



*Breaking*  
a novel  
*free*

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Breaking Free  
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*To my husband for being okay with the many nights I spent writing this story. To Riggs for sitting so patiently beside me as I scribbled out some words across paper. To Bree for being a supportive teenager through this entire process. To my parents and my siblings. Without any of you, I would not have had the courage to keep writing.*

May 2001

I was never one for the bar scene, but it was my twenty-first birthday, and my friends told me that this was where we had to go to celebrate. The Handlebar. It sounds like a biker joint, but it's not. It's a small music venue with a bar in our downtown area. I guess they figured guests to the venue would need the drinks to cope with the up-and-coming musicians who played there.

I could have stayed home that night, drunk a few beers on my couch, and then moseyed off to bed at ten. Instead, I was forced into a pair of tight jeans; a flowy, black top; and a pair of shoes that had a heel no woman should have ever subjected their feet to. Then again, there was the other part of me that wanted to go out. I was always in constant conflict with myself.

"Wow, Rachel, you clean up nice," Kelley joked as she barged through my apartment door. I'm not sure what she would have done if I had ever actually locked my door. I imagined this scenario in my mind often, and I always cracked a smile as I envisioned Kelley crashing into the door that she had expected would open when she turned the handle.

"Shut up." I rolled my eyes at her. "I hate these damn shoes." I really did. I looked down at my feet, and I swore I could hear them pleading with me to take off the shoes.

"Cheer up, buttercup. It's your birthday." Kelley smiled widely at me and pushed her long, blonde hair behind her shoulders. Everyone loved Kelley. She was *that* girl. The one everyone wanted as a friend. She was beautiful. I had always envied her long legs and beautiful, blue eyes.

I was Kelley's opposite. My five-foot-one frame dwarfed next to Kelley, and I definitely didn't stand out in a crowd with my mousy brown hair. And it didn't help that I was an introvert, while Kelley loved to party. But for some reason,

Kelley was my friend. My best friend, I guess. She didn't tell me everything, but she told me the stuff she didn't tell her other friends. That counted for something, didn't it?

The Handlebar was crowded that night. I've never been a fan of crowds, but I pushed a smile on my face, anyway, and pretended to be elated. Chels—our other tall, blonde friend—was raving about the band playing that night. J.R. and the Band. I rolled my eyes at the name. How original.

My friends and I made our way deeper into the tiny music venue, ordered a few drinks at the bar, and then found a high-top table about five hundred feet from the stage. J.R. and the Band had already set up their instruments—a piano, drums, guitar, bass, and a microphone centerstage. I took note of the piano. It was not a normal attribute of a rock band.

“Let's go dance,” Chels exclaimed with a wide and probably too excited grin on her face.

“I'm not dancing,” I told Chels and Kelley. “You two go. I'll watch.”

Kelley rolled her eyes at me. “Just keep drinking. Join us when you're ready.”

Kelley and Chels darted off into the crowd, disappearing among the rest of the herd dancing to some horrible '80s music that the venue's deejay was playing through speakers that also seemed to be set at an ungodly volume.

“You don't dance?” a man's voice asked from my right side.

I was a little startled. I had no idea anyone was around, much less listening to us. I turned to face the voice and found myself surprised to see a long-haired, blue-eyed, bearded man standing right next to me. He had long, dark hair that was thick and curly. It hung well past his shoulders, and I found myself oddly jealous of how perfect his hair seemed to be compared to mine. His dark beard framed his oval face perfectly, and he wore a pair of Ray-Bans perched atop his head. His black, plaid shirt hung open to reveal a white t-shirt underneath, worn jeans with holes in the knees, and a pair of



black boots that had certainly seen better days. He gave me a relaxed, and perhaps even slightly nervous, grin as he watched me look him over.

I was instantly attracted to him. I had always liked this type of man—the kind with a bit of an edge. Bad boy type, I guess. Guys with issues. Maybe I liked setting myself up for failure. My mother would have certainly agreed with that.

“Haven’t had enough of these,” I replied, shaking my vodka tonic at him.

“Ah.” He nodded his head. He continued to look at me with a slight smirk on his face. “You don’t look like the kind of girl who comes to places like these often.” He had to shout to be heard over the music.

I wished they would adjust the volume. My chest was vibrating. “I’m not. My friends forced me here. It’s my birthday,” I explained, “and they thought I would have fun.” I laughed then at the thought of my friends believing that I would consider a place like this fun. “I don’t think they know me as well as I thought.”

He kept the smirk on his face. “Well, happy birthday.”

“Thanks. It’s just a day. Nothing special.” *Positive. Find something positive to say.* “I hear the band playing tonight is really good.”

The man smiled and then shrugged. “Yeah, they’re all right.”

“We’ll see. I hope they come on soon. My friends are counting on me to join them on the dance floor. No one wants to see that.” Self-deprecation was always my go-to when I was nervous. I was socially awkward.

The man glanced at his watch, and then he turned his beer up before tossing the bottle in a nearby garbage can. “I have to meet up with my friends now. Will you be here after the band plays? I’d love to buy you a birthday drink.”

I smiled at him. “Depends on how good the band is.”

He smiled back. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Rachel.”

“It’s really nice to meet you, Rachel. I’ll see you after the show?”

“Yeah,” I replied. He smiled at me again and then turned to walk away. “Wait! I didn’t get *your* name!” I called after him.

He turned slightly. “J.R.” Then he disappeared into the crowd.

## Present

Knox's hair is soft as I run a hairbrush through her brown, curly locks. I'm jealous of my five-year-old daughter's hair. It's perfect in every way. My hair has always given me trouble, unable to decide if it wants to fall straight, curly, or wavy. I typically decide for it and straighten it every day. Sometimes, if I'm feeling adventurous, I'll use a styling wand to throw a little curl into it.

"I'll meet my dad tomorrow?" she asks me as I tuck her into bed. Maybe I'm biased, but Knox is beautiful. She has the kind of blue eyes that will stop a person dead in their tracks. Big and bright. Striking. Her skin is like porcelain. She clearly doesn't take after me much. I carried the kid around for nine months, and she comes out looking like her father. What luck.

"Not tomorrow, but soon," I tell her. "It depends on how things go. You know that your dad and I didn't part on good terms."

"Will he be mad?" She looks up at me from her pillow.

"If he's mad, it will be at me, not you. Okay?" I kiss her soft cheek. "You're going to stay with Aunt Kelley while I'm gone and have tons of fun."

"Will you be okay alone?"

"Don't worry about me, Knox Rose, you hear me?" I smile at her.

"Goodnight, Mama."

"Goodnight, sweet girl." I kiss her again, and then I leave her bedroom, closing the door behind me.

I find a beer in the refrigerator and then nestle down on my couch. I flip mindlessly through the television channels.

My stomach is in knots as I anticipate tomorrow's events. It's been many years since I've seen him, and I can't imagine that he'll be thrilled to see me. Especially when I tell him that he has a daughter he doesn't know about.

May 2001

I nearly choked on my drink when I saw him. The man that was just talking to me moments before was taking the stage. Slowly, like an idiot, I put the pieces together. J.R. J.R. and the Band. I slapped my palm against my forehead.

J.R. took a seat on the piano bench. Strangely, my heart started pounding, and I even began sweating. I had no idea what was wrong with me. I startled when Chels and Kelley bounced back to the table, collapsing into their chairs.

“What’s wrong with you?” Kelley asked, looking at me strangely. She’s sweaty, too. From the dancing, I suppose.

“Nothing. I’m just... I’m excited to hear the band.” I didn’t mention my encounter with J.R. I wasn’t ready for the judging eyes Kelley and Chels would have cast at me if I had told them that I had met J.R. of J.R. and the Band. Then again, I’m not sure why I felt they would judge me.

Kelley looked at me with a look of pure and utter confusion on her face. Chels cut her eyes at me, too. They both knew how much I didn’t want to go out to the Handlebar, and yet, there I was, suddenly excited to see the band. I decided to ignore them both, and I turned my focus to the stage to watch J.R. and the Band perform.

The music was like Southern rock with a more current sound. I wasn’t sure how a piano could be incorporated, but it was, and it was brilliant. J. R.’s fingers hit each key effortlessly, and his voice was smooth as he sang. I hadn’t expected this from the man in the ripped jeans with the ridiculously long hair, but he played with such ease that it was clear he was made for this. Making music came as easy to him as breathing.

I was taken by him, even though only a few sentences had passed between us. It felt ridiculous. Smart girls aren't allowed to be completely swept away by a man they have only just met. But I was. It was happening right then and there. with every song and every note played. I was falling for a man I had only just met inside that tiny building full of sweaty, screaming bodies.

"I hear there's a beautiful woman in the crowd tonight celebrating her birthday." The music was at a standstill, but the crowd was still cheering. J.R. was standing at the microphone with his guitar strapped around his chest. His hair hung in sweaty, curly strings. He stood with a sort of sway, and he looked in my direction from the stage. "Her name is Rachel, and this song is for her."

I felt myself flush. My face was hot. I was biting my lip when Chels and Kelley both turned to look at me with wide eyes. My own eyes darted nervously between them, and I didn't know what to say. There was nothing to tell. It was a two-minute conversation. That's it.

"What the hell, Rach?" Chels slapped my arm as though I had been keeping a secret. "You know him?!"

"No, I don't *know* him. He just...he was talking to me while you two were out there dancing. I didn't *know* he was J.R. of J.R. and the Band. I mentioned it was my birthday." I was defending myself as though I had done something wrong. "I didn't know he'd get up there and announce it to everyone."

"You are embarrassing." Kelley mumbles while taking a shot of vodka.

"Anyway, we have to stay for the whole show. He said he was going to buy me a birthday drink." I felt proud and important but also a little embarrassed, too.

The band began to play the popular "Happy Birthday" tune, and I thought I would die from embarrassment as the audience began to sing along, too. I reacted the way most people do when they're being sung to. I smiled awkwardly and fidgeted nervously until it was finally over and I could breathe again.

Chels and Kelley didn't say a word as J.R. approached the table after the show was finished. He was wearing a sly smile on his face, and he was still sweaty from his performance. It was strangely attractive.

J. R.'s hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, and he'd shed his plaid shirt. He smelled good, too. Like lavender and cedarwood. I think he must have freshened up a little before coming back out to join us.

"So, how was the band?" he asked me with a smile on his face. He leaned into the table, resting his forearms on the tabletop.

"It was all right," I said jokingly. "And the birthday song? Embarrassing."

"I didn't mean to embarrass you. But how cool that you had an entire room of people you don't even know singing to you on your special day."

"That part was cool. Embarrassing, but cool. Thanks."

"So, what's your drink of choice?" he asked me.

"She's a vodka girl. All the way," Kelley interjected.

"Vodka?" He looked surprised. Most girls went for the soft stuff. Not me. Vodka is the only thing that didn't make me sick.

"Yep."

"Alright. I'll be right back." J.R. disappeared to the bar.

"Oh, Rach, he likes you," Kelley sounded surprised. "Like *likes* you."

"No, he doesn't," I replied dismissively. "He's in a band. He probably buys girls drinks all the time. Plus, we just met like an hour or so ago."

"Rachel, don't be dumb," Chels chimed in. "Just go with it."

I rolled my eyes at her, and then I tried to relax in my chair. I felt uptight, but I didn't want to be. Why couldn't I be

one of those girls who were so at ease with themselves? Like Kelley.

J.R. returned with a vodka tonic. It had a sweet, little lime slice on the side. He set the glass on the table and then pulled a chair up next to me. “I didn’t even ask which birthday you’re celebrating.”

“Are you asking how old I am?” I smirked.

“Yep.”

“Twenty-one,” I replied. “And it’s not even a big deal, so don’t say it is.”

J.R. laughed. “Fine.”

I did feel oddly comfortable around him, which also caught me off guard. As an introvert, it always took at least six months before I got comfortable with anyone. Kelley and I had known each other for years, but it took half of those years as friends before I could fully warm up to her. In my defense, she *was* a little forward.

“These are my friends,” I said, pointing at my two baffled counterparts. “Chels and Kelley.”

“I hear you two are responsible for bringing Rachel here tonight,” he replied.

“Yep. If she had it her way, she would be in bed right now. Sleeping,” Kelley said.

I checked my watch. It was after midnight. I would definitely have been about two hours into a deep sleep. I also noticed that it was no longer my birthday.

“Where are you and the band headed next?” Chels asked J.R.

“We’re actually here for a few more days.”

I felt a little leap in my heart, and I wondered if I’d see him again after. I hoped so.

Kelley kicked me from under the table. I promptly glared at her, annoyed by the ache in my shin. She tilted her head toward the exit, asking silently if she and Chels should



leave. At first, I thought yes. It was hard to get to know anyone with chatty Chels nearby, but then I thought about the possibility that J.R. may actually turn out to be a serial killer. Maybe he preyed on girls like me. Short and defenseless... I had probably seen too many movies.

I looked at J.R., though, and I found it hard to believe that he could be anything but harmless. He may have been in a rock band, but he had the kindest eyes I had ever seen. Still, I didn't think they should leave the building, so I tilted my head toward the dance floor instead. Kelley rolled her eyes at me, and I wondered if she would ever tire of doing that. I figured one day, she'd roll her eyes right out of their sockets.

"Come on, Chels; let's go dance," Kelley demanded, sliding off her chair.

"I'm kind of tired," Chels whined.

"Come on!" Kelley drug Chels from her chair, and we watched as they disappeared into the crowd that was still left lingering after the show. The deejay picked up where he left off, blaring some awful '80s music again.

"Well, that was obvious." I laughed. "Kelley can be a little forward. I'm sorry."

"She looks after you," J.R. replied. "I can tell."

I sighed. "She does. She's always there for me, even forcing me into things I don't want to do. Like tonight."

"I'm glad you're here tonight."

"Me, too." I smiled.

## Present

“Are you sure you’re ready to see him again? Rach, you haven’t spoken to him in almost years, and your plan is to just show up at his house, unannounced, to tell him that he has a daughter?” I can feel Kelley rolling her eyes through the phone. Her tone makes me feel slightly stupid, but she makes a good point. It does sound like a stupid plan, but it’s the only one I’ve got.

“First of all, it’s *our* house. Second, how else am I supposed to tell him about her? I’ve been through every scenario, and nothing seems right. Just showing up is all I’ve got.”

Kelley is quiet for a moment, and then she asks, “What if it doesn’t go well?”

I sigh. “It probably won’t go well, but I can handle him.” I’m not afraid of him. There’s no reason to be. I’m the monster in this picture. Not him.

“Fine,” she says with a sigh. “Well, I’m going to bed. I’ll be at your house at eight a.m.”

“Not a minute later.”

“Night, Rach. Get some sleep.”

“Yep.” I hang up. I doubt I’ll sleep tonight. I don’t think I’ve slept well since I left J.R., but I definitely won’t be sleeping tonight.

May 2001

It had been so long since I had been on a date. I usually avoided guys in general and focused on my studies. I was a year away from graduating from the university, and my future was pretty important to me. I had dreams. I worked as an assistant for the CEO of a small consulting firm, but I had dreamed of becoming an author.

Regardless of school being my focus, I had made an exception for J.R. I wanted to go out with him. Get to know him. I wanted to see if my feelings for him were true and not based on some emotion from the night of my birthday. It scared me a little that I had allowed myself to be so completely taken by him. We had exchanged phone numbers and had spoken a good bit since my birthday. They had been good conversations.

I slid on a pair of jeans, a nice top, and a pair of flats. I curled my hair, applied my makeup carefully, and even found a tube of lipstick to glide over my lips. This wasn't normal for me. I was a bare minimum kind of girl. Light makeup, jeans, and a t-shirt. That night was different, though.

J.R. arrived precisely on time. I swung my apartment door open and found him standing there with a bouquet of flowers in his hands. They were beautiful. My favorite kind of flower—daisies. I wondered how he knew this about me. I blushed slightly as he handed me the flowers with a smile on his face.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I respond, trying not to cut down his compliment. It was a conscious effort. I was not accustomed to receiving flattery. “You look pretty handsome yourself.”

I invited J.R. in while I found a vase for the flowers. He awkwardly stood at the door as I rummaged through my kitchen cabinets. I finally found a large mason jar, and I slid the flowers into it.

“Perfect fit.” I smiled, admiring the daisies.

J.R. and I left my apartment, and like any good gentleman would, he opened the passenger side door for me and helped me into the truck. I tried to control the shaking in my hands, but I was nervous.

J.R. explained to me that he could have taken me out in the band’s van, but he didn’t think the van was anything any female should ever have to endure. I could imagine. Five guys riding across the country in a van? I’m sure the van smelled funny. The thought actually made me a little nauseous.

“So, I know you live here, but I found this little nook a couple of days ago, and I hope you like it. It’s a hole-in-the-wall pizza joint,” J.R. said. “You like pizza?”

“I love pizza.” And I did.

“Great.” Then he shifted to another topic. “How was your day?”

“I’m ready to be finished with classes. At this point, I’ve been in school since I was five, and I’m kind of over it,” I said with a chuckle.

J.R. laughed, too. “I was never great at school. Didn’t think I needed to try my luck at college.”

“You’re a great musician.”

“Tell my family that,” he mumbled with a sort of eye roll.

He hadn’t said much about his family, but I got the feeling that he was not on good terms with them. I could relate. I hadn’t spoken to my own mother in over a year. She never called, and I didn’t care to call her either. We were mutually relieved to be rid of each other, I think.

Soon, we had arrived at the pizza shop and were waiting to be seated. The smell of homemade pizza filled my

nostrils, and I couldn't help but smile. There's something about the aroma of dough, cheese, and meat that sparked happiness deep within my soul. I probably had a carbohydrate problem, but don't we all?

We were finally seated at a table, a small corner booth in the back of the restaurant. It was a private seating arrangement, and I thought it appropriate. I had J.R. all to myself. J.R. ordered us a couple of beers, and we looked over the menu together.

"Favorite pizza topping?" J.R. asked me as his eyes scanned the menu.

I thought about this for a moment. "Mushroom, onion, and bacon." It really was my favorite trio of toppings on a pizza. "Oh, and light sauce because I'm an old lady, and I get heartburn easily." I rolled my own eyes at myself and giggled softly.

J.R. looked up at me from his menu and chuckled, too. His blue eyes seemed to glow at me.

We ordered a pizza with my favorite toppings, plus J.R.'s (sausage and banana peppers); and then we relaxed back into our booths, sipped on our beer, and chatted just about everything.

"How did J.R. and the Band get started?" I asked him.

I always wondered how bands began. The Beatles got their start when John Lennon and Paul McCartney met as teenagers on a hot July day in 1957. At the time, Lennon had been playing in a band called the Quarrymen, and McCartney had been a spectator in the audience. After the show was finished, McCartney met Lennon backstage, and the rest was history.

"I've always played music. Piano, guitar, and even drums," J.R. responded. "Ian, our bassist, and I went to school together. We'd get together after school and just mess around in the garage with different sounds. I guess our band officially began the day after we competed in a battle-of-the-bands competition. We won, obviously." He laughed slightly at his

own joke. “Charlie and Dee showed up at my house after having seen our show and auditioned without prompting, and we had ourselves a band by sundown.”

“Isn’t it strange how sometimes, things come together in the oddest ways?” I smiled, thinking of how odd it was for me to have even been at The Handlebar that night, but then, meeting J.R. was even more out of the ordinary. Even still, it had happened; and there we were, eating pizza, sipping on beer, and talking with each other as though we had known each other our entire lives.

“It has been quite the adventure. We have been all over the country. Of course, we’ve not played in anything outside of music festivals and smaller venues. It’s still a blast. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

I found myself fully engaged in the conversation, fascinated by his stories and falling deeper in like with him. I admired how he spoke with such gentleness. He listened when I spoke, retaining the bits of my life that I shared with him. I noticed compassion in his glance but also a genuine interest in my life.

“So, you’re a writer?” J.R. asked me after I shared a bit too much about my hopes and dreams.

“I want to be,” I corrected him. “Right now, I’m just an administrative assistant. I graduate from the university soon. I’m hoping that I can land a position with a publishing company to get my feet wet after I graduate.”

“Are you staying here in the Upstate, or do you think you’ll ever return home?”

I had spoken briefly of my mom to J.R. I hadn’t been home since I graduated high school, and I hadn’t given much thought to returning home.

I shrugged at his question. “I’m not sure. I’ve not really thought about it, to be honest.”

“It’ll come to you. Where you’re supposed to be—it’ll come to you.”

I stared at him for a few seconds too long, admiring the laid-back approach he took to life. I had been avoiding trying to figure out where I would end up after graduation. The thought alone gave me anxiety, but then here was J.R. with the simplest of advice: it'll come to you.

Why hadn't I thought of that? I hadn't thought of anything really. I had avoided anything that had to do with the future and tried to focus on what was in front of me. To some extent, that was a good thing, but I had always been a planner. One would have thought that I had a plan for after graduation, but I didn't.

After dinner, J.R. took me back to my apartment. He was leaving for another city the next morning, and I could tell that he didn't want to go. He was intrigued with me and I with him, and I wondered if we would see each other again. I hoped so, but my life was about to get chaotic with exams before graduation, and he was on tour with his band. When would we see each other next?

We stood outside my apartment door, and I thought about inviting him in. The yellow lights of the apartment complex's breezeway cast an odd color across our faces as we stood there, continuing the conversation we had been enjoying all evening.

He looked down at me with his soft, blue eyes. "Is it okay if I call you while I'm on the road?" he asked. The question felt a little old-fashioned, but I appreciated it.

"Of course," I said with an embarrassingly large smile on my face.

"When I'm back on this side of the world, I want to see you again." He looked into my eyes with intensity. He was so serious about making sure that I knew he was interested. Perhaps even more than interested. This thought didn't bother me, though, because there *was* something special here. Something I had never felt before. Something I had never experienced before.

"I'll be here."

He moved closer to me, and I thought he might kiss me. I wouldn't push him away if he tried, but I could see an internal debate going on inside his head. It was just the first date, anyway.

We gazed into each other's eyes for a few silent moments. I couldn't tell what he was going to do, but I was ready for whatever would come next. Finally, his hands cupped my jaw, and then he pulled me into a kiss. My hands touched his wrists as he kissed me, and I thought my knees might give out. A warmth spread from my head to my toes, leaving me breathless. It had been a while since I had kissed anyone, but I was pretty sure it had never felt like that before. His kiss was electrifying, and my veins surged with fire. I felt something ignite deep inside of me in my soul, and somehow, I knew this was it. He was the one I had spent my entire life waiting for.

J.R. pulled away gently. His hand stroked my hair. He looked at me a little deeper, and then he whispered, "I don't think I want to go."

I replied softly, "Then don't."

"I should," he replied after a few seconds. "This has the potential to go too fast. I don't want to go too fast."

I agreed. Whatever this attraction was between the two of us, it could quickly get out of hand—like a wildfire that couldn't be controlled.

"Okay." I stepped back. "Thank you for the flowers. And for tonight. It was the best night I've had in a long time."

"I'm calling you tomorrow." He gave me a lopsided grin.

"I'm already sitting by the phone."

J.R. smiled again, and then he kissed me one more time, leaving me with an ache in my chest that I couldn't explain. I watched as he walked away, still smiling every time he glanced back at me, and then he disappeared out of sight. I slid back into my apartment with a sigh and a smile. I thought it was funny how one night out completely altered the course



of my world. Of course, it was only funny because I never went out.

## Present

It's a long drive—four hours to be exact—from the Upstate of South Carolina to my old stomping grounds, Tybee Island, Georgia. The drive gives me a lot of time to think about what I'm going to say to J.R. when I see him for the first time in such a long time. Everything I try doesn't sound good, though. What do you say to someone you ran out on? Whatever I figure out, I'm sure he won't care to hear it.

What if he has a girlfriend? Worse, what if he's married? What if I knock on the door of *our* home, and some strange woman answers? I guess I can't be upset. I can't expect him to have remained a single man while I was gone. He's too good to be single, anyway. J.R. is, in every way, the perfect man. I was an idiot.

I blame my mother for the things I thought were true. Of course, I can't blame her for everything, can I? I must take some responsibility for my thoughts and actions. Still, back then, my mother had complete control of my mind. I believed every single word she ever said to me, to an extent. Perhaps there was a part of me that understood she was only trying to motivate me to be a successful adult. Regardless, she taught me that eventually, a man will leave, whether it be through death or free will. She wasn't completely unjustified in that belief. When my dad died, everything fell apart.

I've come a long way since I fled our home on that cold, January morning. I still remember how I felt then. Lonely. Broken. Cold. Angry. I didn't want to leave, but I somehow convinced myself that it's what had to be done. I would be better off. J.R. would be better off. The world would be better off.

It didn't take me long to realize that I had made a mistake. Months afterward, I wasn't any closer to moving on with my life than the day I had left. I knew that I could go home, and J.R. would take me back. Still, I told myself that he wouldn't want me, and he certainly wouldn't want this baby. How could he even be certain she was his? And what if he did want Knox? I didn't want him to take me back just for her either. I had put myself in an impossible situation.

Too much time passed, and I knew I was in too deep to turn around and go back. Knox was born, and my life had changed. I certainly couldn't show up on his doorstep with a newborn in my arms.

I wish that I had gone back home the moment I realized I had made a mistake. I know that J.R. would have taken our baby in his arms and loved her as much as I do. He would have even taken me back because no man has ever loved me the way J.R. loved me. He would have forgiven me because that's who J.R. is. I can't expect the same from him now. It's been half a decade.

September 2001

I watched the television screen with horror in my eyes. Hijacked airplanes, two of them, had flown right into the World Trade Center's North and South Towers. Smoke poured from the buildings while bystanders stood and watched in shock from the sidewalks below. The news reporters were live at the scene, but even they were at a loss for words. The audio from the television was loud with sirens from the responding paramedics and police officers.

There were other reports of more hijacked airplanes, but nothing could be confirmed. All scheduled flights had been canceled, and all planes in the air had been ordered to land. I couldn't even begin to fathom what was actually happening. No one could. The news ran videos of hundreds of people standing in Times Square, all watching the big screen there as the Trade Centers burned. The scene was eerily quiet.

A camera zoomed in on the two towers. I could clearly see people hanging out of their office windows a thousand feet from the ground, as smoke poured out from behind them. Some of the people waved curtain panels to get the attention of rescue workers below. The effort seemed hopeless. We all knew that rescuers would never be able to reach them in time. In time for what? Before the fire and smoke took over.

Specks of white floated gracefully to the ground. At first, I thought the specks of white were paper flying from the opened office windows; but at a closer look, I realized that it wasn't paper at all, but instead people jumping to their deaths. My heart was numb. My hands shook. I had never seen anything quite like this before.

I tried J.R.'s cell phone again. It went to voicemail. He was on a plane—or he should have been. He had been in New

York the night before to play a show, and he was supposed to fly home this day. I didn't know where he was, and I had to force myself not to think too much about it.

Firefighters and police officers were rescuing and evacuating who they could from the Twin Towers. Elevators didn't work. Everyone on the floors above and just below the area where the planes made impact were likely dead. I couldn't imagine that anyone would have survived that. I feared how many thousands of others were dead also. My stomach turned.

I tried J.R.'s phone again. There was still no answer. I was pacing the floor, holding my phone tightly in my hand when Kelley came through my apartment door asking if I had heard from J.R. She looked panicked. Her blonde hair was sort of wild, her blue eyes wide, and she didn't smile.

I shook my head. I refused to cry.

"Maybe cell reception is just jammed. Can you imagine how many calls are being made right now?" Kelley tried to reassure me. "I'm sure he's fine."

I couldn't find my words. I was scared that if I spoke, I would cry, and I didn't want to cry. I knew I couldn't afford to allow myself to think the absolute worst.

"They think it's terrorists," she says. "The way those planes flew into those buildings..." It sounded like she was going to tell a story, but then she ended the sentence with a shudder.

I sat down on the couch, still clutching my phone to my chest. "What if he's not okay, Kelley?"

"You can't think like that right now, Rach."

I knew she was right because it was the very thing I was telling myself. I held my phone so tightly, my palms were sweaty against it. I silently prayed for it to ring.

The news then broke in with a report: *a plane has just crashed into the Pentagon. Hundreds feared dead.*

No word from J.R.

Another news report: *the South Tower of the World Trade Centers has collapsed.*

No word from J.R.

Another news report: *a plane has just crashed into a field in Pennsylvania.*

No word from J.R.

Another news report: *the North Tower of the World Trade Centers has collapsed.*

No word from J.R.

There had been so much tragedy in that one morning. All of this had happened before noon. I couldn't even begin to process all my emotions. I was numb. Nearly emotionless. The thoughts in my head were all jumbled together. All I wanted—all I *needed*—was to hear from J.R. Even if it was for only three seconds of broken cell reception. I wanted to see his name pop up on the screen of my phone. I wondered how many other Americans were waiting for the same thing.

Kelley made us drinks. I sipped from the glass slowly, my hands shaking as I tried to bring the glass to my lips. My mind was somewhere dark. War, death, uncertainty.

“He’s not going to call, Kelley,” I said, pacing the floor. It had been hours now, and the news reports still went on relentlessly in the background. “He would have already found a way. He’s not okay.”

By two p.m., the attacks seemed to have stopped. The news reporters only had the aftermath to discuss. The collapse of the Twin Towers left miles of debris, dust, and bodies—some intact, some not. The site of the crash in Pennsylvania was void of any survivors. The Pentagon was still on fire. So many were dead. They couldn't even come up with a number. Their best guess was in the thousands.

It was like something out of a horror film. It was eerie. The sky outside was gray. There was no sunshine, and if there had been, I think it would have felt like betrayal by Mother Nature. My heart broke for all of the faces I saw on the television. Survivors covered in dust, their eyes bewildered.

The news reporters said things like *terrorists, war, gasoline shortage, food shortage, World War III.*

I had always felt safe in that little world of mine. We lived in America, the greatest country in the world. I had lived every day of my life like there was a tomorrow. I went to class at the university. I bought groceries. I went to the movies. Sometimes, I even went to The Handlebar.

That day, my entire world was shaken. My security was diminished. I couldn't see how life would ever be the same, and I knew that if I felt like that, thousands of miles from ground zero, how much darker were the worlds of those closest to the victims of that day?

I thought of the people who, unknowingly, boarded the hijacked airplanes that day. They thought they were going home. Going on vacation. Heading out for a new job opportunity. They were people just like me, just living.

The victims of September 11, 2001, were wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, someone's child, someone's boyfriend, someone's girlfriend. They were people, just living. Just like me.

I thought about J.R., the man I had only known for four months, the man whom I undoubtedly loved with every ounce of my heart. He had been on a plane that morning leaving New York after a wild night in Manhattan living out his dream. J.R. was just living.

There was no way for me to know where J.R. was or if he was a victim. There was no one to call. There was nothing for me to cling to. No hope. Just the unknown.

It was eight p.m. News reporters had concluded that it would be weeks before we would know exactly how many people had died. It would be months before the clean-up was finished. Footage showed people lined up by the hundreds at gas stations, filling their gas tanks. There were rumors of a gas shortage.

I kept trying J.R.'s phone. Of course, no answer. My phone's battery was close to dying, and I was beginning to

think that it was time to accept the fact that J.R. was not coming home.

My heart was broken. Kelley and I sat in silence. It had been hours since we last spoke. Our eyes were glued to the television, but how much more of this could we stand? I knew that I would never forget the images of people falling from their office windows, of the planes crashing into the World Trade Centers, of those same two buildings crumbling to the ground. I imagined families all over the country, staring mindlessly at their televisions, too. Some of them, just like me, were still waiting.

It was nearly midnight. I wasn't tired. How could I sleep? My eyes felt bloodshot. The darkness of the day wrapped around me, and I shivered. The glow of the television illuminated my tiny living room. Kelley laid on one end of the couch, I on the other. We managed to drag a blanket over our legs, but still, we hadn't spoken in hours.

Then, there was a knock at the door. A frantic knock. The kind of knock that sends a person straight to their feet. The change in sound, the break of the silence, startled Kelley and me both. We looked at each other, and then I slid off the couch, walking carefully, quietly to the door.

I lifted myself to my tiptoes to see through the peephole on the door, but it was a pointless effort. I had never been able to see through those things, and I often found myself frustrated at its existence. It was useless.

My hands were shaking as I slid the chain from the door, and then I turned the deadbolt to unlock it. The door opened slowly, and I peeked through the four-inch opening, cautious of whomever was on the other side. My eyes adjusted to the brighter hall lighting outside, and as they did, I found myself filled with an emotion I didn't expect. Relief.

I didn't know whether to fall on the floor or jump into his arms. I even briefly considered shouting at him for making me think that he was dead. As I sorted through everything I wanted to express in one single sentence, the only thing I could manage was a whisper. "J.R." And then he did the rest.



J.R. stepped into my apartment while scooping me into his arms at the same time. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and I buried my face in his neck. All of the tears that I had been holding back finally broke through the dam and flowed freely down my cheeks.

J.R. placed my feet back on the floor, but I couldn't stop holding his face in my hands. My palms were on either side of his cheeks, thankful for his beard, thankful for his warmth, thankful for him. My eyes were wet with tears, gazing into his own wet, blue eyes.

"I thought you were..." I couldn't even say the words out loud. "I thought..."

"I couldn't call you," he says quickly, cutting me off so that I didn't have to say the words out loud. "I lost my phone somehow in the hysteria of everything. My flight was canceled, along with every other flight in the country. I rented a car, and I drove for ten hours to get us back here."

I pushed a strand of his hair behind his ear. He looked weary.

"Are you okay?" he asked me. His voice was hoarse, too.

"I'm okay. I've had Kelley here all day."

Kelley approached us with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. "How is it out there?" she asked him.

J.R. shook his head. "Like a silent chaos." He pushed his hand through his hair, and I noticed his hands were shaking, too.

I wrapped my arms around J.R.'s waist, and then I pressed my face against his chest. I listened to his heartbeat, very grateful that he still had one. J.R. lifted my face toward his, and then he kissed me. It's different—like he had thought he might never kiss me again.

"I love you, Rachel," he said to me.

He had never said those words to me before, and I thought that maybe he said it to me because of the emotions

from the day. Maybe he didn't mean it, but I knew I loved him.  
And so, I returned with, "I love you, too."

## Present

Being back home is such a strange feeling. I love this town, and I have missed it. I transferred my roots to the Upstate of South Carolina when I started at the university, but after graduation, J.R. and I moved back here. I'm not sure why. As rough as my childhood was, it made zero sense that I wanted to come back home. But I did. We did.

When I left J.R., I moved back to the Upstate to be closer to Kelley. It was the only thing that made sense back then, and J.R. never knew exactly where I had gone. He had looked for me, though, and he had even paid Kelley a visit one night. I was with her then, and I spent thirty minutes hiding in a closet while he shouted at her for not giving up my whereabouts. Staying in that closet was the hardest thing I've ever done. Everything inside of me was screaming at me. Begging me to run to him. But I was running *from* him. The worst part was it was for no real reason.

This town hasn't changed. It remains the same. It's got an retro charm that tends to remind me of simplicity, goodness, happiness. The island is stocked with historical cottages that have been exposed to the salty elements for nearly a century. There are no high-rise hotels or huge resorts. There are "Protect the Sea Turtles" signs everywhere. People riding bikes. People walking their dogs. Dogs walking their humans. It's just Tybee. Small, cozy Tybee. It's my home, no matter my history here.

I turn my car down a small, one-lane dirt road: Beachside Circle. It's a little street, lined with tall oaks covered in Spanish moss. I've always loved the cottages along this road. Most of them are painted in pastel colors. I like to

think of it as a rainbow, with our home being the pot of gold at the end. J.R. always thought that was slightly corny.

Our tiny, white cottage is tucked back at the end of the street, behind some oak trees, with a small, dirt driveway that allows parking for two. Our cottage has a long front porch with black rocking chairs and a front porch swing. The front door is an old door we salvaged from an eighteenth-century home that was being torn down on the island years ago. We hung gray hurricane shutters on the windows and carved out a small dirt trail that starts in the front of the house and twists back to the ocean.

When J.R. and I bought the place, it was a train wreck. J.R. thought I was insane for wanting the house so badly; but it was cheap, and cheap was what we needed at the time.

“It should be bulldozed,” J.R. had said.

But being the innovator that I am, I sketched out some renovation ideas for the old cottage. We hired out some contractors, did a little of the work ourselves, and six months later, had a brand-new home.

“I’m glad we didn’t bulldoze it,” J.R. had told me as we lay in bed together that first night in our home. I had smiled, proud of what we had accomplished.

It was a beautiful home. It still is. Even as I sit in front of it now, I can’t help but think how happy Knox would have been growing up here. How perfect we would have looked bringing our baby home to this house.

I park in my old parking spot, to the right of J.R.’s truck. The reality of what I’m doing here sets in, and my heart begins to pound. My palms go clammy. Maybe Kelley was right. Maybe my plan isn’t the greatest. He could slam the door in my face. That would be terrible, wouldn’t it? Drive all the way down here only to have him slam the door in my face.

I run my fingers through my hair, check my complexion in the mirror, and then slide out of the car, pressing down my wrinkled white t-shirt and denim shorts with my palms. My knees are weak as I walk up to the front

porch steps. I catch my breath, and I try to ignore the anxiety building up in my chest.

I think about the first night J.R. and I met, the way he looked at me back then with his beautiful, blue eyes. I visit that night often in my thoughts, and then I wonder how in the world we ended up here.

I left him. I did it. I got us here. I deserve to have a door slammed in my face. Knox doesn't deserve it, though, and she's why I'm here.

I lift my hand, hesitate for just a second, and then knock. I wait. My heart is pounding. I can't feel my legs. My palms are sweaty. I feel slightly lightheaded.

I wait.

No one comes to the door. I knock again.

I wait.

And wait.

I wonder why we never installed a doorbell.

I wait some more.

No one comes to the door.

I stand on the porch a little while longer, trying to decide what to do next. I could leave. He'll never know I was here. No. I can't do that.

I decide I'll follow the path to the beach. We have a dock along the way and a boat. There's a good chance he is there. When he wasn't on the road or writing music, he could be found piddling around on the boat passing time.

As I follow the path, I'm reminded of how beautiful this little trail is. Though we carved the path, the edges came naturally lined with exotic trees and flowers. I smile a little as my feet track over the sandy ground.

The path opens at the end, to the beach. The ocean spreads out beyond that obviously, and then off to the right, just before the end of the trail, the path splits off into the boardwalk that leads out to our dock.

I hesitate for just a moment before I make my way across the boardwalk. I'm walking quietly, as though I'm afraid I'll wake a monster. Still, the wooden boards creak beneath my feet, and I find myself grimacing with each step. The sea breeze moves through my hair, and I feel myself wanting to melt into the salty air. It's the smell of home, and it comforts me.

I'm more than halfway across the boardwalk when I raise my head to look out ahead of me. J.R. He's standing there, having already caught sight of me, looking at me as though he's just seen a ghost.

His long hair is in a braid, and it trails down his right shoulder to his chest. He's wearing an open, short-sleeved shirt over a gray tee and a pair of black shorts, and he's barefoot. Always barefoot when he can get away with it. Me, too.

We both sort of stare each other down for a moment. Time has frozen between us. Then, with much hesitation, we begin walking toward each other. It's good to see him. He looks good. The same. His blue eyes are hidden behind a pair of black Ray-Bans. I feel like my old self, my heart leaping at the sight of him. I haven't felt this in years, and it feels good.

"Hi," I say as we come together in the middle of the boardwalk. He doesn't look happy to see me. Not even in the least bit.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. J.R.'s tone is flat. He's emotionless, his brow furrowed.

I feel my heart shatter inside my chest as I see years of pain on his face. He looks as though a wound has just been ripped open again.

"How are you?" I ask him.

"What are you doing here?" he asks again, only this time between gritted teeth.

Maybe I expected a cold welcome, but I guess I shouldn't have expected a cordial initial conversation. It's obvious to me now that this meeting probably isn't going to go

the way I had hoped it might. It's definitely going the way I assumed it would.

"Can we go in the house?" I ask him.

"No," he says quickly.

"Okay." I fidget with my fingers nervously. I take a deep breath and consider leaving. I know I can't, but I turn away from him, anyway. I drop my shoulders, sigh, and then turn back to him. "Well, I'll just say it then."

"Say what?" He shifts his weight to his left, but his face is still hard, positioned on me.

This isn't right. Not here. I'm not going to dump the news on him right here.

J.R. is irritated with the long silence. "Why are you here, Rachel?"

"I just..." I wring my hands together. "I just needed—I *wanted*—to see you."

"You don't get to just show up here years later and tell me it's because you wanted to see me." He glares at me for a few moments and then shakes his head at me. "Go home, Rachel."

J.R. pushes past me and starts back toward the house. This action is the equivalent to him slamming the door in my face.

I stand on the boardwalk, watching him walk away, and I'm not sure what my options are. Do I chase after him, or do I go home?

I see Knox's blue eyes in my mind, and I think about how sad she will be when I tell her that it's not going to work out for her to meet her dad. Not right now, anyway. Then, I think how Knox will grow up with daddy issues, and then she'll hate me because all of this is my fault really. I left J.R. Not the other way around.

Nevertheless, I can't change my choices. I can't go back. I'm stuck with the consequences, but Knox shouldn't have to be stuck with them, too.

“J.R.!” I run to catch up with him. “Wait, please.” I grab his arm gently, and then I step in front of him. “Please, just talk to me.”

He gazes down into my eyes for a moment. His expression is like stone. I wonder what he’s thinking. Finally, his lips part. “You’ve got ten minutes, and then I want you gone.”

Okay. Ten minutes. I have ten minutes to tell him that he’s a father. I can do this. I smile at him. “Thank you.”

J.R. continues toward the house. I jog to keep up with his long strides, and then I step into the house after him. His house. Our house. My house. It still looks the same. Beautiful pine floors. White shiplap walls. Open concept. The far wall is made of windows with a perfect view of large oaks, Spanish moss, our dock, and then the ocean beyond all of that.

The kitchen cabinets are pine, too, just like the floors, with white granite countertops. It’s a beautiful home. One that came straight from my brain. I’m glad we didn’t bulldoze it.

I close the front door behind me, and then I stand awkwardly on the burnt orange oriental rug in the foyer. I’m pleased to see he kept the rug. It was never his favorite.

“Why are you here?” J.R. asks for the third time, only now, he’s looking at his watch.

He really is timing this conversation. I’m not sure why I’m surprised. J.R. never says anything he doesn’t mean.

I can’t think of a good place to start, so I decide to start with something simple. It won’t mean anything to him; but I want to say it, so I do. “I’ve missed you.”

J.R. rolls his eyes at me. “Are you out of money? Is that why you’re here, Rach? You need money?”

I’m offended. Maybe even angry. I can’t believe that he would even suggest that I came here because I need money. I’ve never asked for a dime from anyone. I’ve always made my own. In the time since I left J.R., I have worked as a waitress, an assistant, and now I’m finally doing what I’ve always wanted to do. I am writing. I’m not writing novels like



I had hoped I would be, but I am writing opinion posts for our local newspaper. Most people read my posts online instead of the newspaper, though.

I work to keep my temper even, but I'm out of luck. "Are you kidding me? You know me better than that." I've done a lot of wrong between the two of us, but I can't accept the fact that he thinks I'm here for money.

"I thought I did. And then you left." He grits his teeth.

I want to break eye contact, but I don't. I'm terribly uncomfortable. I have to deal with it, though. I wring my hands together. "I made a bad choice, J.R. I know that now. I don't expect you to ever forgive me, but I am sorry."

There's silence between us for a few moments. His expression softens a bit as though my apology does mean something to him.

"There's another reason why I'm here, J.R." I continue. "And I know that you'll never forgive me for this, but maybe, one day you will."

J.R.'s expression changes again. He's both curious and maybe even concerned. I think that I see fear in his eyes, too. I feel a pain in my chest. Dread. Regret.

"Five years ago"—my heart is pounding again, and I feel a little sweaty—"I had a baby."

J. R.'s eyes grow wide.

"A baby girl." I swallow, and then I sigh slightly. "Her name is Knox Rose, and she's yours."

J.R. hasn't moved a muscle since I broke the news of Knox to him. It's only been a few seconds, but the only reaction I've gotten is a set of wide, blue eyes. I wait for him to say something. If he doesn't say something, how do I know what to say? I'm still standing there awkwardly and uncomfortably on the oriental rug in the foyer. The silence is killing me.

"Please say something," I whisper. My own voice startles me.

J.R. lets out a sound like air releasing from a tire. He puts his hands on either side of his head. Still, he doesn't say anything. He turns away from me, his hands now dangling by his sides, looking toward the windows that peer out over the oak tree scenery.

I remain still. Waiting.

Finally, he turns back to look at me. "She's five?" His voice is hoarse, and I think he's trying to wrap his mind around this nuclear bomb that I've just dropped on his life.

I nod.

"She's mine?"

"J.R., of course, she's yours."

"You kept her from me, Rach." It's more of a question than a statement. His eyes are broken. Wide and helpless. Sad.

"It's not something I'm proud of," I tell him. "But it's time. For you two to meet. She wants to meet you."

"You brought her with you? Did you leave her in the car?" He sounds panicked suddenly. "Rach, it's like a hundred degrees out there!" He's trying to push past me to the front door.

I stop him. "I didn't bring her with me, J.R. She's with Kelley. I wanted to tell you first, in person, just me. I had to be

sure that you even wanted to meet her.” I haven’t decided if I should be upset that he believes me to be such a terrible mother that I would leave my kid in the car during a summer swelter.

J.R. settles down, but I see anger surface now. “I can’t believe you, Rachel! You have a baby, *our* baby, and you don’t tell me?” He’s shouting.

I reply calmly, “I’m not even going to try and defend myself because there’s no excuse. I’m here *now*. I’m telling you *now*. I’m trying to make things right *now*.”

I see tears form in his blue eyes, and he wipes a rogue tear from his face with his thumb. He shakes his head at me, and then he starts to pace.

“She wants to meet you,” I repeat.

“How long has she known about me?” He stops pacing and turns to look at me.

“Not until recently. She found an old picture.” I had nearly died when she had brought the old photo to me. It had been tucked away in my bedside table for years. I looked at it frequently. The two of us huddled up in a photobooth, laughing, kissing, making silly faces. That was us.

“Do you want to meet her?” I ask him.

“I just... I have to sit down. I have to think about this.” He sits on the couch, ducking his head between his arms. I’ve never seen J.R. have any kind of anxiety attack, but I’m pretty sure that’s what is happening now.

Maybe I should leave. Give him some time to digest this new information, this life-altering news that I’ve just dumped on him.

Before I do, I pull a photo from my back pocket, walk over to him, and lay it on the table. “Here’s a picture of her. She looks just like you,” I say gently, smiling softly at the picture. It’s Knox on her bike, the sun beaming brightly behind her, her blue eyes shining brighter than even the sun, her hair caught in the wind, and a wide smile across her face. It’s my favorite picture of her.

“I’ll go now. Let you think about it. Just...call me when you’re ready.” I find a piece of paper in my bag, scribble my phone number across it, and then lay it next to Knox’s picture. I give him one final look, and then I back away and start toward the door.

“Where are you staying tonight?” he mumbles, looking up at me.

“I’m driving back home today. I’ll drive back with Knox when you’re ready.”

J.R. doesn’t look up at me again. I back away, and then I slide out the front door.

My composure falls once I’m outside, out of sight. My entire body collapses under the weight of the reality of what I’ve done. I get myself safely inside my car, and then I allow myself to sob. My forehead is pressed against the top of my steering wheel, and my heart aches so bad, I wonder if I should see a doctor. Finally, I take a deep breath, wipe my tears, and then clutch the steering wheel ready to head home.

I wait until I’m a few minutes down the road before I call Kelley with an update.

“I’m on my way home,” I tell her. My voice is bland, but I can’t hide the nasally sound that always comes after I cry. My nose is congested; my eyes burn; and I think it’ll take me a few days to recover from the emotional trauma of today.

“How did it go? You’ve been crying,” she says.

“Not well, but I shouldn’t have expected it to go any other way. He was angry.”

“How does he feel about meeting her?”

“He said that he needed to think about it. Process it. He was really...he was really hurt.”

“Well, you don’t get to disappear, reappear, tell him he has a kid, and expect him not to be angry,” Kelley points out. Sometimes, her directness gets under my skin.

I hear Kelley sigh. It’s the sound she makes when she realizes she’s being a little too hard on me. “I’m sorry, Rach.

Are you okay?"

"I'll be home in a few hours." I am suddenly bone-tired.

"Drive safely, Rach."

I hang up and tuck my phone in the seat next to my leg. My eyes burn from the tears I have cried; my chest hurts; and I'm trying to remember exactly why I left J.R. in the first place. Fear. At least, that's what my therapist said.

My phone begins to vibrate against my leg. My heart leaps thinking that maybe it's J.R., but when I pull the phone into focus, I notice that it's my boss.

"Adam, hi," I answer. I clear my throat and try to speak around the nasal sound to my voice.

"Rachel, I know you're out of town for a few days, but I've got a piece I want you to work on." Adam is not one for chit chat. He'd rather call someone, get to the point, and hang up. If there are any questions afterwards, I'm expected to email him.

"Whatcha got?"

"Did you know the world is supposed to end this year? Has something to do with the Mayan calendar. Anyway, I need an opinion piece on *why* the world won't end on December 21."

