out with me here, so I was thinking that you should have a say in how it gets decorated.”

For a few seconds, Devyn didn’t respond, and the two of us continued to walk back to the treehouse.

“Could we do homework there when school is in session?” she eventually asked.

I hadn’t even considered that as an option. “Definitely. My dad said he’d help me get anything up there that I can’t take up on my own, so if we need a table, we can get one.”

“A table would probably be a good idea if you’re planning to have lunch up there when it’s not too cold outside, too,” she added.

She had such great ideas about what to do. It was just another reason why I was glad I brought her over while it was like this. Devyn would make sure I didn’t forget anything, and it really would be a place that the both of us would want to hang out together all the time.

“My dad said we could put blankets and pillows up there, too,” I shared when we made it back to the rock-climbing wall. “Plus, we could have games and books.”

“And maybe a stereo,” Devyn added as she started climbing the wall.

“Hang on. You go up ahead of me while I go and get some paper to write this all down. I don’t want to forget anything.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you up here,” she called out from the deck.

With that, I dashed off to the house to grab some paper and a pen. While I was inside, something in my room caught my eye. I grabbed it and took it back outside with me. When I made it back to the treehouse, Devyn asked, “What is that?”

I walked over to the side where my dad and I had built some shelves inside the treehouse and set it down on one of them. “It’s the first piece of decoration for the house.”

Devyn saw what I put there, moved closer to inspect it, and smiled at it before she looked at me. Then she hugged me and said, “It’s perfect.”

I didn’t know what to do with myself when she reacted like she had, but I knew that bringing a framed picture of the two of us from a school field trip into the treehouse was the right move.



*Devyn*

*Eleven months later*

“Are you coming?”

I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face as I waited for Theo’s response. We were out riding bikes, powering ourselves up a hill, and he was a bit behind me. Theo wasn’t an overly competitive guy, but he was certainly capable, so I found it odd that he hadn’t passed me. Though, it was certainly possible that I’d just improved tremendously over the last several weeks.

It was the summer again.

Theo and I were another year older. We were officially teenagers, and we were finding that being teenagers meant having more freedom along with responsibility.

That was the reason we weren’t just riding our bikes up and down our street or around the neighborhood. We had been given the opportunity to

venture a bit farther than before, but we had some rules to follow. One of those rules was that we were never to leave each other alone and had to stick together.

For me, that would never be a problem. I didn't think it would ever be one for Theo, either. But if he continued to put more and more space between us, I was going to have to slow down.

"I'm right behind you, Devyn," Theo declared. "You better watch once you get to the top of the hill, though."

So, it was the uphill battle that he was struggling with. Apparently, my best friend believed he was going to take the lead when we started going downhill.

I'd just have to show him he was wrong.

With a renewed sense of determination, I pushed myself to go a bit harder up the hill. I put more and more distance between us, finally making it to the top and glancing back to see Theo pedaling faster to catch up.

Deciding not to wait, I began my descent. Unfortunately, I got a little too confident, and that didn't work to my advantage.

I suddenly realized what Theo meant when he urged me to be careful once I got to the top. He hadn't been trying to tell me that he intended to pass me. He'd been warning me for my safety.

Before I could stop it from happening, I'd picked up entirely too much speed, and as soon as I applied my brakes, things took a turn. There was a lot of loose gravel on the road, along with some sticks from a thunderstorm we'd had yesterday. One stick was rather large, forced me to lose control, and sent my bike flying as I landed on the ground. I landed on my hip, my palm on one hand and the forearm on the opposite limb connecting with the pavement as the gravel bit into and cut up my skin.

Burning.

All I felt was burning pain down my side.

"Devyn!" Theo shouted.

I looked up, saw him making his approach, and mostly noticed the worry in his face.

He made his way over to me, got off his bike, and crouched down beside me. "Are you okay? That was a nasty fall."

I urged myself up to a seated position and inspected my body. Holding my scraped up and bloody arm, along with my scratched palm and skinned leg, it was clear I was anything but okay.



“That really hurt,” I said. “I think I’m okay, though.”

I didn’t want Theo to see me as weak. I never wanted him to see me that way. But it was unbelievably difficult to appear unaffected by what had just happened.

Tears were welling in my eyes, and I desperately tried to blink them back. It was impossible. Everything was stinging.

“Devyn, that was a really bad fall. I can tell you’re not okay,” he said.

“I’ll be alright,” I insisted.

“We’ve got to get these cuts cleaned out for you,” he informed me.

“I’m going to bleed everywhere.”

He shook his head, stood, and took off his backpack. “I have some water we can pour on the cuts to clean off the blood. And I’ve got a spare T-shirt. I’ll just rip it up and wrap it around your cuts.”

“You can’t destroy your shirt,” I argued.

With his eyes pinned on mine, Theo took his shirt in his hands and started ripping it right down the middle.

I stared at him in awe, which I guess was better than bursting into tears.

For the next few moments, I only grew more and more surprised by what was happening. Theo expertly took care of me. He poured some water on my cuts and wrapped pieces of his shirt around them.

“Teddy,” I whispered.

Theo didn’t take his eyes off of what he was doing when he asked, “What?”

“Teddy,” I repeated. “You’re Theo all the time, but this is the first time I’ve ever really seen you like this. You’re making me feel better, the way I imagine a teddy bear would soothe someone when they were hurt.”

Theo’s hands froze on the shirt he’d started wrapping around my leg as his head snapped up, so he could look at me. “Um... uh, okay?”

Not wanting him to feel uncomfortable, nor did I want to make it awkward, I said, “You’re being very nice to me.”

“I thought I was always nice to you.”

“You are, but this is different. You’re taking care of me.”

His eyes lingered on mine for a few more seconds before he returned his attention to my leg. I didn’t think he was going to respond, but following a brief pause, he said, “I’d never be able to see you in pain and not do whatever I could to make you feel better.”

Since Theo couldn’t bring himself to look at me when he said what he

did, I decided it was best not to respond at all. I figured we'd both said far more than we ever had in any situation.

So, I sat there and allowed Theo to continue tending to my wounds.

It was the sweetest, most tender moment I'd ever experienced with him, and something changed for me when it happened.

For the first time in my life, I didn't see Theo as just my best friend. Of course, he was that, and he'd always be that. But right then and there, he became something else to me. He wasn't just my best friend.

I realized then precisely how much he meant to me.

I might have only been thirteen years old, but right there on the ground with scraped up legs and arms, I fell in love with Theo McCormick.

---

## FOUR

---

*Devyn*

*One year, three months later*

I was the luckiest kid in the world.

I hadn't even gotten myself downstairs yet, and the smells were wafting up into my bedroom.

My parents were down in the kitchen preparing for my fourteenth birthday party. It was a Saturday, early October, and I was having a small party with some extended family and friends from both the neighborhood and school.

We weren't doing anything spectacular; there were no events planned. All I wanted was good food, family, and friends.

That's it.

And my parents were going above and beyond to give me the very best they had to give of it.

Because, again, I was still up in my bedroom, and the aromas of my favorite foods were curling around me. It was the scent of melted cheese from my mom's homemade mac and cheese recipe mixed with the smoke.

Yes, smoke.

Rich, sweet smoke from my dad's smoked beef brisket.

My mom's mac and cheese was divine, but nothing could top dad's brisket. Technically, any meat that my dad made in his smoker left little else to be desired. He'd made an art of smoking meat.

God, I was practically drooling just thinking about it.

Uninterested in trying to make myself look pretty for the occasion, I

dragged my brush through my hair, pulled on my favorite pair of jeans, and yanked a sweatshirt over my head.

The weather had been slightly cooler than average this year, which I loved. Fall was my favorite season, especially living in Iris, a quaint little town in the Smoky Mountain region of Tennessee. The leaves had started to change color already, and over the next several weeks, the scenery would be breathtaking. I lived for the gorgeous view.

For now, for today, it was the taste and smell of my parents' homemade cooking that I'd be living for.

I walked out of my room, descended the stairs, and made my way to the kitchen. As soon as I stepped in, I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath.

"There's nothing better in the whole world," I declared.

"Your dad really outdid himself with the brisket for you, Devyn," my mom said.

I gave her a nod of agreement as I moved closer to where the two of them were working at the small kitchen counter. How they'd managed to work so well together in a kitchen of this size was beyond me.

The moment I was close to the counter, my dad set a plate down in front of me. "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

He hadn't loaded it up, but I loved that my dad insisted on giving me the first taste of my birthday meal just minutes before anyone was set to arrive. He'd given me just enough of his barbecue brisket and mom's mac and cheese to tease me.

"Thanks, Dad. It smells so good," I replied.

Offering a smile, he urged, "Well, tell us how it tastes. We've been waiting for you to let us know if any of it needs to be tweaked."

I already knew it wouldn't need anything, but since I wanted it in my mouth, I decided not to share that just yet. Instead, I lifted the fork with mom's mac and cheese to my mouth. Warm, cheesy, creamy, and comforting.

I followed that up with dad's brisket. After chewing for several seconds, the explosion of flavor in my mouth being simply divine, I shifted my attention between my parents and smiled.

"Just as I suspected. It's all perfect."

"You like it?" my mom pressed.

"I love it," I assured her. "I'll never get tired of having this meal."

"Well, at least you know where to go and who to ask whenever you want

it,” my dad noted.

Truer words had never been spoken.

I adored the relationship I had with my parents. They weren’t rich and certainly couldn’t give me everything I might have thought I wanted in my life, but they gave me the most important things I needed.

Love, comfort, and safety.

And, of course, endless amounts of my favorite meals.

Nothing was better.

It was at that moment when the doorbell rang.

“Looks like the party is about to start,” my mom said. “Why don’t you go answer the door while your dad and I get the rest of the food squared away here, Devyn?”

“You really didn’t have to do anything else,” I said to her as I turned to walk out of the kitchen. “Dad’s brisket and your mac and cheese would have been sufficient.”

“We love that you love them, sweetheart, but there’s a variety of people coming here today,” my dad noted as I moved toward the front door. “We have to have options.”

I knew they were right, but it didn’t change my opinion on the whole matter. Even if I disagreed, I chose not to argue with them. That was mostly because I opened the door and was thrilled to see that the very first guests to my party were Theo and his parents.

A bigger smile than had already been there formed on my face.

“Happy birthday, Devyn,” Mary said. She had one free hand and used it to reach out and pull me in for a hug.

Theo’s dad, Scott, had his hands full, but he didn’t hesitate to offer birthday wishes as well.

I thanked the both of them before they moved toward the kitchen to greet my parents. As they went, I couldn’t stop myself from feeling grateful to have Scott and Mary in my life. They were like a second set of parents to me.

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I looked away from where Scott and Mary had walked and back in the direction of the front door. More specifically, I looked at Theo.

“Happy birthday, Devyn.”

“Thanks, even though you already said it to me yesterday on my actual birthday,” I replied.

“Yeah, but today is your party, so I’m not going to not say it.”

Feeling happier than ever, I jerked my head in the opposite direction and said, “Come on. You guys are the first ones here, and I want you to try my favorite foods before everyone else arrives.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Theo returned.

I let out a laugh, recognizing the fact that my best friend’s appetite as of late had changed. Theo ate a lot more than he used to. It wasn’t that I spent every hour with him and knew his eating habits, but I was around him enough to notice. We used to come home from school and go to his treehouse to do our schoolwork, but this year, it was different.

When we walked out into the kitchen, I said, “Theo needs to try your brisket, Dad. And he needs to taste the mac and cheese, too, Mom.”

“He’s family, Devyn. He doesn’t need to ask. Grab a plate and help yourself to whatever you want, Theo.”

“Thanks a lot, Rhonda.”

Yes, Theo called my mom by her first name. He did the same with my dad, and I did it with his parents. We’d known each other all our lives, and calling them Mr. or Mrs. McCormick was far too formal. It would have been the same for Theo with my parents.

After grabbing a plate for him, Theo took it and loaded it up with brisket and mac and cheese. He didn’t hesitate to dive in, and once he took his first bite, his whole face lit up.

“It’s the best, isn’t it?” I asked him. “It’s my favorite food.”

His mouth full, Theo nodded his agreement and said, “So good. Now, whenever I smell your dad smoking brisket, I’ll just think of your birthday.”

That right there was it.

Knowing how I’d felt when I first tasted the food and seeing Theo’s reaction, I felt confident in my recent decision. This very meal was what led to me having an idea as to what I finally wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I wanted to do this.

I wanted to go to culinary school and learn how to make meals that people would eat and ultimately wind up associating with a feeling or something significant in their life instead of just saying that it tasted good.

Nothing made me happier than to know that Theo would smell my dad smoking meat and would think of me.

And right there, sitting across from him as he gobbled down the delicious food, I’d decided my birthday party was already a success. As long as I had Theo here with me to celebrate, I wouldn’t care if nobody else showed up.

Because with each day that passed, I grew more and more confident in the way I felt about him. I grew more and more in love with him.

I just refused to tell him, because I was afraid. Theo was the same as he'd always been with me, and sadly, I was convinced it was because he only saw me as just a friend.



*Theo*  
*Eleven months later*

I did it.

I couldn't believe I did it.

As I stood staring at the list of names posted for the high school Christmas play, I was in utter disbelief that my name was there next to the lead male, Ebenezer Scrooge, in the Charles Dickens play *A Christmas Carol*.

While I was confident in my acting ability, I had questioned whether they'd consider someone who wasn't a senior student to play the lead role.

But it seemed I had nothing to worry about, because I'd taken that chance and gotten the role. It felt like one of the greatest moments of my life.

For the last year or two, I'd been thinking seriously about what I wanted to do with myself. Though I enjoyed being active and having fun, I wasn't interested in organized sports. Playing high school football was of no interest to me.

And even if I didn't mind occasionally working on a project with my dad around the house, construction wasn't my gig.

Being able to play a character sounded like a lot of fun, and I decided to start practicing. I'd asked my parents to sign me up for acting classes, and I'd been taking them for almost a year now. It seemed they'd paid off.

I couldn't wait to tell my parents. I couldn't wait to tell Devyn. If anyone was going to be excited for me, it would be her.

Glad it was the end of the school day, I turned around and walked away

toward my locker. I had to grab a couple of books there that I'd need for my homework and studying this weekend.

But I hadn't gotten more than twenty feet away when I ended up being stopped. Or, I guess, it wasn't so much that I'd been stopped. Rather, someone ran into me, and it quickly became clear it wasn't an accident.

"Kiss ass."

I took a step back, blinking my eyes in surprise, and replied, "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, I heard you, but I'm not sure I understand what the problem is," I explained.

Three guys were standing there, all seniors I'd recognized from the auditions, though I didn't recall their names.

"Who do you think you are? No sophomore has ever had the lead role in the play, and you think you can come along and take it?" one of the guys questioned me.

"I don't think that at all," I insisted. "I know it, considering I did."

No way would I apologize for being good at what I did. If he had auditioned for the part and wanted it, it was a shame he hadn't gotten it. But I worked hard to improve my acting skills, and I deserved the part I'd been given.

"Are you fucking serious right now, dude?"

I pressed my lips together as my brows shot up, offering a look of indifference while I nodded. "Yeah, I am."

The ringleader of the group looked to his buddies, evidently shocked that I didn't seem to care how he felt about this whole situation.

When he returned his attention to me, he took two steps in my direction, dropped his voice a couple of octaves—a vain attempt to appear intimidating—and said, "I'm *your* understudy right now, and this is how it's going to work. You can pretend all you want that you'll be playing the lead role, but on the night of the performance, you'll be feeling a bit unwell."

"No, he won't."

At the sound of the unexpected but all too familiar voice, my body froze. The guys stepped back and turned around to see Devyn standing there, fury written all over her face.

Before they could say a word, she said, "I suggest you walk away now and forget anything you think you want to have happen with the play. It's



obvious Theo earned his spot, and if you're upset about that, maybe you need to go and work on your skills. Who knows? If you're lucky, which is going to have to be the case in order for you to beat out Theo, you might have a chance at the lead role in the spring production. But if you're smart, you're going to realize quickly that Theo is so good, and you'll never have a shot at that one, either."

Hearing Devyn's words, something warm moved through me. While I couldn't recall a situation that ever necessitated it, nobody had ever stood up for me the way that she just did. She was the very definition of a true friend, and I couldn't love her more for being that for me.

Instead of acknowledging Devyn's words—likely because he was far too embarrassed—my understudy returned his attention to me and clipped, "So you need a girl to fight your battles for you? How pathetic."

With that, he and his buddies took off.

My eyes landed on Devyn.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I nodded. "I was handling it."

"Are you mad that I stepped in?" she worried.

Shaking my head, I assured her, "Not at all."

A brief moment of silence stretched between us before she grinned at me and asked, "So, you got the part? You're going to be Scrooge?"

"I did. I am."

She threw her hands up in the air in mock celebration before allowing her arms to wrap around me in a hug. "Congratulations, Theo. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Devyn. It means a lot to me. Are you going to come to the opening night of the production?" I asked.

A look of horror washed over her face. "The opening night?" she repeated. "Are you kidding me? Theo, I'll be there for every single performance. If I'm being honest, I'm actually going to start a countdown to it."

"Okay, now I know you're joking with me," I said.

She shook her head. "Not at all. I mean, I've known you all my life. You're you. You're Teddy. I kind of can't wait to see you as a grumpy old man."

My lips twitched as I fought not to break out into a fit of laughter. Then, I threw my arm over Devyn's shoulders and urged her to walk beside me

toward my locker. “What would I do without a friend like you, Devyn?”

She didn't respond, but she didn't need to.

Because I already knew the answer.

I'd never not have this girl in my life. She was far too important to me.

---

## FIVE

---

**Theo**

*Two years, five months later*

Expect the unexpected.

I wish I'd taken that sentiment to heart. At least if I'd done that, I might not have been so surprised by what happened.

The truth was, things had been going great in my life over the last two and a half years. Now that school was almost over, and I was preparing to graduate in a few short months, there was no question I was looking forward to what was ahead.

Not only had I continued to act in the school plays, but I'd also done a few smaller productions outside of school. I'd found my calling, and I knew that acting was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted it to be my career.

So, I was ready to graduate. I was more than prepared to close this chapter of my life and move on to the next big thing. I had no doubt it was going to be big, too. It had to be, because I couldn't see myself doing anything else in my future.

Fortunately, everything seemed to be going according to plan. It was all heading the right direction for me, and I couldn't have asked for any more than I'd already gotten or been able to experience.

But something else had happened.

Something became clear to me over the course of the last few years. Devyn had been my best friend, always supporting me at every play and being there to hang when we just wanted to chill.

We studied together or worked on homework at the same time with one another. And whenever I needed help rehearsing, she'd help me with my lines.

Finally, after all this time, I realized I'd fallen in love with her. Part of me had wanted to go to her immediately and share the news with her, but I didn't. Instead, I held onto the realization for more than a year now, worried I might ruin the friendship we had with one another.

I had a plan, though. I made a promise to myself, that before the school year was over, I was going to work up the courage to tell Devyn the truth. I was going to tell her that I'd fallen in love with her, and that I wanted her to be my girlfriend.

But as I sat in my bed, the television on in the background while I ran through my lines for my part in my senior year's spring production while thinking about Devyn, something happened that I hadn't been expecting.

Something that was the complete opposite of everything I'd been experiencing in my life lately.

My body tensed momentarily as the sound of a horrendous scream floated up to my bedroom. I remained frozen to the spot for all of a few seconds before I hopped out of the bed, swung my bedroom door open, and raced down the stairs.

One look at the scene before me didn't tell me anything specific, but from what I could manage to gather, something was very, very wrong.

My mother was in tears, barely able to keep herself upright, as my dad's arms were around her, taking her weight and holding her up.

Though she was crying, I could see that my mom was physically fine. My dad was as well.

More alarming than even the sound of my mom's scream or the fact that she was in tears was the police officer.

Standing just inside the front door to my house was a single officer, and the look he wore on his face did not indicate good things at all.

I was torn.

Part of me desperately wanted to know what was wrong, but the other part of me could see the devastation written all over my parents' faces. I wanted to avoid learning about whatever it was that put those looks there.

Sadly, I had no choice.

Because I caught the officer's attention, and his eyes moved in my direction. "Are you Theo?" he asked.

Confusion washed over me. I hadn't done anything to get myself into any trouble, so I had not a clue as to how the officer knew my name. Worse, I couldn't image what he wanted.

"I am," I confirmed. Before he could respond, I shifted my attention to my parents, who were now looking at me. "What's going on? Did something happen?"

That was such a stupid question.

Of course, something had happened.

Why else would I be standing here, witnessing what I was and feeling all that I did about it, if nothing had happened?

I couldn't miss the sympathetic looks that washed over my parents' faces. It was sympathy mixed with a healthy dose of agony.

Neither one of them responded to me.

Instead, the officer said, "Theo, I'm here because I was told by a young lady named Devyn Jade to come over here and share the news."

*Devyn had sent this guy?*

None of this made any sense.

"What news?" I questioned him.

Now it was the officer's turn to send a sympathetic look my way. Following a beat of silence, he shared, "Earlier this evening, Devyn's parents were involved in a fatal car accident. Both of them died on the scene."

In an instant, everything ceased to exist.

Not my parents.

Not the officer.

Not the lines I needed to study and rehearse.

Only Devyn mattered.

Just her.

"Where is she?" I asked, my throat tight and my voice strained.

"She's still in her home," he answered. "We're working on getting her extended family here to be with her, but that's going to take some time. If you think it might help—"

The officer didn't say another word, because I'd started moving toward the door. I shoved my feet into my sneakers there and didn't even consider taking the time to grab a jacket before I flung the door open and walked out.

Get to her.

That was the only thought in my mind.

I ran across the street and right up to the front door. Without knocking, I

yanked the door open and went inside.

An officer put a hand out to stop me, but I said, "I'm here for Devyn.

I didn't know what I thought I'd find when I got here, but what I saw wasn't it. This was just another instance of not expecting the unexpected.

By the time I came around the corner and stepped into the room, all I saw was my best friend curled up into a ball in the middle of the floor as several officers stood around her, doing nothing.

I ignored every single one of them, moved toward her, and got down on the floor. Placing one hand on her shoulder, I leaned my head down and whispered in her ear. "Devyn."

That was all it took.

Devyn's body was wracked by sobs. I gathered her up in my arms, pulled her into my lap, and held on tight to her.

Rocking her in my arms, I rasped, "I'm so sorry, Devyn. So, so sorry."

She didn't respond with words. She merely burrowed her whole body deeper into mine. I happily took it.

Whatever she needed to get through this, I was going to be there to give it to her.

I didn't know how much time had passed. Quite frankly, I didn't really care. If I had to sit here for the next three weeks to give Devyn the comfort she needed, then that's what I was going to do.

Eventually, she loosened her hold on me, but still kept her forehead pressed tightly against my neck. "They're gone, Theo. I'll never see my parents again."

For as long as I lived, I'd never for the sound of her voice in that moment. She was utterly broken, and I was convinced she might not ever be the same.

All I could do was tighten my hold on her as I replied quietly, "I know. I'm so sorry about that, Devyn. Whatever you need, whatever it takes, I'm going to be here to get you through this."

"What am I going to do?" she asked me.

I took a moment to consider the answer to that question. I wasn't sure I had a very good solution for her, but what I came up with was all I could think to say. "I don't know, but I promise you we'll figure it out together."

Whether or not Devyn believed me remained to be seen, but there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I'd pull out all the stops to fulfill that promise to her.



*Devyn*  
*Four months later*

I was here.

I'd made it.

But my heart wasn't in it.

Sadly, there was something about having your parents die that changed your life in an unimaginable way.

For the first two weeks following their death, I didn't do anything. I didn't go to school, and I only ate the bare minimum.

My parents, at some point before their death, had done something I wasn't even aware of. They'd had their will drawn up, and in a twist that nobody but the other two individuals involved had been aware of, Scott and Mary became my legal guardians.

I had family, but they didn't live in this town. I had to suspect that my parents didn't want me having to leave my school and my friends if something had ever happened to them.

And Mary and Scott had been gracious enough to fulfill the promise they'd made to my parents.

For those first two weeks, they'd all taken turns staying in the house with me. I didn't want to leave, and they didn't want me to be alone. So, they rotated. One night it was Scott, and the next it was Mary. I loved them for it, but I felt the best when Theo stayed the night with me.

Instead of me feeling the need to climb into my own bed where I wouldn't get any sleep anyway, I stayed in the living room, on the couch, and Theo stayed awake with me. He'd talk to me for hours about anything I wanted to talk about. And if I just wanted to sit there in silence, he'd stay right by my side.

They fed me.

They looked after me.

And there was no question I wouldn't have survived if it hadn't been for

the three of them.

But there eventually came a point when I realized I couldn't continue to disrupt their lives the way that I was. Granted, I knew this was a promise they'd made to my parents, something they'd discussed at length, but I still felt like a burden.

So, I took a long, hard look at things and realized I only had months left until I would be considered an adult. I was going to have to start looking after myself eventually.

And while Mary, Scott, and especially Theo, never stopped being there for me, they didn't need to be with me for twenty-four hours a day.

Somehow, I managed to push the devastation and heartache I felt over losing my parents into the deepest, darkest recesses of my heart and mind. Then I pushed forward with what I had to do.

By some miracle, I'd managed to make it to the end of my senior year. And now I was here at my graduation ceremony.

But it felt awful.

While I knew that Scott and Mary were there for me just as much as they were there for Theo, it wasn't the same as it would have been if my parents had been there. Even having blood relatives—my aunt, uncle, and grandparents—didn't ease the pain.

My parents were dead.

And I'd convinced myself that no matter what I managed to accomplish in my life, it would always have very little meaning to me.

Now, when everyone at school was preparing for their futures, excited about college and their potential careers, I felt nothing but dead inside.

I had no choice but to give up on the plans I'd had to go to culinary school, because I had to work. While my parents' estate was left to me, obviously being looked after by Mary, Scott, and my parents' attorney until I turned eighteen, the reality was that my parents weren't millionaires. They had debt like everyone else.

Car loans.

Mortgage payments.

Credit card debt.

Insurance.

Electricity.

Groceries.

Taxes.



It was a never-ending list.

Though there was some money there to hold me over for a bit of time, I had no choice but to get a job. Holding on to their house was the only thing that mattered to me, so taking on more debt to go to culinary school when I had all the other bills to pay wasn't an option.

The graduation ceremony ended, everyone tossing their caps up into the air.

I didn't even want to do that.

The only thing I wanted to do was get out of here. I'd only come to the ceremony for Mary and Scott, because I knew if I made the decision not to come, it would have broken their hearts. Plus, Theo likely would have stayed with me and not come, and I couldn't take this moment away from him.

So, I sucked it up, put my big girl pants on, and participated in the ceremony.

Now it was time to get on with the rest of my life.

As I weaved my way through the crowd, in desperate need of finding the exit, I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder. "Devyn."

I stopped, turned, and looked up into Theo's eyes. "Hey," I replied.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Out of here, for sure."

He nodded his understanding. "I completely understand if you don't want to, but my parents were hoping to take the both of us out to dinner to celebrate. Would you like to go?"

I didn't.

Celebrating felt wrong.

But these people had given up so much for me, to take care of me and see me through the worst time in my life.

I could give this to them.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. I can go to dinner. That sounds nice."

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

Theo knew me all too well.

Forcing a smile, I nodded and insisted, "Of course. Congratulations, by the way. You're officially a high school graduate."

He let out a soft laugh. "Yeah. You, too."

"I didn't think I was going to make it, if I'm being honest," I confessed.

Theo reached for my hand, something he'd done a million times over the years. I'd always loved it, especially once I realized I'd fallen in love with

him. But now, every time he did it, I wished he'd just continue to hold on and never let go.

After giving my hand a squeeze, he said, "But you did it. And I'm really, really proud of you."

Though I didn't feel the overwhelming sense of accomplishment I imagined Theo and the rest of my classmates felt, I couldn't say that I didn't appreciate his words. His opinion was one of the few that mattered to me, and it was, at this point in my life, the most important.

"I couldn't have done it without you by my side, though. You've been such a good friend to me all my life, Theo, but nothing compares to what you and your family have done for me over these last few months. I'm not sure there are enough words in the world to tell you how much it means to me to have you all in my life."

Releasing my hand, Theo lifted his arm and wrapped it around my back. He gave me a one-armed hug and replied, "We love you, Devyn. It's just like your mom said a long time ago. We're family, so we're always going to be there for one another."

Tears filled my eyes as I recalled the words my mom had said on more than one occasion about our two families. We weren't related by blood, but we were just as close as any blood relatives could have been.

Theo must have noticed I was too caught up in my emotions to speak, so with his arm still around me, he said, "Come on. Let's get out of here and find my parents. We'll take a picture or two before we go out for dinner."

Maybe I didn't care about the graduation ceremony or what it signified in my life, but if one thing was for certain, I would never turn down an opportunity to have a picture taken with someone I loved.

And though Theo didn't know the full extent of my feelings for him, there was no question he knew just how important he was in my life.

I just hoped I'd eventually get to a place where I'd finally be able to tell him the truth.

---

## SIX

---

### *Devyn*

*Five months later*

The hits just kept on coming.

Time passed, and things never seemed to get any easier.

I didn't know if this was what people meant when they often warned kids to just wait until they entered the real world, but this was getting to be too much.

I was eighteen now, and I was officially in charge of every aspect of my life. Though I knew I had Theo and his family along with my other relatives there for me, the reality was that I was responsible for myself.

But I'd been in that role since long before my age indicated that was the case.

No sooner had I graduated high school, I'd gotten myself a job. I worked in customer service for a retail company, and I absolutely hated it. But it didn't require any education beyond my high school diploma and the pay was reasonable.

Of course, the job I had wasn't a lifelong career choice, but it was what I could do now that would provide a steady income.

Sadly, without the ability to go to culinary school, I just didn't know how I'd ever be able to make a change. Because while I'd been lucky enough to not have to worry about covering the costs of continuing to live in the home I'd shared with my parents and had been raised in while I finished up high school, there was a finite supply of funds. The money was only going to go so far.

Maybe I'd been a bit naïve, but I had believed that as long as I got a job, everything was going to work out okay. My parents had done it; I could, too.

Unfortunately, I was wrong.

The money I made just barely covered the expenses I had, and if there was any chance or hope of me being able to fulfill my dreams in the future, I needed to make a change. Jobs that paid a lot more money for someone like me weren't exactly aplenty. And though I'd gotten a second job waitressing recently, it still wasn't enough.

Because going through life making just enough money to cover the expenses meant that not only could I not save for the schooling I wanted and needed, but I also didn't have anything set aside for when there was an emergency.

And I was quickly learning that owning a home required maintenance, nearly all of which I couldn't afford, nor did I know how to do.

Scott helped out when I had a problem that could be fixed by a handyman with some tools, but when the water heater took a crap and needed to be replaced, I had no choice but to acquire some credit card debt.

As time went on and the bills mounted, I had to face the facts. This wasn't feasible. While it pained me to admit it, I had to do something I'd promised myself I'd never do.

I had to sell the house.

God, it pained me to even think about it, but I was out of options. Things were already tight for me, and I needed to get out before something major happened that put me in a position that was even worse.

