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Harper Security Ops: Jesse & Sawyer

A.K. Evans

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PROLOGUE



Sawyer

Luck was not on my side.

Then again, it never was.

I wasn't necessarily surprised by my current situation, though. It wouldn't have felt like real life for me if it wasn't constantly wrought with struggle.

I was used to it by now.

But accepting that life had thrown me plenty of hits already and was just sending another one my way didn't mean that I hadn't wished things would be different.

For just once, I wanted to live a normal life. I wanted to be a woman who made her own way while checking things off her bucket list. I'd have been content to do this life on my own if I could simply manage to stop the hits from coming.

I lost a huge part of me once.

Then I lost *everything*.

Wasn't that enough?

As I got out of my car and walked toward the building, the answer to that question was easy.

No.

No, I wasn't quite done taking the blows just yet.

The fact that I was walking into the place I'd been employed for the last five years for what would be the last

time was evidence enough of that fact.

I'd lost my job. Though, in all fairness to me, I hadn't exactly been fired. In fact, I hadn't even been at work the night it all came crashing down.

I had been working as a bartender at a strip club in a town just outside of Baltimore, Maryland, for years now. Thinking back to my younger days, back when I was in high school, this was not where I imagined I would have wound up.

I had plans.

I had dreams.

There was so much I had wanted to do with my life, but that all changed in a tragic instant.

So, I settled for the time being. I was doing what I had to do to make a living.

Unfortunately, no matter that I'd simply been trying to make an honest living, I couldn't control what other people did.

Maybe I should have expected some of this, considering my chosen line of work, but I didn't. I never imagined that I would have gotten a call two days ago telling me not to come into work that night because the joint had been shut down.

As it turned out, the club had been raided, and several individuals—including the owner—had been arrested. I was still fuzzy on all the details, but from what I'd managed to gather, it seemed as though there had been a couple of minors employed by my boss, Wade.

At first, I'd been shocked. Wade seemed like a straight shooter to me. He valued his business, and I didn't think he'd have done anything to put it in jeopardy.

But I realized that was particularly naïve of me. Because the truth was that I knew many people only showed others what they wanted them to see. I was one of them.

For years, I'd been showing up at work and doing my job, pretending to have the same life complaints as everyone else.

Nobody knew the truth.

Nobody knew about my life before I arrived in Maryland twelve years ago.

For that reason, I understood that if he hadn't been fooled by these young women, it was entirely possible that Wade had his own secrets he was harboring.

With no concrete answers as to if or when the club might reopen, I had no choice but to start looking for employment elsewhere. I'd been bartending since about six months after I'd arrived in Maryland. At first, I'd made good money in comparison to the waitressing job I'd had at a local chain restaurant, but then I realized I could make even more money if I came into the strip club to do it.

It didn't matter to me where I earned my living, so if I could make more money in a place where women took off their clothes and danced in front of men, I was going to do it.

Walking inside for the first time since before I'd received that call telling me not to come in for my next shift, I didn't know what to expect.

It was late in the morning, about an hour before lunchtime. All I wanted to do was head into the back, where I'd be able to gather some of my personal belongings from my locker. As I approached the door that would take me there, I saw Lindsey step out from behind it. She was clearly not in a good mood.

Lindsey was one of the strippers who'd worked here the longest. In fact, she'd been hired about six months prior to me. While I didn't necessarily hang out with anyone from my job outside of work, that didn't mean that I wasn't friendly with everyone I worked with.

So, when I came to within a few feet of Lindsey, I greeted her. "Hey, Lindsey."

She narrowed her eyes at me and asked, "What are you doing here, Sawyer?"

Surprised by her reaction, I replied quietly, "I was just coming in to grab some things I left here."

Lindsey grunted. “I’m shocked you didn’t think to take everything with you before this all happened.”

Confusion moved through me. I had no clue what she was talking about. “How would I have done that?”

She rolled her eyes. “I swear, it’s like you think I’m stupid. Unfortunately, I don’t have time to stand here and talk to a backstabbing goody two shoes. I have to go find another job.”

Before I could respond, Lindsey pushed past me, her shoulder roughly hitting mine, and walked away.

I stood there for a moment and watched her walk out. That had been the strangest encounter I’d had since I started working here. Considering the things I’d seen and heard working as a bartender in a place like this, I thought that was saying something.

Realizing that the club being shut down was not just a huge inconvenience to me but to everyone that worked here, I did my best to be understanding and shrug off the bizarre interaction with Lindsey. Then, I turned around and moved toward the door that would lead me to the lockers at the back of the club.

After I gathered up my things and tossed them into my bag, I thought it might be wise to check and see who else was around. Maybe somebody could give me some additional information as to what was happening with the club moving forward, if anyone had any answers.

Though I knew he wouldn’t be here since it was confirmed that he’d been arrested, I made my way toward Wade’s office. The building was open, and when I’d called yesterday about stopping in, Wade’s wife, Adriana, had indicated she’d be here today. I figured it might be a good idea to talk to her before I walked out and made any permanent decisions.

As I moved toward Wade’s office, I noted that the door wasn’t closed tightly, like I was accustomed to seeing it. Not only that, but I could hear voices coming from inside. Not wanting to interrupt, I approached slowly.

“I just don’t know what we’re going to do about Wade,” Adriana said, her frustration clear as day.

A moment later, Russ, who was one of the other bartenders I worked with, asked, “I don’t even understand how this happened. Everything was kept so tight-lipped. Do you think I need to be worried?”

There was an extended pause before Adriana huffed, “I just had a long talk with Lindsey before you walked in. She obviously doesn’t know everything that’s going on here, and I honestly don’t know what’s going to come of all that just yet, but I told her where the blame lies.”

“Where?” Russ pressed her.

“Sawyer.”

My eyes widened, and my body tensed. *Me?* I barely had any idea as to what was going on, let alone how I could be responsible for it.”

“Sawyer?” Russ repeated. “Really? I never would have thought.”

“Me neither, but I confirmed it when I went down to the police station,” Adriana explained. “That guy that’s been coming in here and chatting her up for weeks now was a detective. Clearly, she knew about what was happening here, and she let him in on it.”

“Are you talking about that guy, Eric?” Russ asked.

“That’s the one,” she confirmed. “And here I’m sure Sawyer thought the guy was actually interested in her.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Eric was a guy who had been coming into the club for several weeks now. It hadn’t been lost on me that he spent an excessive amount of time talking to me, but I never knew he was a detective.

But I realized now just how stupid that was? Because he was a guy who came into a strip club, and he didn’t seem the least bit interested in watching a single girl that was on that stage.

I remembered thinking that it was really nice to feel like I was of some interest to someone in a place where naked women were on display. And while he hadn't officially asked me out on a date, Eric had asked for my phone number the last time I saw him.

He didn't give me any creepy vibes, so I gave it to him. It shouldn't have surprised me that he never called.

Aside from all of that, I was still blown away by what Adriana had just said to Russ. She thought I knew about Wade hiring underage women to work here and then went on to share that information with Eric.

That simply wasn't true.

And if it hadn't been for what I'd heard next, I might have gone in to correct her and explain.

"So, what are you going to do about all of this?" Russ asked Adriana.

Adriana let out a frustrated sigh. "From what I can tell, they don't yet know everything that we've got going on here," she started. "I can't risk Sawyer knowing about it and being able to tell her detective boyfriend anything else, so I've got to take care of it."

"What are you planning?" Russ questioned her.

There was a long stretch of silence, which only served to make me grow incredibly uncomfortable.

Finally, she answered, "She's a liability. I'm going to have to hire someone to take care of her."

In an effort not to gasp out loud, I slapped my hand over my mouth as fear moved through me.

Not again.

Not again.

Why? Why did this always have to happen to me?

Granted, the situation might have been a bit different last time, and I wasn't aware of anyone who had wanted to have me executed because of it, but it was still the same.

I was being blamed for something I didn't do.

This was serious.

Serious enough that I knew I'd finally worn out my welcome.

As quietly as I could, I took off in the direction I came. The moment I made it outside, I ran to my car, got inside, and sped away. By the time I made it to my apartment and started packing, my phone rang.

I didn't recognize the number. I shouldn't have answered, but I was too caught up in everything I'd just learned.

"Hello?"

"Sawyer?" the familiar masculine voice called. "It's Eric."

Eric.

Fucking wonderful.

The man hadn't called me before he'd decided to do something that made me a target. "Eric?"

"Yeah. You gave me your number at the club a few nights ago."

"Oh, right," I said. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

There was definitely an edge of sarcasm in my tone, and I had a feeling Eric was aware of that, because he didn't immediately respond. Following a beat of silence, he said, "I wanted to see if you'd be interested in going out on a date tonight."

"A date?"

"Yeah. I wanted to take you out for dinner. I thought we could get to know each other a little better," he returned.

If he had been standing in front of me, I might have smacked the guy upside the head. He'd spoken with me at great length over the last several weeks. That would have been a great opportunity for him to tell me what he did for a living. Then again, I'm not sure it would have mattered, because I didn't have any information that he might have been seeking.

Not wanting him to catch on to what I was doing now, I didn't think it was wise to turn him down. So, I replied, "Sure. When and where?"

"How about you give me your address and I'll pick you up tonight around six?" he offered.

I had to wonder if he already knew where I lived.

"No offense, Eric, but you just said it yourself," I started. "We're going to be getting to know one another. I'm not sure I'm ready to give you my address. I'm happy to meet you somewhere, though."

A soft chuckle came through the line, and I thought I might find it endearing in any other situation. In this one, I didn't.

"Fair enough. I can't fault a woman for taking steps to keep herself safe, even if I know I'm not a threat," he said. "Does six o'clock at The Crab House work for you?"

He was a threat.

He was absolutely a threat.

He just didn't realize how.

"That's perfect. I'll see you then," I lied.

"Sounds great. I'll talk to you later, Sawyer."

"Bye."

With that, I disconnected the call and got back to what I was doing. When I'd gathered up everything that was worth something to me, I went back to my car and got on the road. I didn't look back.

Not when Adriana called me, asking me to meet up with her for lunch that afternoon.

And certainly not when Eric called after I'd stood him up for dinner that evening.

ONE



Sawyer

Fifteen Years Earlier

Strong protective arms wrapped around me and held on tightly. There was no place on Earth that felt safer than in the arms of my dad. Nothing could calm fear or anxiety better than my father's embrace. It was a hug from my dad that could always remind me of what genuine love felt like.

"This never gets easier," I said, my voice quiet and shaky.

His arms tightened around me. "I know, darling. I feel the same as you do."

"I wish you could stay," I confessed, knowing it wasn't going to make this any easier on him. I couldn't help it. I wanted him to know how much I loved him and how hard it was when he had to leave.

After giving me a gentle squeeze, my dad loosened his hold on me and assured me, "I'll be back before you know it."

Nodding my understanding, I replied, "As long as you promise to come back."

He tipped his head to the side and allowed his eyes to search my face. "You know there's nothing more important to me than getting back home to you and your mom."

It was.

I knew it was.

Kent McKinney was nothing if not a family man. My dad loved us. He adored me, and he worshipped his wife. He had me convinced that my mom and I were the luckiest women in the world.

“I’m afraid,” I admitted. “It’s so scary, Dad.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “And what does that mean?”

I sighed. “It’s enduring the scary stuff that makes us who we are.”

A proud smile washed over his face. “Exactly. And you’re my daughter,” he reminded me. “You’re a McKinney. We’re as tough as they come, Sawyer. There isn’t anything you can’t do.”

This was how it always was between my dad and me. I was going to be heading into my freshman year in high school after the summer was over, and it was safe to say that I’d always been a bit shy and reserved. It took pep talks from my dad to get me to step outside of my shell. Over the years, I started becoming more and more like the woman I wanted to be, and I knew I was a girl my father would be proud of.

But there was a difference between being brave enough to do things I’d never dream of doing and having the strength to not break down when my father was deploying, heading over to Afghanistan. He’d done it before, and while I was aware of him ‘being a soldier’ and not being around, I don’t think it was until we got word of this deployment that I fully grasped the severity of it all.

I couldn’t quite work out whether I was feeling so differently about this deployment because I finally understood the full scope of just how dangerous it was or if it was because this time was actually different. I had this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach that this conversation would be one of the last heart-to-hearts we ever had. My father had taught me to trust my gut instincts, so it was painfully difficult to ignore that feeling. As much as I refused to tell him what I felt about that, I couldn’t say nothing at all.

“I’d be lost if you weren’t here,” I told him.

“Sawyer, listen to me,” he started, his voice firm but oddly comforting. “You and your mother are the most important people in my life. I will fight like hell to get back to the both of you. But if things don’t go as planned, if my time is up, I’ll still always be here with you.”

Tears filled my eyes, and my throat became painfully tight. There wasn’t a chance I’d be able to speak.

Fortunately, my dad knew I was struggling and didn’t wait for a response. Instead, he declared, “I need you to make me a promise.”

Curious, I managed to rasp, “A promise?”

He nodded. “If the absolute worst happens, you need to promise me you’re going to be the girl I know you are. You need to do the tough stuff without being able to get a pep talk from me. You need to push boundaries and be daring. Be brave enough to tackle what seems impossible, because the greatest rewards will come from facing those challenges. I want you to go after all the things you want in this life. My greatest wish is that you’ll live the fullest life possible. I want you to be joyful. I want laughter to fill your days, and I want love to fill your heart.”

My emotions consumed me as tears spilled down my cheeks. Hearing his words, I had to wonder if he already knew what I was feeling. Or, worse, did he have that same dread consuming him?

It seemed impossible.

My father was the epitome of positivity and determination. He couldn’t be afraid. He was never scared.

But maybe he was just really good at hiding the truth. Maybe he was just as terrified about what could happen.

When I remained quiet for far too long after he’d finished speaking, he pleaded, “Promise me, Sawyer. Promise me that you’ll be the bold and brave girl I know you are.”

Unable to stop myself, I threw my arms over his shoulders and hugged him as tightly as I could. Then I whispered, “I promise.”

His arms came around my body and tightened as I committed the feeling of his embrace to memory.

Unfortunately, despite believing I'd never forget it, when my mom and I learned only a few months later that my father would never be coming home to hug me again, I somehow couldn't remember what it felt like to be in his arms.

It nearly destroyed me.



One year later

“There’s no way I’m doing that!”

I couldn't stop myself from smiling at the utter determination on my best friend's face. Her voice was filled with fear as she stared at the bottles in front of us.

“Come on, Faye, it's going to be fun,” I assured her.

Judging by the look on her face a moment later, it was clear Faye did not think this was going to be fun at all. “You're not serious,” she deadpanned. “What could I possibly find entertaining about burning the shit out of my mouth?”

I rolled my eyes as our two other friends, Janelle and Cristina, laughed. “You're being dramatic,” I declared.

“And you're being entirely too adventurous for me,” she argued.

My eyes shifted to Janelle and Cristina. They both shrugged, but it was Janelle who reasoned, “She's kind of got a point.”

I stared at them in disbelief. “It's hot sauce. I'm not asking her to scale Mount Everest,” I fired back.

Janelle and Cristina turned their attention to Faye, and Cristina noted, “She's got a point.”

My shoulders fell. This was how it had been for the better part of the last six months now.

Faye, Janelle, Cristina, and I had been close friends for quite a few years now. The four of us had always been a bit of a reserved group. We were good students, we followed the rules, and we never really did much outside of our comfort zone.

Or, we hadn't until recently.

Following my father's death—something my friends had been there to see me through—it took me a while to get my mind right again. I struggled to remember the most important lessons he'd given me, and I wanted to make him proud.

So, I got up, dusted myself off, and started living the promise I made to him. I was daring to be the bold and brave girl he had been raising me to be, the girl he believed I already was. I intended to honor my word to him and live the fullest life I could by filling my days with laughter and heart with love.

For the last couple of months, I'd been attempting to do just that. Granted, it was only the summer before my sophomore year in high school, so my options were limited. Since I couldn't exactly do things like climb Mount Everest just yet, I settled for smaller goals that I knew I could execute without much hassle to anyone else.

Of course, my dad's advice to me was something I believed could be inspirational to anyone, and that was the reason why I'd attempted to bring my dearest friends in on the fun.

As was not uncommon, Janelle and Cristina generally sat back and watched as Faye scolded me for my crazy ideas. Apparently, I was being far too rebellious by suggesting we see just how hot a variety of hot sauces were.

Before I arrived at Faye's house, I had my mom drive me to the grocery store. I picked up some breaded chicken tenders and more bottles of hot sauce than any one person could need.

We'd just cooked the chicken tenders, and I had lined up every bottle of hot sauce.

Janelle was not on board with this, but even she hadn't pushed away her plate of tenders.

Cristina loved spicy food, so she wasn't the least bit worried.

Faye had clearly thought I'd lost my mind. She was not impressed. Even still, I encouraged her to try it.

"This is not a big deal. There is so much worse you could be doing," I told her. "In fact, I'll say that if—"

"What's going on here?"

At the sound of the masculine voice that had just cut me off, my friends and I all turned to look behind me. When my eyes landed on the guy that was there, I suddenly realized I was the one who needed a cool drink.

Faye had an older brother, but I'd met him two years ago. This guy was not Faye's brother.

"Jesse!" Faye announced as she zoomed past me and toward the newcomer.

She threw her arms around him as he wrapped one around her waist and gave her a hug.

Though I didn't want to peel my eyes away from him, I managed a quick glance at my other two friends. They were both just as dumbfounded at what was happening in front of them.

"Guys, this is my cousin, Jesse. Jesse, these are my best friends," Faye shared. As she lifted her finger in our direction, she clarified, "That's Janelle. Cristina is sitting right next to her, and this one here is Sawyer."

Jesse's eyes connected with mine briefly before he gave us all a nod and said, "It's great to meet you."

There was a moment of silence before Faye asked, "What are you doing here?"

Throwing his thumb over his shoulder, he answered, “My mom wanted me to drop something off for your mom on my way to practice. I have a few minutes before I need to leave, so I thought I would stop and say hello.”

“I’m so glad you came in. I’ve been dying to introduce you to my friends, and I thought I was going to have to wait until you saw us in school together this coming year,” Faye replied before looking at us. “Jesse is going to be a senior this year.”

I didn’t care if he had already graduated. He was, without a doubt, the first boy I found myself attracted to. It had been so strange to me last school year. While all of my friends had seemingly gone boy crazy, I had zero interest. Sure, I’d had guys that I was friendly with and talked to on occasion, but I didn’t have any desire for a boyfriend. Initially, I had simply assumed it was all because I was coping with my father’s death.

Now, I wasn’t so sure.

Because, looking at Jesse, I was beginning to understand some of the sentiments I’d heard from my friends last school year. Suddenly, the phrase ‘he’s so cute’ made sense to me.

Or, it did on some level. Because Jesse exceeded what I would consider to be cute. He was good-looking, but it was on another level than the boys my friends had been interested in.

Maybe it was because he was older.

Maybe it was because it was a genuine attraction.

Or perhaps it was because I couldn’t ignore the way my belly dipped when he looked at me.

“So, what’s going on here?” Jesse asked as he moved in my direction with his eyes focused on the display behind me.

I turned slightly, keeping my eyes on him until he came to a stop beside me.

Okay.

Okay, so it was the way he smelled, too. I wished I knew more about guy’s fragrances, because I didn’t know how to describe what he smelled like other than to note I liked it a lot.

Unsure that I'd ever be able to stand this close to him again, I wanted to be able to find something that would remind me of him. I already knew how easy it was to forget the things that I promised myself I wouldn't.

"We're testing hot sauces," Cristina answered.

I was baffled by her ability to be unaffected by Jesse. How did she just offer up an answer like it was no big deal to be speaking to him?

"Testing hot sauces?" he repeated.

"Yep."

"And what's the consensus?" he asked.

"We haven't gotten that far," Janelle revealed.

His brows pulled together. "Why not?"

"Faye," Cristina declared.

Jesse's eyes went to his cousin, who had resumed her position directly across from me. "What's wrong with you?"

She swept her hand out in front of her, allowing it to stop on me. "Nothing is wrong with me. I'm completely sane. It's my friend Sawyer that has gone bonkers."

In the next instant, I felt Jesse's gaze on me. Though I was terrified I'd make a fool of myself, I twisted my neck and looked up at him. "Is it true? Are you crazy?"

I shook my head.

"She is," Faye insisted.

Jesse's lips twitched. "Why would my cousin say something like that about you?"

By some miracle, I found my voice. "Because she's convinced that by trying something new, she'll be traumatized for life. Apparently, she's not very daring."

A curious look washed over his face. "And you are?"

I shrugged. "I'm trying to be, but I'm not sure hot sauce consumption fits the bill."

Without being asked, Jesse picked a chicken tender up off of my plate. Then, he dipped it into the sauce at the end of the line, the one deemed to be the hottest, before he popped it into his mouth.

He chewed for a few seconds, nodding as he did it. Without revealing anything about how his mouth felt, Jesse picked up another tender, dipped it in the same sauce and held it up to my mouth. “Let’s see what you think,” he urged.

I swallowed hard. This was far too intimate of a gesture for me to handle. I was tempted to take the food from between his fingers to feed myself, but just as I was about to do it, I remembered that I was supposed to be living my best, most joyful life. I was supposed to be bold and daring. So, I parted my lips and allowed Jesse to place the chicken on my tongue.

He removed his hand and watched me as I chewed.

Nerves built in belly.

And a moment later, he asked, “So, what do you think?”

“It’s a little spicy,” I admitted.

“A little?”

“My mouth is burning,” I confessed.

Jesse burst out laughing as I reached for the nearest glass of water. After downing half of it, I set it down and looked at my friends. Janelle and Cristina were wearing looks of hope and excitement that could only be attributed to what they’d just witnessed between Jesse and me.

Faye, on the other hand, was giving me an ‘I told you so’ look. Clearly, she’d missed the part where her cousin had just fed me food.

Before I knew it, I felt Jesse’s hand on my shoulder. “Good job, Sawyer. I’m proud of you. It looks like there’s only one hotter than that. Are you going to do it?”

Be courageous, I thought.

“Are you?” I countered.

Jesse didn't hesitate to pluck a tender off the plate and dip it in the sauce. I did the same.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

The next thing I knew, I found it impossible to focus on the fire in my mouth, because Jesse was watching my mouth as I chewed. We held each other's gazes for a long time after we both swallowed.

Finally, he blurted, "Okay. You win."

Then, he reached for my glass of water and downed the rest of it.

I felt like I was in the middle of a desert, dying of thirst, and for some strange reason, I knew it had nothing to do with the hot sauce I'd just consumed and everything to do with the boy standing in front of me.

Even an hour after he left, well after I'd consumed several glasses of water, I found I still couldn't quench that thirst.

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TWO



Sawyer

One month.

One whole month had passed since I first met Jesse Hale—I learned his last name about a week later.

One month since he'd picked a chicken tender up off my plate, dipped it in hot sauce, and fed it to me.

Despite the fact that it had felt like an eternity since I'd had that experience, it didn't mean that I hadn't thought about him.

I did.

In fact, I thought about him more than was probably normal, considering I barely knew the guy. I mean, we'd only spoken a handful of words to each other, and even though Janelle and Cristina made mention later that evening after he'd left for practice of the interaction I'd had with him, the conversation was never brought up again.

So, I was stuck not knowing anything about him. Or, I was stuck not knowing much about him beyond the fact that he was cute, confident, and constantly on my mind.

It seemed that today would give me the opportunity to change all of that.

Because today was Faye's birthday, and she'd decided she wanted to have a bigger celebration that included both her family and friends. I'd arrived earlier than the start of the

party, along with Janelle and Cristina. The three of us had wanted to help with any preparations.

Initially, I'd been caught up in decorations with my friends while Faye's parents worked on the food. Faye had been lucky enough to have a summer birthday and a house with a pool. I thought it was the perfect combination.

The moment the party started, I found myself holding my breath, waiting for Jesse to show up. We'd all been in the backyard, playing volleyball or swimming in the pool, and every time the sliding glass door opened, my eyes shot in that direction.

When he still hadn't arrived more than an hour after the party started, I finally concluded that he wasn't going to make it. Making that even more apparent was the fact that his mom had arrived. I'd only realized who she was because Faye had introduced me to her, sharing that Aunt Jackie was her mom's sister. I would have had to question my observation skills if I couldn't take one look at Aunt Jackie and know that she was Jesse's mom. He looked so much like her.

Feeling so disappointed, I decided I needed to do something to liven things up. Faye's party wasn't exactly a drag, and everyone was having a fantastic time, but I needed more than just unlimited access to party food and conversation if I was going to forget about my disappointment at not seeing Jesse.

"Hey, Faye," I called out.

My best friend looked over at me and replied, "Yeah?"

I stood up from the lounge chair and walked in her direction. "Do you still have those boogie boards from when I went with you to the beach last summer?"

She nodded. "Why do you ask?"

Smiling, knowing she would think I was crazy, I answered, "I just thought of something that might be fun to do."

Faye rolled her eyes. "I'm not even going to ask. The boogie boards should be somewhere in the garage."

I let out a laugh, loving that she'd finally just gotten to a point where she accepted that this was who I was right now. The girl seeking a bit of adventure. Considering the real reason I was feeling that way at the moment, I figured it was best not to elaborate. If she knew I had a crush on her cousin, Faye hadn't let on. Knowing she might use that against me at some point, I preferred to keep her in the dark.

A few minutes later, I'd managed to locate the boogie boards in the garage. Just as I was about to head back out to the pool, I heard, "You know we're not at the beach, right?"

I spun around at the sound of the voice I hadn't forgotten over the last month and felt a rush of relief move through me.

Jesse was standing there, and his eyes had scanned me from top to toe. The gesture left me speechless as a shiver ran over my bikini-clad body.

When his gaze was focused on my face again, he noted, "I realize you've got the proper attire for using one of those, but I'm not sure what you plan to do with them in a backyard pool. There really aren't any waves."

There was something about Jesse that had rendered me barely able to speak the first time I'd met him. I'd spent the better part of the day today—not to mention over the last week—desperately hoping to see him.

So, I needed to seize the opportunity. It could be another month or more before I'd see him again, and I didn't want to spend that time regretting my choice not to take advantage now.

"How good is your balance?" I asked him.

Jesse tipped his head to the side, a puzzled look washing over his face. "I won't be winning any medals as a gymnast or dancer any time soon, but I'm always up for a challenge."

Without thinking, I grinned and said, "You're my kind of guy, Jesse."

He smirked at the insinuation. "Is that so?"

Horrified by what I'd said, I clarified, "Well, yeah, you said you're always up for a challenge. I'm the same way, and I like to try new things."

"So, what are we trying today?" he asked.

I held a boogie board out to him. "Let's see who can balance on the board longer in the pool."

Jesse took the board from me. "I might be far too distracted to actually win this one."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Come on."

With that, Jesse and I made our way out to the backyard and over to the pool. Ten minutes later, we'd had a whole tournament set up, and everyone was giving it a try. By nature, I'd become a competitive person, but in this realm, I was even more determined to do well. I wanted to impress Jesse.

At one point, he and I wound up being on the boards at the same time. Once I felt steady on the board with the perfect stance, I trained my eyes on his and stared him down.

His lips twitched, clearly noting my intimidation tactics.

A moment later, seemingly out of nowhere, he went down. I stood, tall and victorious, grinning down at him when he popped up out of the water.

"Jesus, you're tough," he grumbled.

"I try," I told him. "Okay, who's next?"

Looking around, I didn't see any takers. That's when Faye declared, "I think Jesse's the only one willing to go against you. Maybe we should try some kind of team sport."

"Like pool volleyball?" I asked.

"What about chicken fight?" Jesse suggested.

"Oh, I love that game," Janelle chimed in.

Cristina stepped forward, jumped in, and said, "I'm in."

Faye and two of her other girl cousins all decided they were down to the play as well, so it was no surprise that Faye's

brother and a couple of guys from school all hopped in.

Jesse moved close to me, threw his arm around my shoulder, and announced, “Everyone needs to find a partner.”

I looked up at him and scrunched up my brows. “Am I your partner?”

“Damn right.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked.

Shooting me a dubious look, he countered, “Are you kidding? You’re the toughest girl here. I’ve never seen determination and drive like you have. We’re definitely winning this game, baby girl.”

My heart skipped a beat at the endearment. No guy had ever given me a name like that, and I loved the way it sounded coming from his lips a whole lot.

I beamed a big smile at him, but before I had the chance to say anything, Faye’s brother shouted, “We’re all paired up.”

“Time to go down, boys,” Jesse declared.

Confusion moved through me, but the next thing I knew, Jesse had dipped below the surface of the water, wrapped his fingers around my thighs, and slipped his head between them from behind.

Then, I was being hoisted into the air on top of Jesse’s shoulders. My eyes moved through the rest of the girls, and I tried to determine if they were all feeling the same thrill that I was.

I mean, I was on my crush’s shoulders, his hands were on my thighs, and he’d chosen me as his partner. It was taking everything not to freak out, because I knew he was counting on me to win this game.

Unfortunately, I didn’t see any worry or concern on the faces of the girls who were now my competitors. That was all it took for me to put my game face on and ignore the feel of Jesse’s hands on my thighs.

Hormones be damned.

The fight started, and it was just as Jesse had decided it would be. I was far too determined and competitive to not give it my all. One by one, Jesse and I took the other teams down, and all throughout it, it was his voice I heard encouraging me.

Several rounds later, Jesse and I had been deemed the unbeatable team. And even if we spent the rest of the afternoon and evening celebrating with Faye and the rest of her friends and family, it still wasn't enough for me. If I had to wait another month to see Jesse again, I was certain I'd lose my mind.



It was nearly two months before it happened again.

“Hey, Sawyer.”

At the sound of Jesse's voice, I looked up from where I was busy writing in my journal and saw him approaching.

“Hi, Jesse,” I greeted him as he sat down beside me on the brick wall in the courtyard of our school.

“What are you doing here by yourself?” he asked.

“Just checking another thing off my list,” I answered.

A crease formed between his brows. “Your list?”

I nodded. “Well, technically, right now, I'm waiting for my mom to pick me up. I stayed after school today to try out for the lead in the play, and auditions just ended a little while ago.”

“The lead? I didn't know you were in the drama club,” he replied.

I let out a laugh. “I'm not. In fact, this is the first time I've ever done any acting.”

He seemed surprised by my declaration. “Really? What made you try out?”

For the next several seconds, my eyes searched his handsome face. I felt like I could have stayed there for hours just looking at him. The truth was that I probably would have done just that had it not been for the fact that he called my name. “Sawyer?”

I shook my head and apologized, “I’m sorry. I, well, I auditioned because of this.”

That’s when I held my journal up between the two of us.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Lowering it back to my lap, my eyes followed it. Nobody knew about it. Not my mom. Not Faye. Not Janelle or Cristina.

I was the only one, and for some reason, I felt compelled to share it with Jesse.

“It’s my journal that has my list,” I shared when I returned my focus to him.

“What’s on your list?”

I swallowed hard. It was one thing to make mention of the journal and the list. It was something else entirely to tell him what was on the list. Telling him that would likely lead to other questions.

But it had been a year. In fact, it had been a year to the day today since my father had died. I started to think that perhaps it wasn’t a coincidence that Jesse was here with me while I’d been jotting things down.

“It’s all of the things I want to do in my life,” I finally confessed.

“Like a bucket list?” he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I guess you could call it that.”

“Why do you hesitate to call it that?” he questioned me.

I was honest when I replied, “Because it feels like so much more than that to me.”

There was a brief stretch of silence between us before Jesse said, “It sounds like there’s a story behind this.”

“Yeah,” I confirmed quietly.

“I’d love to hear it if you want to share.”

I didn’t need to think too hard about it. Convinced that Jesse wasn’t here for no reason at all, I had already made my choice. I wanted to tell him. He might not ever know just how special that made this moment, but I guess it didn’t really matter if he knew anyway.

The bottom line was that I was finally going to share it, and that was all that mattered.

“I’m trying to be the girl my dad believed I was,” I revealed.

I watched as his expression changed and his features softened. He didn’t share whatever he was thinking. It was as though he knew I hadn’t even scratched the surface of what I had to say. So, he waited patiently and simply gave me a moment to prepare myself to deliver the next part to him.

“It was a year ago today when my father died,” I started. “He had been deployed to Afghanistan, and a few months after he left, my mom and I learned that he’d been killed.”

“I’m so sorry, Sawyer,” he lamented. “I didn’t mean to bring up something so painful.”

I shook my head. “No. No, it’s okay. I just... this is actually the first time I’ve ever really talked to anyone about this. Anyway, we had a very long talk just before he left, and it took me some time after he died, but I eventually decided to take his words to heart.”

Jesse didn’t hesitate to respond. “I’m sure he’s very proud of you.”

Smiling, I nodded. “He always was. Even if I don’t accomplish whatever it is that I set out to do, even if I don’t get the lead role in this play, it’s the mere fact that I tried it that he’d be most proud of.”

“Do you think you’ll get the part?” Jesse asked.

I huffed. “Let’s just say that I’m not an actress. I won’t be disappointed if they don’t choose me.”

“I hope you get it,” he said.

“Oh yeah? Why is that?” I questioned him.

His voice dipped a bit lower when he replied, “Because I would like to come and watch you.”

With that confession in hand, I knew I’d start praying over the next few days that I wouldn’t be chosen. Even if I considered myself to be brave, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to perform if I knew that Jesse was watching me.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I warned him.

He chuckled and returned, “Alright. Then, tell me what else is on there.”

“What?”

Jesse jerked his chin toward my journal and clarified, “Your list. What other things are you planning to do?”

I didn’t know what compelled me to do it, but I held the journal out to him. Jesse hesitated briefly before he took it from my hands.

After he opened it, I found my belly had started trembling. For some reason, I was worried about what he might think of me.

“Go skydiving,” he murmured, reading one of the items on my list. “Release baby turtles into the ocean, be part of a flash mob, go white water rafting... these all sound like a lot of fun.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so, too.”

“Oh, wait. This is interesting,” he declared.

“What?”

Jesse tore his eyes away from my journal, twisted his neck to look in my direction, and cocked an eyebrow at me. “Sunbathe topless?”

Heat hit my cheeks. I knew I shouldn't have been embarrassed, but I couldn't help it. The way he was looking at me made it impossible to feel any other way. And I realized that wasn't his intention, but he was far more confident in this arena.

"I think that's going to be one of the more difficult ones," I reasoned.

"I'll go with you for moral support and encouragement," he offered with a smile on his face.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Yeah, I bet."

"I'm serious."

"I know. That's just it."

The silence stretched between us again. It wasn't uncomfortable, but I definitely felt something pass between us. Something I couldn't begin to explain.

"In all seriousness, Sawyer, this is an incredible plan," Jesse eventually said. "You've got a lot of really cool ideas on here, and some of them are particularly bold. I'd find it very impressive if you attempted even a small fraction of them."