A part of me wants to write an opinion piece on why I *hope* the world will end on December 21. "I'll get right on it," I tell him.

"Thanks," he says. "Oh, and, Rachel? Thank you for introducing me to Kelley. We're going out again tomorrow night."

I didn't intentionally introduce Adam to Kelley. It just happened that way. I never would have guessed that Adam was even Kelley's type, but I suppose opposites really do attract.

"It's actually pretty horrifying that my best friend and my boss are dating, but if you're happy, that's what matters.

Right?” I’m only partially joking.

Adam laughs. “Take care of yourself, Rachel.” He says this in such a way that I think he knows why I’m out of town. I probably have Kelley to thank for that—a very sarcastic thanks.

“You, too.” We hang up, and I tuck the phone back next to my leg in the seat, exhale, and try to push J.R. out of my mind again.

I’m only thirty minutes out of Tybee when my phone rings once more. It’s J.R. this time and my heart stops beating for a few seconds. *That was quick.*

“J.R.?” I answer.

“Where are you?” he asks. “I’ll meet you for lunch or something.” He sounds a little calmer. Like he’s ready to talk.

“I’m in Savannah. We could meet at our old pizza house,” I suggest.

“I’ll see you there.” He hangs up, and I stare ahead, still holding the phone to my ear in a few seconds of shock. My hands are visibly shaking with anxiety.

I feel relieved, though. I’m glad I don’t have to drive home and tell Knox that her daddy needed to think about whether or not he wanted to meet her. I think in some ways, that would have been worse than if J.R. had just told me that he wasn’t interested in knowing her at all.

I change my route and head back to Downtown Savannah.

I’m sitting on a faded and chipped, red-painted bench just outside the pizza house. My leg bounces up and down out of nervousness. My hands are folded in my lap, and I fiddle with my thumbs.

J.R. steps out of the crowd, majestic like he is. He’s changed into a pair of jeans, his hair no longer braided, hanging past his shoulders in waves. He wears a ball cap and a black tee. I stand from the bench to greet him, but we don’t exchange any words. Instead, he opens the restaurant door for

me and directs me inside. A part of me waits for him to touch me. His hand on the small of my back like he used to do. But he doesn't.

We find a table in a quiet corner of the restaurant. J.R. orders a beer. I'm not thirsty, nor am I hungry.

He looks at me from across the table. His Ray-Bans perched over the bill of his cap. His blue eyes still have the power to make me feel in ways I can't describe. J.R.'s hands are folded across the table. He looks like he's thinking, like he's trying to find words. I sit there like a little girl who's in trouble and about to get a scolding. Finally, he says, "I looked for you, Rachel. For a really long time."

I choke back any tears I might cry. "I'm sorry." My voice is a whisper.

"I went to Kelley. Practically begged her to tell me where you were. You were there that night, weren't you?"

I'm not sure how he knows I was there that night, other than common sense. I nod, but I have no words to follow.

"I felt you," he said. "I felt you there." He sips his beer, but he turns his head away from me, shaking it as he does, as though he can't stand to even look at me.

I remember when he used to look at me with admiration, as though I were the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. But now, he can't stand the sight of me. My heart sinks. Choking back my tears is no longer an option, and so I let them roam freely down my already tear-stained cheeks.

"I'm sorry, J.R. I'm really, really sorry for...for everything."

J.R. just nods at me. His jaw is clenched, and he doesn't say anything. His lips are tight.

We sit quietly for a moment until I decide to speak again. "I'm not here in hopes of you taking me back. I would never ask that of you. But we have an amazing daughter, and she should know you. She deserves you. You deserve her. I don't want to keep you two from each other anymore."

J.R. looks at me. His gaze is soft, his expression relaxed. “Tell me about her.”



February 2002

J.R. was in town for a few days, and we hadn't left my apartment since he had arrived. Outside, snow had been falling for a couple of days, so we stayed inside where it was warmer. We watched movies, baked cookies, and, if I'm being honest, we lived those days like an old married couple. It was bliss.

J.R. and the Band was growing in popularity. They were getting bookings in all fifty states, and what was even better than that is they were headlining their own shows. They had their own opening acts. He was excited, but all this meant for me was that he'd be gone a lot more often.

I would graduate in a few months, and I had plans after college. I did wonder what would happen to J.R. and me. I thought about getting married to him all the time, but we never talked about it. I wasn't even sure if it had crossed his mind. We didn't even really talk about the future. We sat and reveled in the present. I suppose that wasn't a bad thing. The present was quite nice.

"I graduate in a few months," I told him. We were huddled under a blanket on the couch. I was curled up into him, and the television was playing reruns of *Friends* in the background. I was comfortable in his warmth. My head was nestled in his chest.

"Does it bother you?" he asked me.

"Does what bother me?"

"That I didn't go to college."

I lifted my head to look at him. "That's never bothered me, J.R. Why would you even ask that?"

"What would your mother think?" he asks.

My mother? I couldn't comprehend why he was even asking me about what she would think. He knew that I hadn't spoken to her in quite some time, and even if I had, I had to at least act as though I didn't care what my mother thought.

"Who cares what she thinks?" I ask him.

"I'm going to have to meet her eventually, Rach."

"No. You won't have to. And if you insist, then I insist on meeting your parents." I said this, knowing that his family was a sore subject, too. We had never talked about the discord with our families in deep detail. We just knew it was there.

J.R. let out a huff. "Well, that's not happening."

"Neither is meeting my mother." I settled my head back on his chest and sat quietly for a few minutes before I spoke again. "You know, she used to tell me that I would grow up to be an old cat lady. Unloved. Unmarried. Just my fifteen cats and me." I couldn't recall how many times she had told me that in my past, but I remembered that she would say those things every time I turned down a date or when I wouldn't give my phone number to an interested boy. Sometimes, I would think that maybe she was right. Maybe I never would get married. Maybe I should have started cat shopping, even though I had never been much of a cat person.

No one in my life had ever been less encouraging than my own mother. In her own way, though, I believe the words she spoke to me were out of love, even if they sounded like the exact opposite of love. Maybe she never wanted me to expect anything great out of life because all life had given her was heartache.

"You won't be an old cat lady," J.R. said to me. "And I love you. And Kelley loves you. You are very lovable."

"You'll marry me then?" I smiled up at him, trying to pass off the question as a joke, but I had never been more serious about anything. With my graduation coming up, I had nothing but the rest of my life left ahead of me. I wanted to get married. I wanted to marry J.R. I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else. Still, we had been

together for nearly a year, and not once had he mentioned getting married.

J.R. shrugged. “Why do we have to put a name on it? Why can’t couples just be happy together without some legal document binding them together?”

My heart sank. I would have never guessed that this man didn’t believe in marriage. Not a romantic like him. He was too perfect. Too kind. Too loving to not want to marry someone one day. I wondered if it was me. Maybe he didn’t want to marry *me*. “You don’t believe in marriage?”

“I didn’t say that. I just... I like this. Right here with you. I don’t want this to change.”

I guess that had to be good enough, even though it wasn’t. I didn’t want to stay curled up on that couch forever, our relationship unchanging. Would that not get boring after a while? Still, I wouldn’t push the subject any further. Pushing it might push him away, and I didn’t want that.

“I love you, J.R.”

“Don’t ever leave me,” he says.

“I would never.”

Present

“She’s beautiful. She has your eyes, your hair. She looks just like you.”

“I saw the picture, Rach,” he snaps, obviously annoyed.

“She’s smart. Loves her daddy’s music,” I continue. “Kind. Gentle. Patient.”

“My music?”

“She knows every word to every song.”

“Rach, my music is not meant for a child’s ears.” He rolls his eyes at me and rubs the bridge of his nose with his fingers as though he believes me to be the most incompetent person he has ever met.

“It’s fine, J.R.” I say, unsure of how I feel about my parenting being judged by him. What does he know, anyway?

He shakes his head at me. “If she likes music, does she play any instruments?”

“Piano,” I tell him. “Since last year. She’s really good. A natural, I think.”

J.R. seems pleased to hear this. “Why did you wait so long to tell me about her? Why didn’t you just come home? You know you could have.”

“I was afraid. Hurt, too, I guess. Since I met you, all I wanted was to be with you. Be your wife.” I wipe away a tear. “I just... I thought you didn’t love me. Not enough.”

J.R. grits his teeth. “It’s always been you, Rach.”

“I made a dumb choice, and I know that now.”

J.R. takes a sip of beer. “I want to meet her.”

I’m relieved, and I smile. “She really wants to meet you.”

He nods, but he looks a little afraid. I think he’s still in shock. I guess I would be, too, if a ghost from my past showed up to tell me that I have a kid.

“How...how do you want to do this?” I ask him. “Come home with me? Or I bring her here? I’m willing to do anything, J.R.” I do have my job to consider, but with the help of the internet, I can write opinion articles from virtually anywhere. My boss wouldn’t need much convincing. He’s all about saving the company dime. One less human occupant in the office meant one less person to use water, electricity, paper, and everything else that might dig into profits.

“Bring her here. To her home—or what should have been. I’ll have her a room ready. She can stay the weekend. You, too, of course.”

“Okay. I’ll bring her down tomorrow then.” I can still work on the end-of-the-world piece I’d been assigned while J.R. and Knox are getting acquainted.

He nods and looks at me softly. “How are you, Rach?” He asks this now with actual consideration for me, and it almost surprises me. As cold as he’s been toward me, I was beginning to wonder if he even cared about me at all.

I relax a little in my seat, smirk a little, and then say, “I’m okay. How are you?”

“Surviving.”

June 2002

The sun was bright. The sky was blue. It was an early summer afternoon, and I had the windows of my apartment open as I packed some more of my belongings into boxes. J.R. and I were moving soon back to my home, Tybee.

I was halfway through the chorus of a song that I was probably singing way too loudly when my phone rang, catching me off guard.

After I confirmed my identity to the man on the other line, a voice I had never heard before began to deliver some news.

My mother had died.

I didn't really say anything after he told me that my mother was dead, but I did thank him for the news. I was just about to hang up the phone when the man asked that I come to the mortuary to identify her body and make the funeral arrangements. But I didn't want to. My mother and I hadn't spoken in a while at this point. Even if I did plan her funeral, I knew that I couldn't possibly plan it to her expectations. She would have no issue coming back from the dead to tell me so either. But she was my mother.

I hung up the phone almost robotically. I was in deep thought, trying to determine how *I* felt and how I *should* feel. My apartment was quiet—full of boxes. The song I had been singing along to had ended, and nothing else had started to play. The silence allowed my mind to land on a thought that I found comical. It would seem that no sooner had we decided to move home, my mother had decided it was time to die. If I hadn't known any better, I would think she had done it on purpose.

My mother and I were a mismatched duo. She always told me how hard she had to fight to have me. She also reminded me of how expensive it had been to undergo in vitro fertilization just to create me. Sometimes, I wondered if she ever liked me. I wondered if I was worth the money it costs to make a pregnancy happen. I was certain that my mother had loved me. In her own way. Even still, I found myself hoping that now that she was dead, all the doubts she had ever put in my head would disappear.

I wondered if I might be a good mother one day. I didn't have a great example of a good mother, and wasn't that how you learn how to be one?

"You're quiet tonight," J.R. said to me later that evening as I picked over my dinner. I wasn't very hungry.

"I'm sorry. Just a lot on my mind." I had not yet told him about my mother.

J.R. looked at me a bit deeper. "Is everything okay? Are you down because we're moving? I know it's a big decision, and we don't have to rush it."

"No, it's not that, J.R." I sat back in my chair and sighed. "My mother died today." My voice didn't even sound like my own as I told him this bit of news.

J.R.'s mouth hung open slightly for a minute like he was waiting for a punchline. When he realized that there wasn't one, he jumped to his feet with a horrified expression on his face. "Rach, are you okay?" He knelt beside me as I remained in my chair at the table, emotionless.

"J.R., I'm fine. That's what's bothering me. I'm not sure that I care my mother is dead. Doesn't that make me a terrible person?" I had been tormented by that thought all day. No one should be elated about anyone's death, but there I was, fighting the urge to pop open a bottle of champagne and throw a party.

J.R. took my hand in his. "There's not a terrible bone in your body, Rach," he said gently.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I was afraid of my thoughts, so my words couldn't be trusted.

J.R. stood up and pulled me up to my feet. "You're the best person I know." He wrapped his arms around me and held me close to him. I felt his lips against my forehead, and I nestled myself into the warmth of his body.



## Present

Knox is calm. We've been on the road a couple of hours, but she hasn't said much. She's guarded. Unsure. She's like me in so many ways.

I haven't been a perfect parent, obviously, but when I found out I was pregnant with her, I determined quickly that I wouldn't keep her. Abortion was never an option, but adoption was. I didn't trust myself to be a good mother, and I was afraid of what it would do to her to grow up without a father. Back then, I still had no intention of going home to J.R., no matter how badly I wanted to.

Knox has been fine all these years without her dad; but she's getting older, and I think that if it's possible, every girl should have a dad. There wasn't a reason for me to keep her from him except my own fear, and I've worked through those fears now. Knox needs a man like J.R. in her life.

I only vaguely remember my father. I had been so young when he died, but he loved me from what I can remember, and I think that Knox should feel that type of fatherly love, too.

"You okay back there, Rosie?" I ask, glancing back at her through the rearview mirror.

"Don't call me Rosie." She sighs passively.

I smile. I love that she hates the nickname I've given her.

"And I'm fine. Just thinking," she adds.

"Oh, yeah? What are you thinking about?" I ask her.

"If you love him so much, why did you move away?" she asks me.

Knox never minces words. She always says what's on her mind, and I can respect her for that. It's a trait she got from J.R.

"I guess I was just afraid," I tell her. "It seems silly to me now, but back then... I was a big, ol' scaredy cat."

"Were you afraid of my dad?" she asks.

"No, baby. Your dad is the greatest human in the world. I think I was more afraid of myself. It's complicated."

"I hope he likes me," she says.

"Better than that, Knox. He will love you. I promise."

When we arrive, J.R. is waiting for us. He's pacing in front of the house, his hands wringing together. He's nervous, which isn't something I see J.R. often being.

Knox is asleep in the backseat, so I put the car in park and slide out quietly. J.R. is watching me as I approach him, his eyes soft, his expression denotes a hint of anxiety. I want to take his hands in mine and ease his nerves, but I don't. I shove my hands in my pockets instead.

"She's asleep, so I thought I would take the opportunity to answer any questions you may have."

"Is she okay? With meeting me, I mean."

"Yeah. She's nervous, I think, but excited, too." I glance back at the car and then to J.R. again. "Do you want to help me get her out of the car? She's getting too big for me to carry." That last part is mostly a lie, but I want J.R. to feel as though he has his first job as a father.

"Uh, yeah. I can do that." He sounds excited to have already been given a job.

"She sleeps like you, so there's no chance of you waking her up," I joke.

J.R. opens the car door gently, and then he stands there for a moment. Observing her. Seeing her in person for the first time, asleep or not, beats seeing her in a picture. I think I see tears in his eyes as his expression goes soft, and I know that he

loves her already. It's instant. The kind of love that only a parent would understand.

J.R. reaches into the car, and he pulls her out gently. He holds Knox against his chest, her head on his shoulder, her legs dangling at his sides. I fight back my own tears, and I've never regretted my decisions more than I do right now in this moment. He hasn't even said two words to her yet, but already, he loves her. He holds her so gently, so naturally.

I remember faking sleep as a child just so my dad would carry me into the house. I remember never feeling as safe anywhere else, except in the warmth and strength of my dad's arms.

I hurry ahead of J.R. to the front door to open it for him, and then I follow them inside. J.R. carries Knox down the hall and into the spare bedroom. Her bedroom.

I'm surprised when I walk in behind him at the efforts he has made in this room for her. Everything from the ruffled, gray bed covers to the sweet, sheer curtains on the windows. J.R. has been busy since we saw each other yesterday, and he's left nothing undone.

He lays Knox on the bed and pulls a throw blanket over her, pausing briefly to look at her again. He stands over her, gazing at Knox as though she is the most beautiful human he's ever seen. I feel a tear run down my cheek, but I wipe it away quickly as I turn to leave the room. J.R. follows me, closing the bedroom door behind him. He meets me in the kitchen, but I'm turned away from him. My heart is aching, and I can't control my tears. I sob, clutching the edge of the countertops, my head sunk into my shoulders.

J.R. doesn't say anything at first. We just stand there on opposite sides of the kitchen with years of silence between us.

Finally, J.R. breaks the quiet. "She's beautiful, Rach."

I nod, still not willing to face him. I'm trying to suppress my sobbing, but instead, I sound like a dying bird. My hands cover my face, and then I remember that this isn't

the first time I've cried in this kitchen. This isn't my first dark moment here. I don't want to talk to him. Not right now. But then I think that maybe if I had just talked to him back then, things would be different now.

I finally feel like I have enough control over myself to face him, and when I do, I'm surprised to see his eyes red and wet with his own tears. He leans against the kitchen counter, too, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes cast to the floor. I move closer to him, my hands out to touch him, but I don't. I'm not even sure what to say or what I want to say. What is there to say?

J.R. looks up at me, and I can't tell if he's angry, broken, or confused. Maybe he is all those things. "Since you left, did you... Were there..."

I know what he's asking. Have I been with anyone else? No. I've never even thought about being with anyone else. I step closer to him. I'm only inches away now, and I look up at him.

"It's always been you, J.R. I've never been with anyone else."

"Then, why did you go?" he asks softly.

January 2006

I was sure that I had never felt more alone in my life. J.R. had been on the road since Christmas, and I hadn't seen Kelley since October. I had been alone in our beautiful home on Tybee for weeks now. I hadn't ventured out to try and make friends or to find something to do. I already had a friend, and I didn't want anything to do. Perhaps I was depressed.

I knew that this was what I got for being with an up-and-coming musician. I was happy for him. Really. Music was J.R.'s dream, and I never wanted to take that away from him. In my defense, though, when we first got together, he was just a bar singer. I hadn't expected him to soar to popularity so quickly. I never would have guessed how often he would be gone. He was gone for weeks on end, and each time he left, it felt like the weeks got longer. Of course, none of that changed anything. I still loved him.

On this night, I was not looking forward to climbing into bed alone again. I had the television on to add some noise to the unbearable quiet of the house, and I had the bathroom light on because, apparently, I had become afraid of the dark. I slid into our fluffy bed. The sheets were soft against my skin, and I looked over at J.R.'s pillow, wishing he were there.

My phone began to ring on the bedside table next to me. J.R.'s name flashed across the screen. I smiled, my heart fluttering just as it always did when my mind settled on J.R. "Hello, love."

"Come outside."

"What?" I sort of laughed at him, confused. J.R. was on the other side of the country. California, maybe. I could

never keep up with where he was on any given night while on tour. “What are you talking about?”

“Put on your coat and come outside.” I could hear the smile in his voice. Like a boy pulling a prank on someone he loves.

I grabbed one of J.R. ‘s sweatshirts from the chair in the corner of the room, and I shuffled down the hallway toward the front door. “What is going on, J.R.?” I asked with the phone still pressed against my ear. I unlocked the door, and then I peered outside into the chilly darkness of Tybee Island. Then, after determining that it was safe, I opened the door the rest of the way.

The cold air hit me hard, sending chills down my body, but none of this mattered because there on the top step of the front porch was J.R. He had on his heavy, military-style jacket and his black, ripped jeans; and he had a knit beanie over his long hair. I was surprised, yes, but more excited to see him so unexpectedly.

“What are you doing here?” I dropped the phone and bounced outside right into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and kissing his lips.

His arms wrapped around me, too, and he smiled against my lips. “We have a little break. Three days, but I wanted to come home and spend it with you.”

“I love you,” I said, gazing into his blue eyes.

J.R. kissed me again, each kiss heavier with passion. And then, still holding me around his waist, he carried me into the house, kicking the front door closed behind him. He continued to carry me down the hall and into our bedroom, where he laid me against the soft sheets and proceeded to crawl on top of me. Our lips were still connected, and his body felt so good against mine. I had missed him even more than I had realized. With every second that passed, my heart beat harder for him. In that moment, all I wanted was to be one body. One whole instead of two halves.

The next morning, the sun rose, peeking its rays through the drawn curtains. I awoke, still wrapped in his arms. I smiled at the memory of the night before, and I rolled over to face him.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

I continued to smile at him. “I have missed you so much.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “It does seem to get a little harder every time I am away.” His eyes were locked on mine, and he thought for a moment before speaking again. “You should come with me. On the tour.”

I laughed at him. I couldn’t imagine myself riding around in a van with five guys on a cross-country tour, fighting off the groupies. I was sure the van would be smelly and the experience unattractive in every way. I didn’t even want to think about the things guys talked about when left to their own devices.

“Why are you laughing?”

“You can’t be serious, J.R.” But then I realized that he was serious, and it looked as though I had hurt his feelings by merely laughing at the suggestion.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “One girl in a van full of guys. I mean, I’m lonely here. I miss you. I’m ready for you to come home, but...” I wiggled out of his arms and rested on my side, gazing at him. Surely, the next step in our relationship was not me going on tour with him. That couldn’t be what’s next, could it? I mean, our entire relationship had already been unconventional. Couldn’t we do one normal thing? Like get married?

“What is it, Rach?” he asks.

“Do you ever think about our future?”

J.R.’s eyes crinkled a bit, and he looked at me with the expression of confusion across his face. “Our future?”

“Well, I mean, we have a house together. You have your band. I’m still writing my opinion posts and working on my first novel. But what about us?”

“What about us?” he asks, still confused. I felt myself grow frustrated with him. Why was he acting like he had no idea what I was implying?

I sighed. “Do you ever think about getting married?” I decided that J.R. needed my question spelled out for him. “We’ve only talked about marriage once before, and it was a long time ago. You made it very clear that you weren’t interested. But now, we’ve been together so long, and I just... I wonder if it’s in the cards for us.”

We had been together for five years, and I knew that I wasn’t getting any younger. With every passing day, I inched closer to becoming the old cat lady my mother always said I would be.

“Rach.” Now he sounded frustrated. “We’ve talked about this. Why do you want to change this? Change us?”

“J.R., we talked about it once, years ago. I want to marry you. I don’t want to tour with you. I want to marry you!” I felt shame for shouting at him, and this was certainly not how I wanted to get my way. I also felt guilty because J.R. took the red-eye to get there the night before, and now I was yelling at him.

J.R. rolled over on his back, taking his eyes away from mine. “And you want kids, right? Settle down? You want me to leave the band, too? Be like everyone else in this world? Is that what you want, Rach?”

I felt my eyes begin to burn, and I wanted to burst into tears. I was angry, but mostly broken at his words. His tone. I didn’t care about having kids, and J.R. could have been in the band until he was eighty, for all I cared. All I wanted was to be his wife.

I was not used to arguing with J.R. We never argued. We rarely even got angry at each other. This conversation had evoked new emotions, and I didn’t like how it felt.



“Just forget it,” I said as I rolled out of bed. I pulled an oversized t-shirt over my head. “Forget I said anything.” I threw open the bedroom door, and then I turned back to him. “I’m not going on the road with you.” Then, I slammed the door shut and stormed to the kitchen for coffee.

I felt like my blood was boiling. I was angry, but mostly hurt. I felt like the last few years with J.R. had been a complete and utter waste of time. He’d never marry me. He wasn’t interested. All I could think about was how my mother was right; he’d eventually leave. Marriage makes leaving harder.

I hunched over the kitchen counters, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. I covered my face with my hands, and I cried into them. My heart hurt as I imagined myself spending the next twenty years with J.R. only to have him walk out on me when I’d be too old to find another. I wasn’t sure that I was willing to risk that. Not anymore. I had never been much of a risk-taker, anyway, but this was my life. I loved J.R. I loved him so much that it hurt. But I couldn’t—I *wouldn’t*—stick around with a man who wasn’t willing to commit himself to me. I couldn’t stay anymore.

Maybe it was a dramatic decision. Less than twelve hours before, I had been over the moon that he had even surprised me by coming home early. Still, it felt right. It felt like the only option to continue forward.

I felt myself begin to mourn him there in the kitchen as I stared mindlessly at the coffee pot pouring its hot, brown liquid into the carafe. I only gave myself a few seconds to do so as I accepted my decision to leave him. To walk away from this house, this life. To start over somewhere else. Alone.

I dried my tears, pulled my coffee mug from the cabinet, and poured myself a cup of coffee. The next time J.R. came home, I wouldn’t be here.

## Present

“I was scared,” I tell J.R. as I think back on the night I packed up my bags and left. It was one of the worst days of my entire life but one that, in hindsight, I could have spared myself from experiencing.

“Scared of what?” he asks. I can tell by the way he is looking at me that this is one conversation he’s been waiting to have since he realized I was gone. I didn’t leave a note. I just took my clothes and left.

“All I have ever wanted since the night I met you was to spend the rest of my life with you,” I tell him. “I wanted to marry you. I wanted to be your wife, and I wanted you to *want* to be my husband. You made it pretty clear that you weren’t going to marry me, and I...I was scared that one day, you would leave me. So, I left before I had a chance to get left.” It sounds so stupid now. All of it. None of that even sounds like my own logic, and it wasn’t. It was my mother’s logic. It was fear that she had given me.

J.R. stares at me, but really, it’s more of a glare. I’m not even sure what he’s thinking. I worried for weeks after I left about what he was thinking. How he was feeling. I was an asshole for vanishing, and I can admit to that now. I don’t expect him to ever stop being angry with me. If he had done to me what I did to him, I don’t think I could stand to be in the same room with him. I might have even hunted him down and killed him. Maybe that’s a little dramatic, though.

After a few moments of intense quiet, J.R. suddenly bursts into a fit of laughter. His laughter is so sudden, so raw, so loud that it startles me, and I have no idea what to think about it. He’s even hunched over, holding his stomach,

slapping his thighs, and I think I even see tears in his eyes from the laughter.

“What could possibly be so funny?” I ask him, feeling like I should smack him back into his right mind. He’s officially lost it, I determine.

J.R. turns away from me briefly before turning back. He smacks the palm of his hand against the kitchen counter and looks at me with eyes full of an emotion that I can’t even interpret. “You left because you thought that I wasn’t going to marry you?” His voice is loud, and for a brief moment, I’m afraid he’s going to wake Knox. But then I remember that she could sleep through a nuclear war.

I don’t answer him. I just stare at him. I’m partly shocked by his reaction, and I’m partly unsure of where this conversation is headed. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him like this. Wide-eyed and wild-looking. Even when he’s playing a show, he doesn’t look this insane. This is what I did to him. I turned him into a crazy person.

I fold my arms across my chest, feeling a bit insecure. I think he’s mocking me, and I don’t appreciate it.

J.R. opens a nearby drawer and rummages through it. Then, he pulls out a small, white box. He turns his blue eyes back to mine, and then he tosses the box at me.

I catch the box in my hands, but I don’t look at it. Instead, I keep my eyes locked on J.R., waiting for an explanation. Although, I think I know where there is going. I’m not an idiot. I know exactly what is in this box, and I’m not sure there is anything else in this world that could make me feel like a bigger jackass than I do right now.

“I came home that weekend to ask you to marry me. But then, we had the argument about marriage, and I knew I couldn’t ask you then. You would think I was just asking you because you told me to.”

He’s not wrong.

“So, I was going to wait a little longer. There were only a few more weeks left on the road. I was going to come home,

take you out there on the dock at sunset, and ask you to be my wife.” His wild blue eyes have been replaced with the saddest blue eyes I’ve ever seen.

I look down at the box in my hand. I won’t open it. I don’t want to see it. My heart is broken, and I am the one who broke it. I wipe a tear from my cheek, walk the box back to J.R., and then tuck it back into his hand. I look up into his eyes to say something, but I have nothing to say.

I walk past him, and I find my way out to the back patio. It was my favorite thing about this house. The patio stretches the entire length of the house, with black iron railings and a view of the ocean that is magazine worthy. There’s even a walkway that joins with the boardwalk, leading to the dock. We built a pergola with a swing and a fire pit and added Adirondack chairs for seating. We added string lights around the area to make for the most beautiful place to be on a warm summer night. I think it’s one of the most magical places on the island.

I ease into the swing, pull my knees up to my chest, and begin to process the story. The real story. Not the one I had created in my mind. Not the story where I believed that J.R. would leave one day. The true story. The one where he came home unexpectedly to ask me to marry him, and I ruined it. I’m angry at myself. Angry for allowing the words that my mother spoke to me so long ago dictate my path. My life. My decisions. I’m a different person now, but back then, I was her puppet. I think that maybe my mother was only trying to motivate me to be the best by telling me that I wasn’t. By giving me the worst-case scenario—the scenario that TV and movies never give you.

J.R. had never been anything but good to me. Even if we never got married, he loved me. He would have died for me. He wouldn’t have left me. I know this now.

I guess I can blame my mother all I want, but ultimately, the decision was mine. I was young, silly, impatient. Maybe I was worried, too, that he would meet some other girl on the tour. Someone younger. Someone prettier. Someone who fit in with his rock-and-roll scene a little better

than I did. I was insecure, and my mother's words only fed into that insecurity. Even after she died, all of that "advice" she used to give me continued to haunt me.

I let myself cry a little more, and then I decide it's time to wake up Knox. J.R. tells me that he wants to take her out on the boat, but he doesn't ask me to come, too. I stop by the bathroom to check my complexion in the mirror before I go to wake up Knox. I don't want her to know that I've been crying; but my brown eyes are red, and my cheeks are blotchy. Even my long, dark hair looks exhausted. I roll my eyes at myself. I did J.R. a favor. He deserves a woman much better-looking than I am right now.

I slide into the bedroom where Knox is still sleeping. Knox is stirring, and I smile. I sit next to her and put my fingers through her hair. "Hey, sleepyhead."

Knox's blue eyes flash open, and she looks around the room confused.

"It's okay, Rosie. We're at your dad's."

"Are you okay?" she asks me, probably noticing my streaked cheeks and glossy eyes. It's hard for me to hide when I've been crying. If my swollen nose and eyelids don't give it away, my nasally sounding voice will.

"I'm fine." I smile. I love the tiny freckles that run along her cheek bones. "Are you ready to meet your daddy?"

Knox sits up in the bed. "Does he have another little girl?" She's still observing the room. J.R. did a great job decorating her room. It doesn't surprise me, though. He's never done anything halfway.

"Nope. He did all of this just for you."

Knox smiles. "Let's go meet him."

"Okay." I smooth her hair down and take her hand in mine, and together, we make our way outside to the dock.

J.R.'s waiting for her there. He planned to take her out on the boat, show her the island from the sea, and then take her to A.J.'s Diner for dinner. A.J.'s was our favorite spot on the

island for food. It sits right on the marsh, and you can drive right up to a dock with your boat like it's a car in the parking lot. Island life at its finest.

When I tell Knox of J.R.'s plan for them on the boat, she asks if I'm coming, too. I wasn't invited, but I think they should have the time together, anyway. There's years of catching up to do between them.

"You'll be okay without me. Your daddy is the best person in the world. You'll have fun."

"What will you do?" I make note of the apprehension in her voice. She's a bit more social than me, but she's also still very much a child and one who has not been away from me much, aside from sleepovers at Kelley's every now and then.

"Maybe I'll call Aunt Kelley. Or take a nap." A nap sounds good.

J.R. is standing at the end of the dock, leaning against the wood railing. He's pulled his hair into a low ponytail, and he's wearing a short-sleeved, blue shirt over khaki shorts. His Ray-Bans are perched on top of his head, and he's barefoot. He has boat shoes, but he keeps them tucked away in the boat when not in use.

"That's him! I recognize him from your picture," Knox says enthusiastically, but also quietly, as we approach.

"Yep." I smile, but my heart is pounding. Knox's grip grows tighter around my hand, too. I can only imagine how she must be feeling in this moment.

J.R. meets us. He's nervous again. I can tell, but I don't think Knox will know. He squats down to make himself eye-level with her.

"You must be Knox Rose. I recognize you from your picture. You are the spitting image of your mom."

"Mama always tells me that I look like you." Knox's voice is soft and sweet, but also unsure and a little shaky. Her fingers are wrapped around the cuff of her shorts, and she tugs at them nervously.

“You are much better looking than me.” J.R. winks at her. “You’re beautiful.” He glances up at me. “Like your mom.”

I blush slightly, a tiny smile breaking across my face. “Do you have a lifejacket for her? I don’t want her on the boat without one.” I’m trying to avoid the muddled mess that I am internally by inquiring about a lifejacket. I am finally an adult, and yet I can’t seem to function in complicated, adult situations.

“I have a life jacket, special, just for Knox.”

We walk toward the boat. J.R. steps on; grabs a pretty, teal-colored life jacket; and presents it to Knox proudly.

“Teal is my favorite color.” Knox beams.

I smile, understanding now why J.R. had called me in the middle of the night to ask what Knox’s favorite color was.

“It’s mine, too, but don’t tell anyone.” He slides the jacket around her body, adjusting the straps and tightening the belt to ensure a perfect fit.

“Mama isn’t coming with us,” Knox says, as though she’s breaking the news to J.R.

“She’s not?” J.R. looks at me, a little confused. He didn’t invite me, and I wasn’t going to invite myself. I’ve had Knox all to myself for the last few years.

“I just... I’ll be fine here. Thought it would be good for you two to have some time to yourselves. Get to know each other.”

“She’s going to call Aunt Kelley,” Knox reports. I shift my weight to my other leg and look at J.R., awaiting some sort of comment about Kelley.

“Of course, she is,” J.R. replies a little stiffly. It’s all he says, though, and I’m proud of him. He even knows how to censor himself in front of children.

I ignore the tone of his voice and kiss Knox’s cheek. “Your daddy plays piano, too. You’ll have lots to talk about.”

“Rach, come with us,” J.R. says, only this time he sounds sincere. Maybe he does want me to come along, but I still think this should be an adventure meant for them.

“Maybe next time. Have fun.” I force a smile on my face.

I stay on the dock long enough to watch J.R. load Knox into the boat. He makes sure that she’s buckled in and comfortable; and then he pulls up the anchor, unties the boat from the dock, and begins to sail out. Knox waves at me, a look of anxiety slightly highlighting her brow; J.R. lifts his hand, too, and they’re off and out of sight.

The house is quiet. It has its own special quiet, and I remember it so well from the days when J.R. was on the road. It’s the sound of the ceiling fans spinning, the almost inaudible rush of the ocean in the distance, the way the sea breeze sounds as it breaks through the iron rails on the back patio.

I take the hallway to what used to be the bedroom that J.R. and I shared. I’m hesitant to open the door, but I push it open, anyway. It looks the same. White shiplap walls, black iron bed, roman shades on the windows, bedside tables made from antique dressers. I even think it smells the same. I kept an air freshener plugged in behind the door. It was a lavender-scented air freshener that I kept installed to help induce sleep. I peek behind the door, and there it is. Still plugged in. Still stocked with lavender oil.

I walk through the rest of the house, finding that nothing has changed. It’s like I’ve walked back in time. J.R. still has his music room. It hasn’t changed either. The piano sits by the window with an oak tree view. His collection of guitars hangs on the wall to the left. A jar of guitar pics, a stool, a piano top full of sheet music. There are other musical necessities in the room, too, but I never understood what they were for.

There’s a chair in the corner of the room. My chair. For all of the times J.R. wrote a new song and needed me to listen. I would sit in that comfy chair, watch him play the piano, and



listen to him sing. Sometimes, his lyrics bothered me. There were songs about unhappy relationships or drugs.

“Only stories,” J.R. assured me. They weren’t lyrics based on our reality. I believed him.

I wonder what he’s written now. I run my eyes over the sheet music, scanning the lyrics. Nothing jumps out at me, and I feel a little guilty for snooping around. This is his private place. Where his magic happens. This is where the music comes together. I never snooped in here when we were together, and I’m not sure why I’m doing it now.

I talk myself out of the room, and I find my way back to the living room. I sit on the couch and remain there quietly. Breathing. Thinking. Crying.

Suddenly, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I startle as I dig for it, and when I find it, Kelley’s name flashes across the screen. I’m relieved. I could use someone to talk to right now, and she beat me to the call.

“Hey,” I answer, but I sound just as bad as I feel.

“I told you this was a mistake,” she says. “Are you okay? Do I need to drive down there and kick his ass?”

“You should have kicked *my* ass when I left him, Kelley.” I sigh.

“Well, yeah.”

“He was going to ask me to marry him. He had a ring and everything.”

I think I hear her laugh at me, the way J.R. had in the kitchen earlier. Then she composes herself. “Oh, Rach,” she says with a sigh.

“I’m the asshole in this equation. I mean, there’s no coming back from this.” I push my fingers through my hair and sigh.

“You’ve beaten yourself up enough, Rach. You’re there now. Just see where it goes.”

We sit quietly for a moment, and then I say, “Thank you for standing by me, even when you knew I was being insane.”

“At least, I told you that you were being crazy. You just wouldn’t listen. Where’s Lil’ Bit? I want to talk to her.”

Lil’ Bit is a nickname that Kelley gave Knox as a baby, and she hasn’t been able to shake it since. Oddly enough, Knox likes Lil’ Bit better than the nickname I’ve given her. Lil’ Bit feels more degrading. Like, when she’s twenty-five years old, she’s not going to want Kelley to call her Lil’ Bit anymore.

“Out with J.R. He wanted to take her out on the boat and to dinner. He has a whole event planned for her.”

“You didn’t want to go?”

“No. It’s better if I’m here. They’ll be fine.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I’m not sure. I guess we’re here through the weekend. Maybe I’ll go visit my mother.” I roll my eyes, even though she can’t see me through the phone.

“Your mother is dead.”

“Yep,” I say. “Maybe I’ll just go drink.”

“Do you need me?” she asks.

“I’m fine, Kelley. Don’t worry about me. Just throwing myself one heck of a pity party.”

“Well, stop. I have to go. Adam is on his way over. He thinks I’m the lucky one because I gave him another chance at another date. Poor guy.” Kelley laughs. “Give Knox my love and tell J.R. that I said hi.”

I laugh. “I think J.R. hates you.”

“Do it, anyway.”

“Fine. I will also need details on this date. Nothing could possibly match the first few.”

## Present

J.R. insists that I stay at the house with him and Knox tonight. I tried to opt for a hotel, but he wouldn't have it. He even offered to take the couch so that I could have the bed. I rejected that notion. The couch is a better place for me.

It's late, and I put Knox to bed just a few moments ago. J.R. meets me in the living room with a thick blanket, a pillow, and a sheet.

"I wish you would let me sleep here," he says. "It doesn't feel right."

"J.R., if you think about it, none of this feels right," I point out. And it doesn't. If I had never left, this would still be our house, and we would be going to bed together. That was the natural fit. This—whatever this is—isn't natural.

"She's a good kid," J.R. says to me. "You're a great mom."

I lay the sheet across the couch, position the pillow, and then spread out the blanket. "Thanks."

"Can we stay up a little longer? Talk? About earlier. The ring, marriage, all that stuff?" he asks.

"I'm not sure what there is to talk about, J.R. I've apologized for leaving; and now that I know with certainty that I'm the asshole in this situation, there's nothing to say." I look up at him into his blue eyes. I want to kiss him, but I don't.

"You're not an asshole, Rach," he says gently. "We just...we should have talked more. It wasn't just you. We just didn't talk."

I shake my head. “It was me. It was all me. You were perfect. Well, maybe not perfect, but close.” I plop down on the couch. “I hid Knox from you, J.R. I’m a terrible person.”

“You’re not.” He sits down next to me. “I have spent so much time thinking of all the things I could have done differently. I should have asked you to marry me sooner. It’s all I wanted. I just...didn’t. Maybe I was afraid. I guess I was afraid.”

I turn in my seat to look at him. I want to touch him, but I don’t. He looks at me so softly, gently, tenderly; and I can’t figure out why. How he can be so calm now? Sitting next to me like this? He was so angry yesterday. So cold. I think he’s still angry with me. I can see it in his eyes, and I don’t expect he’ll ever stop being upset with me. He wants to talk, though. He needs to know everything, and even if it doesn’t change anything, at least he’ll know.

“My mother used to tell me that no man would ever marry me. She had a chapter book of reasons why this was true.” I realize that I’ve never really talked about my mother to J.R. Not really. Just a few things here and there, but nothing in detail. It was easier not to think about it.

“I wanted her to be wrong more than I wanted to be okay with just being your girlfriend. If marriage wasn’t in our cards, if what we had was all there ever would be, then I thought it was better to leave. At least this way, my mother was only partially wrong. If I felt like I was in control of my fate, that made things feel better. More acceptable.”

“You never told me any of that, Rach.”

“It was easier not to think about it. Besides, having just said that out loud, it sounds ridiculous. I don’t think I ever expected you to understand. How could anyone understand what I thought and felt?”

“You told me that she used to tell you that you’d grow up to be an old, cat lady, but I always thought it was a joke.”

“I’m better now. I understand now. I’ve forgiven her.” I shake my head. “Even after she died, she was just always

there. She influenced my actions and my thoughts in so many ways.” I prop my head in my hand and sigh. “I really made a mess of everything.”

He doesn't disagree with me. He just relaxes back on the couch and stares straight ahead. His hands are folded in his lap. I imagine he's considering everything I've said. Maybe even weighing the honesty factor of it all. I can't blame him. Keeping Knox from him was the largest act of dishonesty I've ever committed against another human.

“But you're here now. Maybe we can't go back and change anything, but we have a kid. We have to make it work for her. We have to be friendly for her.”

Friendly. That word crushes me. I never would expect for us to go back to who we were, but I do miss him. I love him. How can I just be friendly? I imagine having to watch him bring home a new girl and Knox telling me about “Dad's new girlfriend.” She'll ramble on and on about how amazing she is, and I'll just be the woman who had J.R.'s child. The one who had J.R. but let him get away. The woman who didn't appreciate him. The one who left without any explanation.

I almost can't breathe at the thought of this scenario because I do still love him. I have always loved him. That has never changed. It never will change. I can't even image myself trying to date again. No one else will ever be J.R.

After a few moments of silence between us, J.R. asks, “Where have you been all these years?”

“Back Upstate, with Kelley.”

“Of course. With Kelley.” He rolls his eyes.

“You know, in her defense, she has always been Team J.R.”

“Oh, really? And that night I showed up at her house, practically begging her to tell me where you were?”

“She's a good friend, J.R. She's loyal, even when she doesn't want to be.”

J.R. just nods.

September 2006

“Kelley!” The pain was intense and sudden. I was stumbling into Kelley’s room through the darkness of the night, hunched over, and certain that I was dying. “Kelley!” I shouted louder. Waking Kelley was a lot like trying to wake the dead. It was nearly impossible.

I feel another contraction. At least, that’s what I thought it was. I had never been pregnant before, of course, but I had seen it in movies.

Kelley finally jolted awake. “Rach? What’s wrong?”

“I think...I mean...I’m pretty sure the baby is coming. Like, now.” I was holding my abdomen, mostly hunched over, and I wasn’t even sure we had time to make it to the hospital. The distance between each wave of pain was less than a minute.

Kelley sprang from the bed in a panic. She was practically running around the room, pulling her clothes on and searching for her shoes. “Your water—did it break?”

“I don’t think so,” I managed to say, and then I cried as another wave of indescribable pain ripped through me.

“That’s good. That means we have time,” she replied hopefully. “Okay, let’s go.”

Kelley pushed me toward the front door, grabbing her purse and keys on the way. I reminded her about the hospital bag that we had packed and situated by the door just in case a situation like we were experiencing were to happen.

“Got it right here,” she said, grabbing it up with one hand as she pushed me through the front door with the other.

The drive to the hospital was like a ride at an amusement park. I had never known Kelley to drive the way she was, and I felt certain that she had missed her calling as a professional race car driver. She was speeding, taking turns on two wheels, and I was clutching the dashboard as though my life depended on it. I was praying, too. Praying that three of us made it to the hospital in one piece.

I reminded Kelley more than once on the way that she needed to call the parents I had chosen for my baby. I had met with them several times over the previous few months, and I was confident that they would give this child a wonderful home. A wonderful life. Something that I knew I could never provide. Kelley promised she would call once we arrived at the hospital, but something in the way she said it made me think that she was going to hold off as long as possible. She still hadn't given up on me changing my mind about placing my baby for adoption.

When we pulled up to the emergency room entrance, we were greeted by a nurse with a wheelchair. The nurse helped me roll into the wheelchair, and then, just like in the movies, I was rushed into the building and down the hall. I felt myself sweating, and I didn't even care what they had to do to get this baby out of me, but I needed the pain to end right then.

Kelley ran behind us, telling the nurse everything she needed to know—my name, how many months pregnant I was, my doctor's name, my date of birth, and a bunch of other things that I wouldn't have even thought to disclose. I was thankful to have her.

As frantic as I felt, I was relieved that this was almost over. The baby was coming, and once she was here, she would be adopted by a beautiful family. I could go home, pretend like I hadn't spent the last nine months pregnant, and resume life. Not that it hadn't been much of a life, anyway. It had been months since I had left J.R., and he was still the first thing I thought about every morning. Still, I talked myself into believing that I couldn't forget him because I had been growing a piece of him in my body for nine months; and when

she was gone, he'd be gone, too. I also told myself that this wasn't true. There wasn't life outside of J.R. There was never meant to be a life without him. All leaving him proved was that he completed me in ways that I didn't know another human could.

I was moved to a bed. Kelley was still at the nurse's station giving them all my information. I wished she would hurry. I didn't want to have this baby alone. There wasn't time for any type of numbing medication. I'd have to deal with the pain and do this the old-fashioned way. The doctor checked me, and then I watched as his eyes grew wide. "We're going to have a baby in about sixty seconds!" he announced.

"What?" I cried in disbelief. It can't be time!

"It's time to push now, Rachel," a nurse told me.

"Kelley isn't here!" I argued. "I don't want to do this alone. This wasn't part of the plan."

"You have to push, Rachel!" the doctor said sternly.

I had a moment of peace and acceptance. This was almost over, and I knew I could do it. I chose to do this on my own.

"Okay." I cried softly. "Okay." My knees came up; my legs parted; and as I felt the next wave of pain come, I pushed. I pushed with everything I had in me. With all my love, all my anger, all my fear. With every emotion alive in my body. Tears ran down my cheeks. My eyes were pinched closed. The pain was so intense that I was mostly numb. My back arched; my head tilted back; and I groaned only slightly. Not dramatically the way women do in movies and television.

And then, after all that, I felt immediate relief. My body was empty. My groans were replaced by the sound of a baby crying. I kept my eyes pressed closed. I didn't want to see her. I wanted them to take her away immediately.

She continued to cry, and every instinct in my body wanted to take her in my arms. Soothe her. Hold her. Kiss her. Tell her, "It's going to be okay; Mommy is here."

"Do you want to see her?" I heard the nurse ask me.



I shook my head no, my eyes still pressed closed. I was sobbing because I could feel my heart longing for the baby who was crying for me.

“Oh no, I missed the whole thing!” Kelley was beside me suddenly.

“It’s okay,” I whispered to her.

I felt her hand on my forehead. “Rach, she’s beautiful. I think you should see her.”

I opened my eyes and looked up at Kelley. “I can’t.”

“I think you should, Rachel. It’s the only way to know.” It was the only way to know if placing my baby for adoption was the right decision.

I knew she was right, and in that moment, I hated her for it. I turned my head slowly toward the sound of the crying baby, and I saw her there in the nurse’s grip as she cleaned her. She was wrinkly with a head full of hair, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Of course, she would have a head full of hair. J.R. had more hair than I could have ever hoped for.

“Do you want to hold her?” the nurse asked me.

“It’s the only way to know for sure that placing her with another family is the right thing to do.” Kelley said to me again.

The nurse brought the baby to me. This beautiful baby had spent the last nine months growing inside of me. Every kick, every flutter, every hiccup—this was her, and I couldn’t believe that I was finally meeting her in person. Face to face.

I took her tiny body in my arms, pushed back the blanket from her cheeks, and gazed into her face. She wasn’t crying anymore. She was looking up at me with bright blue eyes, grateful to finally be meeting me in person, too. My eyes were locked into hers, and I knew then that she was the most beautiful person I had ever laid eyes on.

Tears ran down my cheeks, and I put my finger into her little hand.

“Hey there, little girl,” I whispered.

Her fingers wrapped around mine. Her lips moved back and forth, and I was immediately in love. I knew that I couldn't give her away. All of the planning that went before this didn't matter anymore. She was mine, and I was hers. She was my Knox Rose.

## Present

It's two a.m. We're still sitting on the couch together. Still talking. We're catching up, and I forgot how much I enjoyed just sitting with him. We used to talk a lot. Hours on end, just sitting and talking. The problem is that we never talked about the things that mattered. We never talked about my mother, and he never talked about his parents. We avoided discussions about the bad and only talked about the happy things—music, food, movies, books. All of the things that didn't really matter.

As I think back on who we were, we were too perfect to be real. Hopelessly in love. Oblivious to life, really. It was as though we had created our own reality. A glorious reality, but it wasn't real.

I look at him now, sitting on the other end of the couch. He's wearing an old t-shirt and loose sweatpants, and his feet are bare. His hair is hanging well beyond his shoulders. His beard is fuller around his chin and above his lips, but it stretches from ear to ear. He smiles. He laughs. His blue eyes are kind tonight, but I remember how angry they were just yesterday.