I'd contacted a realtor, had her come out to check out the house, and gotten a punch list of items that I needed to deal with before she would list the house on the market. I'd gotten through most of that list, and she'd set things up to have her photographer come out to take photos of the house early next week. That meant I needed to do this now.

*This* being letting the people who needed to know what I was up to and what was happening.

Since it was Friday evening after dinner, I figured there was no time like the present.

I walked out of the house and made my way across the street to the McCormick residence.

Theo was away for a few days working on a secret project he promised to tell me about once he returned in a week, but I didn't want to delay. I could at

least let Scott and Mary know about my plans. After all they'd done for me, they deserved to know.

Just as I walked up to the front door, Scott walked out.

"Hey, Devyn. Everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded and said, "Yes, I was just hoping to talk to you and Mary. Is this a bad time?"

"Well, I'm running out to grab a pizza for dinner right now, but if you want to hang for a bit, we can talk when I get back," he said. "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

Shaking my head, I promised, "No, not at all. I just have some plans that I wanted to fill you both in on."

He dipped his chin. "Okay. Go inside and visit with Mary. You can talk to her about it if you want, and when I get back, you can fill me in. Does that work?"

"That works."

Scott held the door open for me and waited until I was inside to let it go. As he took off to grab dinner for himself and his wife, I walked into the house and called out, "Mary?"

"Devyn?" she called back from the kitchen. "Is that you?"

I moved toward the kitchen, and once I entered, I answered, "It's me."

"Hi, dear. How are you doing?"

I smiled.

She was the closest thing I had left to a mother, so it wasn't hard to take one look at her, hear her voice, and feel a level of appreciation, respect, and love for her that went beyond her just being my best friend's mother.

"I'm okay. I just talked to Scott on his way out, and he told me I could come in to talk to you until he gets back."

"Of course, you can. You know that. We're always here for you."

I did know that.

It was the only other reason I was dreading having to let go of my parents' home. I'd no longer have Scott, Mary, or Theo just a few steps away.

Once I made this move, I'd really be on my own.

"I do. And I kind of have something I want to talk to you about now, if that's okay."

Her expression grew alarmed. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes. I made some plans about something, and I wanted to fill you in on them."

“Sure. Go grab a seat at the table, and I’ll get you something to drink. What would you like?”

“Do you have any of your sweet tea?” I asked.

She beamed at me. “For you? Always.”

Warmth moved through me. While I knew they’d always be here for me, there was no question I’d miss having them this close by.

I grabbed a seat and waited for Mary to join me at the table. After she brought over a glass of sweet tea and sat down at the table with me, I took a sip and smiled at her.

There was no missing the concerned look on her face, even if she was doing her best to hide it.

“So, I wanted to come over and let you know that I’ve made a decision about something,” I started. “And since you’d likely find out about it anyway by this time next week, I didn’t want it to come as a surprise to you.”

“What’s going on?” she questioned me.

I swallowed hard, not feeling very prepared or ready to share it, but knowing I needed to. “I met with a realtor, and she’s got someone coming next week to take pictures of the house. I’m going to be listing it for sale.”

Mary’s eyes widened in shock. “What?”

“I wanted to tell you, so you didn’t see a sign in the grass next week and wonder what was happening,” I said.

A whole range of emotions moved through Mary’s face. “Where are you going?”

“I haven’t exactly secured housing just yet, but I’m looking to get my own apartment. My realtor is working on finding a few places to show me, but I won’t be moving into anything until the house sells.”

It wasn’t hard to miss how much this was impacting Mary. I felt awful for doing this to her, but she was going to need to know sooner or later.

“Forgive me for asking, but is there a reason you don’t want to stay there? Is it about money?” she asked.

I offered a half-hearted smile. I didn’t want her knowing how upset I was about all of this. “It’s not easy to own your own home.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not. Scott and I would be more than happy to help you if you’re struggling with any of the bills.”

Just like a mother.

She didn’t hesitate, and while I hadn’t expected her to offer, it didn’t surprise me that Mary had responded the way she did.

“I really appreciate that, and I know you and Scott would do anything for me, Mary,” I assured her. “But it’s not just about the money for me. The truth is, it’s a lot of house for one person.”

Mary tipped her head to the side, her eyes searching my face. “It won’t always be that way, Devyn. Surely, one day, you’re going to fall in love and get married.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her I’d already fallen in love with her son and had been too much of a chicken to reveal the truth to him. Theo hadn’t ever made any advances toward me, and I believed he only saw me as a friend. There wasn’t a chance I’d ever risk our friendship by telling him how I felt.

“I’m sure that will happen one day, but until then, I just don’t think I can stay there. Aside from the size and the costs, there’re a lot of memories there. It’s hard, sometimes. Everywhere I look, I see my parents, and I miss them terribly.”

Mary’s eyes had filled with unshed tears. “My heart breaks just thinking about you not being there any longer.”

Not wanting her to worry, I noted, “Well, I’m not moving just yet. But once I do, I promise I’ll come and visit you regularly. It’ll be like I never left.”

“Will you still come for the holidays?” she asked.

Smiling at her, feeling the tears form in my own eyes, I rasped, “I wouldn’t miss them for anything.”

She studied me for a long time before she stood and opened her arms. I knew what she wanted and stood, so I could give it to her. Stepping forward, I folded myself into her embrace, my arms coming around her, too.

“We love you so much, Devyn. Whatever we can do to help you in this situation, whether it’s packing or moving or anything else, we’ll do it. And you know that even after you leave, we’ll always be here for you.”

“I know you are,” I assured her, squeezing my arms tighter around her. It wasn’t the same as getting a hug from my mom or dad, but it was close.

Ten minutes later, Scott returned home, and I filled him in on my plans. His reaction was similar to Mary’s and just as I had suspected.

The only thing I had left to do was tell Theo when he got back from his secret project. Scott and Mary promised they’d wait and let me share the news with him.

And if I thought telling his parents was difficult, revealing my plans to

Theo was going to be the toughest of all.



It was exactly one week later when it happened.

I had gotten home from work, taken a shower, and skipped dinner, so that I could dive right in and start packing.

The pictures had been taken and my realtor had the listing all ready to go. I told her it was fine to list the house, but I wanted to wait until after this weekend to have the sign put on my front yard. I didn't want Theo seeing it without me talking to him first.

I was in the middle of going through everything in the kitchen when a knock came at the front door.

Theo.

I hadn't seen him in days and missed him terribly, so I hurried over to the door and whipped it open.

He was standing there with a huge smile on his face. I wanted to believe it was merely for me, but I had a feeling this had something to do with his project.

Without thinking about it, I threw my arms over his shoulders and gave him a hug. "Hey, Teddy. I've missed you."

His strong arms came around me and hugged me back as the clean, masculine scent of him surrounded me. God, I wished I could hold on to him like that forever.

"I've missed you, too, Devyn. How's it going?"

I didn't want to dive right in with my news, even though I knew it was only going to get harder the longer I waited.

I figured a distraction was in order.

"No, no, no," I started, loosening my hold on him and stepping back to allow him to come inside. After closing the front door, I said, "I want to know about this project. Can you finally tell me about it?"

"I can."

I stared at him, waiting for him to reveal whatever it was. When he said nothing, I asked, "Well, what is it?"



“I think we should sit down,” he suggested.

My brows pulled together. I took in the look on his handsome face, and the creases I found there told me a different story than the one I had in my head. He was worried. Tense.

Not wanting to delay whatever this was, I led us to the living room and realized my mistake.

I had some boxes I’d already packed sitting out.

“What’s all this?” Theo asked.

“Um, well, I kind of have my own news,” I said. “But you go first.”

He shook his head. “No. No, you need to tell me what’s going on. Why do you have all these boxes here?”

I offered a sympathetic look and pressed my lips together. Theo was concerned.

“I’m selling the house.”

“No, you’re not,” he fired back. It wasn’t him telling me I couldn’t sell the house; it was him expressing his disbelief.

“I am,” I confirmed. “It went on the market this afternoon. I told my realtor I didn’t want a sign out until I had the chance to tell you about it tonight.”

Theo turned around, moved toward the couch, and sat down. Long, silent moments stretched between us as he attempted to wrap his head around the news. “Why? Where are you going to go?”

I joined him on the couch, my hand covering his clasped ones. “It’s too much house for me to handle, Theo. And I’m staying in Iris. I’m just going to move into an apartment.”

“Are you okay? Do you need financial help?” he questioned me.

I let out a laugh. Theo was obviously working and had gotten a few jobs, but he wasn’t exactly in a place where he could help solve all of my financial woes, not that I’d ever allow him to do that anyway.

“I’m okay. There’s the financial side of it, but there’s more to it than that. It’s a big house for one person. It’s a lot to take care of on my own, and every room I walk into is a reminder of my parents.”

Theo unclasped his hands and wrapped them around mine, which had been resting on top of them. All the fear I felt about the whole situation had vanished with that simple gesture.

Something moved through his eyes as he searched my face, and after a long bout of silence, he declared, “I did it.”

A crease formed between my brows. "Did what?"

"The secret project I was working on was actually an audition," he clarified. "I got the part."

Theo was an incredible actor, so I wasn't surprised to learn he'd gotten another role. "That's excellent news. What's the part?"

He swallowed hard. "It's for the lead role in a major motion picture, Devyn. I'm going to be in my first big movie."

My lips parted in shock. "Holy crap. Are you serious?"

Theo nodded.

I burst into tears and threw my arms around him. "Oh my God, I'm so happy for you. Congratulations."

He hugged me back, his embrace so warm and comforting.

When I pulled back to look at him, I couldn't stop smiling. "I'm so proud of you. This is great news, Theo."

"Devyn, there's something I have to tell you."

I tipped my head to the side and assessed him. "What's wrong?"

"I have to go out to Hollywood," he said.

"Of course, you do. You're filming a movie!"

He nodded. "This is my chance. I have to put everything I've got into this, and that means I'm not going to just be going out west for this film, Devyn. I'm moving there permanently."

In an instant, my heart sank. It felt like my entire world had imploded.

Theo was leaving.

He was leaving permanently.

"Oh," I murmured. "Right, well, I mean, that's to be expected, right?"

I was blinking my eyes rapidly, doing whatever I could not to break down into full-fledged sobs.

"Come with me," he blurted.

My head jerked back. "What?"

Theo looked around my living room at all the boxes. Then he repeated, "Come with me. You're selling this house, and you don't know where you're going to go yet. We can get a place together out there."

He wasn't serious.

He couldn't be serious.

"Theo, I have a job."

"They have those in California, too," he reasoned.

Of course, they did.

They also had a much higher cost of living in Los Angeles than they did in Iris. If I was barely surviving now, how would I ever do it out there?

Nothing would have made me happier than to move in with Theo and be able to spend every day with him, but I knew that's not how it would be.

I'd be job hunting, and he'd be on set filming for days on end.

Plus, I loved it here. I could never live in a big city like that.

"Theo, that's not the place for me. It'll never be the place for me."

"You don't know unless you try," he stressed.

I let out an awkward laugh, mostly because I still hadn't quite come to grips with the fact that the man I'd loved for so many years was asking me to move across the country with him when we weren't even a couple.

Maybe if we'd been that, maybe if there was something more between us, I might have seriously considered it.

I couldn't.

"I can't," I rasped.

Disappointed, he nodded his understanding.

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"Right after Thanksgiving."

"Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah."

That was barely any time at all.

Inside, my heart was breaking, but I knew Theo had wanted this his whole life. I smiled at him and said, "We've got to pack a lot of fun into a very short time."

I could see a million thoughts running through his mind, but Theo didn't share whatever they were. Instead, he declared, "Well, then we better get your house packed up, so we've got time for some fun."

"Did you have dinner yet?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Let's eat first. Then we'll pack."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

With that, I ignored all the devastating emotions moving through me and did my best to focus on the moment. Theo was here right now, and I wanted to soak up all the time I had left with him.

---

## SEVEN

---

### *Theo*

There was nothing quite like the Thanksgiving holiday to put things into perspective.

I woke up this morning, like many over the last couple of weeks, contemplating the days and weeks ahead of me.

I couldn't remember a time in my life when I was at such odds about anything. So much was happening, and it left me feeling a range of conflicting emotions.

Happiness, gratitude, and excitement on the one hand, and sadness, confusion, and worry on the other.

I'd gotten that call about my audition, how well it had gone, and the offer for the role in my first major motion picture. I was over the moon about it. Having the opportunity to not only act in such a large-scale production but for it to be one of the leading roles was beyond my wildest expectations. It had been everything I'd ever wanted.

So, there was no way I couldn't feel happy, grateful, or excited about the opportunity to live out my dream.

But the euphoria I'd been feeling started to fade when I visited Devyn and had to tell her the truth.

Unsurprisingly, she was beyond supportive and super proud of me. I expected nothing less from her. If the roles had been reversed, I would have been the same exact way for her.

The negative emotions I'd been experiencing for days now had been the result of coming to terms with a number of things.

First and foremost, while I knew I was going to be moving out west permanently and hadn't initially given it a second thought, it wasn't until I saw Devyn that reality set in. It was one thing to feel like my dreams were coming true, and it was something else entirely to feel like I was leaving my whole world behind in the process.

I didn't know how I was ever going to survive being away from her. Devyn had been such an important person in my life. She'd been so loving and supportive from the very beginning, and over the years, she'd become someone I knew I couldn't ever live without.

Somewhere along the line, I'd fallen in love with her. By the time I realized exactly what it was, she'd suffered the most devastating loss, and it never felt like it was the right time to tell her after that.

Once I walked into her house and saw everything being packed up, once she confessed that she was going to be selling the house, I thought it was just the sign I needed. As shocking and unsettling as that news had been, something clicked inside my head.

I was leaving, I didn't want to live without her, and she didn't have a plan for where to live. I thought it was the perfect scenario to try to convince her to make the move with me.

It felt like I'd been stabbed in the heart when she turned me down.

But as much as she'd respected and supported me, I needed to do the same for her.

Unfortunately, now it was Thanksgiving Day, and time was passing far too quickly. If nothing else, I was grateful for the fact that my mom and dad had made sure to convince Devyn to join us for the holiday. There was nobody else I would have wanted to spend the day with besides her.

I was days away from embarking on the opportunity of a lifetime.

I should have been feeling nothing but excited and eager and overwhelming gratitude. And I did. But as grateful as I was for the journey I was about to be on as well as the relationship I had with Devyn, I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't worried about how things would change between us.

The doorbell rang.

Like a warning alarm, letting me know time was running out, that sound rattled around in my brain.

She was here. It was both good and bad.

Because as each minute passed, we got closer and closer to the time I'd

have to leave her.

I opened the door and vaguely noticed what had to be a pie dish in her hands. I couldn't be certain, because I refused to take my eyes off her beautiful face.

It still blew my mind just how pretty she was. Without even trying, Devyn was remarkable. She was, quite literally, the girl next door. But she was that taken up a few notches in my opinion.

She had long, brown hair that she'd so often pulled back into a ponytail when we were younger. Somewhere along the line, she'd started wearing it down and styling it in a way that left waves in it.

Devyn started wearing makeup. Not a lot, but just enough to enhance her natural beauty. Stunning cheekbones, a heart-stopping smile, and a pair of eyes that matched the color of the cognac I'd seen my father drink on rare or special occasions.

On top of that, I often found myself trying not to stare or allow her to catch me staring at her body.

It had certainly changed a lot since we were both eight years old. She was no longer a little girl. Devyn was a young woman. She'd developed curves, and I'd wished I was immune to the sight of them.

I wasn't so lucky.

I stepped back, allowed her to come inside, and the moment I closed the door, she said, "Happy Thanksgiving, Theo."

Careful of the dish she was holding, I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tightly. "Happy Thanksgiving, Devyn."

God, I desperately wanted to hold on to her forever, and as it got closer and closer to the time for me to leave, I was finding myself more and more tempted to tell her the truth about how I felt about her.

I wanted her to know. She deserved to know.

But there was a part of me that believed she deserved to have the guy who loved her here with her. What kind of man would I be to tell her I'd fallen in love with her only to take it away from her days later?

Nothing about this was easy or fair.

Though I didn't want to, I loosened my hold on Devyn, smiled at her beautiful face, and urged her, "Come out into the kitchen. My mom has been out there all morning."

"Oh, no. Does she need help?" she asked. "I could have come over sooner to give her a hand."

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. Mom does this every year, while my dad and I kick back and relax. Usually, we’re watching football, and she’s cooking.”

“That’s not nice. You should help your mom, so she can sit and relax, too,” Devyn reasoned.

We made it to the kitchen, and before I could respond to her, Devyn made a beeline for my mom. “Happy Thanksgiving, Mary. I’m sorry I wasn’t over here sooner.”

“Oh, it’s quite alright, dear. Happy Thanksgiving to you as well. What did you bring with you?”

Devyn held up the dish in her hands and replied, “I hope you don’t mind. I brought pumpkin pie. It was my favorite dessert my mom made every year, and I hate to admit that I never learned how to make it from her. But I went through her recipes last week when I was packing, and I saw it.”

That’s when something else hit me.

This was going to be Devyn’s first big holiday without her parents. I felt awful for not recognizing that fact sooner. I was so caught up in my feelings, I hadn’t taken the time to consider how she must have been managing with all of the changes that were taking place in her life.

How could I claim to love her and not have given a second thought to how difficult this holiday season was going to be for her?

Tears filled my mom’s eyes as she tipped her head to the side. “Rhonda’s pies were some of my favorites. I’m so glad you decided to make one and bring it over today. It’ll be the perfect addition to our dessert menu.”

After my mom took the pie from her, Devyn asked, “What can I do to help?”

My mom waved her hand dismissively in the air. “Nothing. Nothing at all. I’ve got it all covered out here. But if you and Theo want to set the table together, lunch is just about ready.”

Devyn turned around to look at me. “We can do that, right?”

With her, I was convinced I could do anything. I smiled at her and nodded. “Yeah, we can.”

At that, Devyn and I got to work on setting the table for our last official holiday together before our lives changed.

We’d had a wonderful day filled with lots of love and laughs with my parents. The worries I’d been feeling for the last few days faded away as I enjoyed my time with Devyn and them, and I couldn’t have asked for a better

day with the people I loved most in the world.

But by the time I'd walked Devyn back across the street to her house that night, I was thrown right back into a mess of thoughts.

There was so much that I wanted right in front of me in the form of her, and there was a commitment I'd made to not only myself but the people who put their faith in me to film this movie.

I was eighteen years old.

Months away from turning nineteen.

I had my entire life ahead of me, and yet, I felt as though I was leaving my whole world behind me.



### *Devyn*

This was it.

The day I'd been dreading since I'd learned about it had finally arrived, and I wasn't quite sure I was going to make it through.

How was I ever going to survive this?

For the last two weeks, I'd spent every available moment I had with Theo, hoping I'd soak up enough good memories to last me until I saw him again.

Now, he was leaving.

Time had run out.

Even though I knew he'd call and come back to visit as often as he could—something he'd repeatedly told me over the last several days—the reality was nothing was going to be the same.

Our lives were changing.

It was something I always knew would happen, but I never imagined they'd change like this. I never thought we'd wind up at a place where we'd have to say goodbye to one another.

Of course, I knew it wasn't as though I'd never see him again. This wasn't so permanent that we were saying goodbye forever. But that didn't



make it any less painful.

The days we had with one another ever since he'd broken the news to me had dwindled so fast, and I hated it.

I wanted more time with him.

I *needed* more time with him.

Humor hadn't exactly been my forte, but telling myself that felt like one big joke.

Because I didn't just want or need more time with Theo before he left. I never wanted him to go at all.

Obviously, I'd never tell him that.

As his best friend, it was my job to support and encourage him, and I think I'd done an okay job of that.

I talked extensively with him about his plans, the movie, and what I planned to do when it came out in theaters.

My financial situation wouldn't matter at that point. Whatever it took, I was going to see that movie. Repeatedly.

As I watched him look at me from a few feet away, I couldn't bring myself to go to him. Somewhere, deep in the darkest recesses of my mind, I'd convinced myself that if I never said goodbye to him, Theo wouldn't leave.

With the way he was looking at me, it was evident Theo knew exactly what was going through my mind.

"You have to come over here and say goodbye to me, Devyn," he said, his voice a deep rasp.

After pressing my lips together and rapidly blinking my eyes, I replied quietly, "I don't think I can."

Something softened in his features, a sympathetic look washing over his face. Understanding he was going to have to be the one to do this, Theo walked in my direction. I stared at him for a long time when he was just inches away from me, until I finally threw my arms over his shoulders and held on like my life depended on it.

"I'm going to miss you so much," I croaked.

I hadn't wanted to cry, but it was useless to try to stop myself.

"Why do you think I've been begging you to come with me?" Theo returned, his arms holding me tighter than they ever had before. His body felt so hard and strong against mine, and I wished it was powerful enough to take away the pain I felt in my heart.

"I know, but I can't just pack up and move across the country," I told

him. "L.A. is not my scene. I love it here in Iris. I've always loved Iris. And as much as I'll miss you, I'm never leaving this place."

Theo had gone to extraordinary lengths to try to convince me to join him on this adventure, but I couldn't.

Not only did I have the reasons I'd just given him, but I wholeheartedly believed that Theo needed to do this on his own. This was his dream, and I wanted him to live it. I'd miss him. God, I'd miss him. But it wasn't my journey to take.

If I was lucky, maybe he'd make his way back to me one day.

"I think I'm going to come back after this film," he said.

My body tensed, and I jerked my head back, so I could look at him. "What?"

He smiled and explained, "When you wouldn't accept my invitation to join me, I started doing a lot of thinking. And I'm pretty sure I can make it happen. I'll come back to Iris when I'm not filming. This can be my permanent residence, and I'll only fly out when I've got work obligations."

I reached my hand up to the side of his face and cupped his cheek. It wasn't something I'd ever done before, but this moment was too huge not to give myself the chance to do some of the things I'd wanted to do with him.

Stroking my thumb along the skin on his cheek, I asked, "Have you ever seen yourself act?"

"What? What are you talking about?" he questioned me.

My eyes searching his face, I smiled at him. "You're an incredible actor, Theo. Once this film comes out, probably even before, you're going to have so many movies lined up, you won't know what to do with yourself."

He tipped his head to one side and eyed me curiously. "Don't you want me to come back? Won't you miss me?"

I moved my hand from the side of his face and slid it around the back of his neck. After squeezing him there, I answered, "You know I want you to come back. And I just said how much I'm going to miss you. But I have to be realistic about this, too."

"I'm being serious," he insisted.

"I understand your intentions, Theo, and I wholeheartedly believe you're being honest about your desire to come back and live this life where you fly back and forth all the time. But this is your career; it's important, and I know how good you are. You're going to be busy, and I can't wait to see all that you accomplish. In the same breath, I won't give myself false hope. I'll

treasure every visit you make. You know that. But I won't get my hopes up for a return to the life we've had for so many years."

Whether or not he knew what I'd just said to be the truth before I even said it was unknown, and I hated the look I put on his face in saying it. But I had to do it. Not just for myself, but for Theo, too.

He was the kind of guy who'd stress himself out over the fact that he couldn't make it back with the frequency I knew he wanted to promise, and I didn't want that for him. I wanted him to go on, live his dreams, and be successful. I wanted the very best for him, even if it meant I had to torture myself by letting go of him in the process.

It didn't mean that I didn't want him in my life.

Quite the opposite, actually.

But I wouldn't be that selfish. I wouldn't allow him to take himself away from doing the one thing he'd wanted to do for as long as I could remember.

Obviously, I'd hated the mere thought of being so far away from him. Ever since he'd told me about the audition and the move, I felt like I'd been walking around with a heaviness in my chest. An ache that would never be eased. A hole that would never be filled.

It was excruciating.

There was no question I understood devastation and loss. It hadn't even been a full year since I experienced the worst kind of loss.

But somehow, the devastation I suffered when I lost my parents didn't compare to this. What I felt didn't make their loss any less painful. I still had days that had me struggling to want to get out of bed when I thought about them, or when a special occasion arose.

This was different.

Losing Theo like this felt like an even greater loss.

Because he would still be here on Earth, living and breathing, and he wouldn't be with me. If ever I'd felt a moment of regret, this was it.

There was so much I should have done differently, so many things I should have said before we arrived at that point.

I couldn't do it now, though. Not when he was going to walk out that door at any minute, leaving me behind and changing our lives forever.

It'd only cause us both more heartache.

I couldn't do that to myself.

I couldn't do that to him.

But in a cruel twist of fate I hadn't been anticipating, Theo did something

awful next. While I was struggling, wondering how I'd survive without him and wishing I'd done something different a long time ago, knowing I'd have to keep all that I felt about him to myself, Theo didn't seem to be feeling as noble.

"I have to do something," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling curious.

A knock came at my front door, pulling Theo out of his intense focus on my face. He twisted his neck in the opposite direction, looked back, and saw his mom there.

Her eyes focused on her son, and she said, "We're ready when you are."

With a nod, he replied, "I'll be right there."

Mary gave us both one last look and departed, leaving us alone once again.

Theo returned his attention to me, his eyes searching my face.

"What did you need to do?" I asked.

Theo had one hand resting gently on my hip and the other on top of my shoulder. At my question, he took a step closer and lifted his hand that had been on my shoulder to the side of my face.

The back of his pointer finger stroked gently down my cheek, the tenderest of touches he'd ever bestowed upon me.

"I can't leave here without doing this just one time."

His voice was just barely a touch over a whisper, and I was so distracted by the feel of his finger on my face and the confusion I was experiencing over the words he said that I never saw it coming.

Before I knew it, Theo had gently brushed his lips against mine. Soft. Sweet. So very tender.

My knees were immediately weak, and somehow, Theo knew. He slid his hand from my hip to around my waist, holding me upright and close to his body.

Then his hand at the side of my face drifted back into my hair and settled at the base of my skull just as he captured my lips in a kiss.

A kiss.

Theo was kissing me.

The guy I'd fallen in love with was giving me my first kiss just seconds before he was going to walk out of the door to start his new life.

It was wonderful and devastating all at the same time.

His lips were soft, and while I never believed it was possible to feel

anything other than the physical touch of a kiss, in that moment, I was proven wrong. There was something so much deeper there.

Did he feel it, too? Or, was it because I loved him?

When he pulled his lips away and rested his forehead against mine, he tightened his hold around my waist and pressed his fingers firmly into the back of my skull.

For several moments, he said nothing.

I was too stunned to speak.

Then he lifted his head from mine, searched my face, and said, “I love you, Devyn, and I’m going to miss you like crazy.”

Before I could even begin to think about processing that, he touched his lips to my forehead, gave me one final squeeze, and turned around to walk out.

I stood there, unmoving, for minutes afterward.

It was days later when I still hadn’t wrapped my head around the kiss he’d given me or the words he’d said, but there was one thing that became abundantly clear to me.

I’d officially lost it all.

My parents months ago.

Theo, that night.

And three weeks later, the house I grew up in, because it sold.

---

## EIGHT

---

*Devyn*  
*Six years later*

“I’ll see you next week, Ms. Lopez.”

“Thank you for doing such a wonderful job again, Devyn. Have a nice weekend.”

I walked out of Ms. Lopez’s home, a piece of homemade crumb cake in my hand, and made my way to my car.

Ms. Lopez was one of my nicest clients. While her home was on the smaller side and didn’t require a deep level of cleaning like some of my other clients’ homes did, I loved going to her place every week, because she always had a sweet treat waiting for me when I finished. As tight as things were for me in the financial sense, which meant that I should have been searching for a bigger job to do instead of cleaning Ms. Lopez’s place, having her desserts was one of the simple pleasures in my life.

As someone who knew how important it was to hang on to the few enjoyable things she had left in her life, I refused to give up Ms. Lopez’s desserts.

Plus, at her age, she really needed my help. There were just some things that an eighty-four-year-old woman shouldn’t be doing to maintain her household.

So, I did it for her.

And while she did pay me with money, I always got a tip in the form of desserts.

This week was her homemade crumb cake.

After getting in behind the wheel and turning on my car, I unwrapped the cake and smiled. It was rare for me to ever wait until I was home to eat whatever she'd given me. Instead, I usually took my first bite before I even drove away from her place.

Today was no different.

That was partly because I would have done it anyway, but mostly because this would be the first of at least two pieces of cake I'd eat today.

Now that I'd finished up cleaning Ms. Lopez's house—she was my only client on Saturdays, and her place was cleaned first thing in the morning—I was going to head home to shower, change, and get ready. I was meeting Mary this afternoon to celebrate her birthday with her. Yesterday was her actual birthday, but since I'd had a full schedule, we planned to get together today instead.

Mary and I had remained in touch over the last six years. I didn't see or talk to her every day, but I usually called her at least once a week to check in. We'd chat for a bit, and occasionally, we'd get together for lunch out, or she'd invite me over for dinner with her and Scott.

I always tried to go whenever they invited me.

I loved them dearly, and I missed not seeing them every day after I'd moved into my own apartment.

Not staying in contact with them wasn't an option, even if it was difficult to do sometimes.

Just as I popped the last bite of the delicious crumb cake into my mouth, I took off. And on my way home, as I often did, I thought about where I'd wound up.

Life hadn't exactly turned out anything like I had expected. The plans I'd made for myself never came to fruition.

After my parents' house sold six years ago, I found an apartment and was doing all the right things to get myself on track to pursue my dreams. For a long while, things were going great. Well, maybe not exactly great, but in comparison to where I was now from a financial standpoint, it was the best I'd been since graduating from high school.

I'd assumed I was well on my way to making things happen for myself, and I was prepared to work hard, knowing that even if they didn't happen in the time frame I had wanted, I was eventually going to get there.

But it seemed that from the day my parents had died, I'd been blessed with more negative moments than I cared to admit.

Car problems always seemed to be my biggest issue. Every few months, there was something else that would stop working on the car. I needed a new one, but I really couldn't afford it.

But the car problems almost paled in comparison to the emergency dental work I'd needed to get done.

Add all of that to the steadily increasing credit card debt that had been hanging over my head, and it was safe to say I experienced more than my fair share of costly incidences.

Those were the things that sort of happened out of nowhere and always put a damper on things for me. I tried to focus on those when I thought about where my life was, because I didn't want to think about any of the choices I'd made that hadn't exactly been very wise.

Sadly, culinary school never happened, not even when I left the customer service job a couple of years ago and started the cleaning business full time. For a while, I'd been doing both, the cleaning business being more of a side hustle than anything else. But eventually, I grew my client base and had enough referrals coming in that I was able to leave the customer service job.

In the end, I'd wound up making more money when I freed up my schedule and only cleaned, even if it wasn't a whole lot more. On the bright side, I was only working one job, and I had a bit more free time on my hands, which was nice.

And now I managed to make enough to pay my bills while saving up just enough for special occasions like celebrating Mary's birthday by taking her out to lunch and baking her a cake.

No sooner did I pull up at my apartment and make my way inside when my phone dinged, indicating I'd received a text.

I really hoped Mary didn't need to cancel. I hadn't seen her in a few weeks, and I'd been looking forward to this lunch with her all week long.

While I made my way toward my bedroom, so I could dump my purse, get undressed, and hop in the shower, I pulled out my phone.

Fortunately, it wasn't Mary texting to cancel plans with me.

The name I saw on the display was one that had me feeling a mix of emotions.

Theo.