"I'm going to do them all," I assured him.

"You think?"

I dipped my chin. "I know."

Jesse handed my journal back to me just as I saw my mom's car pull into the lot. "If you ever want someone to do any of these with, especially the sunbathing one, I'd be happy to join you. You know I'm always up for a challenge."

"I do, and I'll keep that in mind."

Jerking his head to my mom's car, he asked, "Is this your ride?"

"Yeah."

He stood and held his hand out to me. I paused a moment before I placed my hand in his. Tingles ran up my arm at his

touch, but I did my best to ignore them as I stood up in front of him.

“It was cool talking to you, Sawyer,” he said.

As warmth moved through me, I replied, “You too, Jesse. Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime, baby girl,” he returned with a wink.

I was momentarily speechless. The endearment mixed with the wink was more than I had been prepared for. Somehow, I pulled myself together, said goodbye, and walked toward my mom’s car with butterflies in my belly.

A couple of weeks later, by some strange miracle, I got the lead part in the school play.

And just as he promised he would, Jesse was there a few months later when I had to perform. Seeing him in the audience sent my heart racing.

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THREE



Sawyer

Two years eight months later

“Come on, Sawyer.”

I couldn’t help myself from feeling such an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. So much had changed over the last few years, and those words were proof of that change.

Faye, Cristina, Janelle, and I were out at the quarry, and it was the three of them who were now encouraging me to be a little daring.

Granted, I didn’t necessarily need the push, because I had every intention of following behind them, but I loved knowing that they’d all sort of come out of their shells and opened their eyes to the adventure ahead of them.

The four of us had just finished our last final exam for our senior year in high school. Our graduation ceremony was in a week, and we had decided to celebrate the fact that we were finally done with school. Of course, college was on the horizon for the three of them, so they weren’t completely done, but this was a huge milestone.

I hadn’t quite decided just yet what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and I’d taken some time to really think about my future and how I wanted to spend the next few years. I eventually concluded that continuing with school immediately wasn’t where I wanted to go.

So, I was taking the next year off to travel and to cross some items off of my list. While I'd managed to accomplish a few things on the list, it seemed I was constantly coming up with new ideas of things I wanted to do, so the list always seemed to be growing.

I wasn't afraid of that, though.

I was excited.

I was ready for the challenges ahead of me, and I couldn't wait to start really living the life my dad had always wanted for me.

Truthfully, I couldn't say that I hadn't been living some of that over the last couple of years. I'd thoroughly enjoyed my high school years. I continued to do well in school, and I had the best three friends a girl could ever ask for.

After I'd had that discussion with Jesse, where I shared the truth about my list with him, I told the girls about it. I didn't tell them about Jesse, but I did tell them about all of the things I was planning and why I'd decided to do it.

Once they knew why there had been such a change in me and my determination to try so many new things, they even offered to do some of them with me. I loved that they were all willing to try, and it showed me just how much they cared about me. I didn't know how it was possible, but the four of us grew even closer.

Then, there was Jesse.

I'd managed to see him with some regular frequency throughout my sophomore and his senior year in high school. Our relationship hadn't ever progressed beyond just friendship, but there had been some substantial flirting between us.

Unfortunately, I suffered the loss of physical closeness with him when, after he graduated, he decided to enlist in the Marines. The only thing that made that easier was writing to him.

Before Jesse left, he asked for my address. About two weeks later, I received my first letter in the mail. From there,

the two of us continued to mail letters back and forth, and I absolutely loved everything about those twelve weeks.

After Jesse went from being a recruit to being a Marine, our relationship changed. I was no longer receiving letters from him, but I did manage to see him once when he first returned to Steel Ridge for leave following basic training.

But then he was off again.

Months went by where I didn't have any interaction with him.

It broke my heart, because I missed him terribly. Even still, I knew that what he was doing was important.

He had come home to Steel Ridge a few times over the last couple of years, but he was mostly away. Fortunately, I found ways to keep myself busy and distracted with school, my list, and my friends.

And considering I was now no longer needing to spend my time trying to convince them to step out and have a little extra fun, it wasn't so difficult to distract myself.

"Sawyer!" Faye called out.

"I'm coming," I returned.

Faye, Janelle, and Cristina had all taken their turns jumping into the water from the rock cliff, and now it was my turn. The drop was substantial, but I wasn't the least bit worried. I'd been here before. In fact, the girls and I had come here a handful of times last summer. But jumping into the water did require some effort and a slight running start in order to propel our bodies out and away from the rock face of the cliff.

Recognizing that they'd moved far enough away from where I would land, I moved forward at a quickened pace and jumped. A few seconds later, I plunged into the cool water.

When I rose above the surface and brushed my hair back from my face, I said, "This is a hell of a way to celebrate the end of school. I love it here."

“I still can’t believe we’re officially done,” Cristina chimed in.

Janelle swam a little closer to where we were and added, “I’m so glad to be finished, but I’m going to miss some things at Steel Ridge High School.”

“Like what?” I asked, a bit of disbelief laced through my tone.

I couldn’t begin to imagine what she’d miss. I mean, I had good times with my friends, and I certainly had a lot of memories from my time in school that I wouldn’t soon forget. At the top of that list would probably be standing on the stage in the auditorium to perform in the school play when Jesse was there.

But I couldn’t say that I was upset about being done.

I was thrilled. I could finally move on with my life and have a whole new set of experiences.

“I don’t know,” Janelle replied. “I liked a lot of my teachers, and we’ve obviously had so much fun together over the years. It’s just very bittersweet.”

“Well, I’m with you on the good times we’ve had, but I can’t say I’m anything but thrilled that I’ll never have to walk into a class with Mr. Mills again,” Faye huffed.

We all let out a laugh before I said, “I know that you all are going away to different colleges in the fall, but I don’t think we’re going to lose touch with each other. Whenever we’re all home, if it’s on holiday breaks or over the summer, we have to make plans to see each other regularly. Friendships like ours don’t just stop because we’re growing up.”

“Agreed,” Cristina declared.

“So, I think it’s time to jump in again,” Faye announced.

I laughed again and asked, “When did you become the adventurous one?”

Faye didn’t respond. She merely rolled her eyes at me and swam in the opposite direction. Janelle, Cristina, and I followed.

We climbed out on the side and hiked up to the high point on the east side of the quarry to the same rock face that we'd jumped from before, the same spot that everyone who came here jumped from. There was a group of people a bit farther down the water from where we were, so the four of us pretty much had the spot to ourselves.

Without an ounce of hesitation, Faye took off and leapt off the edge. I smiled, feeling so proud of her and how much she'd pushed herself to try new things now. She was truly enjoying herself.

Faye barely resurfaced when Cristina went charging forward and sprang off the rocky ledge.

Janelle waited a bit longer than Cristina had. She gave herself a few seconds to work up the courage to jump, and though I didn't know it at the time, I'd later find myself wishing I had given her the extra time and gone ahead of her.

Because in the instant that Janelle finally took her turn, everything changed.

She got a running start—as we all did when we took our turn—and just as she was about to leap off, the ground gave out beneath her. As a huge chunk of the rocky cliff dropped off the side, Janelle's body went down with it.

“Janelle!” I screamed, moving to the edge a little farther down from where the ground fell out.

What I saw was something I knew I'd never forget as long as I lived.

Nearly every spot on Janelle's body hit the cliff on the way down. The force with which she hit the rocks and the fact that she continued to fall on the rough and jagged surfaces was unbearable to watch. In that moment, I knew I was watching one of my best friends die a horrific death. There wasn't a chance she was going to survive.

I was paralyzed with fear as that reality moved through me.

But then the screams cut through, and that's when I shifted my attention away from Janelle.

The part of the cliff that had broken off and started plummeting down was heading straight for Faye and Cristina. It was too large, and they had no time.

In the next instant, I watched as that boulder landed on top of them, sending them beneath the surface of the water.

“No!” I shouted, praying they’d come back up while knowing it wasn’t going to happen.

For a brief moment, I was too stunned to move. But then I realized that if I was wrong and there was a chance they survived, I needed to get in and help them.

So, as I looked down to the opposite end and yelled, “Help! Please help!”

When the people noticed me waving my arms, they started running in my direction. I jumped off the edge and crashed into the water. I swam as fast as I could to where my friends had been in the water, and when I went under, I couldn’t find them.

I’d thought that they were in the shallower spots and that I might be able to get to them, but if they’d been pulled farther out, it was easily forty to sixty feet deep. I’d never be able to get to them.

“Oh, God,” I rasped, swimming toward the rock wall. I had to try to get to Janelle. “Oh, God, please be alive.”

I made it to the edge, hoisted myself up out of the water, and climbed over the rocky terrain to where I saw her bloodied, battered, and lifeless body lying there.

“Janelle,” I cried. “Janelle, please.”

She didn’t move. She didn’t answer.

And when I finally made it by her side and put two fingers on her neck to feel for a pulse, there wasn’t one.

“No, please, no,” I begged. “Help!”

Tears were rolling down my face, my heart was in my throat, and my stomach was twisted in knots.

I stayed there with my hands on my best friend's body and cried for what felt like hours before anyone else made it to where I was.

Even though I continued to see exactly what had happened as it replayed over and over in my mind, I said, "I don't know what happened. I don't know how this happened."

Eventually, someone helped to usher me away from her. As I sat on the ground, I cried while my body trembled.

My three best friends were dead.

Everything else was a blur.



There was no graduation ceremony for Faye.

There was no graduation ceremony for Janelle.

There was no graduation ceremony for Cristina.

Instead, funeral services were held.

Cristina's was two days ago, Janelle's was yesterday, and Faye's was today. The day they were all supposed to walk in their graduation ceremony, an event they'd all worked so hard to be a part of.

Now, there was nothing.

There was nothing for them to look forward to or to work toward. Their families wouldn't be able to celebrate any more special occasions with them.

And it was all my fault.

Word traveled fast, and people were already talking.

I'd decided days ago that I wouldn't be attending the high school graduation ceremony. I never would have gone anyway, knowing that the only place I'd want to be is at Faye's funeral.

But the truth was, the kids from school had already started sending me horrible text messages. I didn't even know who half of them were from, and while I might have advised anyone who'd received the messages that I did to contact the authorities, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Because even if I knew what had happened, even if I knew that there was no way for any of us to predict what was going to happen that day, I started to realize that it *was* my fault.

Everyone in school knew who I was. Hell, I'd been voted *Most Daring* in the class superlatives. So, why was it Cristina, Janelle, and Faye who'd paid the price?

The grief I felt was unbearable. It consumed all of me. My mom had been wonderful, doing everything to support me and take care of me through this. Even under the cloud of despair, I knew my mom was thinking one thing: her daughter was experiencing an incredible loss for the second time in her life.

And now, she'd brought me here to Faye's funeral, and I couldn't remember a time I'd felt such sorrow and fear all at the same time.

This was it.

This was the last chance I had to say goodbye to her.

For some reason, I was stuck, unable to move beyond the tree that was easily two or three hundred feet away from where everyone was congregating.

"Are you ready?" my mom asked.

I shook my head. "No. I just want to stay here for a few minutes."

"I'll wait with you," she said.

"Go," I urged quietly. "One of us should be there at the start."

"But Sawyer, you—"

"I'll be okay, Mom," I insisted, cutting her off. "I promise. Please, go and be with Faye's family."

There was a long pause before my mom finally gave me a nod and started walking away.

Then, I watched from a distance as everyone bowed their heads, wiped their tears, and mourned the loss of a beautiful woman. No matter that I understood their pain and anguish, nor that I wanted to be right there with them, I couldn't bring myself to approach.

Deep down, I knew it was because I was afraid.

It didn't matter that this was Faye's family and that they'd known me for years. It didn't matter that they knew how much I loved her. How could I face them?

I stood in that spot by the tree for what felt like hours until, eventually, the crowd began to disperse. People began walking away, moving toward their cars. I saw Faye's dad all but carrying his wife to the car that would be taking them home, and I didn't even make the attempt to go and speak to them.

For the first time since my father died, I truly felt like a coward. There wasn't a single thing about me that was brave or courageous.

When the crowd had thinned substantially, I finally started walking forward. On my way there, I saw him.

Jesse.

He was sitting in one of the chairs beside her gravesite, a chair that had probably been occupied by one of her parents only minutes before. His body was hunched over, his elbows resting on his thighs, and his hands clasped in front of him.

Something obstructed the view I had to him, and I was forced to look away. It was my mother, walking in my direction.

"Are you okay, honey?" she asked.

Not wanting her to feel even more concerned than she already was, I gave her a nod. "I'll be quick," I promised.

She lifted her hand to the side of my face and cupped my cheek. "Take as much time as you need. I'll wait for you by the car."

“Thanks, Mom,” I murmured.

By the time I made it there, nearly everybody was gone.

Everybody but him.

One look at him, and there was no question he was heartbroken. My heart ached for him.

Without saying a word, I walked over and sat down in the chair beside him. For a long time, neither one of us said anything. I took a few moments to say a silent prayer for Faye. It broke my heart.

Shortly afterward, it was the sound of Jesse’s voice that nearly killed me.

“If you had asked me if I thought I’d ever be here watching as they buried my beautiful cousin, I’d have laughed in your face,” he started, his voice ragged. “I was certain that if anyone was going to die young, it would be me. I was the one with a proclivity for the extreme. Faye had a penchant for safety.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. For so many years, that was precisely how things were. I might not have been around Jesse for as long as I’d known and been friends with his cousin, but in the time that I did, it was clear who was the one more willing to take risks.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Jesse,” I said softly.

The silence stretched between us for a long time. I didn’t know what else to say, so I remained quiet.

But when Jesse took advantage of that and spoke next, I wished I would have found a way to speak first.

“She was ours,” he began again. His voice was now slightly agitated. “She was ours, and now she’s gone because she made a stupid, stupid decision. Faye had her whole life ahead of her. A brilliant future. And just like that, it’s all gone. For what reason? This wasn’t her, Sawyer. This wasn’t my cousin who did this. It never should have been her.”

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

Jesse believed what everyone else at school believed. He held me responsible. He knew I was the one who had always been the fearless one. I was the reason Faye, Cristina, and Janelle wound up at the quarry that day.

It was all too clear to me.

Jesse was the one person who I thought might understand the nature of what happened. I was certain he'd know that it was an accident. But the sound of his voice, the words he spoke, and the look of disgust on his face told me everything I needed to know.

Jesse blamed me.

Worse, I had little doubt that he wished it had been me that died instead of her.

So, I swallowed past the painful tightening in my throat and rasped the only words I could offer. "I'm so sorry."

Then, I got up and walked away.

Jesse never came after me.

Then again, I didn't expect that he would.

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FOUR



Sawyer

Present Day

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

That had to be true, right? I kept repeating that sentiment over and over, hoping it wasn't all just a lie.

I had to believe it, because it was the only thing that I could tell myself that would keep me here instead of driving me to turn around and head right back to Maryland.

I'd been gone for nearly twelve years.

Twelve whole years.

Not long after Faye's funeral, I realized I couldn't stay. I hadn't planned to leave Steel Ridge so soon after receiving my high school diploma, but then again, I hadn't exactly expected to lose my three best friends, either.

As sudden as the move had been, it was even more unexpected that I'd be away for as long as I had been. Unfortunately, circumstances forced me to keep my distance.

I left, cut myself off from everyone but my mom, and basically became a ghost. Maybe that made me a coward, but I couldn't handle it. And I knew that it was only breaking my mom's heart every time she looked at me, because there wasn't a damn thing she could do to fix it for me.

So, I wound up in Maryland, got a job, and never looked back.

But now, after all this time, I had returned.

Steel Ridge.

So much had changed, and yet, everything was the same.

I'd done what I could do to protect myself from this place for all these years—to hide from the guilt, the blame, and the crushing disappointment. It was awful.

And if it wasn't for the fact that this was a life-or-death situation, I knew I never would have stepped foot in this town again.

They hated me.

All of them.

Nobody wanted me here, especially not him.

But I prayed that the time and distance might have done something to soften his heart toward me. If nothing else, I convinced myself that he would have never wanted to see me dead if he could prevent it. I didn't know how I managed to tell myself that was the case when I already knew precisely how he felt about that, too.

His words that day at the cemetery had destroyed me, but I believed he wouldn't still be holding a grudge. This was Jesse, after all.

I knew he wasn't in the right state of mind all those years ago when I sat beside him, and he said all that he did. He had been consumed with grief. Everybody was.

I had weeks and weeks of letters from him that came before then, which showed me just who he was.

Plus, I was here.

Here being Harper Security Ops.

If Jesse wasn't the man in those letters, if he wasn't the guy I'd believed he was all those years ago, he wouldn't be working here.

Yes, even without remaining present in Steel Ridge, I still knew what was happening here. Not only did my mom keep

me updated on things happening in town, but I also did a bit of my own research. Once I learned about Jesse being a part of the Harper Security Ops team, I did a little digging.

I learned about the company, what they did, and what they stood for. That was the reason why I knew that Jesse was the man in those letters.

But if I was being honest, it still terrified me to be sitting here in my car at the far side of the parking lot in the middle of winter. Because I could have been wrong.

It wasn't that I believed Jesse wasn't a good man. Deep down, I knew he was incredible. But maybe his kindness, compassion, or even pity might not extend to someone like me. It was possible that he hated me now as much as he did the last day I saw him.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

I'd never wanted anything to be truer in all my life than that single statement.

I could handle shock and surprise. I'd take the anger and the blame. But I didn't think I could bear it if he still hated me.

The next thing I knew, the front door to the building opened, and two men walked out.

It might have been twelve years since I last saw him, but I recognized him immediately. Jesse had come out just behind another guy who was about the same height as he was. They both had dark hair, but where the other guy was handsome with his neatly groomed facial hair and solid body, he didn't compare to Jesse.

The guy I'd crushed on for years was even more breathtaking than I'd considered him to be back then. Though he'd always been a bigger guy, it was plain to see that he'd put on a fair bit of muscle over the years. The last time I'd seen him, Jesse's hair had been a bit shorter, but now it was slightly longer on top and much more unruly.

God, he was gorgeous.

I was suddenly unsure if I could do this.

No.

No, I wasn't going to back down. If there was ever a time in my life to channel the words my father had said to me years ago, this was it.

I had to be brave.

I had to do this and hope for the very best possible outcome.

So, I took in a deep breath as I watched him move away from the building with his friend as he laughed about something the other guy said.

For a brief moment, it took me back. Seeing him with that smile on his face, remembering him laughing with me, nostalgia set in. He'd always been so happy every time I'd been around him. Every time except for one.

Knowing I'd been responsible for that, knowing that he blamed me, I felt nothing but grateful for the fact that he was now laughing. He seemed genuinely happy, and I loved that for him.

Before he could get too far away, I opened the door to my car and stepped out. The minute I closed the door, both men looked in my direction.

Jesse immediately stopped moving and stared.

Yep. Just as I had expected.

Shock and surprise.

It remained to be seen whether he still held any anger or if he hated me.

Wanting to leave it up to him, I stayed in my spot beside my car. If he walked away, I'd give him the peace he deserved and do the same.

I promised myself that I wouldn't come here and cause him any additional heartache, even if I knew how badly it would hurt to walk away a second time. Even if I knew that doing so could result in me winding up dead.

Not taking my eyes off him, I watched as his lips moved and he said something to the man beside him. That guy put his hand on Jesse's shoulder, close to his neck, where he gave it a squeeze before letting him go. Then, he walked away as Jesse started coming in my direction.

With each step he took toward me, I felt the nerves in my belly grow. It might have been cold outside, but I knew that wasn't the reason my body was trembling.

I was doing everything I could to brace for this initial encounter after so long, but my efforts were futile. There was nothing that could ever prepare me for it.

Jesse came to a stop in front of me, and his eyes roamed over my face. I did the same with him. Neither of us said a word.

After too much time passed without a word, I realized this was on me. He'd opened the door by walking my way, so I had to be the one to speak.

"Hi, Jesse," I said softly.

His eyes narrowed on me. "What are you doing here, Sawyer?"

Okay, so that wasn't exactly the warm welcome I'd been hoping for, but it was certainly not unexpected.

"I... well... I was hoping you might be able to help me," I answered honestly.

More surprise moved through his features as his brows shot up. "Help you?"

I nodded.

"I don't even know where you've been all this time, and you want to just walk back into my life after twelve years and ask for my help?" he fired back.

Right.

This wasn't going anywhere good.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "If you want me to leave, I'll go. It's just that..." I trailed off, trying to figure out how to explain

this to him. I hadn't quite figured it out when I started rambling. "I moved to Maryland, and I was working at this club called Sweet Temptations. There were some things that happened, and now the place is shut down, but I went in earlier today to get my personal belongings and—"

"Sawyer, I'm sorry that you're having problems, but I'm not sure I'm the guy who can help you," he clipped, cutting me off.

That was just the thing.

He was the only guy I trusted that could help me.

"Right," I murmured. "I'm sorry, Jesse. I never should have come back."

With that, I turned around and moved to open my car door. When I did, he spat, "You never should have left to begin with."

I blinked my eyes and stumbled back as though I'd been physically assaulted. "What?"

"You heard me. With all that happened, you just picked up and left. You gave me your lame-ass apology that day you sat beside me, and then you got up, walked away, and never came back. I never thought you'd do that. If it was anybody else, I'd have expected it. Not from you. You were never the kind of girl who ran away from anything," he declared, his voice harsh.

Sadly, I couldn't dispute his words.

I hadn't ever been that kind of girl. But once I knew the truth about how he felt, I couldn't bring myself to stick around.

My hand was resting on the top of my open car door when I replied, "You're right. But apart from my mom, there was nothing left here for me to run away from."

At the same moment that hurt moved through his features and completely caught me off-guard, there was a bit of confusion there as well.

I figured I'd clarify things for him. "She was the only one who didn't doubt my sorrow for one second. With all that came my way after what happened, I was determined to stick around for her. Because I believed that she wasn't the only one who'd felt that way. Then I learned differently when you showed me you were just like everybody else."

Something changed in his expression, but I didn't wait around for him to respond. I was about ten seconds away from completely breaking down. If things had been different, I might not have cared that I cried in front of Jesse. In fact, I'd have probably hoped he'd wrap me up in his arms when I did.

But things weren't different, and he had made it clear.

"It's evident to me that you still hate me," I said once I was behind the wheel of my vehicle.

With my parting shot, I closed my door, started the car, and drove away.

As usual, Jesse didn't make an attempt to follow me.

What had I been thinking?

I was a fool to believe that Jesse would have been okay with seeing me. There was no good reason I had that indicated he would ever be in a place where he'd want me around him.

But it wasn't more than a few seconds after I pulled out of the Harper Security Ops parking lot, driving away from Jesse, that I realized I probably shouldn't have been behind the wheel of a car.

Despite knowing how he felt about me all those years ago, I'd managed to convince myself that going to him now wouldn't be a bad idea. Why did I think that he'd see me and suddenly forget how much he hated me?

Desperation, maybe?

There was no other explanation I had for subjecting myself to what I just went through.

So many years. So much time.

I could feel the bitterness creeping in. Time was something else. I'd spent twelve years feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders, crushed by the knowledge that there wasn't a single person in the world besides my mother who cared about me. And Jesse had obviously spent twelve years relieved that I hadn't been around.

Or had he?

On the one hand, it was clear that time had been kind to him. God, he was still as handsome as ever. And there was no question he was happy and successful in his career. I was willing to bet anything that he loved what he did.

But on the other hand, his words to me before I raced out of there had me questioning everything I thought I knew.

You never should have left to begin with.

What did he mean by that? Why would he say that?

There was no way he actually believed that I should have stayed in a place where everybody hated me. Maybe running away from it all was out of character for me back then, but how could he have been surprised that I did?

He had to know. He had to know just how difficult it was. Maybe he didn't know everything I'd experienced from everyone in town following that awful day at the quarry, but there wasn't a chance he didn't know it was happening.

You were never the kind of girl who ran away from anything.

Fuck him. Fuck him for believing I had any other option.

How dare he try to make me feel bad about the choice I'd been forced to make? There was no other option for me. Did he expect me to stay here and endure all that was coming my way?

All I felt now was regret.

Regret that I didn't tell him precisely what I thought about his stupid opinions of me. He thought he knew me well enough to make assumptions about the kind of girl I was, but

he didn't know me well enough to know that I was beyond devastated by what happened to my friends?

Yeah. Fuck him.

Because he might not have believed I was the girl he thought I was, but it was just as clear that he wasn't the man I thought he was, either.

The real Jesse I knew all those years ago wouldn't have treated me the way he did today. That Jesse would have listened to me. He would have comforted me.

Mostly, he wouldn't have made me regret coming back here.

It was on that thought that my emotions started bubbling to the surface. Anger and bitterness were fading while sadness and despair took hold.

I had nobody.

There was not a single soul on my side, except for my mother.

Coming to that realization was nothing short of devastating. On some level, I guess I knew it all along, but somewhere in the deepest corners of my mind, I had convinced myself that time would have healed some wounds. That I'd be able to come back and see Jesse and things would be okay.

I was wrong.

I was a fool.

And I should have stayed away.

At the very least, I should have pulled out of the Harper Security Ops parking lot and gotten right back on the road to somewhere else. Anywhere other than Steel Ridge.

I didn't do that.

Instead, I drove to my mom's house.

Somehow, despite all the heartbreak I was feeling, I successfully made it to the front door without breaking down.

But the minute that door opened, and I saw my mom's stunned expression, I lost it. I burst into tears the moment she said my name.

And after she put her arms around me and ushered me inside, I continued to cry.

It took some time, but I finally managed to settle myself down. My mom led me into the living room, and the moment we both sat down, she asked, "Are you okay? What are you doing here?"

It was no surprise she was shocked.

I hadn't been back here even once since I'd left. My mom had come to visit me down in Maryland, but those were the only times we saw one another.

So, I understood part of the reason why she had such an edge of disbelief in her tone. Of course, that disbelief was also mixed with loads of concern.

That's where I was stuck.

If my encounter with Jesse had gone better than it had, I might have been more willing to share the full truth about what I was doing here.

But now, I wasn't so sure that was a wise idea. My mom didn't know Jesse very well, but she had met him once when we were both still in high school. I'd introduced him at that point as Faye's cousin.

Of course, I'd gotten those letters from him when he was off at boot camp to become a Marine. She never said she suspected anything was going on between us, but that might have been because I insisted we were just friends.

If my mom knew that I was in trouble now, there wasn't a question in my mind that she'd be reassured knowing that Jesse was looking out for me. My father's years of service had instilled a sense of appreciation for members of the military and overwhelming confidence in their abilities.

But since Jesse made it abundantly clear that he was not interested in helping me at all, I couldn't bring myself to give

my mom the truth. She'd be worried, and there was no denying she already did enough of that when it came to me.

"I missed you so much," I replied.

"I've missed you, too."

"I thought I'd surprise you with a visit," I told her.

Warmth moved through her expression as her features softened. "I'm so glad you're here, but I'm concerned. You haven't been back in years, and you burst into tears the moment I opened the door. Is everything alright?"

Everything was not alright. I couldn't tell her that, though. She worried enough as it was.

I sighed. "It's just... it's been so long since I've seen you and been back in this town, in this house. It's a lot."

That might not have been the full truth, but at least I wasn't downright lying to her.

"How long are you staying?"

That wasn't something I had considered.

My initial plan had been to stick around as long as was necessary to keep myself alive. Considering the one guy I believed who could keep me that way wasn't interested in doing so, I didn't think it was wise to be here for any extended period of time. If Jesse couldn't stand the sight of me after all these years, there was little confidence that anyone else would.

I couldn't just pack up and leave immediately without confusing her, but I refused to stick around, too.

Smiling at her, because I didn't want her to know how terrified I felt, I answered, "Just a couple of days."

If I hadn't been paying such close attention to her, I might have missed the disappointment that moved through her. Just as determined to keep her true feelings from me, my mom perked up and declared, "We're going to enjoy every single second of your visit."

She might have been hiding her sorrow, but there wasn't a question that she was that happy about having me around,

even if it was only for a short time.

“That sounds fantastic.”

“Let’s start with dinner,” she suggested as she stood from the couch. “Come out and keep me company in the kitchen while I cook.”

After the day I’d had, nothing sounded better than one of my mom’s home-cooked meals.

So, burying the interaction I’d had with Jesse somewhere deep in the back of my mind, I stood up and followed my mom to the kitchen.

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FIVE



Jesse

It's clear to me that you still hate me.

Still?

For two days now, I hadn't been able to get the conversation I'd had with Sawyer out of my head.

Sawyer McKinney.

The girl who'd captured my heart in a very big way so many years ago. The same girl who then sat beside me during one of the most devastating moments of our lives and gave me hope that we'd both be okay as long as we relied on one another. The girl who walked away from me that day and left town never to show up again for twelve years.

She thought I *still* hated her.

There wasn't a time in my life from the moment I met her when I hated her. Or to be fair, I certainly hadn't hated her up until the point she walked away and left without a word.

I had been granted a very short leave so that I could return home for my cousin's funeral, but immediately afterward, I had to leave Steel Ridge. At the first chance I had, I reached out to Sawyer, but she had changed her number. Though I wasn't personally very big on it, I even went so far as to try to find her on social media.

There was not a trace of her.

It became clear to me that she wasn't interested in being found.

That had been the point at which all the love I had for her had turned to something else. She destroyed all the feelings I had for her, and I convinced myself that I'd never want to see her again.

But two days ago, she was there.

Seeing Sawyer for the first time in so many years left me feeling a flood of emotions, the strongest of those being that attraction I'd always had to her. It didn't matter that it was the middle of January and freezing outside. The moment my eyes landed on her, it was as though a fire had been lit inside me.

She was still just as beautiful as ever. Long, straight blonde hair with green eyes, an adorably petite nose, and the most kissable lips I'd ever laid my eyes on. There had always been something so incredibly precious to me about the way her face looked. Even in the anger I felt the day she appeared in the Harper Security Ops parking lot, I still couldn't deny that I loved everything about her beautiful face.

But a pretty face wasn't going to erase the devastation I'd experienced when I realized she had left.

How dare she? How dare she take off and make it impossible to reach her, only to return like it was no big deal? Like she hadn't ripped my heart from my chest years ago.

And to do it the way she did had made it even worse. She wasn't coming back to apologize and attempt to reconcile.

Nope.

She wanted my help.

She had the audacity to presume I'd have no issue helping her after what she'd done.

With her standing in front of me that day, I wasn't ashamed to admit that I did what I had to do for self-preservation. I made it clear I didn't care what problems she might have; I wasn't going to be the guy to help her through them.

I couldn't be.

Maybe it made me a dick to not even hear her out, but I had no other choice. Because if I fell under her spell again, I wouldn't survive losing her when she walked away the next time.

It was ridiculous how much power she'd had over me. We hadn't gone on a single date or even shared a kiss, but losing her had affected me in ways I never imagined.

There was nothing left here for me to run away from.

Hearing her say those words had been the equivalent of taking a bullet to the chest. How could she say that? How could she not know how much she meant to me?

In all fairness, I might not have shared, but I couldn't begin to wrap my head around the fact that she didn't think I was someone worth sticking around for.

As angry as I was standing beside her car with her two days ago, I wasn't that way now. At least, I wasn't angry for the same reasons.

I would have loved to have pretended that she didn't matter, and that I hadn't hung on every word she said, but I couldn't.

I went home that night, replayed our conversation over and over in my mind, and knew what I had to do. Sawyer said she needed my help. While I didn't know the extent of her troubles, I wasn't the kind of man who could turn my back on someone in need, especially not someone I'd once cared for the way I'd cared for her.

So, when I went into work yesterday morning, I decided to do some research. I'd recalled the name of the club that Sawyer said she'd worked at in Maryland. My first search results led me to a place that couldn't possibly be the place she'd been referring to, so I continued to dig.

Unfortunately, there was no other Sweet Temptations in Maryland.

That's what led me to my second bout of anger. Sawyer had been working at a strip club. The thought made me sick.

I tended not to judge people for doing what they had to do to earn a living and put food on the table, but this was Sawyer. Had she really been taking her clothes off for a bunch of men just to make money?

I pushed my resentment aside and focused again on what I needed to uncover. Digging deeper, I'd learned that the club had been recently shut down due to some legal problems with hiring underage girls.

It was no surprise I was feeling less and less comforted, and I started thinking that perhaps Sawyer was in a very serious situation.

Recognizing the fact that she said she needed my help *and* that she'd been working where she'd been working, I had no choice but to put aside my pride and dive in.

There was no question this was going to cost me and that I might risk my heart all over again, but I'd never forgive myself if something bad happened to her. I couldn't turn my back on her, and I'd rather risk a broken heart than to ever see harm come her way.

But as much as I intended to protect her from whatever was out there, I also needed to be careful.

This was Sawyer, and I'd already felt the undeniable pull to her. My mind was just going to have to be stronger than that, because I was already committed to seeing this through.

Knowing that Sawyer had said she only had her mom in her corner, I figured that was my best place to start.

But before I had the chance to even get up from my chair in my office, Jagger walked in. Jagger and I had been great friends for years, and our friendship went well beyond us being workplace acquaintances.

Judging by the look on his face now, I knew I was in for a conversation that had nothing to do with work.

Jagger made himself comfortable in the chair opposite of where I was seated and asked, “So, are you ever going to share?”

“Share what?” I retorted, knowing precisely what he was referring to.

Jagger had been walking out of Harper Security Ops with me the day Sawyer showed up. I hadn’t ever shared the full story with him—or anyone else, for that matter—about what happened between us. Quite frankly, I wasn’t quite sure what I would have said. Telling someone that a girl I’d crushed on had left town without telling me seemed silly.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Jagger replied. “Who was the girl in the parking lot the other day?”

“Her name is Sawyer,” I answered.

“And is there a reason that both you and Sawyer seemed unable to tear your eyes away from one another?” he pressed.

I recalled that moment in the parking lot. The instant my eyes were on her, I couldn’t look away. That might have been because I was terrified I was making her up in my head and that she’d disappear if I even blinked.

“The last time we saw each other was twelve years ago,” I shared, hoping that would answer all his questions.

His lips twitched before he declared, “So, she’s the girl.”

“What girl?”

“Don’t play that game with me, Jesse,” he ordered. “She’s the girl that’s had you all twisted up inside for years.”

There was no use in denying it, so I nodded. The truth was, there was so much I’d found attractive about Sawyer. It wasn’t just that she was pretty and had an unbelievable body. I loved her courage. I liked the fact that she was willing to give just about anything a try. She didn’t live her life in fear, and she was the kind of girl who went after what she wanted. There was so much determination in her personality, and for me, a girl like Sawyer was a girl that I wanted to be around.

And I had believed she had a level of attraction to me as well. I could see it sometimes when she looked at me, and I felt it in every word she wrote in her letters to me while I was a recruit. The words in those letters were some of the best memories I had of her. I hadn't expected she would write as much as she did, considering we were only friends, and I remembered how good it felt to know that she cared enough to do it.

Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to turn it into something more, and she was gone before I could make it happen. That was why Jagger knew I'd been twisted up inside for years about a girl, even if he didn't know it had been her.

Not missing a beat, Jagger leaned forward and asked, "Is everything good now? Have you worked it all out?"

"Not exactly."

"No? Why not?"

I'd come this far. There was no point in hiding the truth any longer. "I didn't exactly give her the chance to tell me why she was here," I explained. "Sawyer and I haven't spoken for years, and it was her who walked away. I sort of let my emotions get the best of me and made it clear I wasn't interested in anything she had to say."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "In the heat of the moment, I can understand that. But are you still okay with your decision to do that to her?"

Jagger knew me all too well.

I shook my head.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asked.

"Well, I was just about to get up and leave when you walked in here," I revealed. "I'm not sure exactly where she is, but I'm going to start by going to her mom's place. I figure that's my best option at this point."

A look of alarm washed over his face. "Have you visited her mom at any point over the last twelve years?"

"No. Why?"

He shrugged and sat back. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just curious if you showing up might be an issue. What if her mom doesn’t know she’s back in town?”

In any other case, he might have had a good point. But this wasn’t just any scenario. There wasn’t a question in my mind that Sawyer had gone to visit with her mom. “She knows,” I insisted.

Jagger assessed me for a few seconds before he said, “Well, then I guess I’ll just wish you good luck. I hope it works out the way you want, however that is.”

Nodding, I returned, “Thanks, man. I’ll catch you later. Say hello to Lily for me.”

“I will.”

With that, the two of us stood and walked out of the office. While I made a left to head toward the front door, Jagger went to the right.

“Heading out?” Avalon asked.

Avalon was part of our administrative staff, and her desk was situated right at the front of the Harper Security Ops building. When we walked in or when we left, she was almost always there to greet us or to say goodbye.

“Yep. I’ve got someone I need to go and see,” I told her.

Excitement washed over her. “Really? Like a special someone?”

I let out a laugh. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Oh, I want details when you get back,” she demanded.

Shaking my head as I walked away, I said, “We’ll have to see about that. Later, Avalon.”

“Later, Jesse.”

Almost fifteen minutes later, I pulled up in front of Sawyer’s childhood home. It surprised me just how much the sight of it affected me. Over the years, I hadn’t ventured over here. I always told myself it was because there was no need for me to, but it was more than that.

Coming out here would only serve to remind me of Sawyer. She was the woman I'd worked so hard to forget. Now, I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Although I didn't see her car anywhere, I still thought this was my best option. So, I got out of my vehicle and made my way to the front door.

A moment later, the door opened.

"Hi, Mrs. McKinney," I started. Her brows pulled together as I continued, "I'm not sure if you remember me, but my name is—"

"Jesse, right?" she said, cutting me off.

I was surprised she remembered me. "Yes, that's right."

"You just missed Sawyer," she shared.

"Oh, man. I was hoping to... surprise her. Do you expect her back soon?" I asked.

Sadness consumed her. "No. No, she's heading back to Maryland. She just left about five minutes ago, though. She didn't tell me where she was going, but she said she was going to make a quick stop before she got on the road to head home. Do you have her new number? She changed it quite a few years ago."

I shook my head. "No, I don't."

"How about I give it to you? This way, you can give her a call and catch up with her before she heads out of town again," she suggested.

Obviously, Sawyer hadn't shared the fact that she and I weren't on speaking terms for the last few years. "That would be great," I replied as I pulled out my phone. After Mrs. McKinney gave me Sawyer's number, I said, "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. It was great to see you, Jesse," she replied with a smile on her face.

"You, too."

At that, I turned and walked back toward my truck. When I got inside, I pulled up Sawyer's contact on my phone. This wasn't how I'd wanted to reach out to her after how things went down between us a few days ago.

After letting out a frustrated sigh, a thought popped into my head.

Mrs. McKinney had said that Sawyer was heading out of town after making a stop somewhere else. I thought for a few moments about that.

It didn't take me very long to figure out exactly where Sawyer would have gone. There were two options. I hoped I picked the right one.

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SIX



Sawyer

It was time to go.

With the exception of being able to spend some much-needed time with my mom, I had to admit that this trip had been a very bad idea.

Granted, it wasn't exactly a planned trip, which might have been part of the reason for that. But the truth was that this trip had cost me.

And though that cost had nothing to do with money, it was fair to say that the outcome was far more devastating than if it had been.

I'd lost entirely too much by coming home to Steel Ridge, and I was convinced that if I stuck around any longer, I'd only lose more.

I wasn't sure I was willing to pay the price.

This might have been about survival for me at the beginning, but at some point, my dignity had to factor in.

So, after spending the last two days with my mom, I decided it was time to go. The only problem was that I wasn't quite sure yet where my travels were going to take me.

As far as my mom knew, I was heading back to Maryland. I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth, and I felt extremely guilty for hiding it. But I wanted to protect her from it, knowing that I was already panicked enough about it for the both of us.

The bottom line was, I didn't want to go back to Maryland, because I wouldn't trust that I would be safe from harm. If I had said something to my mom about it, she would have urged me to stay.

The problem with that would have been that I would have seriously considered doing that if I'd shared with her everything that had brought me here before I had my horrific and embarrassing encounter with Jesse.

Now, staying in Steel Ridge where there was a chance I could run into him, or anyone else who hated me, would just be too difficult.

So, I was leaving, even if I had no idea where I was going to go just yet.

But before I got myself on the road, I needed to make one final stop. Last night, as I struggled to find sleep, I'd battled a bit with myself about what to do, and I came to the conclusion that I not only wanted but also needed to go to one of two places before heading out of town.

My options were the quarry where my friends had died or the cemetery where their three bodies had been laid to rest.

I had seriously considered going to the quarry, but between the cold weather—Steel Ridge had already gotten some snow this winter—and the painful memories, I wasn't quite sure it was a wise idea.

That was why I was now at the cemetery.

The last time I'd been here was the day of Faye's funeral. Truth be told, it was much more difficult to be here again than I had anticipated. For so many years, I'd struggled with all that had happened that day at the quarry. I'd had days where everything seemed to be going fine, and suddenly, all the memories would come back and smack me in the face. The cliff giving out from underneath Janelle, her body hitting the rocky face of the cliff on the way down, and the sounds of Faye and Cristina screaming before the only thing filling the air around me was the horror in my screams or the voice in my head that had been pleading for them to be okay.

In the end, the reality of the situation—my three best friends were dead—would hit me all over again, and it was almost as if I was suffering the loss of them once more.

Over time, things got easier. I had assumed it was because that's just what happened. People died, and the rest of us grieved before we finally had to pick ourselves up and move on.

But sitting here in front of Faye's headstone at this very moment, the cold ground beneath my body, I realized that wasn't what happened with me.

Nope.

Being here now felt very much like it did twelve years ago. The painful burn in my chest returned with a vengeance. Tears filled my eyes and an uncomfortable lump had formed in my throat.

The memory of the day at the quarry was hitting me full force, and I could only bring myself to apologize. "I'm so sorry, Faye," I rasped. "I'm sorry about what happened, and I'm sorry this is the first time I've been back to see you. I miss you so much."

Faye didn't respond.

With my legs bent and my arms wrapped around my shins, I buried my face in my knees and cried. I did that for a long time before I lifted my head, swiped at the tears on my cheeks, and took a few settling breaths.

"If I could switch places with any of you, I'd do it in a heartbeat," I told her. "Life isn't kind to the person responsible for killing her best friends, even if I never wanted this to happen."

I paused a moment and took in a deep breath.

"You should be here," I continued. "You, Janelle, and Cristina should all be here telling me how horrible my ideas are. You should be living your lives, maybe married with children, and abundantly happy. You don't have that. None of you do. And it's my fault you never got the chance."

At that, I found myself caught up in a bout of silence again. I wasn't quite sure what else there was to say. Nothing would change what happened. Nothing could bring them back.

If they'd been alive, I'd want to tell them about my current situation. I'd share what happened at Sweet Temptations, and I'd seek their advice.

I could have told Faye now, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't be responding, and I didn't think I had a right to complain about what was happening in my life, especially not when I still had one and my friends didn't.

So, I simply sat there, wiping away the tears as they streamed down my face.

The next thing I knew, I was startled when a familiar voice broke through the silence. "I thought I might find you here."

My body tensed.

I heard his voice and immediately knew it was Jesse. Logic told me that if I turned around, he was going to be standing there. But I wondered how that would be possible. Because not only had I not even heard him approach, but he'd also made it abundantly clear just two days ago that he wanted nothing to do with me.

Recognizing that fact, I concluded that it must be me.

Maybe I was making this up in my head.

Maybe the emotional turmoil I felt over losing Faye, Janelle, and Cristina was causing me to hallucinate.

Surely, that had to be it.

Right. Time to confirm that things weren't already bad enough in my life and that I had officially gone crazy.

I turned around, certain I'd see nothing, and got the shock of my life. Jesse was standing there, and the expression on his face wasn't anything like it had been in the parking lot of Harper Security Ops two days ago.

That day, he'd been agitated and angry.

Now, he wasn't anywhere close to that.

But then I realized that the look on his face had nothing to do with me. The truth was, we were in a cemetery where his cousin was buried, and he was likely just trying to be respectful of the space.

So, I quickly stood up, looked at him, and apologized. “I’m sorry. I was just leaving.”

“Don’t,” he returned before I’d even taken a full step in the opposite direction.

I brought my eyes to his again. “Pardon?”

“Don’t leave.”

Maybe I wasn’t crazy. Perhaps Jesse was the crazy one. Did he happen to forget about our last encounter with one another?

“I need to go,” I said, fully aware of the fact that I couldn’t do this with him again. This man had the power to destroy me.

His eyes searched my face. “I’d like you to stay. I’d like you to stay and talk to me.”

This had to be some cruel, twisted joke. I was convinced that at any minute someone was going to jump out with a camera and prove it.

Unwilling to set myself up for humiliation, I reminded him, “I tried talking to you a couple of days ago. You weren’t interested in listening then.”

With that, I turned and started to move in the opposite direction, toward my car. I had intended to visit both Janelle’s and Cristina’s gravesites, but right now, I needed to get out of here. Maybe I could drive around and kill some time for a bit before coming back to do that. Maybe he’d be gone by then, and I could do what I needed to do before I’d be on my way and out of town.

“Sawyer?” Jesse called.

There had a been a time in my life when I would have given anything for him to call my name and to ask me to stay and talk to him.

That time had long since passed.

I had moved on.

I proved that to him when I ignored him and continued to walk away from him.

But he had me stopping in my tracks when he pushed forward and begged, "Please stay and have dinner with me."

Slowly, I turned around, narrowed my eyes on him, and asked, "What?"

He walked in my direction, closing the distance between us, and clarified, "I would like you to stay, Sawyer. I want you to have dinner with me tonight. After we've done that and had a chance to talk, if you decide you want to leave, I won't try to stop you."

I closed my eyes and sighed. This was just one more thing that I'd have given anything for over the years that things were good between us to have him say to me. Nothing would have made me happier than to have dinner with him back then.

Now?

It didn't feel right.

Jesse clearly had something up his sleeve, because I found it unbelievable that he'd suddenly had a change of heart.

No way was I going to fall for that. There was nobody in this world that was looking out for me, so I had to be the one to do it for myself.

Jesse hated me the day of Faye's funeral, and he hated me two days ago. I was willing to venture a guess that there hadn't been any days in between there when he didn't hate me. So, I wasn't completely crazy to think that he hadn't just realized he no longer felt any ill will toward me.

This was too risky to agree to it. "I'm sorry, Jesse, but I can't do that."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Why not?" I repeated.

He nodded his head, clearly wanting me to think he had absolutely no idea why I'd turn him down.

I shook my head, feeling disgusted and hurt, and gave him an explanation he didn't deserve. "I can't agree to what you're asking, because I don't trust your intentions right now."

"Are you serious?" he retorted. Evidently, I'd wounded his pride.

"Deadly," I assured him.

Frustration washed over him. "Look, Sawyer, I was a dick to you the other day. I'm sorry. I don't want to make excuses, but I'll be honest and say that I never expected I'd see you again. It messed with my head, and I took it out on you. I was wrong for that."

"I appreciate the explanation and the apology. Consider yourself forgiven for that," I fired back.

"So, you'll stay and talk?" he asked.

"No."

A crease formed between his brows. "I don't understand."

"I know you think that it's just that easy, but it's not. Apologizing doesn't change it. It doesn't erase what you said. More than anything, it doesn't change the fact that you've crushed me twice now. I won't put myself through that a third time."

Frustration turned to confusion. "What are you talking about? How can you say that I did anything to you when it was you who left?"

If it hadn't been so sad, I might have laughed. "You didn't want me here. Nobody did."

"This is a joke, right? You're kidding me," he said.

I shot him a look that I hoped indicated I didn't find a damn thing funny. When he continued to wear that look of disbelief on his face, I scoffed, "Don't act like you don't know what everybody thought."

“I don’t. I don’t have the slightest clue what you’re talking about,” he returned.

This conversation was going nowhere fast, which was even more of an indication that I needed to get away from him as quickly as possible. If he couldn’t even be honest about this, there was certainly no way possible that we’d be able to have dinner together and discuss anything. At least, I didn’t believe we’d be able to do it without any animosity between us. In all likelihood, we’d probably wind up screaming at one another and making a spectacle of ourselves. Then, because we’d be out in public, someone would recognize me, and the harassment would start all over again.

At the thought of reliving that, of hearing and reading all of those awful, nasty things again, I panicked.

“Please,” I begged, feeling my emotions bubble to the surface. “Please, just leave me alone. I was already leaving town. I just wanted to stop here and say goodbye. I realize how big of a mistake this was. And I was wrong for ever showing up where you worked, hoping that you could help me. I never should have done that. I’m sorry for that. But right now, I’m begging you to just let me leave. I promise. I promise I’ll go and never come back.”

“I can’t do that, Sawyer.”

I dropped my head back and took in several deep breaths. When my chin fell forward and my eyes landed on him again, I asked, “Why?”

“Because you came to me for a reason,” he answered. “You don’t go twelve years without seeing someone and suddenly pop back into their life just because. You need something, and I want to see if I can help you.”

Days ago, I’d learned that someone had been lying to me and everyone else thought I was lying to them. I’d also learned that my life was in danger.

The first person I thought of was Jesse.

The only man I believed could help was him.

He might not have been receptive to the mere sight of me at the start, but his words seemed to be genuine now.

I didn't know what to do, because I absolutely believed he was my best option to handle my predicament. But there was one thing that I didn't even begin to question, and that was that Jesse was not the best for my heart.

He was going to chew me up and spit me out.

It didn't matter how brave I'd been in the past. Courage wouldn't help me when it came to him.

Now he wanted the opportunity to see if he could help me. My heart wouldn't survive it.

So, with my voice just a touch over a whisper, I assured him, "You can't."

I turned to walk away again, only this time, Jesse's hand caught my wrist and stopped me from leaving.

"Let me go," I ordered.

Shaking his head, with a voice so warm and gentle, he repeated, "I can't do that."

"Please," I begged, feeling myself on the very edge of a breakdown. "Please let me go."

Jesse saw it, knew it, and took advantage of it. "Baby girl..."

His voice trailed off, my stomach clenched, and I lost it.

Full-fledged sobs wracked my body, and I would have crumbled to the ground if it hadn't been for Jesse stepping close and wrapping his arms around me. If I'd been in the right state of mind, I would have backed away. I would have reminded myself that this wasn't the way to protect myself. I would have done more to make sure that I didn't put myself in a vulnerable position, one that was arguably worse than the one I'd been running from days ago.

But I wasn't in the right state of mind.

I was upset.

I was lonely.

I was so fucking exhausted for reasons that had nothing to do with sleep.

And for the first time in twelve years, Jesse had his hands on me.

It was no surprise I didn't stand a chance.

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SEVEN



Jesse

In my line of work, it wasn't surprising that there were instances that led to a feeling of tremendous relief. Sometimes, that happened as a result of my direct work, and other times, it was the result of helping one of my coworkers with a case they were working on.

In fact, it wasn't that long ago when I'd helped Jagger locate and rescue Lily after she'd been kidnapped. The situation had been tense, and I remembered feeling incredibly relieved after it had been resolved.

But not even those situations had led me to feeling relief like this. Never did I believe that I'd wake up this morning only to wind up here—in my house with Sawyer McKinney.

Now that she was here, I was simply grateful.

Part of that was because it quickly became clear to me that we had a lot to discuss. But the other part of it, the bigger part, was that I had to be honest and admit that I didn't want her to go.

I couldn't deny it any longer, and there was no use in fighting it. No matter how hard I might have tried to resist it happening, keeping my personal feelings out of this wasn't possible. Pretending I could just treat her like any other Harper Security Ops client who needed our help was foolish to consider.

She was Sawyer.

She ripped my heart from my chest years ago, but that didn't mean that she didn't have the power to put it back.

To some degree, I had to wonder if she already did. Because standing with her in that cemetery, she easily put me through the wringer. I actually started to question whether I'd be able to convince her to stay, and I grew desperate.

In the end, I was grateful I pushed, even if it had brought her to tears. I was surprised by how much it affected me to see her so upset. I didn't like it at all, but I loved that it led to her finally letting down her defenses enough for me to be able to comfort her and touch her again. Ultimately, I managed to convince her to stay so we could talk.

There was a lot for the two of us to go over. Something unexpected and utterly confusing had happened in the cemetery. I was just grateful for the fact that I'd managed to guess correctly where she would have gone when she left her mom's place.

For as long as I lived, I'd never forget the sight of her when I first spotted her there. She was sitting on the ground with her body curled up into a tiny ball in front of Faye's headstone. Then, her face fell forward onto her knees and her body shook with sobs.

Something inside me urged me to go forward, to move toward her, and to gather her up in my arms to comfort her. But something else held me back.

We were in such a bad place, and I didn't want to risk approaching when she was feeling so much already. Eventually, I could no longer hold myself back, and I had to go to her. But the walk there had been an unsettling one, because I knew how things ended with her days before.

And if there was one thing I'd learned about Sawyer, it was that she was a determined woman. Once she made up her mind, she didn't often go back on it.

While that steadfast attitude might have been one of the things I'd been most attracted to about her, in the cemetery, it was arguably the very thing that had me feeling so anxious.

But even if Sawyer's mindset was as fixed as it was, her words told a different story. If one thing was clear, it was that I needed to get to the bottom of what pushed her to leave Steel Ridge twelve years ago.

Much to my chagrin, I was going to have to wait to have that conversation. We had our past between us, but Sawyer needed help from me with what I assumed had to be related to her work, based on what little she'd managed to share two days ago. While both issues were equally important for very different reasons, right now, I needed to focus on the most pressing issue at hand for her. Because I didn't know just how serious things were and what, if anything, I might need to be prepared for.

So, I decided to tackle what was likely to be the easiest to solve, and I'd address everything else later.

Sawyer and I were sitting on my couch in my living room, and she hadn't said a word since we got back here. In fact, she hadn't really looked much in my direction.

"Sawyer?" I called, attempting to keep the tone of my voice neutral.

She finally brought her eyes to mine. "Yeah?"

"Can you tell me why you came back to Steel Ridge after all these years?" I asked.

"I came back for you," she murmured.

I had to remind myself that she didn't mean those words the way I wanted to take them. "You need my help," I corrected her.

Sawyer nodded. "I did."

"Do you still?" I asked.

There was so much trepidation in her expression, which gave me my answer. She needed my help, but she no longer wanted it because of how I had treated her.

Fair enough.

I could ask a different question.

“Let me rephrase that,” I said. “Has whatever you originally needed my help with been solved?”

She shook her head. “No.”

That’s what I thought. “Alright. So, how about you tell me what it was that you had needed my help with?”

There was so much hesitation. I had no doubt that Sawyer had convinced herself that I was no longer an option in helping her, so telling me about whatever it was didn’t make any sense. “I’m really okay now. I’ll figure it out on my own,” she said.

“Okay. Well, I mean, it’s not like I even know if I would have been able to help you to begin with,” I started. “Since you’re here, why don’t you just tell me about it? Even if you no longer want my help, maybe I can offer some advice.”

Sawyer pressed her lips together and stared me down. She was waging a battle with herself, and while I was sure there was some small part of her that wanted to share, there was a much larger part that was going to try to stick it to me.

Jesus, she was a tough one.

Since it worked in the cemetery, I decided it might work here, too. I was going to push her.

“Sawyer, why did you come to Harper Security Ops looking for me two days ago?” I asked her.

I hadn’t expected that was all it was going to take, but the minute I got the question out, she blurted, “Because I had learned just a few hours beforehand that somebody wanted to kill me.”

I’d heard a lot of things over the years that caused me great concern, but nothing in all of my years had ever led me to the point that it felt like ice was running through my veins. I held my hand up in front of me and said, “I’m going to need you to back up a minute.”

“What?”

I could feel the disbelief written in my expression as I allowed my eyes to roam over her face. “Somebody wants to

kill you?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Do you know who?"

"Yes."

It seemed I was going to have to pull every ounce of this out of her, because she didn't have any intention to elaborate.

"Who is it?" I questioned her.

She immediately replied, "My boss's wife."

That was another unexpected response from her. Instead of immediately responding with more questions and demanding explanations, I gave myself a moment to consider it. Obviously, Sawyer didn't know that I'd done any research on the very little she had shared with me, but I did. And with what I had learned about the club being shut down, the type of club that it was, and the fact that Sawyer's boss had a wife that wanted Sawyer dead, a couple of possible scenarios popped into my head.

If Sawyer had been dancing in this man's club, was it possible that he'd crossed a line with her? A line that she'd been happy to cross but that his wife was not happy about?

It was no secret that Sawyer had been a very daring woman. I'd seen her list before, and while not everything was overly ambitious, there still had been quite a few things that were particularly adventurous. Was it possible that the nature of her list had changed? Did she push the envelope further now?

There was too much in all of the thoughts I was having that was affecting my ability to remain composed. Sawyer as a stripper was at the top of that, but the thought of her being with a man, let alone one who was married, wasn't far behind.

It had been easy to ignore the possibility of Sawyer in relationships with anyone else when she wasn't around. But seeing her in front of me made it incredibly difficult to pretend.

Only, that's what I did next.

I saw her.

I looked into the eyes of the woman who'd torn me up inside for years and realized I was being unfair.

She was Sawyer.

This awful scenario I'd just created in my head was so far removed from the woman I knew her to be.

So, I did my best to push all of the discomfort I'd felt about what I'd imagined being the case and asked, "Why would your boss's wife want to kill you?"

Sawyer hesitated to respond. In fact, she'd grown visibly uncomfortable and had been quiet for so long that some of my thoughts had started to creep back into the forefront of my mind. Maybe I hadn't been exaggerating.

But eventually, she answered, "The club I work at was just recently shut down for employing underage girls. I'm not sure if the shutdown is temporary or permanent at this point, but I know things aren't good. Anyway, I went in to pick up some of my things the other day, and I overheard a conversation between Adriana, who is my boss's wife, and one of the guys who is a bartender there. They were discussing the situation, but they were saying some things that made me believe there was more going on than just what the club is currently under fire for. Ultimately, Adriana had shared with Russ that I was the one to blame. They believe I was the one who told the police about what was happening there."

"Did you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I had no idea there was anything bad like that happening, Jesse. I had no clue."

I nodded my understanding, hoping I was hiding my reaction to hearing her say my name. I gave myself a moment to process the relief I felt to know that Sawyer hadn't gotten herself twisted up in something so much more complicated, like I had been imagining only moments earlier.

Then, I asked, "So, did this Adriana woman actually threaten you, or are you assuming she isn't happy with you?"

“She didn’t threaten me directly to my face, but when Russ asked her what she was going to do about it, she told him she was going to take care of it. He pushed for more clarification on how she planned to do that, and that’s when I heard her tell him that she was going to, and I quote, ‘hire someone to take her out.’ That *her* she was referring to was me.”

A direct threat.

Maybe not made to Sawyer’s face, but that didn’t matter. This woman intended to hire someone to handle whatever problem she thought she had with Sawyer.

This was not going to happen. Not if I had anything to say about it.

Just as I was about to tell Sawyer what my plan was, she opened her mouth to speak again. “I’m not sure if it matters, but as I said, I didn’t know what was happening there. I went in and did my job. The reason Adriana wants to kill me isn’t because she believes I said something about the underage girls, though.”

Now, I was confused. If that wasn’t what she was angry about, then I could only assume there was something worse that Sawyer hadn’t shared. I braced myself, hoping I wasn’t going to have her confirm the suspicions I’d had earlier.

“What is her reason, then?” I wondered.

“She thinks that I know something,” Sawyer revealed.

When she didn’t elaborate on that, I repeated, “She thinks you know something?”

Sawyer nodded.

“I’m confused,” I admitted.

Sawyer huffed. “You and me both. I have no idea what it is that she thinks that I know, but I’m guessing that whatever it is, it isn’t good, and she wants to make sure I don’t say anything to the police about it.”

This woman wanted to silence Sawyer, but Sawyer didn’t have any secrets she was harboring. There was no option for me.

Or I guess there was, but it was the only option.

“I have to break a promise I made to you,” I told her.

Confusion washed over her face. “What?”

“At the cemetery, I told you that I wanted you to stay so we could talk and have dinner and that if you wanted to leave afterward, I wouldn’t stop you,” I started. “We’re still going to have dinner, and we’re definitely going to talk. But I can’t allow you to leave, Sawyer.”

Her eyes darted back and forth. “Uh, you can’t?”

Shaking my head, I replied, “I can’t.”

“What am I going to do?” she asked.

“Stay here.”

Sawyer’s brows shot up. “Stay here?”

For the first time since I saw her in the parking lot two days ago, I smiled at her. “Yes.”

Several moments of silence passed as she stared at me in disbelief. Then, she stammered, “I... you... no, I can’t stay here.” She stood from the couch, bent to pick up her jacket, and said, “I’ve got to go.”

I reached for her wrist, curling my fingers around the soft skin. When her horrified eyes came to mine, I asked, “Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Where were you planning to go after you left your mom’s house and went to the cemetery today?” I pressed.

Her eyes narrowed. “How did you know I was at my mom’s house?”

“I went there.”

“You went there?” she gasped. “What did... how did my mom react?”

I grinned. This was the first time I’d ever really seen Sawyer so frazzled. “She actually remembered me.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “She did?”

“Yep.”

Shooting me a questioning look, she pressed, “And?”

I shrugged. “And what? I asked her if you were around, and she told me you had just left, but that you were making a stop before you got on the road. I took a good guess and found you. Now, I’ll ask again. Where were you planning to go after you left the cemetery?”

“I didn’t have a plan,” she admitted. “I just... I wasn’t going to go back to Maryland.”

“Well, now you have a plan, because you can’t leave. I can’t let you leave.”

“My mom doesn’t know what’s happening,” she shared.

I tipped my head to the side, my fingers still curled around her wrist, and I asked, “Do you want to tell her?”

“I don’t want to worry her.”

“So, stay with me,” I suggested.

“How does that help? She’ll want to know why I didn’t leave Steel Ridge.”

I searched Sawyer’s face as I allowed the scent of her to invade my nostrils. I didn’t know how she was going to take what I was about to say, but I didn’t really care, either. “Tell her I found you before you left, and we’re spending some time together,” I suggested.

“Okay. And then I’ll just make sure she’s cool with me staying with her temporarily,” Sawyer noted.

“Right. Well, make sure she’s okay with me being there as well,” I noted.

“Why would you be there?”

I gave her a look indicating I didn’t think she could be serious. But with the expectant look on her face, I finally decided an explanation was in order. So, I tugged on her wrist, urging her to sit down. Then, I leaned in and allowed my voice

to dip low before I explained, “Because as long as there is an active threat against your life, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Sawyer responded by licking her gorgeous fucking lips.

That’s when I added, “You need to decide if I’m taking you out for dinner, or if I’m cooking for you tonight. Then, if you want to go home to your mom’s place, I’ll pack my bag.”

Sawyer swallowed hard as her lips parted.

And I let go of the tension I’d been feeling since the day I walked out of Harper Security Ops and saw her standing beside her car in the parking lot.

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EIGHT



Sawyer

This all felt so surreal.

Everything about this entire day had been unexpected. While there was a part of me that wanted to celebrate the change in the rapport between Jesse and me, there was another part of me that was feeling incredibly uncertain.

That was something I wasn't used to feeling. For so much of my life, I'd been confident in who I was, what I wanted, and things I planned to do. That wasn't to say that I hadn't had moments of doubt over the years. I had. But this was different.

This was all about Jesse.

This was about me not fully understanding where things were in his mind.

For the most part, he'd been mostly all business. He focused on what was happening and getting the facts.

On the other hand, there had been a few moments that really caught me off guard, and I was struggling to cope.

I was currently in Jesse's vehicle as he drove us to a restaurant for dinner. I never thought this would ever happen in my whole life. He'd given me two choices at his house, and I found myself needing to pinch my arm repeatedly just to confirm that I wasn't dreaming, or that I wasn't simply making it all up in my head.

Jesse Hale wanted to either take me out for dinner, or he wanted to cook for me in his own kitchen.

It was, by far, one of the most difficult decisions I ever had to make. Because when I boiled both of them down, there was one pro and one con for each that would help in making the decision.

On the surface, either option might have seemed great. In one case, Jesse would be taking me out for dinner. In the other, Jesse would be cooking dinner for me. If he'd offered to do either of these under any other circumstances—particularly ones that didn't involve me being responsible for the death of his cousin—I would have jumped for joy.

Since that wasn't the case here, I figured it was better to consider the best and worst of each option.

If Jesse took me out for dinner, I'd be able to get some fresh air, out of his personal space in his home. I desperately needed that. The downside to going out was that I'd be in public in Steel Ridge for the first time since I left years ago.

On the flip side, if we stayed in and he cooked for me, I would have been able to avoid the public setting, but I'd have to endure being in that confined space alone with him.

Considering I was now sitting in his truck as he drove us to a restaurant, I'd clearly decided that staying in that confined space with him was a much bigger risk.

And that was because he wasn't exactly making things easy for me from the moment he showed up at the cemetery.

It wasn't necessarily his words that were the problem for me. I could talk to him. I didn't have a problem going toe-to-toe with him if the situation called for it.

But Jesse had done things to me that I struggled to remain unaffected by.

He engulfed me in his arms in the cemetery when I broke down sobbing. He held me tight while I cried. Then, he touched my bare wrist in his house, and it was everything I could do not to recall the memory of his hands on my thighs when we'd played chicken fight in Faye's pool years ago. Worst of all, he smiled at me. When I was feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders, Jesse found a way to be playful.

If only I had allowed myself to let go of the walls I'd built to keep me safe and give in to something that used to feel natural around him.

Truth be told, after our encounter in the Harper Security Ops parking lot a couple days ago, I hadn't expected any of what happened today, nor did I think I'd wind up here with him.

Granted, I was well aware of the fact that there was still far too much baggage between us for it to ever be anything like I had hoped it would be for years when I was younger. Even if I knew that was the case, it still didn't mean that I wasn't affected by how much was happening between us now and how quickly it was happening. I felt like I could hardly keep up.

Because it was all so unexpected. So much of what Jesse was showing me was the Jesse that I believed him to be before Faye died.

At this point, I was nothing if not confused.

Worse yet, as Jesse turned into the parking lot at the restaurant, I started to have second thoughts. My nerves skyrocketed, and a wave of nausea came over me.

I thought this was the best option. Now, I wasn't so sure.

No matter how much pressure I felt in his house or how much air I thought I might have needed, I couldn't lie and say that I wasn't now feeling absolutely terrified about this.

I'd left town so many years ago, but I was convinced that people hadn't forgotten me or what I'd done. Surely, if Jesse had been as upset about it as he was days ago, the rest of the town wouldn't have simply forgiven me.

What if someone saw me and recognized me?

I couldn't do this.

"Jesse?" I called after he pulled the truck into a parking spot.

"What's up?" he asked, looking over the center console at me.

“I... um... well, I think that maybe we should just get some takeout,” I said.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Takeout?”

I nodded. “Yes. Takeout. We can order food to go. We don’t need to go in, sit down, and have that whole experience.”

“We’re already here,” he noted. “What’s the big deal?”

He didn’t know. It baffled me that he was completely oblivious to why I was struggling with going inside.

For a brief moment, my thoughts returned to the conversation we had in the cemetery. I’d made it clear that I’d left because nobody wanted me here, and he reacted in a way that indicated he hadn’t believed that was the case. Of course, he hadn’t seen the texts I’d received. He didn’t hear the voicemail messages that people left.

But he knew what he said to me.

He knew how devastating the loss of Faye was, and yet it didn’t stop him from putting all the blame on me.

Jesse had to be pretending in the cemetery. How could he not know what hearing him say that day at the funeral would have done to me?

“Sawyer?” he called, his voice breaking into my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

He offered a sympathetic look before he promised, “It’s going to be fine. We’re just going to go in and have dinner. There’s nothing to be worried about. As long as I’m with you, I will not let anyone hurt you.”

So that’s what it was.

He thought I was worried about going into the restaurant because of Adriana’s plans to hire someone to kill me. Admittedly, that was technically a valid reason for anyone to be afraid to go anywhere.

Unfortunately, if I told him the real reason I was hesitating now, I’d look like a big baby. Jesse had always known me as

the tough girl who didn't let anything scare her. Maybe I needed to start acting like that girl again.

Ignoring the voice in my head, I finally acquiesced. "Okay. Okay, we can go inside."

Jesse smiled at me as he reached over and squeezed my forearm. Then, he got out of the truck like he hadn't just done the equivalent of branding my arm and met me on my side.

The next thing I knew, we were seated at a table inside a place I'd never been before. According to Jesse, the restaurant had opened about five years ago, but it quickly became a hot spot in Steel Ridge for those looking for a fun night out.

For the first few minutes, I took my time being distracted by the menu. I wasn't quite sure what to expect now that I was here, and all that Jesse was continuing to do was really throwing me off balance.

But after the server walked up and took our orders, there was no place left for me to hide. Terrified that he might bring up something I didn't want to talk about, I thought it might be better if I spoke first.

Before I had the chance to speak, Jesse did. "Despite what happened a few days ago that might have indicated otherwise, it's really nice to see you again, Sawyer."

Just like that.

It was him saying and doing things like he'd just said that left me feeling so confused. There wasn't a question in my mind that he hadn't forgotten about Faye, her death, or what happened the day of the funeral. That wasn't the kind of thing that was easily forgotten.

Knowing that, I couldn't understand why it suddenly seemed as though he'd just flipped a light switch.

Ill-prepared for reacting to his comment, I went with the first thing that came to mind. "Thanks, Jesse. It's nice to see you, too. And don't worry about what happened that day. I can understand why you reacted the way you did."