I wonder if we can be repaired. I'm aware of how much distrust I caused, but I think that maybe we could be fixed. No matter how unreal our reality was years ago, there is one constant. I still love him.

"Answer this one question for me," says J.R. He cuts his eyes at me, and there's a sound of hesitation to his curiosity. "Did you date anyone?"

He's already asked me this, but maybe he didn't believe me. I think about the one and only date I have ever

been on since I left J.R. Kelley kind of forced me into it after Knox was born. She said it was for my own good. I tried to like the guy. I even tried to make myself believe he was handsome, but the truth is that he couldn't match up to J.R. No one ever would. After that night, I concluded that it was impossible for me to date because I was still relentlessly in love with a man who stole my heart years ago on my twenty-first birthday.

"No," I answer. "I went out with someone once. Not because I wanted to."

He hangs his head a little. "I tried to date, too," he admits. "But no one was you."

We sit quietly for a few minutes, and I imagine that we're both picturing each other out with other people. It makes me sick to think about J.R. with another woman. It was something I tried not to think about too much while I was gone.

"I didn't tell you about Knox—not because I didn't think you would want her but because I didn't intend on keeping her. I never wanted to be a mother. I didn't think I would be any good at it," I confess, afraid to see his reaction. I'm not sure my timing is right in telling him that I had intended on giving his daughter to another family without his knowing, but in the spirit of honesty, I feel like it needed to be said. What's the worst that could happen? He's already angry with me.

He looks at me, his blue eyes transitioning from calm to anger. I regret saying it now. I enjoyed the calm.

"You weren't going to keep her?" His jaw is stiff.

"I had it all lined up. The adoption. I had picked this amazing family." I have no idea why I'm giving him more details. It's obvious he's angry, and I don't think he wants to know all of the thought that I put behind giving our daughter away.

"I can't believe you would even consider doing that, Rach. She wasn't just yours to give away." He's accusing.

Disappointed. I don't blame him, but I think he's missing the point.

"I didn't do it, J.R.," I say defensively. "As soon as she was born—the moment she entered the world—when I heard her crying, I knew she was mine. I knew that I couldn't just give her to someone else."

J.R. sits up a little straighter, and he slides his hands through his hair. "I haven't even decided if I can forgive you for keeping her from me all of these years, but now to know you were actually going to give her away? Rach, did I even know you?"

"Don't say that," I whisper, sitting up. "You knew me. You know me."

"You just left. No note. Nothing. If your clothes hadn't been gone, I would have thought you had been abducted. You find out you're pregnant with my kid, and you don't give me a single thought. You don't even give me a choice. Now, I find out you were just going to give my kid to another family."

"I thought I was doing the right thing, J.R. I've already explained this to you. I was messed up!" I exclaim.

"You didn't trust me, Rach."

I trusted him. It was me I didn't trust. I could talk myself into being content all day long, but then, out of nowhere, my mother's voice, disguised as the voice of reason, would whisper to me, *He's never going to marry you because you're not worth marrying.*

"It had nothing to do with you," I tell him. "Absolutely nothing."

"But it did!" he argues back. "We were together. We had a life together. You carried my baby for nine months and never once tried to contact me. You didn't trust me."

Not all of that is accurate. I did call him once. On her first birthday. I had intended on telling him about Knox then, but I had lost my nerve.

“I’m here now,” I say softly. “You said that yourself, just a while ago. I know that I made terrible choices, but I am here now.”

J.R. glares at me. His mouth is gaping. He’s frustrated. Maybe he’s wondering why I don’t get it. I do get it, but what can I do about it now? He looks away from me and then sighs. “You did make some terrible choices, but the unforgivable would have been giving our daughter away.”

I nod in agreement, and I move closer to him. “I’m sorry, J.R. For everything. I just...I knew that I would never love anyone the way that I love you. I couldn’t stand the thought of you walking out on me one day.”

“I never gave you a reason to believe that I would leave you.”

“You didn’t. You were perfect. It was me, J.R. All me.” My voice is soft and calm. I tilt my head to look at him. His eyes, blue and velvety, are on me. “Knox is a good kid. Not because of me, though. She’s good because of you.”

There’s a moment between us. It’s soft, gentle, slightly electrifying. Like a fire being rekindled. Like a gentle wind coming from some place unseen, reaching into the ashes, and breathing new life into the dead flames. It’s a brief moment, but it’s a moment. It’s enough to leave my heart with a slight flutter of hope. Maybe we aren’t completely broken.

“I’m going to bed,” J.R. says softly. He doesn’t move, though. He keeps looking at me, his eyes a black pool of emotions.

“Okay.” I’m not moving either. I can’t. I won’t.

“Okay,” he echoes. There are a few more moments of hesitation, but then he forces himself up from the couch.

I watch him leave me, walking down the hall and disappearing out of sight. The bedroom door clicks closed, and I relax back into the couch, releasing a sigh of disappointment and longing.

September 2007

“Hello?”

It had been so long since I had heard his voice. I had almost forgotten what he sounded like. It was such a funny thing. A person can have every attribute of someone memorized—the color of their eyes, the freckles on their skin, the different expressions of their face—but when time and distance come between them, all of those things fade away. The sound of their voice is the first to go.

I listened to him quietly on the other end of the phone. He repeated himself. “Hello? Hello? Hello?”

I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t. I was not even sure what to say, although I had the conversation planned before I dialed his number. I was choking on my own silence.

J.R. finally hung up the phone, and then I put mine down, too. I thought about crying, but I didn’t. I decided that I would tell him about Knox another day. This day, we were celebrating her first birthday.

We had a party for Knox. It was nothing major. Just the three of us—Kelley, Knox, and me—and Kelley’s parents, who came over to celebrate, too. Her parents had been such a blessing to me since Knox’s birth. They doted on Knox much like she was their granddaughter. I had always been so grateful for all that they did for us. More than they should have ever had to.

We even invited Chels, who happened to be in town that day. After Chels graduated from the university, she took a year to travel and met a man in Italy—and the rest is history. Sometimes, I think life is a bit unfair. Who is fortunate enough

to graduate from college, hop on a plane the next day, and journey across the face of the earth? Chels.

I decorated our little house with streamers and balloons, and I even bought Knox her very own cupcake to devour. We all laughed as Knox poked her chubby, little fingers into the icing. Then, Knox smashed the perfect, little cupcake into a patty. Knox's lips were blue from the food coloring in the icing, and she was perfectly content pushing the smooshed cake into her mouth with the palm of her chubby, little hand. I figured I'd regret the decision to let her have free reign of the cupcake later.

"I called him today," I told Kelley quietly as we watched Knox play with her food. Kelley's parents were snapping photos of Knox, not paying any attention to Kelley and me.

Kelley nearly choked on her drink at my confession. "What?"

I leaned forward and wiped some icing from Knox's chin. "I couldn't say anything. I just sat there like an idiot while he got frustrated on the other line, repeating 'hello' over and over again."

"Why didn't you just say something?"

I cut my eyes at her. "What was I going to say?"

She shook her head at me but shrugged her shoulders, too. "I still think you should just take her to him. She's a year old now. It's not too late, Rach."

"I know what you think," I replied. "But I'm not ready for that."

"You're just afraid."

"Yep." I agreed. I was. I was a complete and utter coward. At least, I could admit it. Besides, how on earth would I show up on his doorstep a year-and-a-half later with a kid on my hip? That wouldn't go over well at all.

"The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be for him to forgive you."



“Yep.” I wouldn’t look at her. I watched Knox Rose with her thick, dark hair; stunning, blue eyes; and her plump, little lips. I smiled, and I could always see J.R. in her little face. He was there; he just didn’t know it.

## Present

I'm packing our things back into the car, getting ready to make the drive back to the Upstate. The weekend is over, and I'm sort of relieved. The stress and tension of the last two days have been overwhelming for me, especially as I try to pretend for Knox that everything is okay. Besides that, I had only written a single paragraph about why the world isn't going to end on December 21. Adam would not be happy, but he's obsessed with Kelley these days, so I'm sure I can find some way to get the heat off of me.

J.R. is leaving tomorrow for a four-week tour with the band. A lot has changed over the last few years, but that remains the same.

J.R. and Knox are sitting together on the front porch swing. I hear them talking and laughing, and I wonder what they are discussing. I feel like a bit of an outsider, uninvited into their new, little world.

The sky is blue overhead. The sun is warm. Birds are singing, and somewhere in the distance, I can hear the soft rumble of the ocean. It's humid today, only a slight breeze for relief. I do miss this place. The coast breathes a life into me that I can't explain.

"Ready, Rosie girl?" I ask, making my way to the front porch. J.R. and Knox look up at me; their blue eyes together are stunning, and my breath catches in my throat.

"Stop calling me that," Knox mumbles, sliding off the swing.

"It's my job to annoy you with nicknames." I smile.

J.R. looks sad, like a boy at the fair that didn't get to ride all of the roller coasters he wanted. He follows Knox to

me, and then he puts his hand on top of her head while looking at me.

“The band and I will be in the Upstate, at the Handlebar, in a couple of weeks,” he says. “I’d like to come see her while I’m in town.”

“Of course,” I reply. “The Handlebar—where it all began.” I smile trying to make light of our situation. “Maybe we’ll all go out for dinner.”

“No. Just Knox and me.” His expression is stiff. I know that it hurts him to exclude me from the equation, but I think that it’s also J.R.’s way of protecting himself.

My heart sinks, and I try to hide the disappointment from my face. “That’s fine, too.” My eyes burn, and I think I might cry. I don’t.

J.R. gives me a nod, his expression somewhat apologetic. He doesn’t want to hurt me, but I think he can’t help it. It’s natural to want to cause pain to someone who has caused you so much pain, and he’s protecting his heart, too. I think about that brief moment on the couch, where I thought that maybe the spark between us was being reignited. I think now that maybe that was all in my head. Maybe he has zero interest in trying to work things out with me. I can’t be angry about that, can I? It’s his right.

J.R. crouches down in front of Knox. “I’ll see you in a couple of weeks then?”

Knox smiles at him. “I can’t wait,” she exclaims.

I smile, and I feel a tear escape down my cheek. I wipe it away quickly before anyone notices.

J.R. smiles at her, pushes a strand of her hair behind her ear, and then kisses her cheek. “I love you, Knox Rose.”

I watch Knox’s face light up in a way that I’ve never seen it do before, and she whispers back to him, “I love you, too, Daddy.”

J.R. stands back up to face me. “Drive carefully.”

“Always,” I say, hoping that he doesn’t notice the still-damp trail on my cheek that the rogue tear left behind. J.R. leans into me, kisses my cheek, pauses to look at me again for one very brief second, and then backs away.

I try to hold myself together as I take Knox’s hand to help her into the car. I even avoid glancing at him as I slide into the driver’s seat. I focus on getting the car cranked and then in reverse; but as I back away from our house, I look up at him through the rearview mirror. Our eyes catch for a second. My heart shatters all over again, and I’m not sure how I’m going to make it back home.

All I can think about as I drive away from the island is the way J.R. looked as I left our home—the way he stood there in the driveway, shoulders heavy, hands in his pockets, hair caught by the wind, the way his blue eyes gazed at us as we drove away. I think about how unnatural it felt to leave. We weren’t meant to be apart. We were meant to be together. I’ve known that this entire time, but today, I believe it without even a hint of doubt.

“Did you have fun with your dad this weekend?” I ask Knox as I tuck her back into her own bed.

She smiles widely. “He’s funny. I like him.”

“He is funny, isn’t he?” I smirk. Apart from Kelley, no other human had ever been capable of keeping a smile on my face the way that J.R. had.

“You look sad, Mama.” My sweet child—always observant.

“I’m not sad, love. Maybe I’m just tired.”

She stares at me a little longer, and I know she doesn’t believe me.

“Goodnight, Knox,” I whisper, kissing her cheek.

“Mama?” Her sweet voice travels through the darkness of her room just as I am about to close her bedroom door.

“Yeah?”

“Aunt Kelley says that everything always works out the way it should, and I think that’s true. I was supposed to spend the weekend with Sydney; but Sydney got sick, and I got to meet my dad instead.”

I chuckle quietly while choking back my tears. I feel a fullness in my heart that I can’t quite comprehend.

“It always works out,” I manage to say without a cracked voice. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Mama.”

I close the door and stand there for a moment, breathing a sigh. I force my legs down the hallway to my bedroom, closing the door behind me. I’m broken. Everything is broken. I climb into my bed, pull the covers over my head, and finally release all the tears I had built up over the weekend—well, really, over the last few years.

I knew it was going to be hard. I knew that it might even be impossible, but I had no idea that it would hurt this bad to face J.R. again after all of these years, to watch a new relationship bud between father and daughter, and to find out that I ran out on the most perfect thing in this world. It’s such a hard pill to swallow, and I think I may drown in my own tears beneath these covers.

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J.R. never breaks a promise. It’s been two weeks since we left him back on the island, and tonight, he’s here to pick up Knox for their special night out. It’s all Knox has talked about all day, and I’m happy that she’s happy. But I’m also nervous at the thought of seeing him again. She looks beautiful with her denim dress and brand-new sandals. Her long hair is silky smooth, and I think she’s even glowing. I don’t forget to tell her that she’s beautiful, and she’s beaming as she bounces toward the door to meet J.R.

“Good evening, Ms. Knox Rose,” he says to her. “These are for you.” He hands her a bouquet of daisies—the same kind he brought to me so many years ago for our first date.

“Oh, wow! No one has ever given me flowers before,” Knox exclaims. “Thank you!”

“That’s so nice, Knox,” I say as she turns to show me her flowers. “Why don’t you go find a vase in the kitchen to put them in?”

Knox bounces off to the kitchen, and we’re left standing there in awkward silence.

“You are all she’s talked about today.” I am the first to break the silence.

J.R. nods. “I’m just going to take her to dinner—if that’s okay.”

“Whatever you need,” I say. “Thank you for making time for her.”

“What are you doing tonight?” he asks. I think I notice a look of concern for me in his eyes. There may even be guilt behind them, too.

I shrug. “Order a pizza. Watch a movie. I’ll be fine,” I assure him.

J.R. looks at me with a slight frown on his face, and I know that he definitely feels guilty for leaving me behind.

“I’m fine,” I say again. I’m not great at lying, though. He can see right through me, and he knows I’m not okay. There is a very large part of me that would love to join them on their night out.

Knox comes bouncing back to us. “I’m ready to go!” she says.

“I hope you’re hungry. Taking you to my favorite little pizza house here,” J.R. says. “You like pizza?”

“I was raised on pizza,” Knox quips, and I stifle a laugh.

“Have fun,” I say, perhaps too brightly, and then I watch J.R. walk Knox to the car he rented for the evening. He opens the door for her and then helps her in. J.R. looks up at

me briefly before he steps into the car and backs out of the driveway.

It's quiet. Lonely. I find myself missing Knox, and she's only been gone for an hour. Knox and I had moved into this apartment not long after she was born, and sometimes, I regret it. Sometimes, I miss Kelley. My pizza has been delivered, and I'm sitting on the couch, flipping through the channels on the television, trying to find something worth watching.

I'm not hungry, and I can't decide on a movie, so I turn on some music and run myself a hot bath instead.

I can't stop thinking about Knox, and maybe I'm slightly worried about how their night out is going.

I send J.R. a text message: *Everything okay?*

J.R. texts back: *Perfect.*

I sigh. Of course, it is. My body slips into the hot water, and it feels like a paradise. I lay my head back against the tub, and I close my eyes. The music plays loudly in the background. It's angry rock music. The kind that makes you want to head bang all of your frustrations out. It's more soothing to me than spa music would be.

The hot water closes around my body and encases me like a dream. In my mind, I go back in time, replaying every moment I've ever had with J.R. Then, I think about Knox and the first time I held her in my arms. I remember looking into her blue eyes and knowing that I will never love another human being like I love her. I can't even think about the fact that I had planned my entire pregnancy around placing her for adoption. I just think about the moment when she wrapped her tiny hand around my finger. That was the moment she owned me.

I'm sitting at my desk, trying to work on this end-of-the-world opinion piece. It's a stupid topic, and I still kind of wish the world would end on December 21. My mind is not in it, though. I've got too much going on personally to write creatively.

Knox and J.R. are back sooner than I thought they'd be. Of course, it's ten p.m., and Knox is a child. An adult is limited to the places they can take a child after nine. Especially in the South.

J.R. carries a sleeping Knox into the house. Her head is on his shoulder, mouth hanging open. I briefly wonder why she's incapable of going anywhere in a car without falling asleep. He walks her into her room, lays her on the bed, and removes her shoes. Then, he pulls her covers over her, and we walk quietly back into the hallway, closing the door behind us.

"Have fun?" I ask as we walk back to the front door together.

"I think so. Dinner and a round of miniature golf," he says proudly. "I let her win."

I smile. "I'm sure she had fun. She has a mean putt."

J.R. looks at me. He smirks a little. He wants to say something, but I can tell he's hesitant to do so.

"Thank you," I tell him, "for stepping up to the plate without thinking twice about it. I know it's not easy to have all of this suddenly dumped on you."

"Rachel, I would have been here all along if I had known."

"I know, J.R. I know." I look up at him. "I was afraid you wouldn't want her because of what I did."

"That's ridiculous, Rachel," he says sharply. "This is our life. Our family. And you just took control of the whole thing."

"I was wrong, J.R. I never expect you to forgive me." I turn away from him for a moment, and then I turn back. "I don't know what else you want me to say. I've told you everything." My tone is sharp. Maybe even angry. I'm tired of rehashing this over and over again. I can't change it. I can't change any of it.

J.R. puts his hand through his hair. He's frustrated, too.



“I love you, Rachel. I’ve never stopped loving you, even after...” He shakes his head. “I just can’t. You and me. I can’t.”

My heart breaks again, and I just want him to leave. I’m crying now, and I can’t even stop myself. I went into this without expecting J.R. to take me back, but I would be lying if I claimed that I hadn’t at least hoped that maybe he might give me another chance at some point. I didn’t expect him to throw himself at me the moment I showed up. “I told you, I didn’t come back for us.” I wipe my cheek. “Thank you, again, for taking her out. Just let me know when you want to see her again.” I turn away from him again, hoping he leaves. I’m not sure how much longer I can bear to be around him. His presence is suffocating.

J.R. doesn’t leave, though. He keeps standing there, watching me. I can feel his blue eyes against the back of my head.

Maybe if I ignore him, he’ll go away. Isn’t that how it works? I force myself to the kitchen and find a dusty bottle of vodka in the cabinet. I haven’t had a drink in a while. I haven’t needed a reason to, but tonight, I have a reason. I don’t want to feel anymore. Not like this. I want to be numb. Then maybe I can actually write this stupid opinion piece on the Mayan calendar and how they were wrong.

I hear footsteps behind me. J.R.’s footsteps. I still don’t turn to face him. I pull a small glass down from the cabinet, and then I fill it a quarter of the way with vodka.

“Rachel.” His voice is gentle.

I don’t face him.

“Rachel,” he says again. This time his tone is stern, and I know that he means for me to look at him.

Reluctantly, I turn to face him. I’m not even ashamed of the trail of tears on my cheeks.

He’s beautiful. The way he looks at me with his soft blue eyes—they’re like a window into his soul. A view that I took advantage of too often. I used to think that I could never

grow tired of gazing into those eyes and exploring every inch of him. All of his pain, all of his joy, everything he's ever been through—it's all there behind his blue eyes.

"When you left," he says, "I swore that if I ever got a chance to have you again, I would take it. No matter what."

"What are you saying?" I ask him, feeling hope ignite in my soul again. I cross my arms across my chest, and I pretend to be done. To be over it. Maybe I am a little. He's made it clear that we don't have a future together, not the way we were. But then, he says things that make me think that there is forgiveness somewhere, waiting. That there is a second chance waiting for us.

"I want you and Knox to come home," he says. "Where the three of us should have been all along. I'm not...I can't...you and I—I'm not there yet. I've got some stuff I have to work through, but I want you and Knox at home. Where you belong."

I'm confused. My head is throbbing. My expression says it all, I'm sure, but I take my shot of vodka and throw it back, placing the glass back on the counter once it's empty. I look up at him. "Are you asking me—*us*—to move in with you?"

"Yeah, I guess I am. It's still our house, Rach. You should have never left it."

I think about the proposal for a moment, and I realize that I don't have an answer for him. We have a life here. A home. Knox has friends, and I have Kelley. How can we just pack up and move? Besides, how hard will it be to live under one roof with J.R.? It's hard enough having him here right now.

"I'll have to think about it, J.R. I can't just—"

"That's fine. Think about it," he says, cutting me off. "I'm on the road for another week." He steps a little closer to me. "Just think about it." He raises his hand as though he's going to brush my cheek with his fingers, but then he stops. "We've got a mess here, you and me, but I think that the three

of us should be together, at least. That's how we were meant to be."

"And if we're not together, you and me, you don't think this will just confuse Knox?" I ask him.

"No, I don't think so. If anything, I think it will make her happy. We both agreed that we need to be friendly for her. I think this is a step in the right direction."

"And what about you and me? Where do we go from here?" I wish that I hadn't asked him this question. None of this was supposed to be about us in the first place, but I can't help but wonder where his mind is exactly concerning the two of us.

"I don't know, Rach," he says with a sigh. "I don't know."

"Okay." I sniff and wipe the back of my hand across my cheek. "Well, I'll run it by Knox."

"Okay." He nods. "The band leaves in the morning. I'll give Knox a call then."

I walk J.R. to the door, and just as he hits the second step down my front porch, I feel a sense of dread wash over me. I hate watching him leave. I hate leaving him. Watching him walk away breaks my heart in a new way that I can't explain.

I call after him. "J.R.?"

He turns. "Yeah?"

"I love you." The release of these words from my heart lifts a weight from my shoulders, and I think I've been longing to tell him this for years.

I watch a smirk break across his hardened expression, and he replies, "I love you, too."

I wipe my cheek, lean into the front door frame, and watch him leave again. This is the hardest thing I've ever done, and a piece of me wishes I had never come back to J.R.. I could have just stayed put with our lives here and told Knox that J.R. was dead or something. Anything to protect me from

this pain that I am feeling right now. Those are selfish thoughts, though, and I've been selfish long enough.

"He just wants you to move in?" Kelley sits at my kitchen table, helping herself to the last of the freshly brewed coffee.

After J.R. had left last night, I didn't sleep at all. I was too busy thinking about what he's asked me to do. What he's asked us to do. I don't appreciate Kelley emptying the coffee carafe into her mug. I need coffee. All the coffee.

"Knox and I both. Move in. Like a family, except that we aren't a family," I reply, sipping the last bit of coffee from my mug. "I don't know if I can. It's hard enough being near him now. I can't imagine living with him. Every instinct in my body wants to hold him, kiss him." I push my hand through my hair and relax back in my chair. "And then to just pick up and leave here. We've made a home here."

"Have you asked Knox about it yet?" Kelley asks.

I shake my head. "I'm not even sure how I feel about it. I can't talk to her about it yet."

"He's not wrong, you know. He just wants his family together," Kelley says. "You have to respect that."

"Why don't you marry him then? You never take my side." I think about saying something about her drinking all my coffee, too, but I don't.

Kelley rolls her eyes at me. "You know I love you, but I'll never understand why you left him in the first place."

"Yeah, well." I go to sip my coffee again, but then I remember the mug is empty. "I'll never understand it either. And if I'm being honest, I don't really understand why you're still dating Adam."

"Don't change the subject. What are you going to do, Rachel?"

I shrug. "I guess what's best for Knox."

"You think she'll want to go?"

“She is irrevocably in love with her dad. She won’t even have to think twice about it.”

“Maybe I’ll come visit. Once a month,” Kelley says.

“You’ll miss me, won’t you?” I smile.

“I’ll live. Besides, I’ve got Adam now.” She winks at me.

Just as I expected, Knox didn’t even take a single second to think about whether she wanted to move to the island or not. As soon as I told her of J.R.’s proposal, her blue eyes lit up; she made some sort of shrill noise that I’ve never in my life heard her make; and then she started packing her bags. I feel guilty for considering not even telling her about what J.R. has asked us to do. I think Knox has waited her entire little life for this.

So, I call J.R. It’s late at night now, but I know he’s awake. The two of us had a bad habit of staying up too late at night when we were together. I think that if we had lacked any more self-control, we would have stayed up until the sun rose the next morning, slept a few hours, and then repeated the process over again.

“I spoke with Knox,” I tell him. “About moving in with you.”

“Yeah?”

“She didn’t even have to think about it,” I say. “She’s already packed her bags and everything.”

“And how do you feel about it?” he asks.

“I feel like living with you and seeing you all of the time won’t be easy, but Knox deserves to be with her dad. I’ll come. We’ll come.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and then he says, “Maybe we’ll work on us, too.”

“What does that mean, J.R.?” I wish he would stop saying things like this. I wish he wouldn’t fill me with hope if there is no hope because I can’t hang onto a hope that isn’t there. I can’t live hanging onto a hope that maybe we’ll work

things out, maybe we can be together again, maybe he'll forgive me and we'll live happily ever after. I can't do that. I need to know what I'm working toward.

“It means what it means, Rach. It means that I still love you no matter how angry I am with you. It means that when I see you, it's everything I have in me not to take you back into my arms. It means that we have a kid, and no matter what has happened between us, we'll always share that.” J.R. sighs. “I love you, Rachel, and you still love me. I think that's worth something.”

J.R. is less than thrilled to see that Kelley made the trip with Knox and me. But she offered to help us move our stuff back to the island, and who was I to argue?

He stands on the front porch with his hands in his pockets and an unenthusiastic look on his face. His expression changes, of course, when Knox goes skipping over to him. J.R. squats down, opens his arms, and takes Knox Rose into a big embrace.

I smile as I pull some things from my trunk, with Kelley helping me, too.

“Well, he’s obviously not thrilled to see me,” she mumbles.

“Or me,” I add.

“Maybe you two will work things out, and then he’ll like me again.”

I shrug. “I’m not so sure. I think I’m just here as part of the Knox Rose package.”

J.R. meets us at the car to help. “Kelley,” he says, greeting her flatly.

“J.R.,” she says, echoing his tone.

“All of this?” J.R. looks into my trunk, slammed full of boxes and bags.

“Yep, and there’s more in Kelley’s car.”

J.R.’s eyes sort of go wide at the sight of all of our stuff, but he doesn’t complain. He steps in and helps us out.

We quietly move everything into the house. No one speaks, and I wonder if the tension will remain this thick. How long can I handle it? If it sticks around, maybe I’ll find myself

a small condo on the island. Knox can stay here with J.R., although the thought of that makes me sick.

Kelley helps me unpack a few things before she decides it's time for her to leave. I follow her out and give her a hug before she steps into her car. I don't want her to leave. She's the only human capable of keeping me sane, and we've been through so much over the last few years. I'm not sure I can live without her.

"You gonna be okay?" she asks me.

"I'll be fine," I lie.

"I'm just a phone call away."

"I know." I smile. "You'll come visit, too. I don't care what J.R. says."

"The road works both ways."

I nod. "Drive safe. Call me when you get home."

She waves her hand at me, and then I watch as she backs out of the driveway, soon out of sight.

"I made us dinner," J.R. says as I walk back inside. "Actually, A.J.'s made us dinner, but I ordered our favorites." He smiles at Knox and me, like this entire situation is normal. It's not normal.

The sun is setting now, and I just want to take a hot shower and go to bed. I have an air mattress in the music room for the time-being, and I just want to disappear away from him. It hurts to see him.

"Go ahead and eat. I'm not hungry," I say. "I think I'll shower."

Knox and J.R. look at me with identical expressions on their faces. I determine that I am definitely the odd man out, and I'm not even sure they'll miss me if I just disappear.

"Rach," J.R. says.

"I'm just tired," I assure him. "I'll be fine. Carry on without me." I wave my hand at them and then travel down the hallway to the bathroom.



I miss my home, and even though I've spent the last few years away from J.R., I wish I was far away from this place. I cover my face with my hands, and I cry silently into them. I feel distant, lonely, and depressed. I don't know how this situation is going to play out, and I'm not even sure I'll make it. I am determined to do my best. I'll cry. Right now. Just this once, and then I won't cry again.

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Living back on the island is a bigger adjustment than I thought it would be. J.R. and I hardly had enough time to get Knox registered for school before it began, and I miss Kelley. I never realized how much I took advantage of our relationship or how close we had become. I miss my little apartment in the Upstate, too—right down to the way the floors creaked beneath my feet when I walked down the hall.

J.R. and I haven't talked much. We actually don't talk at all, but what is there to say? We do keep it cordial, though, for Knox. I feel like an outsider, and a part of me feels like I'm not wanted here. I'm not surprised, though. I knew it would be hard living here with the man I broke but whom I love entirely too deeply.

Still, one thing remains the same. I'm thankful for a Friday night. I have survived Knox's second week of school, and I can breathe again. I've found my way out to the back patio tonight. It's quiet. The only sounds are the songs of the cicadas in the trees and the roar of the ocean in the distance. The sky is black and covered in a blanket of stars. The sea breeze is calm and sticky. I love the way the salty air sticks to my lips. It's warm out here tonight; and I am relaxed in the swing, my head laid back, my eyes closed. My thoughts are running in continuous motion, and I acknowledge the fact that I am miserable. My heart is broken. I'm drowning. Still, I relinquish myself to this calm, warm night, and I breathe.

The screen door behind me creaks open, and then it closes. I crack an eye open to see who is joining me. It's J.R., and he holds an amber beer bottle in each hand.

“Hey,” he says, sitting next to me and handing me one of the beers.

“Hey,” I say, feeling a little guarded. I don’t think we’ve spoken since yesterday, and I certainly hadn’t expected for him to hand-deliver an alcoholic beverage that I hadn’t even asked for.

J.R. sits back in the swing, and he looks out into the darkness. “How are you doing?” he asks without looking at me.

I’m silent for a moment. I have convinced myself that he doesn’t give a hoot about me, but now, he’s here asking about my wellbeing. “I’m okay.” It’s a lie. I’m not sure I’ve ever struggled the way I am currently struggling. I feel like I’m on the outside looking into a life that I was meant to have.

He sits quietly, taking a sip from the beer glass. I take a sip from my bottle, too.

“I haven’t—we haven’t—talked much since you moved in,” he says finally.

“No, we haven’t. It’s okay, though. It’s sort of a strange situation we’ve found ourselves in.”

“You’re not happy,” he points out.

At least, he’s paying attention.

“Knox is happy, so I am happy. I’m okay.”

“I want you to be happy, Rach.”

I glance at him and force a smile on my face. “I’ll be fine, J.R.”

He’s quiet again, and I wonder what he’s thinking. I can almost see the thoughts tumbling around in his mind.

“I’m angry, Rachel. I don’t know how to not be angry. I love you, and I know that; but when I think about everything I’ve missed—you, Knox—I can’t get past being angry.”

“J.R., I told you, I’m not here for us. You’re off the hook, okay?” I tell him.

J.R. shakes his head. “I don’t want to be off the hook, Rach. All I have ever wanted was to be with you.”

I take a sip from my beer again, trying to remain calm. “I think that, for now, you and Knox should concentrate on your relationship. I literally have nothing else to say for myself, J.R.” Every time we talk on this topic, I feel like he wants me to say something different. I don’t have anything different to say.

J.R. grits his teeth a little and then hops off the swing. “You made such a mess of everything, Rachel!” he snaps at me. The suddenness of the outburst startles me.

Still, I sit calmly, realizing that maybe he needs to yell at me. Maybe he should unleash it all on me because I deserve it. I deserve everything he’s ever wanted to say to me since he discovered I had left him. All the pent-up anger.

“I came home, Rachel. I had the whole thing planned. I couldn’t wait to see you. To see your face when I knelt down on one knee and asked you to marry me.” He turns his blue eyes, full of rage, to me now. “And then I realized you were gone. All of your clothes, everything. You were just...gone.” He grits his teeth and shakes his head. “I sat here for days trying to figure out what happened. What went wrong. What I did. You told me that you would never leave, and yet...you did. You left. Without a trace. Without a word. Completely vanished. Do you even know what that did to me? And that was just when I thought I had only lost you. When you finally do show back up, I realize that not only did I miss out on your life, but I missed out on the first part of our kid’s life, too. I’m pissed, Rachel. I’m so unbelievably angry that I’m not even sure what to do with it!”

I sit there, taking it. The honest truth pours from his perfect lips, but with each word comes a heaviness in my heart that keeps me from breathing. When I left him, I knew it would hurt him, but I never thought that I would have to look back into his blue eyes and see the actual pain I caused. It was selfish, and it’s not something I will ever look back on with pride.

“I thought about you every single day. I looked for you. I went to Kelley’s. I postponed tour after tour. I watched for you to pull up in the driveway. I prayed for it, Rachel. You never came.”

I wipe away a tear. “Why are you telling me all of this?” I whisper.

“You need to know how I felt when you left. And then, you’re going to tell me what you’ve been doing all of these years. All of the spaces in between. Everything. I have to know.”

“J.R., that’s a lot of talking,” I say.

“I’ve got all night.” He folds his arms across his chest, and then he leans against the railing of the patio. He’s glaring at me, still holding his beer.

I haven’t moved from my spot on the swing. “Fine.”

“The one thing I can’t figure out, though, is that if you truly loved me the way you said you did, how was it possible for you to do this? To disappear? To have our baby without telling me? I stayed in one spot on purpose. I knew you’d come back. I just had no idea you’d take so long to do it.” His eyes are wet, and his face is broken.

I want to touch him. Hold him. Take it all away. I don’t. I cry instead.

“I wanted to come home,” I say. “Lots of times. I was just... I was afraid

“Oh, please!” he says. “Afraid of what? I never gave you any reason to be afraid of me.”

“I’ve already told you everything!” I shout, frustrated. “Is that not good enough?”

“No.”

I breathe in calmly, trying to keep my composure. What J.R. doesn’t know is what I went through personally after I left.

“Apart from that one night, we never even talked about marriage,” he adds.

“That’s not true. Right after we started dating, there was a conversation. You made it clear that you weren’t a fan of the concept of marriage.”

“Why didn’t you freaking leave me then? When I wasn’t that invested?” he shouts.

“I thought you would get over it!” I yell back.

“Well, I did, but you weren’t around, were you?” he snaps back. He cuts his blue eyes at me.

I stare at him for a moment, and I’m not sure we’re going to get anywhere by yelling at each other. To be honest, we’ve never really had a fight. Especially like this one. I can’t even think of a single time I might have raised my voice at J.R. out of anger. I sigh and move my hand through my hair.

“Was there another man, Rachel?” he asks me.

“Are you freaking kidding me right now?” I yell. I’m officially angry now, and I feel myself growing hot. He’s asked me this question twice now, and both times my answer has been the same. Why won’t he believe me?

“Why do you keep asking me that question?”

“It’s a legit question, Rach.”

“No, it’s not,” I snap back. “I never... I’ve never even thought about another man. I’ve never loved anyone the way that I love you!” I’m still shouting. My heart is racing. I know that if I allow myself to get any angrier, I’ll push myself into a full-blown panic attack. I can already feel my chest getting tighter and my breath getting harder to catch.

“Why didn’t you come home then?”

“I did. I’m here, J.R.!” I yell.

“I’m not talking about now! I’m talking about then,” J.R. yells back. “Why didn’t you come home then?!”

“Well, I can’t change a damn thing, J.R. I don’t have a time machine. I can’t go back. I would. I would if I could, but

I can't. I had my reasons for leaving, and I had my reasons for not coming home sooner. The point is, I'm here now. Knox is here. We are here."

"And what about all of the time we lost?"

"You can't get it back, so why waste time thinking about it?" I say simply and almost a bit too coldly.

J.R. continues to glare at me. His face is full of rage. He'll never forgive me. We'll never get past this. He'll always be angry, and I'll spend the rest of my life regretting my decisions. I think that moving here was a mistake, and I think that I can't stay here any longer.

But then, J.R. does something I don't expect. He steps close to me, grabs my face in his hands, and covers my lips with his. I indulge for a moment, until reality sets in and I want to pull away, but I want to stay right here, too. In the embrace of his angry passion, he kisses me hard, but it's gentle, too. I can't seem to talk myself into stopping him.

I finally find the strength to push him away. "What are you doing?" My voice still sounds angry. I'm still angry. But now, I'm also in shock.

"I've been wanting to do that since you showed up on the dock weeks ago." He doesn't apologize for it, and his tone still denotes anger. It was almost as if he couldn't help himself. He wanted to kiss me, even though he is still absolutely angry with me.

I roughly push him back. "You can't go around doing that. Not if we don't know what is going to happen with us," I snap.

This is all I've wanted since the day I left him, but I'm not about to hope for something that will never come to fruition. I'm not putting myself in a place of hope if there is no hope.

J.R. doesn't push himself forward. He stays where he is, watching me hesitantly, trying to decide what he should say next. Now I'm thinking that even though he was the one who initiated the kiss, the act itself surprised even him. I watch his

face fall from the angry ridges that had been lining his expression. He gently tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm sorry for yelling," he finally says.

"I deserved it, didn't I?" My tone is still cold and detached.

"Maybe." He shrugs. "I didn't mean to kiss you. I just...it just happened. I want to be with you, Rachel. I know that, but I also know there's a lot of forgiveness that needs to be had, too. It's going to take time, but I'm willing to try if you are. I just think that we should take things slow."

We settle back in on the swing, both of us agreeing that we will need to move slowly. For Knox. We can't be reckless. We have Knox to think about now, and I don't want to do anything to ruin the relationship that she and J.R. are building now. I do want to try. I want us to be the family we were meant to be, but this time must be different. I couldn't bear to break Knox's heart.

My head rests on J.R.'s shoulder as he pushes the swing gently with one of his feet. My eyes feel heavy when J.R. speaks suddenly. "Tell me about your mom."

His voice startles me. "What?"

"Your mom. We never really talked about her before. You told me a few things a couple of weeks ago, but I want to know everything."

"On one condition," I tell him. "I want to know about your parents. Everything." I may have made a few comments about my mom in the past, but J.R.'s family was something we never even spoke about. They're a secret that J.R. has never wanted to unveil.

"Fine," he says with a sigh. It's quiet for a moment, and then he says, "Why do you think, during the time we had together, neither of us spoke about our parents?"

"For me, I wanted to wrap myself inside the reality of you. I wanted to forget everything else. My mom. My dad." I close my eyes, remembering life with J.R. "I just wanted you."

"We should talk about them," he says.

“Do you think that’s what happened to us? We didn’t talk enough about the people who destroyed us?” I tilt my head up to look at him.

J.R. kisses my forehead. “I think if we had, maybe things would have made more sense.”

Maybe he’s right.

“When we wake in the morning, will you regret this?” I ask him.

“I will never regret kissing you,” he says. “Ever.”

“I did a lot of wrong.”

“We both did,” he says. I can’t think of a single thing he did wrong. All he ever did was love me.

“I should have married you the moment I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you,” J.R. says.

“And when was that?”

“The night I met you.”

I wonder if we’ll get married, or is it sort of cliché now? Is the pain still too raw? Maybe it’s too soon to talk about those things. We have only just reunited. I’ve changed, and I think he has, too. He seems older, calmer, and maybe even a bit more rational. Not that he was ever irrational. Well, except for the time he decided he wouldn’t propose when he was supposed to propose because we had a fight over it. That was definitely a stubborn J.R. moment that might have changed everything entirely.

I think we still have a lot to figure out, and maybe we should figure it out before we make any hasty decisions about us.

J.R. is a little older than he was eleven years ago, and he has a few wrinkles around his eyes that I haven’t noticed before. There are even a few specks of gray in his long, dark hair. The core of him is still there, though—everything that caused me to fall in love with him in the first place. It’s all still there.



As for me, I've put myself through a lot. I've overcome a lot. I'm older, but Knox really changed me, too. Motherhood seems to have that effect. Maybe the biggest thing that has changed about me, though, is the ability to have my own thoughts. I'm no longer tortured or controlled by the words of my mother. It wasn't an easy thing to let go, but once I did, I was free. My heart was free. My mind was free. I could actually hear myself again, and maybe that's why it took me so long to come home. Maybe I had to rediscover who I really am.

We've been quiet for a little while now, and I wonder if J.R. has fallen asleep next to me on the swing. It's nearly two a.m., and I think that I should probably try to sleep. Who can sleep after experiencing the types of things that have made this night?

I tilt my head back a little and look up at him. He's still awake, wide-eyed, staring at the wooden planked ceiling of the porch. He looks at me, and I say, "I thought it was my fault that my dad died."

"What?" he asks, lifting his head a little from the swing.

"I never liked spending the night away from home with friends and such. It was all fun and games until it was time to go to bed, and then I would just lie there in the dark and think of all the terrible things that could happen to my family while I was gone. I would cause myself so much worry, I would make myself sick." I fiddle with my fingers a little, uncomfortable with telling this story out loud. I've only ever written it on paper.

"So, I was at a friend's house one night. I had gotten myself upset, as I normally would, so my friend's mom made a phone call to my dad to come pick me up." I close my eyes. "My dad never made it to the house. He was struck and killed by a drunk driver. That's really when everything changed with my mother. She never looked at me the same after that. I was Knox's age when that happened, and I can barely remember what life was like before that night."

“Rach, your dad’s death was not your fault. It was an accident,” J.R. says to me.

“I know that now, but I’ve lived most of my life believing that it was my fault. My mother—she hated me. She never let me forget that he was dead because of me. She told me, more than once, that she wished it had been me who died in that car accident.” I wipe a tear from my cheek. “I think she loved me before he died. I remember, vaguely, smiles and laughter and love. But...that one night, it changed everything. She just turned on me.

“I think that I left you not so much because of marriage but because if the one person who is supposed to love you endlessly—your mother—can turn on you that quickly, why would I be a fool to think someone else would ever love me completely? I had a mom and a dad. We were a family. If that could end, then why wouldn’t you and I end eventually? I couldn’t stand the thought of it. I just...I wanted a constant. I thought if we got married, that would be it. I would have my constant.”

J.R. is quiet. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t say anything, and I wonder what he’s thinking. Finally, he rolls his head toward me, his blue eyes locked on mine, and says, “You didn’t kill your dad. Your mother was not a mother. She was a monster who did nothing but batter you with lies.” He touches my cheek with his fingers. “You left me because you thought that one day, I would stop loving you, too.” It’s more of a question than a statement.

“I think so,” I say, relieved that maybe he finally understands what I’ve been trying to tell him since I came back to him.

“I love you, Rachel. With every ounce of my being. Even when I was so angry with you—heck, I’m still angry—but I still love you so much, it hurts. You are everything to me, and that will never change.”

I cry. Old tears. The kind of tears that I refused to cry as a child. When my mother would hurl her hurtful words at me, I captured them and buried them somewhere deep in my

heart. I wouldn't give my mother the satisfaction of making me cry, so I didn't. Everything she had ever said to me—it all came from the place I had buried it. It came to me in the night when I was alone or when I was having a good day. Her words came from some place unseen, and they were disguised as my own thoughts.

*He's never going to marry you, Rachel.*

*He'll leave you one day.*

*You should be the one dead, Rachel.*

February 2006

I knew what I'd done, but there wasn't much I could do about it now. The empty pill bottles surrounded me. I wasn't sure how long I had before my heart stopped, but I didn't think it was fair to Kelley if I just allowed myself to die on the floor of her living room.

So, I picked myself up and tidied up the scattered bottles. Already, I felt a little loose on my feet, but I thought I had at least five minutes. I tried to force myself down the hall to the guest room, where I'd been living since I had left J.R. It would be better if she found me there. *Less messy that way*, I thought.

I felt like the floor was disappearing beneath me, and I felt my body crash into the wall. I hit the floor, and I thought I might vomit. I thought taking myself out of this world would be a little easier this way, but then I realized I should have gone for the gun. At least, it would have been quicker.

The world spun around me. I felt sweat rolling down my forehead. I could hear her—my mother. She was screaming at me, “No one wants you. You're such a burden!”

Color left the room around me. Sound, too. I realized that this was it. Soon, the whole world would go dark, and I'd be gone. Then, I felt two hands on me. I managed to lift my eyelids slightly, and I saw Kelley. She was frantic. Screaming. Her hands were on my face. Her blue eyes were electric. I couldn't hear her, and I didn't expect the last thing I'd feel before I died would be guilt; but as if it mattered, I thought to myself, *I love you, sweet friend. I'm sorry.*

Present

“I told him about my mother,” I tell Kelley over the phone. “Everything.”

“Well, I’m kind of jealous because that’s something you’ve never even told me. At least, not the details.”

“You’re better not knowing. Trust me.”

“So, you two have your first make-out session in years, and then afterward, you tell him about the most depressing part of you?”

I laugh at her. “I mean, yes, but it wasn’t like that. And it wasn’t a make out session. It was very brief and angry.”

“Did you tell him about the time you tried to kill yourself?” she asks dully. I think she’s still angry with me about that. It was a pretty horrible thing for me to do to her.

“No. I’m not ready to talk about that.”

Kelley sighs. “You should tell him that. Soon. How does Knox feel about her mom and dad getting back together?”

“We aren’t back together. It was one kiss. I don’t think there’s any need to tell Knox anything yet. I don’t want to confuse her.”

“I swear you think too much, Rach,” she says, slightly irritated.

“Maybe.” I do think too much. “I miss you.”

“Yeah, me, too. I’m going to visit soon. As soon as J.R. stops hating me. I saved your life, Rachel. He should know that.” Only Kelley would use my suicide story to build herself up to favor in another’s mind.

“Soon,” I say, but I do wonder what he will think of me. Especially since I was pregnant when I tried to kill myself. I didn’t know it at the time, but Kelley saved Knox and me that night. J.R. should know that at least.

I hang up with Kelley and go looking for my family. J.R. is making breakfast, and the aroma of coffee fills the house. Knox is sitting at the kitchen table, flipping through a book and getting J.R.’s opinion on pianos. J.R. seems happy to chat about this, and I smile at the two of them.

I kiss the top of Knox’s head. “Good morning, Rosie.”

Knox rolls her eyes at me, but she doesn’t say anything about my continued usage of the nickname she hates. I swing around J.R. to grab a coffee mug from the cabinet, and he mumbles to me, “I think we should tell her that we’ve made amends. That we’re going to try again.”

I strongly disagree, of course. It’s mostly out of fear, but I also don’t want to give our daughter a false hope. We can try, but will we succeed? The verdict is still out on that. “We should wait,” I whisper.

J.R. looks disappointed, but he doesn’t push the subject further.

“We should go out on the beach today. The tourists are gone. It’s the weekend. It’ll be fun,” I say, changing the subject.

Knox and J.R. look at each other, and then Knox says, “Dad and I made plans already, but you can come, too.” She looks at J.R. “If it’s okay with Dad.”

I lean against the counter, looking at J.R., smiling. “Is it okay, Dad?”

J.R. chuckles, empties some scrambled eggs on a plate for Knox, and then says to her, “I’ll be right back. I need to have a talk with your mom about our plans.”

“Okay,” Knox says, watching us as J.R. leads the way out of the kitchen with me following behind.

We disappear down the hall and into J.R.'s bedroom. He closes the door, and then he turns into me, his hands on my hips.

"I know we agreed on slow, but I've never been slow about anything a day in my life," he says. His mouth is close to mine. "You can't look at me like that, and I'm having a really hard time keeping my hands off of you."

I hook my hands together behind his neck and pull him closer. "We should make sure that this is what we want. I don't want to confuse her. It's not just us anymore, J.R. It's Knox, too."

"I know." He presses his forehead against mine.

"I love you." I whisper.

"I know." He kisses me, pushing me gently against the wall. "I want you all to myself. Just for a day. Just you and me."

"Soon," I say, and I kiss him again. It's long and gentle, my body aching for his. If we are going to take things slow, we can't be kissing like this. The physical attraction between the two of us has always been a bit electrifying. Even the most disciplined woman couldn't resist him, and vice versa.

Suddenly, there are two little knocks on the bedroom door next to us, and we both startle. We muffle a laugh after Knox asks through the door, "What are you two doing in there? I'm ready to go."

J.R. kisses my forehead and then my lips, and then he swings the door open. "We were just discussing our plans. Go get your shoes on."

I stay stuck against the wall for a few seconds, and then I peel myself away when I'm composed again.

The sky is blue, and the air is warm. It's not humid the way it is in the middle of the summer. The air feels good as it moves through my hair. J.R. drives the boat out into the ocean a little way. I watch as the coast grows smaller the further we get from it.

It's a beautiful coastline, lined with tall, green trees. It's not like a Florida coastline covered in high-rise resorts. Tybee is a well-preserved island, where the wildlife has been kept. Wild dunes, tall trees, beautiful houses, docks, and a pier—it's like something from a movie.

Knox is content in her seat. Her little hands cling to her life jacket. She smiles into the breeze, and I think she's the most beautiful human I have ever laid eyes on.

J.R. stops the engine a little past the waves. He pulls a couple of fishing poles from a storage compartment on the boat, and then he gives Knox permission to unbuckle herself from her seat and stand up.

I watch them as Knox listens to J.R.'s instruction. He shows her how to bait the hook and cast the line. Knox watches intently, and I love her willingness to learn. She didn't even flinch when she hooked her own bait, the worm wiggling relentlessly from the hook.

“Want to fish?” J.R. asks me.

“No, I'll watch.” I haven't fished in quite some time.

“Come on,” J.R. urges, taking my hand.