With a part of me always craving any little scrap of him I could get, I slid my finger across the screen and opened our text chain. As was unsurprising, it was the other part of me that started wishing I hadn't.



On my screen was something I frequently got from Theo when he sent texts. It was almost always a picture with a few words of text.

This one was no different.

It was a photo of Theo on set for his new movie, and he wasn't alone in the photo. He had several of his castmates posing for the shot with him.

Theo had good intentions. I knew that. He only ever wanted to remain in contact with me and keep me involved in his life the best way he seemed to know how. But that didn't change the fact that it stung sometimes.

It wasn't that I didn't want to know what was happening in his life. In fact, I often found it exciting to get the latest scoop on upcoming films—he knew he could trust that I wouldn't leak anything to anyone.

But it hurt.

Missing him so much, seeing him with all of his new friends, I often felt the sting of jealousy. His costars and celebrity friends had all the pieces of him now that I didn't.

Along with the picture he'd just sent was a single sentence.

THEO

Today is day one of filming for the next film in the series.

Just as I told him would be the case before he first left here six years ago, Theo was an incredible actor, one of the best in the business. So, it was no surprise to me when he'd had dozens of offers on the table for a variety of projects. He was in his glory, doing exceptionally well, and I couldn't have been prouder of him. Especially when he won his first award. Then his second, third, fourth, and fifth.

It seemed that every year he made a movie, he was almost always guaranteed an award for the role he played in it.

His latest work landed him the lead role in one of the biggest movie franchises ever to hit the box office. He'd already garnered so much notoriety in his career, and it was this role in this franchise that took him to a level that even I hadn't anticipated. Considering I always believed the sky was the limit for him, that was saying something.

I tapped on the photo, zoomed in on his face, and stroked my finger down the side of his cheek, wishing it was the real thing.

When the emotions I felt got to be too much, I clicked the phone off, tossed it onto my bed, and made my way to the shower.

I told myself I needed to go to meet up with his mom, so I couldn't get

involved in a text conversation right now. Besides, he had to work anyway, so it was better for me to wait.

As I stood beneath the spray, hot water raining down on me, I forced myself to ignore the urge that one small part of me felt to respond immediately, and I told myself what I always did.

Those pictures from Theo were a reminder of the stark contrast between our lives. They served to make just how far apart we'd grown more and more apparent.

Recognizing that, I finished in the shower, got myself ready, grabbed the cake I'd made, and was out the door in a flash.

Before I knew it, I was standing in Mary's kitchen, in the same house she'd been in all these years, and my arms were wrapped around her. "Happy Birthday, Mary."

Unsurprisingly, Mary squeezed me tightly. "Thank you, Devyn. You have no idea how much I've been looking forward to seeing you today."

When she loosened her hold and stepped back, I insisted, "It was the same for me with you. Are you all set to go?"

She nodded. "I've been ready for a while now."

With that, the two of us were out the door and on our way to lunch. On the drive there, she told me all about her day yesterday. Scott had taken the day off from work, and they'd spent the day together, just the two of them.

With all that she'd shared, it was no surprise the drive to the restaurant felt like it took only a matter of minutes.

Once we were seated and had made our lunch selections, Mary asked, "So, how's everything going with you lately? How was your week?"

I smiled at her and offered a slight nod. "Things are great. It was a busy week, considering I had two additional clients that only opt for monthly cleanings in my schedule. But I always say I prefer to be busy over the alternative."

"That's for sure."

While I never wanted to come right out and lie to Mary's face, I certainly didn't share just how strained things had been for me, financially speaking. The last thing I wanted was for her to feel any sort of guilt or pity for me. And I definitely didn't want her saying a word about me or my situation to Theo.

"Guess what?"

"What?"

I reached into my purse and pulled out my phone as I said, “I don’t know if he sent you the same one, but I got a picture from Theo earlier. They’re starting filming for the next movie today.”

Once I pulled up the photo, I held the phone out to her. She took it from me, inspected it, and smiled.

“He seems happy, doesn’t he?”

The tone of her voice indicated she was more concerned for him than anything, and I thought that was strange. “Of course. Don’t you think so?”

She shrugged. “I know he loves what he does, but sometimes I wonder if he’s truly happy with his life.”

When she put it like that, I had to stop and think for a bit. When it came to his career, there was no question about it. Theo was over the moon. But when it came to his personal life, I think Theo struggled quite a bit initially. It wasn’t the easiest transition for him, but I thought he eventually adjusted well to it. From what I’d seen more recently, he was always in a great mood.

Then again, it was possible Theo showed me what he did, and perhaps his mom saw something else.

“I think he’s happy. Has he said something that makes you concerned?” I asked.

Shaking her head, she replied, “No. I’m just looking at it from a mother’s perspective, I guess. Maybe this is more about what I want for him and less about how he actually feels.”

“But you’re happy for him, Mary,” I reasoned, not understanding what she was getting at. “Don’t forget I saw all those photos from when you attended the Golden Globes as his guest two years ago. You were stunning, and I don’t think I ever saw you looking so happy.”

“I did look incredible, didn’t I?” she countered.

I giggled just as our server brought over our drinks.

When he walked away, Mary said, “In all seriousness, it’s just this gut feeling I have about him.”

“What do you mean?” I pressed.

Her eyes roamed over my face for a long time before she answered, “For so many years, I thought I knew how things would work out for him. I know he’s realized part of his dream, but I’m convinced there’s another part he’s missing. There’s been no steady companionship in his life all this time he’s been gone.”

I sat back in my seat, understanding finally dawning.

This was really not a conversation I wanted to have with Mary. It was difficult enough for me to think about on my own.

The truth was, I had hoped for a long time that something would come from the kiss that Theo had given me before he left for California. But by the time he came back to Iris for the first time, which wasn't until the following Thanksgiving for just a few days, it was almost as though it hadn't ever happened.

Theo hadn't done anything mean or upsetting to me when he came back. In fact, he'd been the same as he always had with me. But he never mentioned that kiss. He never brought up the words he'd said to me that day.

I wondered if he'd forgotten about all of it. That was the only explanation I could come up with, and for that reason, I couldn't bring myself to say a word. God, that would have been mortifying.

Especially when I had a pretty good idea as to why he'd forgotten about what he'd done that day. Theo had moved on.

He never came right out and said anything to me—even Mary hadn't gotten word on an official girlfriend—but I wasn't an idiot. He was living the life.

I'd seen countless photos of him either going to functions or just out in public with so many different Hollywood celebrities. Female celebrities.

I'd never be able to compete.

I'd never compare.

They were in couture, while I rotated through the same three pairs of crappy jeans.

He'd moved on, and I had no choice but to do the same.

God, I'd never forget the look on Mary's face when she'd learned about my first—and only—boyfriend. She was devastated. That guy was my ex-boyfriend now, and I'd gone on a handful of dates since then, but nothing ever panned out.

The bottom line was that Theo and I had grown apart. Even though I knew we'd both be there for each other in a heartbeat if a situation ever called for it, we weren't the same people we were when we were fourteen or fifteen.

Well, I knew I'd be there for him. I couldn't say if Theo would ever make it back here for me.

We didn't see each other every day. We didn't even talk every week.

He might have communicated over the phone with me every few months,

but it had been a very long time since he'd come home.

When it came to Mary, I just didn't think she understood the dynamics of his life right now. Her son was a young guy, living the life he did, and he likely had a bevy of women at his disposal. She thought he didn't have any companionship, but he probably had more than he knew what to do with.

And since I loved Mary, no matter how hard it was for me to talk about it, I couldn't just ignore her. So, I did my best to ease her concerns.

"Did you just see that picture I showed you that he sent to me?" I asked her. When she nodded, I continued, "He's happy, Mary. He's got friends. And even if he's not seriously dating anyone, I don't think he's starved for affection."

She cocked an eyebrow and sent a look my way that indicated she wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of her son having random hookups. It pained me just as much, but we both had to be realistic.

"I know it's probably not what you want to hear. I get it. But he's a young guy, living a glamorous life, and he's surrounded by beautiful women."

"That's just all the stuff on the surface," she retorted. "None of that matters when it all boils down."

I knew that. Of course, I did.

But I wasn't the one she needed to convince of that.

And if I was being honest, I couldn't say I thought Theo felt that way, either. Unfortunately, it was just as I told her. He was living the life. A life that neither of us would ever truly understand or comprehend.

Wanting to ease her worries about her son's mindset, I thought it was best to give her all the good I could muster up.

"If and when he's ready for something meaningful with someone, I'm sure he'll easily be able to make it happen," I assured her. "He's handsome and kind and talented and so very wonderful. You raised an exceptional man, Mary. When the time comes that he's ready, I have no doubt he'll have his pick of the litter."

Her eyes got wet before she rasped, "I just hope he picks the right one."

Thankfully, I didn't need to respond to that, because our server returned with our lunches. And at that point, we moved away from the subject of Theo's love life. I was grateful for the reprieve, eager to discuss anything else.

Afterward, we went back to her house and had cake.

And later that night, when I finally crawled into my bed, I pulled out my

phone and sent a response to Theo.

DEVYN

I hope it went well today. I can't wait to see you in the next film.

Part of me wanted to be more honest than that and tell him I couldn't wait to see him in person.

But I didn't.

I'd been on a very unlucky streak, as it was. There was no need to make myself feel worse than I already did.

The next several years proved that I wasn't done being unlucky. In fact, I'd yet to experience the worst of it.

---

# NINE

---

**Theo**  
*Present Day*

Heart racing. Gut twisting. Chest aching.

There wasn't a single part of my body that hadn't been affected. It had been a couple of hours since my mom called to tell me about Devyn, and I could confidently say I'd never felt so terrorized and traumatized in my entire life.

Every bone in my body was filled with dread. Fear.

And the words she'd said to me were on repeat in my mind.

*She's alive, but they don't know if she's going to make it.*

I felt like I was crawling out of my skin over the worry I felt for her.

After receiving that call from my mom, I wasted not a single minute. Even with my prompt response, it still felt as though it was taking too long to get there, to get to her.

No matter that I'd gotten on the plane and was up in the air at what could only be described as the very definition of immediate, too much time had passed. I'd finally made it back to Tennessee, back to Iris, and I was currently racing to the hospital.

My stomach was in knots.

My palms were sweating.

Devyn.

My sweet Devyn was in the hospital, and the last thing I knew was that the doctors were unsure if she was going to survive.

If something happened to her, if she didn't make it, I was going to lose

my mind.

Throughout the entire plane ride back to Tennessee, my mind played the cruelest of tricks on me, tormenting me with questions to which I couldn't seem to find any good answers. What were the last words I'd verbally spoken to her? When was the last time I'd seen her? Could I remember what it was like to hold her in my arms? What would I do if I never got the chance to do any of that again?

I'd spent the whole flight bargaining, promising to do better by her if her life would be spared.

She couldn't die.

She just couldn't.

I'd never survive losing her.

Though it had taken entirely too long in my book, I finally made it to the hospital. At some point during my flight, my mom had texted me the details of where I could find Devyn in the hospital. She'd given me the floor and room number, so the second I walked through the doors, I made a beeline for the elevators, ignoring anything and anyone in my path.

No sooner had the doors closed and the elevator started moving, I told myself I should have taken the stairs. This was going too slowly, and there was a risk of the elevator getting stuck, ensuring I might not be able to see Devyn at all.

In my state, rational thoughts seemed to have left the building. I had a feeling I'd better get used to that, too, because until Devyn was out of the woods, I'd never be able to calm down.

As it was, I was terrified I'd arrive just in time to learn I was too late.

The elevator finally stopped, and the doors slid open. I stepped off, feeling as focused and determined as a man on a mission to save the world.

But that feeling was gone the moment I stepped into Devyn's room. I was vaguely aware of the fact that my mom had turned her head in my direction, but I didn't look at her. I couldn't peel my eyes away from the woman in the hospital bed.

She was covered.

Head to toe, the bandages, tubes, and gauze were the best of what I saw. Because if it wasn't that, it was the bruising, blood, and swelling I was confronted with instead.

What scared me about it all was knowing what I knew about her condition. They didn't know if she was going to survive. That meant, even if



it killed me to look at it, I couldn't ignore what was staring me in the face. As bad as the physical injuries were on the exterior, things had to be far worse on the inside.

My knees felt weak; it was a wonder I could remain standing.

I swallowed hard, sick at the thought of all the pain she must have been in, and I finally stepped forward.

When I made it to the side of her bed, seeing her up close and in person for the first time in far too long, I wanted to kick my own ass. Nothing about what I was seeing looked like the woman I knew. Between the bandages, bruising, and swelling, if someone hadn't told me this was her, I wouldn't have known.

"Jesus," I whispered. Unable to stop it, my hand instinctively reached out to hers. Without taking my eyes off of her, I asked my mom, "Is she going to be alright?"

"I hope so. It's still a waiting game," she replied quietly, the strain in her voice undeniable.

This was killing her probably just as much as it was killing me.

"How bad are her injuries?" I pressed, continuing to stare at Devyn in disbelief.

"Horrific."

For the first time since I entered the room, I tore my attention away from Devyn and looked at my mom. "What are they?"

Tears welled in my mother's eyes, an indication of just how awful things were. I tried to brace myself for what she was going to say, but nothing could have prepared me for it.

Nothing.

"She's obviously got a lot of visible swelling and bruising. A couple of her ribs are significantly bruised, and two are fractured. But the worst of her injuries is a severe concussion and a ruptured spleen. She had to be taken in for emergency surgery when she arrived, so they could stop the internal bleeding. Theo, they said she lost a lot of blood."

Don't react.

Don't react.

Don't react.

If I gave in to what I was feeling after hearing all of that, there was no question they'd have to call security to escort me out of the building and off the premises.

“Is she in pain? Can she feel any of that?” I pressed, feeling utterly helpless.

Shaking her head, my mom answered, “I don’t think so. She’s heavily sedated, and I believe the doctors said they’re going to keep her that way to give her some time to heal. They don’t want her upset or agitated, so it’s better to give her the time to rest.”

Given that they didn’t know if she’d survive, I’d prefer to have her upset. At least then I’d know that she was going to make it.

“What happened? Was it a bad car accident? Was anyone else involved?”

I knew I was throwing far too many questions at my mom than was likely reasonable, but I couldn’t help myself. The more she told me, the less answers I felt I had. Every bit of information I’d been given prompted a new set of questions, and I desperately needed to know it all.

“Maybe we should step outside,” my mom suggested.

I shook my head. “I’m not leaving her. What if something happens? What if she wakes up?”

Something softened in my mom’s expression. “Theo, she’s not going to wake up now. I just told you she’s heavily sedated.”

“Okay, but the worst could happen,” I reasoned. “I’ll never forgive myself if something happens when I’m not here with her.”

Any sympathy my mom had for the way I was feeling flew out the window. She stood, her hand still wrapped around Devyn’s, and kept her eyes pinned on me. It was in that way that only mothers could do, and with just that single look, I knew I was in for it.

“Theo McCormick, if you want to know what happened, how it happened, you will walk out of this room with me, and go grab a cup of coffee.”

The thought of sucking back a cup of coffee right now made me sick, but something in the way my mother was looking at me, ordering me out of the room, and the tone of her voice had me releasing my hold on Devyn’s hand and moving toward the door.

My mom followed.

She didn’t speak as we moved toward the elevator.

She remained silent as we stepped on and rode down.

She didn’t even give me an indication of what was going through her mind as we made our way to the cafeteria and grabbed a cup of coffee.

Only when she forced me to sit down at a table in the corner of the room

did she speak. And when she did, I started to understand that things weren't at all like I had imagined.

"Before I tell you anything, I need you to remember that you're here now, and you need to remain in this hospital with Devyn," she said.

"I know that, Mom."

She shook her head. "No, Theo, I don't think you understand. I'm going to tell you something, and when I do, you aren't going to like it. You need to keep yourself together, and you need to do it, because *when* Devyn gets through this and opens her eyes for the first time, she better see your face."

Something unwelcome and cold seeped into my veins, my stomach clenching painfully. This had all been about preparation.

My mom didn't want to just get out of Devyn's room to go for a walk and grab a coffee. She did it for me, because whatever she was about to tell me wasn't going to be good.

When I said nothing, feeling the uncomfortable burn in my chest, my mom demanded, "Promise me you're going to keep your shit together."

Swearing.

Mary McCormick didn't curse.

She found other ways to communicate whatever she was feeling, but cursing wasn't one of them. Hearing her make that demand the way she had, it was a wonder I didn't lose control before she gave me the truth.

"I promise," I rasped.

For several long moments, my mom's eyes searched my face. I didn't know if she was trying to work out whether I was being honest and would keep my word, or if she wanted to be sure I was ready to hear whatever she was about to say.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she said, "Devyn wasn't in a car accident."

My brows pulled together. I was immediately confused, because the injuries she had could only have come from something as traumatic as a very bad car accident.

Before my mom said another word, my mind started scrambling for answers. But tiny little pieces of this puzzle were starting to fall into place. She'd brought me here, out of Devyn's room, away from other patients I might have disturbed, and she'd just revealed Devyn wasn't in a car accident. She believed I was going to have a bad reaction.

My body grew more and more tense with each second that passed.

And then something else hit me. “Where’s Dad?”

“Theo, I need you to listen to me,” she said.

“What’s going on? What happened to Devyn, and why isn’t Dad here with you? With her?”

It was as though I was being turned inside out, the emotions I’d been trying to keep bottled up this entire time needing to be released.

Stern eyes cut to me. “Pull yourself together.”

In an instant, I reined it all in. I needed answers, something I knew I wouldn’t get if I didn’t find a way to at least appear calm and collected.

I was an actor. I could pretend.

When my mother was convinced I had a handle on my emotions, she said, “I’ll explain where your father is in a minute. Right now, I want you to hear the truth about Devyn.”

“Okay. Okay, I’m calm,” I assured her.

“Devyn was attacked outside the movie theater.”

“Attacked?”

My mom nodded. “Yes.”

“What happened?” I pressed.

“I don’t know many details. I’ve been informed that she was out in the parking lot, someone inside the theater saw what was happening, and they called the police. It was more than one person who attacked her.”

I was going to vomit.

Devyn had suffered all the injuries she had from being beaten in the parking lot of a movie theater by more than one individual.

“Were they arrested?” I asked.

“That’s why your father’s not here. He’s down at the police station, attempting to get some information about what happened and what’s being done to locate the men responsible,” my mom explained.

“Men?” I repeated. “You’re telling me there are multiple grown men who put their hands on her?”

“From what I understand at this point, yes,” she confirmed.

The idea that anyone could have assaulted her was bad enough, but to know that she’d suffered a beating from more than one adult male was devastating. No wonder they weren’t sure if she’d survive.

“Theo, there’s more.”

All I felt was devastation and despair. I didn’t think I could handle anything else. But this was about Devyn, and I needed to know everything.

“What else is there?” I asked.

“She wasn’t alone.”

“What?”

“Devyn wasn’t the only person who was attacked last night. She had been at the theater with her boyfriend.”

My eyes narrowed. “Is he responsible? Did he do this to her?”

The silence stretched between us as my mom’s eyes stared into mine. Eventually, she revealed, “He was beaten, too. His injuries are even worse, and while the doctors won’t give me any details on the specifics of his condition, they did let something slip when they were telling me about Devyn.”

“Which is?”

“They mentioned that while she wasn’t in the clear just yet, she was at least far better off than he was. Evidently, he’s in a coma, on a vent, and has suffered a traumatic brain injury. If it looks bad for Devyn, it’s even worse for him.”

Damn.

It pained me to think about Devyn having a boyfriend at all. That had been a source of contention for me for years now, but this wasn’t the time to worry about my own feelings.

I had to consider what things were going to be like for Devyn when she got through this, when she woke up—I refused to believe that wouldn’t be the case.

Her recovery. Her care. Her emotional well-being.

“Is there anything else I need to know?” I asked my mom.

“You know everything I do now.”

For several beats, we stared at one another. “I need to go back up there to be with her.”

She nodded her understanding and said, “Go. I’ll stay here for a bit and give you some time alone with her. And I think I’ll give your father a call to see what, if anything, he’s learned about this whole mess.

“Alright.”

Though I should have stood up and walked out of the cafeteria, I didn’t. Something held me firmly in the seat across from my mom. It wasn’t until she spoke again that I realized what it was.

“She’s going to get through this, Theo. One way or another, she’s got to get through this. We can’t lose her, so you need to go up there. You need to

be with her. And you need to make sure she knows that you're here for her.”

That was it.

I needed not only the reassurance, but also the guidance my mom offered.

Because even though I might have known deep down that I'd have done everything she was saying, it was likely I would have allowed my emotions over the situation to get the best of me. Despair might have consumed me, and instead of pouring my energy into something positive—encouraging Devyn to heal and make her way back to me—I might have walked out of the hospital in search of the men responsible for putting her here.

With that, I stood, took a step forward, and bent to give my mom a kiss on the cheek. Then I walked out of the cafeteria and back toward the elevator, not caring about the looks or stares I'd gotten from the people who must have recognized me.

Minutes later, I was back in Devyn's room.

No matter what it took, I was going to see her through this.

Until she was whole and healed again, nothing else in my life mattered. Then again, I had a feeling that even after she healed, Devyn was still going to be the only important thing in my life.

---

# TEN

---

## *Devyn*

Heavy.

Groggy.

Completely disoriented.

That was the best way to describe my current physical state as I allowed my senses to take stock of my situation.

I could hear voices, but they were so far away. The sound of the occasional beep surrounded me, but it was mostly quiet, giving me no indication as to where I was.

But the smell was different.

That was almost unmistakable. Overpowering antiseptic. There was only one place I knew of that smelled like this.

Needing confirmation, I peeled my eyes open.

A white blanket and white gauze covered parts of my body. Higher up on my chest, the familiar sight of a hospital gown. Glancing down at my arm, I saw the IV in my hand.

I attempted to take in a deep breath and was met with what I could only describe as a tight, achy feeling along my sides. And weak.

God, it felt like it'd take the strength of ten men to simply lift my one arm.

But here it was. I had the proof.

I hadn't died.

My eyes remained focused on the IV as I foolishly allowed my last memories to filter through my mind. The blows. The pain. The truth. None of

it had provided me with any comfort, and all I could do was recall the distinct feeling of fear when it was happening, believing I was going to die.

Maybe I didn't know the full extent of my injuries or what day it was at this point, but at least I had survived.

Tearing my eyes away from my hand, I rolled my head to the opposite side. It felt like moving a lead weight.

But any of the physical symptoms I was experiencing were nothing compared to the emotional reaction I had the moment my eyes landed on the sight on the opposite side of the bed.

Maybe I was dead.

Maybe this wasn't real at all.

Because sitting there in the chair, eyes closed with one hand wrapped firmly around mine, was Theo.

A figment.

He had to be nothing more than that.

Maybe the assault I'd experienced had done extensive damage to my brain, and for the rest of my life, I was going to have visions of Theo dancing in my head as a means of torture, as a reminder of how much I'd lost.

And torture is precisely what it would be.

A man like him, who looked the way he did and still had a piece of my heart that nobody else ever would, there was no doubt I'd be in agony forever.

He was the picture-perfect image of a movie star. Dark hair, blue eyes, cheekbones, and a square jawline. His body was built—tall, solid, and strong. It could only be described as the physique that conjured up thoughts of superheroes.

This wasn't fair.

Because he was so much more than a handsome face and a beautiful body.

He was the first man I'd fallen in love with, my first kiss. He was kindness and compassion. He was confidence.

He was Teddy.

He was my best friend.

And he was everything.

It was those characteristics, the ones that were tucked beneath the surface of his breathtaking exterior, forcing me to reconsider.

Maybe I was still alive.



Maybe I had survived.

Perhaps this was real.

Because if all that I knew of Theo was true, there wasn't a chance he'd ever learn about what happened to me and not be right by my side until he knew I was okay.

That understanding, as comforting as it should have been, terrified me. I didn't want to face him. I didn't want him to know the truth about what my life had become. We'd spent time talking to one another over the years, he'd made a few trips home to Iris ever since he'd first left, and I'd never once let on just how dire things often felt in my life.

They weren't always bad, of course, but it was often enough that things were uncomfortable for me.

One bad stroke of luck after another had put me in a place that was so far removed from the place Theo was in. Embarrassed was all I'd ever feel.

Unless there was a way to hide it from him.

Unless I could do what I'd always done and pretend that my life was great.

Though, I wasn't sure how I'd be able to accomplish that when he would have had to have some idea as to how I wound up here. Covering up the truth about this whole situation seemed impossible.

God, my face was already burning from the mortification and humiliation I'd be confronted with.

Unwilling to risk him opening his eyes, seeing me awake, and wanting to talk about it all, I did the only thing I could do in this situation to protect myself and take some time to figure it out.

I fell back into that feeling of heaviness that had consumed me from moments before I'd opened my own eyes.

I allowed the weight of it to drag me down into what I prayed would be a peaceful slumber. One that didn't include me stepping in front of closed fists to protect a cheating boyfriend. And one that didn't include the man I'd loved my whole life from coming back home at what could only be defined as the worst possible moment.



There was no sense of time when my eyes opened for the second time.

It could have been minutes, hours, days, or weeks. Nothing indicated to me just how much time had passed.

Well, other than one thing.

I had to imagine it could have only been a few hours at most, because when I woke, I saw Theo was still there, wearing the same clothes he had been when I woke the first time.

The only difference now was that Theo wasn't sleeping. He was awake, and he was paying attention to me.

"Devyn," he rasped, the moment his eyes locked on mine.

There was the additional proof I needed. This wasn't a dream or some scenario my mind had made up to torture me.

This was real.

Because Theo had spoken only one word to me, and I felt so much move through me with just that single word.

My name.

Did he know how it made me feel every time he said it? Did he understand what it was like to have his voice be the first I heard after all that I'd been through?

I didn't know why, but I wondered if hearing his name from my lips would do the same thing to him.

"Theo," I whispered.

Apparently, I could turn his whole world upside down, too.

The second he heard his name, his hand tightened around mine, and he dropped his head forward, breaking the connection between our gazes.

"Thank God," he croaked before lifting his head again, shifting himself to the edge of the chair, and bringing both of his hands around mine. Then he used them to raise the back of my hand to his mouth. After he kissed the skin there, he pressed his forehead to the same spot and whispered something I couldn't quite make out.

I was at a loss for words, so I didn't attempt to speak. Instead, I gave myself the opportunity to come to grips with the fact that Theo was here. For the first time in so very long, he was right beside me, kissing my hand, and thanking God.

I could only imagine the stress he must have been under for him to elicit this kind of response to me saying his name.

Some time passed, the silence not uncomfortable, before Theo finally

returned his attention to my face. As his eyes searched, another thought hit me.

I knew I'd been struck in the face several times. There was no question Theo was staring at a bruised and battered face. I could only take a guess as to what he must have been thinking, and what I believed to be the truth didn't leave me with a pleasant feeling.

"You have no idea how good it is to see you with your eyes open," he shared, his voice thick with emotion.

"Theo, what—"

That was all I got out before movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. I looked in that direction and saw a woman wearing a pair of scrubs had entered the room. "You're awake," she declared, moving toward the bed. "I was just coming in to check and see if you'd made any progress."

When she came to a stop on the opposite side of the bed as Theo, she said, "I'm Ruby, and I'm one of the nurses that has been taking care of you these last few days."

Days?

It had been days since the attack?

Disbelief moved through me. I'd lost whole days of my life, days I'd never get back.

I wanted to ask questions, but I figured it was best to stick with the basics. "Hi, Ruby."

"Can you tell me your name?"

"Devyn Jade," I replied after a brief pause.

It seemed strange to me that they'd be asking such a simple question. If I'd been here for days, clearly there had to have been some severe injuries. Had something been so bad that led the nurse—and likely doctors, too—to believe I wouldn't have known my own name?

The nurse smiled brightly at me. "That's great, Devyn. And I assume you know the man sitting beside you?"

I nodded slowly. "Theo McCormick."

Unsure how it was possible, the nurse's smile grew. "You're such a lucky girl. I don't think I've worked a single shift without this guy being right by your side. I'm going to give the doctor a call and let him know you're awake. He'll want to come in and do a couple of routine tests. Okay?"

"Sure."

With that, she turned around and walked out of the room, leaving me with

the guy who'd apparently not left my side since he'd learned I was here.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do with that information. While I knew it was just the kind of guy he was, I had a difficult time with it.

Was this what it took for him to come back? And now that he was here, how long would he stay? Was he just planning to leave now that I was awake?

I was too much of a chicken to ask.

On the bright side, I wasn't left with much time to really try to come up with anything to say to him, because the nurse walked right back into the room with the doctor. "I went out, ready to call him, and he was already on his way to check on you. Devyn, this is Dr. Wheeler."

I shifted my attention to the doctor, who stepped forward with a small smile on his face. "Welcome back, Devyn. You gave us quite a scare when you arrived here at the hospital," he said. "I'd like to do a couple of simple tests now. It's all routine, but it's very important."

"Okay."

With that, Dr. Wheeler went ahead and performed a couple of tests, which all seemed to be related to my vision and memory. I thought it was strange but didn't question it. He seemed pleased by the results and asked if I had any questions. I asked about my injuries, learned I'd needed to have an emergency surgery to repair my ruptured spleen, and that I'd suffered a major concussion, bruised and fractured ribs, and significant bruising and swelling. While I'd wound up with quite a few lacerations as well, it seemed they were the injuries that would cause me the least amount of pain and hassle. They also were going to have the quickest recovery time, which led me to my next question.

"How long will I be here?" I asked.

"I don't want to make you any promises just yet; however, I'm delighted with what I'm seeing so far. I think we'll want to have you here for another two days, at a minimum. If everything keeps heading in the right direction, I hope that we'll be able to send you home at that point. If not, we'll just take it one day at a time," Dr. Wheeler replied.

I nodded my understanding.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asked.

"Maybe, but I can't think of any right now," I said. "Actually, I do have one question. When I came in, I imagine there was a man who came in at the same time. We were together at the theater, and we were both attacked."

The doctor hesitated, the look on his expression turning grim. “Yes, um —”

“Excuse me, Doctor?” Theo interrupted.

“Yes?”

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to have some time alone with Devyn,” he said. “I’m more than happy to bring her up to speed on everything.”

Theo’s request seemed rather strange to me, and what was even worse was the look of relief that washed over Dr. Wheeler’s entire expression. Tension I hadn’t even realized was being held in his shoulders was suddenly gone.

“Of course,” Dr. Wheeler replied. “Devyn, I’ll be back to check on you tomorrow, unless anything pops up between now and then. For now, you’re doing great.”

“Thank you.”

My eyes followed Dr. Wheeler and Ruby as they walked out of the room, and they remained there for a long time. Without him saying a single word, I already knew what Theo was going to tell me.

I didn’t think I was ready for it, and that was why I refused to look at him.

He wouldn’t just blurt it out, and he’d try to share it in a way that wasn’t insensitive. I appreciated that, but there was something about Theo being the one to deliver the news that I struggled with.

Despite the feelings I had about it, Theo seemed intent on addressing it.

“Devyn,” he called, his voice gentle.

I gave myself one, two, three beats before I finally looked over at him. Trepidation was written all over his face.