He shot me a look of disappointment. “Even if you’re gracious enough to understand it, it doesn’t make how I acted okay. I’m sorry.”

“I appreciate that. And I’m sorry I just showed up without warning.”

A small smile formed on his face. “I’m glad that you did, though. You came to the right place, and I promise you’ll stay safe.”

“Thank you,” I murmured. Then, the silence stretched between us, and I didn’t want things to get awkward. So, I asked, “Do you like it?”

“Like what?” he countered.

“Where you work,” I clarified. “Do you like working at Harper Security?”

His grin grew. “I love it. It’s meaningful work, and it keeps me active and on my toes.”

“Is my situation something you typically deal with?” I questioned him, belatedly noticing that the nerves I’d been feeling were slowly fading away.

“For me personally, sort of,” he answered.

My brows pulled together. “How so?”

Something warmed in Jesse’s expression as he rested his forearms on the table and allowed his eyes to search my face. With a contented look on his face, he explained, “Harper Security Ops has different teams with the company. Each team is responsible for handling different types of tasks. We’ve got a private investigation team, a kidnap and ransom team, a bodyguard and private security team, and a self-defense and tactical training team. Royce, the boss and owner of the company, is working on some new ideas, but for now, that’s how it’s all broken down.”

“So, which particular team are you on?” I asked.

“I work in the bodyguard and private security unit,” he answered.

While I had known that Jesse worked at Harper Security Ops, I hadn't known the extent of the work he did. I didn't even know that the company had the different units where each employee worked.

Knowing that he worked as a bodyguard, I guess I now understood why he reacted the way he did when I'd explained the situation I'd found myself in. He hadn't intended to let me out of his sight. Something told me that even if I'd not been okay with that, Jesse wouldn't care. He was probably so good at his job that he could keep himself at a distance and still have his eyes on me.

"Am I to assume that you're officially going to be my bodyguard now?" I questioned him.

He shrugged. "You can assume whatever you want, but I wouldn't say this is official or anything like that. I'm doing it, but it's not something you'll be paying for."

I didn't know how he could do that. If he was with me all the time, and he didn't plan on having me pay for the services he would provide, I wasn't quite sure how he'd be able to make his own living.

"How is that going to work? Aren't you going to get into trouble with your boss?"

Jesse let out a laugh and sat back in his seat. "No. Honestly, don't worry about any of that."

I nodded my agreement, because the truth was that I didn't think it would matter if I tried to argue. Jesse had made up his mind, and I'd only put additional stress and tension between us for no reason if I pushed it. Not only that, but I had one other problem that would have affected my ability to pay whatever the cost of hiring someone like Jesse was. I didn't have a job.

"How long do you think I'll need to stay here?" I asked him.

There was a long pause before he replied, "As long as it takes to make sure you aren't under any threat. I'd guess a few weeks as your best-case scenario, but it's possible it could be

longer than that. Why do you ask? Are you planning to go back to Maryland?”

Being here with him right now, I'd have stayed here forever if I thought that there would ever be a chance of something more happening between us. Hell, I'd probably stay even if I thought he'd only be able to be friends with me.

“I mean, it's where I've been living for years now,” I noted.

Disappointment washed over him, but no sooner did I see it when it was gone. Then he returned, “I can understand that. You've got a whole new life there. New friends, a job, and probably a boyfriend, right?”

I shook my head. “There's no boyfriend, and I'm technically out of a job right now, so that's a problem.”

Relief swept through him as the tension I hadn't noticed he'd been holding in his shoulders vanished. “Maybe this is all a sign,” he suggested.

Confused by that, I asked, “What do you mean?”

He tossed one hand out in my direction as he explained, “You're back here for the first time in years, and you're out of a job. Instead of holding out until things settle with your other situation and then heading back to Maryland, perhaps you can find a job here and start over.”

I'd have loved nothing more. But that was going to be impossible.

“Do you know anyone that's hiring? Is there any chance there's someone that would be willing to hire me?”

There was a long pause, and I could see there was a lot working behind his eyes. Unfortunately, I had no idea what it was. A moment later, he asked, “What kind of work would you be looking to do?”

“Bartending.”

“What?”

“Bartending,” I repeated, assuming he hadn't heard me.

He turned his head to the side slightly, but kept his eyes on me. “You’re a bartender,” he remarked.

“I am,” I confirmed.

If I thought I saw the tension leave his body before, I hadn’t realized just how anxious and stressed he was over this whole conversation. Barely a second later, I learned why.

“I thought you were a stripper,” he revealed.

I gasped. “Are you serious? Why would you think that?”

There was so much work happening behind his eyes. The longer he stared at me, the more desperate I became to have him say something. What had I done to give him the impression that I was a stripper?

When too much time had passed without an answer or explanation from him, I called, “Jesse?”

He shook his head as though trying to rid it of whatever thoughts had been plaguing his mind and lamented, “Sorry. I... well, I actually did a bit of research on Sweet Temptations the day after you showed up at Harper Security. It should come as no surprise that our encounter that day left me feeling a bit unsettled. Since I couldn’t get you out of my head, I decided to see what I might be able to figure out. That’s when I learned that Sweet Temptations was a strip club. I immediately assumed that you were a dancer.”

I shot him an incredulous look as I did my best to ignore the fact that he had mentioned not being able to get me out of his head. “I’ve been a lot of things in my life, Jesse. I’ve taken risks, and I certainly had a knack for adventure, but even stripping would be too much for me. I don’t have that in me.”

“I’m really sorry, Sawyer,” he apologized. “I didn’t mean to insinuate anything or make you think I was judging you. It’s just that... well, never mind. It doesn’t matter, and you’ve set the record straight now. So, bartending?”

Clearly, Jesse wanted to change the topic. I was still curious about what he was going to say, but I was well aware of the fact that he wasn’t going to share. So, I decided it was

best to just continue following the conversation where he was leading it.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “I’ve been bartending for years...”

With that, I told Jesse about how it all came to be, where I’d worked, and how long I’d been there. Our entrees arrived somewhere in the middle of it all, and we wound up having a lovely dinner together.

Considering what I’d woken up that morning believing about my relationship with Jesse, it was a surprising and wonderful way to spend the evening. For the first time in years, I really started to think that perhaps there might be hope of Jesse not hating me forever.

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NINE



Sawyer

“You can sleep in here.”

The words that had just come out of Jesse’s mouth offered a nice sentiment, but the sight before me did not.

After we had gotten back from dinner, Jesse and I had come back to his place, continued our conversation, and sat down in the living room watching television for a bit.

Eventually, he asked, “So, what’s it going to be?”

“What?” I returned, unsure what he was referring to.

He grinned a devious grin, which did not make me think this was going to be amusing at all, and answered, “Am I packing a bag, so we can head to your mom’s place, or are you staying here?”

There was not a chance I was going to bring this to my mom. No way would I show up on her doorstep the same night she thought I was heading back to Maryland and bring Jesse with me for a sleepover. I didn’t even want to think how my mother would react to that.

So, I replied, “You don’t need to pack a bag.”

“Good. I’m glad you’ll be staying here,” he said. “I should probably give you the full tour, so you can make yourself at home.”

The thought of making myself at home in Jesse’s home hit me with an overwhelming sense of longing. If only those

words had the meaning I would have wanted for so long.

Instead of telling him that, I nodded and urged, “Take me on a tour, so I can shower and get in bed. This day has been something else.”

With that, Jesse showed me around the rest of the space until we finally made it here, the place he’d just indicated I’d be sleeping.

I was particularly alarmed by where he’d brought me, especially once I noted one important detail after scanning the space.

Returning my attention to Jesse, I asked, “Where will you sleep?”

He didn’t even hesitate when he replied, “In here as well.”

This wasn’t just a spare bedroom, as I had originally presumed Jesse would be leading me to only minutes ago when he offered to give me a tour.

I should have realized something wasn’t right when he’d quickly walked me in and out of a spare bedroom that hadn’t had a bed in it. I just assumed his house had more than one spare room.

I was wrong.

Because the tour had ended, and I was here.

This room was Jesse’s bedroom.

Convinced I must have missed something, I looked back around the room. I searched it, my eyes moving beyond the inviting king-sized bed, hoping to find another spot beyond it that would be conducive to sleeping. I could locate no such spot.

When I looked at Jesse again, he didn’t even attempt to hide his amusement. He wore a proud smile on his face, like a kid holding a trophy because his baseball team had just won the league championship.

“Can you explain how that is going to happen?” I asked, even though I already knew how he was going to answer.

“You want to know how we’re both going to sleep in here?” he countered.

I nodded. “More specifically, I’m concerned with *where* we’re both going to be sleeping in here.”

His brows pulled together. “You mean, it’s not obvious?”

“Not exactly, considering there’s only one bed.”

“But it’s a big bed,” he argued, not a trace of humor in his tone.

Oh my God. He was serious about this. He actually intended to have the both of us sleeping in his bed tonight.

I shook my head. “No. No way. I’ll just... if it’s alright with you, I’d like to take a shower, and then I’ll sleep on the couch tonight. Tomorrow, I can go to my mom’s, and you’re going to have to deal with not being in the same place as me.”

Jesse moved in my direction. “That’s not going to happen, Sawyer.”

“I can’t stay in the same bed as you,” I insisted as I started to pace, feeling myself begin to panic.

If this had happened years ago, I’d have loved nothing more than to know Jesse wanted me to sleep beside him. But this was now, after years of me believing he’d hated me, and only a matter of several hours of us being on speaking terms.

“Do you sleep naked?” he asked.

I stopped my pacing and looked up at him, horrified. “What?”

Acting as though he hadn’t just asked something so absurd, he repeated, “Do you sleep naked?”

“What does that have to—”

“Just answer the question,” he urged, cutting me off.

“Do you?”

He shrugged. “Depends on the day.”

Suddenly, a vision of a naked Jesse danced in my head, and I couldn’t stop myself from wondering if the fantasy of

that would be just as good as the reality. Not, of course, that I'd ever experience that in real life.

Frustration moved through me for all the wrong reasons. "No, Jesse, I don't sleep naked."

He made a face of mock disappointment before he replied, "Then, there's nothing to worry about."

"Uh, there's plenty to be concerned about," I informed him.

Jesse took a few steps closer, and the look in his eyes had me pinned to the spot. I couldn't move. When his body was only inches in front of mine, he said, "I promise I won't sleep naked unless you ask me to."

A shiver ran down my spine. Why would he say something like that? "Why would you say something like that?"

"Because that's the only thing I could imagine you being concerned about," he replied. "You said you don't sleep naked. I'm promising you I won't, and since you don't have a boyfriend, there's really nothing that should be an issue here."

I couldn't work out if he was trying to make me feel bad about the fact that I didn't have a boyfriend. It seemed unnecessary to rub something like that in my face.

"Well, what about you?" I questioned him.

"What about me?"

"You're standing here bringing up the fact that I don't have a boyfriend," I reminded him. "What about you? Do you have a girlfriend?"

He shot me a questioning look as he tipped his head to the side. "Do you honestly think I'd have taken you out to dinner tonight and then offered to have you sleep in my bed if I did?"

I lifted my shoulders toward my ears. "I don't know. I'm not sure I know you well enough to draw that conclusion."

Hurt moved through his expression, but as quickly as I saw it, it was gone. I hadn't intended to wound him emotionally or

anything like that, but this was a lot. So much was happening, and it was coming at me so fast. I was panicking, just a touch.

“There is no girlfriend, Sawyer.”

I looked away as I replied quietly, “Right.”

The tension was thick between us. I felt like I was suffocating with the weight of it. Jesse either wasn't as affected by it, or he just knew how to move on from it better than I did, because a moment later, he said, “You can use the master to take a shower. I'm going to head downstairs for a minute to take care of a few things, and I'll hop in the other one when I come back up.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“It's no problem.”

With that, Jesse turned and walked away. I watched him go and had to admit that I loved everything about the way he looked from behind.

After giving myself a minute to appreciate that view of him, I snapped out of it and dashed into the bathroom.

While I didn't want to be rude and use all the hot water, I did spend a little longer in the shower than would have been typical for me. I did that because it seemed the bathroom would be the only place I might get a reprieve from Jesse.

The thing was, a very big part of me didn't want the break from him. All the hopes and dreams I'd had when I was a teenager about the kind of relationship I wanted with Jesse were, in so many ways, becoming a reality now. But deep down, I knew this was all on the surface.

Jesse might have made it clear that he didn't want to let me out of his sight, but the reason for that was about the work that he did. He was only inviting me to sleep in his bed because this was a precarious situation.

Of course, as I considered that, I started to wonder how many other women Jesse might have slept beside, all in the name of keeping them safe. It was with those thoughts that I turned the water to a cooler setting and attempted to settle

myself down. There was absolutely no reason for me to become possessive of a man that would never be mine.

I quickly finished up in the shower, hopped out, and got myself dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. It was winter in Pennsylvania, and that outfit was my go-to for lounging around and sleeping. Admittedly, it might have been nice to have something just a little cuter to wear, since Jesse would be seeing me in it. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option, so this was going to have to cut it.

By the time I walked back into the bedroom, Jesse still hadn't returned. Maybe the best thing for me to do would be to climb in and get myself to sleep before he got back. No matter how good my intentions might have been, it seemed fate had other plans.

I'd just made it to the side of the bed when Jesse came walking back in. And the way he did it was completely unacceptable.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my throat suddenly feeling very dry and scratchy.

"Pardon?"

"You said you won't be sleeping naked," I reminded him.

Jesse looked down at his body and back up at me. "I'm not naked."

Okay, so he might not have been *completely* naked, but he was a gorgeous man with a beautiful body, and he'd just entered his bedroom wearing nothing but a pair of grey sweatpants. That was almost worse than him being completely nude.

"You're wearing those," I said, pointing to his pants. I paused a moment for dramatic effect before lifting my finger toward his bare chest—one that was so unbelievably defined and lickable. And his abs? Who knew a person could have so many? I wasn't even going to talk about his shoulders and arms, because the truth was that looking at him had me wondering if he was actually a professional bodybuilder who

moonlighted as a bodyguard in his spare time when he wasn't working on his physique. "And you have nothing on up there."

He shook his head at me before moving toward the bed. "I'm wearing more than I'd have on at the beach, Sawyer."

He had a point.

Still.

Didn't he know what grey sweatpants did to a girl? I was half tempted to tell him to go put on his swimsuit. At least I might have had a fighting chance then.

Jesse made it to the bed, ignoring the disbelief, frustration, and longing written all over my face. He pulled back the blankets and said, "Climb in."

"Uh, I'm not... this isn't your usual side, is it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "You're fine."

"I can go on the other side," I offered, really not wanting to inconvenience him or take his favorite side of the bed.

"Get in the bed, Sawyer," he ordered.

Without further delay, I climbed in, slid my body down, and hiked the covers up until they were just under my chin. I was on my back, staring up at the ceiling, and I didn't dare to watch as Jesse slid in beside me.

That didn't mean I couldn't feel his movements or when they suddenly stopped. I could feel his stare on me, so I had no choice but to look in his direction.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Are you okay?" he retorted.

I nodded, my fingers clutching the top edge of the blanket.

"So, do you always fall asleep like that? Like you're terrified of the monster under the bed?"

If my senses weren't being completely consumed by the clean and masculine scent of him so close to me, I might have been able to come up with a witty reply. I might have even told him that he was the one I was afraid of.

Instead, my voice just a touch over a whisper, I explained, “This is just strange. I don’t know. Doesn’t it feel awkward to you?”

Concern washed over his expression. He stared at me a moment before he shook his head and answered, “No. Or, it didn’t. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable here.”

The sound of his voice indicated he was really concerned about my mindset. I didn’t want to make him feel that way, but I couldn’t control how attracted I was to him. If I didn’t do what I was doing, so that I wouldn’t pounce on him, I’d have done a lot more to embarrass myself. “I’ll be fine,” I assured him. “By tomorrow, I’m sure I won’t even think twice about it.”

The tension eased on his face, and his features softened. “I promise you’re safe with me,” he said. “I’m not going to touch you, okay?”

Well, there went the fantasy.

I realized he was just trying to reassure me, but I couldn’t deny how badly I wanted him to touch me. Of course, I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“Okay.”

He held my gaze for a few more seconds before he said, “Goodnight, Sawyer.”

“Goodnight, Jesse.”

A moment later, the light was out.

I don’t know how long it took Jesse to fall asleep, but it was a long while before I began to let go of the tension in my body. But even once I managed that, I still struggled to find sleep.

Because I was in bed with Jesse Hale, and he was wearing grey sweats, no shirt, and smelled divine.

I didn’t know how it was possible to feel so lucky and so unfortunate all at the same time.



Jesse

Sawyer was going to lose her mind the minute she woke up.

After all the worrying she did last night before climbing into bed with me, it didn't take her long to let down her defenses.

Granted, it had only happened because she was sleeping, but I thought it was a good indicator of what she really wanted.

Right now, I was the happiest I'd been in a very long time. Because despite the fact that I'd promised Sawyer I wouldn't touch her, it didn't stop her from turning toward me at some point in the middle of the night and cuddling up close to me.

Now, it was early in the morning, and her body was plastered to mine.

I was on my back, and Sawyer was curled into my side. Her leg was draped over my thigh, her arm resting on my abdomen, and her cheek was pressed to my chest.

It was much like I envisioned we'd be after a round of phenomenal sex.

As disappointing as it was that we hadn't had that experience with one another just yet, I couldn't say I didn't love absolutely everything about the way this felt.

Aside from the way she was curling into me, making me tell myself this was how much she needed me, it was the feel of her warm and soft body so close that had me exercising so much self-control. There was nothing I wanted more in this moment than to roll her to her back, strip her out of her clothes, and sink myself between her legs.

Or maybe I'd put my mouth there first so I could taste her before I brought her to the height of pleasure. There was little I

wouldn't do for the chance to see this woman squirming and panting while she was naked beneath me.

Having these thoughts about her was all just as I suspected it would be.

Ever since I saw her outside the Harper Security Ops building a few days ago, Sawyer was doing everything I knew she would do to me. She was pulling me under, and I didn't think she had the slightest clue that she was doing it, either.

I was already completely lost to her, even if I thought I was doing a decent job of appearing indifferent.

A moment later, the feelings I had for her only grew deeper.

After letting out a soft moan, Sawyer began to move her body and stretch. Somewhere in the middle of that stretch—one that pushed the front of her body tighter to my side—she froze.

I couldn't stop smiling.

Slowly, Sawyer tipped her chin up and had one eye closed as she peeked out of the other to look at my face. It took everything in me not to burst out laughing at the sight of her.

"Oh, God," she whispered. Half a second later, Sawyer scrambled to sit upright and shifted away from me. "I'm so sorry, Jesse."

"You were asleep. It wasn't like you did it intentionally," I reasoned, even though I thought it was telling that she'd wound up in that position. I had to put in a massive effort to ignore the feeling that moved through me at the sound of her voice in the morning saying my name.

"I should really just sleep on the couch. Or, better yet, you should just let me go to my mom's," she declared.

"You aren't sleeping on the couch, Sawyer," I advised. "As for your mom's, I can't let that happen unless you are prepared for me to join you there."

"But what if... what if this happens again?" she worried.

There was a big part of me that wanted to admit the truth and tell her that I hoped it did. But considering how badly it was affecting her, I decided against it. Instead, I replied, “There are worse things that could happen to me. If it happens, it happens. It’s not the end of the world.”

Sawyer let out a frustrated sigh.

The last thing I wanted was to cause her any anxiety over something that brought me immense happiness, so I thought the best thing to do would be to distract her. Maybe if we didn’t dwell on this, she’d realize that it wasn’t a big deal.

“Do you drink coffee?” I asked.

“What?” she replied, clearly confused by the change of subject.

“Coffee. Do you drink it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have to have it. Generally, I save it for the days when I’m feeling particularly exhausted.”

With any luck, we’d eventually get to a place where I could keep her up most of the night and coffee would be necessary in the morning. I didn’t care if she had it either way, but I definitely liked the idea of her being tired from a night of fun.

“Would you like some this morning?” I offered as I sat up and pushed the blanket back from my body.

I watched as Sawyer struggled to keep her eyes focused on my face. “Yeah,” she rasped. “Yeah, some coffee this morning would be nice.”

“I’ll make you some. Meet me downstairs whenever you’re ready.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

With that, I walked to the door, stopped, and looked back at her. When I did, something moved through my chest. The sight of Sawyer sitting in the middle of my bed was one that I wanted to see repeatedly.

The problem was going to be convincing her that she wanted it, too.

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TEN



Sawyer

The moment I heard the doorbell ring, I bolted up off the couch and ran toward the front door.

This was it.

Finally.

I'd been on edge all day, wondering if this package was going to show up on time. Suffice it to say that I hadn't been waiting very patiently, either.

I'd already spent two nights at Jesse's house. Two nights in his bed. That meant I had two mornings of waking up to find that I couldn't manage to keep myself away from him in the middle of the night.

God, it was mortifying.

There was nothing quite like making a guy promise he wouldn't lay a finger on you and then winding up in his arms anyway.

I couldn't do it any longer. That wasn't because I didn't actually like the way it felt to have my body pressed against his as he held me close. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I loved it.

I loved it so much, I wanted it for the rest of my life.

But since I knew that would never be an option, I had to make a change. I had to do something to give me back just a

shred of control. As it was, I already felt like I was spiraling, because I couldn't do much of anything.

Not only did Jesse not want me going anywhere by myself, but even if he didn't care, it wasn't as though I had anywhere I could go that might be fun. I was convinced I'd gotten lucky the day he'd taken me out for dinner. Surely, it was just pure chance that someone hadn't recognized me.

So, this package arriving this afternoon was precisely what I needed. There was no way I was going to risk waking up wrapped in his arms again.

If only teenaged Sawyer could see me now. She would have risked everything for that. Sadly, thirty-year-old Sawyer knew better than to take risks. Experience had taught her the harsh lessons of the real world, and playing it safe was the way to go.

The best part about this package arriving right now was that Jesse had left about fifteen minutes ago. He wasn't keen on leaving me by myself, even though the security at his house resembled something akin to Fort Knox. Jesse had needed to make a quick stop into Harper Security Ops today, and he practically begged me to go with him.

Thinking back on it now, I was extremely proud of myself for the way I stood up to him and demanded that he go on his own and allow me to stay at his place. Other than the fact that it would have been nice to get out of the house for a bit, I had no real interest in going with him. It would only serve to make all of the sexual tension I was feeling even worse.

Though he wasn't happy about it, Jesse finally acquiesced. He was certainly disgruntled about it, but he gave me all the information I needed to know about the security system, and he gave me his cell number as well as his direct line at Harper Security.

I opened the door, bent down to pick up the package, and waved at the delivery driver who was nearly back to his truck.

I wasted no time closing the door and locking it, so I could dive right into getting everything set up before Jesse returned.

He hadn't been gone that long yet, but he said he didn't think he'd need much longer than an hour.

Plenty of time for me to do what I needed to do.

So, I snatched my phone up off the couch, carried the box upstairs, moved to one of the spare bedrooms, and knelt on the floor. I pulled out the two items inside, smiled, and carried one out of the room.

Jesse's laundry room was on the second floor, which I thought was fantastic, considering that's where all the clothing generally would be. Once there, I pulled out the first of my purchases.

New bed sheets.

Smiling, I dumped them into the washing machine and turned it on. Then, I went back to the guest room. That's where I found my face lighting up even more at what was there. I'd purchased my first air mattress.

Jesse and I would be able to have our very own spaces to sleep in every night, and I wouldn't have to risk an embarrassing situation in the morning. After unboxing the mattress, I noted that it hadn't come with an air pump.

Thinking for moment, I realized that Jesse was an active guy. Surely, he had to have an air pump in his garage for something.

So I descended the stairs again, made my way out into the garage, and started searching for a pump. I was fortunate enough to find one almost immediately. Apparently, luck really was on my side today.

I made it back inside the house and up the stairs to the spare bedroom again, where I intended to inflate the mattress. But I hadn't been in the room for more than a full minute when I could have sworn I heard the familiar chime that indicated a door had opened.

I froze on the spot and listened closely. Then, I heard, "Sawyer!"

Relief swept through me at the sound of Jesse's voice. Though, that relief I felt was brief when I realized that not only had I not finished getting the mattress set up, but also that Jesse sounded panicked and was home much sooner than he had originally indicated he would be.

I moved out of the bedroom and toward the staircase. Standing at the top of the stairs, I called out, "Jesse?"

He came into view at the bottom of the steps a moment later and stopped at the sight of me. There was no missing the stressed look on his face. His eyes raked over my body from top to toe and back again before he began climbing the stairs.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he made it to the top and was just a few feet away.

Crap.

There was no way I could tell him what I was doing. Or, maybe I could. Maybe this would be good for him, too. He wouldn't have to feel like he was being rude by making me sleep on the couch, but he also wouldn't have to worry about me invading his space while he was sleeping.

Even as much as I convinced myself that this would be okay, I knew better than to assume I was right. So, I shrunk back and into myself as I said, "Well, I am sort of working on something that I think will be good for the both of us."

His brows knit together, and there was still so much tension in his face.

Maybe showing him would be a better option.

So, I turned and walked down the hall toward the spare bedroom. I could hear Jesse following behind me.

A moment later, we had both stepped into the room, and I swung my arm out to the side in the direction of the mattress.

Jesse's eyes shifted between it and my face several times before they finally landed on me and settled there. "I called you."

Now, it was my turn to be confused. "What?" I asked.

“I called your phone, and you didn’t answer.”

I glanced down at the ground, saw my phone sitting there, and picked it up. Sure enough, there was a missed call from Jesse. It took me a moment, but then I realized I hadn’t given Jesse my number.

Looking back at him, I wondered, “How did you get my number?”

“Your mom gave it to me.”

“My mom?”

He nodded.

“Why would she do that?” I questioned him.

Jesse shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m guessing it’s because she knew I went to her place looking for you, and you had just left. Clearly, she wanted me to be able to reach you, even when you didn’t want the same. Now, I’ve answered enough of your questions. Why didn’t you answer when I called?”

She wanted me to be able to reach you, even when you didn’t want the same.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

With the expectant look on his face, I couldn’t exactly take the time to ask that question. Clearly, Jesse wanted an answer.

“I didn’t know that you called.”

“Your phone is right beside you,” he noted.

I nodded. “Yes, but it wasn’t beside me when I put the new sheets in the washer or when I went downstairs just now to see if you had an air pump. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal?” he repeated. “The big deal is that I got a notification that my front door had been opened. I knew you were here, and I know that there’s a crazy woman who wants you dead. So, when I got that notification and then you didn’t answer your phone, I assumed the worst. Obviously, I didn’t expect that you were having packages shipped here in secret.”

“Are you... are you angry with me for buying something for myself?” I fired back.

“This isn’t about you buying something for yourself, Sawyer,” he assured me, frustration dripping from his words. “Though we’ll get into why you felt the need to purchase an air mattress in a minute, the problem I have is that I didn’t know that anything was being delivered, and I thought something happened to you.”

He was worried.

That had been the reason for the look on his face from the moment he made eye contact with me at the bottom of the stairs.

The confirmation that he cared that much about me forced my heart to pound wildly in my chest. I wanted to dive into that. I wanted to ask a million questions and demand answers. I wanted to know why, if he felt this strongly about my safety and well-being, did he say all that he did to me on the day of Faye’s funeral and then watch me walk away. Why didn’t he stop me?

My emotions bubbled to the surface, every question right there on the tip of my tongue, but something held me back.

Instead, I decided it was best to focus on something else he said. “Why is it a problem that I purchased an air mattress?”

“What do you need it for?” he retorted.

“Um, it’s meant for sleeping on,” I told him.

“Jesus, Sawyer, I know what an air mattress is used for,” he quipped. “What I want to know is why you thought you needed to purchase one?”

“I thought that since you were against me sleeping on the couch, I could get myself an air mattress. A real one doesn’t make sense, considering I won’t be living here permanently or anything like that. It’s just a temporary solution that gives each of us our own space at night.”

Something changed in his expression, but I couldn’t quite read it. For a long time, he just allowed his eyes to roam over

my face, but he didn't say a word. I didn't think that I'd said anything that was rude or untrue, but something about the way he was looking at me told me that he didn't like the words that had just come out of my mouth.

"You don't like sleeping in the bed beside me," he said, his voice a deep rasp.

I swallowed hard, unsure I was willing to answer that question.

Jesse moved closer, and I moved backward until he reached out and clamped his fingers around my wrist. He tugged me closer, to the point our bodies were touching, and his eyes continued to search my face.

My heart was still pounding wildly in my chest, and the look in his eyes was far too intense for me to be able to speak.

Apparently, that didn't matter, though. Because Jesse seemed to have no problem assessing the situation and figuring out precisely what was going on.

"Or maybe that's not it," he said slowly. "Maybe the real problem is that you like it too much."

My lips parted as my belly pitched. The sound of his voice held too much promise, and I knew what was coming. Or I hoped I knew what was coming.

A moment later, I learned I was right.

Jesse lifted one hand and placed it just beneath my chin as his mouth descended on mine. At first, he gently brushed his lips against mine, but the moment I whimpered, he took things deeper.

His hand under my chin drove into my hair and settled at the back of my skull. His other arm slipped around the back of my waist and pulled me tighter against his solid body. And his mouth claimed mine in a bruising kiss that was undeniably good.

This was it.

This was everything I'd wanted for so long.

And while I'd had no idea that Jesse was even remotely interested in having something like this with me, I wasn't going to stop him now, so we could talk about it.

Nope.

I was going to enjoy this for everything it was and everything it would be.

So, with no use for it, I allowed my phone to fall from my hands before I lifted my arms and slid my fingers through Jesse's hair.

His hand that had been at the back of my head dropped to my ass, where he squeezed before using his strength to lift me up off the ground.

Instinctively, my legs went around his waist, and the moment my ankles locked behind his back, he began moving. I didn't care where he took me as long as he continued to touch me and kiss me like this.

The next thing I knew, I was going down, but Jesse's body didn't leave mine. He stayed connected to me, holding me tight against him, until my back hit his bed. Then, for the first time since his mouth had touched mine, he pulled back.

He took a moment to search my face, something sweet moving through his expression. Then his hands gripped the hem of my shirt and lifted it. He threw it aside and wasted no time touching his lips to the skin at the side of my throat.

The fingers on one of my hands continued to thread through his hair, while the others gripped and barely covered the solid surface of his broad and muscular shoulder.

His mouth drifted down. Over my collar bone, toward my shoulder, and down between my breasts. I heard him inhale before he yanked the cup of my bra down to expose one breast. He did not hesitate to capture it with his mouth.

A guttural moan escaped from the back of my throat as my hips rolled beneath his large frame.

Jesse groaned and pressed his hips forward, pinning me to the bed. Truthfully, he didn't have to try very hard, because I

had no intention of leaving.

None at all.

In fact, I quickly realized that I was no longer thinking about air mattresses or sheets in the wash or embarrassing moments in the morning.

I was here, in his bed, and there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

Jesse's hands went at me, touching where they wanted, removing clothing where it was covering my body. Unwilling to be the only one who didn't get to explore, I clawed at his shirt. I desperately wanted to feel his skin beneath my fingertips again. Once I had that, I wanted more.

We both did.

When he lifted his torso from my body so he could go for my pants, I sat up and went at his. It felt frantic, and I was fumbling with the fly of his jeans, because I was so excited for this.

My pants were gone first, and then Jesse helped me with his jeans. The moment we were both naked, we paused and took each other in.

He was breathtaking.

His physique was like nothing I'd ever seen before. I already seen him without a shirt on, but seeing him without a stitch of clothing on was beyond what I could have imagined it would be.

His impressive torso was balanced by his thick, muscular thighs. I was convinced that the moment he turned around, I'd find his ass to be round and perfectly sculpted. But I was completely content for the moment to have him continue to face me, because that meant I got the view I wanted.

His cock.

Thick, just like the rest of him. Long, and hard.

"God, you're big," I whispered.

“I’ll fit,” he assured me as he reached out, grabbed a condom from the nightstand, and rolled it on.

I licked my lips, heard him growl, and that was all it took. He moved. I moved, and we both became even more insatiable than we had been.

Greedy. So greedy.

I wanted him.

All of him.

And I was not interested in wasting a minute.

Jesse’s lips trailed over the heated skin on my abdomen, making their way up toward my breasts, and finally to my mouth. His hands were everywhere. And while the movement of his hands seemed to be about memorizing my body and covering every inch of it, my hands were all about holding on. About keeping him right where he was.

“Jesse,” I breathed.

He reached down between us, his fingers sliding between my legs. I let out a moan as he said, “Fuck, you’re soaked.”

“Please,” I begged, hoping he wasn’t expecting or needing more of an explanation.

The next thing I knew, Jesse’s eyes were pinned on mine, and he was surging forward. Once he’d filled me, he kept himself still and gave me some time to adjust to his size.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice indicating he was right on the edge of keeping himself restrained and going wild.

Was I okay?

I was perfect. I’d never felt better in my whole life.

Instead of answering him with words, I lifted my head from the mattress and touched my lips to his. That’s when Jesse got the confirmation he needed to know that it was okay for him to move.

And that’s precisely what he did.

As big as he was everywhere, I would have thought that Jesse might just use his size to his advantage. He'd power in and get the job done.

That was not at all what happened.

He thrust into me in a way that indicated he knew exactly what his body was capable of, and he set out to use it efficiently.

I paid attention to those movements for the first three thrusts. Then, I was lost.

Lost in his touch.

Lost in his taste.

Lost in him.

In the way we moved together. We rolled. We kissed. We caressed and nipped. The scent of sex surrounded us as our bodies became covered in a sheen of sweat.

Tangled limbs, deep moans, and pounding hearts. It was beyond beautiful.

But the words were ultimately what did it for me.

“Love the way you feel, baby girl.”

If I hadn't already been on the cusp of an orgasm, hearing him say that to me in a voice that was so deep and husky would have put me there.

“Jesse, I'm... I'm going to come,” I warned him.

That warning pushed him to drive in harder and faster. Then, I shattered, the sounds coming from me, unrecognizable.

He grunted, his hips moving faster, and I heard the change in his breathing through my own orgasm. I was just reaching that peak when he got himself there and found his own release.

Eventually, he collapsed on top of me, careful to keep most of his weight in his arms. I wrapped my legs around him and struggled to find my breath.

Jesse got there faster.

I knew this because he lifted his head, looked me square in the eye, and ordered, “You’re returning that fucking air mattress.”

I bit my lip and suppressed a laugh. Then, I agreed, “Okay.”

Relief swept into his features just a second before he dropped his head forward and kissed me again.

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ELEVEN



Jesse

I fucked up.

I lost my cool.

And it was all because of Sawyer and the way I felt about her.