I notice Knox watching us as I allow J.R. to pull me to my feet, and I think I see a little smile on her face. J.R. hands me his fishing pole. He's already attached the bait, for which I'm thankful. He stands behind me, his arms around me, his hands on mine, and he instructs me on how to cast the line. I smile because I know that he knows I know how to fish; but he just wants to be close to me, and I can't refuse him. It feels good to be so close to him. To feel his legs behind mine. His chest on my back. His hands on my hands.

Knox continues to watch us. There's a smile on her face. Her blue eyes seem to glisten, and I think she's seeing me a little differently now. I wonder if she is seeing us the way she had imagined we used to be.

I remember, somewhere in my deepest memories, how it felt to see my dad love my mother. It always seemed to



fulfill a piece of me that I can't explain. It made me feel safe, and I wonder now if Knox feels safe, too.

Without giving it much thought, I relax the back of my head against his shoulder; and like a magnet, J.R.'s lips kiss the side of my head. I'm not worried about confusing Knox now. She's happy. We make her happy. She needs this. I need this.

We stand there on the boat, in the ocean, two fishing poles in the sea, two girls feeling themselves grow whole, and a man who loves us more than we deserve. This is the way it should have always been. This is how it will be now. Even if we do continue to take things extremely slow.

As I put Knox to bed, we don't exchange many words. We don't talk about the fishing trip or J.R. and me. We share looks instead. Silent words that don't have to be said out loud. Knox kisses me goodnight, and I kiss her; and we silently agree that our lives will be different now. She closes her eyes; I turn off the light; and I slip out of her room.

I find J.R. outside in the swing. He's in the same place he found me last night. I bring him a beer, just as he brought me one, and I sit next to him. J.R. slides his arm around my shoulder, and we sit there quietly for a few minutes.

Finally, J.R. says, "So, I guess Knox knows we don't hate each other now." He smiles.

I sigh. "She never asked me about it, but I think so. A girl needs to know her parents love each other."

"Today was a good day," he says.

"It was." I kiss his cheek. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For loving me, despite everything, and for loving Knox."

"My girls," he says with a smile on his face.

I think about what Kelley and I had talked about this morning—about my needing to tell J.R. about this final piece of me that he doesn't know. The piece where I attempted

suicide. It doesn't feel like it should matter now, but it does matter. It was the darkest moment of my life. I wanted to die. I tried to die. The real story comes afterward, though, and how I've been healing since that night.

I lock my fingers in his, and I look at him. "I have to tell you something."

J.R. looks at me. I see fear in his eyes, and I don't blame him. I'm sure he's wondering what type of surprise I'm going to drop on him now. Besides, it was such a great day.

"What is it?" he asks.

"We're doing this thing where we actually talk about things. Deep things, right?"

"Of course."

One of the first steps to healing is confession. At least, that's what my therapist told me. The thing is no one wants to speak about the darkest moments of their life. We want to keep them tucked away, and I think that's out of fear, mainly. What on earth would people think about us if they only *knew*?

I lift my eyes to his. "I tried to end my life."

I watch his face, expecting a change in expression, but it remains the same. He's still there, ready to listen.

"I planned the whole thing. I went out and bought some prescription pain medication from a street dealer, waited until Kelley was gone for the evening, and then swallowed hundreds of pills. I tried to get myself to bed to die, but I didn't make it that far. I collapsed in the hallway, and that's where Kelley found me. I don't remember much. I just remember her screaming at me before everything went dark."

I feel tears form in my eyes. "Kelley saved my life. She saved Knox's life, too. I wanted to die, J.R. Walking away from you—I believed that it would be better if I wasn't here anymore."

J.R. doesn't say anything at first. I watch him as what I've told him begins to weigh him down. His blue eyes are sad. I even see tears begin to form.

“And Knox?”

“I didn’t know I was pregnant,” I explain. “I found out later. I would have only been about three weeks along with her. A pregnancy test probably wouldn’t have even read positive then, and I had no reason to expect that I was pregnant.”

“Why would you ever believe this world would be better without you?” he asks, softly.

“I don’t know, J.R.” I whisper. “I don’t know exactly where my head was, but I just thought that dead would be better than alive.”

J.R. sets his beer on the ground, and then he takes mine, doing the same. He takes me in his arms, and he holds me close to him.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” he whispers into my hair.

“You weren’t there because I walked away.” I pull away slightly and look back into his blue eyes. “I’m better now, J.R. I don’t see things the way I used to.”

His hands are on my face. His blue eyes are intense. “You are the most amazing person I have ever known, Rach. The best human in this world. A world without you is a world not worth living in. You know that, right?”

“I do. I know that.” I cry softly. “I know that now.”

J.R. pulls me back into him, and I cry into his shoulder.

We settle back into the swing, still recovering from my confession. I look at him again, my hand in his. “You haven’t told me about your parents yet, J.R.”

J.R. picks up his beer again and takes a sip. “My story is a lot less traumatizing than yours, Rach.”

“Let’s not compare. It’s your darkness.”

“Why are we doing this to ourselves?” he groans.

“Because it’s necessary.”

J.R. sighs. “My parents own a big chunk of land in Tennessee. A farm. Family business, all that crap. It’s what I was supposed to do with my life. Run that damn farm and then pass it down to my kids. It’s been in our family for more than a hundred years, and the future of the farm relies on me. So, imagine my father’s dismay when I told him that I wanted to pursue music instead of the farm. I wanted to do something different with my life.” He takes another sip of beer. “My father told me that I wasn’t anything special and that my loyalty lies with the farm, not the music. He told me that I had to take the farm, whether I wanted to or not. So, I graduated high school, packed my bags, and left the next day. That was fifteen years ago, and I haven’t talked to my parents since.”

“Have you tried calling them? You’ve proven you’re special.”

He shakes his head. “It wouldn’t matter. I hated that place, Rach. I spent my entire childhood learning how to tend the farm. Late nights, early mornings, in the cold of winter and in the muggy heat of summer. I watched my dad come dragging in for dinner every night, destined to be nothing else but a farmer. I wanted to be more. I couldn’t settle. They didn’t care. They didn’t understand. They watched me leave, and they didn’t even try to fight for me. That farm means more to them than I do.”

I curl up next to him, and I rest my head on his shoulder. “You grew up to be an amazing man, J.R.”

“I met you.”

“You had your band first,” I point out.

“And then I met you.” He smiles.

“We won’t be them. Our parents. We’ll be different.”

“Knox can be anything she wants to be. If she wants to move to Tennessee and take over the farm, I wouldn’t care. Nothing she could do would cause me to love her any less.”

“And she’ll always know that she’s worth everything that is good in this world,” I add.

“We’ll make it work this time. You and me,” J.R. says with conviction.

“We will. I don’t want to do life without you again.”

J.R. kisses the side of my head, and we sit there in the quiet of the night, comforted in each other’s presence. Content.

February 2006

I can't say I wasn't disappointed to wake up alive. I was in a hospital room, and I quickly realized that my arms and legs were strapped to the bed like I was some sort of a felon. I jerked my arms and legs up and down to try and break free from the restraints, but it was no use.

I looked up, noticing that Kelley was sitting across the room. She was glaring at me. I tried to speak, but I couldn't.

"You can't talk. There's a tube down your throat," she says in a cold, flat tone. "Your body needs assistance with breathing." She stood from her chair and walked over to me. She was angry. "What the fuck, Rachel?" I thought she was going to hit me.

I wouldn't apologize for trying to kill myself. Whether she realized it or not, I would have been doing her a favor.

"You need help, Rach. And I'll see to it that you get it. I almost called J.R."

My eyes widened, and I shook my head. J.R. could not know about this, ever. He would never forgive himself. He would never forgive me.

"You're going to be okay," Kelley continued. "But they want you to see a therapist. I think you should, too. If you can't talk to me about what's going on, maybe you can talk to someone else. Rach, nothing is ever so bad that you have to kill yourself."

She didn't understand. Killing myself had more to do with ridding others of me, not the other way around. I was a burden on Kelley. I had left J.R. The two people I loved the most in this world didn't deserve to be hurt by me, anymore.

“I can’t believe you would do this.” She shook her head. “Do you not know that you’re my best friend? I thought I lost you tonight.” I saw tears in her eyes, and I wasn’t sure that I’d ever seen her cry. I’d seen her sad, but I had never seen her cry.

I signaled for her to get me a pen and paper. She wiped her cheek, and then she dug through her purse and fished out a notepad and pen.

I wrote, *I’m sorry.*

Kelley nodded her head. “I love you, Rach.”

*I write back, I love you too.*

“I’m going to let the doctor know you’re awake. I’ll be back in a little while.”

I nodded and watched her leave. I tried to ignore the guilt I felt in my heart, but it was no use. I had made Kelley cry. I’d never seen her so upset, and I couldn’t imagine how afraid she was to find me the way she did. I was a terrible friend.

The doctor walked in with a couple of nurses following him. Kelley wasn’t there, but I thought maybe she was getting coffee. *What time is it, anyway?* The doctor introduced himself, read my chart, and then checked my vitals. Next, he began to teach me about what my body had gone through while I was unconscious. He told me that my stomach had to be pumped and that my veins were cleansed with a drug that counteracted the opioids I took.

He removed the tube from my throat, and I choked as it slid out of my mouth. A nurse handed me a plastic cup with water in it, and I took a sip. The doctor sat on a stool next to the bed, and he looked at me with his arms folded—the way a concerned parent would look at their teenager when they find out they are on drugs.

“We want to get you some help, Rachel,” the doctor said.

I nodded. I wasn’t sure that I was ready to speak yet.

“Your friend agrees.”

I nodded again.

“I’ve got a friend who happens to be a great therapist. I want you to go see her.”

“Okay,” I tried to say, but my voice was hoarse.

“Do you want help, Rachel?” he asked me.

I guessed if I couldn’t die, then I should get help. At that point, I’d take what I could get. Dying would have been easier, but a therapist could work, too.

My throat ached too much to talk, so I simply nodded my head.

“Good. I’ve made you an appointment.” He ripped off a piece of paper from his notepad. “In two days, at two p.m.” He put the paper on the table next to me. “You’re very lucky to have lived through what just happened to your body. I want you to think about that. You have a purpose here, Rachel. You and your baby.”

My heart stopped. My eyes widened. I stared at the doctor in horror. “Baby?”

The doctor nodded. “We’ll need to keep an extra eye on the baby. For now, the baby is fine. Healthy heartbeat.”

“I didn’t know that I was pregnant. I never would have...”

Tears surfaced immediately, and I fought the urge to cry; but it came without warning. The doctor handed me a Kleenex, and he sat quietly, letting me cry. He looked sympathetic, and I wished he wouldn’t look at me like that.

Finally, when I was able to speak, I rasped out, “I’ll get help. For the baby. For me.”

He nodded and then patted my arm. “I think you’re going to be just fine. Both of you. You just have to work some things out. You have a purpose, Rachel.”

I didn’t know why, but it was encouraging to hear a doctor tell me this. I just nodded my head at him and wiped



my nose with the Kleenex.

Kelley drove me home, and she was quiet. I was ashamed of myself for doing this to her. It would have been worse had I actually died. She might not have ever forgiven herself. She didn't deserve to live the rest of her life with that on her shoulders. These are the things you don't think about when you decide to kill yourself—the after-effect.

“You're seeing the therapist in two days,” she finally said to me.

“I know. I'll be there.”

“You're damn right, I'm driving you,” she snapped back.

“Kelley, you don't have to do that. I'm fine. I'll be fine.”

“Well, it's not only yourself to take care of now. You have a whole baby growing in your body. Why won't you just go back home to J.R.? You're miserable, Rach. And the baby. He deserves to know about the baby.”

“I can't. We were going nowhere.” I said stubbornly, “It's pointless.”

“You don't know that. And if he knew what you did—what you tried to do—he would be devastated.”

“He'll never find out,” I said. “Are you going to stop being angry with me?”

“I'm not angry, Rach. I'm afraid. I don't ever... I never want to see you like that again.” She was crying again.

“I'm sorry, Kelley,” I said softly.

Kelley nodded her head, and we didn't say much else.

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The next day, we were sitting at Kelley's kitchen table. I guess it was mine, too. We had been roommates since I had

left J.R. She wasn't home much, anyway, with her entrepreneur adventures. Kelley graduated from the university with a major in interior design and a minor in business. She'd started at least three interior decorating businesses since graduation. Two had failed. The other was going relatively well. Kelley hadn't dabbled much in a romantic relationship. She wanted her career to be set in stone and thriving before she entertained any possible suitors.

"So, do I tell him?" I asked her. I need her to tell me what to do because any decisions I had made up to this point were obviously the wrong ones. I felt incapable.

Kelley's face was blank. Her eyes drifted to mine, and she said, "I mean, it's the right thing to do, Rach."

"J.R. wasn't even going to marry me, and we never even talked about having kids one day. How do I know he'll want this?"

"Rach, he has a right to know that he's going to be a father. You haven't been gone that long. Maybe you should go home. Maybe it's not too late." She almost looked as though she were pleading with me to go home. Like perhaps my welcome had run out. I couldn't fathom why. I was helping her pay rent. I suppose the attempted suicide had a little to do with it too.

"I can't go back. Especially not now." I collapsed back in my chair and folded my arms across my chest like a child.

"So, you're just not going to tell him?" She looked at me like I was insane. Thoughtless. Heartless. Maybe I was.

"I...I don't even want to be a mother, Kelley. Maybe...well, there are lots of women out there who can't have children who want them. Maybe I will place the baby for adoption."

Kelley shook her head at me. She knew how I felt about being a mom. We had talked about my own mother (in minor detail) and all of the damage she had inflicted upon me. I had never wanted this. It was a decision that I had made a long time ago.

"Rach, it's your decision," she said finally. "But think on it, okay? Once it's done, it can't be undone. If you go off and

have J.R.'s baby, place it for adoption, and never tell him about his child... Rach, that's something you don't ever come back from."

I decided that I wouldn't tell him. I was not going back. I was not keeping the baby either. The best thing I could do for this child was to give her to a family that would love her. To a mother who wasn't still being emotionally tortured by her own mother, even after her death. It was the right decision. It had to be.

Present

“Daddy, Mama asked me to ask you if Aunt Kelley can come visit,” Knox says from across the dinner table.

I nearly choke on my salad. I did tell Knox to hint to J.R. about Kelley coming to visit, but I didn’t mean for her to hint at it right in front of me.

J.R. cuts his eyes at me, and then he looks back at Knox. “Did she now?”

I glare at Knox. “That’s not exactly what I said.”

J.R. hides a smirk, but then he nods. “Kelley can come. Anytime.”

I almost choke again, and then Knox and I say in unison, “Really?”

“Of course.”

“I’m going to call her right now!” Knox exclaims, jumping from her chair.

“Knox! You need to finish your dinner first,” I call after her.

“I’m done!” she calls back, and then I hear her bedroom door shut. I look at J.R. “I didn’t tell her to ask you that.”

“I don’t hate her,” he says. “I mean, I did, but she did a lot of good while you were gone.”

“Knox loves her, too. For years, it was Knox, Kelley, and me. We miss her.” I slide out of my chair and move toward J.R. “Besides”—I sit in his lap in a straddle—“if Kelley comes, we can finally get some alone time.”

J.R. wraps his arms around me and tilts his face toward mine. “That’s definitely a perk.”

I kiss him.

“I do need to tell you something,” he says.

“What?”

“The band—we leave in a week for a six-week tour.”

I drop my head, my forehead against his. My heart sinks, and I remember what it felt like every time he told me he was leaving.

“Okay,” I say, brushing his cheek with my hand. “Where are you going this time?”

“Out west. It’s been on the calendar for a while. Since before you came back. I...well, I was waiting to tell you.”

“I’ll miss you.” I kiss him again. “You’ll need to tell Knox.”

“I will.”

Knox runs back into the room, and she’s immediately disgusted at the sight of me sitting in J.R.’s lap. “Oh, gross!”

I laugh and slide out of his lap. “What did Kelley say?” I ask her.

“Well, first, she said she needed to hear from you, and then she said she would come this weekend.”

“Okay. I’ll call her. Now, sit down and finish your dinner.”

April 2007

I had grown to dread therapy. Actually, I don't think that I ever really looked forward to it. It was sort of like forcing myself to go to the gym. I knew that I needed it. I knew that it was helping. I knew that it was good for me. Still, every time I went, I couldn't help but feel like it was actually a spotlight of everywhere I had failed that week in my healing process.

I was sitting on my therapist's dainty, little couch. I never sat back completely. I would never relax. I refused to be like those people in the movies, laid back with their hands over their foreheads like they were dying. I sat there with my elbows resting on the top of my thighs and hands knotted together.

Carey, my therapist, sat across from me in her chair, her notepad on her lap. She waited for me to speak. I didn't feel like it that day. I was tired of talking. Besides, she judged every word that came from my mouth. It was her job, I know.

"Kelley still thinks I should go home," I told her, breaking the silence.

"Mmm hmm, and how do you feel about that?" Carey asked me. Such a typical response from a therapist.

"The same as before. I'm not going home," I said simply.

Carey wrote something down on her notepad, and it annoyed me. What on earth could she have possibly drawn from that statement?

"I'm still not keeping the baby either," I added.

“We have established both of those statements, so why do you think we keep going back to it?” she countered me.

“I don’t know. Isn’t that why we’re here? Isn’t that your job? To help me figure out how to put myself back together?” I asked her, bothered by the question.

“We’re not here for J.R. or your baby. We’re here for you. The issue here is not Kelley or J.R or the baby. The issue here is something that happened to you long ago. We want to find that issue, and we want to acknowledge it. Then we want to release it.”

It was a no-brainer. The issue was my mother. Maybe even my father. If it was as easy as just releasing them, though, didn’t she think I would have already done so?

“Tell me about your mother, Rachel,” Carey queried.

I didn’t want to. “I can’t.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?” she countered.

I looked at her sharply. “I...I don’t want to go there, okay?”

Carey nodded her head and then stood from her chair. She walked to her desk and slid open a drawer. From the drawer, she pulled a journal. It was a nice journal, with a leather cover. She then walked over and handed the journal to me, placing it in my hands.

“Sometimes, writing is better than talking. So, I have some homework for you. I want you to go home, find some time to yourself, and write. Whatever comes to mind, just start writing. It doesn’t even have to make sense.”

I was a little surprised at the notion. “Like a diary?”

“No, not really. Just like I said. Sit down in a quiet place, relax, put the pen to the paper, and then just write. It’ll come out. Whatever *it* is, will come out.”

I ran my hand over the leather cover, and then I flipped it open. The pages were white, lined, and empty. I liked this idea. Writing it out. I liked this better than talking. I was a writer by nature, so how hard could this be?

I looked back up at her. “Okay.”

“When you come back next week, maybe we can talk about whatever you wrote down.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. There’s that word again—*talk*.

When I got back to Kelley’s house, I took the journal and laid it on the dining room table. I could feel it staring at me as I made my way through the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. I was trying to procrastinate, but curiosity got the best of me. I made my way back to the table, and I glanced down at the journal. I was intrigued—more than I wanted to be. Carey was a licensed therapist, though; she knew what she was talking about. Maybe she was right. Maybe writing it out—whatever *it* was—would be more beneficial to me than talking.

I sat down at the table, took a sip of water, and then picked up a pen. I stared at the journal before me, afraid to open it, afraid of what my hand would write. I took a deep breath, cracked the cover open, and then set my pen to the paper. One more hesitation, and then I wrote.

*“Your aunt is coming to pick you up,” my friend’s mother tells me. I know something is wrong. My dad should have been here by now, and I rarely saw my aunt. Why would she be picking me up? I don’t say anything. I just nod and wait. My heart is pounding, though, and I know that something has happened to my dad. Something terrible. Why my aunt? Where is my mom?*

*Aunt Sue doesn’t say anything to me when she arrives. She just helps me into the car and drives silently into the night. Every now and then, I catch her glancing at me, and I can’t ignore the sad expression on her face. Still, she doesn’t speak.*

*No one is home when we arrive. My dad isn’t there. My mom isn’t there. My aunt looks at me with sullen eyes, and I feel darkness overwhelm my soul. Something terrible has happened—something that will change my life forever.*



*My aunt sits me down on the couch. I'm holding my bear tightly against my chest. My dad gave me this bear on my birthday. I pull at its fur, and I wait for Aunt Sue to say something. I look at her. Her expression twists, and I think she's trying not to cry. Her hands are clasped together, and she looks away from me for a moment before she turns back.*

*"Your dad... He was in a car accident tonight. He didn't survive." Her voice cracks on the last sentence. Aunt Sue's face twists in such way that I determine she's also sad. After all, she has also lost someone tonight—her brother.*

*I process the news. I feel a pain in my heart that I've never felt before, and I want my mom. I feel guilty, too. It's my fault, isn't it? If it hadn't been for me, he would be here, in bed, asleep. If I wasn't such a baby, I'd still be with my friend, and my dad would still be alive.*

*I can't take control of my mind as it instantly plays the scene of the car wreck in my head. I didn't see it, of course—it's only my imagination. I imagine my dad, crushed, bleeding, dead. It's like the walls of my mind are soaked with blood and littered with shattered glass. I shiver, but I don't cry.*

*It's nearly lunchtime the next day before my mom comes home. She drags herself through the front door. Her long, dark hair is a mess. She has dark circles around her eyes, and she's been crying. I try to hug her, but she pushes me away. The act surprises me. Maybe even hurts me. Then I decide that maybe she just needs time to herself. So, I decide that it's best to leave her alone.*

*Days pass, and I wait for her to look at me. Talk to me. Hug me. I stand alone while people come to visit her at the funeral home. Strangers I've never met before run their hands over the closed casket, and then they hug my mother. Everyone seems to look at me with an expression of pity on their faces, but no one really says anything to*

*me. Maybe they don't know what to say. Maybe they're angry with me, too. This is my fault.*

*Weeks pass. My mother speaks to me now, but her voice is withdrawn. She doesn't speak to me the way she always has. She doesn't touch me. She doesn't sing me to sleep like she used to. She cries a lot, and I'm not sure she'll ever work through it. The light in my mother's eyes is gone. She thinks that I should have died in the car wreck instead of my dad. Maybe she's right. Maybe she wouldn't cry so much if it had been me.*

*Days, weeks, and months pass. My mother doesn't look the same to me anymore. She's not beautiful, the way she was before. She's thin. Her eyes are dark. She doesn't even dress herself the same as she did before. My mother is broken. Heartbroken.*

*I think that my mother is right. I should have been the one to die instead. At least then, I wouldn't have to see my mother like this. I've not only lost my dad, but also my family. Nothing is as it was.*

I put the pen down. I stared down at the words I had written, and I wiped tears from my cheeks. I had never written the story before. I had never even told the story out loud to anyone. This was the story, the memory that I relived in my mind nearly every day. It was something I had never forgiven myself for. I had killed my dad and pushed my mother into a deep depression from which she'd never recover. There hadn't been a day that passed when I didn't think about that day or the weeks after.

Carey was right, though. Writing it out lifted a heaviness from me that I didn't know I had. Writing it out made the clouds clear and the sun shine again. It made me realize and finally understand what had actually happened to my mother after my dad died.

My mother had quite literally lost her mind. She was mentally ill. The woman who had said all of those horrible things to me was not my mother. She was someone else—someone who had replaced the mother I knew—the one who

loved me, the one who wanted me to succeed, the one who used to tell me that I was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

My mother should have gotten help. She *could* have gotten help. If I had known or if the people around us had known to help her, maybe things would have turned out differently. We didn't know. Maybe I was too young to understand that at the time, but at some point, should I not have realized that my father's death was not my fault and that my mother was mentally ill? Maybe it was meant for me to understand that later in life.

I felt my anger toward her dissipate. I felt sadness instead. I was sad for her. I was sad that I didn't see this sooner. Maybe I could have helped her. Maybe it was too late. Maybe there was nothing that could have been done. Regardless, I now knew with certainty that my dad's death was not my fault. It was an accident. I knew with certainty that my mother died with him, and I was raised by a shell of a woman who had lost her heart and soul when my dad had left this world. There was nothing wrong with me. I shouldn't be dead. I had a purpose. Isn't that what the doctor had told me a few weeks before?

I sat back in my chair, and I closed the journal. I wiped my tears away, and I relaxed. The room around me was quiet, and I decided that I should say what I felt out loud. So, I did.

"I forgive you, Mama," I whispered into the air. "I forgive you." Then I remembered how I didn't give her a proper funeral. "And I'm sorry I just let them throw you in the ground without a funeral or service or something like that, but can you really blame me?"

I laughed at myself, and then suddenly, I felt as though I could breathe again. I felt free—like a prisoner released from her shackles. I smiled to myself, and then I laughed. I laughed harder than I had laughed in such a long time.

I couldn't hear her voice anymore. It was gone. Like magic, my mother's voice was gone. I had never felt more

alive. I had never had such clarity. I was finally free. My heart was finally free.

## Present

There's a knock at the door. J.R. and Knox are out on the boat, so I make my way through the kitchen to answer. It's against my better judgement. I'm not one to answer the door if someone shows up unannounced. I generally hide until they go away.

As I swing the door open, I'm surprised to find a tall, thin, tan, blonde woman standing there. She's got a bubbly smile on her face that fades when she sees me. Out of pure politeness, I keep a smile on my face and ask, "Can I help you?"

"Is J.R. here?" she asks, looking past me and into the house. Maybe she assumes I'm the housekeeper.

"He's out on the boat with our daughter," I respond. "I'm sorry; who are you?"

I think that I don't want to honestly know the answer to this question. I think I know why she's here, and although I know that I was gone for too long, I have to acknowledge the fact that J.R. probably got a little lonely. Still, looking at her with her perfect blonde hair and long, lean legs—and the overall fact that she's the complete opposite of me—I feel my stomach turn.

"I'm Ashley." She looks puzzled. "I didn't know that J.R. had a daughter."

I'm ashamed to admit that I'm pleased with her puzzled expression. "*We* have a daughter," I correct. "To be honest, J.R. didn't know that he had a daughter either—until a few months ago."

Behind us, the back door opens, and Knox runs into the house with J.R. following behind her.

“Hey, Rach!” J.R. calls, unaware that we have a visitor. “We caught dinner.” He sounds extremely proud of his catch.

I clear my throat. “We have company, J.R.”

J.R. looks up; his eyes go wide; and then he swallows pretty hard. “Uh, Knox, go wash up. You smell like a fish.”

Knox looks at me first for reassurance. I give her a nod, and then she walks briskly down the hall, disappearing into the bathroom.

“I’m gone for three months, and suddenly you have a family?” Ashley asks J.R. She looks upset. I hide a smirk. I don’t generally enjoy drama, but it is sort of fun to watch J.R. squirm. Besides, the blonde lady’s perfect face is now a shade of red.

It’s like I don’t exist now. She stares past me and right into J.R.’s blue eyes. *My blue eyes.*

J.R. doesn’t say anything. I don’t think he knows what to say; and with every passing, silent moment, I feel myself getting a little impatient with his lack of dialogue.

“Well, I’ll give you two time to catch up,” I say, excusing myself from the room. The awkward silence is hard to bear. There’s an edge to my tone. I brush past J.R. on my way out the back door, glaring at him in the process.

I know that I can’t be upset with him for having a girlfriend while I was gone, but I can be upset that he didn’t tell me about her. He had ample opportunity; although, maybe he believed that there wasn’t really anything to tell. However, if she’s showing up at our front door, then she thinks that there is something to tell. Besides, his wide eyes at the sight of tall, blonde Ashley standing in our home was enough of a confession for me.

I’m settled in the swing, trying not to think too hard about J.R.’s perfect lips kissing Ashley’s thin, red lips; but it’s not an easy task. Behind me, I hear the screen door open and then close. I turn my head and see J.R. standing there. His hands are in his pockets, and he’s searching for words. I look away from him and cast my eyes back into the trees.

“Are you upset?” he asks. He’s standing in front of me now, looking at me hopelessly with those gentle, blue eyes of his.

“Is she gone?” I ask him.

“Yeah. Rach, I’m sorry. I meant to tell you about her. I just...I didn’t.”

“I know that I shouldn’t be upset about her,” I say. “But I am upset. I am upset that you didn’t tell me about her. How long were you together?” I ask the question, but I know that I definitely don’t want to know the answer.

J.R. is uncomfortable. He shifts on his feet, and he digs his hands deeper into his pockets.

“Rach, I never loved her. It was just...”

“I swear if you say it was just sex, I will scream,” I snap. “Also, she looks nothing like me.” I fold my arms across my chest. I’m being slightly childish. I know this.

“That was kind of the point. Ashley wasn’t meant to replace you. She wasn’t you, Rach. She was just a distraction. She’s dense. I only enjoyed spending time with her when she wasn’t talking.”

“Well, that makes me feel better,” I reply sarcastically. “I was doing the math. She’s been gone for three months. That’s about the time I showed back up. Did we just miss each other? Did she just come in and out as she pleased? Your own personal booty call?” It would have been horrible if I had come back to find J.R. with her. I’m not sure that I would be sitting here right now if things had happened that way.

“Rach, it was never anything serious. Okay? She’s gone now. She’s not coming back.” His voice has raised slightly.

I stand up from the swing. “I told you everything, J.R. Right down to the night I tried to kill myself. And you couldn’t find a moment to tell me you had a girlfriend? You couldn’t stop asking me if I had been with anyone, when all the while, you had Ashley in the back of your mind.”

“She wasn’t a girlfriend!” he shouts. “I didn’t think that there was anything to tell. Not right now, anyway. We are trying things out again, albeit slowly, but I didn’t want to mess that up. I had intended on calling her, telling her, but I just... didn’t.”

“You didn’t think she would show up eventually?”

“Honestly, I didn’t think that far, Rach. And maybe I thought she would call first.” J.R. puts his hands through his hair, and he’s frustrated.

“Is there anyone else you want to tell me about?” I ask.

J.R. looks at me. His blue eyes are soft, and he walks closer to me. “Rach, there’s never been anyone else. It was always you. Even when you were gone, you still had my heart.” He tucks my hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry, okay?”

J.R. is impossible to stay angry with. I have a weakness, and it’s him. I feel myself grow calm again, and then I hide a smile. “Did you two do it in our bed?”

He hears the joke in my voice. “Shut up.”

He takes my face in his hands and pulls me into a kiss.

I can’t seem to stop thinking about Ashley. It’s been a few hours now since we last talked about her, but as I lie here in bed trying to go to sleep, my mind keeps wandering back to her. I guess I’ve allowed myself to be a little obsessive, but to think of J.R. with another woman makes me sick.

Truth is, when I left J.R., I never thought about the fact that he would move on and be with someone else. My mind froze J.R. right where I left him. I didn’t allow myself to wonder what he was doing, and I never allowed myself to think about his day-to-day activities.

To think that he spent time with someone else is a fact that I’ll have to adjust to. I think that I will have to accept the fact that J.R. is also attracted to tall, thin, tan, blonde women. I also wonder if he’s ever been attracted to Kelley.

“You’re thinking about her, aren’t you?” J.R. asks me through the quiet darkness. J.R. has made a habit of sharing the



air mattress with me in the music room before we part for the evening. It's sort of fun. We keep ourselves distracted with conversation; but taking things slowly means that despite the things we want to do together—specifically things that are done in the bedroom between couples—we avoid. It's not been easy, obviously, but I think we're both making an elaborate effort to really do this correctly this time. Even if our intention in the beginning had been to move slowly, we got careless. We have Knox now. We can't afford to get careless.

His voice startles me. I thought he had fallen asleep. I roll toward him. "It's...it's strange for me to think about is all."

"Stop thinking about it," he says, facing me.

"She was pretty."

I feel his hand against my cheek. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I'm not tall and thin," I point out.

"No, but I think you're perfect. Short legs and all. I love you, Rach. Ever since I saw you sitting there at that table all by yourself that night in May 2001."

I smile. "That was a good night."

"It was the best."

I move in closer to him, nestling my head in his chest. I love the way he smells. Lavender and cedarwood. I hope he never smells a different way.

"I wish you didn't have to leave again," I tell him. I don't think that I will ever look forward to the band touring.

"Just be here when I come home."

"I'll always be here. From here on out. I promise."

J.R. kisses me. "Promise me one thing—while I'm gone, please, for the love of all things, move back into our bedroom. I can't stand you sleeping on an air mattress any longer."

If I'm being honest, the air mattress is beginning to give me a permanent hitch in my back. I might have already been planning to sleep in what used to be our bedroom while J.R. is gone, but I won't tell J.R. this. I relax in his arms, and I listen to his heart beating against his chest. "I promise."

J.R. kisses the top of my head, and then as my eyes grow heavy, I feel him roll off the air mattress and creep toward the door. "Goodnight, Rach," he whispers.

"Goodnight." I smile knowing that he's mine. He was always mine.

Knox doesn't give Kelley a chance to get out of her car before she has her little arms around Kelley's waist. Kelley pulls Knox into her, laughing as she does.

J.R. and I wait for them on the front porch, watching Kelley load Knox down with a weekender bag. Kelley grabs another bag from the backseat, and they join us.

"You made it," I say with a smile, and I even reach out to hug her. I'm not much of a hugger. I have missed my friend, though.

Kelley smiles too, but she looks at J.R. "Are you sure you're okay with this? It's just a couple of days."

"It's fine," J.R. says. "Everything is okay."

"In other words, he's no longer angry with you," I assure her.

"Why were you angry with Aunt K., Dad?" Knox asks concerned.

"That, my dear, is a story for another day." J.R. winks at her.

We get Kelley's things settled inside, and then at Knox's persistence, we head out on the ocean in the boat. Knox has deemed herself Kelley's tour guide, so she identifies the different parts of the island as we pass them. The north end. The south end. The pier. Where the celebrities live. She also gives Kelley a brief history lesson on Cockspur Island and its century-old lighthouse. Kelley has been here many times

before, but this time, Knox has learned so much about her new home that she can't help but share everything with Kelley. Even the stuff Kelley already knows.

Later, we park the boat at A.J.'s Dockside Diner, grab dinner, and then head back home just as the sun is about to set. I can't be certain, but it looks as though J.R. is enjoying Kelley's company again. The three of us have had such a rough road together. It seems like we've known each other for centuries.

Kelley lights up Knox's world in a way that no other human has been able to. She occupied J.R.'s place when Knox was born and the years after. She's just as much of a parent to Knox as I am, and I think Knox is a pretty lucky girl to be loved by not just J.R. and me, but also by Kelley. I was a lonely kid. There weren't many people I could turn to, and I more or less raised myself. I was determined to give Knox a different life than what I had, and though I did things a little backward, I think I at least gave her people who love her unconditionally.

Knox and Kelley plan a girl's day on the beach. It's September; the tourists are gone, but the weather is still perfect for a little fun in the sun. J.R. and I have been instructed to take advantage of the day and spend some one-on-one time with each other.

So, J.R. whisks me away into downtown Savannah for the day. It's a historic town, settled on the Savannah River. It isn't far from home, but it's enchanting enough to feel like another world.

Savannah is lined with centuries-old buildings that have been turned into restaurants, shops, and apartments. It has a deep history with stories of pirates, spirits, and ghosts. Large oak trees are positioned throughout old Savannah, their limbs laced with Spanish moss. It's supposed to be one of the most haunted cities in the country, but it's not as spooky as it sounds. I think that Savannah is more like something out of a fairy tale.

We start the day on River Street at a coffee shop, and then we walk the cobble-stone sidewalks, disappearing in and out of shops along the way. I find it odd that J.R. and I have known each other for more than a decade, and yet today, we feel brand new.

We walk hand-in-hand along the river's edge, stopping to watch boats and to observe the scenery. The sun is warm against my skin, and I smile into the slightly salty smell of the breeze. This day is perfect.

I glance at J.R., and I notice that he's catching glimpses of me from beneath his sunglasses. He tries to act like he's not looking at me, but I know otherwise.

"I see you peeking at me from under your shades," I remark with a grin.

"You're beautiful," he says. "That's all."

I smile and rest my head against his shoulder as we walk. "This is nice." I sigh. "We didn't do this much before." Maybe we really did move too quickly the first time we were together. I'm warming up to the idea of moving more slowly with J.R. I've noticed things about him that I hadn't before—things a person wouldn't notice when moving too quickly through a relationship. Like the way he walks down a street—easy with a sort of swag. Or the way his hand seems to find mine so effortlessly, as though our hands have been joined together since birth.

"We didn't do a lot of things we should have done."

"That's true."

J.R. then stops walking, and he turns to face me. He looks at me softly and pushes a stray strand of my hair behind my ear.

"I leave in a few days," he says solemnly.

"I know. Don't remind me." I sigh.

"I want to ask you something."

"Anything." I notice that he's sort of serious, and I can't imagine what he's going to ask of me. I'm having a hard

time reading him as I look at him, and that alone makes me feel a little uncomfortable. I've seen a lot of expressions on J.R.'s face, but this is one I've never seen before.

"I didn't ask you quick enough last time," he says, pulling something from his pocket.

It's the white box that he showed me weeks ago when I first brought Knox home to meet him. My eyes widen, and I feel the blood rush from my face. My hands move over my mouth, and I whisper, "J.R."

"I've never wanted anything more than to be your husband. I love you. I've always loved you—even when you piss me off."

I laugh at him, but tears roll down my cheeks, too.

"Will you marry me, Rachel?" He opens the box, and it reveals the most beautiful ring I have ever seen. It's simple, yet it's so beautiful. The single diamond glistens in the sun.

I look up at him from the ring, and then I reach up to push his Ray-Bans back so that I can look into his blue eyes.

"Is this your idea of taking things slow?" I joke, but then I quickly add, "Yes, I will marry you."

"You will?" he sounds only slightly surprised.

"I will."

J.R. slides the ring onto my finger, and then he lifts me up off the ground, kissing me as he does. For a moment, we're the only two people in Savannah. The world around us has stopped, and it's just us. I bury my face inside his neck, and my tears soak through his shirt. My heart is full, and I feel an assortment of emotions that I can't quite comprehend at this moment.

J.R. puts my feet back on the ground. He kisses me again, and he brushes my cheek with his fingers. "I love you. I'm also really happy that you didn't remind me that we had agreed to take things slow this time around. I can't waste time anymore."

I smile back up at him. “If I’m being honest, I was getting a little bored with the pace, too. We are passionate people, I suppose.” I kiss him again. “I love you.”

Kelley grabs my hand. Her eyes are wide as she stares hard at the ring on my finger. “Oh, Rach!”

“He asked me on the riverwalk. It was absolutely perfect.” I blush thinking about it.

“You’ve got to start planning a wedding.”

I shrug. “We were thinking about eloping. My parents are dead, and Aunt Sue is gone now, too. Not that we were ever really that close to begin with. J.R. hasn’t seen his family in over a decade. We talked about it, and I think we just want you and Knox there.”

“Eloping?”

“You don’t like that idea?” I ask her, feeling a little puzzled.

“Well, every girl dreams about her wedding day. White dress, tuxedos, pretty centerpieces for the reception tables.”

“I don’t care about any of that stuff, Kelley. You know me.”

Kelley sighs. “Fine.” I think I’ve disappointed her. She’s more of a glitz-and-glam kind of girl, and she was probably looking forward to planning my wedding for me.

I glance back down at the ring on my finger, and although I smile, I still feel slightly sad. This could have been my ring years ago. I could have saved us all so much pain. Kelley included.

“For the record, I’m happy for you,” Kelley says, and then she looks at me a little more seriously. “You deserve to be loved, Rach.” Kelley shifts a bit. “I’ve got something to tell you, too.”

I smile at her. “You have news, too?”

“Adam asked me to marry him two nights ago. I said yes!” she exclaims. “I was scared to tell you because I didn’t

want it to hurt you, but now that J.R. has finally grown a set and asked you to marry him, I can share my news!”

“Wait. Adam? Seriously?” I’m only partially shocked. Kelley had tried to pretend like she wasn’t that into him, but Kelley has never given second chances to bad dates either.

“It’s not a big deal,” she says, embarrassed. “We haven’t set a date yet or anything.”

I hug my friend, “We’re finally getting married.” I laugh as I hug her.

Kelley laughs, too. “Two old hens.”

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Knox and I walk J.R. to the door. He’s got four weeks’ worth of luggage in his hands, and neither of us is ready for him to leave. Four weeks feels like a lifetime, but I had to assure Knox that the time would go by quickly. I call it assurance. Kelley calls it a lie. It doesn’t go quickly. It’ll be the longest four weeks of our lives.

J.R. kneels in front of Knox. He smiles at her; but she looks at him with big, sad, blue eyes.

“I’ll be home before you can miss me,” he says confidently.

“I already miss you,” she responds in a soft tone, and my heart breaks a little.

“I’ll call you. Everyday.”

“Promise?” she asks.

“Cross my heart. I love you.”

“Me, too.” Knox shuffles her feet a little. “I wish I could come with you.”

“Maybe when you’re a little older. I promise.”

I briefly envision my little Knox at one of J.R. shows, caught in the middle of a mosh pit, hearing words come from people’s mouths that she should never hear. I am quickly horrified.

Knox wraps her arms around J.R., and then she kisses his cheek. J.R. stands up and looks at me.

“You know the drill,” he says.

“I know the drill. This time, I’ll be here when you come home.”

“Promise?” He smiles.

“Cross my heart,” I say, and then I kiss him.

“I love you,” he says, his lips still close to mine.

“I love you. Don’t worry about us. We’ll be okay.”

“I know.”

Outside, a car horn beeps, and it’s J.R.’s cab, here to pick him up and carry him to the airport. J.R. pulls his guitar case across his back, lifts his duffle bag with one hand, and grabs the handle of his rolling suitcase with the other. I open the door for him and watch as he moves down the steps and to the cab. Knox and I stand on the porch, our arms by our sides, and I’m positive that we’re probably the two saddest females in the world right now. J.R. tosses his stuff into the trunk, and then he looks back at us before stepping into the cab. We wave at him, and then the cab is gone.

I don’t cry, but I want to. I rest my hand on Knox’s head. “We know how to live without your dad, remember?” I ask her.

“Yeah, but now I know that I can’t live without him.” She turns away from me and into the house. Sometimes, I think Knox is older than she is.

“The good news is that he’ll be back,” I say, following her back into the house and closing the door behind us. “This is what we must do. For your dad. He loves sharing his music, and we shouldn’t make him feel guilty for leaving. So, when he has to leave, we give him a kiss, a hug, a wave, and a smile.”

“And then when he’s gone, we can cry?” she asks.

“Yes, then we can cry,” I say warmly.



“I’m going to go to my room,” Knox says. “You don’t have to come. I want to be alone.”

I giggle. “Okay. Don’t cry too much. He said he would call before he gets on the plane.”

Knox runs off to her room, and I’m left standing alone in the foyer of our house on that burnt orange rug. I take a deep breath, and I decide that I won’t cry. Not this time. Things are different now.

June 2012

“I think I’m going to go see J.R.,” I told Kelley. It was late on a Friday night, and we were sitting in my living room binge-watching episodes of *Friends* like two old hens. Moving out of Kelley’s apartment after Knox was born didn’t change things too much. Kelley still spent many nights with us. I think she liked it better this way. She could come and go as she pleased. When Knox and I were living with her, she couldn’t escape us.

Kelley looked at me sideways. “For real this time?”

It was true. I had said this to her at least a hundred times since Knox was born. I meant it this time. Knox needed her dad. Sure, we were a tight, little family—Knox, Kelley, and me—but I couldn’t expect Kelley to fill the parent role for Knox forever. I was pretty sure she didn’t sign up for that when we first became friends so long ago.

“It’s now or never, right?” I asked her. “He doesn’t have to take me back. He could be married now, for all I know. J.R. should know about Knox, though. It’s time.”

“Don’t you think he’ll be angry to find out he has a kid who isn’t still in diapers?” She always enjoyed playing devil’s advocate.

“He’ll definitely be angry. But I think he’ll want to know her.”

“He’ll probably ask for a paternity test,” Kelley mumbled.

I rolled my eyes at her. “She looks just like him. Even he can’t deny the resemblance.”

“You should talk to Knox about this, Rach.”

“I will,” I agreed. “She’s been asking about him a lot after finding our photograph. I think...*I know*, it’s time.”

We sat quietly for a moment before Kelley spoke again. “It will change everything, Rach. Weekends with Dad. Summers. Christmas. She won’t be just yours, anymore. You’ll have to share her.”

I nodded my head. I’d thought about that part a lot, and I had always felt sorry for kids who had to split their time between mom’s and dad’s. Even as terrible as my mother was, at least I had one place to call home.

“Knox is resilient. She’ll adjust.” I was trying to convince myself as much as Kelley.

Kelley looked at me. “I’m not worried about *her*.”

“I’ll be okay. I have to do what’s best for her, and what’s best for her is what’s best for me.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“I think I’ll just show up. It’s definitely not a phone call type of announcement.”

“Just show up? That’s your plan?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Should I send a letter?” I asked sarcastically.

Kelley rolled her eyes at me. “Fine. When are you planning on going?”

“Soon,” I replied. “I’ll go see him soon.” I hadn’t planned that part out yet, but I would go. Soon.

## Present

The night J.R. and I were engaged, he moved me back into our bedroom. I had gone into the music room to prep my air mattress for bed, only to find it gone. I didn't ask questions. I knew what the absence of the air mattress meant. So, when I crept to our bedroom, I wasn't surprised to find J.R. sitting in bed already, a smile on his face. I did wonder how long he had been sitting like this. I had taken quite a bit of time to get ready for bed that evening.

It was the first night we had slept together since the night before I left him so many years before. Every time with J.R. had been like the first time, but this time, especially, had been exceptionally magical. It had felt familiar and new all at the same time. Only briefly had I thought that we shouldn't go all the way. A part of me wanted to save that, but there was a larger part of me that needed to be close to him again like this. To be part of him again. To be connected this way again. That night, the missing piece to the puzzle was found. We became whole again—which is why no one was more surprised than me when I realized that my period had not started yet.

I've never been late a day in my life. Well, once—and then Knox was born nine months later. I've laid the pregnancy test on the bathroom counter, staring at it from a distance, waiting for it to give me an answer.

My heart is pounding. I'm slightly nauseated. I'm not sure how I feel about the possibility of bringing another baby into this world. Hell, J.R. and I haven't even gotten married yet. We agreed to wait until he was home again rather than squeeze it in before he left, but as the holidays approach, he'll be gone once more. Apparently, Halloween, the entire month

of November, and the first couple of weeks of December are prime dates for rock concerts.

I don't think I'm ready for a baby. I've only just gotten J.R. back, and I'm just now getting a grip on all of the changes we've encountered over the last few months. Now is not a good time. Still, it wouldn't be a terrible thing. Being back with J.R., getting to watch him love our baby through pregnancy to birth—that's something I never got to experience with Knox. It was my own doing, I know. This could be a really good thing. It's a second chance.

I hesitate to look at the test again. I'm afraid, but I can't stand in this bathroom all night, so I step a little closer to the counter. I peer at the test with my eyes pinched closed, not touching it. I count to three, take a deep breath, and then open my eyes.

### **Pregnant.**

It's in bold, black letters. I briefly think about how pregnancy test companies should have these tests read instead. If it's positive: *better start stocking up on diapers!* If it's negative: *try again.*

I try to catch my breath as I stare at those bold letters, and the next nine months flash before my eyes. I see J.R.'s smile when I tell him. I see Knox making room for her new sibling in her bedroom. I see me, big and round, and then I see J.R. again, holding our most perfect baby in his arms.

The timing isn't ideal, and we certainly didn't plan for this, but it could be good. It *will* be good. I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby.

I'm overwhelmed but excited. I want to die, cry, and laugh all at the same time. I'm scared, too. I'm no spring chicken. Pregnancy in your thirties isn't as easy as pregnancy in your twenties. At least, that's what I hear.

J.R. comes home tomorrow. I'll hold onto this secret until then. We'll have dinner and put Knox to bed; and then when we go to bed, he'll pull back the covers. There, on his pillow, will be the pregnancy test. Sanitized, of course. No one

wants something that's been peed on lying on their pillow. J.R.'s bright blue eyes will grow wide. He'll stare at me, mouth wide open; and then he'll hop across the bed, take me in his arms, and kiss me.

It's going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay.

“Set the table, Knox. He’ll be home any minute.”

I hand her the plates with the utensils on top. Knox lays the plates out, and I finish dinner. It’s nothing special—spaghetti, homemade pasta sauce, and some crusty bread lathered in garlic butter. I even splurged on a salad. J.R. will be impressed. I’ve never been much of a cook.

I see lights in the driveway from the kitchen window, and I feel my heart flutter. It’s been a long four weeks. We’ve talked, of course, but long-distance relationships never suffice.

“He’s home!” I exclaim, and then we both take off for the door.

Knox beats me to it, swinging it open, and scales all three porch steps in one leap. She runs straight into J.R.’s waiting arms, and they take a minute to embrace.

He looks tired. I remember this look from the past. Twenty shows, back-to-back, late nights, and probably more alcohol than one man should drink in a year. He always came home exhausted and hoarse. He’s not as young as he used to be. I think recovery may take a little longer this time.

Knox grabs J.R.’s guitar case, and then he pulls his luggage behind him, meeting me on the bottom step of the porch.

“You are a sight for sore eyes,” he says to me with an exhausted half-grin. He kisses me. “I missed you.”

“I missed you,” I say. “You look exhausted.” I put my palm against his beard.

“I have never been so happy to be home.” He sighs.

“Come on, Dad. Mama made dinner, and it’s going to get cold,” Knox says, leading the way into the house. She

carries his guitar case with such care and gentleness, taking it straight to the music room.

“Let me take your stuff,” I tell him, motioning at his luggage.

“I’ve got it,” he says. “Let me look at you.” J.R. steps into the house behind me, takes his hands from his luggage, and observes me. “You look different.”

“Different?” I feel myself choke, and I know that there’s no way he could know I’m pregnant. I literally haven’t told a soul.

“Yeah,” he says, unsure, still running his blue eyes over me. “Haircut?”

I decide to play it cool, and I laugh at him. “No. I think you’re just tired.” I kiss him. “Go put up your stuff. I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

I’m nervous now. My hands are shaking, and I hope he doesn’t find the test that I’ve left on his pillow under the covers. I busy myself with dinner, trying not to act too suspicious, serving the food onto our plates, pouring J.R. a glass of wine and Knox and me a glass of water. I’m hoping J.R. doesn’t notice that I’m not drinking wine tonight.

Knox and J.R. appear in the kitchen, and I can’t help but notice that Knox is wearing a J.R. and the Band t-shirt.

She smiles proudly. “Look at what Daddy got me!”

“I love it,” I say with a smile. “Now, sit down and eat. It’s going to get cold.”

I’m not great at creating conversation, but tonight, I do out of pure nervousness. “Anything interesting happen while you were gone? You always have the best stories.”

“I have stories, but none I can share in front of the kid,” he says with a wink to Knox. “You forgot your wine. Let me get you some.”

J.R. notices everything. I should have at least poured myself a glass of wine. Maybe he wouldn’t have noticed if I didn’t drink from it. He probably would have, though.



“I’m good,” I say quickly. “I’m not really in the mood for wine. You know it makes me sleepy.”

He looks at me strangely, and then he looks at Knox. “Is it just me, or is she acting funny?”

Knox giggles. “She’s been acting funny since yesterday.”

“I am not acting funny. I’m just happy you’re home,” I argue, trying to distract him. “Now, let’s stop evaluating me, okay?”

We continue with dinner. J.R. tells some kid-friendly stories, and then we tell him about the things we did while he was gone. Of course, nothing we did was nearly as fun as the things J.R. experienced on the road. Still, Knox and I both listen to him with complete interest.

After dinner, J.R. helps me clean the dishes. I can feel him staring at me as he dries the plates with a towel, and I wish he would stop. I’m beginning to think that I won’t make it until bedtime to tell him that he’s going to be a dad again. I won’t make it if he doesn’t stop staring at me. I’ve never been great at keeping secrets.

“I wish you would stop staring at me,” I mumble.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” he says. “I’m trying to figure out what it is. Did something happen while I was gone?”

“No. Nothing happened while you were gone. Everything is fine. I promise.” I dry my hands on a dish towel, and then I kiss him. “I missed you.”

He smiles against my lips, and then he walks me back into the edge of the countertop. He presses against me, threading his hands through my hair, and then kissing me again.

“I’m glad you kept your promise,” he says softly.

I feel sadness when he says this to me, though I don’t think he meant for that to happen. I’m sad because I once gave him a reason not to trust me. Every time he leaves now, there

will always be a piece of him that fears me not being here when he returns.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me gently. His fingers brush against my cheek. His blue eyes are looking deep into mine.

“I don’t want you to be afraid to leave,” I say. “I’m not leaving again, J.R.”

“I know that. I know.” He kisses me again.

I look at him for a few seconds, and then I whisper, “I have to tell you something.”

I can’t wait until later tonight. I can’t wait for him to find the test. I have to tell him right now. Right here. It feels right.

J.R. pulls away slightly, looking at me with curiosity in his eyes. I feel my eyes begin to fill with tears, and I bite my bottom lip to hold them back. I watch J.R.’s blue eyes dart back and forth, studying my own dark eyes. Trying to read me. Trying to figure out what is different about me and why I have tears in my eyes now. He knows something has changed. Something is different. He knows because he knows me better than I know myself sometimes.

“I’m pregnant,” I whisper. I am studying J.R.’s expression now, waiting for it to change.

He stares at me, blankly at first; but then his lips move, and I hear him whisper, “You’re pregnant?”

I nod.

“You’re pregnant?” He says it louder this time, and I quickly cover his mouth with my palm.

“Shhh, I don’t want Knox to hear.” I giggle.

J.R. lifts me up, his arms around my body, and he tilts his lips up to mine. “We weren’t even trying.”

“Apparently, I get pregnant only by surprise.” I laugh. “I just found out yesterday. I had this big surprise planned for later tonight, but I just couldn’t wait. You wouldn’t stop looking at me funny.”

“I knew something was up. Something was different. You look different.” He smiles.

“I made a doctor’s appointment,” I tell him. “They’ll tell us how far along I am. I think I’m at least five weeks along. You want to come?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Let’s not tell Knox yet. Not until we know everything is okay,” I tell him.

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“Are you nervous?” J.R. asks. He’s sitting in a chair across from me in the examination room at my doctor’s office.

I’m not nervous. I’m uncomfortable. I’m in a paper gown, laid up on this table, and trying to be patient. Waiting for a doctor is not my favorite pastime. I actually don’t enjoy waiting at all, but I’m more apt to get agitated in a doctor’s office. Especially when I’m nude beneath a flimsy gown.

“No. Are you?” I ask him.

“Little bit.”

“Well, when the doctor comes in, you won’t want to be sitting there. With that view, you’ll see parts of me that you will wish had stayed a mystery.” I laugh. Life is easier for men, I think.

“Thank you for the warning,” J.R. says with a smile, and he moves to my side.

Finally, there’s a knock on the door, and the doctor comes in. He’s a young guy, and I think he can’t have been doing this long. It makes me a little nervous. I definitely don’t care to be a novice doctor’s guinea pig.

J.R. greets the doctor. “Dr. Tyler, I’m J.R.”

“Nice to meet you.” Dr. Tyler shakes J.R.’s outstretched hand, and then he turns to me. “You must be Rachel.”

“None other,” I say with a nervous smile.

J.R. moves back to my side while the doctor babbles on about something. I'm not even sure what he's talking about. This isn't my first rodeo, so I would rather just get on with it already.

These types of exams are always humiliating; but I'm pregnant, and in nine months, this doctor is going to see my body do strange things. So, in full surrender, I drop my knees, and I stare up at the ceiling. Staring at a dot in the ceiling tile above my head seems to be the only way I can distract myself from what the doctor is doing down there.

After the exam, I get dressed, and we wait a little longer for the doctor to return for the sonogram.

"You are definitely pregnant," Dr. Tyler says as he enters the room, and I can only assume that he's just been given the results from my pee test.

"Yep," I say, unsure of anything else to add. J.R. has been quiet since my exam, and I would hope that it's because he gained a whole new respect for women in general.

I raise my shirt over my belly and then grimace as the doctor squirts cold jelly on my skin. He moves what I call "the wand" over my stomach, and we watch the screen in front of us waiting for a baby to appear.

"There's your baby," Dr. Tyler says, pointing to a tiny bean-looking thing on the screen.

J.R. leans in. "Where?" he looks confused. Understandably so. I'm still not sure I ever fully saw Knox in her sonogram images.

"Looks like a peanut," Dr. Tyler says. "See?"

I look up at J.R., grinning as I find myself amused at his confused and wrinkled face.

"That little thing right there is a baby?" he asks.

"Believe it or not," Dr. Tyler says. "We all looked like that once. Isn't that funny?"

I try to imagine J.R. as a tiny peanut.

“Let’s see if we can hear the heartbeat.” The doctor moves a different wand over my stomach, but this time a little slower.

I close my eyes again, hoping we hear something. I think I’ve even stopped my own heart to listen. Finally, through the silence, we hear it. Of course, it doesn’t sound like a normal heartbeat. It’s more like the sound aliens make in movies. Still, I feel relief, knowing that I now have two hearts beating in my body.

I look up at J.R., and I see a tear on his cheek. I smile softly as he looks down at me, and then he leans over to kiss my forehead.

J.R. stares at the sonogram image as we walk back to the car. I laugh at him.

“It doesn’t get any easier. Out of all of Knox’s sonograms, I’m not sure I ever really saw her.”

“I see it—the peanut—but I...I just can’t fathom the fact that it’s a human,” he says, finally looking up. “That it even has a heart to beat.” J.R. opens the door to his truck for me.

I turn to face him. “Are you happy?” I ask him with a smile.

“The happiest,” he says to me, and then he kisses me. “And you are amazing. You just laid there, unmoved, while he stuck that...that...whatever that was in your body.”

I laugh at him. “Want to know what he was doing with that instrument while he was in there?”

“No, I don’t.” J.R. laughs.

I slide into the truck and then watch J.R. walk around to the driver’s side, sliding into his seat.

“So, we’ll have a baby in June,” I tell him.

“Seems so far away.”

“It will be a year then. Since I came home.” I point out.

“I can’t think of a better way to celebrate that,” he says. “Do you think Knox will be excited? About the baby, I mean?”

“I think so.” I say, but I am unsure. “What do you think?”

“I think she might have a hard time with it. She only just met me, and she has me all to herself. A baby will change that. She’s intelligent enough to know that fact.”

I hadn’t thought of it this way, but I realize he may be right. I sink back into the seat a little, and I stare out ahead. What if Knox isn’t happy?

“Well, it’s not like we can cancel a pregnancy, so she’ll just have to adjust,” I say.

“Maybe I’ll talk to her.”

“I think that we should both talk to her. I want to be there, too.”

“Fine. We’ll both talk to her,” he says. “You’re right.”

I look out the window, and I watch the trees go by as we pass them. I feel myself sigh. “You leave again next week.”

“I do.”

“We’ll talk to her before then.”

“Okay.”

We sit Knox down on the couch. She looks at us with intense curiosity, her big, blue eyes darting between J.R. and me.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Knox asks me. She looks worried and unsure.

I glance at J.R. He looks at me, and then he takes my hand and Knox’s. I nudge him, giving him permission to start the conversation.

“You know that we love you very much,” he begins. “And you know that your mom and I love each other very much.”

“You’re going to get married,” Knox says proudly.

“Yes. Soon,” J.R. says. “We have something to tell you. Something fun.” He looks at me.

“Rosie, how do you feel about being a big sister?” I ask her.

She looks at me strangely. “Why are you asking me that?”

I take a deep breath, and then I clear my throat. “I’m going to have a baby, Knox. You are going to be a big sister.”

J.R. and I wait for a reaction, but there isn’t one. She just sits there, staring at us, emotionless.

“What do you think, Knox?” J.R. asks.

Knox shrugs. “I guess that could be fun, but I won’t have you all to myself, anymore. I just met you; now, I have to share you.”

I feel my heart sink in my chest, and I think that maybe J.R. knows Knox better than I do. I glance at J.R., and he

glances at me. He releases my hand, and he sits next to Knox, putting his arm around her.

“Come here.” He pulls her into his lap, and then he turns her to face him. “I know we still have a lot of catching up to do, and I know that the last few months have been full of changes for you, but you will always be my number one. You hear me? I love you so much, Knox.”

“Your daddy and I have so much love for you,” I reassure her. “Nothing will ever change that.”

Knox remains emotionless. She doesn’t look at either of us. Her expression is blank.

“Can I go to bed now?” she asks, and now I know that she’s upset. It’s definitely not the reaction I was hoping for, but maybe I expected it. Everything up until now has always been about Knox. She’s had to make so many adjustments as of late, and now this.

J.R. kisses Knox’s cheek. “You can go to bed.”

Knox slides off his lap. “Goodnight.”

“Want me to tuck you in?” I ask her.

“No,” she says coldly. “I just want to be alone.”

“Okay.” I quickly wipe a tear from my cheek. “I love you, Knox.”

“Love you, too.” Knox’s bare feet patter down the hallway, and I remain frozen until I hear her bedroom door shut.

I look at J.R., my eyes burning as tears develop. I don’t say anything, but J.R. stands up and wraps his arms around me. He whispers against my ear, “It’ll be okay. She’ll come around.”

“Why can’t we ever just do something normal?” I ask him. “How can I expect her to be thrilled about something that she doesn’t even want?”

“She’ll come around, Rach,” he says again. “I know she will.”



I look up at him. “What if she doesn’t?”

“She’ll get over it,” he says. “Okay?” J.R. kisses me.

I nod. “I think I’m going to bed, too.”

“I’ll come with you,” he says. “Rach?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I know.” I smile a broken smile.

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It’s that time again. Time for J.R. to leave for another six weeks on the road. He’ll be gone through Thanksgiving and getting back home just before Christmas. I’m not looking forward to his absence.

I help J.R. pack the rest of his things. We haven’t spoken in a few minutes, and I’m not sure what he’s thinking about. I’m thinking about how much I will miss him. How Knox is still upset about being a big sister. How I’m not sure how I’m supposed to hold it together while he’s away. Maybe I’m just overwhelmed with hormonal emotion.

“Are you okay, Rach?” J.R. is eyeing me from across the room as he zips his duffle bag.

I roll another t-shirt into his other duffle, and then I zip it up. I look up at him. “I’ll be fine.” I swore that I would never make him feel bad for leaving us, but that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want him to go.

J.R. walks to me, and he takes my face in his hands. “Don’t lie to me.”

My hands wrap around his wrists, and I look up at him. “I’ll just miss you is all. It was bearable when Knox wasn’t mad at me.”

“She can’t stay mad forever.”

“It’s been seven days. She’s still mad,” I point out.

“Maybe you should take her to the next doctor’s appointment. I can’t be there. It might make her feel

important. Besides, it might help if she can see the baby,” J.R. suggests.

This isn't a terrible idea, and I think it could work. I smile at him. “You are a brilliant, brilliant man.”

J.R. smiles at me. “I know.” He kisses me. “I'll be back before you can miss me.”

“I already miss you,” I whisper, stealing Knox's line from the last time he left.

“Knox, come tell your dad bye. He's leaving!” I call down the hall toward her room. J.R. is packing up the van to leave, and Knox is playing a good game of cold shoulder.

“I don't want to!” she yells back.

“Knox Rose!” I shout. “You come out right now!”

J.R. meets me at the front. “I'll go talk to her. Don't get upset, okay?”

“She's just being really unreasonable,” I say, frustrated.

“She's a child. Unreasonable is her middle name,” J.R. says. “Calm down. I've got this.”

J.R. heads down the hall and then disappears into Knox's room. I step out on the front porch and settle into the swing. Children are frustrating, but Knox and I have never really been at odds before. I never expected her to be so unhappy about my having a baby. I don't suppose I can blame her.

I hope J.R. is right. I hope she'll get over it, but I wonder how much crap she'll give me before she does.

Maybe I'll have Kelley come stay a while. Maybe she can talk some sense into my daughter.

J.R. meets me back on the front porch. He looks sad. I think the conversation didn't go well. I stand, and he comes to me.

“Well?”

“I don’t want you to worry about her while I’m gone. Okay?” he says. “It won’t help anything.”

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

He smiles. “I’m used to women being upset with me for no reason.”

“Well, let’s just hope she doesn’t stay mad for the next nine months.”

J.R. kisses me. “I have to go.”

“I know.”

“I love you, Rach.” He slides his hand across my stomach. “And I love the peanut.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, and I kiss him again. “We love you, too.”

“I’ll call you.”

“I know the drill.” I offer him a half-hearted smile.

Watching him leave will never get any easier. Days and nights apart from him are hard. I’ve only been back for four months, and I have no idea how I spent so many years away.

Dinner is quiet. Knox eats her food, and she doesn’t look at me. Not even once. Not even when I try to speak to her. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say. What can I do to make this better? I don’t think she’s ever been so angry with me before.

“Knox, tell me what you want me to do. Tell me what I can do to get you to stop being so angry with me.” I’ve put my fork down, and I’m sitting straight up in my chair, trying to show her that she has my undivided attention.

She only raises her eyes to me. Her face is still down, but I feel the cold of her icy blue eyes on me. “Don’t have a stupid baby,” she says sharply.

I’m speechless for a moment, and I don’t even recognize her. This isn’t my Knox Rose. “Well, Knox, I can’t change it,” I tell her. “I thought you would be excited to be a big sister.”

“I’m not,” she says. “I just got a daddy, and now I have to share him with a baby. I didn’t get to have him when I was a baby. Not when I was one, or two, or three, or four either.”

I realize that she’s not really angry with the baby. It’s me. It’s the decisions I’ve made. I should have known that one day, this would come up. One day, she would realize that she should be angry with me.

“You’re angry with me, Knox. Not the baby. Not your dad. With me.”

Knox looks back down at her plate. She twists her fork between her fingers, and then she looks up at me. “I could have had a daddy my whole life.”

“You could have,” I agree, and I lean forward. “Look at me, Knox.”

She doesn’t look at me immediately, but then she finally gives in. She’s sort of hunched, her blue eyes look at me sharply. She’s angry, hurt, and confused. She looks like J.R. the day I showed back up here.

“I am sorry,” I tell her. “I am so sorry that I kept you from your daddy for so long. If I could go back and change things, I would. You deserved to have him, and I took that from you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s just not fair,” she whimpers.

“I know. I am so sorry. It wasn’t all bad, was it? We had Kelley and a nice house. We had fun, didn’t we?”

She nods.

“Your daddy gave me a second chance. Can you give me one, too?”

Knox shrugs.

I sit back a little in my chair. “I want you to come with me to the doctor next week. You can see a picture of the baby on the screen and everything,” I tell her. “It was your dad’s idea to have you come, and I think he’s right. It’s a big sister’s duty to fill in when Daddy is gone.”

Knox thinks on this for a moment. Her angry eyes look a little soft, and I think that maybe I'm finally getting through to her.

"Why does he have to be gone so long?" she asks softly.

"It's what he does, Knox. It's what he's always done. It's his job, and we have to be happy for him," I answer. "He loves us. Both of us."

"I like when he's home."

"Me, too."

"Okay." She sighs.

"Okay what?"

"I'll go to the doctor with you."

"You will?" I smile. "What about being mad at me? Can you forgive me?"

She looks unsure. "You thought you were doing the right thing? Keeping me from Daddy?"

"I did. I really did."

"Okay," she says, but I don't feel very assured by her tone.

"Okay." I smile, anyway.

May 2012

I should have hidden it better—the picture of J.R. and me that I kept in my bedside table. I would pull it out every now and then and look at it. It's how I kept him so fresh in my mind. I could never forget him, but I wanted to remember the way he looked at me. The way he loved me.

I was standing in my kitchen when Knox presented the photo to me. My mouth immediately fell open at the shock of it. She batted her blue eyes at me and waited for an explanation. I was fairly certain that she knew who he was. I think she could see herself in him. I wasn't sure what to say. Should I lie? Or was this it? Was this my chance to tell her about her dad?

“Who is he, Mama?” she asked me. She had asked this question at least three times in the previous sixty seconds, but I hadn't found a way to answer her yet.

“Knox, why were you in my bedside table?” I retorted. I was trying to buy a little time so that I could figure out what to say.

“I wasn't in your table. I found it on top of the table,” she replied innocently. “Who is he?” She was insistent, and I could have smacked myself for leaving the photo out.

“Maybe we should sit down.” I needed to sit down. I felt like I was about to faint. “Come on. Let's sit down.”

I guided her into the living room, and then we sat down on the couch together.

Knox was still looking at me with her big, curious, blue eyes. She was still holding the photo in her hands. There was no way out of this conversation. This was it.

“Knox,” I began, “you know that band we listen to a lot? Our favorite band?”

“J.R. and the Band?”

“Yeah.” I hid a smile. I still felt like they could have definitely thought up a more creative name for themselves. Maybe not. Maybe it was perfect.

“What about them?” She sounded a little impatient. Like J.R. and the Band had nothing to do with the picture she was holding in her hands.

“The man in the picture—that’s J.R.,” I replied. I smiled saying his name out loud. I hadn’t said his name in so long, but as I heard it slide off my tongue, I felt a dead part of my heart spark again.

Knox’s eyes lit up. “You knew him?”

“Better than that, Rosie. J.R. is your dad.” It came out a little easier than I thought it would. I heard myself breathe a sigh, and then I watched her for a reaction.

“My daddy?” she asked, confused. “He didn’t want me?”

The question shocked me, and I was a little speechless that her small, childlike mind would determine something so horrible so quickly. It had never crossed my mind that she might think that the reason her daddy wasn’t around was because he didn’t want her.

“I never told him about you,” I confessed. “I left him before I even knew you were growing in my tummy. We loved each other very much, Knox, but I was silly. I got mad at him one day, and I left.”

“You never told him about me?”

I shook my head. “I tried a few times, but I couldn’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, Knox,” I said simply. “I thought—I still think—that being on our own was the best thing for you and

me.” I sighed and pushed my hand through my hair. “It’s complicated.”

Knox looked down at the picture again, and I saw a longing in her expression. I recognized the expression. It was the same one I had every time I looked at that picture, every time I thought about him.

“Is he a bad man?” she asked me.

“No. He’s the greatest person in the world.”

“Can I meet him?”

I stared into her icy blue eyes for a minute. I didn’t have an answer because I never thought she would ask that question. I had always assumed that one day, I would tell her about J.R., and then we would go back to life. Of course, this situation forced me into realizing how awful my thought process was.

“You want to meet him?” I asked. My mouth was back to hanging open. I didn’t have much of a poker face.

“If he’s not bad,” she replied, “can I meet him?”

“It’s a little complicated, Knox. I haven’t spoken to him in many, many years.”

She looked sad again. “My friends at school all have a dad. I...I always wondered why I didn’t.”

My heart broke as I realized that she had been thinking about this for a really long time. I had been a fool to think we could live forever the way we had been. I had to have known that one day, she would ask about him. One day, she would want to meet him.

“You have a Kelley. Not everyone has a Kelley,” I pointed out, trying to lighten the mood.

“It’s not the same.” She sighed.

“I guess not,” I agreed.

We sat there quietly for a few minutes. Knox was looking at the picture again. I felt guilty. More than guilty. I actually was not sure how I felt.



“Let me think about it, Knox,” I said finally. “About meeting your dad, okay?”

She looked up at me again, her eyes bright. “Really?”

“Really.” I smiled.

“Thank you, Mama.”

“Knox, if it doesn’t work out, you have to be prepared for that,” I warned her.

“You said he was the best person in the world.”

“I did.”

“Then it will work out.” She smiled, satisfied.

Knox Rose sounded so confident, and I wished I could have some of her confidence. I wished I could be so certain. How would this work? How would I even begin to make this work?

Present

“I can’t believe that I have to find out you’re pregnant over the phone,” Kelley yells to me as soon as she walks through the front door of our home.

“It’s nice to see you, too,” I call from the kitchen as I move to meet her in the foyer. “It’s the only way I could get you here, anyway. Adam keeps you awfully busy.”

“That’s not true.” She gives me a hug. “Where’s Knox Rose?”

“Getting dressed. She’s excited for the doctor’s appointment today.” I lower my voice. “She’s not happy about a new baby, though. She’s actually pretty upset. I was hoping you could talk to her. J.R. has tried; I’ve tried. She’s still not happy.”

“I don’t know what I can do,” Kelley says. “She’s kind of got to work it out on her own.”

“Well, it’s been over a week. Maybe she has come around a little; but J.R. couldn’t even get through to her, and we both know she worships the ground he walks on.” I sigh. “She’s pissed.”

“She’ll get over it,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes.

“That’s exactly what J.R. said, but neither of you have to live with her right now. I’m getting desperate.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“Tough love?” I kind of want to smack her, but I don’t.

“Yep.” She smiles. “How are you? Feeling okay? With Knox, you stayed sick.”

“I’m fine. J.R. couldn’t have picked a better time for a six-week tour, though.”

“Well, I’ll fill his shoes. I have before.”

“Knox! We need to go,” I call down the hall. “Kelley is here, and my appointment is in one hour.”

I hear Knox’s bedroom door open, and her little feet run down the hall. She’s like a blur as she runs into Kelley’s arms, and I smile as they embrace. Well, at least she likes one person in this world right now.

The doctor checks me, and then he begins the sonogram. Knox is sitting in Kelley’s lap, biting her nails the way J.R. does when he’s nervous. I try to ignore it, and I stare hard at the screen in front of me. I’m feeling agitated.

“There’s your baby,” Dr. Tyler says. “Baby looks good. Measuring well.”

“I don’t see the baby,” Knox says. “Show me.”

I want to roll my eyes at her. Bossy, little thing. She slides out of Kelley’s lap and moves toward the screen.

Dr. Tyler smiles. “Well, if you look right here”—he points at the screen—“looks like a tiny peanut. See these? Those are arms.”

Knox leans into the screen. Her blues squint. Kelley points to the screen, too.

“You looked like that once,” she tells Knox.

“Like a peanut with arms?” Knox asks.

I smirk.

Knox folds her arms across her chest. “I don’t think it’s a baby. I think you just ate a peanut, and your body hasn’t digested it yet.” Child logic.

“It’s a baby,” affirms Dr. Tyler. “Do you want to hear the heartbeat?”

“It has a heart?” Knox looks surprised.

“The *baby* has a heart,” I say, correcting both of them on their use of the word “it” when referring to the human growing inside of my body.

Dr. Tyler adjusts the volume on the machine, and the room fills with the fuzzy sound of the baby’s heart beating.

Knox listens for a few seconds, but she doesn’t look convinced. “That doesn’t sound like a heartbeat.”

I feel myself growing frustrated with Knox and with her decision to ignore the fact that I am going to have a baby. Maybe it’s my hormones, but I’m fighting the urge to scream at her.

“Thank you, Doctor. I think we’re done here.” I am obviously perturbed. I wipe the gel from my skin and pull my shirt back down, ready to hop down off the examination table and get the hell out of here.

Dr. Tyler understands my frustrations. He puts away the machine, and then he stands. I think he’s unsure of what to say, so he goes back to speaking in doctor terms. “Everything looks good, Rachel. Continue your vitamins. I want to see you again during the week of Christmas.”

“That long?” I ask him surprised. “With my age, I thought you said it would be better to come every few weeks.”

“That’s true, but you’re healthy. The baby is healthy. Let’s push it out a little.” He smiles at me, but I’m not sure I’m okay with this decision.

“It’ll be fine, Rach,” Kelley says.

“It will be,” the doctor confirms.

When we get home, I decide I need a walk, so I leave Kelley and Knox and slip out the back door to the dock. I haven’t really had a moment to myself since finding out I was pregnant; and now with Knox so obviously angry, I think I just need time to clear my thoughts.

Taking Knox to the appointment today didn’t seem to make a difference. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard her blatantly

argue with another adult like she did with the doctor, and she didn't say much on the ride back home.

It's a beautiful day. The air is cold, and I wish I had brought a jacket. Still, the sky is blue, and I love the way the sea smells in late fall. I step onto the boat, not intending to go anywhere. I just want to sit here and cry, nestled in one of the seats. I want to talk to J.R., too, so I pull out my phone and dial his number.

"Hey, Rach," J.R. answers. It's noisy in the background, wherever he is, and I'm sure I've called him at the wrong time.

"Can you talk for a few minutes?" I ask him. I try to hide the fact I'm crying.

"Rachel, what's wrong?" His tone is serious, and he knows I'm crying. "Hold on. Let me get somewhere quiet."

I can't hide anything from him. I'm not sure why I still try.

I wait. I hear the background noise begin to disappear and a slight rustling noise. I imagine he's holding his phone against his chest, the fabric of his shirt rubbing against the speaker. His breathing grows a little heavier, too, and I'm sure he's running down a long hallway to get somewhere quiet. I'm not even sure where he is today. Dallas, maybe?

"Rach, what's wrong? Is the baby okay?" He finally comes back.

"The baby is fine, J.R.," I say softly. "I'm just...I'm not having a good day."

"Is it Knox?" He sounds relieved that the baby is okay, but he's careful not to downgrade the situation.

"She argued with the doctor today on the validity of the baby. He even let her listen to the baby's heartbeat, and she argued that it was even a heartbeat." My head aches just retelling it. "She's...she's not happy. I tried, J.R. I tried to talk to her."

“I’m sorry, Rach,” he says with a sigh. “I wish I were there. I’m sorry.”

I imagine he’s running his hands through his hair, and I think he’s probably also wondering what in the world he can do about my bad day hundreds of miles away.

“She’s angry with me, J.R. About our past. How I kept you two apart.” I cry softly. “I wish I had made better choices.”

“Don’t go back there,” he says to me. “We just got out of there. Don’t go back.”

“I know,” I whisper.

We’re quiet for a moment, and then J.R. speaks again. “I miss you.”

I laugh softly between my tears at his not-so-subtle change of subject. “I miss you.”

“It’s going to be okay. All of it.”

I sigh. “I hope so.”

“It will be.” I hear hesitancy in his voice as he says, “I have to go, Rach. I’ve got a sound check. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just needed to hear you. Have fun.” For the first time ever, I wish I was far away from here with J.R. and the Band, having fun, too.

“I love you, Rach.”

I hang up, and I stare out ahead of me into the sea. The breeze dries the tears from my face, and I fold my arms across my chest to keep warm. I think about Knox. We’ve always had a great relationship. It was something I worked hard at because of the relationship with my own mother. Of course, we haven’t been perfect. We’ve had our arguments, but I can’t recall a time when she stayed this angry with me. This new attitude that she’s adopted has caught me completely off guard, and I think that I’m just not sure what to do with it.

Maybe I get it. Maybe I don’t blame her for being upset with me. It doesn’t make it any easier, though. I want to

feel happy about this baby, but I'm not. I can't. Not with Knox feeling the way she does. Maybe J.R. and Kelley are right. Maybe she will get over it. Eventually.

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It's almost Thanksgiving, and I can hardly believe it. I haven't made any plans for Knox and me, but I think that I should. With J.R. gone and Kelley visiting her own family, I'm at a loss of what to do. I'm not a great cook, and it wouldn't make sense to make a traditional Thanksgiving meal for Knox and me to share. There would be so many leftovers, we would eat on it for weeks. Kelley invited us to have Thanksgiving with her family and Adam, but I declined. I feel like I've mooched off Kelley and her parents for far too long. I don't want to crash another holiday dinner. Besides, I really don't want to spend Thanksgiving with my boss. He wasn't fond of the opinion piece I submitted on why the world won't end on December 21, and I'm quite sure the only reason he didn't let me go was because of Kelley.

Knox still isn't talking to me much, and I even find myself avoiding her. This is not a healthy relationship, and I know I should try to talk to my daughter, but what do you say to a child who is this angry over a new sibling? I know J.R. said that she would snap out of it eventually, but it's been weeks now, and I don't see an end.

Maybe I should take her to a therapist. Maybe she needs someone who can help her through her thoughts. Someone who isn't me. She doesn't care much for what I have to say.

I've finally gotten myself in bed for the night. I've developed a terrible habit of staying up late since J.R. left, but I'm working on getting back on track. It's so easy to stay up all night, watching movies, and drifting in and out of sleep on the couch. Easy, but not healthy.

I slide underneath the covers; my head sinks into the pillow, and I close my eyes. I relax into the bed, and I even smile slightly at that initial feeling a person always gets when

they first get into bed. I'm not sure there's a way to describe that feeling, but it's wonderful.

I don't think I'm asleep yet when I hear my bedroom door open. There's no one else in the house, so logic tells me that it's Knox coming in. I crack open my eyes to see what she's doing here. The way things are going, I wouldn't be surprised if she were sneaking in here to slit my throat. I suddenly regret watching *Child's Play* with her back last year. Maybe I *am* a terrible mother.

It's not Knox sneaking into my room, though. I see a familiar silhouette, highlighted by the moonlight. My heart leaps in my chest, and I sit up quickly. "What are you doing here, J.R.?" I exclaim.

"You scared the shit out of me." He clutches his chest with his hand while laughing at the same time. "Why are you still awake? It's, like, three a.m." He crawls onto the bed, takes my face in his hands, and kisses me.

"Three a.m. is the new ten p.m." I smile, wrapping my hands around his wrists. I think I may cry. What a surprise this is! The best surprise I've had in a while. Well, besides the baby surprise.

"How's baby?" I feel him slide his hand over my stomach, his lips against my neck.

"Baby is fine," I tell him, and I wonder if he notices the bump that my stomach is becoming. He's only been gone three weeks, but baby number two seems to be growing quickly. Even my jeans are growing tighter, and I'm having to wear them with the button undone. It's actually pretty comfortable, and I think I may continue this practice even after the baby comes.

"Baby is growing," he says.

"Mmm hmm." I wrap my arms around his neck. "I'm so glad you're here."

J.R. 's arms wrap around me. "Me, too." He pushes me back a little, and he looks at me softly. The lighting is dim, and



our cheeks are highlighted in the moonlight; but J.R.'s eyes are clear, and I draw comfort from them.

He is worried about me. I can tell by the way he looks at me, and no matter how hard I had tried to assure him that everything was okay here, he knows me too well. He came home.

“How are you, Rach?” he asks gently.

I smile. It's forced. I don't want him to worry, but I must be honest, too.

“Things between Knox and me...” I shake my head. “Well, she hasn't come around yet. I feel like we've just fallen apart, J.R. We hardly even speak to each other. I am avoiding her. On purpose.”

J.R. frowns. “I'll talk to her. Tomorrow. I'll take her out on the boat. I'll talk to her.”

“I don't know if it will do any good, J.R. We've had our fair share of conversations, but she's dead-set on remaining angry. She's angry with me. All of that time that we spent away from you? That's why she's angry. It's really got nothing to do with the baby.” I put my hand through my hair. “The baby just triggered the anger.”

“You have to think about it from her perspective, Rach. She spent the first few years of her life without a dad, and then when she finally gets a dad, a new baby comes along. It's not just a new baby, though. This baby will have a daddy from the very beginning. This baby will know me in a way that Knox did not. That's why she's angry.”

We have covered this scenario before, but even still, the root of the problem is me. “I can't change what I did, J.R. I just need her to forgive me.”

He smiles. “I think I can help.”

“Well, you're welcome to try. Again. And just so you know, not even Kelley could help.”

“I'd like to think I have more power than Kelley does,” he says with smile. “Don't worry about it anymore. Okay?”

I nod. “How long are you here for?”

“I leave on Friday.”

“We get you for Thanksgiving?” I ask, feeling elated.

“Yep.” J.R. smiles against my lips, and then he lays me back gently. His lips run down my neck, and then back to my lips again. I sigh as we melt into each other, and for the first time in weeks, I’m happy.

“What are you doing here?” Knox asks as she shuffles into the kitchen the next morning.

J.R. is standing over the stove making French toast, and I’m at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and watching Knox confront J.R. I only lift my eyes to watch them as I attempt to be an innocent bystander of Knox’s new persona.

“Well, good morning to you, too.” J.R. smiles at her.

“Why are you home?” Knox asks. She turns to glare at me. I avoid eye contact and go back to “reading” the newest article about J.R. and the Band in *Rolling Stone* magazine. J.R. was pretty proud when he showed it to me earlier this morning, and I’ve already read it twice.

“I had a few days, and I wanted to come home for my first Thanksgiving with you two,” J.R. answers her. “Is that okay?”

I glance up at Knox. I think her eyes are lit up a little more than they have been, and I even think she could be suppressing a smile.

Knox shrugs like it makes no difference to her whether he’s home or not. “I guess.” She’s got this bad girl attitude down to a profession.

“After breakfast, I wanted to see if you wanted to go out on the boat. Just you and me? The dolphins are migrating this time of year, and I think we’ll get to see some.”

“Dolphins?” Knox sounds interested.

“Lots of dolphins.” He smiles. “Families of dolphins.”

Knox cuts her eyes at me again. “Is Mom coming?”

“Nope. Just you and me. Like I said.”

“Okay,” she agrees. “After breakfast.”

“After breakfast,” J.R. says, and then he glances at me.

I catch his eyes, and then I smirk, sipping my coffee to hide my enthusiasm.

J.R. and Knox have been gone for hours now, and I’m beginning to get worried. My brain always goes to the worst-case scenario, and I imagine Knox pushing J.R. overboard or something like that. I know it’s not true, but still, I worry.

I’m working on getting dinner ready when I hear the back door open. Knox comes skipping through the house, and she meets me in the kitchen. Before I can say anything, she’s got her arms wrapped around my waist. I look down at her little head, and her big, blue eyes are staring up at me.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” she says. “For being a brat.”

I’m a little taken aback and probably at a loss of words, too, but I run my hand across the top of her head and smile down at her. “It’s okay.”

J.R. appears in the kitchen, and he’s leaning against the counter with his arms folded across his chest and a grin on his face. Whatever he did or whatever he said to her, he’s proud of himself.

“I want to paint something. For the baby’s room,” Knox says to me, releasing her arms from around me.

“Okay. I think we can arrange that,” I tell her. “We’ll go get a canvas and some paints this weekend.”

“Okay,” Knox says.

“Did you see any dolphins?” I ask them.

“We saw lots of dolphins!” Knox exclaims. “Just like Daddy said. Entire families.”

“I’m sure it was beautiful. Go wash up. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Knox nods her head and then takes off down the hall.

I look at J.R., and I admire the big, prideful grin on his face. I move toward him, and I wrap my arms around his neck. “You are a brilliant, brilliant man.” I smile as I lean into J.R. for a kiss. “I don’t know how I ever lived without you.”

J.R. smiles and returns the kiss. “What can I say? I know how to talk to the ladies.”

“She’s like a different kid. Less demonic. You must show me your ways,” I beg.

“It’s a secret,” he whispers, leaning forward.

I kiss him again. “I love you.”

“And I you.”

I do want to know what they talked about. I want to know what J.R. told Knox to cause her to come around, but maybe it’s not for me to know. Maybe I don’t need to know. I think I can breathe again, though, and that’s worth something.

Night has fallen, and I’ve found Knox curled up in J.R.’s lap on the couch. I stop to admire them. Knox curls so perfectly in his lap, and I know that one day soon, she’ll be too big to fit there. Knox is covered in a blanket, her head against J.R.’s chest, and it’s obvious that she’s fallen asleep.

I creep into the living room quietly. “Want me to carry her to bed?” I whisper to J.R.

He shakes his head. “Just a little longer,” he whispers back. He knows, too, that one day, she’ll be too big to fit in his lap like this.

I take my place on the other end of the couch, pulling my own blanket over my legs. The television is on, but I’m not sure what it’s playing. I lie down with my head on the arm of the couch, and I tuck my bare feet between the back of J.R.’s thighs and the couch seat. I gaze ahead at J.R. and Knox, and I can’t help but notice the baby bump that is my stomach now, quite visible now from my vantage point. A perfect, round shape protruding from my body. It’s not a big bump, but it’s a bump. I run my hand over my stomach, and I catch J.R. glancing at me. I smile at him and whisper, “I missed you.”

I know I've probably told him this at least one hundred times since he came home last night, but I'm not sure that I could ever say it too much. I do miss him so much when he's gone, and when he's home, I want him to fill every second of my day.

J.R. smiles back at me softly. "I'm going to carry her to bed." He scoops Knox into his arms so effortlessly and then pushes himself up from the couch. I watch them as he carries her down the hall. When he returns, he lays himself between my body and the back of the couch. His head rests on my shoulder, and his hand rests on my stomach.

"I have to tell you something," he says.

I always dread conversations that begin like this. Wasn't this the same sentence I told him when I had to confess to my suicide attempt? "What is it?" I ask softly.

J.R. turns his face toward mine, and he looks up at me with his soft, blue eyes. "A couple of weeks ago..."

I feel a lump in my throat, and I'm praying that his next words aren't "I cheated on you with one of the band's groupies." I don't think he would ever cheat on me, but the thought does cross my mind. I'm not there. I don't know what type of things he could be getting into. He's definitely not unattractive, and when he's at the piano, I have a hard time controlling myself. I can't imagine what it must be like for other women. Especially the younger ones. I do try to not think about these things when he's gone. It'll only drive me crazy.

"My dad called me," J.R. says, and I'm immediately relieved, although the news is odd. As far as I know, J.R. and his dad haven't spoken in more than a decade.

I push myself up to a seated position, J.R. coming up with me. I think the expression on my face is a good indication of the confusion I feel.

"Your dad?"

J.R. pushes his hand over his head, and a piece of him looks just as confused as I do. "Yeah. It's been years, I know.

He...he called. Out of the blue.”

“What did you talk about?” I ask him.

“He congratulated me on the band. I told him about you and Knox, told him where we live. And I invited them to come down for Thanksgiving.” He watches me as he says those last few words. I think he’s waiting for me to explode.

It’s everything inside of me not to explode. I don’t handle last-minute changes to plans well. I let my expression go blank instead.

“Thanksgiving is tomorrow, J.R.,” I tell him. “We don’t have enough food. We don’t have any food.” I wasn’t even planning on J.R. being here for Thanksgiving.

“I’ll take care of it,” he promises.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Is this the only reason you came home?”

“No, Rach. I had already decided to come home. I didn’t tell you sooner because, well, I had to get the situation with Knox resolved. That was my focus.”

“J.R., this is a big deal. I’m not ready to meet your parents.” I’m only slightly shouting, but I am in full panic mode internally. “What did you tell them about Knox and me? That you’ve only just met Knox because I disappeared for a few years? Did you tell him you’ve already knocked me up again and that we haven’t even gotten married yet?”

“Rach, calm down. Why are you so upset?”

“What did you tell him about us, J.R.?” I ask him with my arms folded across my chest now. I’m not sure why I’m so upset, but maybe I’m a little more self-conscious about my past choices than I thought.

J.R. massages the bridge of his nose. He does this when he’s trying to remain calm, and I’m trying to figure out what in the world he has to be upset about.

“I told him that we met eleven years ago but that we’ve spent the last several years apart. I told him that we just recently reconnected, and we’ve decided to get married. I

didn't go into extreme detail. I didn't think the details were something that should be said through a telephone."

"What will they think of Knox Rose?"

"I don't think it matters, Rach," he says. "Really. I think they want to make things right with me. It doesn't matter what happened in our past. What matters is right now. We're together now."

J.R. takes my hand. "I'm nervous, too. I haven't seen my parents since I left home, but I think they'll love Knox Rose. I think they'll love you, too. I think that we should try. They're my parents."

I sigh, and I know that he's right. I know that I should be happy for him, too, but maybe I have trust issues. Calling your son out of the blue after years of silence? I don't buy it.

"What if things go sideways? Not to mention, I have no idea how to talk to parents. I never had any." Kelley's parents sort of filled that void, but I was never their daughter.

He laughs softly. "They won't go sideways, and I think you'll do just fine."

"You think so?"

"I know so." He leans forward, and then he kisses me. "They'll love you."

"I'm more worried about them loving you, J.R."

"The past is the past. He sounded sincere. We'll just have to see where it goes."

"You're calm," I point out.

He smiles. "Someone has to be."

I scoot closer to him, and I take his cheeks in my hands. "I love you."

J.R. leans into me. "It's going to work out great. If it doesn't...well, it's my house; I'll kick them out."

I take his braid in my fingers, and I gaze in his eyes. I smile, and then I kiss him.

“Are you okay?” he asks me.

“I’ll be fine,” I say. “I’m happy for you. I know it hasn’t been easy living all of this time without them.”

“We’ll see. I’m not getting my hopes up, but it’s a step, right?”

I nod. “It’s a step.”



It's Thanksgiving morning, and I'm every bit of the nervous wreck I thought I would be. J.R. is taking care of the food as he promised. Knox is settled on the couch watching the Thanksgiving Day parade on television, and I'm running around the house cleaning every nook and cranny like the crazy person that I am.

"Rach, stop cleaning!" J.R. shouts from the kitchen, but I ignore him. First impressions are important; and I figure if, by some chance, we have to go into detail about our messy past, at least the house will be clean.

Knox hops off the couch, and I hear her little feet run into the kitchen. "Your mom is crazy," I hear J.R. mumble to Knox. She giggles, and I roll my eyes at them.

I'm sweeping the foyer, but I can hear their conversation continue in the kitchen. "Daddy, if our guests today are your mama and daddy, does that mean they're my grandma and grandpa?"

"Yep," J.R. answers.

"How come I've never heard of them until now?" she asks.

I feel a little relieved to get some of the heat off of me. Sure, I kept J.R. from Knox for many years, but she's got a complete set of grandparents that we haven't even told her about. Well, not until this morning, anyway.

"It's complicated, Knox," J.R. says.

Knox sighs. "How come everything is always complicated?"

"Just enjoy being a kid," J.R. tells her. "You don't want our problems. Trust me."

I bend over and sweep the sand and dirt into the dustpan, but as I stand back straight, I catch a glimpse of a black car pulling into our driveway. My heart begins to pound, and I realize they're here. J.R.'s parents are here. I think I might puke.

"J.R.?" I say, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Yeah, babe?"

"They're here." I'm stuck. Frozen. Standing on this burnt orange rug in the foyer, staring through the glass of the door into the driveway at the black car that is now parked in front of our house, I'm not sure what to expect. I don't think that I've ever even seen a photo of J.R.'s parents.

J.R. appears next to me, and he's drying his hands on a dish towel. He looks out. "Yep, that's them."

I turn to look at him. "Are you ready? Are you okay?" I think I'm probably more afraid than he is as I look up at him with wide eyes.

"Rach, you are white as a ghost," he says, halfway laughing at me. "It's going to be okay."

I take a deep breath and nod. "Okay. I'm going to go dump this," I say as I hold up the dustpan. "Answer the door."

"If you weren't carrying my baby, I'd tell you to take a shot of vodka."

I make my way into the kitchen, and I dump the dustpan's contents into the garbage can. My hands are shaking as I look at Knox, who is at the kitchen counter, staring at me with her big, innocent eyes. I smooth down her hair with my hands.

"It's okay," I tell her. "It's going to be okay, right?"

"It'll be okay," she says, smiling up at me.

We stay here in the kitchen together, unwilling to move, and we watch as J.R. opens the front door. Two strangers step into our home. J.R. hugs them both. It's been years since he last touched either one of them, and I wonder exactly how he's feeling right now. I'm also regretting the fact

that we made our home an open concept. I could definitely use a wall to hide behind right now. Knox and I aren't hidden from view, and I know no matter how badly I want to stay in this place, we have to meet them, too.

"Come on, Mama. I'll hold your hand," Knox says softly, sliding her hand into mine. I wonder when she got to be so grown up, and then I realize that maybe I did this to her. I made her grow up a little too quickly.

J.R.'s parents stand there on my burnt orange rug. They smile at their son, and I am beginning to think this might actually be a genuine reunion. I would never tell J.R. this, but I've got suspicions. Who just comes back into someone's life out of the blue? Well, besides myself.

They aren't what I thought they would look like, but then again, I didn't have a photo or anything to get a visual. J.R.'s mom, Ellie, is sort of short like me, but she's beautiful. Her eyes are blue and gentle. She's applied her makeup meticulously, and she wears her short, blonde hair in a pixie style. Ellie wears a pair of jeans, nice leather boots, and an olive-green sweater. J.R. is nothing like his mother, but then, he also seems to be completely made up of her every attribute.

Roger, J.R.'s dad, is handsome, and it makes sense to me why J.R. is the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on. With his genetics, it was impossible for him to be anything else. Roger has blue eyes, too, and I know now that my dark eyes never stood a chance against all of these beautiful, blue-eyed genes. His hair is gray, cut short, and he wears a pair of jeans with a nice, navy blue sweater. His shoes—made of leather, too—look as though he had just shined them this morning.

J.R. doesn't look like he fits in with them. Not with his long hair, black jeans with holes in the knees, and his open, gray shirt. He looks so unkempt, but that's one of the things I love most about him. The way he can make unkempt look kempt.

As Knox and I move closer to them, their eyes move to greet us. I wish I were invisible. J.R. puts an arm around me.

“Mom, Dad, meet Rachel and Knox,” he says proudly.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” I say, shaking each of their hands.

Knox holds out her hand, too. “Nice to meet you.”

J.R.’s mom and dad smile as they each shake my hand and then Knox’s tiny hand.

“You’ve certainly done well for yourself, J.R.,” Ellie says. “Your girls are beautiful.”

J.R. smiles at me, and then he looks at Knox. “Knox, do you want to show them around? Take ‘em out to the boat?”

I’m not sure about this. There’s so much that hasn’t been said. I could see Knox saying it all if she’s left unsupervised.

“To the boat? Is it safe for her to go out to the boat without you?” Roger asks.

“It’s fine. I know what to do,” Knox assures him.

“Let her show you around,” J.R. says to them.

“Just know that I’m not responsible for anything that comes out of her mouth,” I joke, but honestly, I’m not really joking. I don’t want to be held responsible for anything Knox may confess to them.

Ellie is hesitant as Knox takes her hand, but reluctantly, they follow her out the back door and to the dock.

I exhale deeply as soon as they are out of sight like I’ve been holding my breath for hours. I bend over with my palms on my thighs. “I wish I could drink.”

“Why are you so nervous?” J.R. is laughing at me, and I’m not sure I appreciate it. He puts his hand on my back in an effort to comfort me. It doesn’t do much good. Not with him laughing at me, too.

I stand back up straight and look at him. “I don’t know.”

“I think it went well. The initial meeting is the hardest. It’s smooth sailing from here.” J.R. smiles at me with assurance, but I’m not so sure.

J.R. sets the table with plates, utensils, and glasses; and then together, we move the food to the table. J.R. really outdid himself. There’s turkey, dressing, macaroni and cheese, rolls, and more. Of course, I helped a little, but he did most of it. I’m impressed, and I’m not even sure how he was able to pull off having a full turkey cooked and ready in so few hours. I think A.J.’s had something to do with it, but I won’t be suspicious. He promised he would take care of the food. He didn’t say how he would take care of it, and really, does it even matter?

J.R. and I stand at the head of the table, looking at the feast before us. I lean into him a little and smile. “Out of all our years together, this is our first legit Thanksgiving.”

“It is, isn’t?” he kisses the top of my head.

“You did a good job, J.R.”

“Well, don’t speak too soon. No one has eaten it yet.”

“I’m sure it’s perfect.”

J.R. turns to face me. “Mom was right, you know. My girls are beautiful.”

I smirk and blush a little, too. “I don’t deserve you.”

He kisses me. “I’m going to go find our guests. I’m starving.”

J.R. disappears out the back door, and I turn back to the table to make sure we haven’t forgotten anything in the table setting.

Our dinner is quiet at first. The only sounds to be heard are of chewing and the sipping of wine. Every now and then, there’s a compliment to J.R. about how good the meal is, and it is delicious. Still, the silence is deafening, and I don’t particularly enjoy the sound of people eating. I’m hoping someone decides to speak soon.

“How did you two meet?” Ellie asks, finally breaking the silence. She takes a sip of wine, and her blue eyes dart

between J.R. and me.

I take a sip of water, and then I glance at J.R. He's in the middle of chewing his food, so I begin the story.

"It was eleven years ago. He was playing a show in South Carolina."

J.R. speaks up now. "And I saw the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life walk into the venue."

I decide that I'll let him tell the rest of the story because it dawns on me that I've never heard it from his perspective. I'm interested to hear it.

J.R. is smiling as he looks at me. "I just had to talk to her. She was so out of place. Not like the rest of the girls there." J.R.'s fork dangles from his fingers. "I think—I *know*—I loved her the moment I laid eyes on her. I've never loved anyone else since then."

"That's a sweet story," Ellie says. "Love sort of happens like that. Out of the blue."

"What happened to cause you two to split?" Roger asks bluntly.

I nearly choke on my turkey, and J.R. shifts in his seat uncomfortably. "Not in front of the kid, Dad."

Knox suddenly speaks up. "It's complicated."

Now, I choke on my water, quickly covering my mouth to prevent any from running out.

J.R. makes a nervous laugh.

Ellie smiles. "Well, I'm sad that we missed this. Your family. You." She's looking at J.R. now with the kind of gentle eyes that a mother often uses to look at her child. I've never personally experienced this look before, but I think it's meant to evoke feelings of approval and love.

J.R. nods. "Me, too."

"What about you, Rachel? Where are your parents?" Roger asks.

I've decided I don't like his questions. They come out of his mouth sort of rough around the edges. They're also random. I literally have no idea what he's going to ask next, and that makes me uncomfortable.

I stare blankly for a moment, though, realizing that no one has asked me this question in a really long time—not even Knox, and she usually has all of the questions. I look down at my plate, and I push a macaroni noodle around with my fork. I feel their eyes on me.

Finally, I look up at them. “My dad died when I was a kid, and my mother... She passed away about eleven years ago.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” Roger says, and I think he's truly sympathetic.

“It's okay. It was a long time ago.” I cast my eyes back to my plate.

Everything goes quiet again, the mood ruined by death. We resume eating, but if I'm being honest, I hope we're finished with walking down Memory Lane. I guess, though, when you haven't seen someone in more than a decade, all you have is Memory Lane.

Ellie breaks the silence again a few minutes later. “Rachel, I noticed you aren't drinking wine. I'm just wondering why.”

It's kind of a forward question. A random question, too. Do these people have any idea how to hold a proper conversation? Who cares if I'm not drinking wine? Maybe she's trying to figure out if I'm pregnant or maybe just a recovering alcoholic. I chose to wear a baggy sweater today. I didn't want my obvious baby bump being all that obvious. I'm not ready to tell these people that J.R. and I are expecting another child. Maybe I should tell her I'm a recovering alcoholic.

I look at J.R., and he looks back at me. He would be horrified if I went with the recovering alcoholic story.

“She’s pregnant,” Knox suddenly announces nonchalantly, taking a big bite out of a roll after she says it.

My face goes hot as I look at Roger and Ellie with wide eyes. Their eyes are equally as wide, but smiles spread across their faces.

“You’re pregnant?” Ellie exclaims.

I nod, unable to speak, and I briefly cut my eyes at Knox. She just smiles back at me.

“How exciting! Another grandbaby!” Ellie claps her palms together with excitement.

“You sure don’t waste time, do ya?” Roger asks, eyeing J.R. He’s smiling when he says this, but I think I hear a bit of sarcasm in his voice, too.

“It just kind of happened,” J.R. says. “But we’re excited.”

“They’re getting married, too. Soon,” Knox says proudly.

“That’s what I hear.” Roger smiles. “Tell me about you, Knox.”

For once, I’m grateful for Roger’s random questions and abrupt change of topic.

“Well, I’m a kid,” she says. “Oh, and I play piano. Like my daddy.”

“You know who taught your dad how to play?” Ellie asks her.

Knox shakes her head.

“My mother.” Ellie smiles proudly. “She taught him how to play guitar, too.”

Knox looks at J.R. “Your grandma taught you how to play guitar?” She looks unsure. Maybe it’s a strange sight to think about a grandmother playing guitar. I imagine an old lady in her rocking chair, sewing needles in a basket next to her chair, and she’s strumming on a guitar in her lap.



J.R. smiles. “Sounds kind of funny, doesn’t it? It’s true. I think she had a little rock and roll in her, though I’m not sure you could ever get her to admit to that.”

Ellie laughs. “My mother was a spitfire. That’s for sure.”

“Do you play any instruments, Rachel?” Roger asks me.

Just when I was beginning to relax again, all of their blue eyes are back on me. I’m really getting annoyed, and I’m not even sure why.

“Me? No. I mean, I sing a little, I guess, but Knox and J.R. are the talent.”

“Everyone has a talent,” Ellie says.

“Rachel writes,” J.R. tells them. I glare at him, and he smiles back at me.

“Really?” Roger looks intrigued. “Are you published?”

“I’ve not published a book, but I’m working on it. I write opinion articles for magazines, blogs, newspapers. Sounds boring, but folks seem to enjoy it.”

“That doesn’t sound boring at all,” Roger replies.

After everyone is finished eating, I offer to clean the kitchen to give J.R. time with his parents. But Roger stays behind to help me while J.R., Ellie, and Knox disappear outside. I feel nervous as he hovers next to me, drying the dishes as I wash them. I haven’t decided exactly how I feel about him yet. Knowing the things I do know about him and then after all of the forward and random questions he asked over our meal earlier, I feel uneasy around him. I can’t get a good read on Roger, and maybe that’s what bothers me most about him. I can read most people well. Roger, not so much. There’s something there behind his eyes—something he’s not disclosing. And maybe that’s why I don’t feel like I trust him. Maybe that’s why he makes me uneasy.

“You’ve got a beautiful home,” Roger says to me as he wipes a dish dry and then puts it away.

“Thank you. When we bought the place, it was a dump. J.R. thought we should tear it down and start over.”

“Sounds like J.R.,” Roger says. “He’s never been very resourceful.”

“He’s handy, though. We did a lot of the work here on our own. He only electrocuted himself once.” I laugh, mostly joking. He was shocked once when we were taking down an old light fixture.

Roger doesn’t laugh. He’s lost in a thought somewhere. “He was always a good kid. Despite our differences.”

“J.R. is happy to have you here today. You and Ellie both. It means a lot to him.”

“And you? What do you think?” he asks me.

I glance at him. His blue eyes are piercing into me. I feel like he’s trying to take this conversation down a certain path, although I’m not sure which way he’s trying to go. I wonder if I should take the bait and see where it goes or resist.

I take the bait. “I think it’s great. My mother was never interested in reconciling with me. Every child, no matter the age, needs their parents.”

“Yet you kept J.R. from his daughter for a long time,” he points out. His voice is still kind, but I hear the question in his voice. I’m just not sure which part of me he’s questioning.

“Not my proudest moment,” I reply. I’m not looking at him now. My eyes stare down into the soapy water in the sink, and I scrub a fork a little more ferociously than I need to.

“Why did you come back, Rachel?” he asks me. “Better question, why did you leave him in the first place?”

I continue scrubbing the fork. I feel myself getting angry, and I’m trying to keep a cap on it. I don’t look at him. I don’t answer him.

“Are you sure that Knox even belongs to my boy?” he pushes.

My face fills with heat, and staying calm is no longer an option. I'm filled with a kind of rage that I can't really define, and I briefly imagine taking the fork in my hand and plunging it into one of his blue eyeballs.

I thought I was crazy. I've felt like Roger has been watching me all day. Measuring me up. Evaluating me. Every question he has asked me today has been strategic in its own way. I'm not an idiot. I know when I'm being sized up.

I turn to face him. "Say what you need to say, but please don't question *who* my daughter belongs to."

Roger looks at me. He's calm, still measuring me with his blue eyes. I watch a smirk curve in his lips. "I hit a nerve."

"You did." I keep a straight expression, trying not to shout, but my words are sharp. "Knox Rose is your granddaughter. She looks just like J.R. You can't deny that." I glare at him. "I don't have to explain myself to you, but since we're asking questions, why did you come back? Why did you randomly call up your son and attempt to right your wrong?"

He blinks, and then he turns back to face the dishes. He's quiet for a few minutes. He's gone somewhere else in his mind. I'm not sure where. Finally, he says softly, "I'm dying."

The words take me by surprise, but I don't know why I hadn't noticed before. His ashen face. The way his eyes sink back slightly. He does look sick in a way. Not a deathbed sick, but like he's heading in that direction.

"Does J.R. know?" I ask him softly.

"No," he says. "I'll tell him. I want to be the one to tell him."

"Of course." I go back to my dishes, wiping a plate clean.

"It's a brain tumor. Inoperable."

My heart sinks. "How long do you have?"

"Well, I'll put it this way. This is my last Thanksgiving."

Now I feel like a little shit. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

Roger sighs. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes. With J.R., especially. Before I go, I want my family back. My son. There’s a lot of lost time, but I want to make up for it.”

“Well, take it from me, you can’t go back. You can always start over, though. We can’t change our choices, but we can start over.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Roger says. “I’m sorry, Rachel, for asking those questions. He loves you and that kid. I...I would hate for him to lose you again. Marriage isn’t easy. Some days, you’ll wish you were dead.”

I laugh softly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Suddenly, J.R.’s voice fills the room, and he’s here in the kitchen with us. “Everything okay in here?”

I startle. I didn’t even hear them come in.

“Fine. Everything is fine,” I say with a smile.

Roger looks at me. “I think I want to talk to my son.” He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Do you have the rest of this mess okay?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” There’s not much left to clean up, and part of me is relieved. I need a moment to myself. However, I’m sure he’s going to deliver the news that he just gave me to J.R. It means so much to J.R. to have his dad back. I can’t imagine how he will feel to find out he’s losing him again.

J.R. glances at me briefly as if to see if I’m okay before heading out the front door with his dad.

I go back to my dishes, and from down the hall, I hear the piano playing. Knox must be showing off her piano skills. J.R. has been teaching Knox his ways, and although she was good before, he has made her better. She’s like a child version of Jerry Lee Lewis.

Later, after Ellie and Roger are gone, J.R. is tucking Knox into bed. And though it turned out to be a great day, I’m

happy to collapse on the couch in my sweatpants and breathe again.

I lay on the couch, running my hands over my stomach, and I'm feeling fatigued. Today was a big day—emotionally and physically. I close my eyes; my mind replays the events of the day, and I listen to myself inhale and exhale.

“Hey.” J.R.’s voice comes from around the corner, and then he collapses on the other end of the couch, our legs side by side.

“Hey,” I say, trying to hide the fact that he startled me. “Knox okay?”

“She’s fine. Exhausted.”

“How are you?” I ask him.

J.R. looks at me gently. His eyes are solemn, and I know what he’s about to say. “I don’t know. Apparently, my dad is dying.” He knows I know. I’m sure Roger told him, and I can’t discount the way he looked when he and Roger came back into the house after their conversation earlier.

I look at him tenderly. “I’m so sorry, J.R.”

He doesn’t say anything. I’m not sure what to say either, so I just rest my hand on his leg.

We lay there quietly. We’re looking at each other, but no words pass between us. I push myself up, and then I crawl on top of him, laying my head against his chest. His arms come around me and lock over my back. He sighs and then kisses the top of head.

“I love you, J.R.,” I whisper.

“I love you.”

I feel my eyes grow heavy as I listen to the rhythm of his heart beating against his chest. I feel him kiss me again, and I smile softly against his shirt. *What a day*, I think as the full weight of exhaustion takes over. I feel myself relax completely into him, and I think I’ll be asleep soon.

I wake up in our bed. J.R. is across the room, sliding a hoodie over his head. It's six a.m., and I realize that it's time for him to leave again. So much has happened, I forgot that he wasn't home to stay. I sit up, and he looks at me.

"Go back to sleep, Rach," he whispers.

"Not a chance. You can't leave without saying goodbye."

"I don't want to go." He moves toward me.

"I know you don't; but it's your job, and you do love it."

"I love you," he says with a smile.

"It's just a few more weeks. And then everything can go back to normal. Until your next tour."

"Optimism."

J.R. sits next to me. He kisses my belly, whispers something that I can't hear, and then looks at me. "I want to get married when I come home. We'll elope or whatever, but that's what I want to do. Be thinking about it while I'm gone."

"A Christmas wedding?" I ask a little surprised.

"Why not?"

I shrug. "I guess it could work. At least, we'll never forget our anniversary."

"Exactly."

I laugh at him. "Okay. A Christmas wedding."

He smiles gently. "I have to go." His voice is soft.

"I know." I wrap my arms around him, and I hold him close to me for a few seconds. There's one more kiss, and then he's gone.

I'm getting married today. It's something I feel like I've waited entirely too long for, and yet now, I'm not sure I'm ready. Nothing will change, I tell myself. I think J.R. and I have been married since that night at the Handlebar so many years ago. We'll just be official now.

Though J.R. has been gone for the last few weeks, we've planned this day over the phone. We're getting married here at our house on the boardwalk, which I find symbolic. Wasn't the boardwalk where I found him again less than six months ago?

Kelley and Adam are here—and Kelley's parents, too—and J.R.'s parents are set to arrive soon. The pastor will be here at noon, and I will walk down the boardwalk at 12:30. It was only slightly sad to not have anyone of my own family here today. Aunt Sue was my last remaining relative, and now she's gone.

The thing about December in Georgia is that it will either be relentlessly cold or like a second summer. Today, the sky is blue; the sun is high; and the air is warm. I'm thankful.

Kelley, Knox, and I went shopping days ago for our dresses. After hours of searching, experiencing a period of extreme hunger and then exhaustion, we finally settled on emerald green dresses for them. I couldn't go for a traditional white dress. I'm anything but pure. I found a cream dress with lace across the chest instead. It's beautiful, long, and simple. It's me.

Now, Kelley glides makeup over my face. I sit in a chair with my eyes closed, as she does her very best to make me look presentable. We sit quietly. She breathes softly, and I feel a soft sponge move across my cheeks. She applies eye makeup and then gloss across my lips.

“All done. Take a look,” she says, spinning the chair around to face my vanity’s mirror.

I open my eyes, and for a moment, I don’t recognize myself. My dark hair hangs past my shoulders. It’s got volume, falls in a slight curl down my back, and looks silky smooth. I reach up to touch my hair just to make sure it’s real. My face doesn’t look like my own either. My cheekbones are highlighted; my eyes have what the magazines call the “smoky look”, and although I am very pleased with the way I look right now, I hope J.R. doesn’t expect to ever see me in makeup like this again. I could never duplicate this look, and I’m not sure I’d want to. I’ve been sitting in this chair for an hour, and my back hurts.

However, I look beautiful, and that’s something I’ve never considered myself to be.

“Don’t cry,” Kelley says. “You’ll mess up your makeup.” She smiles behind me. “You clean up nice.”

I laugh, remembering she said those exact words to me the night we went out for my twenty-first birthday. “Thank you.”

I turn to face her. She’s beautiful, too. Her blonde hair is pinned back, her blue eyes are highlighted by her eye makeup, and her cheeks are pink with the perfect amount of blush.

“I can’t believe this day is finally here.” I see a smile break across Kelley’s face. “Thank God,” she jokes with a heavy sigh.

I laugh, standing. I reach to hug my friend, but I catch a glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror across the room. The dress I’m wearing hugs me tightly, outlining all of me, every curve—even my pregnant stomach, which seems to add to my silhouette like a piece of artwork. I’m surprised at myself as I gaze into the mirror. I’m not sure why. Maybe I’ve never envisioned myself like this. All made-up. Although, I never intend on looking like this again, I think I’ll enjoy it for today. Today is special.



Knox emerges from her room, meeting me in the hallway, ready to do her part in this wedding day event. I smile at how beautiful she is in her dress. Her dark hair flows like mine past her shoulders, and she beams up at me with a wide smile and bright blue eyes.

“Aren’t you the prettiest thing I have ever seen,” I tell her.

Knox smiles proudly, and then says, “You look beautiful, Mama.”

I smile and reach for her hand. “Ready to walk me down the aisle?”

“Ready.” Knox takes my hand, and then Kelley gives us one more look-over before it’s time to step out of the house to the boardwalk.

I step out first, and then Knox. The warm air hits my skin, and a soft sea breeze passes through my hair. I’m surprised to find a photographer, snapping pictures as we walk further out. I don’t recall hiring a photographer, and I know J.R. didn’t think about it either.

“I hired the photographer,” Kelley says as if reading my mind. “This day needed to be documented.”

She thinks of everything.

I feel a flutter in my stomach, and I think I’m nervous. I’m not sure why. I know every inch of J.R., and he knows every inch of me. Yet this is different. Maybe I’m still questioning whether or not I am ready for this. Of course, I am ready. I’ve waited more than a decade for this very day.

As I walk across the boardwalk, boards creaking beneath my bare feet, I think about how I made my way across this very same pathway a few short months ago. I remember how my heart pounded just as it is doing now. That walk then had been so uncertain. Today’s walk is certain.

As I reach the curve in the boardwalk, I force my eyes up. It’s the same spot in the walk where I had looked up to see him again for the first time in years. Now, J.R. stands at the end, where the boards open up to the dock. The pastor is next

to him, his mom and dad on the other side. J.R.'s hair is down, curly, and controlled. It's longer than mine, and I don't think I'll ever stop being jealous of how much better he is at long hair than I.

J.R.'s barefoot, too. He's wearing skinny, dark gray pants; a white, button-up shirt tucked in; and black suspenders for effect. It's something I've never seen him wear before, but I think I like it. J.R. smiles at me. I see his lips pushed upward beneath his beard. His blue eyes are bright.

I feel my face begin to grow warm as I walk closer to him. My hands grow clammy, and Knox drops her hand from mine to wipe the moisture away. My heart is pounding; my breath is short; and at this moment, I only see J.R.

"All right, Li'l Bit, we stop here," I hear Kelley whisper to Knox.

J.R. steps out to take my hand, and then we turn to face each other. I think I see a tear in his eye, but I'm not sure.

"You are beautiful," he says to me in a whisper.

"Don't get used to it," I whisper with a smirk.

The pastor starts speaking, and I do wish we could skip this part. Doesn't everyone feel this way about weddings? I'm not even listening to the words he says, but I wait for my cue to recite my vows.

J.R. and I decided to write our own vows, but we didn't decide this until two days ago. I've spent every free second of my time trying to write them, but I'm not sure that I could ever express exactly how I feel. I decided yesterday against writing them out. I'll just go with it.

It's time now, and I suddenly regret my decision not to at least have something prepared. A starter. Something to get me going. I lock my eyes into J.R.'s, and I let my heart do the rest.

"There was a Christmas, about eleven years ago. Our first Christmas together."

“The one where you picked out a ridiculously large Christmas tree?” he interjects.

I giggle. “Yes, that one. Anyway, I told Kelley then that I would marry you one day, and now, one day is finally here. I’ve made a lot of mistakes since that Christmas eleven years ago, but one thing has remained the same all these years later. I love you. I will never stop loving you. I will love you when you’re old and gray. I will love you when you can’t sing anymore or play the piano. I’ll love you when you can’t even remember my name. I’ll love you to death and beyond.” I slide his band over his finger, my hands shaking as I do so, and I fight back tears as I look back up into his soft, blue eyes.

“I remember the first time I saw you. You came bumping into the bar with two tall blondes, and you were definitely out of your element. You were like a beautiful animal out of her natural habitat. I gazed at you with awe. Paralyzed. I couldn’t breathe another breath until I spoke to you.” He smiles at me. “Losing you was the worst day of my life, but there’s not another day I’ll live that will beat the day I got you back. You are the air in my lungs, the beat in my heart, and the blood in my veins. I love you.” J.R. slides a beautiful band on my finger while continuing to gaze into my eyes, and I see tears begin to form in his.

The pastor says a few more mandatory things and then announces us man and wife. In one swift movement, J.R. scoops me into his arms and kisses me. It’s like he’s never kissed me before, and my hands lock around his neck, as I indulge in our first kiss as a married man and woman. I smile against his lips, thankful to finally be his. I was always his, and this, I know, is something I can never forget.

After a little music, some good food, and socialization, we hug our family goodbye, and J.R. drives us to the airport where we will fly off to some secret honeymoon destination. I didn’t think a honeymoon was necessary, but J.R. insisted. I can’t turn down a trip. He even packed my luggage for me so that our destination remained a mystery to me.

Of course, the thing about secret destinations that involve flying is that the secret usually has to run out at the

airport. I'm not sure the flight attendant would have let J.R. board me onto a plane blindfolded. I think J.R. is still trying to figure out how he can keep this trip a secret, but he finally hands me my passport and ticket with a smile on his face. We're going to Costa Rica.

"How are we affording this?" I ask him with wide eyes.

"Don't worry about it," he says with a smile.

I hope he packed well. I can't show up in Costa Rica wearing my normal clothes. I'm a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl. Lucky for me, J.R. knows a lot more about fashion than I do.

"You love me too much," I tell him.

"Nonsense." He kisses me.

The trip is just for a few days. We have to get back home before Christmas Eve because that's when Kelley and Adam tie the knot. And also, because it will be our first Christmas together as a full family, and I haven't had one of those since before my dad died.

I remember my last Christmas with my family. I was four, and Santa brought me the most beautiful dollhouse. It was a good Christmas, one that I haven't thought of in a very long time.

Costa Rica is just as warm as I had imagined it would be. It's different. Not like the heat of a Georgia summer. It's brighter here, too, but in a lot of ways reminds me of our little island back in the States. Costa Rica has lush green trees and soft sand. The only difference besides the weather is how clear the water is. I love our little slice of ocean back home, but its waters have never been clear. Our ocean has a green tint to it, and when you feel something brush across your leg, you pray it's seaweed.

Here, though, I can see my feet through the water. I can see the sandy bottom of the ocean floor, and I can see the fish swimming near the shore. It's the most beautiful place I have ever seen.

J.R. is lying in a wooden beach chair. His hair is braided, and he's got a straw hat pulled over his face. I think he's resting, and it's nice to see him as relaxed as he is right now.

I spread out a towel across my chair, and I adjust the umbrella that shades my space. Normally, I would take all of the sun's rays I can handle, but I'm thinking about the baby now. I think I should avoid getting too much sun, although I can't think of a good medical reason why other than skin cancer. I guess that's enough reason.

"I'm not sleeping," J.R.'s voice comes muffled beneath his hat.

"That's a shame. You look so relaxed," I say, lying back in my own chair. "You should go down to the water. It's beautiful."

J.R. takes his hat from his face, and he turns his head to look at me. He's got his Ray-Bans on, and I wish he didn't. I've always heard that exotic places like these turn blue eyes into the bluest of blues. I'd like to see that.

"How's baby?" he asks me.

"Baby is fine," I tell him. "Aside from making me pay for that stromboli I had in the airport last night. I've never had heartburn so bad."

"You didn't tell them to leave off the sauce," he says, and I smile that he still knows these little things about me. Even when I forget them myself.

"Are you happy?" I ask him.

"The happiest," he says with a smile.

"Me, too." I lay my head back, close my eyes, and listen to the sound of the ocean. My soul is at ease, and I feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

Night has fallen, and we have pushed back the curtains in our hotel room. We've got a front row seat to a full moon hanging over the ocean so perfectly. It's beautiful—the kind of

thing that dreams are made of. Like a painting one might see in an art gallery.

The lights in our room are off, and we're lying next to each other in the bed. I'm in my usual spot, head nestled against J.R.'s chest. He's got his arm around me, and he holds me close to him. We're quiet, enjoying the moment of it being just the two of us without any responsibilities. I like that I can breathe. I'm relaxed. Even with everything that has happened over the last few months and the things that are coming, I'm relaxed right now. I'll enjoy it.

"Do you think we should move to the farm? Just for a little while until..." J.R. asks me through the quiet darkness. I think this is a question he's been pondering since Thanksgiving.

Still, I'm sort of shocked by the question. "What?"

J.R. hates his family's farm. He's made that clear, and I think maybe he's entertaining the idea out of guilt. I don't want to leave Tybee. It's our home, and to go from the island in Georgia to a farm in Tennessee, well, that will definitely be an adjustment.

"My dad. I just feel like it's the right thing to do. For him." He sounds so unsure, and I wonder what he wants me to say.

I think for a moment. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't want to leave our home. Even if it's just for a little while. But isn't that selfish?"

"I don't think it's selfish. Can you be happy at the farm? That's what is important."

J.R. thinks about this for a minute, and then he speaks. "We lost so much time—dad and me—and now he's dying. I think I need to go. I want to make up for lost time."

"What about Knox, the baby, and me?"

"You'll come, too, of course. If you want."

I think about this, and I know that we have to go with him. It's not permanent, but it's what J.R. feels like he needs to

do. I even think that he wants to, and I can't blame him for that, I guess. A part of me wishes that I had been home with my mother before she died. As horrible as she was, there would have at least been some closure.

"Okay," I say.

"Okay?"

"We'll go to the farm." I force a smile on my face. I'm not sure about this, and poor Knox has already had to adjust to so many things recently. This will be another adjustment, and I wonder if it's something that will send her to therapy later in life. Me and the farm.

"The baby," he says. "We'll have to find a new doctor. We won't be able to bring baby home to our home."

"It will be a challenge, J.R. We'll have to put Knox in a new school. It won't be easy, but we'll go. For you."

J.R. slides his arm from around me, and I slide off his chest onto my back. He's on his side, propping himself up on his forearm, and he's looking down at me. I smile softly back up at him as he grazes his fingers across my cheek.

"I'll go wherever you go," I whisper to him.

"I love you."

"I know."

J.R. dips his lips to mine, and he kisses me, pulling the covers over our heads and making the remainder of this night ours.

Kelley and Adam picked the most beautiful venue to get married in the Upstate. I knew that Kelley would never be happy with a small, coastal wedding like J.R. and I. She's been planning this day since she could hold a crayon. I've never really understood her fascination with a big wedding and all the glam that comes with it, but when J.R. and I arrived at the venue fully decorated, I understood it all.

I'm not a bridesmaid. I'm not even a matron of honor. Kelley wanted this day to be about her. She didn't want her guests gazing at her bridesmaids. She wanted her guests to be looking at her. And I can honestly say, all eyes are on Kelley this evening. She is absolutely beautiful. She's always been beautiful, but she's extraordinarily beautiful.

"I can't believe you're leaving for Tennessee next week." Kelley hugs me before the wedding. "Do you really have to go?"

"You seriously should be thinking about Adam and your honeymoon right now. Not me and Tennessee."

"I can't help it. Besides, it takes the wedding anxiety away."

"I'm proud of you," I tell her. "You are a beautiful bride."

"I know." She smiles. Typical Kelley—and yet I love her.

The wedding ceremony itself turned out to be just as beautiful as the bride. Perfect in every way right down to the music and lighting. The reception was of equal beauty. I watched my friend mingle with her new husband, and I realized that neither of us needs each other the same way we needed each other before. I have J.R. again, forever, and she's



with Adam. We're officially grownups, aren't we? It feels so strange.

J.R., Knox, and I drive back to Tybee the morning after the wedding, and perhaps, that was the drive I was dreading the most. The drive back to Tybee meant that packing must resume. On January 2, we were moving—albeit, not permanently, but still.

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This isn't the first time I have left this house on Tybee in January. I'm emotional, like the last time I left here, but for different reasons now. We aren't sure how long we'll be in Tennessee, but I know I'm going to miss my home. There's something about seeing your life packed in boxes that makes you feel funny.

The farm has a barn that we'll live in. I'm told it's not a barn with animals in it *anymore*, but instead, it's been converted into a home. There are a few bedrooms, a couple of bathrooms, and a kitchen. Still, I haven't seen actual pictures, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried about it.

Roger insisted on having the barn renovated before our arrival. However, his idea of renovations and my idea of renovations could be two completely different things. Somehow, no matter how grand it may be, I don't think the barn could ever match up to our home here on Tybee. It's special in its own way.

I don't want to hope that we won't be gone that long. Hoping for that means hoping that Roger will die sooner rather than later. None of us are ready for that. Especially J.R. And no one wants to hope for death.

It's a six-hour drive north, though I think it will take a little longer. We left the house about an hour ago, but the baby has made a trampoline out of my bladder. I'm sure J.R. is ready to set me out on the road because we have stopped three times in forty-five minutes. J.R. is a patient man, and Knox is just proud that she's not the one asking to stop and pee.

On the trip so far, we've seen everything from the big city that Atlanta is to the country sides of northern Georgia. I think it's funny how the scenery can change so drastically in so few miles. From tall buildings and interstates that curve into each other like spaghetti noodles, to flat farmlands with cows and mountains that rise up from the ground like a giant mole hill. The earth's canvas can change quickly yet be so subtle about it at the same time.

Now, as the Tennessee border seeps into the horizon, I watch as the mountains seem to swallow us up in their deep valleys. The road grows thin, and it pulls us deeper into its belly. We pass waterfalls and wide rivers, golf courses and national parks. The trees around us are so thick that if it weren't for a break in their shade every now and then, I wouldn't know that the sun is shining. Finally, the valleys open again, and the mountains spit us out to flatter land. We're in Tennessee.

I look over at J.R., and he looks exhausted. He sits up on the steering wheel slightly, his eyes peeled wide, and I think he's attempting to keep his full attention on the task at hand—getting his family to the farm safely.

I'm tired, too, although I'm not sure why, and I rub my pregnant belly out of habit. Knox is asleep, but that doesn't surprise me. She always gets her best sleep on road trips. I relax back in my seat, trying to release the tension that built up as we followed the curvy roads through the mountains. One wrong move, and J.R. could have driven us all off the side of the mountain.

Finally, I hear the words I've been longing to hear since we first set off on this journey: "We're here." J.R. turns the truck off the main road and onto a dirt drive that no one, except for someone who knew it was there, would have noticed. The drive is lined with tall trees, and the path is a bit bumpy as we continue forward.

My heart starts to pound a little, and I pray that whatever we find at the end of this driveway isn't like something we'd see out of a murder mystery movie. I'm not sure what to expect out of the farm since J.R. has never really

talked about it, but I trust that he wouldn't lead us into a situation where Knox and I could never live comfortably.

To my surprise, the drive opens to a beautiful scene, and for a moment, I wonder why J.R. hates this place so much. The land is flat, and it seems to roll on forever. Mountains paint the backdrop of the farm. I can see cows grazing in the nearby pastures, and there are even chickens roaming free. There's a brick ranch home that sits just off to the right of the drive. Ellie and Roger's place. The home where J.R. grew up.

It's a cute, quaint, little thing, typical of brick ranch homes built in the 1960s. It's got a red brick façade, a large window overlooking a wide front porch, and smaller windows along the front of the house. The landscaping is nice and simple. The front porch is decorated with a wooden swing and two wooden rocking chairs. I imagine J.R. as a teenager, plucking at his guitar in that swing. I see him there with wild hair and the look of teenage angst on his face. The thought makes me smile.

Beyond the house, the land opens to pastures. Cows, horses, even pigs, inhabiting each gated piece of land. There's a barn, tall and red, with a black tin roof, just beyond Roger and Ellie's. I think it's our barn.

To the left of the barn is a trail that leads down to a pond. "A Roger-made pond," J.R. told us earlier on our trip up here. There's a dock and a small boat there, but J.R. says that no one takes the boat out anymore. It's got a hole somewhere in the bow, and it can't be trusted.

"I think I'm going to be sick," J.R. mumbles as he parks the truck in front of Roger and Ellie's. "I haven't seen this place since I left."

I'm still gazing about the property, looking ahead as far as I can see, taking it all in. But I look over at J.R., and I do think he looks a little green.

"Why did you leave, Daddy?" Knox asks from the back seat. I'm wondering when she woke up.

"It's complicated," J.R. answers.

Knox sighs and responds, frustrated, “Why is that the answer to everything?”

I laugh because she’s not wrong. It does seem to be our default answer to every question Knox has. I glance at J.R., and I think he might throw up. He’s pale, and he stares ahead at the house the same way he looked at me the day I returned to him. Like he’s just seen a ghost.

“You okay, Daddy?” Knox asks him.

Before J.R. can answer, Ellie walks out of the front door of the brick house with a giant, ecstatic smile on her face. She’s waving at us as though we’ve been family for life. I wonder if I’ll ever get used to that.

“Is it too late to turn around and go home?” J.R. asks.

“I think so. She’s seen us,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

J.R. turns to look at me and then Knox. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Knox says.

“Ready,” I say.

“Okay.” He nods. “Stay right there, Rach. I’ll come around to help you get out.”

It’s hard being five feet tall, but it’s even harder when you’re pregnant and your husband’s truck is several feet off the ground. I’m thankful for the assistance.

J.R. swings the door open; I put my hand in his, and then I slide out. My feet feel funny when they hit the ground. It’s the way feet do when they have grown accustomed to the vibration of a vehicle’s floorboard on long road trips. I stretch as J.R. reaches into the truck and lifts Knox out, too, placing her feet on the ground.

Ellie is squealing as Knox runs to her, and I smile as they embrace. I wonder what kind of a relationship Knox could have had with my mother. Maybe none at all.

“Are you okay?” J.R. inspects me, his hand grazing my stomach.

“I’m okay,” I assure him, though I am exhausted. I could go for a really hot shower right now.

Ellie gives me a hug, and then she gives J.R. a kiss on his cheek. She’s happy we’re here. She’s happy that her son has finally come home.

“Your dad is at the barn,” Ellie says. “We put the finishing touches on it today. I hope it’s comfortable for you.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” J.R. says. “I’ll drive on over.” He looks at me “Walk or ride?”

“We’ll walk. I’ve ridden enough today.”

“I’ll walk with the girls,” Ellie says.

J.R. hops back in the truck, and we follow his trail around the brick house and down the hill to the barn.

It’s cloudy today, and there’s a chill in the wind. The dead grass crunches beneath my feet as we walk, and I listen to Ellie tell Knox stories of J.R. when he was a kid on the farm. I think I would have liked to have known that J.R. too.

I look out across the land as we walk. Field after field, stretching out as far as the eye can see. Mountains line the horizon, and they’re colored blue in the reflections of the clouds. Animals graze in the pastures, and we even walk by a chicken coop. I’m in a world that I’ve never experienced before, and I haven’t decided how I feel about it yet.

The barn is tall and red. It’s got a black tin roof and fresh landscaping. It has large sliding doors on the front that Ellie says we can open on a nice spring morning. As I envision this scenario, I see myself chasing a wasp out of our living quarters. I think I’ll keep those doors closed.

There’s a smaller door on the front, too, for regular entry into the barn. It’s got a smaller stoop covering the entryway. Ellie even hung a nice wreath on the door.

I notice a space off to the side, paved nicely, with chairs and a fire pit. “A place to spend summer nights,” Ellie says. I wonder how long she thinks we’re going to be here.

J.R. and Roger are waiting for us just outside of the barn. I smile at the two men standing side by side, looking more like each other than either would like to admit.

“Want to take a look inside?” J.R. asks me as we approach.

“It’s not a beach house by any means,” Roger says almost apologetically.

“That’s okay,” I tell him. “You know, we have lived in other places besides the island.”

It occurs to me that maybe Roger doesn’t know this. He takes my comment into consideration.

J.R. opens the door for me, and I walk in, followed by the rest of them. It surprises me—and in the best of ways. It would appear that Roger and I both share the same ideas on renovations. The barn is beautiful, and despite what I thought previously, it is wide and open like our house back on the island.

The barn has old, wooden floors and white, beadboard walls. And from the front door, the space opens into a living and dining area. The large barn doors from the exterior can be opened from inside the dining area, and now I begin to understand what Ellie was saying about opening them on a spring morning. Maybe I won’t mind chasing a wasp away.

The kitchen sits off to the left of the living area, and it’s newly remodeled with concrete countertops that I find odd but also charming. There are shelves on the walls where there should be cabinets, but each shelf is stocked with plates, cups, and coffee mugs.

From the living area is a staircase that leads upstairs to the bedrooms. My hands slide up the iron railing of the stairs, the gang following behind me. There’s a large bedroom with a bathroom attached and then two smaller bedrooms—one for Knox and one for the baby. Roger was quick to point out the special touches he placed in Knox’s room.

None of this is what I had expected, and I sort of feel guilty for thinking about this adventure in any other way than

positive.

“This is just too much, Roger and Ellie,” I say. “I didn’t—we didn’t—expect you to do all of this for us.”

Roger smiles. He’s flattered, and I think he’s proud, too. “We’ve been meaning to make some updates to the place, anyway. You guys coming here gave us a good excuse.”

“Thank you, Dad. Really, it means a lot,” J.R. says.

“Glad to have you home, son.” Roger pats J.R.’s back with his hand.

We venture back downstairs, and J.R. begins bringing in our things. I instruct Knox to help him, and as much as I’d like to help, I’m not sure I have the energy.

“Do you need anything, Rachel?” Ellie asks me.

I realize I’m sitting on one of the stairs, rubbing my belly, probably looking every bit as miserable as I feel. I need a nap. A hot shower, too. A foot rub would work as well.

“I’m fine,” I tell her. “I’m just tired, but I’m fine.”

Ellie nods her head. “Well, I’m going to make us a big dinner. You deserve it after the day you’ve had. I’ll ring the bell when it’s ready.” She smiles at me, and then she’s gone.

I sit there for a minute, staring blankly at the space Ellie had just occupied. A dinner bell? Seriously? I am certain she was joking.

I think that this is the best hot shower I’ve ever had in my life. I’m not sure if it is because of the exhaustion from the day of travel we’ve had or if it’s because of the luxury shower head installed. Either way, I think I’ll be taking a lot of showers. My eyes are closed, and I tilt my head backward into the water. I let it roll down my back, and I know that I never want to end this shower.

“Knox is with Mom,” J.R. says, popping his head into the bathroom. “How’s the shower?”

“Like heaven.” I sigh.

“Can I come in?”

I laugh at him. “Sure.”

The glass door opens, and J.R. slides in. I think he’s broken a record for shortest time it’s taken a man to undress.

I reach up and take his hair from its braid, watching his hair unravel. He smiles at me, his hands on my hips. The water runs down my back as I gaze up at him.

“Thank you for being here,” he says. “It means a lot.”

“Home is wherever I’m with you,” I tell him.

J.R. kisses me, and his forehead is pressed against mine. He’s looking down at his hand on my belly. “I wish I could have seen you like this with Knox. You are so beautiful.”

I feel sad. “I know,” I say softly. “But you’re here for this one.”

“Do you think we’ll have a boy or a girl?” he asks me.

“A girl.”

“You’re sure?”

“No,” I say, and then I smile. “We’ll find out soon.”

J.R. kisses me again. “Soon.”

We’re getting dressed when I hear a bell begin to ring. I laugh as I pull my shirt over my head.

“Your mom was serious about having a dinner bell.”

J.R. laughs, too. “Hell, yeah. How else were we supposed to know when it was time to eat if we were out in the pastures?”

“You never stop surprising me,” I say, and then I kiss him. “Let’s go to dinner.”

Knox is setting the table when we walk into the brick house. The smell of something fried fills my nostrils, and I’m suddenly nauseated. Not just a little, but like I could toss my cookies at any minute.

Normally, this smell would leave my mouth watering, but not tonight. I blame the baby, and I decide that I’ll just



have to force myself through it. Maybe I won't puke.

Ellie delivers country fried steak, mashed potatoes, and green beans to the table. I take a seat, J.R. next to me and Knox on the other side. Roger and Ellie sit at the opposing heads of the table. I try not to focus on the fact that I think I could hurl at any moment, but it's all I can think about as I try to avoid even looking at the food in front of me.

There is conversation going on around me, but I sip my water and pray that the nausea passes sooner rather than later and without incident.

"Rach? Are you okay?" J.R. asks me softly. Roger and Ellie continue their conversation.

"Where's the bathroom?" I ask him, and I've slid my hand over my mouth just in case anything comes up from my stomach unannounced.

"Down the hall and to the left." He's looking at me strangely.

I can't waste another second. I push my chair out from the table and flee down the hall. I barely make it when everything I've eaten today comes back up. All I can think about as I'm hugging the toilet is how extremely embarrassed I feel. What a sight it must have been to see me lunge from the table and sprint down the hall. I'm sure they can hear me as my body rejects any and all that is left in my stomach. Maybe I don't care. It's hard to care about much when you're this close to a toilet. At least, it's a clean toilet.

I hear a tap on the bathroom door, and then J.R. steps in. He's hesitant, but he comes in further. "Rach, what's wrong?"

"The fried food..." I throw up again, and J.R. takes my hair in his hands to hold it away from my face. When I recover, I finish my sentence. "It made me nauseated. The smell. I'm sorry." I think I'm crying now, but I'm not sure why. Maybe tears are a natural side effect of vomiting.

I hear J.R. chuckle at me. "Don't apologize for being pregnant."

“It’s our first night here, and your mom cooked us dinner.” I’m sobbing now, and I can’t even control it.

“Rachel, it’s okay. She’ll understand. She’s been pregnant before.” He tries to reassure me, but it isn’t doing much good. Maybe I would be offended if someone was nauseated by my cooking. Not that I could blame them. I’m not much of a cook.

J.R. finds a clean wash rag in the linen closet, and then he runs it under the sink, soaking it with cold water. He kneels down in front of me, and he wipes my face gently. I watch his eyes as tears still pour from mine. “Maybe we should get dinner to go. It’s been a long day.”

“I don’t want you to miss out. I can just go back.”

“I’m going with you,” he says firmly. “Come on.” He pulls me up from the floor. J.R. smiles at me like he still thinks I’m the most beautiful person in the world, and I can’t understand it.

“Why do you love me so much?” I ask him with a smirk.

J.R. kisses my forehead. “I would kiss your mouth, but...”

“Ugh. No. Don’t.” I roll my eyes at myself.

J.R. takes my hand, and he leads me out of the bathroom.

Ellie and Roger look up at us as we emerge from the hall. The smell of the food hits my nostrils again, and I cover my nose with my hand.

“Rachel isn’t feeling well. I think I’m going to take her back to the barn and get her in the bed,” J.R. tells them.

“You okay, Mama?” Knox asks concerned.

“I’ll be okay,” I tell her. “Don’t worry.”

“I can bring Knox down when she’s finished eating,” Roger says. “I hope you feel better, Rachel.”

I nod and avoid saying anything else for fear of hurling all over the hardwood floors and ruining everyone's dinner.

"J.R., I'll bring you a plate over," Ellie calls as we head out the door.

J.R. calls back, "Just a sandwich or something. It's a pregnancy thing." I'm thankful that he ensures the smell of fried beef doesn't follow us to the barn.

"Ohh," Ellie says, understanding my green complexion now. "Well, I have just the thing for both of you. I'll bring it right over."

The fresh, cold air feels good against my skin as we walk from the house to the barn. I'm still crying, which only seems to make the situation worse. J.R. slides his arm around my shoulders as we walk. I lay my head on the inside of his shoulder, and I cling to him as though I'm dying. I am probably being a little dramatic, but I can't stop myself.

"Were you sick when you were pregnant with Knox?" he asks me.

I forget that this is all new to him—seeing me like this, holding my hair as I puke, having to be conscious of smells.

"I was." I sigh. "I was hoping this time would be different. Thank you for holding my hair while I puked."

J.R. laughs. "I saw it in a movie."

J.R. helps me up the steps to our new bedroom. He peels back the covers on the bed, and I crawl inside. It's not my bed from home, but it will do. I try not to miss Tybee tonight, but I do. I miss not hearing the ocean's roar in the background and the smell of the sea breeze as it moves through my hair. I miss my house and the way my bare feet felt against the cool, wooden floors. I know this isn't permanent, but it's not just a week away either. We'll be here for months, and I'll have to adjust.

J.R. climbs into the bed next to me, and then he pulls me close. We lie there quietly together for a few moments, my eyes closed, as I try to will the nausea away.

“Your parents are being really nice to us,” I say through the silence, trying to distract myself from my current condition.

“They are, aren’t they?” he says.

“You don’t think it’s an attempt to keep us here forever, do you?” I don’t want to ask this question, but the thought has crossed my mind.

J.R. doesn’t respond immediately, but I notice a change in his breathing, and I think he’s not sure how to take what I’ve said.

“I don’t know. What are you saying, Rach?”

I’m hesitant to go any further with the conversation. He sounds offended, and I don’t want to hurt him. I’m still suspicious of his parents, and I wonder if they have ulterior motives. They’ve only just re-entered J.R.’s life after more than a decade of distance, and suddenly we’re here, living in this beautiful barn that they had completely renovated just for us. Someone has to be aware. Someone has to be cautious.

I turn my eyes to his, and I gaze into them for a moment. “Just promise me that we get to go home one day. We won’t stay here forever.”

“Rach, I told you this isn’t permanent. This isn’t our home,” he assures me. “I promise.”

I smile up at him. “We’ll bring our baby home to the farm.”

“Same place I was brought home to. Kind of poetic.”

It is poetic, I guess. I wonder if this baby, whether boy or girl, will have permanent roots to this farm. I wonder if our baby is the one who will take over this place when they’re old enough. Maybe J.R. didn’t want to take the farming route, but maybe the baby will. I wonder.

I close my eyes, wrap my arms around him, and lay my head against his chest. “I love you, J.R.”

I feel his hand stroke the top of my head gently. “I love you, too.”

Living on the farm has been an adjustment. I miss the coast, and although I've spent many years away from it in the past, I was still closer than I am now. Out here on the farm, I've never felt so far from home. I try to write and fulfill the assignments that Adam sends to me, but I'm struggling more than I ever have with writing.

J.R. has postponed touring for a while, as I expected he would. It was hard enough staying behind on the island while he was gone, but I'm not sure I could handle being here on the farm with him away. He spends his time tending the farm with his dad, and he comes in most every night exhausted. I think J.R. misses home, too; but he's dedicated, and I know that there's no turning back. Not now, anyway.

Knox is adjusting well. Better than I thought she would, but then I'm not sure why I'm surprised. Her life has always been full of adjustments. Still, I fear therapy is in her future.

Roger isn't getting any better. With every week that passes, he's able to do less and less. In fact, most of the farm responsibilities have fallen to J.R. Roger forgets things quickly, and he's losing his strength. It's a hard thing to watch someone die. I admire Roger's spirit, though. He wakes up every morning with a death sentence quite literally in his head, but he never stops smiling. Sometimes, I forget that J.R. has spent the last fifteen years without his parents. Being here feels like something we've always known.

Tonight, J.R. looks sad. He's come home after a long day working on the farm, and I watch him take Knox in his arms and kiss her cheek. He looks at me, a weak smile on his face, and then he kisses me, too. I know that all he wants to do is go to bed, but he doesn't want to forget us either.

“How are my girls today?” he asks, sitting down at the table, ready to eat dinner.

I’m not much of a cook, but tonight, I managed to make scrambled eggs, fry some bacon, and not burn the toast.

“Just fine,” I tell him. “You look tired.”

“I’m okay,” he says, but I know he’s not being truthful. We’ll talk about it later, I guess.

We sit down to eat, and we’re all quiet. I’m not sure why. Maybe there’s nothing to say. The mood is solemn. Even Knox just pokes at her eggs with a fork.

“Daddy, is there anything I can do to help you and Grandpa with the animals?” Knox asks, looking up from her plate.

I look at Knox, and I realize she’s serious. Her arms are folded across the table, and she looks at J.R. with concerned eyes.

J.R. looks at her tenderly. “You don’t have to do that, Knox. I want you to be a kid. It’s a lot of responsibility.”

He speaks from experience. I don’t think he would ever want to put the things on her that his dad put on him. He’s scared it will break her like it broke him, and Knox is too good to be broken.

“It’s okay. I want to,” she says.

J.R. looks at me. He’s unsure. I shrug. He glances back at Knox. “Okay, then. Well, how do you feel about the chickens? You can feed them and collect their eggs in the morning before school.”

Knox thinks about this. “I have to wake up early.”

“Yep, it’s the farm life,” he says.

“Knox, you don’t have to take care of the chickens,” I tell her. I know that J.R. could use the help, but I’m not sure if I could stand having both sides of my heart drag into the house exhausted every day. Besides, what if she doesn’t get enough sleep, and then her grades begin to drop?

“I want to,” she says. “I’ll take care of the chickens.” Knox smiles, and I see pride in her decision.

“Okay,” J.R. says. “Tomorrow is your first day on the job.”

“I should hurry and eat so that I can get into bed,” Knox says, beginning to shovel eggs into her mouth quicker.

“Not so fast, Knox. You’ll choke,” I say.

J.R. glances at me, and he smiles a tired smile. I think he’s proud of his girl, and maybe he’s proud of me for raising a great kid, too.

“What’s going to happen to this place when Dad goes?” J.R. asks me later.

We’re in bed, J.R.’s head resting just above my belly. He’s waiting to feel the baby kick.

“I don’t know,” I say, and I hope he’s not thinking we should stay any longer than we have to. He promised we wouldn’t.

“I can’t stay here. We can’t stay here.”

I’m instantly relieved. “No. We can’t.”

“It’s just as terrible as I knew it would be. This isn’t me.”

I run my fingers through his hair. “You’re a good man to do this.”

“I don’t think Dad has much longer, Rach. Today, he couldn’t even think of my name.”

My heart sinks for J.R. “I’m sorry.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and then he turns his face to look at mine. “How are you? I feel like I never see you.”

“I’m okay. I miss you, but I know why we’re here. I know why you have to be here.”

J.R.’s hand moves over my stomach, and then I feel a tiny baby kick from inside. I watch J.R.’s face light up.

“She kicked!”

I smile. “She did.”

“Why do we think the baby is a girl?” he asks.

“I don’t know, but if she comes out a he, we’ll really have to give him a masculine name.” I laugh.

“Maybe, when we’re telling the baby stories later in life, we’ll leave out the part where we thought he was a she,” J.R. says.

“Well, we could have found out if she is a he a couple of weeks ago if you hadn’t decided at the last minute that you wanted the gender to remain a surprise.”

“I don’t always have great ideas, Rach. It’s your job to tell me when I have stupid ideas.”

“So, now you want to know?”

“I think I do.”

“Well, we’ll find out then.”

“We’ll find out,” he replies. He keeps his hand on my stomach, but he moves his lips to mine. He smiles at me softly, kisses me, and then whispers, “Goodnight, Rachel.”

“Goodnight, love.”

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We had a doctor appointment this morning, and the doctor, reluctantly, informed us of the gender of our baby. I can’t stop smiling, and J.R. smiles, too. It fills my heart in a new way. We want to surprise Knox, Ellie, and Roger with a type of gender reveal party. People have these all of the time, announcing the gender of their baby in the most creative ways. I’m not sure that we have to go out of our way to surprise our other three family members, but I do think it’s special. So, we decide to make an event of it. I’ll make dinner, and we’ll have a cake—a special cake with a surprise inside.

It’s been a good day. I’ve had J.R. all to myself, and I’ve forgotten how much I have truly missed him. He’s been physically present, of course, but he’s also been mentally exhausted most days for the last couple of months. J.R. isn’t



happy. This life isn't him. I admire him for leaving this place so long ago, chasing his dreams, and becoming exactly who he wanted to be.

I think of all of the things that wouldn't have happened had J.R. stayed here on the farm after high school. Had he not left the only thing he had ever known, we probably would have never met. If we had never met, there would be no Knox. There wouldn't be a new baby. And maybe there wouldn't even be me.

I think about these things as I stand at the kitchen counter mixing together the cake batter. J.R. is rinsing off a few dishes, and I can't stop glancing at him, admiring him, loving him. How did I get to be so lucky?

"Why do you keep looking at me?" J.R. asks with his eyes slanted toward me. He smirks a little like I'm making him uncomfortable.

I glance back up at him from the cake batter. "I don't know. I'm just...it's been a good day."

J.R. dries his hands and then moves behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I feel his lips against my neck as he says, "It has been a good day."

I set the spoon and the bowl of batter on the counter, and then I turn in his arms to face him. I gaze up into his blue eyes, and then I lift myself on my tiptoes to kiss him.

J.R. smiles back at me. "Do you think Knox will be surprised that she's getting a baby..."

I quickly put my finger to his lips. "Shhh, she's got big ears. She'll hear you."

J.R. playfully bites my finger that is still resting against his lips, and then he kisses me. "Get that cake in the oven; they'll be here soon."

Dinner is on the table, and J.R. is welcoming Ellie and Roger into the barn for our surprise party. Dinner isn't anything fancy—spaghetti, salad, and toasted French bread. I've saved the cake for later. It holds the surprise in the middle of its moist and fluffy interior. At least, I hope it does. I

followed the recipe correctly. Still, that means nothing. On top of not being a great cook, I don't have a high success rate with baking either. I've decided that recipes are pretty useless. Or maybe it's just me. I don't know.

Roger is weak. He's thin, and his skin is gray. His eyes seem to have sunk deeper into his face. He smiles, though, and I can respect that.

Ellie looks tired. Maybe even broken. I don't want to know what it feels like to know that your husband will soon be gone. I know that I walked out on J.R., but at least I knew his heart was still beating.

As we eat, we laugh; we tell stories of old; and we even talk about the farm. It feels strange to me, all of us around the table as though life has always been this way. I think back to March of last year, and I realize that I haven't been back with J.R. for a full year yet. Knox hasn't known him long either, and up until a few months ago, J.R. hadn't spoken to his family in fifteen years. So strange to be here like this now, like a family that always has been.

J.R. leans into me, and he whispers in my ear, "Are you okay?"

He's noticed that I've gone quiet, but I'm just lost in thought. "I'm fine. I'll go get the cake."

"Let me help you." J.R. stands, and he helps me stand, too. He follows me into the kitchen, and we gather the cake and dessert plates.

"You're quiet," J.R. says to me. He's glancing at me out of the corner of his eye as he balances the cake in his hands.

"Just thinking is all," I tell him.

"Care to share?"

"It's just strange. All of us here, like one big, happy family."

"Well, we are, aren't we?" He looks a little concerned.

I smile at him. "We are. One big, happy, *new* family."

“None of this is really new,” he says. “They’re my parents, and we’re us.”

“It’s all new, J.R.” I move closer to him. “It’s not a bad thing.”

J.R. leans in and kisses me. “I’m happy we’re all here together.”

I look up into his eyes, still smiling. “Me, too.”

We join the table again. J.R. sets the cake in front of Knox, and I pass out the plates. Ellie, Roger, and Knox are all unaware of why we wanted to have a big dinner, and I’m pleased that J.R. and I were able to pass this off so effortlessly. Now, they look at us with confusion on their faces as my masterpiece of a cake sits before Knox.

“We wanted everyone here tonight because we have a surprise,” I explain.

“You’re having twins!” Ellie exclaims.

J.R. laughs. “No, Mom. Rachel is not having twins.”

Knox is looking up at me with her big, blue eyes, still confused, and I wonder if she’s hoping that we’re not about to announce another major change in life that she’ll have to adjust to.

“At the doctor today, we found out the baby’s gender,” I tell them.

“I thought you were going to wait,” Roger says, puzzled.

“We were, but then we decided we couldn’t,” J.R. says.

“So, I baked a cake today,” I continue. “And as Knox cuts the first slice, the middle of the cake will reveal if we’re bringing home a baby girl or a baby boy. The answer is in the color of the cake itself.”

“I get to cut the cake?” Knox asks excitedly.

“Yep,” J.R. answers her. “So, what are you waiting for?”

Knox smiles wide, and she takes the knife in her hand. “Ready?”

“Go ahead, Rosie,” I encourage.

Ellie and Roger lean into the table. J.R. and I watch Knox. She glides the knife through the blue and pink icing, cutting a perfect square. I’m nervous, and I’m not sure why. I know what the cake will reveal.

Knox lifts the slice away from the cake, and her eyes grow wide. Roger and Ellie’s eyes are wide, too; and as their cheers erupt around me, I feel like crying with happiness.

The pink cake seems to glow as it sits on its plate like some type of trophy. A girl. Another girl. Poor J.R. Outnumbered by three females. He isn’t disappointed, though. He loves his girls. All three of us.

J.R. lifts Knox into his arms. “A baby sister. Does that make you happy?” he asks her.

“It makes me very happy,” Knox says, and then she looks at me. “What will you name her?”

I shrug. “We haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Well, that’s disappointing.” Roger’s voice comes loud from the midst of everyone’s smiles and laughter. It’s deep, and it catches our attention, bringing us all to silence. He looks different than he did just a few moments ago. He sounds different. I can’t be certain, but I think that I see anger behind his fading blue eyes.

We’re all looking at him now; the room is quiet. Maybe we’re waiting for the punchline.

“Can’t leave the farm to a girl,” Roger says. He folds his arms across his chest like a child, and it’s now obvious that he is upset. He wanted a boy—a boy to inherit the farm.

“You don’t mean that, Roger,” Ellie says gently.

I think I’m beginning to understand why she looks so exhausted. I wonder how often his mood changes. I wonder how nasty he’s been to her recently. It’s the tumor, I’m sure,

but still, it doesn't lessen the blow. Even I can't fight feeling upset and disappointed by his reaction.

"What's going to happen to the farm, Ellie?" Roger asks, and his voice is raised. He speaks to her like she's a child.

I look at J.R., and I can see a rage starting to build behind his blue eyes. The air in the room is suddenly thick, and I'm not exactly sure what to do. J.R. puts Knox down, and I take her hand.

"Knox, get your cake. We'll go outside," I say to her softly. I'm not sure what is about to go down, but I know that I don't want Knox to be present for it.

"You don't have to go. I'll go." Roger stands up, and then he storms out of the barn, not giving anyone a chance to say anything more to him.

Ellie looks at us with sad and apologetic blue eyes. "It's the tumor, J.R." I see tears in her eyes. "It's not him. Okay?"

"It is him, Mom," J.R. says. "He just doesn't have a sensor on his damn mouth anymore. Not that he did before, but he definitely doesn't now." J.R. is shouting now.

"J.R., don't," I urge. "You'll make it worse getting angry. It's okay." I look at Ellie. "It's okay." Knox stands quietly beside me.

Ellie nods at me, and then she smiles. "I'm really happy for you. For all of you."

J.R. thrusts his hand through his hair, and then he storms upstairs. Ellie wipes a tear from her cheek, and then she leaves the barn, too. Suddenly, it's just Knox and me. Alone. Not unusual, I guess. This is how we have spent most of her life. Still, we stand quietly, just staring at the cake on the table. I'm not sure either of us knows what to do or say, so I do the only thing I can think to do.

"Sit down," I tell Knox as I sit down at the table, too. I hand her a fork, and then I take one for myself. I stick my fork

right into the middle of the cake, and I shovel a big piece from the center, cramming it into my mouth.

“Mom, get a plate.” Knox looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“I’ve got one.” I point to the sheet that the cake is on and smile. Knox’s concerned frown slowly turns into a smile, and then she laughs at me. “Get a fork, Rosie!” I urge her.

Knox picks her fork up and then, hesitant at first, digs into the cake, too. She shoves the pink cake and cream cheese icing into her mouth, smiling at me as the icing smears across her face. I laugh at her, thinking about her first birthday and how she smashed her cupcake into her mouth with her chubby hands.

She looks so grown up now with her long, dark hair; big, blue eyes; and perfect complexion. She’s beautiful. My girl. I wish I could protect her from everything that is wrong in this world, but I know that I can’t.

We sit silently for a few minutes, shoving cake into our mouths as though our lives depend on it. Then, Knox looks up at me. “Mom, is Grandpa going to be okay?”

I swallow my cake, take a sip of water, and then put my fork down. I lean back in my chair a little, and I look at her gently. “You know he’s sick, Knox.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t normally say mean things like that.”

“No, but the sickness he has—sometimes, it makes him say things that he doesn’t mean.”

“Why can’t a girl run a farm?” she asks me thoughtfully. It’s funny to me that of all the things Roger said, this is the one thing that stood out to her.

“Well, I don’t know,” I say. “I think a girl could run a farm just fine.”

“Me, too,” Knox agrees. She’s quiet for another few seconds before asking, “Is Daddy okay?”

“He’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine. Okay?”

She nods. "Okay."

After I get Knox to bed, I find J.R. in our room, packing his clothes as though he is going somewhere. He's angry. I can tell by the way he's slinging his clothes across the room and into his suitcase. I stand in the doorway of the bedroom, leaning against the frame, my arms folded across my chest.

"What are you doing?"

"We're going home," he says. "I'm not staying any longer for him."

"J.R." I sigh. "We can't leave. Not over this. It wasn't him saying those things."

"It was, Rach. That look. The sound of his voice. I've seen that before. I've heard it before, and that's why I left this place back then!" J.R. shouts, and I'm not sure I've ever seen him this angry. Not even when I showed back up unannounced last year.

I push myself out of the doorway and move closer to him. I catch his arms in my hands, and I force his eyes to mine. "I love you," I say, mainly because I'm not sure what else to say.

He looks down at me. His blue eyes are full of rage, but I watch them calm the longer he gazes into my eyes. Finally, he sighs, and his shoulders drop. He presses his forehead against mine.

"I don't know what to do," he says softly.

"We stay," I tell him, my hand moving through his hair. "He won't even remember this in the morning."

"I'll remember it, though."

"He loves you, J.R."

"He only came back because he's dying. Not because he changed his mind, Rach."

I know it doesn't matter what I say; I can't change his way of thinking. I sigh, and I drop my forehead to his chest.

“Okay, fine. Well, I’m going to bed. Knox and I ate half of the cake, and now I’m crashing.”

“You ate half the cake?” He lifts my face to his and smirks.

“I baked a cake, dammit. Someone had to eat it.” I smile back at him.

J.R. smiles at me for a moment and then asks, “Is Knox okay?”

“I just put her to bed, but it wouldn’t hurt to check on her. She was worried about you.”

He nods. “I’ll go.” And he starts down the hall.

“J.R.?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re a good man.”

J.R. gives me a nod and then disappears into Knox’s room.

I’m in bed, almost asleep when I feel J.R. crawl into bed next to me. He rolls over toward me and drapes his arm over my waist. There’s a faint smell of sugar and icing on him, and I realize that he’s been downstairs eating cake.

“You smell like cake,” I whisper to him.

“It was a good cake.” I hear him chuckle.

“Did you eat the rest of it?”

“Every last bite.”

I giggle.

J.R. kisses my cheek. “I’m sorry for getting so angry.”

“It’s okay. You’re allowed to be angry every now and then.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I would face you, but it literally took me thirty minutes to find a comfortable position in this bed with my big belly and all.”



J.R. chuckles softly and kisses my cheek again. “My girls.”

“I love you.”

“Mom? What’s wrong? Slow down.” J.R. is alarmed, the phone against his ear, and he’s forgotten about the water he has running in the kitchen sink.

I turn off the water for him and stand at a distance as I watch his face go white. My heart is pounding; and I know that whatever is wrong, it has to do with Roger.

“Okay, call the ambulance,” he instructs. “I’m coming up right now.” J.R. hangs up the phone and turns to me. “It’s Dad. It’s not...”

“Go, J.R.” I don’t need details. I can see them in his eyes. It’s serious.

J.R. hesitates for just a second and then disappears from the kitchen through the door.

I ignore a pain deep in my stomach. Braxton Hicks contractions maybe. I’ve been having them for a couple of weeks now. The doctor said it was nothing to worry about. I wait a few seconds for the pain to subside, and then I wobble over to the couch. I think I’ll regret sitting down. It’s much harder to get up these days, but my legs ache. Everything aches, really.

Out of the corner of my eye, through the window, I see the reflection of ambulance lights swirling red in the foggy night sky. I feel a sense of dread wash over me, and I realize that this probably will not end well—not unexpected, of course, but somehow that doesn’t make death any more bearable.

“Is everything okay, Mama?” Knox is staring past me through the window at the red lights, too.

“I’m sure it will be,” I tell her. “Your daddy went to see.” What else should I tell her?

Knox sits next to me on the couch and looks at me. “Are you okay?”

I smile at her. “I’m fine.”

“You look tired.”

I touch her cheek with the palm of my hand and keep a comforting smile on my face. “I am, but I think God gives us mamas extra energy. Enough to get us by.”

“Grandpa is going to die,” she says softly, casting her eyes back out the window.

I look at her, her blue eyes big and sad. I move my hand over hers, and I give it a soft pat. “I’m sorry, Knox.” I reply gently. Somehow, I can’t bring myself to saying the words—“Roger is going to die”—out loud.

He’s been declining consistently over the last few weeks. There’s nothing more the doctors can do, but Ellie didn’t want to call in hospice, even though it was advised. She has been caring for him on her own—bathing him, feeding him, giving him his medication. I guess she wanted to see the job through. I admire her for not giving up on Roger, for caring for him when it would have been easier for someone else to do it.

Women are extraordinary creatures. We grow humans in our bodies and birth them out like it’s no big deal. We hold our families together emotionally and physically. We continue running at the end of the day on whatever fumes we have left. We love in a way that no one could ever understand. We’re strong. We’re independent. We neglect ourselves so that others are taken care of. It’s who we are. It’s what we do. It’s our job.

I wonder what will happen to Ellie when Roger dies. He’s been hers for the last fifty years. How do you continue to live? I lived without J.R. for just a few years, and it was the most miserable experience of my entire life. I don’t want to know what it would feel like to lose him forever.

Knox and I are quietly sitting together on the couch when J.R. returns. His blue eyes are sad, but he seems calm. That’s J.R., though. Calm and collected.

“Everything okay?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “We should all go. To the hospital. Go get your shoes, Knox.”

Knox slides off the couch without question, and she disappears up the stairs. J.R. takes my hands, and he pulls me up off the couch. I grimace only slightly, which prompts him to ask if I’m feeling okay.

I decide that I must look terrible. Both J.R. and Knox have asked me this question now. Maybe I look like death, too.

“I’m fine.” Although, if I’m being honest, which I’m not, these fake contractions are not letting up. In fact, they seem to be getting worse. I’m worried.

“Do you need help with your shoes?” J.R. asks me.

“Throw them on the floor. I can slide my feet in.” I refuse to let anyone put my shoes on for me. I’ve not lost all independence.

“Are you sure that you’re okay, Rach? You really don’t look well.”

“J.R., your dad was just rushed to the hospital. Let’s not worry about me, okay?” I slide my feet into my flip-flops, and I force a smile on my face.

J.R. decides he won’t ask about me anymore, and within a few minutes, we’re out the door on the way to the hospital.

I hate the way hospitals smell. They’re always so bright and clean, but somehow, they still smell like bodies. Living bodies. Dead bodies. Sick bodies. It makes me nauseated.

We find the elevator to the emergency room and take it without a word passing between us. I’m holding Knox’s hand, while J.R. has mine. I can’t stop thinking about how I need to find some place to sit down. Soon. I’m secretly counting the minutes between my fake contractions, and I am beginning to think that these are not Braxton Hicks contractions at all. I’m not due to have our baby girl for another three weeks, and today would not be the day to go into labor. I’m wondering if I can coerce her into staying in there a while longer. Is there

some sort of secret signal I can transmit through the umbilical cord? Maybe if I just ignore the pains, they'll stop. That's how it works, isn't it?

Arriving on the emergency room floor, I find a couple of chairs for Knox and me, while J.R. disappears down a hall to find his parents. I squirm in the chair, moving myself from left to right to left again. I'm exhaling deeply by reflex, and I'm now counting less than one minute between each contraction.

"Mama, are you sure you're okay?" Knox looks at me with her big, worried, blue eyes.

I grimace. "I have to be okay, don't I?" I feel like crying. I want to cry.

"Maybe you should see a doctor, too," she says, and I think she's right. Actually, I know she's right. I'm in labor.

I don't want to send J.R. a text message to ask him to come back. I know he needs to be with Roger, but I also don't think this is one of those things I can ignore any longer. I'm overwhelmed with the lack of options, and it adds to my desire to cry even more.

Before I have to decide on what to do, I spot J.R. coming back toward us from the hall. I don't have to say anything. J.R. notices immediately that I am definitely not okay, and he moves from a casual walk down the hall to a full sprint.

"Remember when you kept asking if I was okay?" I ask, looking up at him from my chair with a grimace on my face. "I'm not fine. I lied. I think I've gone into labor."

J.R.'s blue eyes widen. "Like, right now?"

I nod. "Pretty sure." I'm fighting the urge to cry out, but the pain is worse with every passing second.

J.R. practically tackles an innocent nurse making her rounds, and within sixty seconds, I'm being pushed to a room in a wheelchair.

“I’m going to take Knox to Mom,” J.R. tells me as a nurse gets me settled in a hospital bed. Although I’m about to push a human out of my body, I know enough to argue. I know that Roger isn’t going to make it out of this hospital alive, and I know that I want Knox to see life, not death.

I take his hand. “Stay,” I say, and I feel a tear run down my cheek. “I know this isn’t ideal. It wasn’t expected. I’m sorry.”

J.R. looks back at me calmly. “We’re about to have a baby.”

“What about your dad?” I whisper.

“I’m going to be here. Right here,” he says to me, and then he kisses my forehead. “I’m here.”

I hold onto his wrists, and I nod my head against his lips. “Don’t let Knox see anything. She’ll never be the same again.”

J.R. laughs at me. “I’ll keep her away from the action.”

Nurses scramble around me, hooking me up to a machine that measures contractions. Once again, things progressed too quickly to administer an epidural, so, like I had to do with Knox, I’m going to give birth the natural way. Only, this time I’ll have an audience. J.R. and Knox.

The doctor comes into the room. He’s calm, sliding his rubber gloves on. I’m squirming and resisting the urge to cry.

“How are you doing, Rachel?” the doctor asks me as he begins to check me.

“Been better,” I manage to say.

“When did you notice contractions?”

“Earlier. Maybe two or three hours ago. I thought they were Braxton Hicks. It’s early, and you told me that there was nothing to worry about.”

The doctor pushes his stool back, slides his gloves off, and looks at me. “Well, you’re at seven centimeters. The baby is coming tonight. Everything looks okay, so I expect the baby

will be okay, too. We'll give it a little longer before we start pushing."

I like how he says "we" like it's a joint effort. It will literally just be me. He's just there to catch her when she comes out.

"How much longer?" J.R. asks the doctor.

"Probably another thirty minutes."

I could puke. I've got to feel this pain for another thirty minutes? Every contraction is worse than the last, and I swear this it for me. No more babies. I'm done.

"Rach, I'm going to let Mom know what's going on. I'll be right back, okay?" He kisses me. "Promise."

"Between the two of us, I'm the one with a history of leaving and not returning. I believe you." I force a smile on my face.

"I love you."

"I know."

"Come with me, Knox. Give your mom some time to be in pain alone." J.R. says, and then the two of them leave the room.

I ask the nurse to hand me my phone from my bag, and when she does, I dial Kelley. She would kill me if I called her after birth. The fact that it was sudden wouldn't matter much to her.

"I was beginning to think you had forgotten me," Kelley answers.

"It's only been three days since we've talked," I reply defensively.

"Long enough. What are you doing?"

"Having a baby," I say nonchalantly.

"Seriously," she replies, not amused by what she assumes is a joke.

“I’m being serious.” I manage a chuckle, but even as I do, I feel another contraction begin to build. My free hand clutches the side of the hospital bed, and I let a heavy breath slide from my mouth.

“Oh no, you’re serious,” she says. “When?”

“Doc says I’ve got about thirty minutes. We were already here at the hospital. J.R.’s dad—he’s not...it’s not good,” I explain. “I just thought they were Braxton Hicks or something.”

“I’m packing our stuff right now, and we’re coming. Adam and I are on our way.”

Another contraction comes and goes. I don’t think I’ll make it another half hour, but then again, I’m not a doctor. What do I know?

“Drive safely. Don’t drive the way you did the night Knox was born.”

“I got you to the hospital in one piece,” she says.

I laugh through tears as they stream down my face. “Be safe, okay?”

“Fine. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Kelley, it takes at least three to get here,” I point out.

“Like I said, I’ll see you in two hours,” Kelley quips, and then she hangs up the phone.

The doctor comes in again, checking my progress. “She is moving quickly. Where did your family go?”

I explain the situation between contractions, and I really wish J.R. was back. I have the overwhelming desire to push. The doctor appears to be a little anxious for their arrival, too.

Finally, J.R. and Knox return, and it’s right in the nick of time. Any longer, and I think he may have missed his daughter’s birth. Again.

J.R. instructs Knox to make herself comfortable in the chair next to the window in the room, and I happen to glance



at her as she settles in. Her eyes are big and attentive, and I think she's both excited and terrified. I am, too.

"All right, Rachel," the doctor says as he takes his position in front of me. "You ready?"

I look up at J.R., and he's looking down at me. I notice a look in his blue eyes that I can't interpret, but he smiles at me. "Ready?"

I nod, and he takes my hand. I breathe, feeling the next contraction build. The doctor tells me when to push, but this isn't my first rodeo. I know what to do.

I push. Hard. With everything I have. My back aches, and I cry out. I feel sweat and tears trickle down my face. J.R. says something to me, but I'm not sure what he says. I just feel him holding my hand, and I'm thankful to have him here this time, even if I do want to kill him a little in this moment.

I push again and again. The pain is so intense that I'm mostly numb, but finally, I hear the doctor say, "One more and she's here."

"I need a break. Just for a second," I whisper. My hair clings to my face, and I'm not sure I have the energy to push again. Not yet. With Knox, it was two pushes, and then I was done. Now, I don't think I have it in me to push anymore.

"You can take a break later, Rachel. Right now, you've got to push," the doctor says loudly.

I cry, and I shake my head. I just want to wait a minute. A couple of minutes. I just need a minute. That's all.

"Come on, Rach," J.R. coaches me. His voice is calm and gentle. "Just one more. I know you can do this."

I know they're right. Both of them. I can't just not push. It doesn't work that way. So, as the next contraction builds, I force myself into the back of the hospital bed, still holding J.R.'s hand tightly, and I give it one more push. It's the hardest one of them all. I squeeze my eyes so tight, the blackness behind my eyelids seem to twinkle, and I hear a loud cry escape from my mouth. I grip J.R.'s hand so tightly, I

can feel his pulse; and sweat like I've never felt before trickles down my chest and back.

Finally, I hear her. My baby. The cackling cry of a newborn. I sigh with relief, and I collapse into the sheets. J.R. keeps my hand, but he's looking at our girl as her cord is cut and she is moved from the arms of the doctor to the nurse. I watch her, too.

J.R. touches my cheek, and I look up to find his blue eyes looking at me. They're wet, and he smiles at me. "You are amazing."

I smile at him weakly, and then I turn my head back to the baby's cry. The nurse places her on a scale, and I notice the baby's tiny arms stretched upward as her fingers curl with each angry cry. She's screaming so loudly, I can't help but laugh.

J.R. turns away from me and invites Knox to the bedside. Her little head appears over the railing of the bed, and her eyes are wide. I think she looks partially afraid, too. I smile to reassure her that I'm okay.

"What do you think of your baby sister?"

"She's loud," Knox says. Her face is sort of scrunched up the way a person does when they hear or smell something they don't like.

"Yeah, but she won't stay loud."

"Are you okay, Mama?"

"I'm okay."

The nurse cleans the baby, and then she wraps her in a blanket, sliding a tiny hat over her head of hair. The nurse looks up at us as we gawk at our newborn in her arms. "Do you want to hold her?"

I nod, and J.R. walks to the nurse, taking our baby. He holds her carefully, afraid he may break her. She looks so small in his arms, but I know I've waited my entire life to see the love of my life holding our tiny baby in his arms. I feel my

heart swell, and I cry again—but this time out of nothing but pure joy.

J.R. never takes his eyes from his baby girl, even as he places her in my arms now. There's a tear on his cheek, and he wipes it away.

I take my baby, and just as I did with Knox, I pull the blanket away and gaze at her face. Her eyes are pinched closed, but she's stopped crying. I find her hand, and I brush my finger across her palm.

“Hey, pretty girl,” I whisper. Her eyes open, and immediately my eyes are full of tears. Her eyes are blue. Just like Knox and J.R. She even looks like J.R., and I laugh. “What luck.” I turn my eyes to Knox. “Can you see her?”

J.R. lifts Knox so that she can see her new sister better, and I smile as the two of them gaze at her. They both look to be in love. My heart is full.

“We haven't picked out a name yet,” Knox points out.

We haven't. We thought we still had time. We had narrowed it down to a few names, but we hadn't settled on anything.

“We'll keep thinking about it. Now that she's here, maybe we'll be inspired.”

Knox reaches over and lightly touches the blanket. “Her face is wrinkly.”

J.R. laughs. “It'll straighten out.”

A nurse walks up to the bed. “Okay, Rachel, we have to take her and get her checked out. Make sure she's healthy, which I'm sure she is. You should rest. That wasn't easy.”

J.R. looks worried. “Take her away?”

“Don't worry. I'll bring her back,” the nurse says with a smile.

J.R. watches the nurse take our baby from my arms, lay her in the baby bed, and then wheel her out of the room. After

the doctor gives me a quick inspection, we're finally left alone.

Knox has resorted herself to a chair, flipping through the channels on the television. J.R. is still next to me, but he sits in a chair, too. His hand is on mine, and he's looking at me in a way he's never looked at me before.

I smile at him gently. "You should go see your dad," I tell him. "Go check on him."

J.R.'s eyes change, and his expression falls flat. I can't decide if he's forgotten about his dad or if there's something he hasn't told me.

"What is it?" I ask him when he doesn't say anything.

J.R. drops his head for a moment, but then he looks up at me again. "He died."

I feel my heart stop, and I can't even understand why he hadn't told me this before. "What? When?"

"Before. When Knox and I went to tell Mom about everything."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"You were five minutes from pushing a human out of your body. It didn't really feel like a good time."

I pull him into me, holding his face in my hands. I feel tears surface in my eyes again, and I whisper, "I'm so sorry."

J.R. smiles at me. "Death for life."

"It's your dad."

J.R. looks sad again. "My dad died a long time ago, Rach."

Roger hadn't been himself in weeks. Maybe even months. He existed, but he wasn't sure who any of us were anymore. J.R. had been running himself ragged between our homes, and I think there's a piece of him that is relieved. Roger's last days were no way to live. I hope I never again have to see someone die like Roger did.

“Where’s your mom?” I ask him.

J.R. shakes his head. “I’m here with you. I’m not worried about her.” He strokes my cheek with his finger.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Go. Be with your mom. Make sure she’s holding up.”

J.R. looks hesitant to leave me but then also anxious to check on her. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I’m just going to rest, and Kelley and Adam will be here soon. They can watch after Knox.”

J.R. leans in and kisses me. “I won’t be gone long.”

“Take your time.”

I write the name over and over again across my napkin. Our baby girl is two days old, and we’ve yet to pick out a name. I didn’t put this much thought into Knox’s name. It just came to me. It’s not working out that way now, but I think it’s because our daughter’s birth has been shrouded with death. We’ll go home tomorrow and attend Roger’s funeral the day after that. J.R. is a mix of emotion, and I’m not sure he knows which way to feel. On one hand, he’s over the moon with the excitement of the birth of our baby. On the other hand, his dad is dead. Both events happened at the same time. How is one supposed to feel? Still, he holds our girl every chance he gets, and I have to remind him to share her with Knox.

“Amia Liv,” I say out loud, repeating the name I’ve written on the napkin more than fifty times. I look up at J.R. and Knox, both of them sitting by the window gazing at our baby as though they’ve never seen a tiny human like this before. I wait for a reaction from both of them.

J.R. looks up at me. “Amia Liv?”

“It means beloved life,” I say, and I stare back down at the napkin. “Amia.” The name rolls off my tongue so gently. So pleasantly. It’s lovely. Absolutely lovely.

“I like it,” Knox says, but I think she sounds unsure.

I’m unsure, too. I love Amia, but the Liv part is throwing me for a loop. “What about Amia Dawn?” I look up

at them again. Their blue eyes seem to lighten at the new suggestion, and I think maybe we've finally landed on a name.

"Amia Dawn," J.R. says, looking down into our daughter's face. He looks back up at me and smiles. "Amia Dawn."

I smile, satisfied. "Amia means love. Dawn is for second chances." Isn't that what this new baby represents? A second chance?

Knox squeezes in next to J.R., and she looks down at her sister. "Hi, Amia."

"She looks like an Amia," J.R. says, and then he wraps his free arm around Knox. "Amia and Knox."

Knox smiles as J.R. kisses her cheek, and then she flashes her blue eyes at me. I smile at her, and I think that we will never be more content than we are right here in this moment. The four of us. A family complete.

Kelley makes sure that all our things are packed before we leave the hospital. I even catch her snatching a few of the hospital baby blankets, and I cut my eyes at her as she does.

"They want us to take them," she snaps at me, and I'm pretty sure we went through this when Knox was born, too. Adam laughs at us as he packs the cart with all of the items we need to carry home. It's funny—I came to the hospital with nothing but the clothes on my back, and we're leaving with so much more.

"All right, the truck is at the front door, ready to take us home. Are we ready?" J.R. asks.

"Ready," I say.

"Ready," Knox adds.

"Let's go." J.R. slides the handle of the car seat where Amia is sleeping peacefully over his arm. Knox takes J.R.'s free hand, and Kelley throws a couple of bags in my lap so that she can push the wheelchair that J.R. insisted I ride in on our journey to the truck. It wasn't just his insistence. It's actually hospital policy, but are they going tackle a new mom

on her way out of the hospital because she's not in a wheelchair? I doubt it.

I'm sad leaving the hospital, mainly because I wish we were going home to the island. I wish we were taking our Amia Dawn to our home, but the barn will have to do for now. I wonder if we'll get to go home. It's too soon to ask J.R. We haven't even buried Roger yet. We aren't even sure what Ellie will do. I'm ready, though, to go home and resume life as it was.

"I think you should rest," Kelley says plopping down on the couch next to me. "Amia is sleeping. It's been a long day, and we have a funeral tomorrow."

"Yeah." I roll my head to look at her. "I'm not tired, though."

"At least lie down," she says. "Let me help you up the stairs."

"I'm not crippled." I laugh at her. "I'm fine here."

Kelley gives up, and she settles in next to me. "You're ready to go home, aren't you?"

She has always had the inept ability to read my mind. Sometimes, it freaks me out.

"I mean, this place is beautiful, but I'm ready to go home."

"How does J.R. feel?"

I shrug. "We haven't talked about it. Amia came before she was supposed to, and Roger died before he was supposed to. It's all very overwhelming. I can't ask him. Not right now."

We sit there together like old times, communicating in silence. My head is resting on the back of the couch, and I feel my eyelids grow heavy. Maybe I am tired. Maybe I should sleep while Amia is sleeping.

May 2002

“What if we buy a house together?” J.R. took a big bite of pizza and then looked at me with anticipation from across the table.

I was sipping my Pepsi, and I almost choked on its fizz. I didn’t, though. I forced the liquid down my throat, and I tried not to look shocked at his proposition. “What?”

J.R. chuckled. “I want us to buy a house. I don’t really have a place to call home, and your apartment is, well, small.”

The jukebox in the restaurant began playing some really terrible ‘80s music, and I lost my train of thought for a second. I suddenly burst into a fit of laughter, and I wasn’t sure if I was laughing at the sudden intrusion of music or the thought of J.R. and me buying a house together.

“Why on earth would we buy a house? You’re gone all the time. It would be just me living in it,” I said after I had regained my composure.

J.R. stared back at me, his blue eyes clearly hurt by my reaction. I realized this reaction was not what he had been hoping for when he asked the question.

I place my hand on my forehead. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to... You just...you caught me off guard.” If I was being honest though, I had expected a marriage proposal before a house proposal.

I nervously fidgeted with my pizza, trying to decide how I felt. We had been living like this for a year. When J.R. was in town or close by, he came to see me. Sometimes, we would get hours together; other times, we would get weeks together. I had only just graduated from the university, and I hadn’t started planning my life yet. I still aspired to be a



writer, but I had a pretty good job that paid the bills and allowed me to write. Besides, for once in my life, I was not tied down to a school assignment. Maybe I thought I was on vacation. Maybe I enjoyed not doing adult things at that time. Buying a house with the man I loved—that was an adult thing.

“It was just an idea,” J.R. said, offended. “If it’s not something you’re interested in, don’t worry about it.” He slumped back in his seat, and he shifted his blue eyes away from me.

“J.R., don’t be pouty. It’s a good idea. I just haven’t thought about it,” I told him. When he doesn’t say anything, I added, “Where? Where would we buy a house?”

“Wherever you want to go,” he replied, sitting up a little straighter again. “We can go anywhere.” J.R. was smiling again, and he looked so full of life. I couldn’t resist him. I couldn’t argue with him. I knew that I would go anywhere he went. I would do anything he wanted to do. I knew this for certain.

I didn’t take long to think about where I wanted to go. I wanted to go home. My mother was there, I know, but it was home. It was the island, the coast, the salty air that gave me life. “What about Tybee?”

He looked at me, surprised. “You want to go home?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Do you want to go back to Tennessee?”

“Hell, no,” he said rather quickly. “No. I’m not...I never want to go home.”

“You don’t miss it? Not even a little?” I missed my home every day. As bad as my childhood was, the island wasn’t shrouded in so many bad memories that I never wanted to see it again—the water, the air.

J.R. shook his head. “No, I don’t. There’s nothing there for me. No one is there for me.” He reached across the table and took my hand. “We’ll go to the island. We’ll make a home there.”

I smiled at him softly. “Home.”

“Let’s go. Tomorrow. We’ll go house hunting.”

“Tomorrow?” Sometimes, J.R. moved too quickly for me. I needed time to plan for things. I was not a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants type of person.

“Why not?”

“I have a job.”

“It’s remote. We’re moving. Your job goes with you. Besides, I make enough money for the two of us. I want you to write what you want to write. That’s what you really want to do.”

“J.R., where is all this coming from?” I asked him. It’s obvious that he had already thought about this in great detail. Right down to my job. I felt like this came out of the blue, and maybe I was even a little suspicious. We had never even talked about these things. We had never even really talked about our future.

J.R. pulled his hand from mine, sinking back into the booth. “I don’t know, Rach. It’s just what I want. For you. For us.”

I wanted to ask him if we’d ever get married, but maybe that’s what would come next. Maybe we’d just do things a little backwards.

“Okay. Let’s go. Back home. Tomorrow.”

“Mean it?”

“Mean it.”

## Present

Amia is crying. She hasn't stopped crying, and I'm alone. J.R. is with his mother, and Kelley and Adam took Knox for ice cream. I am exhausted, and I hope J.R. comes back soon. He's helping Ellie with the last-minute funeral arrangements for Roger. I'm ashamed to admit that I'll be happy when all of this is over and things return to normal. Maybe we'll go home soon, too. Maybe I'm being too hopeful, and maybe I'm being heartless, too. I'm not heartless. I'm sad. I'm overwhelmed. I'm really homesick.

I cradle Amia. I try to feed her. I sing to her, and I try to rock her. Still, she cries, and I'm beginning to think something is wrong. I remember that Knox didn't like me much when she was a newborn either. Kelley was the only one with the capability to stop her crying. What is wrong with me? Why do I birth babies who hate me?

J.R. comes through the front, and I meet him with Amia in tow. She's screaming, her hands balled into a fist. I'm sure I look like I'm about to lose my mind, and a part of me feels like I already have. Aren't newborns supposed to sleep a lot? She's a few days old now, and sleeping is not her favorite pastime.

"What's wrong?" J.R. asks me over her screams.

"Babies hate me." I sigh. "I've tried everything. I think something is wrong."

J.R. takes Amia from me, and he cradles her in his arms. He holds her close to him, and then he looks down into her soft, blue eyes. He speaks softly to her, and like magic, she stops crying. The barn is so quiet now, it's almost deafening.

"I don't get it." I push my hand through my hair.

J.R. looks at me, and I think he's pitying me. I wish he wouldn't look at me like that. I don't want pity.

"Go take a shower, Rach. I've got this."

"What if she starts crying again?"

"I can handle it," J.R. assures me. "You need to go shower and then take a nap."

"You look tired, too, J.R. I can't go to sleep knowing you're exhausted, too."

"Go, Rach. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." J.R.'s eyes move back to Amia. I peek at her face, too, and I watch as her eyes grow heavy.

J.R. is a magician. There's no other explanation.

The hot water feels like heaven as it rolls down my back. I've always believed that a hot shower can cure anything, and at this moment, I stand firm in that belief. My body still hurts from birth, and my stomach is still swollen. Even with Amia on the outside of my body now, my body still looks pregnant. I stand beneath the water, close my eyes, and breathe. I allow myself to relax, even if only for a few moments.

When I've run all of the hot water out, I dry off and drag myself into the bedroom. J.R. is there, and Amia, too. He's sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard, and he holds Amia against his chest. She's asleep. He's not. He's watching me as I cross the room to dress.

I throw a big t-shirt on, and then I crawl into bed next to them. I won't risk speaking. I won't risk waking Amia up. I lie there, instead, looking up at J.R. He looks down at me, and I see the hint of a smile on his face. I miss touching his face, running my fingers through his hair, feeling him next to me. Pregnancy quite literally puts a wedge between things, and I think I'm looking forward to my body bouncing back to its usual self and being close to him again.

J.R. slides off the bed quietly, placing Amia in her crib next to our bed, and then moving back into the bed with me. He pulls the covers over us; I roll onto my side to face him,

and then he drops his arms over my hips. His lips move against mine, and he whispers, “I love you.”

“I love you,” I whisper in return, and I put my fingers through his hair.

“Go to sleep.” He smiles at me.

I close my eyes, and then I think I’m asleep.

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The house is solemn this morning. We’ll bury Roger today, and I’m not sure how J.R. is feeling. I can’t imagine that he’s feeling great, but he does hide it well. Regardless of the turn their relationship took, Roger was still J.R.’s father.

Knox is dressed—Amia, too—but J.R. is missing. He wasn’t in the bed when I woke up this morning, and he hasn’t made it to breakfast yet. I am beginning to get worried. Farm duties would have to wait today.

“Kelley, I’ve got to go find J.R.,” I say, passing Amia to her. I’m more than grateful to still have Kelley—and even Adam—here with us. I don’t suppose any of us would have gotten by the last few days without them.

“I’ve got this. Go find him,” she says, giving Amia’s tiny cheek a kiss.

I head outside, the sticky morning air clinging to my skin. I long for a breeze, but those are few and far between here. There is dew in the grass and a smell that has become familiar to me since we’ve been here but still unidentifiable. It’s quiet. Almost too quiet. On a normal morning, the chickens would be out of their coops making the enormously loud and almost irritating clucking sounds that they make. Today, though, it’s as if even the chickens are in mourning.

I take the trail around the barn toward the pond. I’m not sure why I go in that direction; but it feels right, so I follow it. The trail spirals down a hill and then back up another. As I crest the top, I spot J.R. He’s there on the rugged dock, his back to me, staring out across the murky water. He leans into the railing, his chin in his palm. J.R. is dressed for the funeral. He’s wearing straight, black pants and a black,

button-up shirt. His hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. He takes my breath away, even in moments like these.

I quietly walk up to him, a part of me thinking I should turn around and go back to the barn. The other part of me knows that he needs me. Even if I'm not that great at offering compassion, sometimes a person's presence is all that's needed.

J.R. hears me as I step up onto the dock, and he turns to face me. "Rach, what are you doing out here? You should be careful walking down here." His blue eyes are sad and wet, but he looks at me with a tenderness that I can't explain.

I smile at him. "I'm fine. I came to check on you." We both turn toward the water, and I'm next to him, gently touching his arm. "What are you doing out here?"

He doesn't answer me immediately. I watch him as he closes his eyes, trying to fight back his tears, so I move my arm around him and pull him into me. J.R. turns to me, and though we've shared a lot of vulnerable moments, he's never completely collapsed into me the way he is now. His forehead hangs from my shoulder, and I hold onto him. His body is tense, and then he begins to cry.

I've never held J.R. as he cried. He's held me more times than I can count, but he's never let me hold him. I choke back my own tears as I feel my heart break in my chest. I don't offer any words because I don't have any. We stand together in a moment meant only to be shared by two people who love each other more than life itself.

J.R. lifts his head from my shoulder, and he looks at me, cupping my face in his hands. I put my palm against his cheek, and I clear away his tears.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm...I'm going to miss him. Even if he was an undeniable asshole."

I find myself giggling slightly. "He loved you, J.R. I know that."

J.R. pulls my lips to his, and he kisses me before he slides his arm around me again. "I don't know what my mom

is going to do. With the farm, I mean. She can't take care of it on her own."

I feel a pit in my stomach, and I hope he's not about to suggest that we stay here longer. I'm ready to go home, but what choice would I have? I'll stay here with J.R., just as I promised.

"We have to go home," he says. "I want to go home. I...I don't know what will happen to this place. As much as I hate it, it's where I was raised. My dad and I did so much here. I was miserable, but it was time. It was memories."

"J.R., whatever you decide, I'm here. Right here."

J.R.'s blue eyes gaze in mine. He doesn't say anything. His expression is straight, pained, confused. I wipe away a stray tear as it rolls down his cheek.

Finally, he says, "We're going to go home. It's where we belong. Where we're supposed to be."

"Okay," I say, feeling relieved.

J.R. looks away from me and back out across the pond. "We're burying my dad today."

"Yeah," I say softly.

He looks back at me. "It's such a strange thing—something that I've always known I'd have to do one day—but it still doesn't feel real."

"Death is something we were never expected to adjust to."

J.R. considers this, kisses the top of my head, and then, with his arm around my shoulders, says, "Let's go get our kids."

It's hot. My body hurts. I did just push a human from it a few days ago, which is why I'm not sure why Ellie insisted on a graveside service. I'm certain I've never been this hot a day in my life. I can't complain, though. I won't. Well, maybe to Kelley later, although she's doing a really great job at keeping Amia quiet during this service.

I'm not great at funerals. The last one I attended was my own father's. I was younger then, and I didn't fully understand everything that was happening. Sometimes, I do regret not giving my own mother a funeral of some fashion. I was older then and thought that no service was what she deserved. Today, I stand next to my husband, and I feel his pain. Only a few hours earlier, I was holding him while he grieved, and now he has his fingers locked in mine as he holds himself together. Ellie stands on his other side, crying silently as the priest says only good things about Roger. The priest talks about Roger's life, his dedication to his family, and the way he loved Ellie and J.R. Maybe those things are true, but Roger also allowed a legacy to derail his relationship with his son.

I wonder what J.R. is thinking now. Is he reflecting on good memories, or is he only remembering the bad? Is he thinking about the day he saw his father again for the first time in years, or is he thinking about the day his father told him that he would never amount to anything?

Maybe Roger was a good man, and I am thankful that I got to know him over the last few months. He did some things, though. He said some things—things that J.R. will never be able to erase from his memory—and I know this because my own mother scarred me with her words. Roger let J.R. walk away, and he spent fifteen years choosing not to pick up the phone to call his son.

I had left J.R., too. That thought doesn't make me feel any better. This man, holding my hand beside me now never deserved to be abandoned by any of us. He is the greatest man in the world, and I will spend the rest of my life making sure he knows that.

Knox and I are standing beneath the shade of a tree as we watch J.R. stand over his father's casket with Ellie next to him. He wraps an arm around his mother's shoulders, and then he lays his other hand against the top of the casket. His head is bowed, and they both stand there quietly for a few moments.

"Mom, what are they doing?" Knox whispers to me.



I look down at her, only to find her big, blue eyes looking back up at me. “They’re saying goodbye,” I say softly.

Knox nods, and then she looks back at her daddy.

I feel sweat rolling down my back, and I glance back at Kelley with Amia. They both sit in the air-conditioned car not far from us, and I can’t help but feel a little jealous. Adam is suffering in the heat with his expensive black suit on, sweating like I’ve never seen a man sweat before. I’m not sure if he’s torturing himself for me or if he just didn’t want to be in the car with a crying baby anymore.

Finally, J.R. joins Knox and me. Ellie is talking with a few of the other guests. He forces a smile at me, and then he places his hand on Knox’s back.

“Are you two okay?” he asks.

“We’re fine,” I say with a forced smile back. Never mind the fact that it is five degrees shy of Satan’s kitchen right now; there’s sweat rolling between my boobs; and I am really craving an ocean breeze.

“Who is Grandma talking to?” Knox asks.

“Just some people from my past,” J.R. says. “Old friends of Grandpa’s.”

Soon, it’s time for the casket to be lowered into the ground. I never understood why families want to stay around for this event. I’ve only thought about my own body being lowered into the ground once, and it was enough for me to decide that I’d rather be cremated.

I look down at Knox, sensing that she’s not quite understanding everything that is happening, so I tell J.R. that we’re going to get in the air-conditioned vehicle with Kelley.

“Go. We’ll be right there.” J.R. is sweating, too, his black shirt nearly soaked through. I’m pretty sure it’s the hottest June day I’ve ever witnessed. I really want to rip my clothes off and lie spread eagle on a bed under a fan. However, that’s only acceptable in a world where I live with no one else, and so I choose to dream about it instead.

Once in the car, I pull my thick hair up into a ponytail and then glance over at Amia. “How is she?”

“Hot,” Kelley says flatly.

“Not you, the baby.”

“She’s fine,” Kelley says. “You are sweaty. How are you?” Kelley asks me.

“I’m okay,” I say. “Just ready for a nap. Or some water.” Either one will do.

Adam steps into the car, shedding his jacket before he does. Kelley remarks about how sweaty he is, too.

J.R. and Ellie soon join us, and we head back to the farm in silence. It’s so quiet that I think Knox may even nap. The only noises to be heard are the tires on the road, Ellie sniffing from the front seat, and Amia snoozing. I sigh. Though a sad day, I am glad to have it behind us now. Still, one question remains—what will happen to Ellie now that Roger is gone?

We’re not back at the barn long before it’s time for Kelley and Adam to head back home. I knew this moment was coming, but I am still not ready for it. I wonder if I could hire her to live with us so that she can be my full-time baby whisperer. Probably not, but it might be worth asking her about.

I hold Amia in my arms while J.R. helps Kelley and Adam out to their car with their luggage. I laugh quietly to myself, thinking about the day Kelley helped Knox and me move in with J.R. He was so angry with her then, it was all he could do to help her with her luggage. Now, he does it with gratitude. He’s not a fan of Adam yet, but I think he’ll warm up to him eventually.

Knox clings to Kelley’s leg begging her to stay, but Kelley, laughing, wraps her arms around her and kisses her cheek. “I’ll come back for a visit soon. I promise.”

“It’s not fair,” Knox says, pouting with her arms folded across her chest.

Kelley rolls her eyes at her. “Be good, Knox.” Then Kelley comes to me. “You’ll be okay?”

I smile at her. “I’ll be fine. Thank you for everything. I couldn’t—we couldn’t—have survived these last few days without you.”

“I love you.” Kelley looks down at Amia sleeping soundly in my arms and then back at me. “I’ll let you know when we’re home.”

I nod, and the three of us watch her leave. Adam throws his arm out the window and waves before they disappear.

J.R. turns to me, his blue eyes gentle. “You should go rest. You look pale.”

“I’m fine. I think I just got a little overheated. I do wish that people would stop pointing out to me that I look like crap.”

“You look beautiful,” J.R. says. “But you did just have a baby, and you’ve had a busy day.”

I am exhausted beyond comprehension, and I think maybe he’s right. I should rest—if for no one else but the rest of my family.

“Fine. I’ll go lie down. Naked and under the ceiling fan. I’m still hot.”

J.R. laughs at me, and then he gently takes Amia from me. It’s an art the way he takes her from me without even causing her to stir. I kiss his cheek, and then I make my way up the stairs.

I’m not sure what time it is. It’s dark outside, and J.R. is next to me asleep. It’s after midnight, I assume, and I realize that I must have been truly exhausted. I slept through dinner and bedtime. Amia is next to us in her bassinet, and I hear her stir. A tiny grunt comes from her mouth, and then the grunt turns into a soft cackle. She’s hungry, I’m sure, so I roll out of bed and gently lift her. I cradle her tiny body in my arms and cross the room to the rocking chair, turning the lamp on low and then gazing down at her as she feeds. I smile at her, taking

in her soft cheeks and the olive tone to her skin. She's got a head full of hair just as Knox did when she was a newborn. It has to be a genetic trait that they each received from their father. Sometimes, I'm jealous of the naturally curly and thick hair that J.R. has. He's never had to pay it much attention, yet it is always perfect.

Amia's blue eyes are as bright and icy as J.R. and Knox's blue eyes; and although I've always been taught that brown eyes are a dominant gene, that scientific fact obviously doesn't apply to my family. Neither of my children caught my brown-eyed gene. It's okay, though. I'll never grow tired of looking into the blue eyes of the three people I love most.

J.R. stirs. I watch him feel for me in the bed, and then his eyes open following the low light of the lamp to Amia and me in the rocking chair. He sits up a little, propping himself back on his elbows. His long hair hangs, and I see a soft smile spread across his perfect face.

"I didn't hear her wake up," he says. "I could have gotten up with her."

"It's okay. You lack the proper equipment to soothe her hunger." I smile. "Go back to sleep. I'm okay."

"I don't want to miss a single thing with Amia."

I lay Amia down after she's drifted off to sleep, and then I slide back into the bed with J.R. He opens his arms for me to lie in them, so I do. He's warm, and I nestle myself against him. I feel his lips against my forehead, and then he rests his chin over my head. I lift my face toward his.

"How are you? After today? I know it's not been easy for you, losing your dad and getting a new baby at the same time. It's a lot."

"I spent fifteen years pretending he was dead. I'll be okay," he says.

I think it's sad, but then I felt the same when my mother died. A part of me had already mourned her a long time ago.

J.R.'s relationship with his father improved over the last few months, of course, and that's where our situations are different. The principle is the same, though. We both said goodbye to our families a long time ago. We made our own lives, our own family.

"How is your mom?" I ask him.

"She'll be fine," he says with a sigh. "My uncle has agreed to stay here with her. Keep the farm running."

I'm relieved to hear this. I had been so afraid to ask him what they had planned, afraid that he would say we're staying and that he was going to take on the role his father always wanted him to take.

"Is that what you want?" I ask him this as more of a courtesy. I know it's what he wants, but I have to ask, anyway.

"You know I never wanted to stay here. We have a home. A family. I miss my boat." I hear him laugh at himself.

I smile with him. "I'm glad it worked out then."

"I love you, Rachel. You never stop surprising me."

"What does that mean?"

"Coming here with me, pregnant and all. You didn't even hesitate. You just came."

"It was never a question for me." I kiss him.

I know I was gone awhile from this place before, but I swear I've never been happier to be back on the island. The last six months, in some respects, actually felt longer than the actual years I was gone after leaving J.R. As I step out of the truck into our driveway, I close my eyes and inhale the humid, salty air. The sea breeze catches my hair, and I hope I never have to leave this place again. This is home.

J.R. carries Amia into the house, and Knox and I follow behind. I'm strangely surprised to find that everything is just as we left it. The front porch rocking chairs sit just as they were in January, empty and waiting for a seat. Still, it's a little obvious that no one has been here in a while. Well, with the exception of a woman we hired to come in and clean once a week. Kelley and Adam were here for a week back in the spring, too. Other than that, our home has been empty.

As J.R. unlocks the door, I recall Kelley telling me that she had left us a surprise inside when they were here in the spring. She wouldn't say what, of course, but I remind J.R. in case the surprise is sitting right in front of the door.

"No surprise here," J.R. says as he walks in. Knox and I follow behind him, and I feel myself smile as I glance around our house, more than elated to finally be home.

Knox takes off down the hall to her bedroom. I assume she'll want to take inventory and make sure that the things she left are still there. I turn on the lights, open the curtains, and let in the sunshine. I can almost feel the walls yawning as the sunlight hits them.

"I think I found the surprise!" I hear Knox call from down the hall.

I glance at J.R. as he pulls Amia out of her car seat, and then we walk down the hall together to see what surprise Knox has found. We aren't far when we stumble upon the

surprise, too. The extra bedroom—not the music room, but the other room that was serving as a storage closet—has somehow been transformed into a nursery. The walls are now painted a soft pink, and a vintage style crib sits against the far wall. There’s a white rocking chair in the corner next to a small bookshelf loaded with children’s books. A dresser sits on another wall, which also doubles as a changing table; and the most beautiful, round oriental rug lies across the hardwood floors. There’s also a large, wooden wardrobe closet with its doors wide open, revealing several baby outfits.

I stand in the center of the room, completely overwhelmed with the transformation of this room. I didn’t even really know it could be a room. We had always used it to store stuff while renovating the house, and then we never really revisited it. Now, it’s a beautiful nursery. I have no words, but I feel tears surface and then stream down my face. J.R. looks surprised, too. His blue eyes are wide as he takes in each wall, each detail. Knox stands there between us, beaming.

I had been worried about having a room for Amia here. I could never take J.R.’s music room away from him, even though he would have gladly given it up, and I couldn’t have asked Knox to room with a newborn. I had thought it was something we would have time to figure out; but then January came, and we left so quickly, there was never a solution. The solution that Kelley provided us with is more than I could have ever imagined, and I’m pretty sure that no one has ever had a better best friend than I. She must have spent her entire vacation doing this for us.

“This is amazing,” J.R. says, his mouth gaping.

“So cool!” Knox says with excitement.

“I can’t believe she did this,” I cry. “I just...I can’t.”

J.R. slides an arm around my shoulder. “I take back every negative thing I have ever said about her.”

I laugh at him. “She’s the best. I’ve got to call her or something. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay her for this.”

“Go call her. Amia and I are going to test out her new room.” He looks like a kid in an arcade, and I laugh silently about the types of things that adults with children get excited about. New rooms, strollers, Disney World.

I don’t wait another second. I pull my phone from my pocket, dial Kelley, and disappear outside onto the back deck. When she answers, all I can do is cry, and then I hear her laugh at me through the phone. “I take it you found the surprise.”

“I can’t believe you and Adam did this,” I say, trying to contain myself. “No one has ever done anything like this for me. It’s beautiful. It had to be expensive. Tell me how much you spent, and I’ll pay you back.”

“Shut up. It was a gift,” she says. “I’m serious. I better not get a check in the mail. And it was mostly me. Adam had nothing to do with it. He can’t even pick out a decent throw blanket.”

“You are unbelievable. I don’t even know what to say.” I stop trying to hide the fact that I’m crying, and I go into a full-blown, ugly cry, wiping my cheeks as I do.

I hear Kelley still chuckling through the phone. I begin to laugh with her, too, because Kelley has the type of laugh that is contagious. I don’t know why, but my mind goes back to the first time I saw Kelley cry. It was the night I woke up in the hospital after I tried to kill myself. That seems like it was so long ago, but it wasn’t. Not really. After everything we’ve been through together, she is still able to manage something like this for me. I owe her everything—my life, really. She saved me. Without her, who knows where everyone else would be?

“I love you, Kelley. You know that, right? After everything I’ve put you through, I love you.”

“Rach, stop crying. Okay? You’re going to make me cry, and I don’t cry.”

“I can’t help it.” I wipe my tears from my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I...I’m overwhelmed.”



“Rach, go enjoy your family. I know you’re all exhausted. Call me when you stop crying.”

I laugh. “Okay.”

“Love you,” she adds.

“Love you, too.”

I sit back in the swing, clutching my phone to my chest, and staring out across the tall green oaks with their Spanish moss. I close my eyes, and I listen to the sound of the ocean roaring in the background. I inhale the salty air, and I turn my face into the sea breeze. I relax into the swing, lay my head back, and sigh. Today is a good day.

“I think I’m going to get back in the studio with the band,” J.R. says to me. We’re on the back deck on the swing. The warm, summer air wraps itself around us, and the night sky is blanketed in clouds. Cicadas sing; crickets chirp; the ocean roars.

It doesn’t surprise me that J.R. wants to get back to music. The last six months have been spent with him doing the one thing he hates. Still, I didn’t expect him to want to go back so soon. We just got home; Amia is still a newborn; and I thought we would have more time together.

I don’t say anything to him. The baby monitor next to me gurgles a little, and I wait to hear Amia’s cry. Only silence follows, and I am thankful.

“You don’t want me to go back,” J.R. says in response to my silence. It’s half a question, and half a statement.

“J.R., you know that I would never tell you that you can’t make music,” I say. “We just got home. I guess I didn’t think you would want to leave again so soon.”

The studio isn’t like touring. He comes home most nights, but in some respects, it’s worse than when he’s gone for weeks at a time. When J.R. is in his creative space, writing lyrics, writing music, he’s somewhere else. Mentally. I admire that about him. I love his creativity. Still, once J.R. hits the studio, he’s gone; and sometimes, he’s away for a while.

“I don’t want to leave you or the girls; but I think I need to go,” he says, “Six months on that damn farm, my dad, Amia—I’ve got to write.”

I turn toward him in the swing. “I know.” I can’t think of anything else to say. I really want to stomp my feet and beg him not to go back yet, but that would be both selfish and childish.

“What is it, Rach?” he asks me, shifting his blue eyes to mine. He sees something else behind my eyes—something that doesn’t have anything to do with this conversation.

“I came back to you a year ago today,” I point out.

He nods his head, and then he smiles. “That was a good day.”

I roll my eyes at him. “It was a terrible day. I never want to feel that way again.”

“Okay, it was a terrible day. Fine. Still, I got you back and gained two kids in the process.”

“I feel like things have been insane since that day—one event after another. I moved Knox and me back here; we got back together, got engaged, found out I was pregnant, got married, moved to the farm.” I lock my fingers between his. “We’re home. There’s absolutely nothing going on. We can relax. I guess I thought we could relax a little longer before you left again. That’s all.”

J.R. sighs a little, and then he moves closer to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should relax.”

“I want you to be happy, J.R. If you need to write, if you need to go, go.” I rest my head against his shoulder, and then I lay my hand on his thigh. I want to be selfish. I want to hold onto him for as long as I can.

“I’m happy here with my girls,” he says and then kisses my head.

He’s not being honest. Not completely. I can’t dampen his need to write. He might combust if he doesn’t. Creativity can’t be contained, especially when there’s inspiration behind it.

I lift my head and look at him. “You should go. You need to go.”

“Rach.” He sounds unsure.

“I’m serious. This isn’t one of those female traps where I say one thing but mean the other. You need it.” I smile

at him.

His blue eyes seem to shine as he smiles back at me. He moves in for a kiss, and then Amia's crying erupts from the baby monitor. J.R. stops, rests his forehead against mine, and laughs.

I sigh. One would think that we would be used to these interruptions by now. "I'm sure she's hungry. Again. I swear I feel like I'm only wanted for my boobs." I stand up from the swing, and J.R. follows me inside.

"I will miss you and the girls, but it's not like I'm going on tour or anything," he says, continuing the conversation and following me into Amia's nursery.

"J.R., it's fine," I say, leaning over the crib and scooping Amia up into my arms. "Go." I try to give him my best smile of reassurance.

J.R. helps me change Amia's diaper and then leans into the door frame of her room, watching me as I sit in the rocking chair to feed Amia. He doesn't want to end the conversation yet. Not until he's certain that I'm okay.

I move my eyes from Amia's back to J.R.'s, and I smile at him. "We'll be okay."

He nods. "Okay."

"Okay."

"A year ago, I would have never believed that we could get to this. Together again, married, a whole family," J.R. says thoughtfully, changing the subject.

I look back down into Amia's blue eyes. "I was pretty sure there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that we would ever get back together."

"It was in the cards. It's always been in the cards," he says. "Even when you were gone, I knew you would come back."

"How were you so sure?" I ask him.

"I wasn't really. It was a feeling. Maybe I willed it."

I lift my eyes to him. “Thank you for loving me through it all.”

“It wasn’t hard.” He smirks. “What is hard is loving someone so much, but also wanting to kill them at the same time.”

Soon, Amia is asleep again, and I tuck her back into her crib. We exit Amia’s room quietly, closing the door behind us. I know that we should probably go to bed ourselves. It’s the middle of the night, and I know I’m exhausted. Still, these late nights with J.R., together and talking about nothing, are few and far between. I don’t want to give it up.

J.R. pulls me against him once we’re in the hall again, and with his hands on my hips, he kisses me deeply. I move my arms around his neck, and I sink into him, moving him against the wall. I feel him smile against my lips, and then he whispers, “Let’s go to bed.”

I nod, returning the smile. J.R. lifts me up in his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist, and he carries me to bed.

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“Can I go with you to the studio?” Knox asks J.R. He’s throwing a fresh book of blank sheet music in his guitar case, along with his guitar.

He looks down at her as she looks up at him with her big, blue eyes. “Not today, but soon,” he promises.

“You always say that.” She pouts.

“Okay, well, this time, I mean it.”

“Knox, you aren’t missing anything. Really,” I tell her.

“Is that so?” J.R. smirks at me only looking slightly offended.

I wink at him. “Maybe we’ll stop by later with lunch for the boys. How about that?” I suggest to Knox. J.R. only had to mention studio once to one of the other band members, and they all arrived in town the following day. It’s an addiction—this music making business.

“Works for me,” J.R. says. “Knox?”

“Fine.” She sighs. “I want to play the piano.”

“You want to do a lot of things today, don’t you?” J.R. asks her.

“I’m just bored. I want to go on the boat.” She’s being a little whinier than usual, and I chalk it up to exhaustion. We’ve been home a few weeks, but I think we’re all still adjusting.

“We’ll find something to do, Knox,” I say, beginning to get annoyed with her. “You should go, J.R. You’re going to be late.”

J.R. leans in and kisses me. “I love you.” He kisses Amia in my arms. “I love you.” And then he kisses Knox’s cheek. “I love you the most.”

Knox hides a smile. “That’s a lie.”

“No, it’s not,” J.R. argues back.

Knox blushes a little, and then she wraps her arms around his neck. “Go make music,” she says to him.

“I’ll see you at lunch.” Then he’s gone.

After he’s finished in the studio, there will be a tour. There is always a tour. Even when J.R. says there won’t be a tour, there’s a tour. Even more so, it’s summer, and that means music festival season. Music fests are worse than normal tours. It’s a lot of late nights, zero sleep, and alcohol. It’s wild, hot, and literally insane. J.R. always comes back from those looking like he’s aged a few years and smelly.

“J.R., we have to talk.”

I tell him this through the phone between gritted teeth because he is six hours away getting ready to perform at a music festival in New Orleans. I’ve grown to hate summer. It’s music festival season; and although he’s not officially touring, he and the band have been festival-hopping for four weeks. I doubt it’s a good time for a heart-to-heart, but I feel like this can’t wait.

“Rach, it’s not a good time right now. Can I call you back?” He’s shouting over music playing in the background. I imagine he’s had about four beers already; his long hair is probably soaked in sweat—the bandana around his head is, too; and he’s probably got the buttons of his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest to allow for a breeze.

“You should probably make it a good time,” I say, my tone flat.

I hear him sigh, obviously flustered; and then after a bit of rustling, the background noise is gone. I suppose he found somewhere quiet to go.

“All right, what’s going on? What’s wrong?” He sounds agitated.

“There is a video of you circulating the internet,” I tell him. “It’s from two nights ago in Tennessee. One of Knox’s friends showed it to her.”

I hope he knows what I’m talking about, but judging by the video I saw, there’s a good chance he won’t remember.

“I’m not following you, Rach,” he says. “Just tell me what I did wrong.”

I roll my eyes, and I push my hand through my hair. I don't really know where to start. Knox hasn't been the same since she saw the video, and I'm not sure who I am most angry with—J.R. for acting like a teenager or Knox's friend for showing her that video. I guess I can't be angry at either of them. We could have done a better job of letting Knox see J.R. perform. Maybe then, she wouldn't be so traumatized. The kid has been walking around like a zombie for the last four hours. She'll definitely need therapy when she's older.

I sit down at the kitchen table, reclining back in the chair. "You got a little insane, J.R. I mean, the video was pretty intense. You know I don't care, but we have children. I'm pretty sure Knox is going to need counseling after seeing that. Plus, it cost her a friend."

"Can you please tell me what I did?" J.R. asks impatiently. He definitely doesn't remember.

"Where should I start?" I say back.

"Was it that bad?"

"Well, from the leopard print pants and the gold jacket, to the way you laid all over your female audience. You also chugged a bottle of liquor between songs, and then there was the most intense headbanging I have ever seen you perform, which, by the way, Knox was not impressed by." As I say it all out loud, I find that I am more amused by the situation now than angry.

I should be angry with him, but I'm not. I can't be. When he's on stage, he's playing a character—the same way an actor plays a character in a movie. It's not who he is. It's the artist inside of him. I can't explain that to Knox, though. She wouldn't understand. Not yet, anyway. Maybe I'm hoping that J.R. can tone it down a little. At least until Knox is old enough to understand.

"It was a wild show, Rach. The energy was intense. It just came out of me."

"I know that. But maybe you should just think of Knox when you're playing. Pretend she's in the room. Okay? She



lost a friend over that video, J.R. I'm pretty sure her mother thinks we're Satanists or something."

"I hate the internet," he mumbles.

"For the record, I thought the video was kind of hot."

"You did?" I hear him smile.

"I kind of wish you were coming home tonight," I say seductively. I'm joking, of course, but only half-way. I'm attracted to this man of mine in more ways than one. There is something to be said about the way he looks on stage, hair insane, wild and free. It gives me life. I guess that's what drew me to him in the first place.

J.R. laughs through the phone. "Stop it."

I laugh, too, and then I add, "Seriously, though, you've got to have the conversation with Knox when you get home. She's never seen you like that, and I think she's in shock."

"I'll make it up to her," he promises. "I gotta go. Are you sure you're not mad?"

"I suppose I'm not angry this time," I tell him. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Be home soon." He hangs up, and I sit there at the table a few minutes longer before deciding that maybe I should be the one to talk with Knox first.

I find Knox in the living room, staring blankly at the television. She's curled up on the couch, her head resting on the arm of the couch.

"Can we talk?" I ask, sitting down beside her.

"About?" She doesn't look away from the T.V.

"Your dad."

"I don't want to," she mumbles.

"I know you don't want to." I reach for the remote control and turn the T.V. off. "But we should."

Knox sighs, and then she turns her head to me. "What do you want to talk about?"

“I know the video Maria showed you surprised you.”

“That wasn’t my dad,” she says. “His clothes, everything about him, was...” She grimaces as she tries to find the words.

“You’re right. The man in that video wasn’t your dad completely, but it was your dad playing a character. You know how actors play characters in movies? Musicians are the same. They write stories and sing them; and when they sing them at concerts, they play the character that they want to be,” I explain. I’m not sure she’s following, though, so I add, “I met your dad at one of his shows. Did you know that?”

“Was he acting the way he was in that video?”

I laugh a little. He may have been worse back then. He was younger, and he could move a little easier. “Believe it or not, he did, and I think it’s why I fell in love with him so fast. I loved his energy. Not many people can entertain others like that. I loved who he was on stage, and then I loved the man he was off stage, too. Soft and sweet. Perfectly sane. I admired that about him. How he could play the music, entertain the audience, and then come off the stage and be a total sweetheart.”

“The stage is like his T.V. show,” Knox says with her best child-like logic.

“Exactly. It’s not real. It’s just a show.” I feel like I’m getting somewhere with her now.

“I just think he’s too old to be acting like that,” she says matter-of-factly, folding her arms across her chest.

I laugh at her. “He’s not that old.”

“Too old for gold-and-leopard print,” she points out.

“Touché.” I smile. “I do like him better in jeans.”

“I can’t go over to Maria’s house anymore,” she says sadly.

“Maybe that’s for the best,” I tell her, scooping her up into my arms and kissing the top of her head. “They’re the ones missing out, anyway. You are an amazing kid, and you

have the best daddy in the whole, wide world. He loves you, Knox Rose. Don't forget that."

"When is he coming home?" she asks me.

"Soon, I hope. I miss him."

"Me, too."

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"Daddy! I learned a new trick!" Knox exclaims, crashing into J.R. as he walks through the front door. She wraps her arms around his legs, and he drops everything in his arms to hug her back.

He seems to be surprised by Knox's enthusiasm. "Nice to see you, too," he says with a weird smile on his face as he looks at me with a questioning expression on his face. I shrug. I had no idea she learned a new trick or that it was something she was dying to show him.

"Come see my new trick!" Knox says, pulling his hand.

"Wait a second. Let me kiss my bride." J.R. leans into me and kisses me. "I missed you."

"I missed you." I smile, but I can't ignore his smell. It's probably been days since he's had a decent shower, and I think his pores are bleeding alcohol.

J.R. looks down at Amia in my arms, and he gives her a kiss on her cheek. Amia smiles up at him, and J.R. looks back up at me with surprise in his eyes. "She smiles now?"

I laugh. "She's been smiling. She's really good at it, too."

"She looks bigger," he points out.

"Babies grow."

"Come on!" Knox says impatiently, pulling J.R.'s hand.

"All right, I'm coming." Knox runs ahead of us down the hall.

“What is that?” J.R. asks me in reference to Knox’s enthusiasm.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I kind of talked to her the other day about how you play a character on stage and that the video she saw of you was just you acting. It seemed to help, but she hasn’t stopped playing piano since. Maybe she taught herself a new song.” Now that I say it out loud, I realize that maybe I should have been watching her a little closer.

Knox takes her place on the piano bench. Her long, dark, curly hair hangs down her back; and before she begins, she turns toward us to flash us a big smile. There’s something in her blue eyes that tells me she’s got something up her sleeve—something she has yet to share with me—and I’m not sure how I feel about whatever is coming next.

“Let’s see your trick,” J.R. says, motioning with his hand for her to begin.

Knox takes a moment to compose herself, and then she begins to play an old song of J.R.’s. It’s one with a quick tempo and a great piano riff. I’m surprised that she was able to teach herself how to play this particular tune without J.R.’s instruction. I shouldn’t be surprised, though. She’s talented. Just like her daddy.

J.R. and I both stand there with smiles on our faces, proud of our girl, until she begins to do something that we don’t expect. Knox begins to head bang. Her little head goes back and forth in a rapid motion consistent with the beat, the way J.R. does when he plays. Her long hair is flying back and forth, side to side; and just like J.R., she doesn’t miss a single note. Knox has the method down perfectly.

I’ve always felt that J.R.’s head banging was unique. One would think that head banging is head banging until you’ve seen J.R. in a show. His head-banging technique is not quite as extreme as an ‘80s hair band would have been, but it is pretty fierce. Watching my daughter do the same is both frightening and entertaining. I’m undecided on whether or not I should be proud or disturbed.

My mouth is hanging open in shock, and J.R.'s is, too. But then for the finish, Knox steals another one of J.R.'s signature moves—a backbend right over the piano bench. She hangs upside down, and her hair is dragging the floor. Her feet are hooked around the front legs of the piano bench so that she doesn't flip over, and her blue eyes are glistening at us just as J.R.'s shine when he's playing. She smiles wide at us, and she waits for us to clap or cheer or do something to acknowledge her performance.

I'm not exactly sure what to say, and I can't even bring myself to clap. My mouth still hangs open wide, and I shift my eyes to J.R. His eyes are wide but in a different way. He's proud, and beneath his beard, I see a smile on his face.

Knox sits upright again and turns to face us on the piano bench. "I did what you do, Daddy," Knox exclaims.

"Yes, you did," J.R. gushes. "I'm impressed. How did you teach yourself to do that?"

"I watched a video of you over and over again until I got it just right," she says with pride. "What did you think, Mama?" She looks at me, hopeful for a good review.

"It was good. It was great. I'm just...well, I'm a little surprised," I say to her. "That backbend, though—be careful with that. You could hurt yourself."

I move Amia to my other hip, supporting her back with my free hand, and I move my eyes to J.R. "When you're finished in here, can I talk to you?"

He gives me a nod, and then I leave the room.

I keep replaying the scene I just watched over and over again in my mind. It's hard for me to fathom that my sweet Knox Rose went from playing "Mary Had a Little Lamb" to a rock segment on the piano so quickly. Knox has been obsessed with J.R. since the day they met, and that has always made me happy. I have noticed how she watches his every move. I've noticed how she listens when he speaks. I knew somewhere deep down that my child would dismiss the things I want for her and for her life and go after the life her daddy lives. Why

wouldn't she? Compared to J.R.'s, my interests and talents are rather boring. Still, I'm not sure I am ready to watch her decide on music so quickly. She's got so many other talents that she could explore.

I've placed Amia in her swing, and I sit across from her on the couch, waiting for J.R. to join me. She looks content as her blue eyes stare up at the mobile in front of her. Oh, to be a baby again. Life was so simple.

I'm probably overreacting to Knox's little stunt, but I think we should tread this newfound love that she has discovered lightly. I don't want to encourage her to chase these rock star dreams yet, and I want her to remain a kid for as long as she can. Kids her age should be building sand castles on the beach, coloring in coloring books, and obsessing over cartoons. Kids her age shouldn't be head banging at the piano to a rock tune.

Finally, J.R. joins me and collapses on the couch next to me. He's exhausted, and I know he wants to shower. *He needs to shower.* He probably wants a nap, too, but I'm not sure this conversation can wait. Knox moves fast, and we should get on the same page as quickly as possible.

"You're exhausted," I tell him, and I give him a pity tap on his cheek with the palm of my hand. It's heartfelt. I don't like seeing him so tired.

"I'm getting too old for this." He sighs. "Not the performance part, but the drinking and not sleeping part."

"I know, but you love it," I say with a smile.

"I do." Then he turns his eyes to mine. "What did you want to talk with me about?"

"Your daughter," I say, changing my tone back to the disbelief and fear I was feeling just a few moments ago. "I had no idea that's what she's been doing these last couple of days."

"I was impressed. The backbend? She didn't even miss a beat. It took me years to master that," he says with pride. "Kid is going places."

I think he's missing my point. "J.R., I don't want her thinking she has to be just like you at the piano." I remember her sweet, little hands playing preschool tunes once upon a time.

J.R. looks at me strangely and maybe even a little offended. "What are you saying?"

"Those moves don't come with innocence, J.R. That's just the beginning of what could be some rough teenage years if we don't calm her down."

"I don't see anything wrong with it," he says in opposition. I'm not sure why I thought he would side with me. At least, not on this topic.

"Maybe there's nothing wrong with it right now, but soon, she'll be fourteen years old with a mohawk, wearing all black and a nose ring, and chugging liquor she found in the kitchen cabinet."

"You have an active imagination," he says to me dismissively. He even rolls his eyes at me. Only Kelley gets to do that.

Maybe I am being a little dramatic, but I know Knox, too. Yeah, she's sweet, but she's been a wild child from birth. It's in her. I see it. I've always seen it, and I've done my best to tame it. Still, I can't be angry with J.R. or Knox. I don't get to choose what path she pursues. J.R. and I both agreed to that. Whether I like it or not, she loves music. She always has. Even before she knew who her dad was. She's a natural entertainer. I can't—and I won't—change that.

"I guess this is what I get for making babies with some guy I met in a band," I joke, but I'm a little serious, too, though I will never regret J.R. Ever.

J.R. looks at me in the most seductive way. His blue eyes are tantalizing. There's some leftover eyeliner beneath each of his eyes, and even that is seductive to me. He doesn't normally wear eyeliner—only for shows, and even then, only if he's still drunk from the night before. *It adds to his image.* J.R.'s long hair hangs past his shoulders, and I can't help but

notice that even his curls have fallen flat with exhaustion. If I lacked any self-control, I would take him right now on this couch. Even with his exhausted, alcohol-infused self, he still makes my heart pound. He also knows how to distract me when necessary.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I tell him, blushing slightly.

“Like what?” he asks, but he knows. His eyes have a twinkle to them, and I see a smirk on his face, too.

“The way you’re looking at me right now. It’s hot. Stop,” I say with a little laugh this time.

J.R. laughs at me, and then he looks away, pushing his hand through his hair. For a moment, we’re like two bashful pre-teens exploring brand new thoughts.

I lean into him, kissing his cheek, and then change my expression back to serious again. “Just promise me you’ll help me keep Knox tame until she can no longer be tamed.”

“I will,” he says. “I promise.”

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“Daddy, I want you to teach me how to play guitar. Teach me to sing, too,” Knox says as she sits across from us at the kitchen table. Her request seems to come out of nowhere, and it brings our dinner to a halt.

Spaghetti hangs from my fork in suspense as silence surrounds us. I stare at her, trying to figure out if I heard her correctly. I’m sure I did, and I realize that maybe we’ll never tame this musical monster inside of her. J.R. gazes back at Knox, too, but he has a smile on his face. He’s proud; meanwhile, my mind flashes forward twenty years into the future. Knox has a spiked, purple mohawk; she’s wearing a skirt that’s too short and heels that are too tall; and she’s doing a backbend over the piano bench flashing innocent bystanders in the process. J.R. was right. I do have an active imagination.

I know that J.R. and I decided that we would let our children grow up to be whatever they wanted to be. That’s easier said than done. I did nothing to discourage this path



Knox is paving for herself, of course. I named her Knox Rose, for crying out loud. If that isn't an album cover waiting to happen, I don't know what is. Besides, J.R. makes the rock band life look normal. It's not normal, but to Knox, it is. She's going to grow up to be in a rock band, and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it.

"I can teach you these things," J.R. says. "Well, at least the guitar. Only way to learn to sing is to sing."

"You play piano so well, Knox," I say. "Why do you want to play guitar, too?" Normal parents would encourage such talent. I've never been known to be normal, though.

"I want to be like Daddy when I grow up. Have my own band. Travel the country. It looks fun." She beams with an undeniable confidence. It's a confidence that I can't destroy no matter how badly I want to.

I drop my eyes to my plate and poke at the spaghetti with my fork. I'm trying not to let her know that this projected path scares the shit out of me. Band life looks like fun, but there's so much more to life than fun. Right?

"It's a lot of work, Knox," J.R. says. "It's not always fun."

"You looked like you were having fun in the video I saw of you," Knox points out.

*That damn video. Damn the internet.*

"I was having fun then, but think about the work I put into getting there. All of the hours in the studio, away from you," J.R. says.

"Why do you do it then?" she asks.

I'm sure I've asked that question a million times, but I know the answer. He has to. He has to write, sing, create. An artist who cannot express themselves cannot breathe. Creation is necessary to their existence. It's vital. It's like water. It's like food. It's like air. It's what gives them life.

"It's all I've ever wanted to do," J.R. answers her simply.

Knox looks a little disappointed by his response. I'm not sure what kind of answer she was looking for. She looks up at him with her big, blue eyes. "I like playing music. It makes me happy."

"Do what makes you happy, Knox. The world will tell you differently, but the value of life is determined by its happiness. I don't want to reach the end of my life and find that I'm filled with regret. I don't want that for you either."

I know that J.R. isn't wrong. Yes, I would like to see Knox take a different path. She could be a teacher, a writer, or maybe even a doctor. However, all I've ever wanted is for her to be happy, and if music makes her happy, then so be it.

"I want to sing. I want to create music. Just like you," Knox says.

"Then do it," J.R. replies with a smile. "I'll teach you."

Knox smiles wide. She's satisfied, and I can see her scheming her next steps behind those blue eyes of hers. I glance at Amia. I wonder which path she'll take in life. Will she want to have a rock band, too? I sure hope not. One of these kids needs to be more like me, but then there's probably not much fun in that.

Later that night, J.R. climbs into bed next to me, turning off the lamp as he does. He pulls the covers over our heads, and I feel his lips against my bare stomach, chest, and neck. He kisses my lips, and I move my hand through his hair. We don't say anything. We just lie there together, our lips connected, moving slowly at some unheard beat.

The air beneath the blanket is warm. His hands move across my skin so effortlessly, and I feel chills run down my spine. He pushes my shirt over my head, and then he slides my shorts off, too. I do the same to him, and then we're lying beneath the covers together with nothing between us. It's his skin against mine, and mine against his.

"I love you," I hear myself whisper to him.

J.R.'s lips come back to mine, and he whispers against them. "I love you."

I take his face in my hands, pulling him closer to me. I pull him as close as I can get him, and everything inside of me wants him to mold into my body.

We've made love more times than I can count, but for me, each time is different. Better than the last. It's personal, and it's fulfilling. It's the way I think real, true love was designed to be.

There's no question mark. There is no daydreaming of someone else to fill this spot. It's exactly the way it should be. It's fate. It's security. It's assurance. It's knowing that out of all the people in the world, we found our way to each other. Not once, but twice. There was no amount of time, or distance, or problems, or situations that could keep us from finding each other again.

Fate doesn't stop when we lose our way. It has a way of guiding our steps until we find our way back to where we're supposed to be.

We all lose our way at one point or another. Bad decisions, influences, trauma. Whatever it is that knocks us off our course, there's always a way back.

How did a boy from Tennessee and a girl from Georgia find each other in a place like The Handlebar in the Upstate of South Carolina? How did our paths cross at the exact same time? What are the odds? We aren't in control of our lives, no matter how much we believe we are. Our steps are laid out before we're born, and we follow them unknowingly. Even when we misstep, there's another step that puts us back on course.

I lost my way, but then, I think if I hadn't, I wouldn't be where I am tonight. Here, in the arms of the man I love—in the arms of a man who loves me more than I will probably ever understand. I wasn't sure where our lives would go when I first met that blue-eyed, long-haired man of mine. I could have never dreamed this up, though.

I won't die an old cat lady like my mother thought I would. No, I'll die a woman who loved and was loved. I think that's the benefit of life.

## Epilogue

It's been nineteen years since I came home, back to Tybee and back to J.R. I'll never forget the day, the year, or the way J.R.'s icy blue eyes looked at me on that hot summer day I returned. I look at J.R. now, and he still makes me smile. He still makes my heart pound, and he still makes my stomach flip.

Today, the sun is warm against our skin as we sit on our back deck, enjoying a cup of coffee together. We are settled in our old swing—the same swing that has been with us since we first hung it so many years ago. J.R.'s hair is still long and thick, but today, he wears it with strands of gray. His beard is mostly gray, too, but his blue eyes are still bright as ever.

We're older, wiser, calmer. We have a good life, and that hasn't changed over the years. Even raising two daughters wasn't enough to bring us down. It's been an adventure, to say the least. Knox is twenty-five, and Amia just turned eighteen. Still, it seems like it was only yesterday when I was holding them in my arms. Time flies.

"It's quiet this morning," J.R. says to me. He holds my hand in his, and he pushes the swing into a slow motion with his feet.

"It won't be long before the tourists are back," I say, and I gaze out into the trees ahead of us, peering out at the sliver of ocean on the horizon.

I love the way early morning sounds on the island. The ocean rolls softly in the distance, and above its low hum, the gulls squawk as they dive into the water for breakfast. It's peaceful, and it's the best way to begin a day. We sit here in the mornings the way we used to do at night—quietly, just listening to nature around us. Every now and then, we exchange words, but being close to each other is enough, too.

"Amia said she would swing by before she heads back to the Upstate," I tell him.

Our sweet Amia graduated high school a year earlier than we anticipated, and she enrolled into a university in the Upstate that specializes in agriculture. It nearly broke J.R.'s heart when she told us that she would take over the old farm in Tennessee. The same farm J.R. worked so hard at forgetting now beckoned to his daughter, who fell in love with it. We didn't argue with her. We couldn't. We had always agreed that we would let Knox and Amia choose their own path. So, Amia left us. She moved to the Upstate right after graduation, and she's spent the last two summers on the farm in Tennessee. We don't see her much, but sometimes, she does drop by to say hey when she's in town. I think, in a lot of ways, J.R. is happy that Amia loves the farm. Ellie is much older now, and she needs Amia's help and dedication. When Amia is in school, J.R.'s cousin helps with the farm. I think Roger would be proud of how his family has banded together to ensure that the farm never dies. I do wish Roger were still alive to see that a woman can, indeed, run a farm.

J.R. rolls his eyes. "I still don't understand her infatuation with the damn farm."

"She was born there. It's in her blood." I smirk. "Your dad would love it. He was so upset when we found out that Amia would be a girl. He didn't think a girl could run a farm. He would be impressed."

"I doubt it. Nothing was ever quite good enough," J.R. says, and then he looks at me. "But I'm proud."

I smile at him. "Amia."

"Sweet Amia," he says, and we go back to sitting quietly in the swing.

I kind of like this life. There's peace, not very many responsibilities, and not a whole lot to say. I'm told it's empty nest syndrome. Some parents get depressed; others thrive. We're thriving, I think.

J.R. and I are out on the dock when Amia stops by after lunch, just as she promised she would. She walks down the old boardwalk toward us, and for a moment, I see her as my feisty, little two-year-old with long, bouncy, dark curls.

Today, she's tall like her daddy and fit. She's got long hair, but she keeps it under a baseball cap most of the time with a ponytail pulled through the back. It suits her. Amia has the bluest of blue eyes, and today, those blue eyes greet me before she does.

"I'm heading back," Amia says, approaching me. She leans into me for a hug before propping herself against the railing of the dock. She's been on the island for a few days with a group of friends. I tried to get them to stay with us, but they rented a house closer to town. She swore we didn't have enough room for all of them, but I would have made room. I just think she didn't really want to hang out with her ma and pa.

"Just let her do what she wants to do," J.R. had said to me. So, I conceded.

"Well, it was nice to see you for all of two minutes," J.R. remarks sarcastically. He doesn't look up at her as he throws some rope into the boat, but I know that he's only kidding.

"Dad." Amia sighs, and she adjusts the bill of her cap. It's a nervous habit of hers. She nearly folded the bill in half the day she told us she would be moving away. She's always been stuck between wanting to make us happy and keeping herself happy in the process. We've tried to assure her that her happiness is what creates our happiness.

J.R. looks up at her and steps out of the boat. "I'm only kidding." He smiles at his daughter before pulling her into a hug and kissing her cheek.

"Drive carefully," I tell her. "People are crazy on the roads." I've feared a lot of things in my lifetime, but nothing is scarier than having your kids driving unsupervised. Knox and Amia aren't really kids, though, are they? I think I'll never not worry about them.

"I'll be fine, Mama," she says. "I'm stopping in to see Aunt Kelley. She said she would kill me if I came through town again without seeing her."

“And she probably will.” I laugh. “Give her my love.”

“You’re coming to your sister’s show next week, right?” J.R. asks.

Amia rolls her eyes. “Knox won’t miss me. That’s not my thing, Dad. You know that.”

“Oh, come on. This one is important. She’s playing in the same venue where your mom and I met. Do it for her, and if not for Knox, then us.”

“We’re making an entire event out of it,” I add. “A reunion of sorts. Kelley will be there, and you’ll get to meet my friend Chels, too. It will be fun.”

“Ugh, fine. I’ll see you there.” Amia adjusts her cap again. “Text me the time,” she adds as she starts to walk away from us.

“Will do,” I call to her backside. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. I’ll see you soon.” Amia turns to give us both a smile, and then she continues along the boardwalk until she’s out of sight.

I turn to J.R. and look up into his blue eyes. It breaks my heart each time Knox and Amia leave. I could have never prepared myself for raising two daughters who would inevitably leave home before their twentieth birthdays. They both left us, though I guess I should be thankful it was to follow their dreams and not out of hate.

“She’s a good kid,” J.R. says to me. “We did well.”

“Well, Knox grew up to be the lead of everything in a band. The jury is still out on her,” I joke.

“She’s wild, but she’s good.” He smirks and kisses my forehead.

“Wild and good like her daddy.”

He shrugs with a smile. “You loved me.”

“I still do.”

I can't explain what it felt like when Knox called to let us know that her band would be playing at The Handlebar. Well, maybe my first reaction was of disbelief that the old venue was still there after all these years. The next reaction was a mixture of all sorts of sentiments, but maybe the biggest one being that our daughter will be playing in the same place where our story began.

To mark the occasion and against Knox's wishes, J.R. insisted that I make an event of it. So, I did. I was even able to convince Chels and her husband to come home to meet us for a reunion.

I've been looking forward to the date for a couple of weeks, and as I stand in front of The Handlebar now with Chels and Jack, Kelley and Adam, and J.R., I find that my insides are a cocktail of emotions. Good and bad memories. From where our story began to where we are now. I stare blankly at the familiar venue, and my mind is suddenly a movie of memories.

The old building looks the same as it did back then. It even has the same big, red, double entrance doors with long, vertical, gold handles. The letterboard that runs across the front of the building reads: *Knox Rose—TONIGHT ONLY!*

I pull out my phone to snap a picture. This will make a great post on social media so that I can brag about my girl to the world. I might be an older woman now, but I know how to operate my social media accounts like a professional. I have a pretty big following these days, too, although most of them come from being fans of Knox Rose and J.R. And maybe they're my fans, too. I am a published author. A *New York Times* bestseller, three times. Adam's feelings weren't too hurt when I quit. He thinks he had something to do with my becoming a published author. He and Kelley are two peas in a pod.

"Too bad none of us are twenty-one anymore. We'll all need to take a Tylenol when we get home later tonight to help with the inflammation from the intake of alcohol," Kelley remarks.



I laugh at her. “You never change.”

“Just being a realist.” Kelley shrugs, but I catch her smiling.

“There’s Amia,” J.R. points out, and we all turn to see Amia crossing the street toward us. She did her best to dress up for the occasion, but the poor thing is like me. High heels aren’t really our thing, so when we do wear them, everyone notices. It’s not hard for me to miss how uncomfortable she looks, but she is beautiful. Amia has straightened her dark curls, and her hair hangs past her shoulders. She even spread a little extra makeup on her face, and the mascara on her lashes make her blue eyes pop. Still, she looks like J.R. The only thing she got from me was my awkward personality.

“You guys are being weird. Why are you just standing here?” Amia asks as she approaches.

“We were waiting on you,” J.R. says to her.

“This place looks like it should be condemned,” she says with her lip curled.

“Hush, girl,” Kelley says to her. “Appreciate the past. It made you.”

The crowd begins to build around us on the sidewalk, and soon, we’re being pushed inside with everyone else. We’re shoulder-to-shoulder with strangers through the entrance, but as soon as we’re able, we break apart and try to find our table from so many years before—the one Kelley, Chels, and me sat at the night we met J.R. The interior looks the same as it did in 2001. I’m pretty sure they haven’t changed a thing, and with that comes a feeling of nostalgia. How many people can walk into a place from their past, and it looks exactly the way they left it?

“There’s the table,” Kelley points out, and she’s right. It’s near the bar, and it still has three chairs around it. We pull up some additional chairs, and all sit down accordingly. Oddly, our seating arrangement is nearly identical as to before with a few extra people we’ve come to know and birth along the way.

“Want to go dance?” Kelley asks Chels and Amia as the deejay begins to play some music. It’s not music from the ‘80s, but I think it’s worse. Rap music. Adam and Jack look nervous that their wives might ask them to dance.

“I don’t dance,” Amia says. “In what world could you ever see me out there dancing?”

“Oh, Rach, she’s your twin,” Kelley says, rolling her eyes and looking at me. “At least Chels danced with me.”

“You don’t want to dance, anyway,” I tell her.

“We really don’t.” Chels adds like she’s also trying to convince Kelley that she doesn’t want to dance.

“I’m going to get us some drinks,” J.R. says, standing. “You get a Shirley Temple,” he adds, pointing at Amia.

“Water is fine. I’m not two,” Amia replies, and then she looks at me. “You and Dad really met here?”

“Yep. Kelley and Chels were here, too.”

“This doesn’t look like a place you’d be caught dead in. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a bar.”

“I forced her here. It was her birthday,” Kelley says. “Have you never heard the story?”

“I’ve heard what I want to hear of it. No one really wants to hear the story of how their parents met and fell in love.”

“You are so weird,” Kelley says to Amia.

“Thanks,” she says sarcastically.

I laugh at them. “Tonight isn’t about us, though. Well, partially. The other part of this is Knox, don’t forget.”

“She’s going to be so mad you brought the whole family,” Amia says. “She told you not to make a big deal out of it.”

“She tells me a lot of things. I guess I forget them because I’m so old,” I quip, and then J.R. is back with our drinks.

I take note of the stage. There's a microphone front and center, a piano, a couple of guitars, and a bass. The piano is what makes me smile, though. How out of place I thought of J.R.'s piano when I first saw his set. Now, a stage would be odd without it.

Knox doesn't come out to visit with us before the show like she usually does. I'm willing to bet that she started to visit until she saw we brought the whole family, which is really being dramatic because it's not like there are twenty of us. That's Knox, though. Dramatic. It's what makes her a great performer.

The room is crowded, more so than I thought it would be, and I feel myself growing nervous for her. I'll never not respect Knox and J.R. for being able to go out on a stage and sing in front of hundreds of people. I don't even like to sing in front of J.R.

The lights go down, and I see Knox's silhouette appear on stage behind the mike. Her silhouette is tall and thin; and her long, dark, curly hair hangs well past her shoulders. For a second, a brief second, I think I'm looking at J.R. on stage. Then, there's a spotlight on my Knox Rose. She's got her guitar strapped around her; her green-and-black plaid shirt hangs open over a gray top; her black jeans are ripped at the knees; and she wears a pair of what used to be white, low top, Converse tennis shoes. Knox's blue eyes glow in the spotlight; and they're wide, wild, and free as she plays the opening note of the show.

The crowd is cheering and singing around us, the audience singing word for word every lyric of her song. I'm proud. I have no other choice but to be proud.

I've been to many of her shows before, but there's something different about this one. I feel a smile spread across my face as I watch my oldest girl live out her dream. J.R. is next to me, and I glance at him as he watches his daughter with a type of pride on his face that I cannot define. My heart grows warm as I look at Kelley, Chels, Adam, Jack, and Amia; and I realize that although the story that began right here in this room had many ups and down, it made me. It made my

family. It made a love between J.R. and me so thick that I'm certain not even death will separate us. It made Knox Rose, and it made Amia.

If you had told me nearly three decades ago that The Handlebar would change my life, I would have laughed in your face. Who really wants their life to be changed by a bar, anyway?

Tonight, I know that I would not have a beat in my heart, air in my lungs, or blood in my veins if it weren't for the night of my twenty-first birthday. That one night changed my entire life. It pushed me to break free from the prison to which I had chained myself. Every moment after that night led to my breaking free from all the lies I had ever believed that robbed me of the joy that life truly is. I know that now. I wish I had known that then.

## About The Author

### **Samantha Lauren**



Samantha Lauren has lived in Greenville, South Carolina her entire life. She married her husband, Paul, in 2007 and together they have a daughter, Bree. Samantha also has a doggy named Riggs who, coincidentally, has no idea he's a dog. When Samantha isn't writing, she can be found reading, watching a good movie, heading to the beach or simply enjoying her backyard.

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