He shook his head slowly, the uneasiness turning to sympathy. “I don’t know all of the details. I’m not in a position where I could get specifics, but I got enough. Your boyfriend...” Theo trailed off and inhaled deeply. After blowing out that breath, he said, “His injuries were far worse than yours, which, considering how bad yours were, is saying something. Anyway, they tried. He hung on for a bit, but ultimately, I’m so sorry, Devyn, but he didn’t make it.”

He didn’t make it.

Roy didn’t survive.

I felt oddly conflicted. So many thoughts ran through my mind.

I’d put myself in harm’s way to try to protect a man who was supposed to be in love with me. I wound up with life-threatening injuries, because I

wanted to stop what was happening to the man who'd cheated on me.

And it didn't even matter.

Because he was dead.

We'd been together for less than a year. We had been in a committed relationship, and I had actually believed he might have been the guy for me.

What had I been thinking?

How could I have possibly thought that when he was busy cheating on me?

Now, he was dead, my best friend and the guy I'd loved nearly all my life had relayed that news to me, and I didn't know how to feel.

I should have been upset. I should have been distraught.

On some level, I guess I did feel as though I was in a bit of turmoil. But it wasn't for the reason it should have been.

My boyfriend died.

My boyfriend died, and I barely survived trying to protect him.

I looked away from Theo, my eyes dropping to my lap, and started quietly sobbing. Seconds passed before I felt the bed depress with Theo's weight as his arms came around me.

And though I didn't know exactly how much time had passed, I knew I stayed wrapped in Theo's arms for a long time, crying my eyes out.

I cried for so long, exhaustion finally took over.

By some miracle—maybe it was my body trying to protect my brain and heart—I eventually drifted off.

---

# ELEVEN

---

## *Devyn*

It was a strange feeling, being in a wheelchair and feeling relieved.

Today, sitting in a wheelchair meant that it was finally happening.

I was finally able to leave and go home.

After spending more time in the hospital than the doctor had initially anticipated I'd need once I woke up, he'd cleared me. It had been just over two weeks that I'd been in the hospital before I'd gotten the green light to go.

Of course, my departure from the hospital did not mean that everything was fine, and I could go about my business like nothing ever happened. If anything, I was going to be acutely aware of everything I'd gone through for quite some time, weeks at a minimum.

The doctor had given me some very strict orders to follow once I was home.

First and foremost, with the exception of a few of the cuts and bruises I'd gotten, there was nothing else on my body that had fully healed yet.

Recovering completely from the surgery I'd needed to stop the bleeding from my ruptured spleen was going to take several more weeks. I had the cracked and bruised ribs, which were expected to fully heal right around the same time as the spleen. The concussion was a matter of another week or two.

Overall, this was going to be an exercise in patience.

The worst part about it was that it all required limited physical activity and lots of rest, both physical and mental.

While that was, to some degree, all relatively self-explanatory and

expected, it didn't mean that it was ideal.

This whole situation was already a disaster of epic proportions, and I wasn't sure how I was going to follow through with the doctor's orders.

How was I supposed to do what I needed to do to rest and recuperate from the injuries I'd suffered when I needed to work? My need to do that wasn't even really about my clients, either. I could have easily called them up and told them I'd needed an emergency surgery—which was the truth—and most of them would have understood I needed the time to recuperate.

Sadly, understanding didn't pay the bills, and for someone who had plenty of those without a lot of extra money, I was going to be screwed.

There was no other way to put it. I was going to have to take some time to figure out which bills were most important and pay what I could. Maybe I'd be able to call the companies involved, explain the situation, and find some relief that way.

But none of that was my top priority right now. For today, I was merely looking forward to being out of the hospital and back in my own bed.

While the hospital staff had been wonderful and taken such good care of me, it just wasn't an ideal environment for a multitude of reasons. The biggest of those was all related to one man.

Theo.

From what I'd learned, he'd been with me since the day after the attack in the theater parking lot. Theo had been by my side, day and night.

Since I woke up, there had only been two occasions when he left me, but he didn't leave me alone. He only walked out of my room when his parents showed up to visit with me. Mary and Scott visited for a while, and Theo was only gone for a short time.

I figured he was running back to their place, grabbing a shower, and changing his clothes, because both times, he'd returned wearing a fresh set.

There was no question I'd appreciated everything they'd all done for me, but I hated learning how much this whole thing had tormented them. The last thing I had ever wanted was for my life to leak into theirs like it had and impact them so negatively.

Not that they complained.

They were fantastic about all of it.

At least, now I'd be going home and could give them all the break they deserved. Especially Theo.

I'd been a bit terrified as to how things were going to pan out between us



while I remained in the hospital, but it was easier than I had anticipated. He was very good about following the doctor's instructions. Or, technically, he was very good about making sure I followed the doctor's orders.

My television watching needed to be limited, along with any additional screen time. When it came to conversations, he kept it very lighthearted. Nothing serious or that required intense concentration.

It was almost a good thing that I was given such a strict set of instructions, because it meant that I didn't necessarily need to worry about anything getting too serious or intense with Theo.

But that time was winding down now.

Theo was taking me home, and I had to wonder if when we got there, he'd want to have a talk about something.

I wasn't sure I was prepared for that.

I'd just been wheeled down to the hospital entrance and was waiting patiently for Theo to pull up. He'd come downstairs ahead of me, wanting to make sure he could get a head start, so I wouldn't be waiting around for him.

The next thing I knew, a huge SUV—one that looked brand spankin' new—pulled up. A moment later, Theo exited the vehicle, rounded it, and opened the passenger side door. I was wheeled closer to it, and once I came to a stop, I stood and reached out.

Theo took my hand in his, the other hand coming to rest at the small of my back. Though I knew he was just trying to help and make sure I didn't get injured any worse than I already was, my mind couldn't ignore the way my body reacted to the intimate touch, even if he hadn't intended for it to be as such.

After helping me inside, Theo closed my door and rounded the front to get in on the opposite side. As soon as he was inside, I rattled off my address to him, and explained the precise location of my apartment.

Theo nodded his understanding, but several minutes after we started driving, I realized he was going in the wrong direction.

"This isn't the right way," I told him.

"Just relax, Devyn. We're not going to your place," he replied.

My brows pulled together as I kept my focus on his profile. "Where are you taking me?"

He smiled. "We'll be there in a few minutes. I'd rather show it to you."

Realizing I wasn't going to get anywhere with questions and still lacking energy, I figured it was best to just wait.

Before I knew it, Theo had slowed down and turned into a driveway. It seemed to go on forever, until a home finally came into view.

No.

Not a home.

A mansion.

“What is this place?” I asked, my mind feeling boggled.

Only when we came to a stop, and he put the car in park, did Theo look over at me and respond. “It’s my house.”

“What? I didn’t know you had a place here.”

“That’s because I bought it a week ago,” he explained.

“You bought it a week ago,” I repeated.

He nodded.

I tore my attention away from him for a moment, twisted my neck, and looked out the window. My eyes roamed over the exterior of the home. It was exceptionally gorgeous. It was huge.

Focusing my gaze back on his, I said, “I don’t understand. What made you buy a house here?”

“You needed a comfortable place to recuperate,” he announced, his voice nonchalant.

Was he kidding me?

He was acting like it was no big deal.

“I’m sorry. What?”

Theo’s features softened. “Your body is healing from something traumatic, Devyn. You need a place to do that, so I made sure I had one where that could happen.”

“I have an apartment.”

“From what I recall, that’s a one-bedroom, right?”

I jerked my chin down. “Yeah.”

“So, were you planning on having me join you in your bed, or were you going to make me sleep on the couch?” he countered.

I ignored the way my body wanted to react to the thought of him joining me in bed and asked, “Why would you be doing either one of those?”

“Did you have someone else lined up to come and take care of you?”

I moved my head back and forth. “No.”

He grinned. “There’s your answer.”

Before I could respond, he was out of the car and making his way around to my side. I was still in a state of disbelief by the time he opened my door.

I was convinced Theo was crazy.

Who did something like this? Who went and purchased a home just so somebody else would be able to recover from a traumatic ordeal? Not only that, who did that for someone else and purchased a home of *this* size?

Apparently, that person was Theo McCormick.

“Theo, I can’t stay with you,” I argued when he held his hand out to mine.

“Yes, you can,” he replied. “I insist. Come on. Let’s go inside.”

Still feeling entirely too much shock over it all—the purchase of the house and that he wanted me to stay with him—I found myself at a loss for words. Did he know what I would have given for him to tell me he wanted us to move in together years ago?

Not, of course, that I believed I was officially moving in with him. This was obviously just some temporary arrangement he’d come up with on his own, something I was eventually going to have to speak to him about before he got his hopes up.

Since he seemed eager to take me inside, and I liked the idea of being able to see where he was going to live, I placed my hand in his and stepped out of the vehicle.

Theo closed the door behind me and didn’t let go of my hand as he led me to the front door. The next thing I knew, we’d stepped inside.

Even though I was still experiencing some soreness from the swelling and bruising on my face, my mouth dropped open.

It had been roughly twelve years since Theo went out to the west coast to pursue his dream of becoming an actor. He’d done it with ease, because he was just that good. And he’d stayed there all that time. Sure, he’d come back to Tennessee on several occasions throughout the years, but Theo’s home had been in California all this time.

I’d never seen it.

Never. Not once.

It wasn’t for lack of trying on his part, though. Theo had requested my presence several times over the years. More than once, he’d asked me to come for a visit. I’d been invited to go to awards shows as his guest on more occasions than I could count.

I never went.

I never went, because as much as it wasn’t my scene, I knew I’d never want to leave if I got a taste of what it was like to be in his life again. If I took

a few days to visit him and managed to forget about all the bills and worries I had here in Iris—something I technically couldn't afford to do—I'd be so disappointed when I had to come back.

Theo never said so, but I had a feeling he was frustrated. I was supposed to be his best friend, and from his perspective, I never gave him my full support and celebrated some truly great moments in his career with him.

Now that I was standing here inside this house that he seemed to have bought on a whim, I was blown away. Was this the kind of life he'd been living all these years? My entire apartment could have fit inside the main entrance to his house.

"This is... gosh, Theo, this place is huge," I declared.

When I finally managed to tear my eyes away from all that was surrounding us and focus them on Theo, I saw him staring at me with a strange look on his face. I was instantly concerned that he was insulted by what I'd said.

"It's beautiful," I assured him. "I've just never seen something so tremendous in all my life."

I wanted to ask him what he planned to do with a place this big, but I thought I'd be stepping into dangerous territory if I did.

"Let me give you a tour, so you know your way around the place," he urged.

For the first few minutes, Theo led me through his massive estate, showing me a couple of rooms that were completely devoid of any furniture, a kitchen large enough to feed twenty-five families, and a great room that had a couch and what could only be described as the world's largest television hanging on the wall.

When I looked up at Theo, I said, "You've got the important things covered."

His lips twitched. "It was the best I could do with such limited time. The couch is just temporary, too. I needed to make sure something was here for us, so we could sit and relax, but I'll ultimately want to change it out for something else."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "It probably won't go with the rest of the house once I order furniture for it."

I guess that made sense. Considering he'd spent nearly every minute with me at the hospital, I was surprised he'd gotten this much done.

“Well, you should have the time now,” I reasoned.

Nodding, he agreed, “Yeah. Plus, I have someone who’s got great taste here, too. I was hoping you’d be interested in helping me turn this house into a home.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No. I know how good you are at this kind of thing. I’ll never forget how quickly and easily you just rattled off the things we’d need inside the treehouse my dad and I built when we were kids,” he shared.

I swept my hand out in front of me and noted, “That was a treehouse, Theo. It’s completely different than a real house.”

He shot me a look of indifference in return. “It feels like the same thing to me. Either way, I’d like your mark on this place. I know you’ll make it feel like a home in here.”

My feet moved, slowly turning my body in a circle as I looked around the room. All of the furniture I had in my apartment would have fit into this one room alone, and there’d still be space left for more.

When I made no move to speak, Theo decided to reveal more surprises.

“There is one room here that is fully furnished,” he started as he took me by the hand again and led me out of the great room. “It doesn’t have to stay the way that it is, but I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed to make you comfortable.”

We began climbing the stairs, and it became clear before we even got there what room he’d had fully furnished.

When we walked into one of the bedrooms, I learned I was right.

“I hope this is okay for you. I didn’t want to take liberties with what you might like, but I thought it was more important for you to have what you needed here to feel at home,” he said.

I hadn’t meant to blurt it out the way I did, but I immediately replied, “Theo, nothing about this feels like home.”

He was instantly prepared to fix it. “How can I change that? What can I do?”

Tearing my eyes away from what had to be the most luxurious bed I’d ever seen, I turned my attention to him. “It’s not about what you have here, or what you could buy to change it. I’m talking about this whole place. This doesn’t feel like home, because I live in a one-bedroom apartment, an

apartment you should probably take me back to.”

“Why would I do that?” he asked.

It surprised me that his tone was genuinely curious. He really didn’t see what the problem was here.

Not wanting to hurt his feelings, especially considering all that he’d done, I reasoned, “Well, for starters, all of my clothes are there.”

“I already took care of that,” he said, moving away from me. He opened a closet door and revealed it was fully stocked with clothing. “This is all brand-new. I had my mom run out while you were still in the hospital to pick up a few things for you. I thought you might just want some comfortable clothing while you recuperated, which she did pick up for you, but she also picked up dresses and jeans and tops.”

My lips parted. “Your mom bought all those clothes for me?”

“Well, she did the actual shopping, but I paid for them,” he explained. “I don’t think my mom has ever had so much fun. She was sending me all sorts of text messages and pictures while she was out.”

My eyes shifted between Theo and the clothes in the closet. I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s okay if you don’t like any of it. There’s some comfortable clothing here for you to wear for tonight, and tomorrow I can either take you back to your place to grab whatever you want from there, or we can just order some things you like and have them shipped here.”

He thought I didn’t like the clothing.

Was he crazy?

I was certain my body might have an allergic reaction from the shock of having such magnificent pieces touching it.

“It’s not that.”

“I don’t understand the look on your face, then.”

“And I don’t understand what’s going on,” I told him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“All of this? Why am I here? Why did you buy this place? And why has the bedroom you intend to have me sleep in been fully furnished and stocked with clothing?” I questioned him.

Theo walked away from the closet, moved toward me, and stopped when our bodies were just inches apart. He lifted his hand to the side of my head, ran his fingers gently down a lock of my hair, and said, “Weeks ago, I got the scariest phone call of my life. My mom told me they didn’t know if you were

going to survive what happened to you, and I was terrified I wasn't going to make it back here before the worst happened. You mean the world to me, Devyn. I want to take care of you. Please let me do that."

I swallowed hard. I knew things couldn't have been good for him or his parents when they'd learned what happened to me, but I hadn't known all the details of how it had gone for them.

For a moment, I put myself in his shoes.

If I'd gotten a call that something had happened to him that was so bad he might not survive, I'd probably have gone over the top to do whatever I could to make sure he recovered.

Once I did that, I realized there was no point in arguing.

He wanted to help, and I was likely going to need it for a few days anyway.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. I'd known Theo my whole life.

How hard could it be?

---

## TWELVE

---

### *Devyn*

“Well, I hope you feel better.”

“Thank you. And, again, I’ll call you soon to get everything rescheduled.”

“That sounds great, Devyn. We’ll talk then.”

With that, I said goodbye and disconnected the call. Then I dropped my head back against the pillow and let out a sigh.

I was exhausted.

It had been a few hours since Theo and I left the hospital. He’d given me the opportunity to have some time alone, so I could shower and relax in the bedroom for a bit.

I’d taken the shower, which felt glorious, but I hadn’t really done much relaxing. Per the doctor’s orders, I was supposed to be resting not only my body but also my mind.

As it turned out, I wasn’t very good at following doctor’s orders. Because as soon as I’d gotten out of the shower and put on fresh clothing Mary had gone out to purchase for me using Theo’s money—something I still hadn’t wrapped my head around—I decided to pull out my phone and contact some of my clients.

My goals had been ambitious. I thought I’d be able to reach out to all of them and fill them in on my current predicament, but I was wrong.

Four.

I’d managed to call four total clients before I felt like I needed to take a nap.

Even if I’d hoped to be able to get back to work sooner rather than later,



there was no question recovery was going to take some time. If I couldn't tackle a list of phone calls without feeling the need to close my eyes for a few minutes afterward, there wasn't a chance I'd be able to tackle cleaning anyone's house, not even for a light cleaning.

The only bright spot in all of it was the response. Of the four clients I'd contacted, they'd all been incredibly understanding. While I hadn't revealed the full extent of what had happened to me, I had explained I'd needed to undergo emergency surgery, and I was under doctor's orders to take time off while I recuperated.

As grateful as I'd been for their understanding—everyone I'd spoken to so far had been fine with waiting for my follow-up phone call to get them back on the schedule—I couldn't say it didn't have me worried. I was desperate to heal as quickly as possible, so I could get back to work. Even though nobody had indicated yet that they wouldn't be able to wait for me to return, I didn't want to risk losing any clients as a result of this.

It would be just one more thing Roy would have taken from me.

And that was my other problem.

My doctor wanted me to rest my mind. It seemed impossible to do, because if I wasn't worried about my clients or my financial situation, I had several other things consuming my thoughts.

For starters, there was everything that had happened to me in that parking lot I had to contend with, the physical pain and visible injuries a reminder of such a horrific event.

But that wasn't all.

There was me learning Roy had cheated, learning Roy had died, worrying about the hospital bill I was going to receive, and possibly the biggest challenge of all, living with Theo.

That shouldn't have been a worry.

I should have been feeling grateful.

I was, and I technically wasn't worried about my physical safety by being here with him.

But even if I could appreciate all that he was doing for me, it didn't mean I wasn't concerned about how successful this whole living arrangement was going to be. Theo and I might have been best friends, and I might have known I could count on him to do whatever he could to help me in this situation, but I couldn't miss the overwhelming sense of tension lingering between us.

There was more happening in this for the both of us, and I wondered if it would be like it always was. Would the two of us continue to pretend that everything was fine when it really wasn't?

As an actor, it would probably be easy for Theo.

I, on the other hand, didn't think I'd survive more than a few days.

Because, best friends or not, there was no question that our relationship with one another had changed drastically over the years. It wasn't anything like it had been before he left to pursue his career.

Glancing at the time on my phone, it was just after four o'clock. Before he'd left me to my devices here in the bedroom he'd had set up especially for me, Theo had shared that after he went and took his own shower, he'd be downstairs, taking care of a few things.

I didn't know exactly what those few things were, and it didn't really matter to me, but there was something in his tone that indicated he wanted me to join him again when I was ready, before the night was over.

Right now, I just wasn't ready.

I could close my eyes for a few minutes and rest. There was no question I'd need to have fully stocked energy reserves to be back in his presence without the hope or possibility of an interruption from a nurse or doctor.

So, that's what I did.

I allowed my eyes to drift shut for a few minutes.

The next thing I knew, I'd opened my eyes, looked at the clock, and saw it was six-thirty.

Apparently, I was even more tired than I had thought.

After taking a minute to gather my bearings, I walked into the bathroom and splashed some water on my face. A moment later, I was descending the stairs, doing it carefully, as I still felt significant tenderness in my torso. Between the incision from the surgery and the ribs that were still healing, it was going to be a while before I was feeling like I could take on the world.

I was on the second to last step when I heard Theo. "I thought I heard you coming down the stairs. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"A bit sore," I admitted.

"I've got your pain medication in the kitchen if you want to take some. You probably could have had some at least two hours ago," he returned.

I nodded and explained, "Yeah, I meant to come down sooner, but I got tired and dozed off. Sorry about that."

He shook his head as I made it off the last step. "There's no need to

apologize. I'm pretty sure that's normal, and it's going to take some time for you to get back to your regular sleep schedule."

"Fingers crossed it happens sooner rather than later," I mumbled.

Theo offered a sympathetic look and asked, "Are you hungry? I've got dinner ready."

My eyes narrowed on him. "Like, you bought dinner, and it arrived? Or are you telling me you cooked?"

He lifted his chin proudly and grinned at me. "Believe it or not, I cooked for us."

Us.

He cooked for us.

It shouldn't have been a big deal, but it was.

There was a time when I would have given anything to walk down the stairs of a home we were living in together and have Theo tell me he cooked for us. Even better, I would have loved if the roles were reversed, and it was me who had cooked for him.

Understanding that I couldn't continue to allow the feelings of longing to move through me and make their presence known, I shook off those thoughts, smiled at him, and said, "I've got to see this."

"Just wait. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by my talent," he teased.

With that, the two of us walked away from the stairs and made our way toward the kitchen.

"Why don't you grab a seat at the table, and I'll bring everything over?" Theo declared.

I didn't know how long I'd be able to tolerate him waiting on me hand and foot, but considering I was still a bit unsteady and a lot sore, I figured it was best to let him indulge me for a while.

No sooner had I gotten as comfortable as possible at the table, Theo walked over with two plates. The second he set them down, I felt a wave of shock move through me.

I had anticipated some spaghetti topped with a jar of store-bought sauce.

Suffice it to say, I was wrong.

Each of our plates had a piece of salmon, a pile of potatoes, and some asparagus.

"You made this?" I asked.

With a slight nod, Theo answered, "Broiled salmon, lemon-roasted potatoes, and parmesan roasted asparagus."

“It looks incredible. I didn’t know you could cook like this,” I replied.

Theo let out a laugh and advised, “Don’t get your hopes up. My skills are limited. I’m great at breakfast, awful at lunch, and have a few meals I’m capable of making for dinner that aren’t bad.”

Now that the food was sitting in front of me, I found my stomach was rumbling a bit. The aroma of Theo’s meal wafted into my nostrils, and my mouth was watering.

The two of us dove in, and after taking a bite of each item on the plate, I had no choice but to praise him. “Well, I’m happy to report it doesn’t just look good, Theo. It tastes excellent, too.”

“Thanks.”

We continued to eat, but I could see there was something working in his eyes. Theo had questions for me he wasn’t asking, and I couldn’t bring myself to ignore that look.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked him.

He was silent a moment as he finished chewing and assessed me. “A lot of reasons, I guess. Probably far too many to cover in one dinner conversation.”

Yep.

Just as I had suspected.

If nothing else, Theo’s words offered me a bit of comfort. Because even if I knew they meant we’d probably have to address all that we both had plaguing our minds and hearts, at least I wasn’t alone in feeling everything I was.

“So, pick something and share it,” I begged. “We can’t just keep dancing around whatever is on our minds.”

“You’ve got things on your mind?” he retorted.

“I always have things on my mind, Theo. Especially when I’m around you,” I confessed.

He eyed me curiously, but he didn’t push me to give him any additional explanations. Instead, he asked about something that was on his mind.

“I’ve been wondering about something for a long time,” he started.

“What is it?” I asked, bracing myself.

“I’ve always been curious why you never went to culinary school. I mean, I know you have your house cleaning business now, but I wanted to know why you never went to school.”

In an instant, I felt my blood run cold.

While I didn't doubt that he had no clue just how bad my financial situation was, making going to school nearly impossible, I couldn't stop myself from thinking the worst.

Theo must have thought my job was a crappy one.

Granted, it wasn't what I had wanted to do with my life, but even if the job I was doing wasn't my dream job, I was the owner of a business. An entrepreneur.

I thought that was something to feel proud of.

"Devyn?" he called when I took too long making assumptions about his reasons for taking the conversation in this direction.

"Yeah?"

"I can see there's a lot going on in your mind, and that's not good for two reasons. First, the doctor said you need to rest your mind. If I had thought a simple question would cause the response and reaction this one did, I wouldn't have asked you. But beyond that, I can't help myself from feeling like you've got the wrong impression in your mind about this."

I shrugged my shoulders and pressed my lips together. "I'm not sure what you're looking for me to say."

"It was a simple question."

Maybe to him, it was. To me, it was something else.

"I realize that cleaning houses isn't exactly a fancy job beyond someone like me being a person who works for someone like you, but I'm proud of the business I've built," I told him.

Theo studied me without saying a word. Maybe he hadn't expected me to respond the way I had. Perhaps he believed I'd confirm what he was already thinking. Even if I agreed with that assessment, I couldn't bring myself to not defend what had been the one thing to provide me with some form of stability over the years.

"I don't understand," he replied quietly.

I let out a sarcastic laugh, feeling myself grow more and more uncomfortable with what was happening. "That's because you do what you do and can afford to buy a house like this on a whim," I reasoned. "There are people in this world who have regular jobs, Theo."

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I instantly regretted them. I'd allowed my emotions to get the best of me, and now Theo was going to think I was a bitch on top of everything.

"I get the distinct feeling that you've got something twisted in your

head,” he remarked.

“I don’t,” I assured him.

He cocked an eyebrow. “You do, Devyn. Because I asked you about culinary school, and somehow you turned that into me being critical of what you actually do. Nothing I asked you about had anything to do with the business you run now. I was merely curious if you’d simply lost interest in cooking or if it was something else. That’s all.”

I held his gaze, knowing there wasn’t any way I could write off what he’d just said as him simply wanting to cover his own ass. My words had hurt him, and suddenly, I felt even worse about myself.

I swallowed hard, looked down at my plate, and murmured, “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too,” he replied, a clear edge of frustration in his tone. “Let’s just forget about it and finish dinner.”

I didn’t want to do that, but considering I was the one who’d clearly hurt his feelings, I thought it was best to honor his request.

And throughout the rest of dinner, Theo and I didn’t speak. It was a chore for me to eat anything else, which I thought said a lot about mental state given how delicious the food was that he’d made.

But I didn’t want to insult him further, so I sucked it up.

After we finished, Theo took my plate and walked it out to the kitchen. When he returned, he brought my pain medications with him. Setting them down in front of me, he said, “I know things aren’t easy for you right now. I know you’ve suffered through something horrible, and I know you’ve lost someone important to you. And I understand there’s a lot happening here that probably brings up a ton of questions. But I’m trying, Devyn. I’m trying my best to be somebody you can depend on. I’m trying my best to see you through this. Most of all, I’m just trying to be your best friend.”

With that, before giving me a chance to respond, he turned and walked away.

I sat there for a long time, trying not to break down into tears.

At some point, I finally managed to pull myself together, took the medicine, and got up from the table.

I moved toward the stairs, passing the family room on my way, and found Theo there, sitting on the couch. I stopped and watched as his eyes came to mine. “I appreciate all that you’re doing for me, Theo. You’re right. There’s a lot that has happened in the past few weeks, and it hasn’t been easy. But I see everything you’re doing for me, and I appreciate it. I’m sorry for the way I

responded to you at dinner. It was uncalled for.”

“Apology accepted.”

Just like that, without any hesitation, he forgave me.

Tears welled in my eyes.

Theo reached his arms out and urged, “Come here.”

What other option did I have? I crossed the room, made it to him, and collapsed into his arms.

Theo held me close to him, his lips pressing kisses to my hair, providing me with love and comfort I hadn’t had in a very long time.

We didn’t say anything the rest of the night.

The two of us stayed like that on the couch for a long time before Theo turned on the television, me eventually drifting off somewhere in the middle of a show.

And when I woke the next morning, I was tucked safely in the bed he’d bought just for me.

I only wished he’d have been there with me.

---

## THIRTEEN

---

### *Devyn*

Days had passed since I'd been released from the hospital and Theo had brought me to his brand-new house to stay and recuperate.

Things were much better between us after what happened that first day. It seemed the both of us had decided to tread a bit more cautiously with one another.

I didn't think it was the result of us being afraid of sharing our feelings. Rather, I believed we'd managed to come to an understanding that we were in a different place with one another—a place we'd never been before—and getting used to this new arrangement was going to take some time and a bit of patience.

Granted, I realized some tough conversations were on the horizon. I had quite a few things I'd wanted to ask Theo about, but figuring out the way to do that without him feeling as though I was insulting him was a challenge.

Or, perhaps I was wrong.

Maybe Theo wouldn't care what I asked. Maybe he'd answer all my questions without hesitation, and it was me who was simply fearing the worst.

Because it quickly became clear to me that he had asked an innocent question, and I'd immediately gone on the defensive.

I didn't know.

For now, I was merely grateful I didn't feel the tension lingering or building between us. If anything, it was almost as though it had all started to dissipate. And I knew that was all thanks to Theo.



After our first evening together, when he'd showed me more grace than I probably deserved, his entire focus seemed to be on doing what he could to aid in my recovery. There had been a brief moment initially when I thought maybe he was pushing so hard for it because he wanted me out of his house. But that thought lasted all of a few seconds before I felt a wave of disappointment move through me, and I scolded myself for having the audacity to think such a thing.

That was not who Theo was, and I felt horrible for even having considered it as a possibility.

I reminded myself how much I'd missed him over the years, how grateful I was for all that he was doing now, and how lucky I was that he'd been by my side since the moment he'd learned about what happened to me.

Aside from the emotional turmoil I'd been trying to work through, there was the still the physical trauma I was attempting to heal from. Though it had been a couple of days since I'd left the hospital, I was still trying to make it through a single day without needing to take a nap.

And every time I got exhausted like that and made the attempt to force myself to stay awake, Theo would stop me. He frequently urged me to rest, and if he noticed I couldn't manage to get myself to relax, he'd find a way to make it happen.

With everything he'd been doing for me, it was impossible for me to not notice how concerned he was about me. All of it reminded me of the reasons I'd fallen in love with him so many years ago. He'd had such a caring and protective nature toward me right from the very start.

Only now, it came with something else. Now, I got several home-cooked meals a day from him. And every single one of them made me smile, because I'd never envisioned him to be such a domesticated man.

"I'm going to be in your debt forever," I said, just as I pushed my breakfast plate back.

He hadn't been lying that first day here when he told me he was exceptional at breakfast. His eggs were perfection, regardless of how I asked to have them. The toast was never burnt, and I loved that he cut up fruit for me into perfect bite-sized pieces. He even did it with a banana.

After setting his coffee mug down, Theo's lips twitched. "What could you possibly believe you owe me for?"

I waved my hand out in front of me. "This. You've made me so many meals and healthy snacks since we left the hospital, I've lost count."

“Well, I’m glad for that, because you don’t need to keep track,” he insisted. “I’m not doing any of this with the thought in my mind that you’ll be indebted to me. I’m doing it because I care about you.”

“I know. I wasn’t being serious. Or, well, I wasn’t being totally serious. Between you and your parents, I’m feeling overwhelmed with appreciation.”

He reached his hand out to mine, which had been resting on the table, and offered a gentle squeeze. “I don’t want you thinking about anything that any of us has done as something you can’t repay us for or that you’d need to repay us for. It’s not necessary. Besides, I’d like to think that if the roles were reversed and something happened to me, you’d stop at nothing to take care of me.”

He wasn’t wrong about that, but the thought of him being near death sent an unwelcome shiver along my spine. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to see you through,” I replied, a slight rasp in my voice.

Just as he parted his lips to say something, his phone began buzzing from over on the kitchen countertop. Theo gave my hand one final squeeze before he stood, moved in that direction, and glanced down at his phone. Lifting it in his hand, he returned his attention to me and said, “Speaking of my parents, this is my dad.”

I smiled and gave him a nod in response as he answered the call.

“Hey, Dad.” There was a brief pause as he listened to his father’s response before he smiled and said, “She’s doing great. Every day is getting better. We actually just had breakfast together.”

My heart melted.