When I realized that the door at my house had been opened not long after I'd left her there alone and she wasn't answering her phone, I lost it.

I completely panicked, believing I'd made such a rookie mistake. In the minutes that it took for me to drive back to my house, I realized just how terrified I was. Beyond that, I finally had to admit the truth to myself. Sawyer had become something more to me than she already was.

There was no way to describe the relief I felt when I walked in and saw her standing at the top of the stairs, whole and unharmed. But that relief quickly turned to horror when I saw what she'd done.

That air mattress.

For a fleeting moment, I convinced myself that I had to do something to pull myself together and get ahold of what I was feeling for her. It was becoming clear that I was setting myself up for disaster, or worse, heartbreak. Sawyer was very obviously not interested in me the way I was interested in her.

She couldn't be.

Not when she was coming up with a way to sleep separately from me.

God, that was torture. To see her in the spare bedroom with that air mattress on the floor. She intended to sleep there.

Without me.

To some extent, I understood it. We weren't a couple, and we weren't dating.

But that didn't matter to me at all.

Waking up the past two mornings with her warm, soft body wrapped up in my arms was like having every dream come true. If I could have had my way, I would have stayed there like that with her all day.

It was a tough pill to swallow to know that she didn't find it to be as enjoyable as I did, that she didn't want to experience that in other ways.

I'd been craving having her body pressed against mine like that, but without all of the ridiculous clothes she wore to bed. I wanted to feel her soft skin against mine. I wanted to touch and taste the gorgeous curves on her naked body. I wanted to feel her hands in my hair and her fingertips on my skin. I wanted to hear her delicate moans and desperate whimpers.

If ever there would be a chance for me to have anything like that with her, we were going to need to talk about it. I was going to have to understand why she bought that mattress. Better yet, the two of us were going to have to discuss why she left Steel Ridge all those years ago without a word.

I needed to take some time to focus on ways to break down the barriers between the two of us. But panic set in, and all I could do was focus on the fact that she didn't intend to sleep in my bed that night.

One look at her face when I confronted her about not liking being there told me precisely what I needed to know.

So, I decided not to talk.

I chose to do what I'd wanted to do from the moment I saw her standing in the Harper Security Ops parking lot.

I kissed her.

And that kiss brought us to now.

She was exactly where she claimed she didn't want to be, in my bed. She was here, she was naked, and she was curled into me the same way she'd been the last two mornings. Only now, neither of us had any clothes on.

"That was unexpected," Sawyer said, lifting her cheek from my chest to bring her eyes to mine.

"Which part?" I asked.

She let out a soft laugh. "All of it, actually. But I was mostly referring to the part that started it. The kiss."

Brushing her hair back from her face, it was my turn to laugh. "Yeah. I've been wanting to do that since I walked out of Harper Security and saw you standing beside your car in the parking lot."

Surprise washed over her. "Really?"

I nodded, the back of my head moving against the pillow. "My verbal reaction to seeing you might not have lined up with all that I was feeling inside."

Her eyes roamed over my face for a few seconds, and I could see that she was wrestling with something. I used that time to allow my fingertips to draw random patterns on her skin. Whether that gave her the reassurance she needed or not, I didn't know, but the next thing I knew, she shared, "I've wanted you to kiss me for a lot longer than that."

My brows shot up. "Oh yeah? When did you decide you wanted it to happen?"

Sawyer swallowed hard. "Since you picked up a chicken tender, dipped it in hot sauce, and fed it to me."

That was surprising, because it was the first time I'd met her.

Truth be told, I'd wanted to kiss Sawyer all those years ago as well. "I still haven't forgotten putting that tender in your mouth and feeling the tip of your tongue touch my finger."

“I licked you?” she asked, seemingly horrified.

At that question, I burst out laughing. Holding on tight to her, my body shook with my laughter. Once I settled down, I replied, “I wouldn’t exactly say you licked me.”

Heat hit her cheeks. “You know, I might regret telling you this, but by the time of Faye’s pool party when you and I were on the same team for chicken fight, I wanted to do more than just kiss you.”

I closed my eyes and sighed as my fingertips pressed in. The memory of that day came back to me, and I could remember every detail of it. “That day was something else,” I told her. “I purposely picked you, not just because I knew we’d be a winning team, but because I really liked the way you looked in your swimsuit.”

This news seemed to catch her by surprise. “I’ll never forget the way it felt to have your hands on my thighs.”

“And I’ll never forget having your thighs on either side of my head,” I fired back, my lips twitching at the innuendo and where I wanted to guide this conversation.

Just as I was about to roll her to her back so I could create that memory with a slightly different twist, Sawyer spoke.

“I’m going to let that one slide, mostly because it was your letters that proved to me just what kind of guy you were,” she said.

At that, my body tensed.

I couldn’t say that I’d forgotten about the letters Sawyer and I had written back and forth to one another when I was just a recruit, but I hadn’t thought about them in a very long time.

There was no denying the attraction I’d had to her over the time that she and I had just been discussing. Getting to know her more changed everything for me. Maybe I was a fool, but it was time I told her the truth.

“That’s when it happened,” I confessed.

Sawyer’s body went solid. “What?” she whispered.

Following a brief pause, I explained, “Getting those letters from you was the highlight of my day when I was in training. The things I was going through while I was there had felt so difficult at that time, and it was receiving and reading your letters that gave me the extra push I needed when I felt down. I’d remember talking to you about your dad, and I knew that he’d been a member. Knowing how proud you were of him, I wanted you to feel the same about me. So, it pushed me to see that I was doing something good and meaningful. I loved everything about those letters. What they gave me while I was there, of course, but also all those pieces of you that I got, too.”

Tears had filled her eyes, and she allowed her face to fall forward. A moment later, I felt a tear land on my chest. Then, I heard her snuffle.

I wanted to think that what I’d just shared with her was a good thing, but I was quickly realizing that perhaps it might not have been the best decision. Maybe it was far too much entirely too soon.

I was about to apologize to her when she lifted her head and rasped, “You let me leave. You said those horrible things to me, and you let me leave just days out of high school.”

This was the second time she’d indicated that I’d said something to her that wasn’t okay, but I had not a clue what she was talking about. “Sawyer, I don’t understand what you’re saying. The day you showed up at Harper Security, you said that it was clear I still hated you. I don’t know where that’s coming from.”

Quickly, Sawyer scrambled to a seated position and wrapped part of the sheet around the front of her body. “What do you mean? Are you telling me you forgot what you said to me at Faye’s funeral?”

I sat up and scooted myself back, so that I could lean my back against the headboard. Then, I took a moment to wrack my brain. Nothing was coming to my mind. Shaking my head, I returned, “That day is a big blur. I don’t recall exactly what I said to you, but I really don’t remember anything bad. I do

recall you walking up and sitting down beside me. I remember thinking how incredibly difficult it was going to be for you, because where I'd lost Faye, you had lost her, as well as Janelle and Cristina. I knew them, but I wasn't close with them like you were."

Sawyer dropped her gaze to the sheet covering her lap. Long moments passed without a response from her. I wanted to reach out, gather her in my arms, and fix whatever was wrong, but something held me back. There was obviously something she needed to share with me, so I waited patiently for her to do it.

Finally, she murmured, "You blamed me."

"What?"

Lifting her chin, so her eyes could meet mine, she said, "When I sat there beside you in the cemetery, you told me how Faye was gone because she had made a stupid decision that wasn't her. You said it hadn't been your cousin who did it and that it never should have been her. This was right after you had expressed how Faye was the one who would always err on the side of caution, so I knew that you felt the same as everyone else did. It was my fault, and I was the one who should have died that day."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks, and after hearing those words, there was no way I could hold myself back any longer. I reached out to her, tugged her toward me, and held her tight. Brushing her hair away from her cheeks, our faces just inches apart, I insisted, "I never blamed you. *Never*. My God, you thought that all this time? You thought I wished you would have died?"

Since I was holding her face in my hands, she couldn't exactly move much, but she managed to give me a slight nod.

Horror moved through me. This beautiful woman, just a young girl at the time, thought that I had wanted her dead. My throat grew painfully tight, and something hollow settled in the pit of my stomach.

“Baby girl,” I rasped before dropping my hands from her face and hugging her tightly against my chest. She sobbed as I continued to kiss the side of her head, right at her temple. “I loved you, Sawyer. I never, ever wanted to see harm come to you. I was devastated. For me, yes. But especially for you.”

“Everybody hated me,” she cried.

My arms grew tighter around her. “Not me. Not for one second. Even after you left, I never hated you. I was upset, and I didn’t understand why you walked away. I held on to a grudge for a long time, and I was definitely bitter, but that was mostly because the girl I had fallen in love with had walked out of my life. I never wished death upon you, and I certainly didn’t blame you for what happened to Faye.”

Sawyer’s body tensed, and she tipped her chin up to look at me. “You fell in love with me?”

I didn’t hesitate to respond. “Yes.”

Her eyes searched my face, something I couldn’t read moving through her expression. She looked as though she had at least a dozen questions she wanted to ask, but instead of asking them, she buried her face back in my chest and held on tightly to me.

Time passed without a word from Sawyer. I continued to hold her, hoping I was providing some kind of comfort and reassurance that she obviously needed. Eventually, she pulled back just a touch, so she could look at me. “What did you mean?”

“About what?”

“When you indicated that the girl who died at the quarry that day wasn’t your cousin, because she didn’t do things like that,” Sawyer clarified.

I didn’t know why, but I had hoped that after telling Sawyer how I felt about her all those years ago that she might admit she felt the same. If nothing else, I had hoped my admission would lead to a discussion about how she felt about me now.

It was one thing to kiss her and lead us to what we'd just had with one another, and it was something else to have a conversation that involved emotions and real feelings. I wanted the emotional connection with her just as much as I wanted the physical one.

Maybe it was going to take just a bit longer for her to get there. Maybe she was still just too hurt and confused by all that had happened, especially since the question she'd just asked indicated where things might have gone wrong for us.

I closed my eyes and sighed, because it was all starting to make sense. "I was talking about what could only be described as a rebellious streak, I guess," I began. "Faye envied you, but it was never in a bad way. I remember talking to her one day, and she told me how she wished she could do what you were doing after graduation. She was so accustomed to following the rules and the expectations my aunt and uncle had. Faye didn't want to tell them that she'd changed her mind about college, so she started doing things that I think gave her a sense of control and freedom."

"But I told her, Cristina, and Janelle about my journal and my list after I'd shared it with you, and it was after that when they all started doing some of those things with me," Sawyer argued.

"That's doesn't mean that what happened at the quarry was your fault," I insisted. "The four of you were best friends, and I knew how devastated you were. I saw how you stood so far away at Faye's service. I can't imagine the pain you must have been going through, and there's nothing I wish more than that you would have known I wanted to be there for you through it."

There was a long stretch of silence before Sawyer murmured, "We've lost so many years."

"Yes, we have," I confirmed.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

My brows drew together. "I had no idea you thought that I hated you. I thought you left town and didn't want to be found."

Sawyer shook her head. “No. That’s not what I mean. I was wondering why you didn’t tell me how you felt about me all those years ago.”

God, that had been the hardest thing I’d ever done. There was nothing I wanted more than to make Sawyer mine. “You were still in high school, and I was technically an adult,” I started. “But more than that, I was away so much. I didn’t want you to not have the experiences you deserved to have, because you had a boyfriend who was never around.”

It was Sawyer’s turn to sigh. “I never knew how you felt. I wish I would have known. I never would have left.”

My arms tightened around her. “I’m sorry, Sawyer. I wish I could go back and change it, but I can’t. What we can both do is look at where we are now and be happy that we made it here.”

Sawyer and I had both made some mistakes. She left town, and I never went after her. It sucked. It was awful. And there was no denying we’d lost a lot of time. But we couldn’t sit here dwelling on all that we’d lost. It wouldn’t do either of us any good.

“You’re right.”

“Yeah?”

Nodding, she added, “What just happened between us is something I’ve wanted for what feels like forever. I don’t want to spend our time together now, focusing on regrets. It’s just like you said. We can’t go back and change it. All we can do now is look forward to what’s ahead for us.”

It was a huge relief that Sawyer wasn’t going to sit with her sorrow about our mistakes. I shouldn’t have doubted her for a second, though. This was who she was. Or, this was the girl I knew her to be years ago.

Something told me that if I stuck with it, if the two of us could get back to where I wanted to see us go, I’d find that the girl I’d been attracted to all those years ago was still there.

While I didn’t doubt there’d be new things I’d learn—things I couldn’t wait to have from her—I could wait to

uncover the parts of Sawyer that I'd missed for so long.

With a smirk on my face, I leaned in close and asked, "Got any ideas on how we can commence that forward movement?"

Her body shivered as her lips parted.

I brought my hand under her chin, tipped it up, and said, "I've got some ideas if you don't."

"I'm open to suggestions," she returned.

With that, I claimed her mouth and the two of us fell to our sides in the bed, where we started another round.

By the time that round ended, there was no longer any doubt in my mind. I wanted every part of this woman: past, present, and future.

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TWELVE



Sawyer

“I’ll call you as soon as I talk it over with Jesse. We’ll figure something out.”

I could hear the giddiness in my mother’s voice when she replied, “I hope it’s soon. I can’t wait.”

I smiled, loving the sound of her so happy, and promised, “It will be. I’ll talk to you later, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Sawyer.”

I disconnected the call, set my phone down on the kitchen counter, and got back to making breakfast. It had been a couple of days since Jesse and I decided to go from zero to one hundred and hop into bed with one another.

We were now officially in a relationship, and I was loving everything about it.

Given where Jesse and I were, I decided it was time to call my mom and fill her in on what was happening. She still didn’t know that I hadn’t gone back to Maryland. I didn’t want to lie to her or keep it from her, so I decided to take some time this morning to call her while I made breakfast for Jesse and me.

Just as the toast popped up in the toaster, movement out of the corner of my eye on my right side caught my attention. I looked in that direction and saw Jesse standing there with a sweet smile on his face.

“Hey, breakfast is just about done,” I told him.

He moved toward me, brought his hand to my hip, and kissed my mouth. “Thanks for cooking.”

“You did it yesterday,” I reminded him.

“What do you expect when I get what I got from you in the morning and then got to see you wearing my T-shirt afterward?”

I smiled at him, looked down at this morning’s attire, and asked, “Is it safe to assume you like my outfit this morning?”

I was wearing another one of his T-shirts and a pair of panties. The shirt was white, so it didn’t come as a surprise that the look in his eyes intensified as he answered, “I love it.”

Feeling proud of myself for taking one of his shirts without asking, I returned, “I aim to please.”

“And you succeed every single time. Did you talk to your mom this morning?” he asked.

I nodded as I pulled the toast from the toaster and set it on the plates. “I did. And all I’m going to say is that she’s not interested in waiting a very long time for the two of us to go over and have lunch or dinner with her. I hope that’s okay with you.”

Jesse and I sat down beside each other on the stools at the island countertop. Then he replied, “I’m good with that any day you want to go.”

“She’s so excited,” I revealed. “Honestly, I can’t recall a time in my life when I’ve ever heard such excitement in my mom’s voice.”

“Well, I can’t say I blame her. She hasn’t had you around for years, and now she’s getting confirmation that you’re here to stay,” he noted.

He made a valid point.

To say that my mom was ecstatic at the news would have been an understatement. While I wanted her to know that I was still in town, I didn’t want to tell her about the lingering death threat.

Fortunately, even if I had planned to tell her about it, she was so distracted when I told her about Jesse and me. I would have thought she'd have been caught a bit off guard by the news, because it hadn't even been a full week since he went to her house looking for me. Mere days ago, I was supposed to be heading out of town permanently, and now I was here and living with Jesse.

That thought and the words he'd just spoken forced me to address something with him.

"I've been thinking," I shared after I'd taken a bite of my eggs.

"About what?" he asked.

After I chewed and swallowed, I answered, "About work."

Immediately, the air in the room changed, and Jesse's body had gotten tense. "What about work? You aren't going back to work at that place, Sawyer."

I let out a laugh and said, "Of course, I'm not. Do you think I'm crazy?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just making sure you're aware. So, what exactly are you thinking about regarding work?"

"A job," I stated. Picking up my glass of orange juice, I took a sip and set it back down. Then I continued, "I'm guessing you aren't interested in having me move back to Maryland any time soon."

"You're staying in Steel Ridge," he insisted.

I was glad he felt that way. Even if I had no intention of returning to Maryland, I certainly didn't think I would have been able to stay in Steel Ridge if Jesse didn't want me around.

I loved my mom, and I had missed her just as dearly all the years that I was gone. I wasn't sure I could stay here if I knew that she was the only person who wanted me around.

Truthfully, even with Jesse on my side, I felt a bit uneasy about what was to come. I wasn't sure if people would want

me here.

For that reason, I replied, “I want to stay as much as you want me to be here, but I want a job.”

“I can cover you,” he offered.

My brows pulled together. “Jesse, we’ve been together for all of what feels like five minutes. You can’t just cover me. I’m uncomfortable with that. Besides, I can’t sit here every day doing nothing. I need to have something I can do, even if it’s only a few days a week.”

He sighed. “First, we’ve known each other for years, so don’t pretend like this is moving fast between us.”

“Fair enough,” I murmured, scooping up more eggs.

Jesse had just shoved a heaping forkful into his mouth, but after he chewed and swallowed, he added, “I’m still not going to want you going anywhere alone. If you get a job somewhere, I need you to promise me that you’ll agree to having me take you to and from work.”

I didn’t think that what he was requesting was unreasonable at all, so I pointed out, “I came to you from the beginning, because I knew you could keep me safe. Because I trusted you. If you believe the best thing for me is to be escorted by you wherever I may need to go, I’m going to listen to and heed your advice.”

Jesse’s body relaxed, and his features softened. “There’s a bar in town that could be a good fit for you. It opened up about five years ago, and from what I’ve heard, people seem to like it there.”

“Can we go there later today or sometime tomorrow so I can submit an application?” I asked.

He nodded. “I’ll take you this afternoon.”

Warmth and appreciation moved through me. I knew how big of a deal this was to Jesse. He was the kind of guy he was, and I knew every protective instinct inside him didn’t want me being anywhere that might have put me in a vulnerable position.

So, the fact that he was willing to compromise and not only suggest a place I might be able to work, but also be the one to drive me there, spoke volumes. Clearly, my happiness was important enough to him to figure out a way to make it work.

Having finished my breakfast, I leaned toward him, placed my hand on his thigh, and whispered in his ear, “Thank you for seeing my side.”

I then kissed him along his jaw.

I’d only just started when I felt movement and heard our plates being moved across the island. The next thing I knew, Jesse put his hands to my hips and lifted me onto the counter, where he stood between my legs.

His mouth descended on mine as one of his hands cupped me behind my head. Jesse’s other hand began exploring. It moved from my thigh up my side and over to my breast. He squeezed me there, his thumb swiping up from the bottom and over my nipple.

Loving the way it felt, I moaned and scooted closer to the edge of the counter. My hands slipped beneath his tee, and I relished the feel of his warm skin underneath my palms.

“You know,” I started, when he tore his mouth from mine and started kissing me along my jaw and down the side of my throat. “We haven’t had sex on the kitchen counter yet. If you’re not opposed to it, that might be fun.”

Jesse straightened upright and pulled his face from my neck. A curious look washed over him, and I wondered if I’d said something wrong. I didn’t think I had. I mean, I was offering sex. Maybe he had a thing about doing it on the same spot that he ate and prepared his food.

No.

No, that wasn’t it.

Jesse was not an uptight guy. In fact, I could see him preferring the sex over the food.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I questioned him.

He shook his head. “I was just wondering what’s next?”

“Next?” I repeated.

Nodding, he clarified, “On your list. It’s been so many years since I saw you with your journal, and as soon as you said that we hadn’t had sex on the kitchen counter, I wondered if it was something you were planning to check off on your list.”

Shit.

I hadn’t been prepared for this conversation. I hadn’t intended for what I’d said to him to lead us here.

I swallowed hard, trying to come up with something to say, but I was failing. What exactly could I tell him? If I gave him the truth, how would he feel?

By some miracle, I got lucky. My phone started buzzing on the counter beside me, and I immediately reached out for it. When I lifted it in my hand and looked down at the display, I noted that I didn’t recognize the number. It was probably a spam call, something I would have usually ignored, but I was willing to answer if it meant that I would have a bit more time to delay addressing the words Jesse had just said to me.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Sawyer?”

I had expected a robotic voice to come through the line, or at the very least, one of those voices that immediately indicated to me that someone was calling from a call center, the ones that were surrounded by other voices in the background. That, unfortunately, was not what came through the line.

It was a voice I hadn’t heard my whole life, but it was one that I’d recognized quickly. It was also one that had me regretting answering the phone.

“Eric?”

A rush of air came through the line. “Thank God you’re okay,” he said.

“I’m fine,” I said, realizing that the last he’d heard from me, I had agreed to meet him for dinner.

“You stood me up.”

“Yes. Yes, I had to go out of town,” I told him.

“Why didn’t you call?” he asked. “Are you back?”

“I am not, and I likely won’t be for a long time,” I shared, giving him more information than he probably deserved.

There was a moment of silence before he asked, “Is everything okay?”

I didn’t know if it was because I was still reeling from the direction my makeout session with Jesse had taken, if I was still pissed at Eric for putting me in the position that he did, or if it was something else entirely, but I couldn’t manage to hold myself back.

“No, actually, it’s not okay,” I informed him. “I wish I would have known that you were using me to find out information about the club.”

As soon as I got the words out, I felt the air in the room change. Jesse was the one responsible for that change. I might have been able to focus on the look on his face if it hadn’t been for the fact that Eric spoke in my ear.

“I wasn’t using you, Sawyer,” he said.

“Only because I didn’t let you,” I argued. “Only because I had not a fucking clue what was going on there. And you actually had the audacity to ask for my number and then call me to ask me to dinner like you really wanted to get to know me.”

“I did,” Eric insisted. “After just a few minutes of talking to you, I knew you weren’t privy to what was happening there. I wanted to be up front with you from the start, but I couldn’t jeopardize the case.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, well, you might have succeeded in doing that, but now I’m the one who has to be worried, because my former boss’s wife wants me dead.”

There was another brief stretch of silence before Eric surmised, “So, that’s why you went to Pennsylvania.”

My body tensed, and my eyes flew to Jesse’s. “How the hell do you know I’m in Pennsylvania?”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed, and I could tell he was not liking what was happening, but I couldn’t focus on that, because Eric spoke again and distracted me.

“I was worried about you after you didn’t show up,” he explained. “I used the resources I have available to me to locate you, and that search led me to Pennsylvania. But, Sawyer, you need to—”

That was all I heard before the phone was snatched out of my hand and Jesse was lifting it to his ear. “Who am I speaking with?” he barked.

There was a moment of silence while he waited for Eric to answer, but it was clear Eric hadn’t given Jesse the answer he wanted.

“That’s none of your fucking business. All you need to know is that I’m the man that’s going to hold you personally responsible if you’re the one who put my girl in danger,” Jesse declared.

I blinked my eyes in surprise. *His girl?* Jesse had just called me his girl!

Granted, I knew that things had gotten serious between us and that we were officially together, but something about hearing him call me his girl felt really nice.

“Is this a good number to reach you?” Jesse asked. Following a much shorter pause, he ordered, “Good. You don’t contact Sawyer again. I’m going to have a chat with her, and then I’ll be in touch with you. Until then, I’m going to strongly suggest you don’t utter a word to anyone about where she is.”

Without giving Eric anywhere near enough time to respond, Jesse pulled the phone from his ear and disconnected the call. Then, he brought his focused gaze to me and said, “We need to have a talk.”

His voice was not happy.

It was not sweet.

And he certainly didn't have the same look on his face that he'd had when he first hoisted me onto the counter.

Jesse was pissed.

Not giving me time to answer, he lifted me off the counter and set me on my feet. Then, he took me by the hand and dragged me out of the kitchen.

At that moment, I decided to look on the bright side. At least I wasn't going to have to answer the question he'd asked before Eric called.

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THIRTEEN



Jesse

It was rare for me to find myself in a situation where I felt fearful.

I'd felt tense or anxious, and I'd certainly felt anger or rage. And that wasn't to say that I didn't currently feel those emotions now.

I did.

I absolutely did.

But there was something else beyond that. Something I hadn't been very familiar with in my line of work.

Fear.

More often than not, my job as a bodyguard put me in situations where we knew what the threat was and where we would find it. Having spent a good chunk of time over the last few years working as part of the private security team for a world-renowned industrial rock band, I'd managed to do my job with a certain level of confidence.

The band had been on tour, and we knew what had to be done to get them to where they were going at each venue, hotel, or stop they made along the way. It was a unique situation with celebrities, and not once had I ever felt the way I felt now while needing to do that job.

It was because this was her.

It was Sawyer.

The life of the woman I was in love with had been threatened and was at risk, and I was just now realizing the severity of the situation was worse than I had originally thought. It was no wonder I couldn't contain the dread.

There were about a hundred other things I would have rather been doing with Sawyer, but what I wanted right now didn't matter. I needed to focus on the facts and the very real threat against my girl's life.

I'd been under the impression that I knew everything about this situation, but that call she'd just received had clearly indicated that there was more going on here than Sawyer had shared.

Now that I'd led us both into the living room—I couldn't bear to stand at the kitchen counter knowing everything I'd just been envisioning doing to her on it—it was time to get everything out in the open.

"I thought you told me everything I needed to know about this predicament you're in," I said.

"I forgot about Eric," she murmured.

"You forget about mentioning the guy responsible for putting you in this situation?" I countered.

She lifted her shoulders to her ears. "When I was on the phone with him, he said he didn't intend for that to happen."

"Are you seriously defending this guy right now?"

Sawyer shook her head as a look of disgust washed over her. "No. I hate that he made me think he was interested in me all so he could take down some criminals. I just think that now that we're discussing it, maybe I should tell you everything that has been said to me."

Based on the very brief conversation I'd had with the guy and the part of the conversation I'd heard when Sawyer had been talking to him, I couldn't exactly say that I believed he was using her.

I think he had likely intended to find out some intel, stumbled upon her, and Sawyer, being all that she was, ended

up on his radar in a different way. I wasn't a fool. I knew how beautiful Sawyer was. It wasn't unbelievable or out of the realm of possibility that someone could be in his position as a detective and find it difficult to separate what he needed to do for his job and what he wanted to do in his personal life. Fortunately for me, he didn't get the chance, and she got out of there before it seemed he could act on whatever attraction he might have had to her.

I nodded and urged, "Yeah, let's do that. Why don't you tell me what it is that I need to know about this guy? And I'll preface this by saying that I even need to know the things that you might think I don't. In other words... everything."

God, I hated this.

On the one hand, I felt nothing but murderous rage that Sawyer was in such a terrible position because some asshole couldn't do his job without putting her in the line of fire. It was that part of me that was struggling to keep things on an even keel.

But on the flip side, there was that part of me that realized what was happening, how it was affecting Sawyer, and wanted to protect her from it.

"I thought he was a regular guy, just like all the other ones who came into the club," she started. "The only difference between him and the others was that he spent more time chatting with me instead of watching the girls who were up on stage."

"You didn't find that to be odd?" I questioned her.

A look of disappointment washed over her. "Well, thanks for pointing out that I'd be far less interesting than naked women."

"That's not what I meant," I said, not a trace of humor in my tone. "But a guy showing up at a strip club and never paying attention to the strippers should make you at least a little skeptical."

Nodding her agreement, she replied, "I know, but it wasn't as though he *never* paid attention to them. It was just that he

spent most of his time chatting with me. And I'm a bartender, so it's not unreasonable for people to sit and talk with me. You wouldn't believe the things I've heard over the years."

The last thing I wanted to do was say another thing that would make Sawyer think I was scolding her or like it was her fault that she was in this predicament. I just needed to understand the situation better, so I could decide how to proceed.

"Alright, so he came in and talked with you a lot. I'm assuming you weren't aware that he was a detective, right?"

"Correct."

"So, how did you find out?" I questioned her.

"Adriana," she answered.

My eyes narrowed. "Your boss's wife told you?"

Sawyer shook her head. "No. But the day I heard her inside the office talking to one of the other bartenders, the same day she threatened to have me killed, she'd essentially indicated that she'd seen Eric at the police station and recognized him from when he came in and would talk to me."

Wonderful.

It was a wonder this guy managed to have a successful career if this was how he handled things.

"What was your relationship with your coworkers like?" I asked.

Sawyer looked away from me briefly, and I watched as the sadness moved through her features. Something about that look on her face didn't feel right, and it wasn't simply because I didn't like to see her upset. This was more than that.

When she finally returned her attention to me, she said, "I didn't become best friends with anyone I worked with, but I wouldn't say it was hostile or anything like that. It was just... I don't know, what it was. They were my coworkers, but I never gave any of them my life story or made plans to see them outside of work."

Hearing that after seeing that look on her face, I started to wonder what Sawyer's personal life had been like over the last twelve years. The truth was, she'd left Maryland in a hurry, and not once since I'd been around her had anyone but this guy, Eric, called her.

At this point, I didn't need to say anything that was going to upset her more than she already was. If she'd been living a solitary life when she left Steel Ridge, I didn't need to point it out and make her feel bad about it.

Apparently, I'd taken entirely too long focusing on that, and Sawyer began to fret. "Jesse?" she called.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think I need to be worried?" she asked.

Tipping my head to the side, I countered, "Are you telling me that you weren't worried before?"

She shook her head. "Not like I am now. Eric found me. I realize he's a detective, but if he found me, doesn't that mean that Adriana or whoever she's hired to carry out her orders can find me, too?"

I didn't want to lie to her. "I don't know her, so I can't say for sure. I don't know if this woman has the capability or resources to locate you. But if you're asking me whether or not it's possible, then the answer is yes."

"Are you worried?"

"I can't say I'm thrilled about knowing someone wants you dead, especially for no good reason," I returned.

There was a moment of silence while she digested all of this. Then, she asked, "Are you going to call Eric back?"

"Yes."

"Will you make sure he knows that there's something else?"

Unsure of what she was referring to, I questioned her. "What do you mean?"

There was no hesitation when she answered, “Adriana indicated to Russ that she didn’t think the police knew everything that was going on. It’s more of the reason why she wanted to kill me. Her goal was to see to it that I didn’t have the opportunity to tell the police anything else that they were up to. I have no clue what it is, but there’s something, and I think it’s got to be big if she’s willing to go to these lengths.”

She was right.

Killing Sawyer as an act of revenge because it was believed that Sawyer was the reason the club owner went down for hiring underage girls was different than killing Sawyer because it was believed that she could shed light on some other illegal activity.

Granted, the outcome was the same, but the motivation was completely different. In this instance, it worried me that desperation to silence Sawyer would kick in, and that’s when things could get particularly dicey.

“I’ll make sure he knows,” I promised. “And until this is all settled, I’m going to keep you safe.”

Sawyer offered a small smile. “I know you will.”

“Come here,” I urged.

She shifted closer to me on the couch and allowed me to wrap her up in my arms. We stayed like that for a long time before Sawyer pulled back enough to look at my face. “Does this new information now mean that you don’t want to take me to submit an application for a job today?”

Right now, all I wanted to do was lock Sawyer up in my house and keep her safe here until I knew this was all over.

But I knew that wouldn’t be fair to her. And if nothing else, I could recognize how much she was struggling. This situation was the kind of thing that could send her running again. I needed to do everything I could to protect her, while I made sure that she had the chance to build a life here in Steel Ridge again.

Sawyer had made it clear that she left last time because she believed she only had her mom. She needed to know that she

had other people in her life, and that was never going to happen if I tucked her away to keep her safe. I needed to trust myself to do my job as I would have done with any other person.

“No, baby girl,” I replied quietly. “If you still want to go out and find a job, I’ll take you. And if there’s anywhere else you want to go, all you need to do is ask.”

Her face lit up. “Really?”

I dipped my chin. “Of course.”

“You’re the best guy ever,” she declared just before she planted her lips on mine.

That’s when I knew for sure that I’d made the right decision. Come hell or high water, I was going to keep this woman safe while she fell in love with her home again.



“You look exceptionally happy.”

Sawyer’s smile got even brighter. “That’s because I am exceptionally happy.”

I gave her a squeeze and said, “I’m so glad everything worked out the way it did for you today.”

She nodded her head furiously and replied, “I never expected them to interview me right away and then hire me on the spot.”

Yep.

That had happened.

Sawyer was in disbelief at what happened, and I couldn’t say I wasn’t surprised, either. Neither one of us had imagined she’d wind up finding employment her first day searching, but we weren’t going to complain about it.

For me, it was a relief.

It was the first step toward helping Sawyer find some stability again in the place that had once been her home. My hope was that she'd continue to find things here that would make it harder and harder for her to leave again. I wanted to believe that the relationship the two of us were building was enough, but I didn't want to leave anything open to chance.

The more things she had in her life to keep her connected here, the better.

"I did tell you the place has become a hot spot," I noted. "But I'm not even sure that's the real reason you've got a job. They'd be a fool not to hire you."

Tipping her head to the side, she eyed me curiously. "Why do you say that?"

"Because they're in the business of making money. They do that by selling drinks. If you're behind that bar, I get the feeling they're going to see an increase in patronage."

Sawyer cocked an eyebrow. "That doesn't worry you?"

"Should it?" I countered.

She shook her head.

"I know what I give you, Sawyer," I told her. "I know how you light up for me, and I know what we have between us. And it's not the kind of thing that some guy who walks up and sits down at that bar is going to take away. You know how I take care of you, how I'll always take care of you, and there won't ever be the chance that you'll want to give that up."

"You're right, but now I'm wondering," she said.

"About what?"

A seductive look washed over her face. "Do I take care of you enough? Can I be sure that I'm giving you all that you need, so that there isn't a chance you'll want to give me up for some other woman you might need to protect?"

Fuck.

She was crazy if she thought that would ever happen.

But since I liked the look on her face and the promise that it held a whole lot, I decided to have a little fun. “I’m pretty sure you do a great job, but I’m always up for reminders.”

“I’ll give it my best,” she advised with a smile on her face.

Sawyer decided she was done talking, but that didn’t mean she was done using her mouth.

After whipping my shirt over my head, Sawyer’s lips were against the skin on my chest as her hips swayed from side to side, slowly scooting herself off the couch and lowering herself to her knees in front of me.

Her hands worked at the fly of my jeans, and the look on her face as she brought her lips to the tip had the power to undo me completely.

“Baby girl,” I said, my voice having dropped a couple of octaves.

A knowing smile washed over Sawyer’s face before she parted her lips and took me in her mouth.

My hands balled into fists as my head dropped back. I wanted to watch, but I needed a moment to just feel. This woman was everything I’d ever wanted, and there was nothing quite like the feel of having her mouth, warm and wet, wrapped around my cock.

Eventually, I had to drop my head forward, so I could watch.

Sawyer worked my length, licking, sucking, and hollowing her cheeks. I reached out and threaded my fingers through her hair, wrapping it firmly within my grasp.

Doing what she was doing, it became clear I wasn’t the only one getting enjoyment out of it. My girl moaned repeatedly, the vibrations from her doing so only serving to make my pleasure that much more enjoyable.

The sounds, the enthusiasm, and the unmatched skill she had for doing this led to her being able to build me up to the brink quicker than I had wanted. And because I knew I was

right on that edge, I gave her hair a gentle tug and freed myself from the confines of her mouth.

In a flash, I got her on her back on the couch, ripped off her bottoms, and buried my face between her legs.

The moment my mouth was on her with her legs thrown over my shoulders, Sawyer was whimpering. The taste of her was intoxicating, and the way she laced her fingers through my hair and held me against her made all that was happening not the least bit mundane.

If she wanted to keep me there, I'd stay there forever. Licking and sucking her clit, tasting her, and listening to the sounds of her pleasure would be enough for me in this life. I'd decided I wasn't going to move until she asked me to.

"Jesse, I want you inside," she said.

It was like she knew what I'd chosen to do. As desperate and needy as her voice sounded, I wanted more.

So, I kept at her.

I built her up, brought her to the edge, but held myself back from pushing her over. Each time I did it, she groaned with frustration until finally, she begged, "Please. Please, let me come."

That was it.

That was what I wanted.

My mouth left her pussy, and my lips began blazing a path up her abdomen toward her chest. I captured one of her breasts in my mouth while one of my hands teased the other. Sawyer's hips bucked beneath my body, and when I could hear the desperation in her panting, I continued my ascent.

With my lips against hers, I asked, "What do you want, Sawyer?"

"Fuck me," she pleaded.

Reaching one hand down between us, I positioned myself. Then I smiled against her lips and surged forward. God, each time I slid inside her, it was like entering paradise.

Sawyer let out a guttural moan, her thighs pressing tight to my sides.

“You feel so fucking beautiful,” I groaned.

Lifting her head, her hands on either side of my face, Sawyer panted, “I want more.”

I did not delay giving her what she wanted. I pulled my hips back and thrust forward with a hard, steady pace. Sawyer, still as determined as always, began moving with me.

The movement of her hips matched mine, and with each thrust into her beautiful body, I found myself climbing higher and higher toward that point of no return.

“Harder. Please,” Sawyer begged.

I’d give her anything she wanted, so I went harder.

I lifted my torso from hers, brought my hands to her hips, and drove inside. Over and over again, our bodies slapped together.

Sawyer’s breathing grew shallow, and she started to whimper, indicating she was right on the verge.

“Are you going to come for me?”

“Jesse,” she called, her tone cautioning me.

With that word of warning, I went just a touch faster. And seconds later, she let out a cry of pleasure and pressed her face into my shoulder. Feeling her pussy clench my cock, I stood no chance of holding myself back. Somewhere in the middle of Sawyer’s orgasm, I found my own release.

Still buried inside her, moments after it left the both of us, I looked down at her and promised, “There’s nothing that would ever make me give you up, Sawyer. You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever known.”

She smiled at me. “That’s good, because I don’t think there’s any way I could let you go again.”

I brushed my lips back and forth against hers. “Hearing you begging for my dick, baby girl, I lost control. Are you covered with birth control? I didn’t use a condom.”

“I’m covered.”

That was a relief. “Good. And I say that not because I wouldn’t want to have babies with you one day, but I think things are a little tense for you right now. Besides, I’d like you to myself for just a bit before we add another human to the mix.”

Sawyer seemed a bit surprised by my response. “You want babies with me?”

“I want everything with you.”

Her body relaxed even further, and she whispered, “Coming back to Steel Ridge is starting to feel like the best decision I could have made for myself.”

“It was the best decision you could have made for me, too.”

And that was the truth.

Because there was no denying that I hadn’t felt this good about anything ever since she had walked out of my life twelve years ago.

I was going to do whatever I could to hold on to her this time around.

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FOURTEEN



Sawyer

“I need a passion fruit margarita and a rum and coke.”

“Got it,” I said, glancing up at my new coworker, Deanna. “Anything else?”

Deanna looked over her shoulder, surveyed the space behind her, and returned her attention to me. “Not officially, but be ready, because it’s coming.”

I grinned. “I’m ready for whatever you can hit me with tonight.”

“Let me go check on a table, and I’ll be right back,” she said.

“Okay.”

With that, Deanna turned and walked away. I got to work on the drinks.

It was Thursday evening, and it was my first official day working at The Steel Pub. Coming into tonight, I certainly felt a bit nervous, but I couldn’t have been more relieved about how well it was going so far.

My boss and the owner of the pub was Cameron, though everyone called him Cam. He’d given me the grand tour when I arrived and made introductions to the staff on hand at the time.

That staff included Deanna and Kelly, who were both working as waitresses tonight. I’d also met Gina, another

waitress, and Ernie, one of the bartenders before they both left for the day. In addition to me, Everett would be the other bartender working tonight.

From what I could gather, Cam did everything from bartending and restocking to inventory checks and paying the bills. It made sense. This was his place, and it was clear it meant a lot to him that it ran successfully.

For me, I was merely grateful.

I mean, it came as enough of a shock when I actually got hired for the job. Once that happened, a whole slew of new emotions bubbled to the surface.

I'd been particularly concerned about how this would all go, because my memories of my last few days in Steel Ridge and even the first few weeks that followed when I left twelve years ago weren't very nice.

Being here now, I wondered how I'd gotten to this point. Maybe it was luck. I'd just met the people I worked with here at The Steel Pub, so it was possible that they had no clue who I was or what I'd done all those years ago.

I couldn't quite decide if that was what I hoped was the case or not. Because on the one hand, if they'd recognized me, hired me, and been this welcoming and friendly to me, it showed me that people could forgive and move on. On the other hand, if this was an instance of them not knowing the truth, I wondered how they'd react if they ever found out. Would they do their best to drive me right back out of town again?

God, I hoped that didn't happen.

I couldn't bear to leave Jesse a second time.

For now, I couldn't think too much about any of that. I needed to just be grateful for my job, the kindness, and the fact that things seemed to be going well.

In fact, when I took the time to think about it, I realized I was starting to like the small-town vibe that came along with Steel Ridge. It wasn't something I could appreciate as a kid,

but I could see it now for all the positives that it brought with it.

Though I was new to the team, it was easy to see the relationship my coworkers had with one another. They were close and had such a fun-loving and easy relationship with each other.

I loved seeing it.

I wanted it.

And none of them had done anything to indicate that I wouldn't eventually be able to have it.

I never thought I'd like being back in a small town where it was so much easier to stand out—especially the same small town that had already forced me out once—but if the vibe I was already getting here at work was any indication of how it could be, I was not going to complain.

I'd just finished making the drinks when Deanna came back to pick them up. "I got another table that's looking for a couple of beers. Pale ales. You decide."

"Got it."

As she took off, I got the next order ready. Once she delivered those and came back, we had a momentary reprieve.

"So, do you live around here?" Deanna asked.

"Well, I grew up here in Steel Ridge, but I moved away right after I graduated high school. I just came back into town, and I thought it was going to be a short visit, but it's turned into an extended stay," I replied.

A knowing look washed over her, and a smile broke out on her face. "Is there a guy that factored into that decision?"

As much as I refused to tell Deanna about the reason I left Steel Ridge or the specific reason I'd returned, desperately hoping our conversation wouldn't lead us there, I didn't mind admitting that Jesse was a huge reason I was here to stay.

So, I grinned at her and admitted, "There is. He's a guy I've known since we were in high school. He's a few years

older than me and we were never more than friends back then, but we reconnected, and things have changed between us.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet.”

“Yeah, I’m really happy. What about you? Are you originally from the area?”

She nodded. “Well, my parents moved to the area from western Pennsylvania when I was three, so I don’t really know anything else. I grew up in Lockwood.”

Lockwood was the neighboring town to Steel Ridge.

“I love it here,” I said.

“I do, too. And like you, I’ve got a guy who makes me so happy that I’m not planning to leave here ever,” she replied.

Before I could delve deeper into that conversation and ask about her guy, Deanna had to run to take care of a group of people that had just walked in.

The next thing I knew, the rush that Deanna had told me earlier would be coming arrived. Being in the thick of it, hustling around behind that bar, I felt moments of utter joy. In the end, I’d had a fantastic first day at work that only got better when I walked outside to see Jesse standing there, waiting for me.

I’d just texted him as we discussed before walking outside, even though Kelly and Everett were both leaving at the same time.

“See you guys later,” I called out, as I broke off from them and moved toward Jesse.

He slipped his arms around my waist the moment I was close enough to touch and gave me a kiss on the lips. “How was your first night?”

Smiling brightly at him, feeling wonderful, I answered, “Unbelievably good.”

Jesse returned the smile, kissed me again, and said, “Let’s get you home, so you can tell me all about it.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

Then, Jesse led me to his vehicle, opened my door for me, and took me home. I had to admit that despite the very horrible thing that had pushed me to come back to Steel Ridge, I started trying to see the bright side of it.

Maybe I was going to get a second chance.

Maybe this was finally going to be home again.



It was about ten minutes before my shift was over when it happened.

I'd been working at The Steel Pub for about two weeks now, and everything was going well for me.

I got along with my coworkers, and the relationship I had with them was far better than I'd had with *anyone* in the twelve years I'd been away from Steel Ridge. In all fairness, I hadn't really allowed myself to open up much to anyone ever since I left.

It was too risky.

There was a time when I felt like I'd had it all, and in an instant, it had all been ripped away. I didn't want to take that chance again.

But being back here, making things right with Jesse, and being able to see my mom on a regular basis again was starting to help me make changes.

I wanted this place to be home again, and the only way that would ever happen was if I opened up and took the chance again.

Fortunately, it was paying off, and the patrons at The Steel Pub had been great, too.

But nothing could have prepared me for what happened just before my shift ended. The front door opened, and a group of women came walking in. At first, I didn't think anything about it.

I mean, it was a Wednesday night, and folks were looking to unwind and relax after their workday. But as the women approached the bar, I noticed them not just looking at me, but quietly assessing me.

My body started to tense up, bracing myself.

This was it.

This was going to be the moment that someone recognized me, declared how horrible I was in front of my new friends from work, and I'd be fired.

But then, I realized I recognized one of the women. Only, she wasn't someone I knew from high school.

She was Lily Mack, the famous actress.

My eyes widened in surprise as she and the four other women made their final approach.

"You're Sawyer, right?" one of the other women asked.

I debated for a few seconds whether I should answer that question honestly. Ultimately, I decided that if I was going to be called out for what happened all those years ago, I didn't need to add being a liar on top of it. So, I answered honestly, "Yes. Yes, I'm Sawyer."

The woman smiled at me, looked at the other women, and they all grabbed a seat at the bar in front of me. Then, the same woman declared, "I'm Avalon. I work at Harper Security Ops with Jesse." She pointed to the woman seated right beside her and said, "This is Liv. She also works there."

My eyes shifted between the two women, and I was suddenly feeling uneasy. I had foolishly assumed that Jesse spent his days working with a group of men. I knew that anyone, male or female, could be former or current members of the military, but I strangely assumed it was just men there.

I wasn't exactly the jealous type, and Jesse and I had obviously already discussed how much we trusted one another, but I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't the least bit surprised that my guy was working beside all of these beautiful women.

"Um, hi. It's nice to meet you both," I replied.

"You, too," Liv returned.

The woman seated beside her extended her hand and said, "I'm Mallory."

I shook her hand. "Hi."

On the opposite side of Avalon, Lily Mack said, "I'm Lily."

Nodding, with a huge smile on my face, I replied, "Yeah. I knew that."

Lily didn't seem the least bit fazed by the fact that I was a little starstruck. She offered a sweet smile and a nod in return.

Finally, the last woman interjected, "And I'm Tarryn."

After acknowledging her, I allowed my eyes to slide through them. "I'm guessing you all know Jesse."

They nodded.

These women all seemed sweet enough, but I started to feel a bit uneasy. At least two of them worked with him. Lily Mack was here, and she was a celebrity. Jesse was a bodyguard. Had he hooked up with her?

Oh, God.

Were they all his ex-girlfriends?

"You look like you've just seen a ghost," Liv noted.

I snapped out of it and shook my head. "I'm sorry. I just... well, I was wondering if you're all Jesse's coworkers or... I mean, I know that Lily is probably a client, but... oh God, I'm rambling."

Mallory didn't hesitate to attempt to ease my fears. "Avalon and Liv are the only ones who work with Jesse. I am the owner of Grant's Deli here in Steel Ridge."

“And I own The Early Bird,” Tarryn chimed in. “It’s a coffee and doughnut shop.”

None of this information made me feel any better. If they didn’t all work together but they all knew Jesse, it was seeming more and more like they might have been ex-partners of his.

I swallowed hard and asked, “How do you all know each other?”

I figured if I kept the line of questioning neutral, I might get some answers without seeming like I was the jealous and possessive current girlfriend.

Lily was the one who answered, “We’re all dating, engaged, or married to Harper Security Ops men.”

I hadn’t intended for the air to leave my lungs as fast as it had, and much to my dismay, the women noticed.

“Oh, my. Sawyer, did you think we all knew Jesse in a different way?”

I bit the corner of my lip and shrugged my shoulders.

That’s when Tarryn explained, “Lily is dating Jagger, who is probably one of Jesse’s closest friends. Liv is with Brixton, Avalon is dating Damon, Mallory and Nixon are together, and I’m married to Royce.”

“Jesse told me about you when I gave him no other option but to tell me who was suddenly occupying so much of his time and keeping him in such a pleasant mood,” Avalon revealed. “Then, Liv and I decided to call the rest of the girls up, so we could come and meet you.”

Mallory said, “You’re one of us now.”

I had about a million things I wanted to say at that moment, but I couldn’t. I was too busy trying not to burst into tears.

Friends?

Were these women going to be my friends?

In an effort not to break down and to give myself a second to get it together, I asked, “What can I get you all to drink?”

“None of us are really big drinkers, so whatever you want to mark the occasion,” Tarryn answered.

There was no hesitation when I stated, “A round of spritzers coming up before I clock out.”

After I made the drinks, I noted the time, told Cam I was off, completed a couple of my end of shift duties, and joined the girls on the other side of the bar. The next thing I knew, we were raising our glasses together as Lily said, “To new friends.”

We all took a sip before Avalon suggested, “Why don’t we go grab a table, so we can talk?”

With that, the girls and I made our way to an empty table and sat down. Excitement moved through me.

“So, how do you like being back here?” Mallory asked.

My brows pulled together. “In Steel Ridge?”

She nodded.

My immediate thought was to panic and assume the worst, but nothing that any of these women had done indicated to me that they were being motivated by any ill intent. I needed to let go of that fear and allow myself to have this. “It’s great, actually. Better than I expected.”

“And things are obviously going well with Jesse,” Avalon noted.

I couldn’t stop the smile from forming on my face as heat hit my cheeks. “They are.”

“I’ve never seen him looking so happy before,” she shared. “He’s like a completely different person, and I mean that in the best way possible.”

“Jagger said the same thing,” Lily added.

More warmth moved through me. Had things really improved that much in Jesse’s life since I’d been back? Granted, there were a couple of days of tension in the

beginning, and we'd had a tense moment or two, but it had really been wonderful between the two of us. I knew what I felt happening between us, but it meant so much to hear that others were noticing the change in him.

"I'm really glad to hear that. So, which team are the two of you on at Harper Security Ops?" I asked, my attention on Liv and Avalon.

"We're not working in any one individual unit," Liv shared.

"Oh?"

"I work in the surveillance room as the data security analyst," she revealed. "Essentially, I make sure there are no breaches or vulnerabilities in any of the software we're using, and I use my skills on a computer whenever the guys have something that might require a higher level of programming or decoding."

"Wow. That's really cool," I marveled. Shifting my gaze to Avalon, I questioned her. "Do you do the same thing as Liv?"

She shook her head. "Goodness, no. I have no idea what half of the stuff she looks at means. I'm the receptionist."

I smiled at her and felt pure happiness move through me. This was what it was all about. "Thank you for coming in today and hanging with me. This really means the world, and I'm so glad that Jesse has such wonderful friends."

"We're your friend, too, Sawyer," Mallory insisted.

"Yeah," Tarryn added. "Don't hesitate to contact us about anything you might need, okay? Even if you just want to talk or vent."

I recalled what they'd shared earlier and countered, "What if I just want to order some doughnuts or a sandwich?"

"You can do that, too," Mallory assured me with a big smile on her face.

"And Jagger and I are always available for a double date," Lily offered. "Jagger and Jesse are already really great friends,

and I'm always looking for some friends to add to my small circle here in Steel Ridge."

Wow.

This was even better than I could have imagined. I felt so grateful for these women and their willingness to pull me into the fold. It was kind and sweet, and it gave me hope about what might be in store for me here.

"That's sweet of you to offer. I'll keep that in mind," I assured her.

I'd barely gotten the words out when my attention was pulled away from the women in front of me and toward the entrance to The Steel Pub.

Jesse had walked in with five handsome men. They didn't come close to doing anything for me when it came to physical attraction, but I couldn't deny they were all very good-looking.

Jesse's eyes immediately sought me out, and the moment they connected with mine, I watched the tension leave his body as a smile formed on his face. I hadn't realized he was still so worried about the physical threat I had looming over me.

Or, perhaps that wasn't what had him all worked up. Maybe he was simply nervous about the girls coming to visit with me, because there wasn't a doubt in my mind that he'd done something to facilitate all of this.

The guys made it to where we were seated, and Jesse didn't hesitate to speak. "I see you've made some friends," he noted.

Grinning, I confirmed, "I did."

"Want a few more?" he asked.

Warmth moved through me as I nodded.

Pointing to each guy as he introduced them, Jesse declared, "Royce, Nixon, Jagger, Damon, and Brixton."

"It's so nice to meet all of you," I said.

I received a round of chin lifts or similar sentiments before the guys pulled up a couple of extra chairs and sat down with us. If I thought things would be awkward now that the guys had joined us, I was wrong.

It was a wonderful time. Everyone got along, had great conversation, and shared a lot of laughs.

As I took stock of the situation, I realized just how much my life had changed in such a short time. Considering my new job, coworkers, friends, and Jesse, it was no surprise I felt like the Grinch the moment his heart had tripled in size.

That was why I didn't hesitate to take a second to lean into Jesse and quietly share, "You've made me the happiest woman in the world."

His features warmed as he wrapped his arm around my back until his hand settled on my opposite shoulder, where he gave me a loving squeeze.

I didn't know how I'd managed to live without this man for all these years.

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FIFTEEN



Sawyer

The whisper-soft touch of Jesse's lips against my cheek forced a smile to form on my face. The strong hold he had on me with his arm wrapped around my waist made me feel protected and loved. And the warmth I felt with his body pressed close to mine from behind brought me a sense of comfort and peace I hadn't realized I'd been needing for so long.

"Morning," I murmured.

"You're awake," he said after pressing another kiss to my cheek. "Did I wake you?"

My eyes fluttered open, and I twisted my neck in his direction. "Do you honestly believe I was awake on my own after all that happened last night?"

As Jesse's arm tightened around my waist, I felt his lips smile against the skin on my neck. "You didn't enjoy it?"

"I loved it," I assured him. "But between working late and coming back here only to have you ravish me in the shower and again in the bed, it's safe to say I'm a little tired. I probably could have stayed sleeping for a few more hours."

"We have lunch with your mom today," he reminded me.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling. I loved that he remembered, and that I hadn't needed to tell him about it more than the one time that I did. Jesse had proved, repeatedly, that I was an important part of his life. He made it impossible not to love him.

“Yeah. She’s so excited to see the both of us,” I told him.

“I assume you feel the same about seeing her, which is why we need to get up,” he reasoned.

“But we still have a couple of hours,” I noted.

Jesse’s hand on the arm that was draped over my body slid up toward my breast. Once he was cupping it protectively in his grasp, he explained, “And we’ve got a lot to do in those few hours.”

“Really? Like what?”

His thumb stroked over my nipple as his lips moved toward my shoulder. “For starters, I have to feed you breakfast,” he said before kissing my skin. “And I have to do other things to you.”

“Other things?” I questioned him.

“Other things,” he repeated. There was no missing how deep his voice had dropped and the innuendo in his tone.

“Mmm,” I hummed. “Other things sound like a lot of fun.”

“And they’re going to take some time,” Jesse explained.

I dropped my shoulder back into his chest, and Jesse shifted his body to give me the space I needed to turn, so I could face him. Once I’d managed that, I pressed myself close, slid my fingers into his hair, and suggested, “Then you better get started on breakfast.”

“Do you want to eat in bed, or are you going to come downstairs?” he asked.

“I’ll come down. I just want to take another minute or so to wake myself up,” I told him.

Jesse kissed my forehead and squeezed me a little tighter. I loved every ounce of affection he showed me, but it was the moments like this one, when we were together in his bed and he was being sweet with me, that I loved the most.

“Take your time,” he urged me.

A moment later, after giving me a few more kisses, he rolled out of the bed and made his way to the bathroom. When he walked out again and gave me a wink before he left the room to head downstairs to make breakfast, all I felt was happiness.

Happiness and joy.

Life was unbelievably good.

And if it hadn't been for the one little thing I had looming over my head—the very thing that had forced me back to Steel Ridge—I wouldn't have had a single complaint.

I hadn't expected I'd get all that I did coming back here, and now that I had it, there wasn't a chance I'd take it for granted. I'd never take him for granted.

Not wanting him to have to make breakfast all alone, despite how much my body wanted to relax in bed, I decided to get up and use the bathroom so I could join him downstairs.

But when I finished up in the bathroom a couple of minutes later, and had put on one of Jesse's T-shirts, something caught my eyes in the corner of my room.

It was one of my bags. A smaller one that I hadn't taken anything out of since I'd been living with Jesse. Seeing it at that moment, following all the good vibes that had moved through me that morning, I decided to open it now.

Lifting the bag in my hand, I sat back down on the edge of the bed. Inside the bag had been something I hadn't used in years but also couldn't bring myself to dispose of, either.

My journal.

For the longest time, I sat there clutching the journal in my hands without even opening it.

This book had held so much joy at the same time it held so much heartbreak. Unsure if I could handle this now, I considered putting it back in the bag.

But the next thing I knew, Jesse was standing beside me. I looked up and saw him holding a coffee mug in his hand.

There was something profound in his expression, but I couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Jesse sat down beside me and said, "I thought I'd bring the coffee to you since I knew you were struggling to wake up."

I didn't respond. I simply gripped the journal tighter in my hands.

Jesse set the coffee mug down on the nightstand and brought one hand behind my back. "Have you finished it?" he asked.

"Finished it?"

He jerked his head toward the journal and clarified, "Your list. Have you crossed everything off yet, or are you still adding things to it?"

I wondered how he'd take the news when I shared the truth. "I only added one additional thing to the list in the last twelve years," I confessed.

Surprise washed over him. "Really?"

I nodded. "Yes. And I haven't crossed anything off of this list in twelve years."

"What?"

So, the initial reaction Jesse was going to have was shock. I expected as much from him. Knowing me the way he did all those years ago, I imagined it seemed impossible to him that I'd have just stopped doing this.

"I couldn't bring myself to open this book and try to complete anything on it. It was just too much."

Jesse's concerned eyes searched my face. The silence stretched between us, but he eventually asked, "You only added one additional thing to the list in twelve years?"

Knowing what it was, I felt my features soften as warmth flooded my veins. "Yes, and surprisingly, it was a two-part goal that I genuinely believed I'd never be able to accomplish. As it turns out, I think I can actually cross it off the list now."

"What is it?"

I opened the book, flipped the page with the last entry, and read it to him. “Find a way to get Jesse not to hate me, and move back home.”

His fingers pressed in at my lower back. “Baby girl... I never hated you.”

Jesse’s voice sounded tortured. The idea that this had been the one thing I’d written on my list in twelve years crushed him.

Nodding, I whispered, “I know.”

The hand he’d had at my back came up and brushed my hair back from my face. He allowed it to settle at the base of my skull, where he gripped my hair in his hand and urged me to look at him. Once he had my attention, he added, “And you’re home now. Here with me, you’re home.”

“I am,” I agreed. “And I love being back here.”

Relief swept through him, a smile formed on his face, and he tugged me toward him, so he could press a kiss to my forehead.

When Jesse let me go, I shared, “I got so much more than I ever thought I’d get coming back here. You’ve made me so happy. I love you, and I love us together. I have a job here, and I’ve made new friends at work. A week ago, your friends and the women in their lives welcomed me to town.”

“You love me?”

How could he not know that was the case?

I offered a small smile and confessed, “I feel like I’ve loved you my whole life.”

Something changed in his expression, the sight of it affecting me profoundly. In fact, it was so immense that I couldn’t just ignore it.

“What is it?” I asked.

He shook his head slightly before he replied, “I don’t know. I just... I guess I wasn’t prepared for how hearing you

say those words would make me feel. And if I'm completely honest, I like what it means for the future."

"In what way?"

Jesse let out a sigh, which I realized was not the result of feeling frustrated. Instead, he was relieved, because he said, "Sawyer, I love that you're feeling good about being back here, because there's nothing I want more than for you to stay in Steel Ridge. I want you to have every reason you can to make leaving here difficult. I couldn't bear it if you left again."

My heart squeezed in my chest. The look I'd seen on his face just moments ago suddenly made sense. I hadn't realized how much me leaving here all those years ago had affected him. Now that I was back, and we had each other the way we did, Jesse was dealing with some demons about where we had wound up last time.

It broke my heart to know that he was worried I'd walk away from him once more. He needed to know the truth not only about my feelings, but also about what pushed me to go.

So, I was honest with him when I replied, "I don't think I'd survive leaving again. It was so incredibly difficult to do, but it was necessary."

"I don't know if I'd go that far," he advised.

"But it's the truth," I argued. "I've been in public for several weeks now, and I'm beyond surprised. I'd convinced myself that I was going to start working at the pub and I'd be lucky to make it a week before it all started again."

Confusion washed over his face. "Before what started again?"

Disbelief washed over me. Was he serious? How could he not know what it was like for me before I left?

"The calls and the messages. The harassment," I finally answered.

"What are you talking about?" he pressed.

He was serious.

He had not a clue what I was talking about.

“I already told you that everybody blamed me for what happened to Faye, Cristina, and Janelle,” I began. “They didn’t just wait until they saw me to tell me how they felt, Jesse. It was awful. They all told me that it should have been me who died that day at the quarry. It got so bad; I had no choice but to change my number.”

For several long moments, Jesse didn’t respond. He allowed his eyes to roam over my face, and I could see there was something working in his mind. The look in his eyes indicated he had a lot of thoughts about what I’d just shared, but I wasn’t sure what any of them were.

Finally, he spoke. “I was upset when I learned that you had left town,” he started. “I tried to put myself in your shoes, and initially I realized how difficult it must have been to lose your best friends. But then I tried to call you, and I learned that you had changed your number. I was so angry. I assumed you didn’t want to be found. I never knew that anyone was harassing you, making you believe it was your fault.”

Jesse paused a moment, his chest heaving as he attempted to communicate all that he was feeling. I didn’t respond, because I wasn’t quite sure what I could say.

“Baby girl, if I knew what was happening...” He trailed off, his voice indicating just how much he was struggling with this.

I hated that he was feeling this way. Hearing him sounding so tortured was awful. Our morning had started off fantastic, and it was slowly heading toward a very dark and bad place.

I didn’t want that.

In fact, pulling out the journal had been something positive for me.

“Jesse, I know that now,” I assured him. “I misunderstood the things you said the day of Faye’s funeral, and when I combined that with what everyone else was saying about and to me, I couldn’t handle it. I did what I had to do in that

situation. But we're here now, and things are great between us."

He lifted his hand to the side of my face. "We lost so much time."

"Yeah," I replied quietly.

"I'm sorry for what everyone did to you," he lamented. "It was wrong on so many levels."

Their actions weren't Jesse's fault, but I loved how he felt compelled to apologize. He was just a good man who believed that I deserved an apology for how people treated me. Maybe, on some level, I did. But I couldn't say I didn't understand where people were coming from back then.

So, I said, "You're not the one who has to apologize to me. You didn't do anything wrong. And the truth is, I've been back here for a while now, and I've been in public settings for several weeks. Either people don't recognize me, or they're no longer holding a grudge for what I did. I think it's done now."

Jesse went from looking glum and a bit subdued to looking determined. "It's done, because I'm not going to allow anyone to make you feel badly about this. That includes you, Sawyer. You need to stop talking about what happened all those years ago in a way that makes it sound like you blame yourself. You didn't kill Faye, Cristina, or Janelle. I don't care what everyone else thought. Those girls all made their own decisions. You didn't force them to go to the quarry that day. It was a freak accident, and you're not to blame."

I closed my eyes as I nodded my head. Deep down, I knew that everything Jesse was saying was the truth. My friends meant everything to me, and if I had known that what happened that day was going to happen, I'd have stopped us from going.

But I didn't know.

I couldn't have predicted what had happened.

There was nothing I could have done to change the outcome.

I lost my best friends that day, and I missed them terribly. It could have been any one of us that died that day. It could have been me that died while they were still here, and if that had been the case, it would have still been an accident. I had to start believing that if they were here right now, my friends would tell me they didn't blame me.

"I miss them so much," I confessed when I opened my eyes again and looked at Jesse.

His features softened as he tugged me toward him. "I know you do."

Jesse held me close for a few moments, giving me an opportunity to find some comfort in his embrace. Eventually, I pulled back, because I wanted to set the record straight with him.

"I didn't mean for this morning to take this turn," I started. "In fact, pulling out this journal feels really good. I wanted to mark that one thing off this list, since it's the only thing that has mattered to me for the last twelve years."

Jesse reached out to the nightstand, opened the drawer, pulled out a pen, and handed it to me.

Once I made the mark in the journal, he asked, "So, what now?"

I took a moment to consider my answer to that question. What now? There was no denying that I could just continue as I had been. The last few weeks had proven that life could be great for me. It was already far better than I had anticipated. Did I need to mess with that?

Of course, I recalled that conversation I had with my father just before his final deployment. What would he have told me to do?

After giving myself some time, I finally turned my attention fully to Jesse and said, "No risk, no reward."

His lips twitched. "Are you going to be adding to this list again? Maybe crossing a few things off, too?"

I held his gaze, feeling something so profound move through me. “This life has been very interesting for me,” I told him. “I’ve experienced so much, and there’s still a lot that I want to do. When I was working on this list, I felt so alive. I haven’t lived for the last twelve years, Jesse. I think it’s time I start changing that.”

A look of pride washed over him. “I think that’s a fantastic idea. But I do have one question.”

“What’s that?”

His expression turned naughty. “I just want to confirm that you haven’t yet sunbathed topless.”

Of course.

I should have known that would be the one thing he remembered about my list.

“Why is that even a concern to you now?” I asked. “You’ve already seen my boobs.”

“I know. But I’m never going to pass up an opportunity to see them again,” he reasoned. “I figure this is like a two birds, one stone type of situation.”

“Right. Efficiency is what you’re about.”

He grinned.

I smiled back at him.

“Ready for breakfast?” he asked.

I nodded.

With that, Jesse gave me a kiss. Before we got up, he said, “You know I love you, too, right?”

I smiled at him. “I do.”

He returned the smile, grabbed my coffee mug, and the two of us made our way downstairs.

Breakfast was delicious. But the way we spent the rest of our morning was even better.

SIXTEEN



Sawyer

“Your dad would be so proud.”

The feeling of contentment moved through me as I sat beside Jesse across the table from my mom.

The truth was, there was so much for me to be thankful for. It had been an emotional day, but I was feeling as happy as I could be. More than that, I was excited about revisiting my list, checking some things off of it again, and adding some new things to it, too. I was beyond grateful for what Jesse had brought into my life.

All that had happened from the moment my mom opened the door had been emotional in all the best ways possible. A few tears were shed, which mostly came from my mom, but there was no denying we all just felt the love. I felt like a big ball of love.

Suffice it to say, my mom seemed just as content as I felt. She was beyond welcoming to Jesse. My heart was already bursting at the seams, and to see that she not only remembered Jesse but also accepted him without hesitation sent my heart soaring. I felt like I was living in a fantasy.

How could it all be this easy?

After all these years, was I really going to experience this much happiness?

Considering how emotional the morning had started for me, it was nice to be at this place. Though, in all fairness, I

hadn't really had any concerns about Jesse and I coming for this visit with my mom.

I'd spoken to her several times over the phone since that first time I called to let her know I hadn't left Steel Ridge, and she'd already indicated she was excited about my relationship with Jesse. This just happened to be the first time she was seeing me since I left her house the day Jesse saw me at the cemetery.

The fact that he and I were here together with her, especially with the status of our relationship being what it was, was a bit surreal. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I'd be sitting at the table in my mom's house sharing a meal with her and Jesse.

But here we were.

It was one of the most special moments of my life.

Jesse and I had just filled my mom in on all that had happened since the day he showed up here looking for me. We told her how he'd had a feeling I might have made a stop at the cemetery, so he went there and learned he was correct. We shared how we decided to spend some time together talking and how I simply never left.

Jesse and I had decided against telling her the real reason I had come back to Steel Ridge. Or, I had mostly insisted on not telling her. I didn't want her worried about me, and I had full confidence in Jesse's ability to keep me safe. Jesse might have disagreed with my decision and believed there would be no harm in telling her the truth, but ultimately, he left it up to me.

Not knowing about that, my mom couldn't have been happier about where things were in my life, and apparently, she believed my father would have felt the same. I couldn't say that I thought he'd disagree with her, but I was curious to know if her reasons for saying what she did were different than what I believed they would be.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

The smile on her face, already beaming, grew larger. "There are a million reasons that your dad would be proud, but

if I'm speaking specifically about what's in front of me right now, I can say without a shred of doubt that he'd have been thrilled to know his daughter found the man that she did. You found a man who is a lot like your father was. Your father was a selfless man who had a desire to protect the people he loved. He had a desire to protect people he didn't even know."

She wasn't wrong about that.

My dad was just a protector by nature. Jesse was the same, if not already evidenced by the way he treated me and the fact that he was part of the bodyguard and private security unit at Harper Security Ops. To know that my mom believed Jesse was a lot like my dad warmed my heart. I loved knowing that the man I'd fallen in love with had so many of the same wonderful qualities that made my father such an admirable man.

I'd taken so long allowing the way my mother's words made me feel to move through me that she decided she wasn't finished speaking.

"And he's completely smitten."

"What?" I asked.

"Your dad loved me like I never knew was possible," my mom started as a painful burn hit my lungs. "I didn't have him for as long as I would have liked, but I'd never trade the years I did have with him for anything. I'm convinced that Jesse feels very much the same way about you that your dad did about me."