While Theo’s parents hadn’t spent every waking moment with me, there was no question how much they loved me. Scott acted just as I had suspected my father would have if this had happened when he was still alive.

He offered his love and support, he called to check in, and he and Mary visited me regularly while I was in the hospital and ever since I’d left. In addition to that, he’d been focused on something else, too. While his primary concern had been my physical safety and well-being, Scott had been on top of this in a different way. Though he didn’t give me all the gory details, it was made clear to me that he’d been on top of the police and how they were handling this situation.

As it turned out, the men who’d attacked me hadn’t been caught. Though I probably should have been scared, I wasn’t. I didn’t fear them coming after me. I was convinced they had no idea who I was, beyond being just another

obstacle for them that night. Their beef wasn't with me; it had been with Roy. And they'd managed to eliminate that problem for themselves.

"Really?" Theo replied, the surprise evident in his tone.

I watched as his face twisted in an unusual way while he listened to his father speak, and any of the positive vibes I'd been feeling over the last few days instantly vanished. I had an inkling this had to be related to my attack.

Had Scott heard something from the police?

"Alright. Let me talk to Devyn, and I'll give you a call back in a little bit," Theo said.

After saying goodbye to his dad, Theo disconnected the call and focused his attention on me again. One look at him, and the conflict swirling in his eyes became evident.

Not wanting to make this any more difficult for him than it already was, I urged, "Tell me what's going on."

"My dad got a call from the Iris Police Department," Theo revealed as he walked back to the table.

When he sat down, he took a sip of his coffee, set the mug down, and clasped his hands together in front of him. I couldn't miss just how much tension he was carrying in his entire frame.

"I assume they had some news," I replied.

He nodded. "They've got two guys in custody. In addition to having you go down to the station to identify them, they'd also like to ask you some extra questions. The men they've got aren't talking, and they want to see if you're able to provide any additional information about the others."

I slowly moved my head up and down, indicating I'd heard what he said, and eventually replied, "Okay."

"How do you feel about this?" he asked, concern littering his features.

"I'm alright."

His eyes searched my face for a long time before he said, "I think I need to tell you just how proud I am of you. With all that you've dealt with in the physical sense at the hands of these so-called men, you've been a real trooper when it comes to how it's affecting your mind."

"Thank you, Theo. That means a lot."

He shook his head. "I hate that you have to go down to the police station to identify these guys, but I'm guessing you feel a bit of relief."

I shrugged. "Not really."

Theo sighed. "They're going to find the other two guys, Devyn. And until

that happens, I promise that nobody is going to be able to hurt you again.”

My brows pulled together. Theo clearly believed I was concerned about my physical safety.

“I’m not afraid of them,” I told him.

He offered a small smile and said, “I know you’re trying to be tough, but it’s not necessary with me. It’s okay to feel afraid.”

It seemed Theo was the one who needed some comfort now. I reached my hand out and covered his clasped ones on the table. “I’m not afraid, though,” I insisted. “Theo, those men were never after me. They were after Roy, and I just happened to make a foolish decision that put me on their radar. Trust me, they did what they felt compelled to do. More than anything, I’m upset with myself.”

Confusion washed over his face as he sat back in his chair. “What are you talking about? What do you mean, you made a foolish decision?”

I thought back on everything I could remember from that night. All that had happened, all that I’d learned.

“None of it had to happen,” I claimed.

“Of course not, but it’s not like you could have prevented it,” he reasoned.

“Maybe I couldn’t have prevented what started it, but I could have stopped myself from getting involved and making it so I wound up in the hospital. Plus, it was completely preventable.”

Nothing I was saying was making any sense to Theo. He was growing more and more confused with each second that passed.

“I don’t understand.”

My throat grew painfully tight. “It was Roy.”

“What?”

Beneath my hand, I could feel the tension coursing through Theo’s body. The worst thing about that was that I was sure once I explained this all a bit more clearly to him, he wasn’t going to feel any less stressed about it. If anything, I was only going to make things worse.

But since I’d already revealed enough to have him concerned, I couldn’t just act like nothing had happened.

So, I sucked in a deep breath before I decided to let it all out. “It was his birthday, so I’d decided to take him out. We went for dinner before going to the movie theater. Since we hadn’t gone anywhere in a very long time, I was looking forward to it. He’d been checking his phone regularly while we were

out for dinner, which frustrated me a little, but I tried to ignore it. It was his birthday, and he said he had friends reaching out to wish him a happy birthday.”

I paused a moment, tried to take stock of the situation by reading the look on Theo’s face, and got nothing other than confirmation that none of his tension had eased.

I continued. “We made it to the theater, went inside, and grabbed seats. But no sooner did it seem we got there when Roy told me he wasn’t feeling well and needed to use the restroom. I waited a while for him to return, and when the previews had started, I decided to go and look for him. It didn’t take long for me to learn that Roy wasn’t in the bathroom, but when I looked outside, I saw him standing there with a group of guys. I had assumed they were buddies of his and that he’d just lost track of time. I was wrong.”

“He went outside the theater to meet up with the men who attacked the both of you?” Theo asked, surprise littering his expression.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. Roy willingly went outside the theater that night, but he hadn’t expected to meet those men.”

Tipping his head to the side, Theo pressed for more information. “So, what was he doing? Why would he leave you alone inside the theater?”

This was the part I’d been dreading. It was the part of the whole experience I didn’t want to relive, the part that was mortifying.

Dropping my gaze from his, I murmured, “Roy left me alone in the theater, so he could walk out to meet up with one of the women he was cheating on me with.”

Even with my eyes focused off to the side, I could feel the profound shift in the energy surrounding us. That shift was the direct result of Theo and the reaction he was having to the news I’d just revealed. His voice, deep and murderous, demanded, “Tell me you are joking with me.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. When I opened them and met his, I said, “I wish I was.”

Anger and frustration moved through him. “What happened next?”

“I walked out and approached the group,” I began again. “Nobody had seen me there initially, and that’s when I managed to hear enough to know Roy wasn’t having a friendly meeting with his buddies. One of them was furious, because apparently, Roy had intended to meet up with his girlfriend that night. If that hadn’t already felt like a kick to the face, the next guy stepping forward and announcing he was angry with Roy for hooking up with

his girlfriend earlier that afternoon would have done it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Theo clipped.

“I’m not.”

For several long moments, Theo simply stared at me. His eyes seemed to roam over every inch of my face, and with each second that passed, something seemed to soften in his features.

Eventually, he urged gently, “Tell me how you wound up being attacked.”

“I jumped in.”

“Jumped in?” he repeated. “What do you mean, you jumped in?”

Shaking my head, feeling the disappointment with myself move through me, I promised, “Trust me, I never intended for it to go down the way it did. But when those four men started taking turns beating Roy, venting their anger and frustrations with physical blows to his face and body, I couldn’t stand there, doing nothing. So, I shouted at them to stop and jumped in between them and him.”

“Jesus,” Theo hissed.

I ignored his reaction and explained, “I just assumed they’d never take their hands to me, so I demanded that they stop. I told them to leave Roy alone and walk away or that I was going to call the police. I never even managed to pull my phone out before I went flying backward.”

I paused once more, recalling the final memories I had of the incident, and eventually shared, “The last thought I had was that my life had been filled with a lot of bad moments, things I’ve often wanted to forget, but that moment wasn’t going to be one of them. I wholeheartedly believed I was going to die in the parking lot of a movie theater for a man who had the capacity to cheat on me with multiple women.”

By the time I had finished speaking, I hadn’t realized tears had escaped from my eyes and started rolling down my cheeks. I only noticed when I felt the pad of Theo’s thumb swiping them away.

“I’m so sorry, Devyn,” he lamented.

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” I replied.

His hand slid back, his fingertips threading into my hair, most of his palm covering my ear. “You’re a goddamn treasure, and I’m sorry he wasn’t man enough to make you believe it,” Theo croaked.

Theo believed I was a treasure.

I loved the thought, but also hated it.

Because as far as I knew, people held on to treasure. Hell, they fought battles over it.

Recognizing that, I had to wonder... exactly what kind of treasure did Theo think I was, and when would he walk away from me again?

---

## FOURTEEN

---

### *Theo*

Fixing my mistakes.

Having done what I'd done in my life, I wasn't sure I deserved redemption, but there was a selfish part of me that couldn't stand by, doing nothing.

It had been just over a week since I'd learned the truth about what had happened to Devyn. Only a matter of days since she'd shared precisely why she'd been knocking on death's door.

I still hadn't wrapped my head around it.

I still hadn't accepted that she'd sacrificed herself the way she did.

Hearing those words that day, knowing she'd put herself in harm's way to attempt to protect a man who didn't do even the very least to deserve it, was nearly impossible to stomach. He was being attacked because he'd cheated on Devyn with women who were already spoken for, and Devyn had still stepped in to try to save him. To protect him.

How her ex could have been lucky enough to have her like he did in his life and hadn't done everything to cherish her was baffling.

Then again, I wondered if I really had any room to talk.

I'd had the opportunity so many years ago to make sure she knew how I felt about her, to tell her just how deep my feelings ran for her, and I didn't take it.

But I was done hiding it.

I'd lived for far too many years without her in my life the way I had wanted, and I couldn't do it any longer.



That's how I was planning to fix my mistakes. I only hoped I'd be successful in my efforts.

The most challenging part of it all was going to be timing. In a perfect world, I'd be able to come right out with it, and Devyn and I could go on to live happily ever after.

But this world was far from perfect.

She'd been beaten to within an inch of her life after having just learned moments before that she'd been betrayed by her boyfriend, who'd subsequently died. To top it off, she was now living in my house while she took the time she needed to recover.

If all that hadn't been enough, I then had to take her down to the police station that day I'd learned all the details. I waited there for hours with Devyn while she not only managed to positively identify the men who'd hurt her, but also while she answered some questions for the detectives who were working on her case.

There was no way I could expect her to just forget about all that she'd been through. I didn't think she'd be able to pretend everything was fine and happily ride off into the sunset with me, no matter how much I wished that would be the case.

Devyn was going to need time.

To heal.

To trust.

To believe she deserved better than she'd gotten.

And to get to a place where she felt safe enough to open her heart again.

The last thing I needed to do was come across as insensitive to all that she'd suffered lately by swooping in and expecting her to just jump right into another romantic relationship. Even if her ex was the biggest idiot that ever lived and didn't deserve an ounce of her tears, I wanted Devyn to have the time she needed to cope with the loss.

In the meantime, I was fully prepared to support her in any way that I could. Whatever it was going to take to see her through this was my only concern. I'd give her anything she needed.

Because I'd made a decision.

Devyn was going to be mine. It wasn't going to happen today, and it probably wasn't going to happen tomorrow. But when the time was right for her, we were going to get there.

For now, I was going to try to get her to have some fun, because she

deserved it.

Devyn's recovery was going well, and she was making improvements every day. She no longer needed to nap in the middle of the day, and she didn't walk as gingerly across the room any longer. Despite the progress she'd made, she wasn't quite a hundred percent yet, either.

So, as much as I had wanted to do things that would remind us both of the fun we used to have when we were kids, it was going to have to wait. I'd keep those ideas tucked safely in the back of my mind, and as soon as she was ready—hopefully by at least her birthday—we'd do it all.

Devyn Jade deserved the world.

If I could have given it all to her now, I would have.

But since she wasn't ready, I'd hand her bits and pieces. Before she'd even realize what was happening, Devyn would have it all. She'd have everything right in the palm of her hands, and it was going to be me who gave it to her.

It was starting tonight.

Though I hadn't forgotten a word she'd said to me the day she told me about what happened to her, there was one thing that stood out to me.

Devyn had indicated how much she'd been looking forward to going out that night she'd been attacked, because she hadn't gone out in such a long time.

I'd decided to give her that tonight, but this time, she was going to have a much better time. Because not only was she going to have someone with her who wanted to be there and would give her his full focus and attention, but she was going to make it back to be able to sleep safely in her bed as well.

And although I'd had some concerns about how she'd react when I asked her to join me tonight, Devyn proved I had no reason to be.

"Really? You want to go out?" she countered after I'd asked. The tone of her voice indicated she was feeling surprised by my invitation.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?"

Devyn shot me an incredulous look. It was almost as though she believed I was asking a foolish question. "I realize we're in Iris, but you're not exactly an unrecognizable face."

"It'll be fine," I insisted. "With what I have planned, I'll be able to arrange for us to have some privacy. I promise you won't have cameras in your face."

She thought for all of a few seconds before she agreed, "Okay. I'd love to

join you. It's been a long time since the two of us have had the opportunity to do something fun together.”

Keeping it casual.

That was the plan.

I fully believed if I kept things laidback, if I didn't put Devyn under any pressure, her heart would begin to soften, and I'd have a fighting chance.

Now, I was waiting down in the great room for Devyn, and I had to keep reminding myself that this wasn't yet what I wanted it to be. It didn't matter that she was upstairs getting herself ready to go. It didn't matter that I was taking her out like anyone else who was dating someone would do. It didn't matter that even if I knew it wasn't going to happen, I desperately wanted to end this date with the two of us coming back to my place, where I could kiss her lips for the first time in twelve years.

Twelve years.

God, I didn't know how I'd managed to survive that length of time without having another taste of her.

Patience.

As I heard her footsteps descending the stairs, I reminded myself of the goal. The only way I'd achieve it, the only possible chance I had of getting what I wanted, was to have patience.

Right.

Devyn was my friend. First and foremost, especially for right now, she was just my friend.

The moment she stepped into the room and came into view, I nearly lost it. In all the years that I'd known her, I couldn't remember a time when I saw her dressed the way she was dressed now.

It's not that she didn't ever look nice—hell, I'd fallen for the girl who wore jeans and T-shirts, rode bikes, and climbed trees with me—but this was different.

Apparently, I was going to have to give my mom a call at some point to thank her for going out shopping for Devyn, because now this woman was standing in front of me, wearing a dress and looking breathtaking.

“Wow, you look incredible,” I said, marveling at the sight of her.

The dress she had on was a deep navy-blue color with a bright pink patterned band around the middle. It had an overlapping V-neckline, which offered a nice view of her cleavage without it feeling raunchy. The short sleeves were slightly oversized, and the dress stopped at mid-thigh.

Over the years, I'd seen Devyn's legs on display, especially in the summer when we'd be hanging out together. And I'd noticed the curves she did have before this very moment, but somehow, seeing all that I'd seen before in this way was like seeing her for the first time.

She was beautiful.

Surprise washed over her as she looked down at her body and back up at me. "Really? This feels awkward, but you said I needed to dress fancy."

I nodded and moved toward her. "I promise. You don't look awkward at all, even if that's how you're feeling right now. You look very nice, Devyn."

As she smiled at me, something warm and sweet stole over her expression. She took in my appearance and replied, "You look distinguished, as always."

My lips twitched. "Let's hope I've nailed that look down by now. I've had enough practice."

I could have sworn I saw her wince, but it happened so fast, I questioned whether I'd imagined it. Even still, feeling concerned, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

"What? Yeah, it's fine," she assured me.

"You made a face that looked like you were in pain," I noted. "Nothing is hurting you, right?"

She stared at me briefly before she answered, "Sometimes, I feel pain, but I promise I'm alright."

Not wanting to start the night off on the wrong foot, I accepted her explanation and gave her a nod. "Okay. Are you all set to go?"

"I think so. Now will you tell me where you're taking me?" she asked.

"We're going to a dinner theater to eat while we watch a show," I told her.

Devyn's face lit up with surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah. I wanted to do something that would be fun, but I didn't want to go too crazy since you're still healing," I explained.

Shaking her head with a smile on her face, she said, "Are you kidding, Theo? This is going to be incredible."

I was so glad she thought so. Seeing her excitement, knowing she was looking forward to our night ahead, meant everything.

With that, the two of us left and made our way to the theater. Iris was a small town, and while there were some fun things to do, it really wasn't a popular tourist attraction. For that reason, we had to drive about forty minutes

outside of the town's limits into one of the bigger cities in the Smoky Mountain region. There were a bunch of tourist attractions there, and one of the best places, in my opinion, was one of the oldest buildings in the town. It was an upscale dinner theater that was said to have served delicious food.

The drive to the theater was comfortable, and the conversation was easy.

"Can I ask what we're seeing tonight?" Devyn wondered.

"Of course. We're watching a show about Blackbeard and his adventures."

"Blackbeard? The pirate?"

I twisted my neck, taking my eyes off the road briefly, so I could look at her with a cocked eyebrow. "Is there another Blackbeard you know about?"

She shook her head. "I don't even really know much about this one, other than that he's a pirate."

"Then I think you're going to love this," I told her.

"Have you seen it already?" she asked, her tone a bit hesitant.

"No. But I did read a script once for a part in a movie that would have had me playing the role of Blackbeard. I was on board, all set to do it, but they ended up scrapping the movie."

"Bummer," she murmured.

Before I knew it, we'd arrived and parked. I got out, rounded the vehicle, and met Devyn on her side. Then I held my arm out for her to link hers through. Mostly, I was attempting to be a gentleman, but part of me couldn't deny that I wanted to have her hands on me while she stood close.

She hesitated briefly, a bit of uncertainty washing over her, but eventually, she linked her arm through mine and held on firmly.

After Devyn and I were escorted to our seats, things took a bit of a turn for me. At first, everything was okay.

"Look at these seats," Devyn marveled. "Are you joking me right now?"

I shook my head, smiling at her. "No. But I wanted the privacy."

"Privacy?"

"You said it yourself when I first invited you," I started. "As much as I'd like to believe that we could be here and enjoy ourselves without any interruptions, experience has taught me that people will approach when they see me. I love my fans, and I'm grateful for them, but I want to enjoy my night with you tonight."

"Well, then this was very smart of you," she replied.

"Smart, yes. But if I'm being completely honest, I also wanted to make

sure that you had the best seat in the house, too,” I explained.

Even in the dimly lit room, I could easily see how her cheeks flushed. “Thanks, Theo.”

And that was the point at which it all changed for me. Seeing the pink color in her cheeks, knowing I’d done that with just my words, I started feeling an overwhelming desire to see if there were other ways I could get that flush to creep over other parts of her body.

A few minutes later, the lights dimmed a bit more, and the first part of our meal was brought out as the show began.

I watched for a while, truly appreciating the set, the acting, and the story. But I’d have been lying if I said I wasn’t the least bit distracted.

Because I struggled throughout the entire first part of the show and dinner not to simply stare at Devyn. It was difficult to remain focused on what was happening on stage when I had the scent of her surrounding me.

It was soft and feminine, like a pink rose, with a dose of sweetness, like honey.

But more than just the scent of her was the look of utter fascination on her face throughout the show. She was enthralled, and I had to believe she was enjoying herself. It was the most relaxed I’d seen her when she wasn’t asleep since before she’d left the hospital.

There was a ten-minute intermission about halfway through the show, and the moment the lights had come up just a bit, Devyn turned toward me and said, “Thank you for bringing me here tonight. This is my first time ever coming to a live show like this. It’s so much better than I thought it would be.”

I wrapped my arm around her back, my hand landing on her opposite shoulder. “I’m glad you’re enjoying this. That’s all I wanted tonight. I thought you deserved to have a night of fun, where your biggest worry was going to be deciding which dress to put on.”

Devyn’s soft laughter spilled out of her, the sound like music to my ears. “Well, you certainly accomplished that. Do you know how long I agonized over what to wear? I must have tried on four dresses before I settled on this one.”

Unable to stop them, my eyes drifted down her body and over the dress. My throat tightened, and I definitely felt my pants growing tighter around my groin. “You really do look beautiful tonight.”

No sooner did I get those words out, her eyes dropped away from mine

and settled on my chest. She didn't respond with words, but I saw something happening in her features. And when I saw her swallow hard, I started to think she was feeling that same tightening in her throat that I did in mine.

But just as I was about to ask her about it, she tore her eyes away from me and lifted her glass to her lips to take a sip of her drink.

While she might have been having similar feelings to me, it was also possible that she was uncomfortable. And because I refused to put her in that position, I removed my arm from behind her back, reached for my own drink, and took a sip.

And when the lights dimmed again, I found focusing on the second half of the show was no easier than the first half had been.

Only this time, it was because I had so many questions running through my mind about what my chances were of getting Devyn and I where I wanted us to be.

---

## FIFTEEN

---

### *Devyn*

“Thank you for calling, Officer.”

“You’re welcome, Ms. Jade. I hope this news brings you a bit of comfort. Have a good night.”

“And the same to you.”

I pulled the phone from my ear, disconnected the call, and leaned my forearms on the railing. Then I took several deep breaths.

Maybe it was sighs of relief.

It could have been something else altogether.

In so many ways, it felt as though there was too much happening in a single day for me to keep up with. And in other ways, the days dragged on.

I heard the door open behind me and felt Theo make his approach. “Is everything okay?” he asked when he came to stand beside me.

Keeping my eyes focused on the view in front of me, I countered, “Do you know how ridiculously beautiful this is going to be once fall hits?”

The silence stretched between us for a long time before he eventually shared, “It’s one of the reasons I bought it.”

Even if I still hadn’t gotten over Theo purchasing this home, I couldn’t deny that he’d done an incredible job when choosing it. Ever since I’d left the hospital, I felt as though I’d been living in the lap of luxury by being here.

Of course, that was partly due to the living arrangements and partly the result of how Theo treated me.

And while there wasn’t any part of Theo’s home that wasn’t beautiful, this was my favorite. “I’ve decided this is my favorite thing about your



house,” I told him.

“The balcony?” he asked.

I nodded. “The view is breathtaking. I can’t wait to see the fall colors when the leaves change. I mean, there’s nothing more beautiful than the Smoky Mountains in October, am I right?”

“When it comes to good views, then I’ve got to agree.”

I tried to ignore what his response implied. On the surface, it seemed he was agreeing with me, but I couldn’t miss the other implication. Could he only appreciate the views here?

Theo had traveled to so many different locations over the years, and he frequently sent me photos of those spots. There was no question they were beautiful. Maybe on some level, he believed this view was comparable, but that was all. Maybe he thought it was all Tennessee, or more specifically, Iris, had to offer.

It was that realization that had me wondering how long it would be before he left again.

“That was the Iris Police Department on the phone,” I finally revealed, deciding to switch topics. “They wanted to let me know they apprehended the last two men.”

“That’s excellent news. I assume the information you gave them helped, then?”

I nodded. “Yeah. They said once I told them about how the men had mentioned Roy was communicating with their girlfriends through their social media accounts, they were able to do a bit of digging and figure them out from there.”

“Do they need you to go in to identify them?” he asked.

Shaking my head, I replied, “No. At least, not yet. Apparently, between the footage they had from the parking lot, the private messages through social media, and the admission from both men once they were picked up, me going there would just be redundant. That might change, but for now, they told me to just focus on recuperating.”

I hadn’t realized Theo was holding onto any tension, but after I’d answered his question, I saw his body visibly relax.

The concern he had for me was so endearing. It always had been. And that was just another thing I had to try to ignore in this whole mess.

To say things were becoming difficult for me would have been an understatement. Obviously, being here with Theo, he made it so I didn’t

technically have to worry about anything from one day to the next. But that didn't mean my mind wasn't struggling with so many things.

The situation with the men who'd attacked Roy and me was finally resolved, which brought me some comfort. Even if I wasn't necessarily afraid of them—they genuinely had not a clue who I was—I still didn't like the idea of anyone who could do what they'd done to us to be walking around freely. Roy did what he did to me, and even if I hated him for that, he didn't need to die for it.

Beyond that, if I allowed myself to think about it, my financial situation stressed me out. I wasn't working, I didn't know how soon I'd be able to start again, and I worried my clients wouldn't wait around for me for much longer. It terrified me to think they might have already moved on.

It was easy to ignore all of it when I was here, being distracted by him and all the reminders of all the things I'd fallen in love with years ago. It warmed my heart to see how so many years away hadn't changed the man he was deep down inside, and I was constantly feeling grateful he hadn't wound up in Hollywood and changed into someone I didn't recognize.

That was part of the reason I was having such a hard time now. Getting what I was getting from Theo—the care, concern, conversations, and the wonderful night out—I found myself wondering how to hold back. How could I stop myself from falling harder than I had years ago? And if I couldn't do it, how soon would it be before I wound up brokenhearted again?

"I'm so glad the worst of this is over for you, Devyn. You've come such a long way since the day I first saw you in that hospital bed," Theo stated.

I offered a smile and returned, "I'm not sure I would have progressed this quickly if it hadn't been for you."

"You did all the hard work," he reasoned in an attempt to diminish his role in my recovery. "I was just here to help you when you needed it."

It was so much more than that, but I wouldn't get anywhere if I tried to argue it with him. So, I merely replied, "Well, I appreciate it. Being here in this house with you while having this view has certainly made it easy and, dare I say, enjoyable."

He grinned at me and asked, "In that case, do you want me to make it even more enjoyable?"

My brows knit together as I sent a confused look in his direction. Tossing my hand out to the side in the direction of the view, I countered, "Unless you have the power to speed up the changing of seasons, I'm not sure what else

you could possibly do to make that better than it already is?”

It was at that moment when I realized Theo had been hiding one of his arms behind his back, because he took whatever was in his hand and played with it to the point it made enough noise to draw my attention to it.

“What is that?” I asked him.

Theo turned fully to face me, pulled his arm out from behind his back, and showed me what he’d been holding on to. I took one look at it and decided he’d done it. He’d made this whole thing even better. “I thought you might like some of these.”

“You got these for me?” I questioned him, reaching out to take the package from him.

“I did. I remembered how much you said you liked them,” he replied, the softness in his voice impossible to ignore.

This was my problem.

I loved, *absolutely adored*, what Theo had just done for me. It was the smallest thing for him to do, but it meant the world to me.

The issue was that in addition to the package of gummy bears he’d just given me—something I hadn’t had in years—he’d also taken me out to the dinner theater. Theo had been generous and sweet with me, and if things had been different between us, him handing me these gummy bears would probably feel like the most romantic gesture in the world.

The worst part about it was I couldn’t seem to deny just how much I wished that’s what it was.

With no choice but to ignore that feeling, I declared, “I haven’t had these in years.”

“Here, let me open them for you,” he urged.

I handed the package to him and watched as he opened it with ease. He looked inside, reached his hand in, and pulled out a clear gummy bear. “Pineapple, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Theo didn’t place the gummy bear in my hand. He brought it to my mouth and held it in front of my lips, waiting for me to accept his offering.

While it was entirely possible he was simply trying to mark the occasion in a special way, I would have been lying if I said it didn’t send shivers down my spine.

Keeping my eyes on his, I parted my lips. Theo placed the sweet treat on my tongue and watched as I chewed. There was certainly a level of

excitement in his expression, but there was something else there, too. Something that felt a lot like a mix of seduction and attraction.

“Well?” he asked after I’d swallowed.

I licked my lips and shook my head with a smile on my face. “They’re still the best. You should try one.”

He shrugged, dug his hand back inside the bag, and grabbed a bear. After holding it up between us, Theo popped it into his mouth.

I watched his lips as he chewed and felt something come over me. Heat and desire. I was convinced the look on my face must have matched his only moments ago, but that couldn’t be right.

With the exception of the day he left Iris to move out west to start his career when he kissed me, Theo hadn’t ever given me any indication he was interested in anything more than friendship.

And the truth was, given that he’d never talked about that kiss ever again, I had assumed that what felt like a romantic kiss to me was nothing more than a farewell kiss between friends for him.

Seeing the way he’d just looked at me, recognizing the feeling that moved through me as I did the same to him, I wasn’t so sure any longer.

Maybe there was more there.

Or, maybe it was just all wishful thinking.

Because as I continued to ask myself all the questions about what everything he’d been doing might have meant, Theo was rolling with the punches.

He was sweet to me, but he’d always been sweet.

“Yeah, these are definitely my favorite, too,” he said after he swallowed.

“What?”

“I have to tell you something,” he revealed.

I cocked an eyebrow, silently questioning him, and feeling my body grow rigid. There was an edge of seriousness in his tone, so I felt compelled to brace myself for whatever he was about to reveal.

When he said nothing, I rasped, “What is it?”

He held the bag of gummy bears up between us and shared, “These were the only treats I would get when I had a reason to celebrate or wanted something sweet over the last twelve years. I’d always immediately toss the green ones, save the pineapple ones, and eat the others.”

“What did you do with the pineapple ones?” I asked.

“I saved them until the rest were finished. For a while, I kept them in a

sealed plastic bag. My plan was to give them all to you when you came out to visit me, and we could have shared them. But after so many years passed, I had to toss them out, because you never came.”

My heart.

My poor heart had already been through too much turmoil.

I couldn't handle this. I didn't know what to do with this information.

“Theo,” I murmured. “I'm so sorry.”

He must have realized how distressed I was, because he quickly shrugged his shoulders and insisted, “It's okay. It was a long time ago, and I eventually stopped doing it.”

I didn't know what to say.

For so many years, I'd convinced myself that Theo was the one who left and never knew what it was like to experience the pain and heartbreak I did over it.

Maybe the reason was different, but I had no doubt about it now. Theo understood the disappointment and pain I felt, because every time he'd tried to convince me, especially in the beginning, to go out for a visit, I always declined.

“Isn't a crazy?” he asked.

“What?”

“It feels like it was a lifetime ago when we sat in that tunnel in the culvert talking about everything and nothing under the sun,” he started. “Somehow, I remember everything we talked about that night. I'd recall it frequently, especially when I missed you. And aside from always finding it amusing that our parents called the police, I think it's hysterical that neither of us wound up where we thought we would.”

As sentimental as his words made me feel, I was slightly relieved by the turn in the conversation. “You wanted to work in construction,” I noted.

“And you wanted to design and build Legos,” he returned with an amused look on his face.

The tension I'd been feeling was slowly dissipating. “I haven't built a Lego set since whenever you and I built our last one together.”

“Are you joking?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He grinned at me. “Neither have I.”

I offered him a look of indifference, reached into the bag, and pulled out a handful of bears. I held my palm out to him, and Theo took the red and

orange ones, leaving the two pineapple ones in my hand.

I smiled and popped them into my mouth right after I said, “We’re grownups now. I think those days are over.”

Theo lifted the bears to his mouth, his eyes studying my face. I couldn’t handle the intensity in his stare, so I eventually looked out at the view again, resting my arms on the railing in front of me.

A few moments of silence passed before Theo joined me in the same position and said, “Sometimes, I think I’d give anything to go back there.”

I couldn’t say I disagreed. There was so much I would have done differently. So, I replied, “Yeah. Me too.”

Then, I reached into the bag, pulled out more bears, and shared them with Theo. And as we stood there in the silence, staring at the gorgeous view, I foolishly allowed myself to think about how different my life might have been if I’d been given the chance to do it all over again.

---

## SIXTEEN

---

### *Devyn*

Finally.

I could finally stop it.

And it was a good thing, because I was done. I'd reached my limit, and I needed to put a stop to all of this.

Opening the door, I stepped out into the waiting room, my eyes immediately meeting Theo's concerned ones. I moved in his direction as he stood, and the two of us walked out of the office together.

Once we stepped outside, he asked, "How'd it go?"

"Great. The doctor said that everything looks really good, and he's happy with how much I've healed. He cleared me to return to normal activities, obviously keeping in mind if I experience anything that doesn't feel quite right, I'm supposed to reach out to him," I replied.