Worry immediately consumed me. I didn't think she was doing it intentionally or with any malice, but I wondered if what my mother was saying was making Jesse feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

I turned my head to the side and shifted my gaze to him. Much to my surprise, he didn't seem the least bit distressed.

In fact, it was quite the opposite.

Jesse was looking at me like I was the most exquisite thing he'd ever seen. Then, he said, "I can't speak for your father,

because I didn't know him, but I know your mom is not wrong about the way I feel about you."

"She's not lying about my father," I assured him, hoping he realized that I knew my father and the way he loved my mother. My mom hadn't been wrong. Jesse loved me the way my dad loved her.

He must have gotten precisely what I wished to communicate by that statement, because he nodded and smiled at me.

That's when a thought popped into my mind, and I returned my attention to my mom. "While you're not wrong about the way Jesse feels about me, I'm curious about how you managed to figure that out in the time that we've been here. It's not even been a full hour."

My mom let out a laugh. "Sawyer, he came to watch you perform in the high school play during your sophomore year. I knew then that he was a good guy with an eye for you."

I stared at my mom, dumbfounded.

There had been no questioning that there was a bit of a flirtatious vibe between Jesse and me back in high school, but I never believed he was interested in me. I certainly didn't think, at least not at that point, that our relationship was anything that would have given her the impression he was interested in me.

"And let's not forget the letters the two of you sent when Jesse was a recruit," Mom continued. "I didn't read those letters, obviously, but I saw the look on your face. I knew all I needed to know about how he made you feel."

This was supposed to be a happy occasion, but the tears that were welling up in my eyes might have suggested the opposite. My mom had known for years what Jesse meant to me, so it was no wonder she hadn't realized that he and I hadn't spoken after I left town.

Likely wanting to give me a minute to pull myself together, my mom shifted her attention to the man sitting

beside me. “You should have seen the way her face lit up when she got those letters in the mail from you.”

Jesse wrapped his arm around my back until his hand settled on the opposite shoulder. He squeezed me there and replied, “It was the same for me whenever I received one of her letters. And you aren’t wrong about my feelings for your daughter. I feel like I’ve loved Sawyer for a lifetime.”

“I know you have,” my mom returned.

That was all it took. With the conversation the two of them were having, I couldn’t control it any longer. I broke down into a fit of full-fledged sobs. Jesse didn’t hesitate to curl me into his body, so I could cry in his chest while he offered me the comfort of his embrace.

“She’ll be alright in a minute,” Jesse told my mom as he continued to hold me.

“Wrapped in your arms, I have no doubt about that being the case, either,” my mom assured him.

I cried harder.

Eventually, I pulled myself together—though it took longer than the minute Jesse had indicated it would—and the three of us had a wonderful afternoon together. In the end, my mom was thrilled to know that I was in Steel Ridge to stay.

Once again, I couldn’t say I disagreed with her.



I was back at work.

It was late on a Tuesday afternoon, two days after Jesse and I had gone to my mom’s house to have lunch and spend time with her, and things were slow at the pub. It wasn’t uncommon or out of the ordinary for that to be the case,

considering the day and time. It was, however, perfect for finding some time to catch up with my coworkers.

Unfortunately, despite how wonderful things were going in my life, it seemed as though that wasn't the case for all the people around me.

Deanna was having an awful day, and I knew she needed someone to talk to. I didn't know if she'd want to share, but I couldn't sit back and do nothing.

So, when she'd returned to the bar area after dropping some appetizers and a couple of beers to some guys who'd come in, I asked, "Is everything alright?"

Immediately, Deanna shook her head and answered quietly, "No, it's not."

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm happy to listen," I offered.

She sighed just as Cam walked up. "Lance wants to take a break," Deanna shared.

My eyes slid to Cam, and I wondered for a moment if I'd been working here for the last few weeks and hadn't been introduced to someone. I quickly realized that was ludicrous and asked, "Is Lance your boyfriend?"

Deanna nodded. "Well, he used to be. It seems he doesn't want that any longer."

"Shit, Dee, I'm sorry," Cam lamented.

Despondency was written all over my new friend's face. I felt awful for her. "How long have you been together?" I asked.

"Two years."

Wow.

I couldn't imagine what she was going through. "I'm so sorry you're going through this."

"Yeah, me too."

"Have you guys been having problems?" I questioned her.

She shook her head. “No. Nothing that I was aware of. We’re living together, and we haven’t been fighting at all. Granted, I work a lot of evenings, so by the time I get home, he’s already asleep. Then, he’s up early to go to work. But we’ve had discussions about marriage, so this feels completely out of the blue.”

“You’re living together. How effective is a separation going to be?” Cam chimed in.

Tears filled Deanna’s eyes. “He said he’s going to move back in with his parents until he figures out what he wants to do.”

This was so confusing to me. “Did he explain why he wants to separate? I mean, two years is a long time to decide to want a separation so suddenly, especially if you’re already living together and not having any problems. I imagine he has a reason, right?”

“That’s just it,” she started. “There’s no reason. Nothing he’s sharing, anyway. He just said he thinks we need to take a break. We’ve been together for so long, and he just wants to make sure it’s the right thing.”

It seemed strange to me that a man would leave the place he was living with his girlfriend if they weren’t having problems and had had discussions of marriage. Then again, I wondered if it was possible he was having commitment issues. “How recently did you two talk about marriage?” I asked.

“Within the last two or three months,” Deanna replied.

Okay, so maybe this wasn’t so strange after all. “Maybe he’s just getting cold feet,” I suggested. “I realize he hasn’t proposed and that you aren’t planning a wedding yet, but maybe the recent discussion is making him take a hard look at where he is now and where he wants to go. It might not be a bad thing. He probably just wants to be sure that you’re the one for him.”

Deanna swiped at the tears that had managed to escape and roll down her cheeks. “I have no questions about my feelings for him. How is he suddenly not sure?”

I looked at Cam. “I feel like you’re better equipped to answer that. I don’t understand why a guy would go as far as Lance has with Deanna, and then at the mere mention of marriage, suddenly start to question if she’s a woman he wants to spend his life with. He was already living with her.”

Cam turned his focus to Deanna, and he shot her a sympathetic look. “Assuming he’s being honest in all that he’s telling you, my best guess is that he’s worried about his ability to take care of you.”

“What?” Deanna asked, clearly just as confused as I was.

Cam leaned his forearms on the bar and explained, “A lot of men have traditional values when it comes to stuff like this. If this is the case with Lance, he was content to live together and play pretend, but the minute it gets serious, things change. He suddenly realizes that what he believes his role in a marriage is might not be something he can do. His job is to take care of you, and maybe he doesn’t feel equipped just yet to do that.”

My brows pulled together. Before Deanna could respond to that, I said, “I don’t understand what you mean by that. What does marriage change about his ability to take care of her?”

Standing up straight, Cam replied, “Deanna and Lance are living together in an apartment. Marriage is a big step. He might think that it means buying a house together and starting a family. Maybe he doesn’t feel he can provide that right now.”

“So, it’s a financial thing?” Deanna questioned Cam.

Cam shrugged. “I don’t know. He’d have to tell you that, but that’s my best guess.”

Deanna took in Cam’s words, considered them, and said, “I need to check on my tables.” She looked at me and asked, “Do I have makeup running down my face?”

I shook my head. “You’re good.”

With that, she took off to check on her tables. I watched her go, and I felt my heart break for what she was going

through. The conversation we'd just had forced me to consider my relationship with Jesse and the kind of man he was.

If he had done to me what Deanna's boyfriend was doing to her after two years, I wasn't sure I'd be able to wipe my tears, put a smile on my face, and do my job.

Then again, the thought of Jesse doing to me what Lance was doing to Deanna seemed impossible. We'd been through such a long separation already, and we both knew what it was like to live without one another.

Maybe he and I had a better appreciation for what it meant to have each other in our lives.

Whatever it was, I prayed I'd never have to walk in here with tears in my eyes because the man I loved was breaking my heart.

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SEVENTEEN



Sawyer

Everyone seemed to be having a rough week.

Well, everyone except for me.

Since I'd been in that position before, even if my reasoning had been different, I thought it was best to do what I could for those who were struggling. For the last couple of days, that involved being there for Deanna, so she could vent her frustrations or cry on my shoulder.

It had been a few days since her boyfriend had decided he wanted them to take a break and spend some time apart before making a bigger commitment to one another. Despite the fact that she had tried to get him to talk about it, so she could really try to understand his feelings, he insisted they couldn't spend their time apart talking to one another all the time.

Since he hadn't changed his mind about the separation and he wasn't really giving Deanna much of anything in the way of communication, it was safe to say she was out of sorts and incredibly downtrodden.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who was struggling.

As a bartender, I had grown accustomed to listening to people's problems. It was one of the reasons I became a bartender to begin with. I'd taken the classes for it at a time when I felt like my world had fallen apart. On some level, I think I knew that I'd have days or weeks like this one when people found themselves struggling to cope with whatever was happening in their lives.

I wouldn't go so far as to say I got enjoyment out of other people's suffering, but it was nice to know that I wasn't the only one who was living with what felt like devastating circumstances.

And the truth was, I'd learned a lot. If nothing else, I now knew that these things passed. Humans faced adversity. There would always be challenging times and rough patches, but things would eventually work out.

Now, I was standing behind the bar, and I was preparing myself to settle in for another sad story. Because it wasn't more than a minute or two ago when our latest patron entered the pub, walked right up to the bar, and requested a couple of shots.

I took one look at him, recognized him as a guy who'd come in two or three times before, and saw the heartbreak written all over his face. Immediately, I sprang into action.

After I'd set two shot glasses down in front of him, he didn't hesitate to lift one, down it, and do the same with the next. I filled one of the glasses again, and once he tossed that one back, he let out a deep sigh.

"Women suck," he declared. I cocked an eyebrow at him. The man lifted his gaze, realized it was a woman he was confessing his thoughts to, and winced. "No offense."

I smiled and let out a laugh. "None taken."

It wasn't like I couldn't understand his position. All week long, I'd been feeling like it was men who sucked, considering what Deanna was going through. But I had Jesse, and I knew that wasn't really the case.

So, I decided to let the guy get away with what he said without apologizing. Instead, I gave him the time he needed to figure out what he wanted to get off his chest. I didn't have to push him. I rarely had to push anyone to share.

When people got emotional, especially once they had some alcohol in their system, they shared willingly.

Sure enough, he finally asked, "What's your name?"

“Sawyer.”

He nodded and repeated, “Sawyer.” After letting out another deep sigh, he asked, “If a guy loved you at your lowest moments, would you leave him?”

If that wasn't a loaded question. “What's your name?” I countered.

“Kurt.”

“Okay, Kurt. Well, I guess that depends. I can't imagine leaving a man who loved me, assuming I knew that he did.”

There. At least I was being honest. Because I'd clearly left Jesse when he loved me. I just hadn't realized how he felt about me.

“She knew,” he insisted. “She knew, and it still didn't stop her from hooking up with her personal trainer.”

My eyes widened. “I'm so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. Can I get a beer?” he asked.

I gave the man a beer.

He took a swig, set the bottle down, and shared, “Loved her. I loved her so much. I won't pretend that I never made any mistakes, but there is nothing I wouldn't have done for that woman. Her family cut her off, she gained weight, and she lost her job. I saw her through all of it. Loved her no less. One day, it was like she finally snapped out of it. All of the things that had been weighing her down became her motivation.”

As he took a moment to gather himself, I replied, “Sometimes, having the love of a good man will do that. It was probably the fact that you stuck by her side that she found the strength to pull herself out of it.”

He grunted. “Yeah, well, she's got a funny way of showing it.”

“What exactly happened?” I wondered.

“She woke up one day and said she was done feeling miserable all the time,” Kurt started. “So, she started taking steps to get herself to a better place. She was exercising, eating

healthy, and started looking for a job. She found a job and continued with her workouts. I saw her go from being depressed to being cheerful and confident with each day that passed. She'd been wanting to get into a gym and start working even harder, so for Christmas this past year, I got her sessions with a personal trainer. I wanted to do anything I could to support her and encourage that confidence I'd been seeing."

This guy sounded like a dream come true. I couldn't imagine what would bring a woman to do what he'd indicated she'd done to him. "How did you find out what was going on between them?"

He hesitated for a moment, narrowing his eyes, as a look washed over him that made it seem like he was trying to figure something out. Eventually, he brought his eyes to mine and shared, "She told me. She came right out and told me to my face that she was done with me. She wanted to end things with me because she had been hooking up with the trainer from about two weeks after she started working with him."

Wow.

That was awful.

Before I had the chance to respond to him, Kelly called out, "Sawyer, I need a water, two lagers, and a martini."

"Got it."

I offered Kurt a sympathetic look as he waved his hand in the air. "I'm good," he assured me.

With that, I got back to work, but I didn't do it without a sense of appreciation for what or, more importantly, who I had in my life. With all that I'd been hearing over the last few days, I was never more grateful for Jesse and the relationship we had with each other.

Things got a bit busier from that point forward. I continued to check in with Kurt, and fortunately, he cut himself off from the alcohol before he took things too far. He even grabbed himself a bite to eat.

Deanna and Gina came in for their shifts about an hour before I was set to leave. Ernie and Everett arrived roughly thirty minutes after the girls did. And it was at that point that it happened.

All of the confidence I'd been feeling about where things were for me vanished.

Because a group of three women had walked into the pub and right up to the bar. I didn't think twice and said, "Hi. What can I get you?"

"Like we would ever trust you to make us a drink," the first girl replied.

I stepped back at the harsh response and took a second to look at the women again. That's when I realized that I knew them. I couldn't remember two of their names, but the one who'd spoken was named Alyssa. We'd gone to high school together.

Figuring it was best to ignore them and give them what they wanted, I offered a slight nod and said, "I'll get one of the other bartenders for you."

"I'm right here," Everett said, putting a hand to my shoulder. "What's the problem, ladies?"

All three of them looked at him in disbelief. "Um, she's the problem," Alyssa declared. "Do you even know who you have working here?"

Oh, God.

They were going to tell everyone I worked with what happened.

Everett didn't miss a beat. "Well, I'm not the owner, but I think we know all that we need to know about Sawyer. She's an excellent bartender."

That was really nice to hear, and if Everett's compliment hadn't been overshadowed by the impending doom I felt, I might have thanked him for it.

Gina walked up to the bar, oblivious to what was going on, and said, "I need a light beer and a margarita."

“I’ve got it,” I said, wanting to remove myself from the situation that was going down in front of me.

“Who is the owner?” Alyssa asked, as I walked away.

I did my best to ignore what was going on and got Gina the drinks she needed. When she walked away, I noticed that Deanna had stumbled upon the situation and Cam was making his approach.

This was going to be it.

I could officially kiss this job goodbye.

“What’s going on?” Cam asked.

“Well, I was just wondering if you knew about your employee?” Alyssa asked him.

Cam looked around at everyone standing there before he replied, “Which one?”

Alyssa immediately raised her hand, pointed in my direction, and replied with an evil grin on her face, “Her.”

“What about her?” Cam pressed.

Entirely too happy to do it, Alyssa answered, “She’s a murderer.”

Pain sliced through me as Cam’s eyes shot in my direction. I’d come a long way in trying to remind myself that what had happened was an accident, but being in this situation, it wasn’t exactly easy to do.

Cam didn’t ask me any questions. Instead, he assessed me a moment before he returned his attention to Alyssa and said, “I don’t think that’s right. Clearly, if Sawyer was what you’re calling her, she’d not be here, because she’d be in prison.”

“People commit crimes all the time, and justice is never served,” Alyssa noted. “Just ask her best friends from high school... oh, wait, you can’t do that. They’re dead. Haven’t you heard about what happened at the quarry years ago?”

There was a brief moment of silence before Deanna muttered, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Shaking her head, Alyssa said, “I wish I was.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding me,” Deanna seethed. It was at that moment that I knew things were about to take another turn. The problem was, I didn’t know Deanna well enough to be sure where the rage that was building inside her was going to go.

Fortunately, Cam held his hand up to Deanna and said, “Relax. I’ve got this.” It took her a moment, but Deanna started to breathe a little slower and buried her frustration.

With his eyes pinned on Alyssa and her friends, he ordered, “Get out of my bar.”

Alyssa gasped. “What?”

“Get out of my bar, and don’t ever come back here again,” he instructed her.

“You’re kicking us out?” she exclaimed, her voice revealing the exasperation she felt.

Cam barely nodded and confirmed, “I am. I’m doing that because you just walked in here and attempted to start trouble by pinning a tragic accident on an innocent woman.”

“But she—”

“Get the fuck out of my bar!” Cam roared.

My lips parted in shock as my body tensed.

Alyssa’s friends instantly scooted back. She was slower to move. And because she was the bitch that she was, she had to get the last word. “Whatever. I’ll never step foot in here again.”

“That’s wise, because if you do, I’ll have you arrested for trespassing,” Cam warned her.

A rush of air left her lungs. “Let’s go, girls,” she said as she turned around. “This place is a joke.”

A moment later, they were gone, and I was left standing there, a bunch of nerves. But the nerves lasted all of a few seconds before I felt a hand on my shoulder and saw Cam standing in front of me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Thank you,” I rasped. “Thank you for doing that for me.”

Cam’s features softened, and his expression warmed. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Tears filled my eyes. The next thing I knew, Deanna squeezed in front of Cam, wrapped her arms around me, and held me. “Those girls were absolute bitches. Please tell me you weren’t ever friends with them, especially the ringleader.”

“I wasn’t,” I assured her, loving the feeling of knowing her reaction earlier was in defense of me.

“Good. You’re way too good for them.”

Deanna stepped back, put her hands on my shoulders, and offered me a blinding smile.

“Thank you, Deanna.”

“Girl, we know who you are. I can’t speak for everyone, but it’s clear to me that everyone here will always have your back,” she assured me.

That was it.

Until she said it, I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear it.

Twelve years ago, I lost everything, and I’d desperately needed to know that someone believed in me and the person I was. I didn’t get it. Part of that had been my own fault, assuming I knew what Jesse had been referring to that day at the cemetery. But being here now and having my coworkers who’d only known me for a few short weeks stand up for me was unbelievably reassuring.

As awful as the evening could have ended for me, it was the exact opposite.

And when I grabbed my things to head out of work that night, I knew I had one man to thank for it all.



Jesse

I'd barely had the chance to pull my truck to a stop and put it in park when it happened.

Sawyer pounced.

I'd just picked her up at work and had brought her home, and it seemed she was in no mood to delay getting what she wanted.

She all but crawled across the center console, placed one hand on my thigh, and brought the other behind my head. Her mouth was immediately kissing me. Her lips moved along my jaw and up toward my ear, where she began to nibble.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," I returned as she began moving back toward my mouth.

When her lips connected with mine, her hand that had been on my thigh had shifted and landed on my cock. Feeling me hard against the palm of her hand, Sawyer moaned. That sound only served to send more blood rushing to one spot.

Eventually, Sawyer pulled her mouth away, allowed her eyes to search my face, and brought both of her hands to the fly of my jeans.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

As she lowered the zipper, she shared, "I don't want to wait any longer."

One of her hands curled around the waistband of my underwear and pulled back as the other slipped inside and wrapped around me. "Wait for what?"

She cocked an eyebrow, and a seductive look stole over her expression. "To show you how grateful I am for everything

you've given me.”

I had no idea what prompted this, but there wasn't a chance I was going to complain. Wanting her to have all the room she needed, I shifted my seat back. That's when she stroked my length once before dropping her head toward my lap.

Her ass was in the air as she parted her lips around my cock and took me into the warm and wet recesses of her mouth. I groaned and reached my right hand out toward her ass.

Sawyer sucked me off like she'd been starving for it. Her head bobbing up and down in my lap while her moans filled the cabin.

The fingers of my left hand threaded through her hair and gripped it firmly while the other hand slipped into the back of her pants to grab the bare skin of her ass. I squeezed as my head dropped back against the seat.

“Fuck, Sawyer, your mouth feels amazing.”

She hummed against me, the vibrations doing little to help me rein in my control. Finally, a bit frantic, she freed me from her mouth and shimmied her hips back and forth in an effort to get her pants off. Then, she climbed over, pulled her thong to the side, and slid down over me.

“Oh, Jesse,” she moaned.

My hands gripped her hips and helped her to move with me inside her. It wasn't like she needed my help, though.

Sawyer was determined, clearly wanting to show the gratitude she'd promised only minutes ago. I let her deliver on her promise, giving myself the opportunity to enjoy her being in charge.

It didn't matter that we were in a confined space. There didn't seem to be anything that was going to deter Sawyer from doing what she set out to do.

I reveled in all of it.

Her movements.

Her tenacity.

Her moans.

Her scent.

“Jesse, babe,” she called out a warning.

I gripped her hair in my fist, urged her mouth toward mine, and pressed my lips to hers just as she came apart on top of me. Feeling the warmth and wetness as her pussy clenched my cock, I didn't need anything else. Sawyer brought me to the brink of my own orgasm and effortlessly sent me over the edge.

For several long moments afterward, neither of us said a word. I was content to have her sit on my lap for the rest of the night, if that's where she wanted to be. But eventually, my curiosity got the best of me, and I said, “I'm not at all complaining about that, but I have to admit I'd love to know what I did to deserve it.”

Sawyer's eyes searched my face for a long time, and something warm moved through her expression when she did. Finally, she replied, “I love the way you love me. You're such a good guy, and you treat me right. And I couldn't be more grateful to you for the people you've brought into my life.”

“Loving you is easy, Sawyer. It always has been,” I remarked.

“See? That's what I mean. I couldn't have hoped for anyone better than you,” she returned. “I already told you about Deanna's boyfriend wanting a break from her. Then I had a guy come in today who has a girlfriend that cheated on him. He was devastated. I can't imagine you'd ever hurt me the way they were hurt.”

“Never,” I assured her.

“To top it all off, I had a bit of a drama at work today,” Sawyer shared.

“What? What happened?”

She waved her hand in the air and insisted, “It's all good. A couple of girls from high school came in and tried to start

trouble. They brought up what happened all those years ago, but Cam, Deanna, and Everett all stood up for me. In fact, Cam yelled at them and kicked them out of the bar.”

The tension I’d started to feel the moment she said she had experienced some drama at work fled once she shared that her coworkers had her back. Sure, I’d still worried about her for other reasons, but I was glad to know she’d found people who cared about her and would look out for her when I wasn’t around.

“I’m happy for you, Sawyer.”

“And I’m so grateful for you,” she declared.

“How about we go inside and take a shower?” I suggested.

Sawyer rolled her hips over me. “That sounds like fun.”

I groaned.

“Thank you for being the best guy.”

“Thank you for being my girl.”

A moment later, Sawyer and I separated, got out of the truck, and went inside for a shower.

By the time I had her wrapped up in my arms before we fell asleep, I started to feel more and more at ease. With everything she was communicating, I had a feeling Sawyer was definitely here to stay.

EIGHTEEN



Jesse

Life seemed to be a balancing act lately.

Then again, it always did.

For far too long, I'd felt like I was going through the motions every day, simply doing my job. Nothing was exciting or special.

Now, I was experiencing unbelievable highs. Merely waking up in the morning was a gift. Of course, it was difficult not to feel that way when I was waking up with Sawyer's body pressed against mine.

I wanted to believe things would remain this way, but I couldn't be foolish. I knew there was still a threat lingering out there, and as quickly as my life had turned around when Sawyer walked back into it, there wasn't a question in my mind that it would change again if something happened to her.

As good as things were right now, I was still very acutely aware of the potential disaster waiting just around the corner. Suffice it to say, I was terrified.

Because what I had now felt like a lifetime in the making. Sawyer was back in my life, and she was there in a way I never wanted her to leave. It was a chilling thought to know that there was an active threat against her life.

I wanted to believe that she'd done all the right things when she learned what was happening and had immediately packed up to leave Maryland. Truthfully, I did. She was here,

and it was the best place for her to be for me to keep her safe. I had hoped trouble wouldn't find her here, but now that my phone was ringing in my hand and I saw the name on the display, I no longer had any good feelings about what was ahead.

"Yeah, you've got Jesse," I answered the call.

"Jesse, this is Detective Eric Perkins."

I already knew that. I'd programmed the guy's number into my phone a couple weeks ago after I'd spoken with him about this case. At that time, he had assured me that he hadn't shared what he knew about Sawyer's location with anyone else, and the two of us had an agreement that if and when he had any news to share regarding this case, he would contact me directly.

While I had always respected law enforcement and the job they did, I didn't hide the fact that I disliked Eric's carelessness when it came to Sawyer's safety in this situation.

Fortunately, she was okay now, and with each day that passed, she was getting more and more attached to the place she used to call home.

Seeing Eric's number and hearing his voice for the first time in weeks had me on edge.

"Yes, Detective. I assume you have news to report," I returned.

"Is Sawyer okay?" he asked.

My gut clenched. Immediately, I assumed the worst. Was he thinking that she might not be okay, or was he merely attempting to ease into this conversation?

"She's fine," I assured him. "What do you have for me?"

An audible sigh came through the line. Admittedly, hearing it did not make me feel very good. "Well, I have some good news," he started. "Throughout our investigation of what was going down at Sweet Temptations, we learned that things weren't as simple as they seemed to be on the surface. As it

turns out, they weren't just into hiring underage women to work a pole."

"It's worse than that?" I asked, feeling a bit of disbelief, all while knowing that these kinds of things were not uncommon.

"Unfortunately," he confirmed. Following a lengthy pause, he added, "They were leading a sex trafficking ring, and the owner wasn't the only player in the game. I'm happy to report that we've managed to arrest his wife, Adriana, and a few other employees from Sweet Temptations that were also in on it."

This was fantastic news.

Not, of course, learning what they'd been doing. I had no doubt they'd destroyed at least hundreds of lives.

But for Sawyer and her safety, it was reassuring to know that the woman who wanted her dead was in custody. The only hope I had now was that there was a rock-solid case being built against all the players, so that I would no longer need to worry about this threat.

"I assume this is a solid case," I said.

"Airtight," he confirmed.

At that word, I felt some of the tension leave my body. This was getting better and better. "Great. So, is this finally over for Sawyer?" I questioned him.

There was a lengthy pause, and that's when I knew there was more Eric hadn't shared. As the tension built back up in my body, he shared, "I wanted to believe that was the case. I was certain we'd managed to nip it in the bud, but I'm not sure we made this happen fast enough."

"What makes you say that?"

"I had a bit of a one-on-one with Adriana," Eric revealed.

When he didn't add anything else, I prompted, "And?"

"She had asked me if I'd taken any recent trips to Pennsylvania to visit my girlfriend," he returned, his voice indicating he didn't like having to divulge that information.

“They know where she is,” I stated.

“They know,” he confirmed.

I closed my eyes and rolled my neck to one side in a vain attempt to find some relief from the stress that was quickly building. Sawyer’s life was still in jeopardy.

“Any idea who might be heading this way or how long they’ve known?” I asked him.

“Not a clue, but I’m working on it. If she hired someone, I’m hoping there’s a trail that’s going to lead us to finding that person,” he answered.

This was bullshit.

The people who wanted Sawyer dead were in custody, but the person who had been hired to kill Sawyer was still out there and knew she was in Pennsylvania. If they knew what state she was in, I had every confidence that they knew what town she was in.

“Anything else I need to know?” I asked.

“That’s all I’ve got for now,” Eric replied.

“You need to dig and find out who we should be expecting,” I ordered. “And if you and your guys can’t make that happen, you need to give us what you’ve got so we can.”

Eric hesitated before he urged, “Keep Sawyer safe. I’ll be touch.”

With that, he disconnected the call. I stood there, hoping like hell we were going to catch this guy before he had the chance to get to my girl.

She was at work right now, but I was going to have to figure out how to break this news to her when I picked her up tonight.



Sawyer

I never thought my life would ever be this good again.

Never.

But here I was, and it was better than I could have imagined.

I had a job I loved with coworkers I adored. I was back in my hometown and could see my mom whenever I wanted. I had made new friends, not only with the people I worked with, but also with the women connected to Harper Security Ops. And I was madly in love with the man who'd made all of it possible for me. That was only, of course, because he loved me at least as much as I loved him.

It was a bit crazy to think about how it had all gone down from the start. I'd come back to Steel Ridge out of pure necessity. Within an hour of being here, I realized that the price of survival was just too high. Jesse had crushed my heart once, and I couldn't risk having that happen again.

Death was the better option. Maybe that was because I knew that facing that kind of rejection again, especially when I desperately needed his help, was a worse punishment.

Then it all changed.

He found me on my way back out of town. And while that encounter wasn't exactly all rainbows and sunshine, it was arguably the most critical one. Because I hadn't gone a day since then without seeing him, each one better than the one before.

Now I knew one thing was true. There was no price I wouldn't have paid for this. Not just for survival, but to have it all. Because I did.

I had it all now.

And though it hadn't come without some major heartbreak along the way, it was a beautiful place to be.

Today was just another day of good vibes all the way around.

I was at work—thankfully without any high school drama—and I was excited about the evening ahead.

A few days ago, I'd gotten a call from Avalon. She told me that she and the girls were planning to come in for a visit. Apparently, some wedding planning was in store for Liv and Brixton's upcoming nuptials, and they wanted to bring me into the fold.

I was eager to see them all again. Even better, my shift would be ending about forty-five minutes after they were scheduled to arrive. I'd be able to spend some quality time with them and forge deeper friendships.

I couldn't wait.

Of course, all of the wonderful things I'd been experiencing lately should have been a clue that something was about to go awry.

They weren't.

I was oblivious and so caught up in how much my life had changed for the better that I didn't stop to think for one second that I might wind up losing it all.

And it all started when Deanna came back in the middle of her break and burst into tears.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" I asked, moving toward her.

"It's over. It's officially over," she cried when I pulled her into a hug.

I had a feeling I knew precisely what this was about. "Did something happen with Lance?" I asked.

She nodded against my shoulder.

"Tell me what's going on," I urged her.

Deanna pulled back, looked at me with her red, splotchy face, and said, "It's over. He doesn't want me anymore."

My heart broke for her, and I turned around to find Cam close by. "Hey, Cam, do you mind if I take a break now?"

Cam's eyes slid to Deanna before they shifted back to me. He shook his head. "No. Go handle that."

Deanna hadn't hidden the details of what was happening in her personal life. I wasn't surprised that Cam took one look at her and came to the conclusion that this wasn't good. Not only was it bad for Deanna, but it wasn't exactly ideal to have a crying waitress working on the floor.

So, while Cam, Ernie, and Kelly held down the fort, I'd ushered Deanna away from the bar and any prying eyes. I guided her down the hall that led toward the back door, and when we were just a few feet away from the rear exit, I asked, "What happened?"

Deanna burst into tears again and cried, "He's cheating on me."

"What?"

"He didn't want time away to figure out if he was ready to take the next step. He just wanted to have the freedom to fuck someone else."

My heart was breaking. Deanna's voice was a mix of anger and hurt, and I felt absolutely horrible for her.

"He came out and told you this?" I questioned her.

She shook her head.

Confused, my brows knit together, and I pressed, "So, how do you know?"

Deanna reached into the front of her apron and pulled out her phone. After tapping on the screen a few times, she held it out to me and said, "I saw this while I was on my break."

On the display was a photo of a two people. A girl, looking right at the camera and smiling brightly while the guy had his face buried in her neck where he was kissing her. I didn't

know either of these people, obviously, but I had the feeling that Deanna did.

I mean, the guy's face wasn't even showing, so I didn't know how anyone could say who it was.

Then again, I had to imagine that if I saw a picture like this with Jesse doing precisely what this guy was, I'd know it was him. I'd studied his features many times, and I'd recognize him anywhere. If it had been the underside of his jaw on display, I'd know it.

"Is this him?" I asked.

She nodded. "And in case there's any question about it being him, just swipe through the next two pictures."

I did as she suggested and realized where she'd gotten her proof. In the second photo, Lance was kissing the woman's cheek as she continued to smile at the camera. And in the final photo, his face mirrored hers.

"I'm so, so sorry, Deanna. Where did you find these? Could they possibly be old photos?"

She shook her head. "One of my friends is mutual friends with this girl, and she sent it to me. It was posted on Lance's new girlfriend's social media last night."

I handed the phone back to her. "Have you spoken to him?"

Deanna took her phone from me, tears spilling down her cheeks, and shook her head. Her gaze settled on the picture of Lance kissing a girl who wasn't her, and I watched as her breathing became shallow.

"I'm going to be sick," she warned me.

Not thinking twice about it, I took her by the arm and moved toward the exit. Once we were outside, she bent over and emptied the contents of her stomach on the ground. I stood there, holding her hair away from her face and stroking her back.

This was awful.

Devastating.

I wanted to make Cam aware of the situation, so when Deanna and I didn't return in a reasonable amount of time, he'd understand why. Unfortunately, my phone was inside, and nobody else was around.

"It's okay," I assured her. "You'll get through this, Deanna."

I wasn't sure I was offering her any real comfort. If the roles had been reversed and I had just learned that Jesse was cheating on me, I didn't think there was anything anyone would be able to tell me that would make it better.

It would never be better.

"Why would he do this?" she asked through her sobbing.

"I don't know. But you deserve so much better. I thought that days ago, and he just confirmed it now. If he couldn't even be bothered to tell you the truth to your face or to end things officially before moving on to someone else, he's not good enough for you," I replied.

Deanna's emotions got the best of her, and she heaved all over again. I continued to hold her hair and rub her back as I looked around the parking lot.

Suddenly, I saw a familiar face walking in our direction.

"Everything okay?"

"Oh, Kurt. Thank goodness you're here. Would you mind going in and letting Cam, Ernie, or even Kelly know that Deanna and I are out here? I could use a hand."

Kurt gave me a nod. "Sure."

"Thank you," I said, returning my attention to Deanna.

The moment I looked away, it happened.

My hands were yanked away from Deanna, and a big body grabbed me from behind. It took me a fraction of a second to realize that Kurt was dragging me away through the parking lot.

“Help!” I cried out as I struggled and fought against his hold.

Deanna was still sick over what she was going through and vomiting that she didn't notice what was happening until Kurt had dragged me so far away from where she was. By the time she noticed, he was already opening a door on the side of a van.

A moment later, he tossed me inside and slammed the door shut.

I attempted and failed horribly to get out. Everything was locked, and I had no way to even crawl through to the front.

The next thing I knew, the engine started, and the van started moving.

All I could think was that by the time Jesse got here, I'd already be gone and dead.

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NINETEEN



Jesse

“Hey, do you have a minute?”

I was at Harper Security Ops, standing in the doorway to an office, looking at my closest friend, Jagger.

“Yeah, sure,” he returned. “In fact, I’ve got plenty of time, because Lily is meeting up with the girls tonight while they do the wedding planning thing with Liv.”

“What about Liv?”