"That's excellent," Theo declared. "I had a feeling you were going to get good news from him today."

We made it to the car, where Theo opened my door for me.

He'd done that every single time I'd gotten in his vehicle since the day I'd been released from the hospital, and he'd taken me back to his place.

I couldn't stop myself from thinking that I'd probably only experience that one more time before it ended.

Because this was all going to end.

I was making it so.

After Theo rounded his SUV and got in on the opposite side, my thoughts began to run wild. My emotions felt like they were all over the place, because

while I felt relieved about a lot of things, I felt fear over others.

But regardless of the mix of emotions, there was one thing that was certain. I had finally reached the point where I could do something about all of it.

As it turned out, based on the appointment I'd just had with my doctor and my overall sense of well-being, I'd healed enough from all that I'd been through. Even if everything had gone in the right direction there, I had several other concerns occupying my mind at the moment.

Work.

It was now the beginning of September, the Friday before the Labor Day weekend, and I hadn't worked in weeks. Up until today, I hadn't received clearance from my doctor to return to work, and given the physical nature of my job, there hadn't been any choice but to give my body the time it needed to recover.

While it had paid off in the physical sense, money was one of my biggest concerns, if not the biggest.

I had bills to pay, clients who might not be prepared to wait much longer, and a life to get back to.

Yes, I was fully aware I'd been living in a fantasy world over the last few weeks. If I had been anything but realistic, I probably would have been content to stay there.

But I knew better.

I knew it couldn't continue forever.

In fact, given how great things had been going between Theo and me lately, I knew it was even more of a reason for me to make the change now.

I had to go home.

If I didn't, I knew I'd wind up losing him anyway. Maybe not immediately, maybe not even in the near future, but at some point, much sooner than I would have wanted, I'd eventually lose Theo.

And I wasn't willing to risk that.

So, before I had the chance to get even more attached than I already was, I had to bring this all to an end now. It was already going to be difficult as it was, so there was no question if I allowed this to continue for any length of time beyond today, I wouldn't be doing myself any favors.

It nearly killed me when he left me twelve years ago. I'd never survive losing him a second time. I'd never get over it.

My body had healed from a beating that had me fighting for my life, and I



knew that didn't come close to how it would be if I fooled myself into believing I suddenly would have Theo forever.

I'd never recover.

Because I loved him. I did then, and I did now. And somehow, over the years, I'd accepted where we stood. I'd recognized that we lived very different lives and would only ever be friends.

Continuing to stay with him, continuing to sleep in a bed that was only a matter of feet away from the entrance to his bedroom, would be akin to torture.

And with the way he'd been lately, I was finding it harder and harder to prevent myself from falling harder for him. Every night, I'd lie awake in that bed feeling nothing but longing for a man I'd never have.

Caring for me the way he had, taking me out to do something fun, telling me I looked great all dressed up, and giving us the time together that we'd had these last few weeks had me feeling the way I felt years ago. It was like I'd gotten back bits and pieces of the boy who'd stolen my heart so many years ago.

And while I wouldn't go so far as to say that Theo had changed from being who he was deep down inside—I was grateful the life in the spotlight hadn't taken that away—the man he was now deserved someone who was on his level.

So, I needed to let him go.

Fortunately, I was going to be able to make that happen sooner rather than later, because the doctor's office wasn't terribly far away from Theo's house.

After the short drive back to his place, we walked inside, and I decided to get right to it.

"I'll be quick," I declared.

"Quick? What are you talking about?" he asked.

In some small part of my mind, probably the one that had been loving living in this fantasy for the last several weeks, I had been hoping Theo would just know what I'd been referencing. I'd have loved it if he'd been expecting what was going to happen next.

There was the other part of my mind that knew I never actually believed that would be the case. For some strange reason, Theo seemed completely content with me being at his place. He didn't do anything, not even once, to make me feel like I'd been inconveniencing him and needed to get out.

I stopped walking away toward the stairs, which I'd intended to climb, so I could run to the bedroom I'd been staying in to pack up the things I'd brought from my place when Theo had taken me over there to get them.

As he eyed me curiously, I said, "I was just going to go pack up my things."

A crease formed between his brows. "What?"

"I have a few things upstairs that I brought over from my apartment, and I just need to pack them up. There's not a lot, so it shouldn't take me more than a few minutes. Then we can leave."

Despite the explanation, even if he knew exactly where this conversation was heading, Theo still asked, "Leave to go where?"

"Home."

He looked around the room before bringing his eyes back to mine. "I'm a little lost."

He wasn't.

I knew he wasn't.

"Theo, I have to go back home to my apartment," I said softly. I was hoping the sound of my hushed voice might lead him to taking it easy on me. And while I didn't necessarily think Theo would ever do anything to intentionally make me uncomfortable, there was no question this conversation wasn't an easy one to have, regardless of our intentions.

"But you're not saying you need to go back to pick something up. You're talking about packing your things and leaving," he returned.

I nodded slowly and confirmed, "Yes."

"Why now?"

Okay, so I hadn't been as prepared for this as I would have liked. While I wasn't sure exactly how I expected Theo to respond to the news that I was ready to go home, this reaction certainly wasn't anywhere close to what I had been anticipating.

There was a big part of me that believed he'd just accept it was time, since I'd gotten the clearance from the doctor to return to normal activities as I felt I could.

Believing that was the best reason I could give, I answered, "You told me you wanted me to stay here with you while I recuperated. I've done that, Theo. The doctor is very impressed with how well I've healed, and you're a very big part of the reason I've managed to get to this point so quickly. But now that I've recovered, it's time for me to go home."

For several long moments, he simply stared at me, a look of disbelief marring his handsome face. “I don’t understand. You just got the clearance from the doctor less than an hour ago. You don’t have to run out of here right away.”

“I know. I appreciate that, but I’ve got to get back to reality,” I explained. He jerked back like I’d physically struck him. “Reality?”

I ignored the way it made me feel to see him with such a look of hurt on his face and said, “Yes, Theo. Reality. I’ve got an apartment and work and bills. I can’t just pretend that none of that exists. Not all of us live the fancy life you do.”

Apparently, I’d landed another unintended blow. As soon as those words were out of my mouth and I saw the way he’d reacted to them, I’d regretted saying them. No matter how true they were, it was never my intention to hurt Theo. I’d never seek to hurt him.

“What does that mean?” Theo fired back.

The hurt I’d seen on his face was mixed with the anger I heard in his voice.

I swallowed hard. I needed to be kind to him, especially after all he’d done for me, but I also needed to be honest. “I’m sorry,” I rasped. “I didn’t mean for that to come out the way it did.”

“You obviously feel some type of way about me.”

Shaking my head as my emotions bubbled to the surface, I parted my lips to respond. But it seemed that years of frustration over it all had built up, and everything came out a bit harsher than I had wanted when I insisted, “No. I just... I just meant that I don’t have the same luxuries that you do. I can’t do the things you do. I have to work. I have to pay my bills. My life hasn’t exactly afforded me the opportunities that yours has for you. Weeks ago, when you first brought me here, you asked me about culinary school and why I didn’t go. The truth is, I couldn’t afford it. I still can’t.”

Any of the anger he’d been holding onto instantly dissipated. Theo tipped his head to the side, his eyes roaming over my face. With his voice just a touch over a whisper, he asked, “Why wouldn’t you tell me that?”

“I just did.”

He shook his head. “No. I mean, why wouldn’t you have told me that a long time ago? If you’re struggling, Devyn, I can help you.”

Is that what he thought I wanted? Of all the things I might have wanted from Theo, his money wasn’t one of them.

God, how mortifying was it to have to admit all that I just had to him? Worse yet, he believed the best thing to do was to offer to help me financially. Maybe he had good intentions, but he clearly hadn't considered how it would make me feel.

Tears filled my eyes. "I don't want your money," I rasped. "That's not why I said any of this to you. I'm just trying to get you to understand the reasons I need to go back to my apartment. We live in two very different worlds, Theo. I live in a world that requires me to go to work every day, to make money, and to pay bills. I struggle, yes. But I'm also capable of taking care of myself. I've done it since the day I lost my parents. I've made the tough decisions throughout my life that have made it so I can survive. I'm sure you'll recall me selling the house I grew up in."

"You said it was too much house. You said it was too painful to be there," he argued.

"Yeah. On my own, that's exactly what it was, and I had no choice," I returned. "But that's really not the point. Right now, I've got to get back to work, because I don't live in a world where I can just buy a mansion for the heck of it. I can't buy myself a house to recover in, let alone one for someone else to do that."

Theo stared at me, dumbfounded. I could tell he was feeling a bevy of emotions over it all, but he couldn't manage to bring himself to speak.

I took it upon myself to continue. "Look, I don't expect you to understand where I'm coming from with this. It probably all seems silly and meaningless to you. All I'm asking you for right now is a bit of understanding. Our lives are so different, Theo, and I need to get back to living mine. Can you *please* give that to me?"

Hurt made its presence known in his features, and as awful as it made me feel, I was relieved when Theo rasped, "Yeah, Devyn. I can give that to you."

With that, I gave him a nod of thanks and said, "I'll only be upstairs a few minutes to get my things."

He jerked his chin down slightly, but he made no move to speak.

I took that to mean the conversation was over, so I turned around and made my way toward the steps. As sure as I might have felt about this being what I needed to do, it didn't make going through the process to make it happen any easier.

By the time I'd made it to the spare bedroom Theo had been allowing me to stay in, the first of my tears fell. I shed a few more as I packed up my

things, and by some miracle, I'd managed to pull myself together before I descended the stairs again for him to take me home.

But once he'd dropped me off at my apartment, I no longer needed to hold myself back. I barely had the door shut behind me when I burst into tears.



### *Theo*

I was in a state of shock.

There was no other way to describe it.

I'd just dropped Devyn off at her apartment, and nothing had ever felt so awful and final in all my life.

Here I'd been thinking everything was great, that we were getting back bits and pieces of the friendship we used to have so many years ago, and I was wrong.

I didn't even understand how it was possible that I never knew all that she'd been feeling. I didn't know what she'd been struggling with, and I certainly didn't know that she believed we lived in separate worlds.

Everything came as a surprise, but now that she'd shared how she truly felt, I had to wonder if perhaps she'd have done better as an actor than I did.

How could she have hidden those thoughts all these years? Every time I visited, every time I called or texted, Devyn never gave me the slightest inclination that she felt the way she did.

Now, I had no choice but to drive away from her apartment and head back to the place I'd hoped she would have wanted to stay and build a life with me.

As I made my way back there, all I could manage to do was ask myself one question.

How had I gotten it all wrong?

---

## SEVENTEEN

---

### *Theo*

The last thing I ever thought I'd need at my age was my mom's advice.

Or, at least, I never thought I'd need it in this capacity.

Because I didn't think it was possible that I'd reach this point in my life and be experiencing girl troubles.

While I could have attempted to figure this out on my own, something I'd been trying to do for days now, I knew my mom would be able to provide me with solid advice.

And apparently, that was the thing about parents. It didn't matter how old their children got; the good ones would always be there to listen whenever their kids needed them.

I had no doubt my father would have been just as willing to help me, but since he was working, and I couldn't wait any longer, my mom was going to have to fill the role by herself this afternoon.

Yes, my father still worked, even though I'd made several attempts to retire him. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate my willingness to help them out. He did. But he was a proud man, a man who believed it was his responsibility to take care of his family. Even when I came home over the years and we'd all go out to dinner, he always paid. Plus, he was just the kind of guy who couldn't sit around doing nothing all day.

So, he worked.

And it was the very opposite of what I'd done over the last couple of days. I'd spent that time trying to wrap my head around the conversation I'd had with Devyn. I'd been unsuccessful.

Truth be told, I had believed we were in a good place, a place where I was working toward eventually revealing the truth about my feelings to her. And in an instant, she ended it.

Now, I was lost. Confused.

I hadn't really slept well in days.

If I thought it had been difficult to sleep when she was in the guest bedroom, I was a fool.

At least she'd been there. At least I knew I'd wake up in the morning and see her beautiful face and hear her sweet voice. At least I knew she'd be there at night before bed.

Now, I had nothing, and I was feeling as hopeless as I had when I'd gotten the call that Devyn was in the hospital fighting for her life.

Would this woman ever be mine?

I didn't know what to do, but as I turned into the driveway of my childhood home, I prayed my mom would.

The moment I walked inside, I felt a peace settle over me. And as soon as I saw my mom, a warmth moved through me.

All she needed to do was take one look at me. That was it. One look, and she knew. "Your heart is broken, isn't it?" she asked.

Something told me that even if her words had been posed as a question, my mom already knew the answer. Even still, I nodded and confirmed, "Yeah."

She moved toward me, lifted her arms, and wrapped them around me. "It's going to be okay," she promised, hugging me tightly.

I wanted to believe her, because I couldn't bear the alternative, but there was a very big part of me that felt so hopeless. I couldn't bring myself to respond and tell her.

"Sit down," she urged after she'd loosened her hold on me. I did as she asked, and the moment I was seated, she asked, "What happened with Devyn?"

"She's gone."

"Gone?"

My throat tightened painfully as I nodded. "I took her to the doctor last week, and she was cleared to resume all activities. It was great news, and I'm still relieved to know that she's healed well. But I was surprised when we got back to the house and Devyn said she was going to run up and pack her things."

Concern washed over my mom as she asked, “She wanted to go back to her apartment?”

I nodded. “Yes. And I questioned her about it, because I couldn’t understand why she seemed so adamant about leaving so quickly. The next thing I knew, she was telling me all about how we lived in different worlds, and how I couldn’t possibly comprehend what it’s like for her. She made it seem as though I didn’t understand why she’d need to return to work or that she had bills to pay.”

“Obviously, I think you know that people need to work to survive, but I can’t say her thoughts are completely far-fetched. Maybe she just meant that you don’t have that understanding of what it’s like to struggle financially,” my mom reasoned.

I shook my head. “This was more than that.”

“I assume you took her back to her apartment.”

“I did.”

“Have you spoken to her since?”

Something tightened in my chest. I’d gone from seeing her every single day for weeks on end, and now it had been five days since I’d had a conversation with her.

“No.”

“Why not?” my mom pressed.

I thought that was self-explanatory, but the expectant look on my mother’s face told me that it might not have been as clear to her as it was to me.

“She doesn’t want me around her,” I answered.

My mother’s expression turned dubious. “Did she say that?”

“No, but it’s obvious, isn’t it?” I countered. “She wanted to go home, and she hasn’t reached out to me since I took her there. And in all the thinking I’ve done over the last couple of days, I’ve come to realize that she didn’t do much of that when I was away, either.”

Curiosity washed over her. “What do you mean?”

I swallowed hard, hating that I was going to have to finally admit this out loud. “I was always the one reaching out to her. I’d call her when I could, and I’d frequently send texts to her. I did what I could to make sure we never lost that connection.”

“But it was different,” my mom reasoned.

“What?”



There was a beat of silence as she took a few seconds to consider how to respond. “Think about your relationship with Devyn from the start. For years, she had you right at her fingertips. All she had to do was walk out her front door and take a few steps to get to you. To talk to you in person. She went from having the ability to see you whenever she wanted to barely seeing you a couple of days a year. I’m not saying you didn’t do what you could to remain in touch with her, but your absence was your decision. You went off and did what you always wanted to do. She was here, and she was the one who lost you.”

“I wanted her to go with me. I asked her to come out there with me,” I argued.

My mom cocked an eyebrow. “So she could live your life?”

“It wasn’t like that at all, but there’s no question she wouldn’t have wound up in a near-death experience if she had joined me.”

“And what if you never went out there?”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “What?”

“If you never left, do you think she would have wound up where she is now?”

That question had my body going solid. If I never left, I had to believe things would have been much different between Devyn and me. We fit together so well, and we never argued. If I hadn’t left, she would have been mine all these years.

We’d have been married by now, and we probably would have already had at least one kid. Maybe two.

“I can see where your mind is right now, and I don’t think that’s what Devyn would want for you, Theo,” my mom started. “She’s so proud of you, and nobody was happier than her about all that you’ve accomplished, but you need to take some time to think about all of this from her perspective.”

I felt completely defeated, because I knew every single word my mom spoke was the absolute truth.

“I don’t know what to do,” I confessed.

The silence stretched between us. My mom was quiet for so long, I started to think she wasn’t going to offer me any advice. “Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all that matters.”

My brows pulled together. “I think you’re underestimating things.”

That’s when she hit me with me. In a look that only a mom could pull off,

she tilted her head to one side and smiled at me. “Theo, nothing else matters.”

“Considering all that was said just a few days ago, I think—”

“Those are details. Don’t get caught up in the details,” she suggested.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe my hope that my mom would be able to help me in this situation was all about to be crushed, because I didn’t think what she was encouraging me to do was possible.

“Are you telling me I should just ignore all that Devyn said and pretend like nothing happened?” I retorted.

“Now, why would you think that?”

My eyes widened in disbelief. “Because you just told me not to get caught up in the details.”

Once again, I was met with a bout of silence. Part of me was starting to wonder if my mom was purposely making me sit there quietly with her for my own benefit. It was entirely possible she was hoping I’d figure it all out on my own.

But when it became clear that I was no closer to seeing or understanding whatever it was she hoped I would, she spoke.

“When Devyn’s parents died, I was heartbroken,” she started, taking the conversation somewhere I hadn’t expected it to go. “We were all devastated, but for me, it went beyond grieving for the friends I’d lost. It was about being a mother and knowing where their deaths left Devyn in this world. Somehow, I’d managed to find peace with it. I was always comforted by the knowledge that Devyn would never be alone. For as long as I can remember, I always believed you and Devyn would wind up together. But then you left, and you never came back unless it was to visit for a short time.”

My mom paused a moment, giving me time to process all that she’d just shared. I had barely started to do that when she continued, “Devyn was alone. She had your father and me here, but it was never the same. It was never like it used to be, and it certainly wasn’t how I thought it would be.”

“Mom, I—”

“She loves you, Theo,” my mom interrupted me. “I’ve known that for years. I don’t think there’s anyone in this world who means more to her than you do.”

A hollow feeling settled in the pit of my stomach as a painful burn developed in my lungs. “She’s my best friend.”

Nodding, my mom confirmed, “Yes. But you know she’s so much more than just that.”

She was.

God, I'd known she was so much more than just my best friend for a long time. I'd done everything I could for years to forget that, because I'd witnessed how easily she'd moved on with her life after I left.

But after hearing my mother's words, it was all beginning to make sense to me. Devyn had no choice but to move on, just like I had. She just did it by searching for something she was never going to find with anyone but me.

I hated to think how much hurt and pain I'd caused her.

"Do I even stand a chance now? Can I fix this?" I questioned my mom, a bit of desperation leaking into my tone.

She left out a small sound of laughter before she answered, "Probably not without a good grovel, but yes, I think you can. I still believe the two of you are meant for each other. You just need to prove to her that she has reason to open her heart up to that possibility."

"What do you think I should do?"

Smiling, she countered, "You really want me to answer that?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Talk to her," she urged. When I stared at her in disbelief, she added, "It's not rocket science, Theo. There's nothing groundbreaking here. It's communication, and that's everything in a relationship, especially a romantic one. Give Devyn the truth. Tell her how you feel. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but that really is the bottom line. Talk to Devyn, and I promise you, everything else you're worried about will naturally fall into place."

She made it sound so easy.

I'd been twisted up inside for weeks over Devyn.

At first, it had been all the worry and fear I felt about whether she'd survive and if I'd get the chance to talk to her ever again. Then it became about her recovery and what I could do to see her through that. Next it was the death of her ex, the mess he'd gotten her into, and the truth about all she'd suffered because of him.

But the one thing that remained present throughout all of it was the love I felt for her. I wanted the very best for her. I wanted to give her the world, and I wanted to spend my life with her. In a matter of weeks, I'd gotten a taste of that, and I was well aware that I'd only scratched the surface of what life would be like with her.

Maybe my mom was right.

Perhaps the biggest problem in all of this had been my lack of effort in

communicating to Devyn exactly what she meant to me and where I wanted us to go.

I inhaled deeply and blew it out before I said, “I think I have to go and make a phone call.”

My mom grinned at me. “Before you go into it, Theo, make sure you’re prepared to fight her for her heart. Whatever you do, no matter how difficult it seems, don’t give up on her.”

I stood from the couch and promised, “I could never do that.”

Once she was standing in front of me, my mom wrapped her arms around me again and said, “It’s all going to work out.”

“I hope you’re right. Don’t you want to wish me luck before I leave?”

She loosened her hold on me, stepped back with a smile on her face, and answered, “You’ve never needed it.”

I smiled back at her, gave her a nod, and walked out feeling an overwhelming sense of determination and hope.

Today was the day I was going to fight to get my girl back in my life, and make sure she stayed there permanently.

---

## EIGHTEEN

---

### *Devyn*

“And if you know anyone who’s looking, please send them my way.”

“Will do. I’m glad you’re feeling better, Devyn. Take care.”

I disconnected the call and let out a deep sigh.

Another one gone.

It was only a matter of time before the bad luck started again. I knew it would happen; I just hadn’t anticipated it happening so soon.

It had been mere days since I’d left Theo’s place and returned to reality. Everything was even worse than I had expected it was going to be. Considering I’d pretty much been assuming the worst, that was saying something.

My rent was overdue, my credit card bills were beyond late, I’d received my enormous hospital bill, and several of my established clients had needed to move on and find a new cleaning lady. That was precisely what the phone call I’d just had was about. I’d been working through my list of clients over the last several days, and while I still had a handful of them left as loyal clients, others had decided to find someone else.

I understood it, considering how long I’d been out of commission. And given it was through most of the summer, when the majority of the clients who had children were home from school, it was even more understandable why they couldn’t wait for me to return.

To top it off, as though all of that hadn’t already been enough, I hadn’t spoken to Theo in days, not since the day he’d dropped me off here at my apartment. I’d conjured up a whole slew of reasons in my mind as to why that

was.

Maybe seeing where I lived, having the real disparity between us become painfully obvious to him, set everything straight in his mind. Sure, he'd brought me here to pick up a few things while I was recovering at his house, but until I pointed it out, he might not have really thought about it. Now, he couldn't avoid accepting that we were worlds apart.

Not seeing or hearing from him shouldn't have come as a surprise to me, nor should it have upset me. This was how it had been. It was precisely the reason why I left his place when I did.

Because I knew this was going to happen.

Life had to go back to normal, so this made sense. He was likely already back in California, and he'd probably send me a text message in a few weeks of some incredible view.

Just like that, he'd be able to return to normal. And I guess I wanted that for him. I'd always wanted the very best for him.

But no matter how much I wanted him to have an incredible life, I couldn't deny the hurt I felt over all of it. I couldn't pretend that there wasn't some small part of me that wished things would have been different.

Even if I knew I would never measure up to him or the women he was now surrounded by, it didn't change that I longed for a life that was different than the one I had. Because although Theo was technically still my friend and would always be a part of my life, it never felt like enough.

Being without Theo like I wanted was always painful. It was feeling this constant ache in the center of my chest. It was knowing that no matter how hard I tried, nobody would ever come close to having as big a piece of my heart as Theo did.

Not even the death of my ex-boyfriend had affected me the way being without Theo affected me. I thought that said a lot about the love I felt for Theo.

Sadly, none of it mattered.

All that was said, all that had happened, and everything I'd felt over the last few weeks of being with him all the time hadn't meant nearly as much to him as it did to me. I hadn't wanted to play games with him or try to get him to do something he didn't want to do, but I fully believed his response to me wanting to come home had all been for show.

Because if I'd meant more to him, if all that he'd made me feel when he did things like taking me out to the dinner show were purposeful, wouldn't he

have done something about us being apart now?

Wouldn't he have wanted to change things?

His inaction proved to me that I'd been right to get myself out of that situation before I became even more lost to the feelings and love I had for him.

I'd been so caught up in all that was happening inside my head I hadn't realized the tears began rolling down my cheeks. As soon as I noticed them, I didn't try to fight them.

Instead, I buried my face in my hands and let them flow.

But somewhere in the middle of it all, a knock came at my door.

Great.

I hadn't been expecting anybody, so considering my luck, it was probably a bill collector whose calls I'd been avoiding.

I made my way to the door, not even attempting to clean up my face. Maybe that would work to my advantage. Goodness knows that if it was the bill collector who'd already left me several messages, he probably wasn't going to want to deal with me when I was emotional. Maybe that would be the silver lining of this whole situation.

I flung open the door and instantly regretted my decision.

Because it was not a bill collector.

Theo was standing in front of me, and he looked like he hadn't slept in days.

"Theo?" I rasped, my voice a mixture of surprise and the emotions I'd succumbed to only minutes earlier.

"You've been crying. Are you okay?"

I ignored his question, the softness and concern in his voice, and the worried look on his face. Instead of answering, I countered, "What are you doing here?"

"Why are you crying?" he pressed.

I was not going to admit to him that I'd started thinking about him and burst into tears as a result, so I went with something else that was partially true.

"Life just seems to like to kick me in the teeth on a regular basis," I said. "I'm dealing with business things. Now, what are you doing here?"

He tipped his head slightly to the side, allowed his eyes to roam over my face, and replied, "I was going to call, but I've decided I'm done doing the bare minimum."

I couldn't bring myself to react to his words the way I might have if he'd said them to me ten years ago. I refused to assume what he meant.

It also seemed I refused to worry about self-preservation, because I ignored all the shock and confusion I felt at seeing him standing there, and I stepped back to allow him the space he needed to come inside. Once I closed the door behind him, I repeated, "The bare minimum of what?"

For long moments, seconds that felt like whole minutes, Theo didn't respond. He looked at me. His eyes raked over my face in such a way that it was almost like being touched by his fingers.

"Do you know what I was doing when I got the call from my mom that you were in the hospital fighting for your life?" he finally asked.

If his goal was to try to surprise or confuse me, he was succeeding on both fronts. Because not only did I not anticipate that question, I also didn't know what it had to do with why he was here now.

"No, Theo, I don't know what you were doing," I answered honestly, hoping he wasn't going to tell me he'd woken up in bed next to a beautiful woman.

"I'd just woken up not long before in a luxurious hotel up in New England, and I was preparing for a day of looking at properties, hoping to find one to purchase," he revealed.

This was becoming more and more strange with each word he spoke. "Okay," I replied.

"I got that call, and my whole world stopped," he declared.

Suddenly, my mouth became parched, and my lips parted slightly.

Theo wasn't done. "My mom told me you were in the ICU and that the doctors weren't sure if you were going to make it," he began again. "I felt like I couldn't breathe. The craziest part about all of it was that mere minutes before I got that call, I'd been thinking about you. It had dawned on me you never responded to my text the night before, and I had gone through my phone to find a folder I'd saved on there. In that folder were pictures of just you or you and me, and I hadn't added a new one to it in years, because I hadn't been home for years. That led me to thinking about the last time I saw you, the last time I spoke to you. Too much time had passed, and I was a fool for ever allowing things to be that way."

There was so much to unpack in all that he'd just shared, but I couldn't stop my mind from going to one important thing. He claimed to have a folder on his phone with pictures of just me or me and him. I didn't know what I



was supposed to do with that information.

Why would he have a folder like that on his phone?

When I finally managed to get myself to stop focusing on that, I realized I needed to say something. Since he was standing here sharing all that he was and placing so much blame on himself, the safest and easiest thing for me to tackle was that.

So, I replied, “You were working, Theo. You did so many movies in such a short time. I’m sure time was just passing you by, and before you even realized it, years had passed. It wasn’t intentional.”

Shaking his head, he said, “No, it wasn’t. And you’re right, I did a lot of filming in that time, but I also didn’t make the effort to come back. That’s unacceptable.”

“I’m not upset with you for doing something you love, Theo. Why are you telling me all of this? What is going on?”

Frustration moved through him. “I was up in New England searching for a place to buy, a place to settle down. I didn’t know if that’s where I was going to end up, but that’s where I started my search. Then, I got that call, and I knew this was where I needed to be.”

“How? Why?”

“You’re here,” he said in such a way that he must have believed offered all the explanation I needed.

It didn’t.

“I’ve always been here,” I reasoned.

He nodded. “Yeah, and I stayed away for too long for a lot of reasons, none of which were particularly good. But I’m here now, and I know so much time has passed, but I bought that house, because this is where I’m settling down. I’m not leaving, Devyn, and I want you in my life.”

Wow.

I hadn’t realized Theo had reached a point in his career where he was looking to slow down or stop acting, so he could settle down.

But more than that, I had been sitting here just minutes before he arrived, believing that he had already moved on from our discussion days ago and had gone back to California. Not only was I wrong about that, but I had seriously underestimated how much that conversation had affected him.

Now he was here, proving how wrong I’d been and sharing his feelings. I couldn’t bear to see him so distressed.

“Theo, I’m not going anywhere, and I’m always going to be in your life,”

I assured him. “I’ll admit that our conversation a few days ago wasn’t exactly the most pleasant, but you need to understand that me leaving your place to come back to my apartment wasn’t about me not wanting to be in your life. It was just about me needing to get back to mine.”

Shaking his head again, he declared, “No. I know why you left, and I understand it, but when I say that I want you in my life, I don’t mean I want it to be like it’s been for far too many years. I want you in my life the way it should have always been.”

My body went solid. I didn’t want to make assumptions about any of this, but things were taking a turn I wasn’t sure I was prepared for, certainly not the one I had been expecting.

“What are you saying?”

He stepped forward, closing the distance between us. Then he reached for my hand, held it in his and squeezed it before he shared, “I left here twelve years ago, and I was so stupid. It’d be easy to stand here and blame being young, but I should have known better. For some foolish reason, I always thought everything would work out the way it was supposed to, the way I wanted it to. I mean, everything I had wanted to happen in my life was happening. It was all so easy, and I thought it was going to be that way with you.”

He stopped for a moment, took a few breaths, and continued, “I was wrong. I was so wrong. And I can’t even begin to tell you how much it gutted me when I came back and learned that you had moved on, that you had a boyfriend.”

For the first time since he’d started indicating things I hadn’t been anticipating, I moved, and it was only because my body jerked backward. “What?”

Without taking his eyes off of mine, Theo’s head moved slowly from one side to the other. “I’ll never forget when my mom told me she’d gone out for lunch with you the week prior, and you had told her about the guy you’d started dating. She had indicated it was serious between you and that guy, and even though I think I did a good job hiding it, I was devastated. I knew I’d lost you.”

Lost me?

How could he say that?

“Why would me getting a boyfriend upset you?” I asked him, feeling my heart pounding wildly in my chest. “Theo, you’ve got to be joking me right

now. You had all of those celebrity women you'd be on press tours or walking the red carpet with. Gorgeous movie stars with whom I could never dream of competing."

"Of course, you couldn't," he returned, striking a blow I don't think he realized he'd delivered. When I dropped my gaze to the ground between us, I felt his opposite hand gently touch my chin. He pinched it softly between his thumb and forefinger and urged me to look at him again. I did, but it wasn't without tears in my eyes. "You couldn't compete with them, because there was no competition. They were never going to be what you were to me. And for the record, I never moved on to anyone until long after I realized I'd lost my shot with you."

My lips parted, a tear escaping and spilling down the side of my cheek. Theo released my chin, shifted his hand to the side, and swept the tear away.