I turned around and saw that Brixton had poked his head into the room. Damon happened to be there as well.

“Jagger was just telling me that he had time to talk because Lily is going to be out with the girls while they wedding plan with Liv,” I told him.

“Oh, yeah, Damon and I were just talking about that,” Brixton replied. “Liv and Avalon drove together to The Steel Pub.”

None of this was news to me. Sawyer had shared that she and the girls were planning to get together tonight after her shift at work. I was glad for it, feeling grateful that they’d accepted her into the fold with so much ease. Sawyer was ecstatic that she’d found some friends outside of her coworkers, with whom she also seemed to have a really great rapport.

“Is everything okay?” Damon asked, his attention focused on me.

I sat down in one of the chairs, let out a sigh, and shook my head. “I don’t know,” I mumbled. “I thought that maybe Jagger could give me some advice.”

“What’s wrong?” Jagger pressed.

“It’s Sawyer,” I answered.

“Sawyer?” he repeated. “I thought everything was going well for the two of you. Did something happen?”

Shaking my head, realizing he’d gotten the wrong impression, I clarified, “We’re fine. Everything is actually fantastic between us. It’s just that... well, I got a call from a guy who is a detective in Maryland. He’s the guy that’s been working on the case involving the club that Sawyer was working at before she came here.”

“Is this that guy named Eric?” Jagger asked. “The same one that basically made Sawyer a target in the first place?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s this about?” Brixton asked.

I’d told Jagger about what had happened with Sawyer a few weeks ago. He knew from the start about Sawyer being the woman who’d had me all twisted up inside for years, but he didn’t know all that I’d learned about her situation. So, when I became even more twisted up inside about Sawyer for very different reasons, I went to him and shared.

Since Brixton and Damon didn’t know about the part of Sawyer’s situation that involved Eric, I decided that was the best place to start. I explained how everything happened with him that resulted in her becoming a target.

When I finished, Damon said, “Jesus. Didn’t the guy realize that by showing his face there for so long and then outing himself as a detective in front of one of the criminals was a bad idea? What a rookie mistake.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know how long he’s held his position, but he knows how I feel about the lack of care he showed in making sure Sawyer stayed safe.”

“So, what’s going on now? What did Eric have to say when he just called you?” Jagger questioned me.

“As it turns out, the reason these people wanted Sawyer dead wasn’t because they thought she’d already spoken out about them hiring underage girls to work at the club,” I started. “They wanted her dead, because they thought she knew about their other business dealings.”

“Let me guess,” Brixton chimed in. “Eric now knows what those other business dealings are.”

“Yep. And he insists they have a solid case against them for sex trafficking,” I confirmed. “The problem is that while the woman who ordered the hit on Sawyer is in custody along with a few of Sawyer’s former coworkers, there’s reason to believe she’s not entirely safe just yet.”

Confusion washed over their faces. “Why is that?” Damon asked.

“Adriana asked Eric if he’d made any visits to Pennsylvania to see his girlfriend,” I revealed.

“Sawyer dated the detective?” Brixton asked.

I shook my head. “No. But they saw how he had interacted with her when he came into their establishment. Sawyer thought the guy was genuinely interested in her, and it appeared that way to the people who worked with her.”

Silence settled over the room for a moment until Jagger finally declared, “So, they know she’s here.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“How can we help you?”

Glancing around the room, I realized that each one of these men had been in situations where the women they loved found themselves in danger. All of us felt this overwhelming desire to protect innocent people. When it came to the ones we loved, that urge was amplified. So, I knew that they’d understand where I was coming from with my current predicament.

“I just got her back,” I told them.

“You’ll keep her safe, Jesse. You’ve got to know you’re doing everything you can to make that happen,” Brixton insisted.

Nodding, I returned, “Yeah, I do. But I’m concerned about this for another reason. I don’t want to keep her in the dark about the call I received from Eric, because I know that it’s not wise. I’d rather her be more vigilant. But there’s a part of me that wants to keep this to myself, because I’m worried it might send her packing.”

“You think she’ll leave?” Jagger questioned me.

I shot him a look that I hoped indicated I didn’t know the answer to that question. “I don’t want to think that she will. I mean, she’s just now setting down roots again and getting all of the things back in her life that she should have had all along.”

“So, why are you worried?” Damon asked.

I thought the answer to that question was obvious, but based on the fact that each of the three men in front of me seemed to be waiting for a response, I answered, “I don’t want her to run if she thinks someone knows she came here.”

“But she didn’t have all that she has now when she left Maryland,” Brixton noted.

“Okay. What does that have to do with anything?” I countered.

“Jesse, she came to you when you two hadn’t even spoken for years,” Jagger explained. “She trusted you to keep her safe back then. Now that she has all that she does and things are good between you, why would she leave?”

He was right.

They all were.

When she realized the danger she was in, Sawyer didn’t hesitate to come to me. It took a lot of courage—something that was never in short supply with her—to do that when she genuinely believed I hated her.

So, I had to look at it from their perspective. Sawyer knew what she had here in Steel Ridge. And she was a brave woman. I never wanted her to have to live in fear, but I had to believe that she trusted me enough to keep her safe to know she wouldn't have to.

"I'll talk to her tonight about it," I finally said. "She needs to know."

"I think it's a good idea, and I don't think she's going to pack up her things as a result," Jagger returned.

Just then, my phone rang.

I pulled it out of my pocket, saw the name on the display, and looked up at the guys with confusion written all over my face. "Why is Avalon calling me?"

Damon cocked an eyebrow.

I answered the call, held the phone to my ear, and said, "Hello?"

"Oh my God, Jesse, where are you?" she shouted.

Damon immediately rose to his feet. His body was tense, and I couldn't say I didn't understand it. After what Avalon had gone through just a few months ago, it was safe to say that Damon had every reason to be worried about her. And judging by the fact that I had to pull the phone away from my ear because she was yelling so loudly, I didn't doubt he heard the same terror in her voice that I did.

"I'm at Harper Security," I answered. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Liv's fine. But we're chasing this guy," she shared.

At that declaration, Brixton had a similar reaction to Damon. Liv was his, and he'd known her since they were kids. The idea that she was chasing someone wasn't sitting well with him.

"What?" I replied.

Avalon let out a groan of frustration. "Sawyer's in trouble. Liv and I are following this guy who took her, but you need to

get here. We just pulled out of the pub's parking lot and are heading east."

Suddenly, the notion of being paralyzed by fear made sense to me. I'd always been able to react quickly in a tense situation, but the confirmation that Sawyer was in trouble, that the guy who'd just taken her was likely the man who'd been hired to kill her, left me feeling nothing but dread.

No sooner had Avalon gotten those words out when I heard Liv's voice. "I think he's going to get on the highway and head north."

My girl had just been kidnapped. I had to ignore the fact that I felt sick and wanted to vomit. I had to pretend my lungs were still functioning and that I could breathe. I couldn't pay attention to the awful churning in my gut or the fact that my heart felt like it was pounding in my ears.

Sawyer needed me, and I needed to act.

My eyes darted around the room. None of us said a word, but we all sprang into action and immediately filed out of the private office and toward the exit.

"We're coming," I told them. "You need to stay on the phone with me and tell me what's happening as it does."

"Oh, man. Jesse, I—"

Avalon stopped herself. That's when I knew that whatever she was going to say wasn't going to be good. "What, Avalon? What is it?"

Following a beat of silence, her petrified voice came through the line. "You should have heard the way she screamed," Avalon said.

My gut clenched.

My girl. My beautiful girl

If something happened to her, I'd never survive it. The thought of Sawyer leaving town had been too much to bear. If she got hurt, or if this guy managed to carry out the task that he'd been ordered to do, there wasn't a question in my mind that I'd never get over it.

I couldn't lose her again.

Damon grabbed me by the arm and pulled me toward his truck. I got in, and he did the same as I watched Jagger go with Brixton in Brixton's vehicle.

Once we pulled out of the lot, I put the phone on speaker and demanded, "Avalon, tell me what happened."

"Liv and I had just pulled up at The Steel Pub for girls' night," she began, her words coming out fast and panicked. "When we pulled in, we saw Sawyer outside helping another girl who seemed to be sick. Liv parked, and when we weren't even a few feet away from the car, we heard someone yelling for help. We stopped and looked around. That's when Liv realized some guy had Sawyer. She was fighting against him, but he managed to get her in this van. We decided the best thing to do was to follow them."

While the thought of Liv and Avalon both getting caught up in this mess wasn't one I relished, I couldn't have been more grateful that they'd been there when they were and that they'd decided to take action. There was no telling when I would have found out otherwise that Sawyer was missing. It might have been hours, and without a lead, this whole thing would be even worse than it already felt.

"Did she see you? Does Sawyer know that someone is aware of what happened?" I questioned Avalon.

Liv's voice came through the line. "He's taking us north on the highway."

"Got it," Damon returned.

"Hey, Damon. I didn't know you were with Jesse," Avalon said.

"I am. But, baby, answer Jesse's question. Did Sawyer see you and Liv?"

Avalon had always been the most talkative employee at Harper Security Ops, so it wasn't a surprise to me that in such an intense situation, she didn't think twice about having another conversation that had nothing to do with what was happening right in front of her.

“Right. No. Sawyer didn’t see us, but like I said, she was outside with a girl who had gotten sick,” Avalon shared. “That girl was still there, looking dumbfounded and slightly horrified at the van, when Liv and I drove past her. If nothing else, Sawyer knows that girl is aware she was taken.”

That was both good and bad.

Because if whoever Sawyer had been helping was sick and unaware of what had happened, I wasn’t sure what reassurance that would have given Sawyer. It was likely that my girl was panicking now, believing that nobody who could actually help her knew that she had been taken.

“This guy is driving like a maniac,” Liv announced.

“Where are you?” Damon asked.

“We just passed mile marker forty-five,” Liv answered. “We’re currently in the left lane, so I’m guessing he’s not ready to get off of here just yet.”

Damon and I were about ten miles behind where Liv, Avalon, and Sawyer were.

Assuming this all worked out well, I was going to have to go out of my way to show Avalon and Liv how grateful I was to them for doing this. The duo was a perfect balance. Avalon liked to talk, which meant I was getting all the information I needed about what was happening. And Liv was calm and collected in this situation. She was focused and determined, speaking only when it was critical to the operation.

My mind was racing with what felt like a million thoughts. Was Sawyer hurt? Was she scared? Did she know that I was coming for her?

As Damon sped up the highway, I couldn’t seem to stop myself from thinking the worst. This would be my luck. I’d have foolishly stayed away from Sawyer for all those years when I had all the resources at my disposal to find her easily, only to have this happen. Only to get a glimpse of what life with her would be like and have it ripped away.

“He’s getting over,” Avalon declared.

“And signaling to get off,” Liv added.

“Who would have thought a criminal would use their directional?” Avalon muttered.

Ignoring Avalon’s curiosity, Damon asked, “What exit?”

“Black Maple Forest,” Liv answered. “Shit!”

“What? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Liv spat.

“Liv, focus. What’s wrong?”

Liv didn’t answer, but Avalon did. “Two cars cut in front of us getting off of the exit. There’s a light off the exit. He’s going to make it through, but we aren’t.”

Damn it.

“Damon, we’ve got to get there,” I said, my patience running thin.

I knew he was doing all he could do, already breaking the law by speeding as fast as he was.

“I’m going to cut around these people,” Liv declared. “I’m not risking letting that van out of my sight.”

“Liv, be careful,” I warned. “You don’t want to draw attention to yourself, either.”

“I’ve got it, Jesse. We’re not letting anything happen to Sawyer.”

There was a momentary pause before I heard Avalon speaking to Liv. “You’re good this way. Go!”

God, these women. They had grit that was tougher than some of the men I’d encountered over the years.

Coming to that revelation, I hoped the same would hold true for Sawyer. I just needed her to hold on until we got to her. Damon was doing everything he could to close that distance, and we were now just minutes behind them.

“We caught up to them. Make a left off the exit and follow that road out. This is really far off the beaten path,” Liv said.

“We’re about a mile away from the exit,” I told her. “We’re coming right behind you.”

The next thing I knew, we were exiting the highway. Fortunately, the light immediately off the exit was green, and Damon was able to make that left right through it.

“He’s pulling off,” Avalon said.

“Where’s he going?” I asked.

Silence came through the line, until Avalon eventually whispered, “Oh, shit.”

“What?! What is it?”

“Jesse, Damon, you need to hurry.”

I needed to know what we were heading into. I needed to know what Liv was facing. “What’s happening?”

“He pulled off onto a dirt trail that leads into the forest,” Liv answered. “Should we follow? I feel like it’s going to be obvious that something is up if we do.”

“Where exactly are you?” I asked.

Liv rattled specific details about their location.

“We’re three minutes away,” Damon told her. “Stay put.”

Even though I wanted to tell them to follow the van into the woods, I knew what Damon told them to do was the best response. He was thinking with a mostly clear head. It wasn’t his girl that was in the back of that van, but Avalon was at risk in Liv’s car if things took a turn down that dirt road. We didn’t need to be rescuing three women.

“I think we should go in after her,” Avalon said.

“Avalon, baby, do not even think about it,” Damon ordered.

“But—”

“End of discussion. We’ll be there in less than two minutes,” he explained.

With that, Avalon acquiesced. But I loved that she and Liv felt so much love and concern for Sawyer that they were

willing to take that risk and put themselves in harm's way to look out for her.

Once this was all over, I was going to make sure to tell Sawyer about the kind of people she had in her life now, and what they were prepared to do for her.

The truth was, I was focusing on being able to do that, because I couldn't bear to consider the alternative... that I might not get the chance to talk to her about anything ever again.

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TWENTY



Sawyer

There was nothing quite like knowing that death was fast approaching.

Over the last ten minutes, I sat in the back of a moving van contemplating how awful that feeling was, and it brought me back.

Suddenly, my mind had taken me back to twelve years ago at the quarry, and the only thoughts I had were about my friends, Faye, Cristina, and Janelle. Did they know? Did they understand what was happening to them in the mere seconds it took for it all to happen? Did they realize they were going to die?

God, it was unbelievably painful to consider what their final moments were like. What thoughts, if any, did they have?

I didn't think there was any instance that could ever make sudden, unexpected, or tragic deaths feel better, but for me, I started to think that perhaps it would have been better to not know it was imminent.

Because the mind was such a powerful thing, and right now, my mind was doing a number on me.

I was on the way to my death.

There were no words to describe what that felt like.

Terror moved through me as my heart pounded wildly in my chest and my belly felt much like Deanna's had only a short time ago. It was a wonder I hadn't thrown up, too.

I wanted to be positive, but it was difficult to do.

Sure, Deanna knew that I'd been kidnapped, but she had been so distraught over what she'd just learned about Lance that I didn't think she'd be in the right frame of mind to get me help.

And even if she managed to pull herself together long enough to act, what could she have possibly done? I mean, she could have run back inside, told Cam what happened, and called the authorities.

There were cameras outside of The Steel Pub, but by the time anyone could review the footage and review license plate numbers or even determine that it was Kurt that had taken me, it would all be too late.

And Kurt?

I hated that I'd been kind to him. I hated that I'd been sympathetic to his plight a matter of days ago. It had all been a farce. It was all just a ploy; though, I couldn't quite understand what the motivation there was. Had he really made up that whole scenario with his girlfriend leaving him for her personal trainer? What did that accomplish?

Unless it was this.

Unless it was to become a familiar and friendly face that I'd eventually believe meant me no harm, so he could carry out Adriana's orders.

If he was successful, I had a feeling I wasn't going to be alive an hour from now. Adriana wanted me dead, so I was certain this was going to be quick.

But just because the outcome seemed bleak didn't mean that I had given up. I couldn't. I had far too much to lose, and there was no price I wasn't willing to pay to survive. No matter what it took, no matter how difficult it was, I refused to give up before it was over.

I promised myself that I'd come up with a plan. That wasn't exactly easy to do, considering I had not a single clue where I was heading. Based on the way the van had been moving, I was relatively certain we'd been on the highway for

a period of time. We were driving a bit slower now, so that led me to believe we had gotten off at an exit.

On the one hand, I liked knowing that we couldn't have been too far from home. On the other hand, getting off the exit now might have meant that I wouldn't even have an hour left.

We were probably getting closer and closer to wherever this was going to happen. As Kurt continued driving, I silently hoped that wherever he wound up stopping would be a place that wouldn't make it impossible to get away, because I had every intention of doing what I could to save myself.

Kurt made a turn, and the van started moving at a much slower pace. The tires no longer sounded like they were traveling on a roadway. I heard the crunching of gravel beneath the tires, and the van moved awkwardly across the bumpy terrain.

None of this gave me a good feeling.

I didn't know how much time had passed—it had felt like a lifetime—when the van finally came to a stop.

This was it.

If I was lucky, I was going to have a matter of seconds to assess the situation and react to it.

The front door opened and slammed shut. I listened closely to Kurt's footsteps as he moved around the backside of the vehicle. When he made it to the opposite side and I heard him at the door, it was safe to say the nerves I'd been feeling had ratcheted up a notch.

But for all the nerves and terror I felt, there was just as much determination.

Then, the door opened. When it did, I had to admit that my resolve faltered. Kurt had brought me into the woods. I had no clue where I was, and if he killed me here, there wasn't a question in my mind that nobody would find me.

At that realization, images of Jesse danced in my mind. He would feel nothing but tormented for the rest of his life.

I couldn't let that happen. We'd come too far. We'd gotten through too much. This couldn't be the way it ended for us.

Kurt pulled me from the van. I didn't know how he intended to execute his plan, but I wasn't interested in finding out, either.

Barely taking another moment to think, I started fighting.

I clawed.

I scratched.

I swung my fists.

I threw him off balance enough that he loosened his hold on me. When he did, I reared my foot back and kicked him in the groin.

Kurt doubled over in pain, and I took off running.

I didn't know where I was going, but I figured my best option was to go in the opposite direction of where the van had been pointed.

Mere seconds passed when I heard gunfire. My body jolted at the sound, but I didn't feel any pain.

So, I kept going.

And as I ran, I didn't do it in a straight line.

Moving targets were harder to hit. If Kurt planned to shoot me, he was going to have to hope he was a really good shot.

My adrenaline was pumping, and my lungs were burning, but I refused to stop. I could hear the sound of Kurt's footsteps somewhere behind me, and it was all I could do to push myself harder.

The next thing I knew, I was hit from behind. Kurt tackled me to the ground. Out of breath and panting, I managed to find a way to scream.

Nobody would hear me. Nobody was around.

I squirmed and screamed beneath him, hoping that I'd somehow get lucky. But he was bigger than me by a sizable margin. It eventually got the point that I couldn't scream.

Oxygen was in short supply as the weight of him was crushing me.

Until it wasn't.

In an instant, the weight was gone. I sucked in air, desperate for it. Hands came under my arms, and I shouted, "No!"

"Sawyer!"

At the sound of the most beautiful voice yelling my name, my body tensed. Slowly, I twisted my neck and looked behind me. Jesse was there.

"Jesse," I whimpered.

"Baby girl," he rasped.

I didn't know how he was there, but I didn't care. "Oh my God," I blubbered as I launched myself into his arms.

Jesse held me tight against him, his hold being like wrapped in a cozy blanket. Tears spilled down my cheeks as I held on to him.

I was vaguely aware of the guys behind us who seemed to have swiftly and expertly handled Kurt.

"I thought I was going to die," I sobbed.

"I know. I've got you now, and it's over. You're safe."

I closed my eyes and let out a deep sigh of relief. It was over, and I was safe.

I had what felt like a thousand questions running through my mind at that moment, but there was one thing I wanted more than an answer to any of them. I pulled back, looked Jesse in the eyes, and begged, "Take me home."

His eyes searched my face for a long time before he nodded and led me away from the van and out of the woods.



“I’m off.”

Cam jerked his chin up at me and smiled.

I moved around from behind the bar and walked toward my friends who were sitting at a table on the far side of the pub.

It had been a week since the incident with Kurt, and we’d rescheduled girls’ night.

Everyone seemed to have been shocked by my ability to bounce back from what had happened. My coworkers, my friends, and Jesse.

Maybe it wasn’t so much a shock for them as it was disbelief, that I wanted to get right back to living my life.

That was just it, though.

There was something about having an experience like I had that only served to push me to get back to it. I wasn’t killed out in the woods that day. I fought hard to save myself, and I still had my life to live.

Twelve years ago, three girls I loved dearly didn’t get the second chance to live out their dreams. Their deaths and what immediately followed had crushed me, but coming back to Steel Ridge had given me a second chance.

I couldn’t have been more grateful for Jesse and the people he’d brought into my life. If Avalon and Liv hadn’t done what they did and followed Kurt’s van when he took me out of the parking lot here at The Steel Pub, I wasn’t convinced I’d be alive right now. I owed them everything.

There was still a lot being worked out with regard to Kurt and his crimes that crossed state lines. The bottom line was that Kurt was in some serious legal trouble for his attempted murder of me. I’d learned about how things had changed for

Adriana, Russ, and a few others from Sweet Temptations, and I couldn't say I was surprised to learn what else they'd done. After hearing someone admit that they wanted to kill someone based on a hunch, there was little that could surprise me about the unsavory and illegal things they'd gotten themselves into. It was my hope that justice would be served on that front.

One thing that had managed to surprise me happened when I came back to work two days later. Not one single person I worked with hesitated to share the love. Though, I had spoken with Deanna and Cam the same night I'd been kidnapped. They were both frantic, and Deanna had been devastated, believing she was responsible for putting me in a vulnerable position.

On the plus side, when I returned, I was happy to see that not only had everyone been overly ecstatic to see me, but Deanna seemed to be in a much better headspace. Apparently, after I spoke to her that night as Jesse and I rode back with Damon to Steel Ridge, she took a long, hard look at her situation. She realized that as upset as she was about the circumstances with Lance, she deserved better. Life was too short to waste it being upset about someone who could do what he did to her. Sure, she was still heartbroken, but it was clear she was determined to heal and move on to better things.

I made it to the spot where Tarryn, Mallory, Lily, Liv, and Avalon were all seated and waiting for me, and the moment I was there, Avalon declared, "You're officially one of us now."

Tipping my head to the side, feeling slightly confused, I asked, "In what way?"

"Jesse hasn't told you?" Liv countered.

"Told me what?"

Something warm moved through their expressions as Lily patted the seat beside her and said, "Settle in. This might take a bit."

Nervously, I moved and sat down between Lily and Mallory. Once there, Tarryn said, "It all started with me."

The next thing I knew, I was regaled with tales of everything these five beautiful women had endured recently. My mind was blown to learn how awful things had been for each of them, but there was something oddly comforting about being part of a group of strong women who understood just what I'd been through. Granted, each of our situations was different, but it didn't change the fact that we could have lost our lives. It was just as Avalon had said. I was one of them now, and after feeling so alone for so many years, I liked being right where I was.

I'd had such a wonderful time with them, learning more about what they'd all gone through, that I never even noticed how late it got.

Before I knew it, I felt a pair of hands settle on my shoulders. When I twisted my neck to look up and behind me, something indescribable moved through me.

Jesse was there.

He looked unbelievably handsome, too. Maybe it was because he no longer had the worry and fear etched into his features. I was safe now, and he'd made it so.

"Hey," I greeted him.

He leaned down, kissed me, and replied, "Hey. Sorry if I'm interrupting girls' night too early. I missed you."

He missed me.

Jesse had seen me when he dropped me off at work earlier today—something he did not because it was necessary for my safety any longer, but rather because we both enjoyed spending that time together.

Apparently, it had been too long for him to be away from me. I loved how much he loved me.

"You're not interrupting," I assured him.

"Yeah, we should probably call it a night at this point," Mallory noted. "It's been quite a few hours."

Jesse's eyes moved through the group. "Are you all safe to drive?"

God, he was such a good man.

“We’re good,” Tarryn assured him.

With that, the girls and I said goodbye to one another. We all promised to get together again as a group soon, and I secretly wondered if perhaps we’d eventually be able to add anyone else to the mix. There were a lot of guys that worked with Jesse. I had to believe that someone else was eventually going to find a special woman he couldn’t live without. It just remained to be seen who that guy would be, and if the lady in his life would find herself in a precarious position. It might not have been fun while going through it, but there was no way I could deny just how great it felt to know I’d gotten through something like this the same as each of these other women had. Surely, there’d have to be more.

By the time Jesse had gotten us back to his place, I had to admit that I felt nothing but overwhelmingly content.

What had started off as such a dreadful and horrific situation turned into the biggest blessing of my life.

It brought me back to Steel Ridge.

I found forgiveness and friendship here again. I found love. And I intended to spend the rest of my life going after the life my father had always wanted me to have.

With the people I’d found here, especially with Jesse by my side, I knew it was going to be a great life.

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EPILOGUE



Jesse

Six Months Later

“I can’t believe I did it.”

“I had not a single doubt about it.”

Sawyer rolled her eyes at me. “I think that was just wishful thinking on your part.”

I dropped my eyes to her tits, grinned at the sight of them, and returned my focus to her face. Then, I cocked an eyebrow and asked, “Can you blame me?”

My gorgeous girl looked down at her breasts, smiled, and answered, “I guess not.”

I let out a laugh.

Fuck, I loved her.

This woman came back into my life and changed it in ways I hadn’t anticipated. She gave me something that I’d given up believing I’d ever have in my life. And for the last six months, I hadn’t needed any reminders of just how lucky I was to have her.

Life was short.

Time was fleeting.

And after losing her once twelve years ago and nearly losing her again permanently six months ago, I refused to take a second of the life I had with her for granted.

I wanted to give her everything.

If I had my way, Sawyer wouldn't want for anything, and that sentiment had little to do with material possessions. I just wanted her to live the life she had always wanted, the life she deserved.

So, in keeping up with the promises I'd made, I decided to take her on a trip. We were here on the beach, and she was finally sunbathing topless. I loved the thrill I'd seen on her face from the moment I told her we were making it happen for her.

Now that she'd done it, there was no denying how proud she was. There was nothing else I wanted in life than to see her this happy.

Before I had a chance to say anything in response, she added, "Truth be told, I'm a little surprised."

"About what?"

A bit of a devious look washed over her before she replied, "I didn't think you'd be okay with me being out in public without a top on."

Tearing my eyes away from her, I looked around us. My eyes scanned along the length of the beach and out at the ocean. When I returned my gaze to her, I asked, "Baby girl, why do you think I brought you to this private stretch of beach?"

"Wait. You knew nobody would be here?"

The disbelief was written all over her face.

I dropped my gaze to her tits again and felt my cock stir to attention. "Do you honestly believe I'd not have a single issue with another man seeing what's mine?"

Sawyer narrowed her eyes on me. "I should have known."

"Does that upset you?"

She thought on it a moment before she stood and moved toward me. Swinging one leg over my body, she brought her hands to my shoulders and lowered herself onto my lap. "No,

Jesse, I'm not upset at all. If we're really alone, maybe we can even be a little more daring."

Yep.

This woman was it for me.

I kissed her mouth. When I pulled back, I suggested, "We should get out your journal so we can cross one thing off and add another."

Keeping her ass planted firmly in my lap—something I was more than happy to accommodate—Sawyer leaned to the side, reached out for her bag, and pulled out her journal. She opened it up between us, found the page where she'd written about her desire to sunbathe topless, and marked it off. Then, she flipped forward until she found the next blank spot and started writing.

"There," she declared. "Make love on the beach. What do you think?"

I'd looked through Sawyer's journal several times, so I knew about all of the things she'd hoped to do in her lifetime. That moment was the perfect moment to ask her about something very specific.

"I think it's a great idea, and I'm happy to help you achieve this goal," I started. "But I think there's something else missing from your list."

Her brows drew together. "Really? Like what?"

I reached over to the bag she'd brought down and pulled out what I'd snuck inside of it. When I pulled it out, I held it up between us and said, "There's nothing in there about falling in love and getting married."

Sawyer's body tensed as her eyes fell on the box holding the engagement ring I bought for her. "Jesse," she whispered.

"I feel like I've loved you for a lifetime, Sawyer," I began again. "I know we lost our way for a while in there, but ever since you've walked back into my life, I've been the happiest man. I want to wake up every day knowing that I get to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

Tears filled her eyes as she slowly nodded her head. “Yes. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

I took the ring from the box, slipped it on her finger, and kissed her.

“You’ve made me the happiest woman in the world,” she shared when she tore her mouth from mine.

“I’m glad you said yes,” I told her.

“Did you have any doubts?”

“I didn’t want to, but it wasn’t on your list. I wasn’t sure where you stood,” I explained.

Something warm and sweet stole over her expression. “I’m not as bold as you think I am. If there was one thing I was afraid to write down in this journal, it was that. I never knew if I’d be lucky enough to have it happen for me.”

I drove my fingers into her hair and settled my hand on the back of her head. “Baby girl, I want you to write everything your heart desires in this journal. I will do whatever I have to do to make each and every one of them happen.”

The silence stretched between us.

“I love you,” Sawyer said.

“I love you, too.”

She bit her lip before she suggested, “I think you should help me cross that last entry off my list.”

“Anything you want.”

With that, knowing we could add in falling in love and getting married later, Sawyer dropped the journal into the sand beside the chair. She brought her mouth to mine and kissed me. That was the last thing she initiated, because from that point forward, I took over.

And right there, under the hot summer sun on a private beach, I made love to my fiancée.

PREVIEW OF DISTRACTED

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Prologue

Ellery

Boundaries.

A line in the sand.

The straw that broke the camel's back.

I considered myself a tolerant woman. I'd have to be to have accepted my fate eight years ago, but there was a limit to how much I was willing to endure.

A week ago, I reached that point, and I couldn't have been more grateful that I'd spent the better part of the last five years preparing for this moment.

Of course, no amount of preparation made it any less terrifying.

Doing it this way meant I was going to be taking a huge risk. I knew I'd be putting a target on my back if I did.

But I had no choice.

I wasn't sure I'd have stayed alive if I stuck around.

So, I did what I had to do to keep myself safe for the last week, and I pretended all was good in my life.

The reality was that I'd spent many nights awake feeling nothing but dread. It was everything I could do not to give into all the fear I felt and let it consume me in a completely different way.

I couldn't allow that to happen.

If I did, I knew I'd never find my way out. I'd never see them again, and I'd never be happy. I'd already lost far too much.

Getting ahead of myself wouldn't help, either.

This was going to take time, planning, resources, and grit.

Fortunately, my resolve was strong, and I was going to do whatever it took to find a way out of this mess.

That's why I was currently on my way to the mall.

I hated the mall.

Hated it.

But today, the mall was going to be my saving grace, because nobody else knew how much I hated it. In fact, I'd devised a plan and come up with a strategy based on the fact that I'd learned how to pretend for the majority of the last eight years.

I'd done all of the little things necessary. I made the money, fulfilled the roles, and pretended I was content with my life. Happy, even.

But I wasn't.

I hadn't been genuinely happy since before I landed myself in this position.

No sooner had I pulled out of the driveway for what would be the last time, and onto the street in the fancy Range Rover I hated driving around because of all that it stood for and represented in my life, when I glanced in the rearview mirror and realized I was being followed.

Of course.

I always knew this was a possibility. In fact, I expected that the moment I needed to execute what I'd devised, someone would follow me.

That was why I was heading to the mall.

It was one of the few places I'd be able to go where I could be gone for hours without anyone questioning my

disappearance. Plus, anyone who was ever tasked with having to follow me never followed me inside. They'd spend hours waiting in the parking lot until I finally exited the mall and returned to my vehicle.

Then they'd follow me back home.

I'd done this for months.

Not what I was planning to do once I got to the mall, but just going there. I did it because it was necessary. I had to make it believable.

It was the only way I'd eventually be able to get out.

Nobody knew what I had planned.

Nobody.

So, for all anyone knew, this was just another one of my spending sprees.

And I couldn't say that it wasn't expected. In fact, Patrick was expecting this was where I'd be going. If not today, then another day this week.

There was a function coming up this weekend, so I was going to have to get dressed up and attend it. Wearing the same dress twice to anything like this would have been frowned upon.

Yep.

The mall would be my saving grace.

I just wished I wasn't being followed. My whole plan already had me feeling anxious; I didn't need the additional nerves from knowing that someone was going to be there.

Deep breaths. I just kept taking deep breaths.

Did they know? Was it possible someone had found out what I was planning?

No.

No, that wasn't possible.

I was just working myself up too much.

This would be fine. It was all going to be fine.

By the time I parked the car in one of the spots in the mall parking lot, I had to take a minute to pull myself together. Because when I looked in the rearview mirror again, I saw that I'd been followed all the way here. I knew where the tail had parked, and I was well aware of the fact that if I appeared to be anything other than the woman I'd portrayed over the last eight years, I wouldn't have the chance to get a head start.

Screwing this up was not an option.

After taking in one final deep breath, I reached across the center console to my oversized handbag. That was another thing.

I'd had to use this handbag on several occasions before, just so it wouldn't seem strange that I was using it now.

Nearly everything that was mine had been left behind, but there were a few things I needed to take. One of those things was my laptop. So, I made sure I put that in my bag before I walked out the door this morning.

This was it.

With a fake smile plastered on my face, I exited the vehicle, hooked my purse over my shoulder, closed the door, and locked up the car.

Then, I took off toward the mall entrance, and I did it with a bit of a bounce in my step.

Whatever it took.

I was going to do whatever was necessary to make sure I could see this through and get out.

Once I was inside, I immediately walked into the first store on my left at the entrance. It didn't matter that I didn't intend to purchase anything from the store that carried accessories for teens and young girls. I merely wanted to take a few minutes to confirm that nobody was following me inside.

Granted, on the one hand, I felt confident and empowered enough to finally take charge. Or maybe it wasn't so much about confidence as it was about desperation. Either way, even

if I had reached the point where I couldn't continue to stick around, I still feared for what would happen if anyone learned what I was planning to do today.

I might not have known who Patrick was eight years ago, but I knew him now. And accepting this in my life now was no longer an option.

I gave it some time in the accessories store, and when I was reasonably confident I had nothing to worry about, I didn't hesitate. I made my way to the opposite end of the mall.

It had been eight years of feeling like a prisoner.

Eight years living someone else's life.

I didn't have any expectations about what would come once I got away, but I knew that this had to stop. If it didn't, there was no telling if I'd be alive a year, a month, or even a week from now.

So, I left the mall from another entrance, tossed the phone in the trash on the way out, and hopped in the car I'd gotten for myself three days ago.

A car I bought for myself using my own money.

A car Patrick knew nothing about.

I turned it on and drove away, immediately heading to the place that I prayed would give me the last piece of the puzzle I needed to keep myself safe.

Because this wasn't the life I had ever envisioned for myself.

Then again, I wasn't sure that what I'd wind up with when I got out would be that, either. But what else did I expect?

All my dreams went out the window when I was forced to marry a criminal.

The only thing I could do now was hope that he'd never find me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over forty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

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