Then his voice dipped low as his opposite hand gave mine another squeeze. "My dad told me a long time ago that time is our most precious resource we can't get back. It kills me to know how much time I've lost, but I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere. I want to fix this. I want to fix what comes after all the mistakes I've made. Before I left here twelve years ago, I kissed you and told you I loved you, Devyn. Maybe I wasn't as clear about it as I should have been. I was in love with you then. I fell in love with you all over again these last few weeks, and I haven't been able to get the taste of you off my tongue in twelve years. I don't know where you—"

That was all he managed to get out, because I couldn't take it any longer. I yanked my hand out of his, threw my arms over his shoulders, and captured his mouth with mine.

---

## NINETEEN

---

### *Devyn*

I was no longer in control.

Too many words had been said that I couldn't ignore, and the moment my lips touched Theo's again, I was gone.

Lost to years of longing and desire.

*I was in love with you then.*

He loved me then.

*I fell in love with you all over again.*

In the weeks we'd spent together since I'd been released from the hospital, he'd fallen in love with me all over again.

He was in love with me.

There were so many questions I had for him, like why he hadn't made it clear when he kissed me twelve years ago—a kiss which resulted in him not being able to get the taste of me off his tongue in all that time—that he didn't just love me but was *in love* with me.

So much would have been different.

It would have changed everything. At least, I think it would have.

So many unanswered questions, and yet, I didn't care about talking to get any responses from him.

Because it didn't matter to me now. All I cared about was being right where I was—in his arms, our bodies pressed close together, and his lips on mine.

I couldn't even begin to quantify what I was feeling.

Years.

God, it had been years of remembering what we had and believing I'd lost it forever.

Now, it was back. *He* was back.

And everything about him and this moment was consuming me.

The scent of him around me, fresh and spicy, warm and woody, only pulled me in closer to him. It was subtle yet inviting, drawing me in deeper.

I'd been trying to ignore the masculine scent of him for weeks, and I'd been mostly successful. But now I didn't stand a chance, because as I had the aroma invading my nostrils while he kissed my lips, it was mixed with the sounds coming from him.

Deep rumbles from his chest vibrated against my body. They started there and became what could only be described as satisfying groans, the kind you'd expect to hear after someone took a bite of their favorite dessert. Only in this case, with the way Theo was kissing me, his soft lips claiming mine in a way I didn't know was possible, it was safe to say Theo thought I was a delicious treat.

But what affected me more than the scent and sounds was the feel of Theo. Or maybe it was the feel of us together. I didn't know how to describe it. He'd released my hand a long time ago, slid his arm around my waist, and tugged me close. My body tight to his, Theo's other hand drove into my hair at the side of my head, settled at the back of my skull, and his fingertips pressed in every so often, matching the moans as they left him.

The physical closeness, the complete lack of space between our bodies, finally felt like it matched the connection we'd had in our hearts for years. The way Theo held me was possessive yet gentle, like he wanted to claim me at the same time he thought I was precious to him. I loved the dichotomy between the power and strength of his hold and the warmth and tenderness of his touch.

All that I was experiencing made it impossible for me to avoid the buildup of desire and longing. I loved what was happening, but I was desperate for more. But no amount of hunger for Theo could bring me to pull my mouth away from his to ask for what I wanted. My fear that he might come to his senses and put a stop to this altogether was far too great.

But no sooner had I had that thought when Theo tore his mouth from mine. With his forehead pressed against mine, both of our chests rapidly rising and falling with our labored breaths, he asked, "What's happening here?"

He knew.

He had to know the answer to that question already.

But perhaps this wasn't about him not knowing so much as it was about him wanting my admission of it.

This was my chance, my opportunity. *My moment.*

I'd had plenty of bad ones over the course of my life, but this one felt different. Being held close to him, emboldened by the words he'd just shared, I felt confident I could take this moment and make it beautiful, make it the best one of my whole life.

"I fell in love with you when I was thirteen years old," I started, a bit breathless. "I fell off my bike, and you came to my rescue, patching me up. That was the moment I knew how much I loved you, and there hasn't been a day since when I've ever stopped."

"Jesus," he hissed, angling my head in a way that put me in the perfect position for his mouth to descend on mine once more.

While this kiss didn't last nearly as long as the first one, Theo added another element, which made it that much more enjoyable. His tongue ran along the seam of my lips, a silent yet unmistakable demand for access. I granted it, and the moment I felt his tongue inside my mouth, a shot of desire went right between my legs, forcing a moan to escape.

Theo pulled back once more, the grip he had on my hair much firmer than before. "What are we doing?" he asked, his voice deep and husky.

A smile formed on my face, a sense of pride moving through me. I'd made Theo McCormick sound like he was riding on the very edge of losing control. It was almost like having all of my wildest dreams come true.

Almost.

"We're doing what we should have done a long time ago," I whispered. "You're going to make love to me tonight, Theo."

He released my hair, the backs of two of his fingers stroking tenderly down the side of my face. "Are you sure you're ready for that?"

"I've had more years than I care to admit to prepare for it. I think I'm beyond ready," I confessed.

He dropped his mouth to mine, pressing several chaste kisses against my lips. Then I was up in his arms, and Theo was carrying me through my apartment to my bedroom.

Any and all thoughts or worries I had about where I lived or what he might have thought no longer existed.

I was with Theo.

Teddy.

The man who'd been in love with me nearly as long as I'd been in love with him. Money, houses, and social status didn't factor in here.

It was just us, the way it was always meant to be.

And it was about to get even better between us.

We made it to my room, Theo effortlessly lowering me to my back in the bed. Once he settled his body over mine, his hips nestled between my parted thighs, he started kissing me all over again.

I was inclined to say this round of kissing was the best yet, because along with it came the ability for me to feel more of him. To feel *all* of him. And though it wasn't quite yet all that I had hoped it was going to be between us, there was a whole lot of promise in what I did feel.

As Theo's lips left mine and moved along my jaw and down the side of my throat, it was the feel of him hard between us that had me most excited. I loved knowing he was so turned on, that he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

That's when it hit me. I didn't need to wait to get more of him.

I'd waited what felt like a lifetime for a moment like this, and I had every right to enjoy it the same as he was.

So, I immersed myself fully, and I allowed my hands to go exploring. They were in his hair and on his shoulders. I eventually slipped them beneath his torso, snaked them down his sides, and for the first time in my life, my hands touched Theo's ass.

He groaned, his tongue gliding across the skin covering my collarbone, and I smiled, feeling victorious.

I grabbed his ass in my hands and gave in to the urge to roll my hips against him. That got me another groan from him.

As wonderful as it was, it still wasn't enough.

I wanted more of him, all of him. His grunts and groans. His kisses and caresses. And I desperately wanted to feel the warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips. So, I released his ass from my grip, dragged my hands up toward his back, and slipped them beneath the hem of his shirt.

Theo's body tensed the moment he felt my touch. It only lasted a few seconds before he released it and started doing some exploring of his own.

While he continued to pepper kisses on my shoulders, neck, jaw, and mouth, one of his hands reached down, so his fingers could curl around my

leg just above the back of my knee. He hiked it tighter around him, nearly trapping my arm between it and his back.

His hand began blazing a path up my bare thigh toward the bottom hem of my cotton shorts. Much to my surprise and utter delight, Theo didn't hesitate to slip his hand beneath my shorts, so he could find a handful of my ass.

When I let out a moan, he revealed, "I've wanted my hands and mouth on you like this for as long as I can remember."

"I love it," I panted.

"The real thing is so much better than the fantasy, Devyn."

"Theo, I want more," I informed him, the need dripping from my words. "Please, take this off."

I'd been tugging my hands against his shirt, but then Theo lifted his body from mine, forcing my hand to fall away.

On my back in my bed, I stared up at Theo as he lifted his shirt over his head and shifted back and forth on his feet, so he could kick off his shoes. I'd seen him without a shirt on before, but this was different. He was no longer a teenager, or an actor on the big screen.

He was my guy, big and strong, and he was taking his shirt off for me. The feeling it left me with was indescribable, and I wanted to give him something similar back in return.

So, I curled my body up and lifted my camisole over my head. The look in Theo's eyes, already dark, intensified.

His hands went to the fly of his jeans. Recognizing what he was doing, I found myself holding my breath as I waited for him to drop them. A moment later, I continued to hold my breath when he pushed his pants down his legs, and they fell to the floor.

Give and take.

That's what this was between us, and now, it was my turn.

I hooked my thumbs into the elastic waistband of my shorts, lifted my hips, and slid them down my legs.

I didn't think it was possible for Theo to become even more turned on than he already was, but apparently, I was wrong. Him seeing me in just a bra and panties was undoing him. I could see it in the way his hands balled into fists as his sides, and the way his jaw clenched.

"Do you like what you see?" I asked.

"You're so beautiful. I can't believe we're here like this right now," he



replied.

“I think it’s only going to get better from here,” I told him, reaching my hands behind my back to unclasp my bra.

His breathing grew shallow, his muscled chest rapidly rising and falling. And when I pulled the straps down my arms and tossed my bra aside, Theo took a moment to appreciate the view before he moved forward, pressed one hand to the bed and lifted the other to my chest, cupping one of my breasts in his palm.

A shudder ran through my body, and I squeezed my legs together in an effort to relieve the ache building between them.

“Lay back,” he said softly.

I immediately complied with his request, and the next thing I knew, both of his hands were on my breasts as his mouth captured one of my nipples. His tongue lapped at me, licking and swirling around the hardened peak, before moving to the other side. I didn’t know precisely how much time had passed, but it felt like Theo had lavished my breasts for hours.

Throughout it all, I moaned and squirmed.

Feeling the heat build in my body, wanting more of him, I reached down and flattened my palm against his abdomen. Then I allowed it to drift down until it landed at the waistband of his boxer briefs.

With my breasts held firmly in his hands, Theo lifted his head and brought his eyes to meet mine. Anticipation lingered in his gaze, and I smiled as my fingertips slipped beneath the material of his underwear.

“Are you okay?” I asked, keeping my hand still.

“I’m not sure what would ever make you think I’m not,” he returned.

“You’re frozen to the spot right now. I just thought I’d make sure there’s nothing wrong,” I told him.

He closed his eyes briefly and swallowed hard before letting out an unsteady breath. “Nothing is wrong, baby. I just want to make sure I don’t miss a single second of feeling your hands on me for the first time. That’s all.”

Baby.

Theo had just called me *baby*, and he’d done it so effortlessly. I loved it. I loved the way it felt to have him call me that.

So, I wanted to give him something he’d love just as much. I pressed the back of my hand against the material, slid my fingers toward the middle, and felt the velvety soft skin of his cock. When I curled my fingers around him

and squeezed, Theo groaned, the sound deep and guttural.

I switched the position of my hand, grasped him firmly from the opposite side, and stroked once.

“Devyn,” he groaned. “Fuck, baby, no matter how many times I fantasized about you, I couldn’t have dreamt up anything as perfect as you are in real life.”

My heart was beating so hard, I thought it was going to come right out of my chest. “Kiss me,” I begged.

Theo’s lips were instantly on mine, his tongue darting into my mouth, and he was devouring me. I continued to stroke him, and his thumbs didn’t stop moving over my nipples.

We stayed like that a long time, the fire in my belly burning wildly out of control, until Theo pulled his hips back and disconnected his mouth from mine.

“I need to be inside you,” he whispered against my lips.

“I want you inside me,” I whispered back.

Releasing my breasts from his hands, Theo dragged them down my sides, made it to my panties, and curled his fingers around the top hem.

A moment later, they were gone. His eyes remained focused between my legs as he removed his final article of clothing and rolled on a condom he’d pulled out of his wallet.

I didn’t mind him taking in the view, because I was certainly doing a bit of sightseeing on my own. My eyes had dropped down his body and focused on his erection.

I licked my lips at the sight of him—long, hard, thick, and pulsing.

For a while, he stood there, unmoving.

“Theo?” I called.

He lifted his gaze to mine. “Yeah?”

“Come here,” I urged.

Several more beats of anticipation lingered between us before Theo moved and joined me in the bed. His body initially hovered over mine, but the moment our lips touched, he rolled to his back and took me with him.

He continued to kiss me, one hand drifting down my back and toward my ass. My body was burning with desire, my hips rolling feverishly over him.

Theo tugged gently on my hair, forcing my mouth away from his, and said, “Guide me in, baby.”

I didn’t need any additional instruction or encouragement. I reached down

between us, wrapped my fingers around him, and positioned him.

Our eyes met, and I sank my hips down, my lips parting at the sensation of being filled by him.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

The two of us remained like that for a few seconds, and I don’t think either one of us was prepared for just how profound this moment would feel.

“You’re perfect for me,” I rasped.

Something washed over his face. “I’ve known that about you for a long time now, Devyn.”

I smiled at him, lowered my mouth to his, and kissed him.

Then I began to move.

It was perfect. Completely, totally perfect.

With his hands on my body, our tongues dueling as I moved my hips over him, the burn that had been building in my belly was growing by the second.

Theo gave me a moment to be in charge, but he eventually took over. With what seemed like impossible ease, he managed to flip me to my back without breaking the connection between our bodies.

And somehow, he took something that was already perfect and made it even better. He thrust his hips forward, each stroke slow and deep, my body melting into his.

Theo’s eyes remained on mine, the look on his face unbelievably sweet. “After all this time,” he growled.

His expression mixed with the sound of his voice indicated he was feeling so much of what I was. His eyes bored into mine, silently communicating just how much this connection between us meant to him.

This had been years.

God, *years* in the making.

My moans filled the air around us as I wrapped my limbs around him. I wanted to hold on to him forever, to never let him go.

And I found myself desperate for more.

More of everything.

Faster. Harder. Deeper.

“Harder,” I breathed.

Theo did not give it to me harder. He continued to thrust inside with his languid pace and gentle strokes, building me up, but taking his time.

“Theo, please,” I begged. “I need you.”

He dropped his mouth to mine, brushed his lips gently against my lips, and whispered, "I've dreamed of that for years." He dragged his hips back slowly before pushing them forward at the same speed. After pressing a kiss to my lips, he revealed, "I have you now, baby. I'm taking my time and savoring every single second of this." He repeated the movement, his cock going a little deeper this time, but certainly no faster. "I want every moan, every whimper, every kiss. Every inch, Devyn. I'm going to take pleasure in every part of you for as long as I can."

Apparently, I didn't need him to go faster.

Hearing those words, the determination and confidence in the way he said them, was enough for the feeling to start building deep in my belly.

Theo McCormick wanted every inch of me, every part. And he went about taking it, too.

He pressed his lips to mine before they drifted down along my jaw and to the skin on the side of my throat. His hands caressed my body, roaming everywhere, like touching my skin was as crucial to his survival as breathing oxygen.

I couldn't say I didn't understand. My hands couldn't get enough, either. Seeking. Searching. There was no better feeling in the world than the weight of his body over mine.

And that's when it hit me.

His words.

*After all this time.*

I got it. I finally got it. We were here with one another after all this time. It suddenly made sense why he wanted to go slow. This wasn't just about physical pleasure. It was about connection. It was about years of longing.

It wasn't about wishing we could go back in time to change things. It was about being here in this moment, accepting everything for what it was, and looking forward to what comes after.

It was about love.

Our love.

And there weren't many words to describe just how incredible it felt to realize we had that between us.

It was simply perfect.

So, it was no surprise that Theo managed to build me up, to build us both up, in the most beautiful way.

We took our time with each other, exploring with our hands and mouths.

And eventually, the feeling in my belly grew stronger as my breaths became shallow.

“Teddy,” I whimpered, the sound of my voice unrecognizable.

He groaned and said, “Love that, baby. Let go, and come for me.”

So, I did.

Sparks of pleasure shot through my body, one pulsing wave after another. It went on for what felt like hours, and somewhere at the tail end of it, Theo found his own release.

I watched as he came, his eyes focused on mine, and there was no question I’d never seen anything more fascinating or breathtaking in my entire life.

I didn’t know where things were going to go next between us, but when Theo collapsed on top of me, his big warm body covering mine, I knew everything was going to be fine.

---

## TWENTY

---

### *Theo*

Hope could easily lead to disappointment.

Depending on the situation, that disappointment could be devastating. Coming to Devyn's apartment this afternoon, intending to reveal what I had, could have gone either way, and if things had taken a turn into a bad place, devastated would have been just a fraction of what I felt.

Despite knowing how bad it could have turned out, I couldn't dream of coming here without having hope. The idea that things wouldn't work out was unbearable.

Fortunately, things had gone far better than I'd anticipated. While I'd had high hopes about how things would go between us when I came here to tell Devyn the truth, I never expected what just happened between us.

Of course, that didn't mean I didn't love every single thing about it.

I did.

It was the single best experience of my entire life.

And after all this time, all these years, I believed I was finally right where I was meant to be. I believed Devyn was where she was supposed to be. The two of us, wrapped up in one another's arms, just felt perfect.

"I can't believe we just did that," Devyn said softly, lifting her cheek from my chest to look at me.

I was on my back in her bed, her gorgeous, naked body was pressed tight to my side, and we'd been like that for a few minutes now. I think we were both taking some time to try to process it all.

But apparently, Devyn had some thoughts about it she wanted to discuss.

Feeling immense relief about being where I was, especially after all that we'd just had, conversation didn't bother me at all.

"Yeah, it definitely came as a surprise to me," I returned, my fingers trailing lightly over the skin on her back.

She cocked an eyebrow. "Are you telling me you didn't come here hoping for that result?"

"I'd be lying if I said I haven't wanted what we just had for years, baby, but I can't say that I believed I was going to come here and get what you just gave me," I confessed. "I never thought you'd attack me like you did."

"I didn't attack you!"

My lips twitched, recalling how it happened. "I didn't even get to finish what I was saying when you decided to cut me off by kissing me."

Devyn bit the corner of her lip as a sheepish look washed over her face. "You said all that stuff," she reasoned.

Nodding against the pillow, I confirmed, "I did. And it seems it was the right thing to do."

"Do you think it's crazy?" she asked.

"Do I think what's crazy?"

She attempted to shrug her shoulders, but it wasn't exactly easy to do in her position. "I don't know. I guess I'm just in shock about how it all happened."

Worried that she was having second thoughts, I asked, "Do you regret it?"

My body braced for her response, terrified she might say what I didn't think I could handle her saying.

Her eyes roamed over my face, inspecting every feature. "Not at all. Do you?"

"Absolutely not."

The tension moved out of both of our bodies, and when Devyn didn't say anything else, I asked, "So, what do you think is so shocking about it?"

"It just seems crazy to me that we held off admitting the truth to one another for so long, and the minute we do, we couldn't manage to have a lengthy conversation about it or even go on a date before jumping into bed with one another," she explained.

My fingers stopped trailing along the skin on her back and pressed in. "We went on a date not that long ago," I pointed out.

"What?"

“The dinner theater,” I reminded her.

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, but we weren’t exactly a couple or anything. That was just you and I going out to do something fun. It wasn’t an official date.”

“Maybe it wasn’t in your mind, but it was in mine,” I revealed. “And if I’m honest, I had the best time with you that night.”

Her grin grew. “Yeah, I did, too. We used to have fun like that all the time, and it was really nice having it back.”

“So, can I ask you a question, then?”

“Sure.”

The last thing I wanted to do was create any tension between us after what we’d just had, but I couldn’t avoid having important conversations with her if this was going to work for us in the long run.

“If you were enjoying spending time with me, why did you push so hard to leave right away?”

Everything changed in her expression. I started to question if I’d made a mistake in asking for this too soon. It wasn’t that I didn’t think we should talk about it, but maybe we needed to have more time together just being comfortable with this new place in our relationship before we started addressing every little thing.

“I told you it was because I needed to get back here and return to my normal life,” she replied.

Right.

I knew that’s what she’d told me, but there had been so much said that day, which left me wondering if there wasn’t more to it. The last thing I wanted to do was start this off between us with me accusing her of lying to me, so I said, “Okay.”

A tense silence lingered in the air for a few beats before Devyn revealed, “That wasn’t the only reason, though.”

At least I had confirmation I wasn’t crazy or paranoid.

“What else is there?” I asked.

“Fear.”

Her response caught me by surprise. “Fear? What are you afraid of?”

“You,” she answered. My body tensed, and just as I was about to ask how she could ever be afraid of me, she added, “More specifically, I’m terrified of losing you. Being around you like I was for weeks on end, it was impossible not to reminisce about how it used to be, how I could walk out my front door



and see you whenever I wanted.”

While I was relieved to understand she wasn't actually fearful of me, I was still a bit confused. “You were staying with me,” I reasoned. “You could just wake up every morning and see me. I don't understand.”

“That was temporary, Theo. You have a life, a job. I could feel myself getting caught up in you all over again, and I knew I wasn't going to survive it when you left to go back home to California.”

I closed my eyes and sighed.

My mom had been right about everything. All of it.

I'd been such a fool.

When I opened my eyes again, I declared, “Tennessee is my home, Devyn. Iris is my home. *You* are my home.” She held my gaze intently, hanging on to each word and desperate for another. So, I continued, “I don't know what you want to see happen here, but I know what I want. I'm here to stay.”

“Stay?” she repeated.

“I won't lie and say I'll never make a trip out west again to visit, and I can't say I'll never make another movie, but I've accomplished everything I've wanted to accomplish in my career,” I explained. “Films would be few and far between, if at all. I want my day-to-day life to include waking up beside you as the two of us build a life together.

“You were serious when you said you were looking at properties to settle down,” she stated, as though the words I'd said earlier had just clicked inside her head, as though she believed them now.

“Yes, Devyn, I was serious about it, and the second I arrived here weeks ago, I knew this was where I needed and wanted to be.”

Her eyes roamed over my face, searching for something. I wasn't sure if she found whatever she was looking for before she asked, “So, we're going to do this? For real?”

“Yes.”

Devyn took in that single word, smiled at me, and dropped her cheek to my chest again. We stayed like that for a long time, neither of us saying a word, until I finally spoke.

“Can I ask you another question?”

“Okay,” she replied.

“When I got here earlier tonight, it was clear you had been crying,” I started. “You told me it was about business things. Was that the truth?”

She lifted her head again, returning her gaze to my face. “Not all of it,” she admitted.

“Was it about us?” I asked, figuring it might be easier on her if I just guessed.

Devyn nodded. “Yeah. I was trying to tell myself I’d done the right thing by leaving, but it hurt when so many days had passed, and I hadn’t heard anything from you. I felt as though I was right back to square one. You being away while I waited for scraps of you to come through the phone or the very rare visit.”

Her words had me stopping for a moment to consider everything that had happened ever since I left to start my career. As much as I didn’t want it to be the truth, Devyn’s assessment of the situation was accurate.

I was away, and she was here, waiting to get anything she could from me.

“You rarely reached out to me,” I said. “I mean, I’d hear from you on my birthday or on a special occasion. And of course, you never hesitated to contact me whenever a new movie was released. But beyond that, I didn’t hear from you. I’d send things to you on occasion, because I never wanted to lose my connection to you, but I started to think you didn’t want to hear from me.”

She tipped her head to the side, her eyes filling with tears. “I lived for those moments, Theo. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt. I’d get a shot of a view from some gorgeous place where you were on set, and it would just remind me where I stood. I realized how different our lives were, and how I’d never measure up to the people who were constantly around you.”

I hated that.

Of all the things she’d shared with me, this wasn’t the first time she’d indicated she didn’t think she was good enough, or that I was somehow better than her.

I lifted my hand to the side of her face, my thumb stroking along the skin on her cheekbone. “Please tell me that’s no longer how you feel. It kills me to think you thought you were unworthy in some way.”

She looked away from me, her eyes darting around but never focusing on anything specific. Eventually, Devyn dropped her head forward and pressed her forehead into my chest. “My life is a mess.”

I had a feeling this had something to do with her business troubles she’d mentioned before. “Tell me what’s going on,” I urged.

Devyn kept her face hidden, and the tension in her body was

unmistakable. Full minutes passed without a response from her, and it became clear this was something she was really struggling with.

“Baby, I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s going on,” I explained, my voice gentle.

That got me a reaction.

With tears spilling down her cheeks, she lifted her head from my chest and said, “I don’t want that. I want us to just be us. I don’t want us to be you cleaning up my mess. I got myself into it, and I need to figure out how to get myself out. Unfortunately, that’s proving to be a bit difficult, and I’m feeling overwhelmed. Being in the hospital for all that time and then being unable to work for all the weeks that followed hasn’t helped. I’ve gone two months without any income, and for someone who was already struggling in the financial sense, that’s a lot of time.”

I wasn’t sure if she’d give me the answers I needed, but I asked, “How bad is it?”

“Embarrassing.”

“Tell me,” I urged, giving her a squeeze.

“I’m two months behind on rent, have some credit card debt, and I just got my bill from the hospital, which was nearly sixty-thousand dollars. I was expecting that to be more, so I guess I’m relieved it wasn’t worse, but I still can’t afford it. Worst of all, so many of my clients had to find someone new to clean their homes, so now my income isn’t even what it used to be, and that was just enough to keep me afloat before all of this.”

Guilt ate away at me. I’d been living in the lap of luxury for years, never worrying at all about money, and Devyn had been struggling for a long time.

“This isn’t anything you should feel embarrassed about,” I told her. “You’re behind on your rent because you were in the hospital. And the hospital bill was not your fault. As for the credit card debt, I think most of the American population has some. It’s not a big deal, and I’d feel a lot better if you’d allow me to help you. I can take care of all of it for you.”

“It’s not your responsibility,” she argued.

“I see it differently,” I retorted.

Her brows pulled together. “How so?”

“You’re mine now, Devyn. I want nothing more than to give you the whole world, and that’s got nothing to do with me being an actor. It’s about me being the man in your life who wants a future with you, who wants to remove any obstacle in your way, and who wants to be the partner you

deserved to have all these years.”

“You make it sound like it’s as simple as snapping your fingers.”

My lips twitched. “Because it is. For me, it is. And I want it to be easy for you. After everything you’ve been through, let me give you something. Let me take care of you. Give me the chance to show you how a man treats the woman he loves.”

Two tears rolled down her cheeks. “I don’t know if I know how to do that.”

I brought my hands to either side of her face and used my thumbs to swipe at her tears. “Of course, you do. You let me take care of you after you fell off your bike.”

That got me a smile.

I wasn’t done yet, so I continued, “And if you forgot how it works, I’ll teach you. I’ll show you what it’s like to be loved. And when you’re ready to go, I’m sending you to culinary school, because you deserve to do what’s going to make you happy in this life.”

“You can’t do that, Theo.”

I rolled her to her back, brought my face to within inches of hers, and whispered, “Theo’s not the one doing it.”

“What?”

“Teddy’s taking care of you, so you’re going to have no choice but to let him.”

Her voice was a deep rasp when she replied, “This is going to take some time to get used to.”

I grinned against her mouth. “Let me start helping you now.”

“What do you mean?”

I kissed her, and almost immediately, I felt the tension she’d been holding on to vanish. Then I pulled my mouth from hers and answered, “I want to taste you, baby. All I want you to do is lay back and enjoy having me take care of you.”

The look in her eyes turned seductive.

I chuckled, kissed her mouth once more, and began working my way down her beautiful body.

My lips and tongue and teeth explored her, kissing the delicate skin at the front of her throat, licking and sucking her nipples on her full breasts, and nipping at the flesh covering her hips.

“Theo,” Devyn moaned, the sound of her voice an indication she was

already turned on again.

I continued my descent, dipped my face between her legs, and allowed my tongue to dart out, so I could taste her.

Devyn's hips bucked at the sensation, so I curled my arms around the backs of her legs, urging her thighs on top of my shoulders, and settled my hands on her hips.

The taste of her was too good, and I wasn't prepared to have a drop of her go to waste. I wanted her right where I wanted her, and much like I had with our first round, I intended to take my time.

I took one last glance up her body to her face. She was looking down at me, heat and desire and longing written all over her face, and I refused to deny her any longer. I refused to deny myself any longer.

Twisting my head to the left, I kissed the inside of her thigh. My lips lingered there, feeling the muscles in both of her legs tense. Then I turned my attention to the other side and did the same before burying my face in her pussy and feasting on her.

And once I started, I didn't want to stop.

There was no question I was going to need to take my time, because I needed more of her. The taste of her was unbelievably sweet. In addition to that, I loved the way Devyn's hand reached down to me, gripping my hair firmly in her grasp.

It was almost as though she wanted me to stay exactly where I was, doing precisely what I was, as much as I wanted the same.

I was relieved we were on the same page, because I couldn't stop, even if I tried.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any better, Devyn proved me wrong. Because the sound of her sexy moans filled the air around us as she attempted to grind herself against my face.

Hearing her like that, needing more of it, I continued to devour her.

Licking.

Sucking.

Teasing.

*Eating.*

Over and over, I brought her to the very edge, building her up expertly but never sending her soaring. I could hear the frustration in her groans every time I did that, but then she'd start whimpering when I started to go at her again.

“Teddy,” she moaned.

God, that voice. The way she said that name that only she called me.

I fucking loved it.

My cock was stiff, straining against the mattress beneath my body. I needed to be back inside her, or I thought I’d die.

So, I decided it was time to stop playing games with her. I gave her what she wanted, pushed her over the edge, and saw her through one wave of pleasure after another. Only when she made it to the other side did I begin to kiss my way back up her body.

I kissed her mouth, allowing her to taste herself, and nearly came at the sound of her moan that followed.

When I pulled back, Devyn offered a lazy smile. “I didn’t expect all that from your mouth,” she started. “You know, if this is how you go about teaching me how to accept your help, maybe I will be able to do it, after all.”

I let out a laugh and kissed her again. “I told you I’d teach you how, and I’m up for the task whenever you want, but right now, I need to be inside you again.”

“So, what are you waiting for?” she whispered against my lips.

With that, I didn’t delay.

And since I’d taken my time to do slow and sweet with her the first time around, I switched things up during the second round. It was no less enjoyable.

---

## TWENTY-ONE

---

### *Devyn*

“I can finally rest now.”

There was no stopping the laughter that escaped at Mary’s declaration. It had been two days since Theo showed up at my apartment, and things took a very wonderful turn in our relationship. It was the first time in so many years that I truly felt lucky.

We’d decided to come over to visit with his parents tonight, since I’d had work commitments yesterday and this morning.

Yes, even if I’d decided to stop being stubborn and allow Theo to help me, I still intended to honor my commitments to my clients for a little while. Life without Theo was impossible to imagine, but I just wasn’t sure where we’d wind up. I couldn’t put myself in a position where I’d have no way to support myself.

Theo had called his parents yesterday, and he told them he wanted to visit tonight. He hadn’t shared what happened between him and me, so when we arrived together, smiling and holding hands, it was safe to say they were ecstatic.

Scott and Mary ushered us both inside, and we celebrated with a delicious feast. While she didn’t know for sure what Theo had wanted to visit for, she certainly had her hopes up.

He and I had shared that we were officially together and were planning to see where this was going to take us.

Mary couldn’t have been happier, and I had a feeling I knew why. I easily recalled a conversation I’d had with her years ago, when I’d taken her out for

her birthday.

Theo was utterly confused. “What are you talking about? What do you mean you can finally rest?” he questioned her.

With her exuberant expression pinned on her face, she brought her eyes to her son. “No matter how old you get, you’re always going to be my baby, so I can’t stop myself from worrying. And ever since you left Iris to chase after your dreams, I’ve worried even more. Now, I don’t need to.”

Theo’s brows pulled together. “You’re done worrying about me?”

She shrugged, a smile still plastered on her face. “I mean, I’ll always worry, but not in the same way.”

“What were you worried about?”

Mary’s eyes came to mine before she answered, “That you were going to make the biggest mistake of your life and let this girl get away.”

I smiled at Mary as tears welled in my eyes. God, I loved this family. All of them.

“Well, I have to agree with you on that one, Mom. It would have been the biggest mistake of my life,” he declared.

She returned her attention to him and said, “Oh, I know. I told Devyn about this six years ago.”

Theo’s head snapped in my direction. “She did?” he asked me.

“She made it clear she was concerned about you,” I replied.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“What else could I say?” I retorted. “I told her she raised an incredible man, and that when the time came that you were ready to settle down, you’d have your pick of the litter.”

Theo’s brows shot up in surprise.

“And I told her I just hoped you picked the right one,” Mary interjected.

“You did good, son,” Scott chimed in. “And Devyn, you know how much we love you.”

I nodded and rasped, “I do.”

For the next hour or so, Theo and I sat and visited with his parents. We had such a great time, and I loved feeling like I was now part of their family in a much different way.

I was no longer their best friends’ orphaned daughter; I was their son’s girlfriend. It was something to be happy about, something to celebrate, and it felt so good.

After a while, Theo stood and said, “We’re going to get going.”



I thought Mary might be disappointed, but she didn't seem the least bit upset that Theo was ready to leave. I think she really was happy knowing that we weren't just leaving here, but we were doing it together.

Scott just went with the flow, like always.

We all said our goodbyes and offered a few embraces, and then Theo and I were out the door. I started to walk with him toward the car, but he took me by the hand and said, "Wait. I want to do something."

He tugged on my hand, urging me to follow him in the opposite direction. I went, even though I was confused as to where he was taking me. It wasn't quite dark yet, but it was getting there, so that made it even more baffling.

But a moment later, I realized where he was taking me, and something warm settled in my heart, my belly, and all the way down to my bones.

"After you," he said, when we arrived.

I beamed up at him and started climbing. Theo followed closely behind me.

The next thing I knew, we were standing inside the treehouse we'd spent months of our lives in when we were younger. A feeling of contentment moved through me as I looked around at the space that hadn't changed since the last time I was in it. Everything was still there.

"I can't believe your parents left this like this," I said.

"Yeah, my dad has done some routine maintenance on it over the years, since the wood all needed to be replaced."

"Why didn't he just take it down?" I asked.

Theo walked over to the outdoor bean bag style armchair we'd put in years ago. I hadn't realized it would survive all these years out in the cold, even if it was technically safe from the rain and snow. But it had a nylon cover on, which seemed to have held up well in the colder months.

"Probably because he knew I'd eventually want to come back here one day. And now, I can finally do what I've wanted to do for so long," he replied.

He sat down in the chair and reached his arm out to me. I went, and once I was close enough for him to touch, Theo urged me to sit in his lap. Then he pressed a chaste kiss to my lips.

"This is what you've always wanted to do? Bring a girl to your treehouse, so you can make out with her?"

Theo shook his head. "No. Just you. Only you. No other girl has ever stepped foot in this treehouse. It's yours and yours alone."

I cocked an eyebrow and bit the corner of my lip. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then I’ve got to celebrate.”

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

With my palms pressed firmly against his chest, I wiggled my hips back and forth in his lap. “I think this deserves a reward, don’t you?”

His hand on the arm that was wrapped around my waist dropped down to my ass and squeezed me there. “I don’t have any expectations, but I’m not going to say no to anything you want to do.”

This was it.

This was one of the best changes that had come about since Theo and I acknowledged our feelings for one another and had taken this step.

So much was different between us, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t wonderful.

It was so freeing to not have to hold myself back from doing what felt natural around him. I could touch him, kiss him, hug him, make love to him, and best of all, I could tell him how much I loved him whenever I wanted.

And right now, I wanted to do something I had yet to do with Theo, something I hoped he was going to enjoy immensely.

I licked my lips, lifted my booty off his lap, and dropped down to my knees in front of him. The heat in his eyes was undeniable, and I knew he was thrilled about what I had planned to do.

My hands drifted up his thighs and made their way to the fly of his jeans. They worked there to free him, and the minute I had my fingers curled around his length, Theo groaned.

“This is beyond what I’d expected I’d get here.”

“Hopefully you won’t be disappointed,” I returned with a grin on my face just a second before I parted my lips and took him inside.

Another groan escaped from him, which only served to make me want to do everything I could to make this enjoyable for him.

Theo and I had been doing our best to make up for lost time over the last several days, but it seemed we were both as insatiable as we were generous. Not only had he made it clear he wanted to savor our first time together, but when he got his mouth on me a little while afterward, he seemed intent on prolonging it.

I felt the same way about him now.

Drawing him in deep, hollowing my cheeks, I wanted this to go on and on

forever. Part of that might have been the desire to make up for lost time, but the bigger reason was about wanting to please him.

Theo had his hand in my hair, gripping it firmly, while I alternated my pace on him. I'd started off slow, taking my time to build him up, and when I wanted to give him more, I increased my speed.

His grunts and groans filled the air, encouraging me to continue just as I was.

Much to his delight, I didn't just adjust my speed. I also worked on the depth. I'd work him fast before taking him in as deep as I could and holding him there. Then, if I needed to give my jaw a break, I'd pay special attention to the tip, licking, kissing, and sucking him there.

Throughout, I'd glance up at him, and I'd see the heated look in his eyes, the one that told me he was on the verge of losing control. I was so turned on, and seeing that look mixed with the feel of his hand in my hair and the sound of the deep rumble that came from him, had me pressing my thighs together to relieve the ache that was building there.

I kept at him, my mouth filled with him. I loved every second of it.

Theo did, too.

Eventually, he croaked, "Devyn, baby, if you don't want me to come in your mouth, you need to stop."

I released him, kept my mouth right at the tip, and revealed, "I want you to come in my mouth."

His jaw clenched just as I smiled and took him inside again. Then I kept my eyes on him as I worked him through to the end, swallowing every last drop of him.

When I finally freed him from my mouth, Theo's head dropped back, and he sighed as he gave me a gentle tug behind my head. "That was beyond my wildest dreams. Jesus, Devyn, you're incredible with your mouth."

I crawled up his body and kissed him. And after he'd taken a few moments to gather himself and fix his pants, Theo stood.

"Time to take care of you," he said before he began kissing me.

Theo kept one arm wrapped firmly around my back to hold me close as his opposite hand covered my breast and squeezed. His hand kneaded the flesh there while his tongue explored my mouth, but eventually, that hand began drifting down my torso.

My jeans were unbuttoned, the gentle brush of Theo's knuckles sending shivers down my spine. After he lowered the zipper and created enough space

for it, Theo's hand slipped beneath the hem of my panties and drifted down between my legs.

The moment he'd reached his destination, he groaned. Apparently, Theo liked knowing that I was already hot and wet for him. I couldn't help it; I'd become so turned on when I had him in my mouth, and now that he was kissing me and had his hands on me, I didn't stand a chance.

He continued to kiss me, swallowing my moans as his fingers played, circling my clit and applying the pressure right where I needed it.

Whether taking a page out of my book or simply wanting to do it on his own, Theo built me up in a variety of ways. Fast and firm or slow and gentle, it all worked for me. There wasn't anything he could do I wouldn't love.

And eventually, I became such a mess of whimpers and panting, I had to tear my mouth from his.

"Are you going to come?" he asked me.

One of my hands came up to his shoulder, and my nails dug in. "Teddy," I called out a warning.

He didn't relent.

A moment later, my lips parted and my breath caught in my throat as I felt the familiar onslaught of my orgasm starting to tear through me.

I let out a deep moan of pleasure, Theo's mouth coming to kiss the skin on my neck as he worked me through it.

My pulse pounded, wave after wave of pleasure crashing into me.

Theo saw me through to the end, and for a few seconds afterward, we merely stayed like that with our bodies pressed tight together.

He gave me time to come down from the high, and once I did, he said, "Come on. We need to get home, so I can get you out of these clothes."

"You still want more?" I asked.

Theo grinned at me. "Baby, brace yourself, because I'll never have enough of you."

I didn't need to prepare myself, because I felt the same about him.

I smiled back at him and begged, "Take me home, Theo."

He didn't delay.



“Is this a good birthday present?”

My hand was being held in Theo’s grasp, and when I looked up at him, I couldn’t help myself from feeling such immense gratitude.

Weeks had passed.

I’d had whole entire weeks of being Theo’s girlfriend, and they were arguably the best weeks of my whole life.

Theo begged me not to schedule myself to work today, because he wanted to spend my birthday with me. We woke up together in his bed this morning, and if I was being honest, he could have given me nothing else but that, and it would have been the best present in the world.

As I was quickly learning when it came to stuff like this, when it came to me, Theo wasn’t one to just do the bare minimum.

My birthday was no exception.

“This isn’t a good present, Theo. It’s the *best* present. I haven’t been here since we came together with our parents when we were twelve. I’ve always wanted to come back,” I told him.

“I wanted to bring you sooner, back when I took you to the dinner theater, but I was worried you might not be able to enjoy it completely, so I decided then that I’d bring you for your birthday,” he replied.

“I’m so glad, because I really enjoyed going to dinner with you that night,” I replied. “And I definitely wouldn’t have been able to do everything here that I am now if you had brought me then.”

“Where to next?” he asked.

I grinned and pointed at what I wanted. “That one.”

His brows shot up. “Again?”

“I think it’s my favorite.”

“Then we’re doing it as many times as you want,” Theo said.

I let out a laugh. “I think just one more will be enough for me.”

Theo tugged on my hand and started leading me in the direction we needed to go, and I happily went.

For my birthday, he brought me to Dollywood. If there was one thing we, as Tennesseans, were lucky to have, it was the best theme park in the country. Better yet, it was right in our backyard.

But as I’d just mentioned to Theo, this was the first I’d been here since our parents had brought the both of us here together when we were twelve years old. Coming here had been one of the best memories I’d had as a kid, and I loved that Theo thought to bring me here today.

Not only that, but it seemed he was intent on fulfilling all of my wishes for the day. That was precisely the reason why we were going on Dollywood's *Mystery Mine* for the third time today. It was my favorite coaster, one I'd ridden on with my dad when I was younger. Enjoying it now with Theo was all I could have ever wanted and more.

Since we were visiting Dollywood in the fall, what I deemed to be the best time of year in Tennessee, we didn't wait more than five minutes to get on the ride. I had an absolute blast, and when we got off, Theo asked, "Are you sure you've had your fill?"

I nodded. "Will you feed me now?"

"I'll do anything for you, Devyn."

Looking up at him with his baseball hat and sunglasses on, I knew that was the truth. Theo didn't think twice about bringing me out in public, donning a disguise just so he might be less recognizable. I'd noticed several people give us lengthy stares, and a handful of people who saw us in line recognized him and asked for a photo, but beyond that, we'd been fortunate not to have anything crazy happen.

Of course, he'd brought two guys from his security team along with us, just to be on the safe side. It was a bit strange having them around, but it was for our benefit and safety, so I didn't mind.

Truthfully, I was so caught up in Theo and all the fun we were having together that I barely noticed them there.

"Do you know how much I love you?" I asked him, leaning my torso into his.

His lips twitched as he nodded. "I absolutely do."

"This has been the best birthday ever," I told him.

"It's not over yet. You've got this today, a fancy dinner with me tomorrow night, and Mom and Dad want to celebrate with you this weekend," he reminded me.

Tears welled in my eyes. "Thank you, Theo."

"For what?"

I shook my head. "For a long time, I was really down in the dumps about where I was in my life. I never imagined I'd ever feel this happy again. I swear, I feel like the luckiest girl in the world right now, and it's all thanks to you."

Theo wrapped his arms around me, hugged me tightly, and said, "I love you, Devyn."

“I love you, too.”

Following a beat of silence, he loosened his hold, took me by the hand, and declared, “Come on. Let’s go get you fed.”

I happily followed beside him and thoroughly enjoyed the rest of my special day.

---

## EPILOGUE

---

### *Devyn*

“I knew this was going to be breathtaking, but I still can’t get over it. What did I tell you?”

I was at Theo’s place, sitting on one of the new pieces of outdoor furniture he’d had me help him select for his balcony. It was my favorite part of the whole house.

Every day I was here, I came out and spent some time on the balcony.

Fall had officially arrived, and it brought with it the vibrant fall colors in the Smoky Mountains. Red, orange, and yellow patches of color made up the most beautiful sight. It was one of the things I’d always loved about where we lived, and I felt happy and lucky to be able to see it like this.

Theo had just stepped outside when I made my declaration and asked my question. I’d been focused on the view, but I’d heard him open the door and step outside. He’d been out here with me moments ago and had started the fire for us to enjoy when he said he was going to go inside to put some water on. I had requested a cup of tea, because nothing made me happier than being with Theo on his deck, in the fall, sipping a hot cup of tea, with the fire burning beside us.

“You did tell me that. But do you know what will make it even better?” he countered.

More happiness moved through me, and a smile lit up my face. I twisted my neck, tearing my gaze away from the gorgeous colors to stare at something even more captivating.

My guy.



My Teddy.

Another few weeks had passed, and there was no question how much he'd changed my life in such a short time.

I was happy. All the time.

Just a few short months ago, I'd been feeling like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders and nothing exciting to look forward to, nothing to bring me joy.

Now, I had him, and having him meant having it all.

Not material things. Not money. Just Theo.

Well, Theo and his sweet surprises.

"Did you bring me gummy bears?" I asked, noting his hands behind his back.

He grinned at me, pulled his arm out, and held up a bag. "I did."

My eyes widened in surprise, because Theo didn't just get me a regular package of gummy bears. Theo got me what looked like several pounds of pineapple gummy bears. "Are you serious?"

Theo moved closer and gave me the bag. "I thought they might make you happy."

I took the bag, set it down on the chair right between my legs, and worked to open it up. I didn't hesitate to reach in, grab a handful, and pop two of them in my mouth before holding a couple out to Theo.

He sat down on the seat next to mine, opened his mouth, and allowed me to place them on his tongue. As he chewed them with a smile on his face, he moaned. I leaned forward, touched my lips to his, and got a groan out of him.

"Thank you for this. This is perfect."

"It can get better, you know," he declared.

"How is that?" I asked.

A look I'd never seen before washed over his face. "This place can be the place that you and I not only cuddle and talk and eat gummy bears while we enjoy the scenery, but it can also be the place where you tell me you'll be my wife."

I jerked back, my lips parting. "What?"

Theo pulled his other arm out from behind his body, revealed a velvet-covered ring box, and slid off the chair down onto one knee. "I've loved you my whole life, Devyn, and I've spent far too much time away from you. I don't want to do that any longer. I want you with me always. Please give me the greatest gift in the world, and tell me you'll marry me."

Tears had welled in my eyes.

Theo and I had only officially been dating for about two months. But that didn't matter, because it was just like he said.

He'd loved me his whole life.

I'd felt the same about him.

Being apart was agony, and I never wanted to live another day without Theo lighting up my world.

"I'll marry you, Theo. I'll be your wife."

He pulled the ring out of the box, slipped it onto my finger, and captured my face in his hands, so he could kiss me. Then he gathered me in his arms, lifted me off my seat, and brought me over into his lap.

"I can't believe we're engaged. I had no idea you were going to do this," I said.

"I don't know how I waited this long. I've had that ring for three days, waiting for the perfect time to give it to you," he shared.

"What made you pick now?"

His lips twitched. "Mostly, I couldn't wait any longer. But the truth is that no matter how much I thought I needed to do something extravagant to make it perfect, I was wrong. Because this is you. And the only thing that would really make this whole proposal perfect was the two of us. Nothing else needed to be factored in."

I smiled, leaned in, and kissed him again. His tongue swept into my mouth, and things got a hot rather quickly.

I broke the connection between our mouths, rested my forehead against his, and revealed, "You've made me the happiest woman in the world, Theo. I hope you know just how much I love you."

"I do, baby. Because it's the same for me."

I touched my lips to his once more.

Theo broke the connection the second time. "I have to go get your tea. It's sitting on the counter inside."

"We can get a new cup later," I told him.

"You don't want it?" he asked.

"I want something else instead. I want my fiancé to make love to me right here on this chair, on this balcony."

His eyes darkened. "You're my fiancée."

"I am. What are you going to do about it?"

Theo's hand drifted down my side to my hip, where he gave me a gentle

squeeze. “I’m going to give you everything, baby.”

Barely a second later, Theo’s mouth captured mine.

Then he went about fulfilling his promise to give me everything.

Much later, he got me a new cup of tea and the two of us cuddled while we shared gummy bears. It was the best day of my life.



*Theo*

*One year, one month later*

“Husband?”

I’d never get tired of hearing that.

Even if I thought there was some chore that was going to follow the summons, hearing Devyn call me husband was something I’d never grow tired of.

I made my way to the kitchen, and the moment she looked up, I replied, “Yes, wife?”

Her face lit up.

As much as I loved her referring to me as her husband, it was clear Devyn felt the same when I called her my wife.

It had been just over a year since we’d gotten married, and neither of us seemed to have gotten used to our new titles.

Yes, we’d been married for just over a year.

As it turned out, we’d opted for a short engagement. A *very* short engagement.

Without her parents being here to celebrate, Devyn didn’t want anything big. She actually suggested simply going to the courthouse a day after I proposed to get it done. I wanted something special for her, so I decided against it. I told her to take my mom with her and go buy the dress of her dreams.

Two weeks later, we had a private, small, and intimate ceremony. It was perfect, and she looked stunning.

Even now, with her hair pulled back away from her face and an apron covering her body, I thought the same.

“I need you to try this,” she declared. “I think I finally have it.”

I moved toward the island where she was standing, pulled out a stool, and sat down. Devyn slid the plate over to me before she clasped her hands in front of her mouth, her excitement and anticipation consuming her.

“Well, it certainly smells like you’ve got it right.”

Surprise washed over her. “Do you really think so?”

I nodded. “I do, baby.”

Bouncing on her toes, she waved her hand toward the plate. “Okay. Try it, then tell me what you think.”

God, I loved her. I loved seeing her like this, and I was relieved she’d finally accepted my offer to send her to culinary school. She shut down her cleaning business and focused all of her spare time and effort on learning.

It was paying off for me in a very big way, because she was constantly cooking in the kitchen. But the meal she’d just made was one I hadn’t expected she’d ever make.

Mac and cheese and brisket.

Devyn had said she couldn’t bring herself to make that meal if she wasn’t going to do it justice. I loved that she now had the confidence to at least try to make it. If she didn’t think it was going to live up to the recipes her parents had used, she never would have allowed me to try it.

I plunged my fork into the pasta and brought it up to my mouth. Rich and creamy, it was divine. Before revealing my thoughts, I moved to the brisket. Perfection.

After I swallowed, Devyn asked hopefully, “Well?”

“The last thing I’d ever want to do is break your heart, baby, but I can’t lie to you,” I started. The color drained from her face as the shock she felt over my words registered. I quickly continued, “This is exquisite, and I have to tell you that I think it’s just a touch better than what your mom and dad made.”

She blinked her eyes rapidly. “You think so?”

“I promise. It’s incredible.”

Devyn moved around the counter and made her way to me. Once I wrapped an arm around her waist, she said, “I wanted it to be like Mom and Dad’s.”

“It is,” I assured her. “But I think for me, there’s something even more

special about it, because you made it.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I have one more question,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Do you think our baby will want it for his or her birthday meal just like I did?” she asked.

For a brief moment, I stared at her. A feeling of hope surged through my body, but I didn’t want to get ahead of myself. “Well, I can’t see why not. I’m going to want it for mine. But I’m curious why you’re asking that question.”

She smiled at me and rasped, “Because I’m pregnant, Theo. We’re going to be parents.”

There was no way to describe the feeling of utter joy that moved through me. “Are you serious?”

Devyn nodded.

“When did you find out?” I asked.

“I took a test this morning.”

Pregnant.

Devyn was going to be a mom. I was going to be a dad.

I dropped my fork down on the plate, wrapped my arms around my wife, and hugged her tighter than I could ever remember doing before that moment.

“Do you feel alright?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she assured me.

“What made you take a test?”

“My period was late, so I took the test on a whim. Even though I knew it was a possibility, I didn’t think it was going to come back positive.”

“What a surprise.”

“Are you happy about this?” she asked.

I tipped my head to the side, my eyes roaming over her face. “Devyn, there isn’t anything I don’t want to experience in this life without you. I’m ecstatic, and I can’t wait to meet this baby.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “I’m so happy, Theo. Deliriously happy.”

I drove my hand into her hair, running my fingers through the strands until my hand settled at the base of her skull. Then I urged her mouth to mine and kissed her, doing it while feeling so much love and gratitude for all that she’d brought into my life.

There was no question the last year and half had brought about some major changes in both of our lives, and now they were going to change again.

It amazed me how one small moment could have such a profound impact, but our lives were proof of just how true that was. The outcome hadn't always been the best, especially for Devyn, but now that we were here together at this point in our lives, we didn't worry about what was coming.

Together, the two of us could face anything.

And it was a good thing that was our mindset. Because when our twins—a boy and a girl—arrived the following summer, there was no question a united front was going to be necessary.

---

# **PREVIEW OF CHASE THE STORM**

---

## Prologue

### *Indy*

“We’ll be millionaires, Indy.”

I let out a sigh and closed my eyes.

Travis was certainly enthusiastic. Maybe I shouldn’t have taken that to be a bad thing, but I honestly believed this was a bit far-fetched.

Of course, it was entirely possible I was just being my typical cautious self.

Realizing what I was feeling could have merely been my own personal issues and not about what the future held, I forced myself to be positive about it. “I hope you’re right.”

I was standing in the small bathroom in my apartment, preparing to brush my teeth so we could go to bed. While I lifted the toothbrush to my mouth, I looked in the mirror at Travis.

He was standing, leaning against the doorjamb, and he was watching me with a brilliant smile on his face. Travis always did have a nice smile. It was one of the things that attracted me to him from the start. It was that and his positive outlook on everything.

When I initially turned him down after he’d asked me out on a date nearly a year and a half ago, he didn’t give up. He was persistent, and eventually, that tenacity wore me down. I figured there were worse things in life than agreeing to go on a date with a guy who put in that much effort.

So, I agreed to a date.

And now, we were here.

Things were great between us. We got along well, enjoyed each other’s



company, and loved one another.

I was happy.

And Travis? He never hid his enthusiasm for anything, so I knew he was wildly happy.

As soon as I'd gotten my words out and started brushing my teeth, Travis pushed off the door and took a step forward into the already cramped bathroom.

"I am right," he insisted eagerly. "This is going to be the best thing that's ever happened to us."

Since I couldn't exactly speak, I cocked an eyebrow, silently questioning him. I didn't need words. Travis knew me; he knew I didn't hold illusions of grandeur the same way he did.

"I'm serious. You've got to give me just a few minutes to show you everything tonight. I can show you how the last four months have been, and you'll see I'm not making this up. It's happening, Indy. It's happening, and I want you to go on this ride with me."

I bent over to spit into the sink, rinsed off my toothbrush, and wiped the toothpaste from my mouth. When I stood and spun around to face him, I smiled. "You know I'll go on this ride with you," I assured him. "What would make you think any differently?"

Shaking his head, the smile lighting up his face, Travis replied, "I don't mean I just want us to go about things the way we have been. I want us to do this together."

My eyes narrowed, confusion moving through me. "What do you mean?"

Travis held my gaze for several beats. Initially, I thought it was because he was trying to figure out how to explain what he was getting at, but after he spoke, I realized that wasn't it at all. He'd paused for dramatic effect, and he knew what he was about to say was crazy.

"I want you to quit your job."

See? Crazy.

"Are you nuts?" I countered, letting out a nervous laugh.

Travis reached for my hand and gave it a gentle tug. "Not at all. Come on, let me show you."

My boyfriend urged me into the bedroom, where I found his laptop sitting in the middle of the bed.

I wanted to be as excited as Travis was right now, but the truth was that I was exhausted. I'd had a long week at work, and now that it was Friday, I just

wanted to crawl into my bed and close my eyes. Seeing Travis's computer sitting there, I had a feeling I wasn't going to be going to sleep any time soon.

Travis and I didn't live together. He had his own apartment, and we typically spent our work week staying in our own places. When the weekend rolled around, we were with each other. While we occasionally stayed at his place, we typically stayed at mine. Travis shared an apartment with his best friend, Randy, and since we often wanted privacy, my place just made more sense.

We climbed into the bed, where I settled myself beneath the blanket while Travis opened his laptop.

"Alright. Look at this," he urged, turning the computer slightly in my direction.

With my head resting back on my pillow, my eyes went to the screen, and what I saw caught me by surprise. I stared for a long while, trying to discern if what I was seeing was accurate.

I shifted my gaze to my boyfriend's face. "Are these numbers accurate?"

He nodded slowly, the smile on his face growing. "I was just as shocked as you are when I realized it. Obviously, I knew I was making money, but it didn't occur to me until this afternoon just how much. I talked to Randy about it, and he was blown away, too."

"This is excellent, Travis. I'm really happy this is working out for you."

"I want it to work out for you, too. You hate your job, and this will give you the opportunity to make more money while getting to spend your days with me," he reasoned. "What could be better than that?"

Travis wasn't wrong about my job, even if "hate" was a rather strong word for it.

Currently, I worked as an administrative assistant. It wasn't my dream job, but it paid the bills and gave me some extra every month to save. It offered security, and that was something I liked.

My dream was to become a photographer. I was saving my money every month, so I could take classes to learn all the tricks of the trade. I wasn't far from making that happen, either. Just a few more months of saving, and I'd finally be able to register.

"It certainly sounds delightful, but you aren't serious," I replied.

"I'm dead serious, Indy. I really need the help, especially with handling the books. You're the only person I know I can trust to not screw me over."

“What about Randy?” I asked.

“He’s working for me, but I wouldn’t want him handling the business side of this. You’re good at this kind of thing, and you’ll easily make double what you’re making now. Probably more.”

The numbers Travis was showing me were certainly promising, but this was wild. “It’s only been four months,” I noted.

Nodding, he returned, “Exactly. If I’m doing this well just four months in, imagine what it’s going to be a year from now.”

As it turned out, Travis had decided to open his very own cannabis dispensary. It officially opened four months ago, and I did my best to be as supportive of his new business venture as I could.

Based on what I was seeing now, there was no question things were looking promising. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. There weren’t any other dispensaries within a reasonable distance to where we were, so it was likely Travis had nailed down the entire market. Mixing that with his absolute determination, he was bound to be a success.

While I couldn’t deny what was staring me in the face, it still made me feel uneasy. “I don’t know, Travis. The business is still young, and I’m so close to having enough money set aside to take my photography classes. Maybe we should give it some time.”

“Time? Time for what? Are you looking at the same numbers as I am? Indy, I’ll pay for your classes. I just want you to come and work for me. Come on, take a chance for once. I realize this is a big deal for you, but just imagine it. I’m already doing this well on my own. With you by my side, handling the important stuff, the sky’s the limit for us.”

The man certainly knew how to say all the right words. The romantic side of me gobbled that up, but the practical side of me always had to make me see reason. Throughout my life, that was always the side that won. And I couldn’t necessarily be mad about it, because I was comfortable.

Life was good.

Granted, I wasn’t a millionaire, like Travis was claiming we’d soon be, but I was happy. With him, and with my life.

“It’s risky,” I said softly.

His expression softened and turned sympathetic. “I know you feel that way. I understand. But I’m confident this is going to be it for us. Is there something I can do to make you see this isn’t the thing you need to be so cautious about?”

“This really means that much to you?” I asked.

He nodded. “It means everything. I’ve always wanted to give it all to you, and for the first time, I feel like I can. But for me to be the best I can, I need you by my side.”

“It scares me. What if something happens? What if... I don’t know. What if there are a couple of bad months, and we can’t make ends meet?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see that happening, but why don’t we move in together?”

“What?” My eyes widened.

“We’ve been together for a year and a half now, and we love each other,” he reasoned. “If it’ll set your mind at ease, we’ll move in together, so it’s less money we’ve got to shell out. My lease is coming to an end in two months with Randy, so I’ll tell him now that I won’t be renewing. He’ll be cool with it. And you and I can just stay here at your place until your lease is up five months from now. We’ll see where things are at that point, and we’ll either renew if you’re still feeling unsure, or we’ll get a bigger place if things are going well.”

Now my brain was feeling a bit muddled. I liked the idea of us moving in with each other, and truth be told, Travis was doing what he could to ease the part of my brain that wanted logic to factor in.

I spent some time trying to mull it over, and I had a feeling Travis could see that I was wavering. He took advantage of that and tried to pull me over to his side.

“Please, Indy,” he begged. “I get that it’s scary for you, but take a chance on me. On us. I promise I’ll make sure you don’t regret it. I’m going to give you the life of your dreams.”

For far too long, I’d been stuck on the straight and narrow path. I never veered off, and it had always served me well.

But nothing about my life to this point had been extraordinary. And nothing could ever beat Travis’s enthusiasm and determination.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to do something a little daring for once. Maybe it would be the best thing I ever did.

“Fine,” I agreed. “But I want to see a full reporting of all the numbers before I give my two weeks’ notice on Monday.”

Travis’s face lit up before he captured my face in his hands and kissed me. “You won’t regret this.”

The two of us spent the weekend going over all of the details, and when

Monday rolled around, I walked into my job and handed them my two weeks' notice.

I felt good.

I was nervous, but I was excited.

I couldn't wait to start this new chapter, and I was looking forward to seeing where finally deciding to take a risk would lead me.

Sadly, I never could have prepared myself for where I wound up.

**[Get Chase the Storm here.](#)**

## **ALSO BY A.K. EVANS**

### **The Everything Series**

*Everything I Need*

*Everything I Have*

*Everything I Want*

*Everything I Love*

*Everything I Give*

### **Cunningham Security Series**

*Obsessed*

*Overcome*

*Desperate*

*Solitude*

*Burned*

*Unworthy*

*Surrender*

*Betrayed*

*Revived*

*Unwrapped*

### **Hearts & Horsepower**

*Control the Burn*

*Behind the Wheel*

*Far Beyond Repair*

*How to Rebuild*

*Out of Alignment*

### **Archer Tactical**

*Line of Fire*

*Collateral Damage*

*Silent Target*

## **Rock Stars & Romance**

Fragile

Wish

Closer

Underneath It All

Terrible Lie

Complication

## **Harper Security Ops**

Broken

Tempted

Conceal

Haunted

Sacrifice

Crushed

Distracted

Ruined

Salvaged

Silenced

Mistaken

Intention

Unharmmed

## **Road Trip Romance**

Tip the Scales

Play the Part

One Wrong Turn

Just a Fling

Meant to Be

Take the Plunge

Miss the Shot

In the Cards

Only in Dreams

Break the Ice

In Plain Sight

*Twist of Fate*

*Lock and Key*

*Crave the Love*

*What Comes After*

*Chase the Storm*



---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over forty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

For new release updates, sign up [here](#) and follow me:

