

A NOVEL

I'LL
BE
SEEING
YOU

LISA SORBE

I'LL BE SEEING YOU

LISA SORBE

OceanofPDF.com

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To Lindy, who is so loved.

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Prologue

Room 232

My husband is behind this door.

Here's here, right here, right on the other side.

With her.

I raise my hand, take one shuddering breath, and knock once. Twice.

.

.

.

I think I'm gonna be sick.

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Chapter 1

My dad died when I was young—ten years old, to be exact—and I used to wish and dream and imagine that one day he'd come back, come back home, maybe just show up on the doorstep, a wide grin on his face and a chuckle in his throat, saying that this whole death business was nothing more than a joke, a simple misunderstanding. He'd draw me into his arms, smelling of Old Spice and Ivory soap, and say the words I'd longed to hear since that dark night in the hospital: "I'm here, sweetheart. I'm here. Everything's going to be all right."

Oh, what a wonderful world it would be.

Or so I thought.

Because now I'm standing here with a ghost, a man who is no longer phantom but flesh and bone, and this man is not dead, not dead at all, but alive, so very alive, and I'm not sure at all how I feel about this.

This man is my husband.

Or *was* my husband.

Honestly, I'm not sure what he is anymore.

Because he died—or so I thought—six years ago.

And in the beginning, right after it all happened, I used to wish and dream and imagine that he would come back home, too.

"Lois?" He speaks first, my name a question on his lips, and his voice is as familiar as it is alien. It's strained, though, thick and tight, like he's sucking the very word up through a too small straw and spitting it out with a strangled breath.

His eyes are wide and haunted—again, familiar yet alien—and they mirror mine.

Like me, Adrian doesn't know what to make of his resurrection.

He says something else, something I can't make out, because there's a roar in my head, a buzzing like bees, a whole hoard of bees, and they're stinging my brain, poking at memories long ago buried: The last time I saw his face, the feel of his hands on my waist and the rough tickle of stubble as he pulled me close, pressing his cheek to mine and whispering an empty promise in my ear.

I'll be seeing you.

Then, the weeks that came after: the frenetic energy and the rapid heartbeats and the random bouts of hyperventilation that plagued me night after endless night. And those frantic searches—now more blur than memory—on the mountain trail that seemed to have swallowed him whole. Up and down, up and down, flanked sometimes by the search and rescue team and sometimes not, accompanied always by the wagging tongues of others and their whispered theories.

There were days when I thought I'd die on that mountain.

There are times I wish I had.

I try to slam the door on those images, but the ghost is in my head now, and the emotions are clogging my throat...and I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

It's been six years, but he looks the same now as he did then at twenty-seven, right down to the dependable set of his shoulders and the dark stubble dusting his jaw. There's the tiny scar above his right eye, the one that curves like a scythe through his eyebrow, just a sliver of pale skin peeking through the black. His hair, unlike mine, hasn't started to gray, and it's styled the same way it was the day he left—short on the sides, a little longer on top, the ends falling over his forehead in messy waves that refuse to be tamed.

His attire is the only thing that's different. For some wild reason, I expected Adrian to answer the door in the hiking clothes he'd had on the day he left. But instead, he's wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt that bunches at the wrists and says **Bellingham PD** across the front. And instead of his top-of-

the-line hiking pants, a dark pair of jeans hang loosely from his hips, the hems touching the carpet and covering most of his bare feet. These are not his clothes, but rather donation wear from the police department.

This ill-fitting ensemble makes him seem vulnerable, more like a lost little boy than the confident man I know him to be.

And I hate it.

My legs are turning to jelly, second by agonizing second, and I'm not sure how long they can bear my weight before giving out entirely, leaving me crumpled at the threshold of room 232 like a boneless bag of meat.

Actually, that doesn't sound so bad. Because I'm tired. So tired.

I haven't slept a wink since I got the call yesterday, the one telling me that Adrian is alive.

Fucking *alive*.

To be fair, I'm not the victim here. I know this. I'm not the one who's risen from the grave, who's made the arduous journey from one realm to another...only to find out that the life I knew and loved no longer exists.

That's Adrian. Adrian is the victim, not me. And I'm just...just...

I don't know what the hell I am.

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Chapter 2

It was October first, and I was supposed to be with him on that clear autumn day, when the sun spilled over the mountain peaks like honey and the golden larches burned even brighter in the dazzling light.

I was supposed to be there, on that trail, by his side and keeping pace, the way we always kept pace with one another, the way we had been since the day we met. We were two halves of the same soul, we often joked, our jagged edges fitting together seamlessly, each of us filling in what the other had lost.

Adrian was light to my dark, hope to my despair, balm to my very soul, and after he was gone, the inner landscape that unfurled in his absence was bleaker than it had ever been before.

My excuse is wretched, I admit. Selfish and prideful, ego over heart. I wasn't with him that day because I put work before pleasure, always before pleasure, which meant that I put it before Adrian and our marriage. Coming from a family of high achievers, where good was never good enough, I had too much to live up to and not enough time to do it. I'd been in fight or flight mode since I was ten, my sympathetic nervous system triggered by the death of my father and the unreasonably high expectations of my overbearing aunt who cared for me after, and when I got a job as an attorney at a respected Seattle firm straight out of law school, that survival instinct rocketed into overdrive.

I was working the day Adrian went missing. Working on my day off because I didn't have it in me to say no.

There will be other hikes, I thought.

There will be other days, I promised myself.

Tomorrow. Next month. Next year.

I was a fool.

In the first few weeks, I ran on adrenaline. I ignored the aches as I trekked that mountain trail, climbing forever and always toward Jasper Peak, my calves screaming and my ankles cracking, over and over again, day after day, week after week, my eyes peeled for his red jacket, his bright green backpack. When the weather changed and the ice came, I strapped crampons to my boots before setting out, charging up narrow switchbacks and the steep terrain that followed, squinting into flecks of snow that needled my eyes and stung my skin. I swore on those trips. I raged and bellowed. I hiked too fast over ice-covered rocks, veered too far off the marked path...all the while daring Mother Nature to take me, too.

But she didn't, and I kept going and going and going, even after the snow stretched past the tree line and the trail was too treacherous to trek. I did it anyway, reckless and alone, refusing to give up when others did, spending sleepless nights burrowed in a tent far too thin for the elements.

When the road to the trailhead closed for the season and searching became impossible, when I could no longer run my body so ragged that it wore out my mind, I held up in our Seattle apartment, keeping to the shadows, refusing to so much as peek out the window for fear of seeing the world moving along without me.

Without *us*.

Six weeks after Adrian's disappearance, I found out I was pregnant.

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Chapter 3

There's a dog in Room 232, a golden retriever puppy, and when I enter, she bounds off the bed, lanky and uncoordinated, all loose muscle and scrambling legs. Her tongue is pink and wet, and it lolls from the side of her goofy grin as she tears across the room, neck stretched and nose twitching. The tag from her collar catches the light, little sparkles that flicker this way and that, and before I can so much as register what's happening, she's in the air.

I catch her in my arms, all thirty pounds of her, with a loud *oomph*.

“Josie! *Down*.” Adrian moves to take her, but I'm lost in the moment, staring at this wiggling bundle of fur like I'm about to go blind and she's the last thing I'll ever see.

Something swells in my chest, threatens to burst.

“No, no. It's okay. I...I've got her.”

It's the first time I've spoken since Adrian opened the door less than a minute ago, and the simple release of words shakes something loose in me, cuts through the tension I've been holding since boarding the plane earlier this morning.

I press my face into her fur and take a deep breath. She smells like citrus lavender, the scent of the overpriced, organic dog shampoo I bought in bulk but only had the chance to use once. It's something I'd forgotten about until just now, that purple bottle that smelled like a fresh summer's day, and the memory of that first and last bath washes over me now, a blessing and a curse, causing me to sway on the spot.

Because she was with Adrian that day on the trail, and she's been missing six years, too.

And just like Adrian, she hasn't aged, either.

Sensing my imbalance, Josie leaps from my arms, darts behind Adrian's legs.

“Lois?”

Again, my name. Again, a question.

Adrian takes a step closer, lifts his arm. But instead of reaching for me, it just hangs there, awkward and uncertain, and after an uncomfortable pause, he balls his hand into a fist, shoves it into his pocket.

We’re treating each other like strangers.

“I’m fine.” My voice sounds foreign in my ears, echoes like a gong in my head. I feel like I’m talking too loudly, too clipped, too stiff. In fact, my whole body feels strange, like I’m wearing someone else’s skin, flexing someone else’s muscles and working someone else’s bones.

But then again, I sort of am.

I am not the person I used to be.

Josie peeks out from behind Adrian’s legs and whines.

“Your hair.” Adrian waves a hand, indicating my short locks. “It’s, uh, different.” And then, as if worried his comment might offend, he rushes on. “Not that it looks bad or anything. I mean, it looks good. It’s just, you know, what I meant to say, is that it looks”—he closes his eyes and sighs—“different.”

The last time Adrian saw me, my hair brushed the middle of my back. Now, it barely skims my shoulders.

I just nod. “Well, you look…” My lips start to tremble, so I press them together, clear my throat, start over. “You look…”

Exactly the same.

But I can’t get the words out. I can’t because suddenly I’m all tears, ugly tears, and they’re spilling out, messy and uncontrollable, springing from a well I thought had long since dried. I cry like I did that night six years ago, that November night when the mountain had become too treacherous to search and I had to, for the first time, admit that Adrian was gone, really gone, and that he was never coming back.

Josie rounds Adrian's legs, crosses the distance between us and, looking up, places her front paws on the tips of my boots. Her canine gaze is direct; deep and limpid, it communicates a wisdom too beautiful and complex for me, a mere human, to ever understand.

Where have you been, love? I want to ask her.

If only she could talk.

She blurs before my eyes, and I realize I'm crying even harder than before, if that's possible. I'm heaving, hyperventilating, and this time when Adrian reaches for me, he doesn't pull back. "Lo," he whispers, and I feel his hand cupping the back of my head as he draws me close, pressing me against him.

And I let him. God help me, I let him.

Falling into him is like falling into a warm bed, a vivid dream, into a memory so real it becomes reality, the only reality I've ever known, scrubbing away all the days that came after. Locked in his arms, I'm caught in time, tucked snugly away in the past with no memory of the future.

I don't know how long we stay like this, tangled in this desperate embrace, but it's long enough that the beat of my heart begins to match his, begins to slow and steady to the point that I can finally breathe, get some oxygen to my brain.

Begin to start thinking clearly again.

It takes everything I have to pull myself back to the present. To pull away from him, from his arms, from the sudden and overwhelming desire to stay right here in this room, just the three of us, and never ever leave.

I take a step back, then another, and swipe my hand over my face. Without a word, Adrian snags a box of tissues from the dresser, pulls a few from the opening, and hands them to me.

It's the little things like this, the way he always managed to anticipate my needs and quietly deliver them without thought or expectation, that I've missed the most.

I used to joke that he was my hero.

He countered by saying that I was his savior.

Like I said earlier, two halves of the same soul, each filling in what the other had lost.

I wipe my tears away, hardly caring how I look, more afraid of what I'm about to say. Balling the tissues in my hand, I wrap my arms around my waist, as if the very act will hold me together.

As if.

The bedrock upon which I rebuilt my life is about to come crashing down.

Then again, this isn't about me.

I'm not the victim here.

"We, um, have a lot to talk about," I say.

Adrian doesn't disagree.

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Chapter 4

It was October first—just two days ago, and six years to the very day he disappeared—when Adrian finally came down off that mountain, Josie in tow. The sky was dark when he reached the trailhead, as if night had fallen several hours earlier than it should have, and the minute his boots hit the gravel parking lot, the heavens opened, unleashing a torrent of rain that fell in blinding sheets. It struck him as odd—the late hour and the sudden inclement weather—but knowing that the conditions can change quickly in the Cascades, he shrugged it off, his only desire to get in his truck, crank the heater, and get home.

“But the Jeep wasn’t there.”

We’re outside, tucked away at a corner table on the patio at the coffee shop next door to the hotel, and while the autumn day is warm and the sun bright, I can’t shake the chills that have been tripping along my spine since we sat down. While I was given a brief synopsis of Adrian’s story from the detective handling his case, it’s nothing compared to sitting here, listening to it firsthand.

“And, of course, my phone didn’t work.” Adrian smiles, though it’s halfhearted, and I instantly feel guilt creep up my throat.

“I kept your line for a year, you know, *after*. But then, when...I mean, it just didn’t make sense to keep...” My throat tightens, dries, and I lift my mug to my lips, chug too-hot coffee to stall my confession. The liquid burns my mouth, slithers a path of fire all the way down to my chest, and I gulp more and more, because this searing pain is what I deserve.

“Lo.” He dips his head, trying to catch my eyes—because I can’t even look at him right now—and raises his brows. “I doubt I would have gotten service out there, anyway. You know how hit and miss it is on those trails.”

I do, but my guilt is unabated. Because Adrian and Josie had to walk five miles down a forest service road, and then another six miles along the connecting highway before finally reaching a lonely, out-of-service gas station. The only saving grace of the dilapidated old place was the ancient phonebooth that hadn't yet been torn down. Adrian used it to call 911.

I just shrug, so Adrian continues, filling me in on what the detective left out.

His hands are steady in this retelling, strong around the coffee mug filled with his second cup of steaming brew. They don't clench or fidget, nor does the rest of his body. Even his gaze is steady, a testament to his training: first as a paramedic and then as a firefighter. Adrian's always had the rare ability to stay calm and centered in the most chaotic and volatile of situations—a habit, I know, that was honed years ago, growing up as the only child of an alcoholic father who preferred hitting to hugging.

My hands are curled around my own mug, though unlike Adrian's, they're hardly steady. I was the one who suggested getting outside, grabbing a drink, thinking that once I got out of that gloomy hotel room and into the light again, once I was with the world and felt the healthy buzz of life going on around me, I'd be better equipped to tell Adrian what it was I had to tell him.

Because he still has no idea.

But what he's telling me now, this outlandish story that sounds more fiction than fact, is so hard to believe that I can't wrap my mind around it. My brain is rejecting every word out of Adrian's mouth. But my heart? My heart is listening with rapt attention and bated breath, welcoming the tale with wide open arms. I've wanted for so long to find out what happened to Adrian, to Josie. Wanted closure more than anything in the world.

Now that I have it, though? I have no idea what to do with it.

I feel a subtle weight on my foot and glance down. Josie, her leash tied around the leg of Adrian's chair, has switched

from his side of the table to mine, her chin coming to rest on my boot. Sensing my stare, she rolls her eyes my way, gives her tail a few short wags.

My chest constricts.

“I should have been there.” My eyes fill with tears again, and I fiddle with an empty sugar packet, focus on the words *Sugar in the Raw* until they blur into a blob.

“You couldn’t have known.”

I blot away the tears with a napkin. “I *should* have known.”

Adrian laughs, though it’s gentle and soft, sympathetic rather than jeering. “What?” he says. “You mean, you should have known that I was going on a hike that would—at least, in your world—last six years? Baby—” He stops, catches himself, and for the first time since our reunion, I see a flicker of horror flit across his face. It’s feral, wide-eyed fear steeped in panic, and for a moment he freezes, caught somewhere between then and now, there versus here.

I know this. I know this because I’m caught there, too.

“Adrian?”

He blinks once, twice. Like he’s coming to after a long nap, the kind that starts in the light and ends in the dark, all sense of time and place lost during slumber.

“Where have you been?”

He just stares at me.

“What the hell happened up there?”

I press on, I have to, because with everything he’s told me so far, this is the part of his story—the *most crucial part* of his story—that he’s left out. Whatever happens from this moment on stems from this very question, blooms or dies with his answer. I know where he was before, and now I know where he was after. But what I want to know—what I *need* to know—is where he was *during*.

The answer I get is not the one I was expecting.

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Chapter 5

Wagging tongues and whispered theories.

They followed me everywhere.

The disappearance of Adrian Kelley was big news, not just in Western Washington, but the entire country. Thanks to true crime enthusiasts, missing persons podcasts, and reporters of the strange and mysterious, Adrian's story (or lack thereof) spread like wildfire. I spent the first few months after he vanished fielding requests for interviews from some of these people, most claiming that the more I got his name and face out in the public, the more likely it was that he would be found. And though some were empathetic, crafting their invitations in such a way that bespoke their concern, others acted like vultures, treating me like prey, their appetite for drama and trauma evident in their demanding emails, their pushy words.

I ignored every single one.

In my mind, Adrian was somewhere on that mountain, with Josie, and the two were in dire need of help. Adrian was a seasoned hiker, an accomplished backpacker, an avid trail runner. Not to mention, the North Cascades were Adrian's playground, had been since he was a child, and he knew most of the trails in the area like the back of his hand. Nature was his church, and he was prone to depression if locked for too long in the city. To Adrian, time in the wild was akin to oxygen; he needed it to survive. It was one of the reasons I didn't balk when my schedule changed that day and he opted to go alone. It was a simple day hike to Jasper Peak, not the easiest trail but certainly not the most difficult; at Adrian's pace, it shouldn't have taken him more than a few hours to complete. We'd hiked the trail before, usually in the dark of morning, making it to the top just in time for the sunrise, and we were familiar with its twists and turns.

For Adrian, this was a walk in the park, a much-needed breath of fresh air, and I didn't think twice as I watched the pair set out before dawn that day, him shouldering his backpack and Josie strapped in her harness.

My husband wasn't missing. Not, at least, in the generic or traditional sense. He wasn't somewhere else in the state, the country, the world. The only place he was or could possibly be was near that trail. No amount of getting his story or image out to, say, Delaware or Iowa was going to bring him home. Adrian hadn't faked his death so he could run off and start a new life in Bentonia, Mississippi (a woman swore she saw him there, at a roadside café, singing the blues) or Orlando, Florida (where one overzealous tourist claimed to have spotted him dressed up as Eric from *The Little Mermaid*).

I took these stupid, ridiculous, obvious cries-for-attention with a grain of salt. They were fabricated stories woven by people with no lives who desperately wanted to insert themselves into Adrian's narrative, as ludicrous as that may be.

So, no. I didn't pay attention to any of these theories, even the ones suggesting that he ran off with another woman (or man, for that matter). I knew our marriage was strong, that Adrian and I were solid. Others could assume and gossip all they wanted. And while I do admit that sometimes the speculations about his infidelity bothered me, caused the back of my throat to pinch with suspicion (because *what if?* There's always a *what if?*), I was usually able to swallow it down, dislodge the notion before it could grab hold.

I loved Adrian, and he loved me. This was all I knew for sure, the only thing I knew for sure. And I had no intention of letting others dissect our marriage, reconstructing the life we'd built together into something it wasn't, sowing seeds of doubt where there were none.

Adrian was gone, and all I had left were the memories. I couldn't afford to have them tainted.

Chapter 6

“I don’t know.”

I’m not sure why I’m surprised by his answer. It’s the same one he gave to Detective Lotz, which Lotz in turn gave to me when he called to say that Adrian had been found. But for some reason, I expected Adrian to have a different response for me, maybe one he wasn’t comfortable sharing with anyone else. Because after everything I’ve been through—that *we’ve* been through—I want to know *why*. Why my world was flipped on its axis, my entire life turned upside down. I need to be told, in exhaustive detail, the reason for it all: the pain, the suffering, the sheer misery that plagued me that first year (and, to this day, sometimes still does). I want from him an explanation, one that will shake some sense into these past six years.

The loss of Adrian tainted everything in my life, has run like a vein of melancholy through the good days and the bad, pulsing with just enough pain to temper the joy, stoke the despair.

I haven’t felt whole since he disappeared.

“You don’t know?” Doubt begins to creep in, disembodied voices taking over my thoughts, giving rise to fears I’ve always been too scared to consider. I try to shrug them off, to ignore them the way I’ve been ignoring them since he disappeared.

He shrugs, the movement stiff and unnatural, like he’s trying to remember how to move his body. It’s almost an afterthought, this response, as if he’s...lying.

Suspicion pricks the back of my throat. I swallow around it, try to level my tone as I ask, “How can you not know?”

It doesn’t work. My voice is choppy, high-pitched, and the question sounds accusatory instead of sympathetic.

Because I should be sympathetic.

I should be...

I should...

I...

No.

I'm fucking angry.

Adrian looks away, shifts in his seat, runs a hand through his hair. Beneath the table, his knee jerks—bounces up and down, up and down—and a muscle in his jaw tics once, twice. It's like he's been hit with a sudden rush of energy, a rush he can barely contain, and it's seeping out of him now, a palpable restlessness I can feel all the way across the table.

Maybe he wants to run.

Maybe he wishes he'd never come back.

Maybe...

"I..." He swallows, rubs the back of his neck. More nervous little movements, more pent-up energy released. "It's just...I really don't..." He glances my way, quick and fleeting, and in that swift moment, when his eyes meet mine, I can see in them the torment, the panic.

This man is haunted.

And it breaks my heart.

My heart, which has been broken and repaired too many times to count over the course of my life, becomes unglued. Ruin upon ruin upon ruin.

I can't seem to hold on to my anger, my doubt. The absurd suspicions that ran through my head moments ago evaporate into nothing, leaving behind a twinge of guilt. How could I have even entertained the idea that Adrian left on purpose? That he strode off that morning with a plan in his pocket and a different destination than the one he'd given me?

Josie lifts her head, sniffs the air, and rises. Meandering to the other side of the table, she sits, leans her body against

Adrian's legs. Without looking, he reaches down and strokes her head.

I don't know what to do, how the hell to deal with this. What he needs is the person I used to be, not the one I am today.

On the table, my phone lights up, the ringtone too loud. It's *The X-Files* theme, eerie and haunting, and the sudden out-of-place music draws Adrian's attention.

I don't need to look at the screen to know what name he's seeing.

"Sorry." I reach for the phone, fumbling it as I do, my fingers sticky as I try to silence the call. The name **Sam** burns in bright, accusatory letters across the display, a silent scream given voice. "I thought I turned the ringer off..." My grip is clumsy, squishy, as if all the bones in my fingers have suddenly dissolved, leaving them limp and worthless. The phone slides from my hands, lands face down on the table with an obnoxious thud, and goes silent.

The entire world goes silent.

Cars rush by on the street.

Two tables over, a woman throws her head back; eyes squeezed shut, she's laughing, laughing.

The wind picks up, rustling the leaves of the potted ferns edging the patio's fence.

All of this happens, all of it, without a sound.

Adrian's face is blank; the emotion that flared in his eyes seconds ago is gone.

I open my mouth to explain, to tell him what I've been too afraid to tell him, but he's already talking, his body at ease again, like the last few minutes never happened.

"I got a headache," he says, and I notice that his hand is still stroking Josie's head, slow and rhythmic, as if the very movement is keeping him anchored to the present. As if she's his only connection to this world.

In a way, I guess she is.

I feel a lurch in my chest as I remember Ava—sweet, beautiful Ava—and know that Josie isn't the only thing connecting him to this plane.

“A headache?” I'm trying to stay focused on the conversation, but all I can think about now is my daughter.

Our daughter.

Adrian frowns. “It was strange. Like a migraine, I guess? Though I've never had one, so I can't be sure. But my vision went blurry, and suddenly there was this pressure in the back of my head.”

“This happened on the trail, you mean?” I sip some more coffee, though with the way my nerves are tweaking, caffeine is the last thing I need right now. But it gives me something to do, gives my hands something solid to grasp. Because it doesn't seem real, sitting here with Adrian, sharing coffee and conversation after all these years. I feel like I'm someplace I shouldn't be, have no right to be, like maybe this is all a dream, too good to be true, and any moment Adrian and Josie will vanish, disappear into thin air. Again.

“Yeah, right on the trail. Figured it was low blood sugar or something,” he says, “so I sat down. I was about three miles in, right near that boulder field you hate.” He gives me a half smile, a soft chuckle.

I bite back more tears.

He waits for me to laugh, maybe smart back, jib-and-jab like we used to. When I don't, he clears his throat. “Yeah, anyway. So I sat down, had a protein bar, gave Josie one of her carrots, and after about ten minutes felt completely normal. We hit the trail again and made it to the top without any issues. But on the way back down—it was by that damn boulder field again—the same thing happened.” His gaze grows distant; unblinking, he stares over my shoulder, lost in a memory, in a moment, in a hell I can only imagine. “Pressure, worse than before, and it just sort of...exploded. Thought I was going to pass out.” His eyes catch mine. “And I must have, because the

next thing I know, I'm on the ground and the sun...it...it wasn't where it should have been."

I'm not going to speculate. During the last six years, more so the first two, I did some digging into places I wished I hadn't. More disappearances occur in the wilderness than in cities, and while it's easy to attribute that number to something natural (like animal attacks or foul weather), the lack of evidence surrounding missing persons in these cases often steer searchers toward a more *unnatural* conclusion. The paranormal, the strange and bizarre. The theories range anywhere from aliens to interdimensional portals to feral groups of cannibalistic humans that live underground and come out only periodically to hunt.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Don't get me started on the speculations surrounding government coverups and the secret experiments taking place beneath the surface of our national parks, where some say American citizens are stored like lab rats in underground bases, poked and prodded for this test or that.

I feel itchy, twitchy, and suddenly it's like the unmanageable energy that was coursing through Adrian moments ago has jumped the table, injected itself into me. Pushing the soles of my boots into the ground, I lean forward in my chair, try to calm the chaos. My whole body feels like it's being restrained; it takes almost all of my concentration to sit still, to not get up and run from the table, the café...this conversation. "So," I say, thankful my voice doesn't sound as tense as I feel, "after you woke up, what happened next?"

Adrian frowns. "I already told you." When he sees my confusion, he sighs. "I— *we*—hiked back down. Got to the trailhead, saw the Jeep was missing, and walked to the gas station with the payphone."

The sun breaks through the clouds, shifting reality with shadow and light, and for a moment, the entire scene—the café, the patio, the customers and city and sky—flickers, like there's a darker world beneath this one, pulsing just below the surface. The shadows are phantoms that flit and float, pulling grotesque images from seemingly benign things. One dances

across Adrian's face now; chased by the light, it ripples and distorts his familiar features, turning him into something otherworldly.

Turning him into a stranger.

"But..." I stop, take a breath, press my fingertips together and temple them against my forehead. My frustration is flaring; it's tracing a path over my shoulders, down my spine, around my middle. I'm tight, taught, like a wire about to snap. This conversation is getting us nowhere. No closer to the truth. No closer to the answer to the question: *Where the hell have you been these last six years?*

Josie whines, and Adrian brings her up onto his lap. She leans into his chest, nuzzling her forehead against his neck. It reminds me of an intimate moment from long ago, when his arms cradled me, when I was soothed by the warm press of his skin against mine.

I blush with the memory, hate myself for craving it.

"And Josie, I take it, just what? Stayed by your side the entire time?"

For six years.

He considers her, scratching behind her ears, smiling when she licks his cheek in appreciation. "When I woke up, her leash was hooked to the carabiner on my belt loop. I must have had the wherewithal to attach it before I passed out. Or blacked out. Whatever you want to call it. Either way, I don't remember doing it. Sure as hell glad I did, though."

He says this last part softly, and I have no doubt his mind is throwing up images of what could have happened if he hadn't buckled her to him.

I know this because it's what mine did. Without closure, I was left with the agony of not knowing, tortured day and night by horrific *what if* scenarios, each one more despairing than the last, filling the hole in my chest with so much pain I could barely breathe.

Had they been shot or tortured by some lunatic?

Had they been torn apart and dragged away by wild animals?

Had they fallen through a crevice in the mountain, bones broken and bleeding out, waiting for help that never came?

There were times when my imagination drove me mad.

There are times it still does.

“But.” Again I start, and again I stop. I can’t seem to form the words.

On the table, my phone beeps, letting me know I have a message.

Sam, no doubt, checking in.

Good and kind Sam, supporting me and Ava, always, in any way he can.

I don’t deserve him. Not now, sitting here with Adrian, devouring his very presence, taking him in like I never want to let him go.

Because despite everything—my frustration, my confusion, my goddamn fury about the whole situation—this is *Adrian*. My first love, my best friend, the other half of my poor, withered, wasted soul. He filled in my gaps, made me whole when I never thought I could be, and I’ve been half a woman since he disappeared.

Adrian’s gaze is locked on the phone. Beneath the table, his knee starts to jump again. Josie chuffs and hops from his lap. “Do you, uh, need to get that?”

Yes.

“No,” I say, trying for a smile and failing. “I don’t.”

Adrian just nods. Works his jaw for a second, then: “You don’t live in Seattle anymore.”

I shake my head.

“Why did...” He picks up his mug, holds it, and then sets it down without taking a drink. “Lotz just said you were out of state. He didn’t say where.”

Abel Lotz has been working Adrian's case since his disappearance, first as a detective for the Bellingham Police Department and then, after retiring two years ago, as a civilian. In his late sixties now, Lotz is still tough and trim, a large man with an even bigger presence. Originally from Texas, he has the look of a wizened cowboy who's spent his life on horseback, riding the wild plains and roping steer, eschewing comfort for adventure. We've stayed in touch over the years, and while he never had anything concrete to relay until two days ago, his enthusiasm for discovering the truth always kept me hopeful, believing that—someday and somehow—I'd finally know what happened to Adrian and Josie. Though, after all these years, I figured the truth would be uncovered in bone and dust rather than flesh and blood.

Lotz knows about my life now, the obvious details if not the most intimate. When we spoke over the phone yesterday morning, he assured me that—aside from revealing I no longer resided in Washington state—he didn't mention any of it to Adrian.

Kid, he said on the call, his voice filled with empathy, *all of that personal stuff is gonna have to come from you.*

Personal stuff. Like Sam, like Ava.

Like the engagement ring stuffed in the inside pocket of my purse.

I hear Lotz's words in my head now, and swallow. It's time to get personal. "I live in Minnesota. Up north, by Lake Superior." I take a sip of my coffee, giving Adrian time to digest the information.

He furrows his brow. "Minnesota. The land of a thousand lakes, right?"

I chuckle, and the sound that escapes my throat sounds too high, too forced. A laugh out of place under the circumstances. "Actually, they call it the land of *ten thousand* lakes."

"Ah." His smile, though polite, appears just as forced as my laugh. "I stand corrected."

This conversation is awkward. In fact, this whole reunion is awkward. In all the years and in all the fantasies I've had about reuniting with Adrian, it was never like this.

Stiff. Formal. Subdued.

This...this is not us.

Adrian and I were passion and flame. We were carefree and intense, fever and delight. Our relationship, the love we shared, was everlasting, but also impatient. We thought we had forever, in this life and after, yet still we rushed ahead, squeezing as much out of our time together as we could.

I open my mouth, ready to tell him about Ava, not at all ready to tell him about Sam, and the words are balancing on the tip of my tongue when he says, "Jesus, this is so fucked up." He swipes his hands down his face, shakes his head.

I can't argue. And I don't try.

It is incredibly, irrevocably *fucked up*.

"I mean, what the hell?" He leans forward, dropping his forehead into his palms, and utters a strangled sort of moan. His shoulders heave with his breath, and I can sense that he's finally—finally and completely—coming undone.

I glance around, thankful that the patio has mostly cleared. "Let's just go back to the hotel, okay? Maybe coming here wasn't the best idea."

I start to rise, but as I do, Adrian reaches out a hand, clamps it around my wrist. The look in his eyes is like nothing I've ever seen before; it's wild and crazed, like a deer caught in the line of fire, realizing all too late the danger it's in.

Surprise speeds my heart, drums heavy in my ears. My body reacts on instinct, and my arm jerks in his grasp. "Adrian —"

"*Lois.*" His grip tightens. The wild flare in his eyes makes him seem almost savage. "Are we married anymore? Are...are you still my wife?"

Suddenly, I'm scared to tell him.

So I tell him the truth, which is basically just a lie by omission.

“Yes, Adrian,” I assure him, placing my hand over his. “We’re still married. I’m still your wife.”

And it’s true. Legally, Adrian couldn’t be declared dead until he’d been missing for seven years. Of course, I could have pressed the matter, filing a suit with the court to change the status. I could have also filed for a divorce; given the nature of Adrian’s disappearance and the temporary hoopla surrounding it, having our marriage dissolved would have been difficult, sure, but doable.

I didn’t have it in me to do either.

Sam understood, and while he proposed last summer, he agreed to wait a year for the wedding.

Adrian pulls away, back across the table, releasing my wrist as he does. Squaring his shoulders, he swallows hard, closes his eyes. When he opens them again, his gaze is clear but sad, heartbroken and shattered in a way that tells me he senses the omission in my confirmation. “But,” he says.

It’s not a question.

My throat swells with everything I’m too afraid to say.

“But,” I agree.

And then I tell him everything.

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Chapter 7

Smoke.

It was everywhere that night.

Adrian was the first thing I saw when I could see anything, though it was only a flicker here and a flash there. The smoke curled around his frame, tricking my perception, making him seem more spectral than solid. But I was desperate, lightheaded, and I focused on him anyway, holding my sleeve over my mouth and squinting past the flames that licked up the walls, tasted the carpet at my feet. When he disappeared completely, folding back into that choking charcoal haze, I followed his voice, which rang clear and calm despite the crumbling chaos around us. For the first time in years, I put my trust in someone other than myself, and as the seconds passed into eternity, as the windows to my left popped and shattered, as the wail from the sirens filled my head, I inched toward him, bit by bit, until I felt his hand, fell into the steadiness of his grip. I coughed and pressed my forehead into his neck as he slipped his arm around my waist, spoke reassuring words into my ear. Hauling me off the ground and into his chest, he carried me the rest of the way, out of that house of terror and into the cool October night.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur—the ambulance, the medics, the frantic shouts and shattered screams. The only thing that stayed crisp was Adrian—his soot-stained face, his bright eyes and crooked smile, his knee bumping mine as he doled out one lame joke after another, doing his best to ease my stress.

We later learned that a candle had been overturned in the haunted house where I worked and, in its fall, took several others with it. The result was an inferno that devoured the old Victorian home and everything in its path.

My dad always said that the trajectory of our lives can be altered by something as small as a pebble. For me, it was the

tiny flicker of a flame.

Adrian's clothes were threadbare and worn. Because of that, I assumed he also worked at the haunted house. I couldn't place his face, though that was hardly surprising. The cast of Horace's House of Horrors was fairly large for such a modest production, and I just figured he worked in another section of the building, maybe downstairs with the zombies and ghouls instead of upstairs with me, in the shuttered bedrooms turned insane asylum.

I liked him right away, laughing at his jokes and appreciating the handsome set of his cheekbones, the sharp edge of his jaw, the way his dark hair flopped to one side of his forehead. But I was eighteen with a wary heart, and after I was cleared to leave the scene, I hopped off the bumper of the ambulance with the expectation that I'd never see the beautiful boy who rescued me ever again.

And I was okay with that. I wasn't the kind of girl who fairytales were meant for, and I'd learned long ago not to expect a happily ever after. Life happened until it didn't; in the meantime, there was no use trying to mold it into something it could never be.

But when Adrian insisted on driving me home, when he walked me to the entrance of my dorm at the university and asked if he could see me the next day, something in me started to waver. Because the truth was, I wanted to see him again. I wanted to be a girl worthy of a hero's love, if only for a few hours.

I was tired of feeling alone. Angry that, at eighteen, I'd already accepted my lot in life as permanent and unchangeable.

So I said yes. And nestled in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, over a dinner of the most delicious pizza I'd ever eaten, I learned all about Adrian Kelley: that he didn't work at the haunted house, that he was merely driving by when he saw the smoke billowing out from beneath the overhang of the porch, and that he ran into the building on his own after calling 911, saving five people before the fire department even arrived. He

confessed that, at eighteen, he had no direction in his life until the night of the fire, and after leaving me at my dorm the previous evening, he'd gone straight home and applied for admission to a local community college to acquire his EMT certificate. From there, he said, he planned to work toward a degree in paramedics before, ultimately, seeking work as a firefighter.

In the blink of an eye, he'd planned his life. He claimed that barging into that burning house was the first time he'd ever felt truly alive.

Not only was I drawn to his enthusiasm, but I was incredibly envious of it.

He was pursuing something that he loved; I was trudging toward a career out of obligation and expectation.

Later that night, as we sat in his car in front of my dorm and he kissed me goodnight, I felt the first flutter of love flap in my chest, and I suddenly realized that I knew exactly what he meant. Meant about feeling truly *alive*. For years my life had been nothing more than a grainy version of a black and white film, shades upon shades of gray, monotonous and dull in its never-ending rotation. But Adrian...being with him changed that. He brought back to me what I thought I'd lost the night my father died—a vibrant world saturated with color.

We were married one year later.

Of course, I eventually came to understand that it wasn't Adrian that brought about this technicolor change. Rather, it was my willingness to open myself up to another person that cracked my cautious exterior, allowed in the light. By taking a chance on the unknown, I was, for the first time in years, living my life instead of avoiding it.

Chapter 8

“We’re leaving soon.”

On the other end of the line, I can hear bird song, a little girl’s laugh, and the swift sound of the wind.

Another beautiful autumn day on Lake Superior’s North Shore.

“Good.” Sam’s voice is strong, solid, happy even. He doesn’t sound like a man who, for the unforeseeable future, is about to house his fiancé’s husband.

It was his idea.

No, I’m not joking.

That’s the kind of man he is.

“Cabin Eight is all ready to go. I had Jenna give it a good scrub, stock it up with the essentials.” He pauses, and I know he’s waiting for me to say good, to say thank you, but the words are stuck in my throat. I woke up yesterday in Minnesota, took the red-eye to Seattle, spent the morning in Bellingham, and now I’m about to take a three-day road trip halfway across the country so I can bring my husband home to the lakeside lodge I own with my fiancé.

Needless to say, I’m having a hard time thinking clearly, of forming appropriate responses to even the simplest of questions.

For instance: *Are we still married?*

Yes, but.

Are you still my wife?

Yes, but.

The phone’s connection stutters; I can hear Sam calling to Ava, but I can’t make it out over the static.

“Okay,” I say. And then, too late, “Thank you.”

I sound hollow, not at all thankful.

And I'm not even sure he heard me.

The line crackles again, and then suddenly it's clear, Sam's voice booming into my ear as if he were here, standing right beside me. "...what he might want to eat, so I got a little bit of everything. Coffee, milk, cold cuts for sandwiches. Things like that."

"Pizza rolls." It pops out of my mouth without thought. And suddenly I'm smiling, remembering Adrian's obsession with the frozen treats, the way he'd come home after a long night at the station, fill a plate until it was practically overflowing, and slide it into the microwave. It used to bother me to no end, this unhealthy habit he insisted on indulging day after day. At the time, streaming services were flooded with food documentaries blowing the lid off things like MSG and the ill effects of pesticide laden produce, and after binge-watching all of them, I jumped on the bandwagon, abandoning junk food for clean eating overnight. I replaced everything in our refrigerator with organic vegetables and fruits, with lean meats and almond milk. And while Adrian—bless his heart—supported this frantic whim with patience and a smile, he outright refused to give up the goddamn pizza rolls.

Sam chuckles. "I can certainly get those. Frozen, right?"

I nod, even though he can't see me. "Yeah, the ones in the big yellow bag. Get a few. If you don't mind, of course." Guilt tightens my throat, and that last bit squeaks through strained, uneven.

Sam sighs, though not in frustration. It's more empathetic, this exhalation, the way it sounds when he knows I'm overwhelmed, lost to memory and emotion.

He knows what it's like to lose someone you love.

It's just that his girlfriend never came back.

"Lois," he says, "of course I don't mind." Then, after a beat, "How are you doing?"

I shrug and glance over at Adrian. We're at Abel Lotz's place—a rustic cabin just south of Bellingham—and picking

up the truck he's gifting Adrian. It's an old but well-cared for '79 Ford Bronco, vintage in appearance, and the two men are walking around it now, lightly kicking the tires and talking about things like gas mileage and oil changes. "I'm fine."

Another sigh. "Lois."

"They're just inspecting the truck now," I say, rushing over him. "We'll be heading out in about ten minutes or so. The goal is to make it to Spokane tonight, then Bismarck tomorrow. Though that's, like, a fourteen-hour drive, but if we take turns at the wheel, it shouldn't be so—"

"Lois." Sam cuts me off, light but stern. "I know you're not...I mean, how can you be..." I can hear him pacing, the crunch of gravel beneath his boots echoing through the line. I imagine him strolling along the beach skirting our property, Ava running a few steps ahead, our ginger cat Benji at her feet and Superior's waves lapping gently against the shore.

It's a scene I desperately long to be a part of. Yet, at the same time, I feel so far removed from it, from *them*, that it's hard to gather the feelings, the emotions of what it would be like to walk next to Sam, to hold his hand and hear Ava laugh.

I've only been with Adrian for a few hours, and already I'm losing my grip on reality, on the here and now. Time no longer feels solid, linear. Instead, it's circular, spinning madly, like a top turning on its axis, round and round, flipping from the past to the present so fast it's jarring.

And when it finally stops, where will we all be then?

"I'm fine," I insist now, though we both know I'm not. What I want to say is *This is so messed up and I'm so sorry and I love you, and I love my husband, and I don't know what the fuck to do right now.*

In the background, I hear a small voice call, "Dad! Look at this!"

This is *so* messed up.

But Adrian has nowhere else to go. His only family consists of a father he hasn't spoken to in years (I'm not even sure the man is still alive), me, and...Ava.

And that's why I know Sam is right, that the only place Adrian can possibly go right now is home, our home, the one I created with Sam four years ago. Because that's where Ava is, and if Adrian deserves anything at all—and he does, he deserves so much more than I can ever give him—it's getting to know his daughter.

I say goodbye to Sam and pocket my phone. Josie is already in the Bronco, head sticking out the passenger side window, and as I make my way toward her, I'm able to hear more of the men's conversation. They're on the other side of the truck; through the window, I can see Adrian's strong profile, note the uncertainty in his stance.

"...this is great, but it's just too much. I don't think I can accept it."

Despite his tough exterior, Abel Lotz has a jolly deep laugh, and he unleashes it now. "Of, course you can. There's no sense in keeping it here, where it'll just rust away."

"But..." Adrian stops, and even though he doesn't say it, I know what he's thinking. The poor guy has nothing but the clothes on his back and maybe a twenty in his wallet. Barely enough to buy the gas to put in the truck much less pay for it. He knows the offer is far too grand for the situation, yet he also knows this vehicle is something he desperately needs.

Adrian is torn, and it's obvious.

Lotz's responding snort is one of frustration.

Despite our predicament, I can't help but laugh. When the retired detective told me his plan over the phone yesterday, the one where he intended to give Adrian his old truck, I countered by saying that he'd have a tough time convincing Adrian to take it.

"*He's proud,*" I told Lotz. "*Plus, generosity—to this degree, at least—isn't something he has much experience with.*"

Lotz responded with a humph and mumbled something that sounded a lot like *hogwash*.

Remembering this, I squish Josie's face between my palms and pop a kiss on her forehead. "Hogwash, huh?"

She licks my chin in agreement.

I give her one last pat before making my way around the truck, joining the pair as they barter.

"Look, son," Lotz says. "I don't have any kids of my own. Hell, my cases are my kids. They keep me up nights, drive me crazy, and do their best to ruin my marriage on a daily basis. Give me more gray hair than I'd care to have, too. Though at this sorry age, I'm lucky to have any hair at all, eh?" He laughs, and I can see Adrian's resolve start to fade. There's a soft look about his face now, like a forlorn child who—for the very first time—is confronted with the sort of compassion he's never experienced and can't quite believe is real.

Lotz places a hand on Adrian's shoulder and gives him a long, hard look. "I searched for you for six years, kid. Thought about you," he nods at me, "about Lois, more days than not. And you...hell...you were one of the few that came home." He steps back, digs around in his pocket, and produces a set of keys. "You freed up space in my head. And this old truck here..." He shakes his head, his eyes glassy. "Well, she's just a way to say thank you."

Adrian swallows hard and nods, holds out his hand. Lotz drops the keys into his palm...and that's that.

Adrian has a vehicle.

Something in me shudders with relief.

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Chapter 9

I wanted a story.

When I first learned that Adrian had reappeared—popped back into existence, back into my *life*—I wanted there to be a reason for it. A reason for the interruption that was, once again, going to upend my world, flip my life so completely. Suddenly, I craved a story that would support all those naysayers out there whose speculations dripped of doom and gloom. The ones that jabbered on about his alleged infidelity or supposed ties to drug smuggling or human trafficking. It was only a small group of people that painted him out to be a bad guy, one whose wicked ways had finally caught up with him and now he was somewhere out there, on the loose and on the run.

I wanted their absurd theories to be true because I wanted a reason to hate him.

Adrian's disappearance was like a splinter that never went away. It was always there, always piercing every little bubble of happiness that would arise, like a pin prick poised to deflate any emotion that ballooned past neutral.

I wanted to hate him so I wouldn't have to choose:

My new life for my old.

My fiancé for my husband.

Who I was then for who I am now.

This desire, however, flew out the window entirely when I saw Adrian this morning. When he opened the door to that hotel room, filling it so fully I thought I would be crushed under the weight of his presence, I was forced then and there to abandon my selfish thoughts

Adrian could never be the bad guy.

That role in this story is reserved strictly for me.

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Chapter 10

“Tell me about your life.”

We’ve been on the road for a few hours now. Night has fallen completely, drawing the dark around us like a cocoon, making everything seem more surreal, more intimate. It’s easy to pretend we’re who we used to be, who Adrian still is, when it’s like this, isolated as we are on this lonely interstate. The dashboard lights lend a hint of nostalgia, warming my insides like a shot of good whiskey. I’m exhausted from the whirlwind of the last two days, and the whir of tires on the pavement along with the dark has me sedated.

I’m blissfully numb, and I don’t want to talk about my life as it is now.

But Adrian needs to know what he’s walking into, what he’s about to see when we arrive in Minnesota.

I’m in the past right now, trying to remember the future, and I don’t know where to start. So I ask. “What do you want to know?”

Adrian is behind the wheel, and he shrugs, a blurry movement in the dark. “Why did you move? To...what’s it called again?”

“Midnight,” I say. “Midnight, Minnesota.”

He nods. “Midnight,” he says. “So, what drew you to Midnight?”

I draw in a breath, hold it.

Here we go.

“Um, well.” I’m hemming and hawing, and I really need to just spit it out. We can’t avoid the topic of Sam forever, especially not when we’re in the process of hurtling toward him at seventy-five miles per hour. “Sam’s from the area. Not Midnight, specifically, but the North Shore area.”

Adrian doesn't say anything, just stares straight ahead, his expression lost in shadow.

"I'd been wanting to leave the city for a while"—Adrian shoots me a look when I say this— "so when the opportunity to buy Midnight Sun popped up, we took it."

A car passes, throwing light into the cab and illuminating Adrian's face. His brows are knit together and his jaw tight, but when he speaks, his voice is clear, even. "I thought you loved the city."

I did. But when Adrian disappeared, when I was suddenly alone in a place that housed hundreds of thousands of people, it all became too tight, too claustrophobic, too chaotic. I felt like I was being pressed in on all sides, cornered and caged like a broken animal. And after Sam, after Ava, that feeling of suffocation only intensified.

Sam understood—thank, God Sam understood—and we left. We left to follow his dream of opening a resort on Lake Superior, a dream which soon became mine without effort, one I didn't even know I carried.

I don't tell him this, though. Because to relay any of it would be to let him know how broken I was in his absence, how rock bottom ruined I was before Sam came along, before Ava was born. To know my despair would only add to his, and I won't do that to him.

I shrug, doing my best to keep my answer brief but clear. "I did until I didn't. And we thought a smaller town would be a better place to raise Ava, so..." I trail off, realizing that I just alluded to Sam's role as father figure in Ava's life.

"I see. So how long have you and, uh..." He clears his throat, slides his hand along the wheel as he takes a soft bend in the road. "...you and..." He stops again, shakes his head. His grip on the steering wheel tightens; I can hear the subtle squeak of leather beneath his palms. "Jesus *fuck*."

His gaze flicks my way—a silent apology—before returning to the road.

As if he has anything to apologize for.

“Adrian, it’s okay.” This is a lie, of course. A kneejerk response. Because we both know that this crazy arrangement is anything but okay.

Adrian’s laugh sounds like it’s being ripped from him. “Fuck, Lo. I can’t even say his *name*.” He looks at me now, his faced drawn in misery. “What the hell are we even doing? How is this going to work?”

His eyes are on me, still on me when they should be on the road, so I gently direct his attention back to the interstate. “You need to pull over. Okay? There’s a gas station up here.” I point, rather unnecessarily, toward the upcoming exit, where a blue sign bearing the crude image of a gas pump looms in the headlights. When he opens his mouth, looking as if he’s going to argue, I shake my head. “We’re taking a breather, okay? Let’s just step out of it for a moment, all right?”

“Take a breath, step out of it,” he says dully, and flicks the turn signal. Veering to the right, he takes us up the exit ramp, left across the overpass, and down a short road to the only building in sight. The lights from the gas station are almost blinding in all this the dark, too revealing considering our moods, and Adrian drives all the way to the far side of the lot, out of their reach, before shifting the truck into park.

In the backseat, Josie stretches, rises, and sticks her head between the seats.

Adrian takes a deep breath, his shoulders heaving. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Josie nudges my arm, and I reach up, scratch under her chin. “I’m...” I sigh. “I’m the one who should be sorry.”

He leans back in his seat, presses his head against the headrest. “Lo, you have absolutely nothing to be sorry for.” He rolls his head my way and lifts his brows. “Okay?”

I nod, though it’s mostly just to appease him. Because I should be sorry. Sorry I wasn’t with him that day, sorry I failed him, sorry I let myself fall in love with another man.

My heart hurts and my soul aches, and right now I feel worse than I did the day he didn't return, worse even than the night I had to give up the search, admit that the weather had become too severe to brave. Surrendering in that way felt as if I was being shredded from the inside out, over and over, until there was nothing left. Back then, when I was in the thick of it all, I thought nothing could top the gut-wrenching agony of those awful moments.

But now, sitting here with Adrian, so close yet so far away, it's like I'm dying inside all over again.

I can't stand seeing him like this.

If there was some way that I could take on Adrian's pain, all of his pain, *every single bit* of his pain, I would. I'd willingly crumble under the weight of it, grind myself into dust and float away, releasing him of this torturous burden.

Adrian was my splinter, and I don't want to be his.

We're quiet for a while, breathing in and stepping out, away from this mess and into something else—possibly calm, maybe denial. Beyond the window, the sprawling plains of eastern Washington are silvered by moonlight, and as I look past my ghostly reflection and into the world beyond, I wish I could split myself in two, stretch my soul in half. That way everyone would be happy and no one would get hurt.

With my eyes, I trace the rolling horizon, following the moon's touch as it grazes the soft flow of the land. The stars are bright and the night wide, to the point that it feels almost overwhelming. After living for so long in the Pacific Northwest, and now in the cloaking forest of northern Minnesota, all this open sky makes me feel off, anxious.

Or maybe it's just the current situation.

"For better or worse," I say, still looking out the window.

Next to me, Adrian shifts in his seat. "What?"

I turn to him, and now the moonlight is reflected in his eyes, making him seem even more superhuman than he did to me this morning.

A man who survived whatever it was that he survived can no longer be considered mortal, after all.

“For better or worse,” I repeat. “I broke our vows.”

“Lois—”

I hold up a hand, stopping him. “No, Adrian. I did. For better or worse. And in our worst, I strayed. I lost faith, and I lost hope, and I didn’t...” I heave a shaky breath, feel it flutter up my throat, a confession breaking free. “I didn’t wait for you.”

Pushing himself up straight, he props an elbow on the arm rest and leans toward me. “Jesus, Lois. I’m *glad* you didn’t wait. I’m glad you had someone you cared about, that cared about *you*. We—human beings—we’re not meant to be alone. And as much as I wish...” He stops suddenly, as if the words have lodged in his throat, and he closes his eyes, works his jaw like he’s trying to break them loose. “I’m just happy you weren’t alone. That you’re not alone.”

Adrian, being my hero all over again.

Because he knows what it’s like to be alone.

We both do.

To be alone in the world, alone among billions of people? Well, there’s really nothing worse.

And now I’m not alone, and he is, and how the hell am I supposed to live with this?

“Besides,” he says, cracking a smile, “how were we supposed to know that our worst was going to be me taking hike that would last six years? I’m pretty sure whoever wrote those vows way back when didn’t account for something like that, right?” He laughs, pulling a face and nudging my arm when I don’t so much as smile.

“That’s not funny, Adrian.”

His smile falters. “Yeah, well,” he says. “If I don’t laugh about it, I’m going to lose my mind, so...” He shrugs, his eyes glassy.

Meanwhile, I'm a complete mess, my face tear-stained and mascara-ruined.

And this...this will not do.

Adrian is the one who needs comfort, not me, and this guilt trip I'm on needs to stop now.

But how do you comfort someone when you have no idea what he's been through? How do you soothe another's pain when you're the very cause of it?

Nudging her way between us, Josie hop-skids onto the armrest, coming to a scrambling stop in my lap. I cradle her to my chest with one hand and swipe at my face with the other, grateful for the distraction. "It's been while since our last stop. I bet she needs to go outside." I peer down at her. "Does Josie need to go outside, huh?"

She flicks her tongue over my wet cheek and then leaps across the armrest, crashing into Adrian's lap, all wiggling and wagging. He chuckles as he clips her leash to her collar. "I know, I know," he says, gently restraining her. "Just give me a minute, crazy."

I watch the two for a moment, my heart in my throat, and when Adrian opens the door, I grab my purse and hop out the passenger side. Rounding the vehicle, I meet up with them, give Josie a quick pat on the head. "Can I get you anything? Soda? Lemonade? Something to eat?"

Adrian glances over his shoulder at the gas station, rubs a hand along the back of his neck. "Nah, that's okay," he says, turning back to me. "I'm good. But maybe a water for Josie?"

I nod and watch as they walk away, in the opposite direction, toward the strip of grass separating the road from the parking lot. Adrian's red jacket is the same one he was wearing the day he went missing, and I remember how desperate I was back then to catch even a glimpse of that crimson fabric between the moody pines.

I used to dream about that jacket, though it was always just a spot of red in the distance, forever moving away, out of my reach.

Seeing it now, bright beneath the station's overhead lights, brings me back to those early days, when the searches were frantic and the nights unbearable.

Suddenly I feel like I'm about to throw up.

The gas station is my only escape, and I stay in its dingy restroom longer than I should, willing myself to calm down and buck up. When I finally return to the truck, Adrian is still at the other end of the parking lot with Josie, apparently taking his time, as well. Their backs are to me, their profiles lined by moonlight, and when I climb into my seat, I feel more alone than ever.

Tonight, I am the ghost.

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Chapter 11

Adrian and I were married in a private ceremony next to a waterfall in the North Cascades, the sound of the water crashing against the rocks doing its best to drown out the officiant we hired online and paid extra to marry us so far away from civilization. Adrian wore a hand-me-down suit with a simple burgundy tie, and after we hiked down to the base of the waterfall, I slipped behind a giant old growth pine and into a wedding dress I'd found at a thrift shop for thirty bucks. It was tulle and lace with a tight bodice and a flouncy flared skirt, and though it was second hand and had a small tear in the fabric, it was perfect. Having thought I'd never be a bride, I suddenly found that I wanted to look like one, going so far as sliding a silky garter up my thigh and crafting an exquisite bouquet out of flowers and ferns from the Pike Place Market. Our wedding photos were taken by the officiant's photographer husband, and they were so beautifully unique that they were featured first on his blog and then, later, as the main image on his website's homepage. Adrian's dark hair accented my blonde, and together we provided the perfect contrast against the rainforest's moody light.

The whole shebang was just shy of five hundred bucks, and we could hardly believe it when, a year later, we received news from the photographer that our wedding had been featured in *Pacific Northwest Bride*. Along with his letter, he included a hardcopy of the magazine, and Adrian and I laughed as we paged through it, finding it hilarious that our simple day was being showcased alongside nuptials that were far grander and considerably more expensive.

I still have that magazine. It's buried in a trunk with a small collection of Adrian's things that, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make myself throw away. The cover is worn now, stained with coffee rings, and the pages are soft and dogeared from being leafed through repeatedly. But the images are still bright and shiny, as bright and shiny as we were that

day, standing at the base of a rushing waterfall, tucked in amid the towering evergreens, newly married and ridiculously smitten. We were on top of the world—young and, so we thought, entirely untouchable.

As if that's ever the case.

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Chapter 12

We say little after leaving the gas station, driving another hour before stopping in Post Falls, a town in Idaho located a few miles outside of Spokane. Signs direct us off the interstate and into the parking lot of the only motel in sight, a two-story L-shaped building that, despite its dated appearance, looks like heaven to my dry and tired eyes.

My hand finds the door handle before we're even off the exit ramp. Fingers damp and slippery against the slick metal, I clutch it like a lifeline, as if I'm adrift at sea and it's the only thing keeping me afloat. Because I need to get out of this truck and, as awful as this sounds, away from Adrian. The size of the cab doesn't leave any room for the elephant in our relationship, and yet it's managed to squeeze in anyway, regardless of the tight space.

Adrian walks Josie around the lot while I head inside to check us in, and as the clerk enters my information into their system, I send a quick text to Sam, letting him know the name of the town and motel. He responds right away, dependable as always, and then follows his message up with a picture of him and Ava, both mugging for the camera—fingers pulling at corners of their mouths and eyes crossed. Behind them is Benji, sprawled on the back of the couch like a jungle cat, his expression one of typical feline derision.

I send a quick heart emoji and then put the phone away, folding my hands on the counter and taking in the motel's front lounge while the clerk taps away at the keyboard. There's a worn leather sofa along one wall and an ancient soda machine against the other, an out-of-order sign slapped across the front. The snack machine next to it appears to be in working order, though, and the space is clean and tidy, which gives me some hope that the rooms will be, at the very least, decent.

“You’re in luck.” The clerk, *Brittney* according to the nametag on her vest, looks up from the computer. Young and way too spunky for this time of night, she bounces a little on her toes and smiles at me like I just won the lottery. “You got the last one.”

I frown. “Last one what?”

“Um, room?” She snags a key from a hook behind the counter and holds it out, the tag dangling from the ring bearing a large white 7.

“You only have one room left?” It’s a needless question at this point, but I blurt it anyway, sounding like a complete idiot as I do.

Because I asked for two. I wanted *two*.

She shrugs, pulls an apologetic face. “Sorry. There’s a high school basketball tournament in Spokane and a big tourism conference over in Coeur d’Alene,” she says, hooking a thumb over her shoulder to indicate the next town over. “We got the overflow.”

Of course they did.

“That...it’s fine.” Exhausted past the point of caring, I accept the key, and Brittney grins as if I just patted her on the head and offered her a cookie.

Oh, to be young and innocent, hopeful instead of despairing.

Then again, youth doesn’t always equal innocence, and despair can be concealed in even the most alluring smiles.

So I find it in me to work up a smile of my own, putting as much heart into it as I can, because I have no idea who Brittney really is and what might be going on behind her closed doors.

Maybe she needs a reassuring grin as much as I do.

Adrian’s back in the truck when I reach it, with Josie snoozing in his lap. She lifts her head as I climb in, neck stretched and nose twitching. Her tail bats against the steering

wheel, a rhythmic little *thump-thump-thump* that resounds through the otherwise quiet space.

“We’re in luck,” I say, waving the key. “Last room in the place.” I try to sound happy about it, but inside I’m a bundle of nerves. Nights are made for nostalgia, and I’m slipping back into feelings I thought I’d long since shed. My love for Adrian has never wavered, though the physical attraction I used to harbor did diminish slightly, softening from lust into something more sentimental, like fond memories and tempered desires. I found myself remembering the man more than the muscle, the spirit more than the flesh, and any time I thought of him, it would be about the conversations we had, the laughs we shared, the memories we made. I longed for the comfort of his companionship, the sense of peace I could always find in his presence. Adrian became family when I had none, and the loss of that ethereal tie trumped anything material. I was desperate for his mind more than his body. And if after his disappearance I could have had him back as a disembodied voice, forced to reside forever with nothing but the sound of his soul, I would have done so in a heartbeat.

But now he’s here, alive and in the flesh, and the memories rising to the surface are anything but tempered.

This is my husband, after all.

This is the first man I’ve ever loved.

And Adrian and I...well...we were never exactly chaste.

“Lucky,” he agrees, though his tone sounds like he feels anything but. Shifting the truck into gear, he steers us a few spots down, parking in the empty space in front of our room. Our moves are mechanical as we pull our few belongings from the backseat—Adrian’s forest-green backpack and my small suitcase. Without a word, Adrian holds out a hand, a silent request to carry my bag, and I let him, because even after six years it’s habit, him reaching out to take on my burden and me letting him do it. The sweetness of the gesture is so familiar, and I feel my insides quaking again, my throat closing, my hands trembling with a volcanic burst of energy that my weary body can barely contain. For the second time in less than

twenty-four hours, I'm weak-limbed and limp in front of yet another rented room.

It takes three tries to get the key into the lock, because every move I make feels jerky, too fast for this slow-motion world. How do people survive, go about their days, live-laugh-love with the weight of the universe pressing down on them?

When I enter the room and see the lone, king-sized bed, my knees buckle, but I don't break.

Not yet.

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Chapter 13

“I can’t believe you gave her that.”

Adrian looks down at Josie, who’s stretched out between us on the bed, gnawing on a carrot and making a mess. Little slivers of orange, bleached from the soft glow of the television, litter the sheet. She senses our attention and glances up while she chews, as if to say, *What’s the big deal?*

Despite the situation—despite the fact that I’m in bed with my husband for the first time in six years—I laugh.

Adrian does, too.

And it finally, finally loosens some of the tension that’s plagued us since we settled in the room twenty minutes ago.

“She is a mess,” he agrees, still chuckling.

Josie eats more carrot and snorts.

“Obviously,” I say, and then ruffle her ears. “But what I meant was, that carrot. It’s from your backpack, right? Should she be eating anything that, you know...I mean...” I’m struggling, and I realize all too late that maybe I shouldn’t have brought up Adrian’s missing time.

Josie chomps the last of the carrot stick, sniffs at the chunks of carnage left behind, and turns up her nose. Shifting her weight, she curls into my hip and sighs.

“What?” Adrian jokes, his voice gentle. “Too good for the scraps?” He picks up the pieces, dropping the little orange bits into his palm one at a time. “Look, Lo. I know what you’re thinking, and it’s fine.” He gets up and heads toward the trash, brushing his hands over the bin. “I checked it over before giving it to her. Trust me, it was fresh.” He stops at the armchair next to the trashcan and rifles through his backpack. When he returns to the bed, he tosses a small sandwich bag into my lap.

Inside is a single carrot, about four inches long and roughly the width of my thumb. Its color is bright, still vibrant after all this time. I pull the vegetable from the bag and study it before snapping it in half with a crisp *crack*.

Josie lifts her head, perks her ears.

I look up at Adrian. He's watching me with his arms crossed, a strange look on his face. "This is just...fucking insane."

"Tell me about it," he says, climbing back into bed and leaning against the headboard. The light from the television washes over us, flashes of life from another world. The tinny laugh track from the sitcom sounds off somehow, sinister under the circumstances.

Neither of us have changed clothes. Adrian hasn't stripped down to his boxers like he normally would, and I haven't pulled on one of his t-shirts in lieu of pajamas. He's still wearing those oversized clothes from the Bellingham PD, and instead of digging through my carryon for sweats and a tank, I'm still wearing jeans and a blouse. The underwire of my bra has been digging into my skin since I got into bed.

Waves of exhaustion hit, so deep the room tilts, and I close my eyes, rest my hand on my forehead as I wait for it to pass. When it does, I pick up the remote, squint at the buttons. "It's late. We should probably get some sleep."

Adrian nods. Then, "Do you remember that trip we took to the coast? For your birthday?"

I don't have to think hard; of course, I remember. It was the last trip we took together, that four-day weekend tucked inside a tent on the beach, and it was filled with bonfires and roasted marshmallows, wide starry nights and sun-soaked days. The thrum of the ocean was constant, and the salty sea air stuck to our skin like a glaze. Josie frolicked on the beach, and Adrian and I trailed after her, holding hands, the sand soft as silk beneath our bare feet. Over dinners of fire-roasted hot dogs and flame-warmed apples, we talked about our future. We ate S'mores and dreamed of a house on Whidbey Island, talked about starting a family, and decided we weren't yet—

and may never be—ready to have kids. Both of us had been broken early in life, shattered and put back together in such a way that the world didn't look to us the way it did to others. As a result, we never truly fit in anywhere. Always black sheep, always outsiders looking in.

Adrian and I were likable, sure. But we were severely introverted, preferring each other's company over anyone else's. And adding a child to our mix would bring the world to our door in ways we weren't quite ready for yet.

"I remember," I say now, though the memory of that getaway probably holds a different, more significant meaning for me than it does him.

That was the trip we conceived Ava.

The Universe has a funny sense of humor, doesn't it?

"For you, that trip was six years ago. But for me...Jesus." He shakes his head. "For me, that trip was *three weeks* ago."

I know the facts. Lotz laid everything out on the table during his call: Adrian had materialized from out of nowhere; his clothes and backpack were in the same condition they'd been in when he embarked on his hike six years earlier; neither Adrian nor Josie appeared to have aged; Adrian had no memory of being on that mountain for more than a few hours, much less six years.

But sitting here with Adrian now, both of us lost in a collective memory that feels like a lifetime ago for me and weeks to him, bleeds new life into the detective's words, makes them real in a way I hadn't fully grasped until now.

To Adrian, nothing has changed. In his world, everything that used to be still is: our Seattle apartment with the brick walls and fussy toilet, our favorite Irish pub and quirky neighborhood bodega, busy nights at the fire station and heaping plates of sunrise pizza rolls, spending Saturday mornings on the trail and Sunday evenings on the couch binging reruns of old nineties sitcoms...

As for me, all of that is a vague memory, dulled by the passage of time, faded even more by new memories made

along the way. My last few days were spent with Sam and Ava, focused on Midnight Sun and the work that goes into running a resort that's also an adventure company. I moved out of our Seattle apartment ages ago, and the Irish pub we loved to frequent turned into a sushi bar a year after Adrian's disappearance. I have no idea if the bodega is still around, because I haven't walked the streets of our old neighborhood since I moved to Minnesota. And I haven't spoken to any of Adrian's old co-workers in years.

So much of my life happened in Seattle. It's where I was born, where I grew up. And for a brief time, it's where I thought I would die. I lived, loved, and lost in that city by the sea. But now, having been away for so long and with a life that is so different, I hardly remember it.

Adrian is still, his face turned toward the television. But his hand is clenched atop the bedspread, knuckles white, as if it's taking everything in his power to keep the madness at bay, to not break down in front of me.

His wedding ring glints in the glare of the TV.

“Adrian...”

He shakes his head, and I stop, because this is about him and not me.

I want nothing more than to wrap myself around him—every inch of myself against every inch of him—and hold him close.

But that would only add to his pain, not take it away. Right?

Right?

We can no longer be what we were. We can't, and yet there's a part of me that desperately wants to.

“You're Lois,” Adrian says, his voice even, “but you're also...not.” He looks at me and squints, as if trying to see past my skin, beyond my bones, into whatever part of me that exists outside this earthly realm, like he's searching for something—for someone—he recognizes.

He won't find her.

“A lot has happened since you've been gone.” I'm defensive, yet I have no right to be. I know I'm a different person now, that I'm not at all like the girl Adrian married over a decade ago. And I'm certainly not the one he remembers from the day he left—driven to the point of exhaustion, too busy for life, too guarded to let in anyone but him. I was tough, sure. But I could also be distant, cold in my pursuit of perfection. He had to work hard to draw me out of my shell of self-imposed isolation, using humor and sarcasm, jokes and ribbing. Much like he did the night he saved me from the fire, Adrian would employ the same sort of antics to lure me away from work, from stress, from the numbness I craved. And I have to admit there was something seductive about it, him trying so hard to reach me when no one else ever cared to.

It was our dance, our back and forth. Our love language, you could say. Adrian liked the challenge, and I liked the attention.

But Adrian's disappearance cracked me open, forced me to evolve beyond my comfort zone, pushed me out of fear and into acceptance. Having lost my father at ten and Adrian at twenty-seven, I'd been to Hell and back twice. After that second trip, I finally got the message: control is an illusion, an instrument of the weak.

And carrying Adrian's child, the only piece of him I had left, I couldn't afford to be anything but strong.

So even though what Adrian's saying rings true, there's a part of me that recoils at his observation. I don't like the way he's taking me in right now, as if I'm someone he barely knows.

I used to define myself by way of his attention, and I'd forgotten how much I craved it.

“You're softer, somehow. More open.” He smiles, though it doesn't reach his eyes, which are still regarding me in a way that makes me feel inadequate. Because what he's telling me,

with a look instead of words, is that I no longer resemble the woman he loves.

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Chapter 14

The night was long, and while I did manage to get in a few hours of shut eye, I can't attest for the quality. Every time I closed my eyes I'd fall into an anxiety-ridden sleep, dreams and reality clashing into a befuddling mindfuck that would jerk me awake so fast it was hard to tell if I was awake or dreaming.

In one, Adrian and I were making love.

In another, I was sleeping next to his corpse while Josie gnawed on his femur.

I woke from that one with a scream in my throat and a lurch in my chest. That was around six, and I've been awake ever since.

Needless to say, I'm a bit on edge.

Which is why I insisted on driving this morning. I thought taking the wheel and pushing the pedal to the metal would provide enough distraction to dissolve the lingering effect of the dreams. That it would require enough concentration to push aside meddlesome thoughts.

I was wrong.

"Tell me about Ava."

I'm in the middle of a much-needed swig of coffee when Adrian asks this, but the minute the to-go cup is away from my lips, I smile. This I can do. This is a happy distraction I can fall into without effort. Because I love talking about our daughter. "She looks like you," I say, taking my eyes from the road long enough to drop the drink into the cup holder in the center console.

He doesn't say anything, though after chancing another glance away from the road, I can see his lips are turned up in a small smile. I showed him pictures of Ava yesterday—the ones without Sam, of course—so he knows what she looks

like. Though his shell-shocked expression was hard to read, and he hasn't brought her up since.

Until now.

"She has your chin," he says suddenly.

"My chin?"

"Yeah." He twists in his seat, and I can feel his stare, the weight of it, the *heat*. It's scorching, and he might as well be tracing his finger over the soft curve of my cheek with the way it's making me blush. "That pointy, pixie chin of yours."

"Pointy, pixie chin?" I snort. "You know I hate that description, right?"

"And you know I think it's adorable."

I smile, and blush even more, and then think maybe I shouldn't, shouldn't smile or blush at all, because nothing good can come from getting so swoony over a compliment given by a man whose love I have no right to take.

This exchange between us is routine, though uncomfortably close, given the circumstances. So I steer the topic back to our daughter. "She's smart," I say. "Like, unbelievably smart."

Adrian smiles politely, no doubt assuming that I'm just being a typical mother, claiming brilliance when her child is perfectly average, perfectly normal. But the thing is, Ava really is smart, off the charts smart, so smart that it's sometimes intimidating.

"You think I'm exaggerating, don't you?"

Sunlight bounces off the windshield of a passing car, the sudden burst stabbing me in the eyes and filling my vision with stars. I curse, and just as I'm about to reach for the glove compartment for my sunglasses, Adrian beats me to it.

"You? Exaggerate?" he says, handing them over and turning his lips down in a mock frown. "Never."

I slide the glasses on and scowl. I know exactly what incident he's referring to. "Don't even. That snake was huge."

He huffs. “That snake was about the size of my pinkie finger.”

“Whatever. Maybe around the middle. But it was *long*.” I shudder, remembering the reptile I encountered on one of our hikes. We were trekking the bluffs on Whidbey Island—having a wonderful time, mind you—and suddenly the thing was there, just *there*, stretched across the path, blocking the only way back to the parking lot.

Adrian laughs so hard he bends at the waist. “You just,” he says, then stops to laugh more. In fact, the jerk is laughing so hard he can barely catch his breath. “I’ve never seen you move so fast.” Straightening, he pushes his head back against his seat and swipes at his eye. “You spun around and flew down that trail like your ass was on fire.”

I toss him a glare, and when he sees my expression, he loses it all over again.

“It was about to attack,” I say in defense.

“It was sunbathing,” he counters. “And you disturbed it.”

“Sunbathing my ass,” I mumble. “More like lying in wait.”

“It was a *garter* snake. And I had to carry you the rest of the way to the car,” he continues, still snickering, “on my *back*.” He reaches around, rubs a spot between his shoulder blades. “In fact, I can still feel a twinge...right about here—”

“Oh, shut up. You loved it.”

“You on top? Well, yeah. You know it’s my fav—”

“Adrian!”

He snickers again, and I smack his shoulder, and he feigns pain because this is how we are.

I wonder if we’ll ever be able to be anything else.

For now—the next few days at least—we’re indefinable.

That is, until we reach Minnesota.

“Well,” I say, “I’m not exaggerating about Ava. She’s pretty brilliant.”

I spend the next half hour talking about our daughter, about how she's already reading at a fifth-grade level. I tell him about the books she loves, and that the Little House on the Prairie series is her favorite, but Harry Potter is a close second. He laughs when I talk about her obsession with Big Foot and all things weird, and goes quiet when I admit that yes, she does call Sam "Dad".

"Does that bother you?" I ask, then shake my head. "Sorry. Dumb question. Of, course it bothers you."

"No," he says. But his voice is tight, clipped. "I'm happy she has...she has someone who..." He trails off, turns to stare out the passenger window. After a few seconds, his knee starts bouncing, and he says something I can't make out.

"What did you say?" I can feel his energy spiking, so I keep my voice gentle, calm, hoping to smooth away his sharp edge. When he doesn't answer, I flick my attention between him and the road, back and forth, as if I'm monitoring something about to explode.

Josie must sense the same, because she sticks her head between the seats and nudges Adrian's shoulder.

His knee pops faster, and Josie whines.

"Do you think..." He pauses, swallows hard. "Can you pull over?"

The words are barely a whisper, but I can sense the urgency, the desperation in his request.

"Yeah, of course." I squint ahead. "There's a gas station coming up in a few miles—"

"Now." It's only one word, but it expels from his lips in a choked, quaking gasp. He clears his throat, presses his hand on his knee to stall his leg. "Please," he adds, and he sounds more human now, more like the man I know. "I just...I really need some air."

I nod, my own throat clenched tight, and flick the turn signal. A lonely exit looms ahead, and I take it, steering us up the ramp before turning right onto an even lonelier road. The sky above is wide and yawning, and vast fields stretch out on

either side of the asphalt, peppered here and there with scraggly pines and golden-leafed Aspen. Easing my foot off the gas, I let the truck coast to the side of the road, coming to a stop thirty or so feet from the ramp. Adrian's fingers have been tapping against the passenger door the entire time, and before I can even throw the old Ford into park, he's out, feet crunching on the gravel shoulder as he speed-walks down the shallow ditch leading to the valley beyond.

He didn't shut the door behind him, and Josie hops from the backseat to the front, legs flailing as she scrambles after him.

"Shit," I hiss. Flinging my own door open and grabbing Josie's leash, I go after them both.

A few yards ahead, Adrian throws his head back and bellows at the sky.

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Chapter 15

In lieu of a honeymoon, Adrian and I spent the summer after our wedding at one of the top survival schools in the country, submersed in a fourteen-day wilderness intensive that tested our limits as well as our newly acquired marital status. It was a testament to our bond, this rigorous training, and we felt that if we could make it through this, we could make it through anything.

No, this wasn't the honeymoon that most women dream of. But after meeting Adrian, after following him along trails that wound up the sides of mountains so tall they scraped the sky and through valleys so thick with wildflowers they were practically postcard perfect, my love for nature bloomed right along with our romance.

Adrian was born with a love for the outdoors. Growing up a few hours north of Seattle, on a lonely acreage in a small, forgotten town, the rugged wilderness wasn't just his only form of entertainment, it was his only solace. The mountains were his church, and exploring the forest was his form of prayer. His father, a charismatic man who hid his drinking from everyone but his wife and son, was the town's Chief of Police, and he could deal a blow so hard it would, according to Adrian, make his teeth rattle. Before Adrian was old enough to hit back (which he did), and before he was old enough to blow town (which he also did), he fled to the mountains that bordered his backyard, finding refuge in the towering evergreens, peace on the meandering trails. He built forts along fresh water alpine lakes where he'd stay for weeks in the summer, days in the winter. He'd sneak into the kitchen and stuff his oversized backpack with food, and when that ran out, he'd forage for berries and hunt small game. He once confessed that he missed those days, the ones where he was able to slip from society's constraints and become as untamed as the land around him. Out there, his needs were akin to the

animals he shared the forest with; he was content with little, happy with the bare minimum.

It was the most difficult time in his life, he'd say when speaking about his childhood. But it was also when he felt most free.

Having cut his attachment to the material world at such a young age, Adrian found that he never needed much as an adult. It was one of the things that drew me to him, this minimalistic nature, the way he never desired for the sake of desiring. Adrian didn't base his worth on what he owned, and he only pursued the things he truly loved. He didn't care to impress people with flash and flare. Rather, he'd show up as himself, let his personality do the talking, and if they liked it, great. If they didn't, he wasn't bothered. "Someone who *needs* to be impressed," he said shortly after we met, "will never *be* impressed."

Raised by a woman who valued high ranking degrees and appearances above all else, who considered herself both judge and jury, who tied her worth to her wallet, I didn't have to think on that notion. I understood it immediately. My aunt was superficial and haughty, offering me housing but never love, and her standards were set ridiculously high. So high that, no matter what I accomplished, I was never able to meet them.

Maybe this was why I latched on to Adrian so tightly. With him, I didn't have to pretend to be someone I wasn't. I never had to prove my worth.

But as much as I grew to share Adrian's love of the outdoors, I never craved it the way he did. I grew up in the city, was groomed for the city, had never experienced anything but the city. And while summitting a mountain was certainly exhilarating, it didn't compare to the climb up the corporate ladder. That fleeting rush of recognition from those that mattered most was, back then at least, worth significantly more than conquering a giant hunk of rock and snow.

For Adrian, the city was something he merely tolerated. We had a good life, a happy life, but there were...challenges. Though he loved his job, punching a timeclock was, at times,

hard for him. So was living in an apartment; the modest size of our home could be claustrophobic in comparison to the vast wilderness that he craved. If possible, Adrian would have chosen a life without walls, without clocks and schedules, monotonous days and tedious responsibilities. He even dreamed of one day living off-grid, of settling down on an island in the Sound, building a tiny house and becoming entirely self-sufficient.

I adored the islands and had no problem picking one on which to settle. Though at the time, I had no interest in a rough-around-the-edges life of self-sufficiency, preferring instead a swanky modern home on the water, complete with all the amenities.

In all the years we were together, this difference was the only thing we ever argued about. And eventually, Adrian stopped bringing it up.

I naively thought that his silence on the matter meant he'd succumbed to reality, realized the truth in his fantasy—that turning away from civilization wasn't as easy or romantic as he'd made it out to be.

Over the last six years, though, I found myself wondering.

Maybe I'd been wrong.

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Chapter 16

Adrian looks like he wants to bolt.

And out here, amid this wide stretch of Montana wilderness, there's plenty of places to run.

Speaking of running...

Ahead of me, Josie is galloping circles in the field, kicking up dirt and darting just out of reach every time I'm about to grab her. She bounces toward me now, leaping like a gazelle, and then, right when I'm about to snag her collar...poof... she's gone again.

I chance a glance over my shoulder, keeping an eye on Adrian. He's facing a line of trees that edge the end of the valley, leaning toward them as if the wind whispering through their leaves is a siren's song. His muscles are tense, his jaw tight, his gaze unwavering.

He looks like a jungle cat, coiled and ready to spring.

And suddenly, I'm desperately afraid he might.

"Adrian," I call, softly at first, so as not to jar him. Sensing my distraction, Josie rushes up, bats a paw at my shin, and then bounds away again, chuffing, as if we're playing a game of tag and she's just won. I take a few steps in her direction, and once she's sure I'm following her, she bolts, hurtling toward the same grove of woods that has Adrian so entranced.

And I lose it.

"Adrian!" I snap.

He jerks, stares at me with unfocused eyes.

I fling my arm, pointing at the dog. She's a few good yards away now, just a speck of gold against the autumn-tinged landscape. "Josie!"

Adrian blinks a few times before turning back in the direction I'm pointing. Then, bringing his fingers to his lips,

he sticks two in his mouth and lets loose a whistle so loud I flinch.

Josie skids to a halt. Turning slowly, she stares at him for a minute, cocks her head, and comes trotting back. Once she's at his feet, she sits, looks up, and waits.

I'm shocked. I can't remember Adrian teaching her to come with a mere whistle. The only training we'd made progress on before their disappearance were the commands *sit* and *down*. And no matter how much I bribed or begged, pleaded and praised, I could never, ever get her to come when I called.

It was always my fear that she would run so far and so fast that, by the time she looked up and realized how far away from us she'd gotten, she'd be long gone.

Now, I watch as the two are stare at each other, lost in some communication I'm not a part of.

"How did you do that?"

Adrian blinks, tears his gaze away from Josie to find me. "I don't know. I wasn't thinking. I just...did it." He takes a few steps back, runs a hand through his hair. When he drops it back to his side, I see that it's shaking. Sensing my stare, Adrian follows my gaze and slaps a hand over his trembling wrist.

I extend a hand, can practically feel the weight of Adrian's pain in my palm as I hold it out. I'm shaking, too. I can't help it.

"Come on," I say. "Let's go back to the truck. Okay?"

"I can't." Adrian shakes his head, tuns his attention back to those damn trees. "I can't," he says again.

I need to be calm. I need to be cool. I need to be loving, understanding, and patient.

But right now, I'm not any of those things.

I'm *angry*.

I'm angry at Adrian, for leaving—whether or not it was of his own free will.

I'm angry at Sam, for coming along right when I needed him and for being so damn loving and supportive.

I'm angry at the Universe, for giving me two good men to love, and then making me choose which one to hurt.

And mostly, I'm angry at myself—for being so goddamn angry in the first place.

I take a breath, and then another. Josie's leash is heavy in my hand, a reminder that she's still loose. I give a quick whistle, pat my thigh, and she ambles over. When I attach her leash, she twists her head, looking over her shoulder, as if wary of letting Adrian out of her sight.

"I hear ya," I tell her softly.

Once clipped, she tugs the leash, straining to get back to Adrian. I follow, watching as she rubs against his shins like a cat, first one way and then the other. He looks down, as if surprised to see her, and then glances up at me.

His eyes, they break my heart.

I slide my hand into his. "Sit with me. Okay?"

Flinching at my touch, he pulls his hand away almost immediately. But he nods, and together we drop to the ground, me cross-legged and him with his legs bent, forearms propped on his knees. Swallowing hard, he stares out into the trees.

I was always the weak one. The overwhelmed one. The one who had too many emotions to count, who always felt like I was going to burst from the pressure of them all. And Adrian...Adrian was the one who held me together. Who kept me sane. He helped me deal with my anxiety, my depression, my fears and constant feelings of not being good enough, of never being good enough. I'd stepped to the metaphorical ledge too many times to count, and Adrian was always there, every single time, to talk me back down.

I owe this man my life.

Because I'm certain that if he hadn't come into it, I wouldn't be here today.

And now it's my turn to pay him back. To talk him down from the ledge, bring him back from the brink.

I suddenly feel entirely inadequate.

"Can I ask what you're thinking?" It's a tactic he would use on me, something that would get me to talk while not feeling pressured into doing so. Sometimes I'd say no, and, for a while, he'd leave it at that. Most of the time, though, I'd say yes, and that simple question alone was enough to get me going, to get whatever was bothering me out of my head and into the world, where it would inevitably dissolve into nothing.

When I was in a mood, when I was deep, dark, and *in it*, talking to Adrian could feel like therapy, and I always felt lighter after one of our "sessions".

I hold my breath, wait for him to speak.

Birds chirp, and the wind blows, and those trees at the edge of the field reach with their spindly branches, beckoning.

And just when I think Adrian isn't going to speak, isn't going to reveal what's on his mind (even though I can hazard enough guesses, given the circumstances), he starts.

"Jesus, Lo. Where do I even begin? Everything's so...it's all..." He wiggles his fingers in the air, and then huffs in frustration. "...jumbled."

"Then we'll unjumble it," I say. "Together."

"Together, huh?" He turns his head, squints at me. "Didn't think that was a thing anymore."

"Adrian, I'm here for you. You know that."

But he shakes his head, frowns. "No, no you're not. You're here because of *you*, Lois. Because of the guilt you'd feel if you turned your back, went on your merry way with your new life and your new fiancé and your...your..." His voice catches, and he closes his eyes, tilts his head back to the sky. "...your daughter."

“Ava is our daughter. *Ours*,” I emphasize. When he refuses to look at me, I reach out, lay a hand on his arm. Despite the October chill, his skin is warm, almost hot. His face, still turned to the sky, is drawn, contorted, as if my very touch is painful.

I quickly pull my hand back, cradle it in my lap. Though the warmth of his skin has bled into mine, leaving a tingling sensation I can’t shake.

“Our daughter,” he says, his eyes still closed, “who calls another man *Dad*. Our daughter, who doesn’t even know I exist.”

“She knows you exist.” I want to reach out to him again—God, how I want to reach out—but I hold back, squeeze my hands together so tightly they hurt. “I’ve told her all about you. Sam and I...we don’t keep anything from her. She knows that Sam isn’t her biological father.”

“Biological.” He looks at me now, his features skewed in skepticism. “She’s five, right? Five and a half? How can she even understand something like that? Something like,” he gestures at himself, “this?”

“I told you, she’s smart.”

His responding *humph* is one of disbelief. Again, he thinks I’m exaggerating.

So I go for the jugular because it’s the only way he’ll understand. “You were five, weren’t you, when you spent your first night in the woods? Alone?”

He turns his gaze back to the tree line, his shoulders stiffening.

“You knew then that something wasn’t right at home, didn’t you? You understood what was going on, right?”

“That...” He swallows, clears his throat. “That was different.”

“Kids are smarter than most adults give them credit for.” I lean toward him a bit, rest my hand on the ground by his thigh. “I mean, you were.”

“Yeah, well.” He nods, then shakes his head. “*Kids.*” He pulls in a deep breath, then releases it all in one shaky exhale. “I never wanted... I mean, I wasn’t sure...” He squints at me, and the exhaustion on his face mirrors my own.

We’re both so tired already. So tired, and this is only the beginning.

“I have no idea how to be a father.” He shrugs, and the move is angry, almost hostile. “Absolutely none.”

“The only thing you need in order to be a good father is to be a good person.” I lift a brow. “And you already are.”

His cheek twitches, as if he’s chewing the inside of it. The fingers of his left hand curl into a fist, then uncurl. Over and over.

Clench, release.

Clench, release.

It’s like he’s mimicking the beat of my heart.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he says.

And suddenly it hits me, the pressure I’ve put on him. The pressure I’ve been putting on him this whole time, moving us forward on my schedule, on my agenda. Pushing for what I want—which may or may not be what he needs. “All right, look. You don’t have to do this, okay? You have a choice here. I was just hoping that, maybe, you might want to meet her, be a part of her life.”

He doesn’t answer, but his hand stills. Then, after a beat, after a breath, he drops it down, letting it rest over mine. A few seconds later, he gives my fingers a gentle squeeze.

An unspoken answer, sure. But gestures matter more than words, anyway.

Chapter 17

We stop at a small, rustic-looking restaurant for lunch, one with an outside patio that allows dogs. Josie is treated like a patron, given a complimentary bowl of water with cucumber garnishes and a hypoallergenic cookie in the shape of a bone. She eats the treat with enthusiasm, then slugs the water and the vegetable slices like she's a poor, mistreated animal who hasn't eaten in days.

This makes Adrian laugh. So I laugh.

The sun is warm and the breeze is cool, and everyone—the customers as well as the staff—carry good moods. The entire atmosphere is that of a holiday, like the restaurant is contained within its own little bubble, the outside world and responsibilities out of sight and out of mind. With the building's log cabin exterior and the wrought iron seating, with the fresh air and the light slanting just so, with the sun glinting off our drinks and the savory smell of smoked barbeque, it's easy to pretend that Adrian and I are just another couple on vacation, free and unreachable for the next five to seven days.

But that's not how it is, because reality is reality and there's no ignoring it, regardless of how you try to steep yourself in feel-good fantasies. We have one, maybe two days left of travel before we reach Minnesota, and then shit gets real.

I peer across the table at him. “After lunch, we should stop at that outlet mall we saw coming into town, get you some new clothes. What do you think?”

Adrian reaches for his water glass, the ice cubes shifting with a soft clink, and I notice his hands, his strong hands, hands that used to cup my chin, the small of my back, the curve of my hip. I'm hit with a profound sense of loss, knowing I'll never feel those hands in the same way ever

again, and my chest tightens uncomfortably with this realization.

As it turns out, having Adrian back is like losing him all over again.

He takes a drink before answering. “I think,” he says, “that you’ve spent enough money on me.”

I withhold a sigh, try instead to imagine what it would be like to leave home one day with the simple intention of taking a walk or running some mundane errand, only to return hours later and find that everything’s changed. That the people I love and the things I favor are no longer there. That my life is gone, erased entirely, the only proof that I ever existed at all the clothes on my back and the memories in my head.

So I try not to push, but I’m firm when I say, “Look, this is how it’s going to be.” He opens his mouth, probably to argue, and I hold up a hand. “For now. All right? Just for now.” I pause, leaning back in my chair as the waitress arrives with our food—cheeseburgers and fries for the both of us—and say “No, thanks” when she asks if we’d like anything else.

Still, she lingers.

“Your pup is adorable,” she says, squatting down to ruffle Josie’s ears. I notice a band of pale skin around the ring finger of her left hand, a stark contrast against her deep tan. The woman seems to be about my age, and I wonder if she’s newly single or just chooses to waitress sans wedding ring with the hope of flirting for tips.

Her question is addressed to Adrian, and when she flashes a megawatt smile and leans in to rest her elbow on the arm of his chair, I assume the latter.

He doesn’t seem to notice. Or maybe he doesn’t care. Women flirting with Adrian is nothing new; it happened all the time when we were together. He was spectacular and I was plain, and based on looks alone, they thought they had a better shot than me.

I didn’t hold it against them. More often than not, I felt the same.

“She’s just a little over five months,” Adrian says, donning a polite smile.

Just a little over six years, I want to amend.

“Well, she’s just the *cutest* cutie patootie I’ve ever seen.” The waitress stands and tweaks her ponytail. The name of the restaurant—*The Black River Café*—is stretched across her red t-shirt, which hugs her ample chest. She turns to Adrian, propping a hand on the hip of her daisy dukes as she does. “Let me know if I can you anything else, hon.” Tipping him a wink, she sashays away, heading toward a table of rowdy men who bellow small hoots of approval when she arrives. She laughs and waves them off, and while it all seems innocent enough, I can’t help but think how exhausting it must be to base your livelihood off the hit-or-miss generosity of others.

My stomach is slightly sour, and I’m surprised at the sudden sensation, the sharp tingle of jealousy brought on by her interaction with Adrian. After all, I have no right to feel this way. None at all.

But my face is flushed and my emotions are on my sleeve, and exposing this weakness will only make our situation more complicated. So I grit my teeth, take in a few slow breaths, and try to let it go.

But I can’t. The thought of the two of them together runs like a movie in my head, one I can’t shut off or even mute... and...my stomach churns, turning over and over...and...this is...this is just ridiculous.

I have no right.

Adrian is looking at me now, and though his stare is blank, I know what he’s thinking.

Caught in a truth I don’t want to admit, I turn away from him, dropping my gaze to my plate. “Wow,” I say, feigning enthusiasm, hoping to bolster the mood at our table, “this looks amazing, doesn’t it?”

Adrian picks up a fry, studies it, then drops it back to the plate. Like suddenly he’s reluctant to eat what I buy for him, as well.

I want to roll my eyes.

I want to cry.

I want to go back in time, go on that damn hike, disappear right along with him.

Then everything would be as it should.

And also...nothing. Nothing would be as it should, because then I never would have met Sam, I never would have helped create Midnight Sun. I never would have moved to Minnesota, discovered a land I love so much, that feels more like home than the concrete jungle of Seattle ever did. I never would have discovered a life that makes me feel alive, that makes me want to jump out of bed each and every morning because I can't wait to start my day.

And that, all of it, happened because Adrian—my *husband*—went on a hike one day and never came back.

This all makes me sound horribly grateful for Adrian's disappearance, doesn't it?

But I'm not. And I wasn't.

The fact that I found a happier life than the one I had with Adrian? One filled with such joy, such wonder and awe, with every day bringing something new and exciting? And all of this happening while he and Josie may have been going through unimaginable torture, a type of hell I couldn't (didn't) even want to imagine?

This new and beautiful life of mine, more often than not, has made me feel worse.

If it hadn't been for Ava, for Sam, I would have kept to the old routine, stuck to my soul-sucking job and my eighty-hour work week, run myself into the ground years sooner than nature would have done alone. Killed myself slowly, the way I felt I deserved.

And now that I think about it, all of it and in that way, maybe Adrian *is* right.

Maybe I am doing this out of guilt.

But no.

No.

“It was the not knowing.”

He pushes his plate away, just slightly. “The not knowing.” He repeats my confession like a question, drawing the words out as if he needs me to elaborate.

And it hits me. He really *doesn't* have any idea what I'm talking about. He wasn't there, wasn't with me all those years ago, when I was lying awake in bed every night, plagued with one terrifying scenario after another. He doesn't know what I went through, what the aftermath of his disappearance did to me, how it affected me...the wide-open gap it left in my life. He doesn't know about my runaway imagination and the sharp pinch of desperation I'd feel whenever I thought about what their last moments might have been like. There was a scream in my head that never stopped, an agony so all-consuming that it warped time, turning hours into years and days into eternity.

I grip my glass, feel the condensation on my skin, and with the burn of all those memories heating my flesh, I'm almost surprised the water doesn't start to boil. I'd wanted to spare him these details, but maybe...maybe...he needs to know. Needs to know that my life hasn't been a bed of roses since he disappeared. That even with Sam and Ava, with my new life and all the beauty it contains, I still ache for him.

Every single day, I ache for him.

“You...” I have to stop, take a sip of my drink, force the liquid down my throat. I find I'm suddenly shaking—in body and in voice—and I squeeze my eyes shut, focus on the dark behind my lids, just like Sam taught me, so I can slow the beat of my heart, let the swell of emotion pass.

And it does, it always does, just like Sam assured me it would.

“You,” I say again, opening my eyes, “have no idea how hard, how *awful* it was after you were gone.”

He doesn't say anything, just stares, his mouth a thin line.

“Adrian, I had no idea what *happened* to you. If you were dead, alive but injured, or maybe being tortured... And Josie, was she alone out there, waiting for me to find her? Scared? Hunted by a wild animal? Maybe...” My voice catches. “Maybe torn apart, eaten alive?” My eyes start to heat, to water, and I swipe at them angrily. “Were *you* being hunted, torn limb from limb? Or maybe...” My lips tremble as I admit—for the first time—what I’ve never allowed myself to admit before. “Did you just run away? Leave me because of something I said, something I did...”

Adrian’s face is screwed up in...shock? Disbelief? Anger? He’s looking at me so strangely, and I’m too wound up to decipher his expression. Is he mad at me? Furious that I could even entertain such a notion? “Lois,” he starts.

But I hold up a hand. “Look,” I say, swiping again at my eyes, “I know what you’re going through is, like, fucking horrible. The most godawful thing. And my sob story is probably the last thing you want to hear, especially as I drag you—Jesus, practically *force* you—halfway across the country and into my life.”

He doesn’t object, but his features have softened, his eyes now as glassy as my own.

“But, you see, the whole reason I’m doing this, is because I need to know that you’re okay. Does that make sense? I spent so many years wondering, replaying one wretched scene after another, and it was torture. But now that you’re back? Now that you and Josie are back, and you’re healthy and fine and, at least physically, untouched? Jesus, it’s like I can breathe again. Actually *breathe*. And the thought of just turning you away, of knowing you two have nowhere to go, nothing but the clothes on your back? I just...” I shake my head. “I just can’t do it, go through that again—all that not knowing. Only this time wondering if you’re on the street? Homeless and standing on a corner, begging for a money or something to eat? So yeah, I guess. Whatever. Call it what you want. If you think it’s guilt, then fine. But I think—no, I *know*—it’s love. Selfish love, probably. But love nonetheless.”

His expression is blank, his tone soft when he says, “But you love someone else.”

And this. This is the kicker.

I can’t lie, and I won’t.

“I do,” I say. “But I love you, too.”

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Chapter 18

“Don’t bury the emotion.”

It was the early days of our friendship. The days when just thinking about Adrian, about Josie would send me into fits of hyperventilation. I’d just met Sam, the first real friend I’d had since...hell...since grade school, and I knew this because even though I was a constant mess—weepy and depressed and anxious and moody—he stuck around.

For some reason, that wonderful man stuck around.

“You need to feel it, Lois.”

“But I don’t *want* to feel it,” I told him, my voice high and desperate. “It hurts. Jesus, Sam. You of all people know...”

“Just close your eyes.” His voice was calm and deep, firm but never demanding, and I listened, doing exactly as he said. I opened myself up to the pain—every single goddamn bit of it. I remember how doubtful I was that first time, steeped in emotion so sharp it was cutting. But I tried it anyway, desperate to dull the blade, knowing I could never eradicate it completely.

And I tried this, all of it, not for me, but for Adrian’s child.

“Just look into the dark and feel it. Right here.” Sam laid his hand on my chest, and the pressure helped me zero in on that spot, as if his touch was drawing every bit of pain from my body and holding it there, right beneath my breastbone. I was so raw, my nerves so frayed, that I could actually feel it, all that torment, a chaotic sort of shudder, tripping over the beat of my heart. “Picture it, if it helps. A dark cloud, a swirling mass of energy. And then watch it climb up from your chest, through your throat, and right out the top of your head.”

Suppressing a frustrated sigh, I did as he asked, focusing on that stuttering vibration, giving it form, watching as it spun in my chest. An image of a magnet popped into my mind—a

gift of grace, maybe, from a god in whom I no longer believed—and I clung to it, used it, pictured it drawing that horrible mass up, up, up. I could actually feel it as it began to climb, lurching upward with each frantic breath I took. I traced its path as it rose, noting the swell of my throat as it lodged briefly behind my tongue, and then, after a deep swallow, feeling it tear loose, pitching higher still, a buzzing mass of dark energy that pressed against my forehead, my skull. And then, with one final push, right out the top of my head.

Sam was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. His hand was still on my chest, resting over my heart, the beat of which had now calmed.

For the first time in the six months, I felt relief.

Along with the tiniest flicker of...desire.

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Chapter 19

The rain came quick after lunch.

Now, an hour later, it's still falling, coming down in heavy sheets, drumming against the windshield with such force that the interstate is barely visible. The sunshine we enjoyed earlier has been washed away, and the clouds darkening the sky are playing with time, stealing minutes from the day and throwing us into twilight several hours before it's due.

Adrian opted to drive, so once again I find myself curled up on the passenger seat, gazing out the window, the world a never-ending blur of rain-washed images. The rhythmic thud of the windshield wipers is heavy in my ears, dulling my thoughts, my senses. Before long, I'm skipping in and out of sleep, in and out of dreams that blend with reality, the limits of my perception stretching farther than the eye can see. I'm everything and nothing, here and then not, awake and asleep, and when my phone rings, waking me fully, I push away from the door and look at the clock on the dash, surprised to find that only twenty minutes have passed since the last time I checked.

Groggy from my fitful nap, I tap at my phone, my fingers heavy, and end up clicking the speaker button by accident. Bringing my phone to my ear, I jerk when Ava's voice fills the truck's quiet cab.

"Mom! Mom-mom-mom!" Her little voice is breathy, filled with subdued excitement that—I know from experience—is just about to burst. She rushes on before I can get a word in edgewise. "Guess what?"

My daughter's voice has cleared the clouds from my head, if not the sky, and I smile as ask, "I can hardly guess. What?"

A pregnant pause fills the line, expectant and eager. I can just picture her now, drawing in a breath, holding it, her lips

pursed and cheeks full, delaying the suspense for the utmost effect. “We saw one!”

I immediately know what she’s talking about; aside from Bigfoot, Ava has been longing to see a moose in the wild all summer. Now, just a couple of weeks into fall, it appears she got her wish. Still, I tease. “Let me guess. Bigfoot?”

Her giggle is like a soft flutter of bells in my ear, the sweetest sort of music. “No, Mom. *Gawd*. If we saw Bigfoot, I wouldn’t be able to, like, *contain* myself right now.”

At five and a half, Ava already has the dramatics of a teenager.

“My bad,” I say, laughing. “So, was it a...moose?”

“Yes!” Her response is more of a squeal than a word.

“That’s great, bug. Tell me all about it. Was it huge?” Then, my voice stern, “You didn’t get close, did you?”

Ava huffs. “Mom”—she draws out the word—“you know I’d never get *really* close.”

The way she emphasizes “really” doesn’t make me feel any better.

“Dad let me use his binoculars,” she gushes, and then proceeds to fill me in on every little detail of the sighting. I’m smiling, listening, wrapped up in her words the way I always am when she speaks, every bit as smitten with her as I was the day she was born.

It’s not until we end the call that I realize I never took the phone off speaker. I glance at Adrian, who’s staring straight ahead, his expression unreadable. We haven’t spoken much since we left the restaurant, not to mention that the majority of our lunch was eaten in silence. So whatever mood he’s in now, whatever thoughts are running through his head...I have no idea.

“So, a moose, huh?” he says finally.

“Yeah. We found a wildlife book at a thrift store a few months back, and she’s been obsessed with finding a moose ever since.”

“And Bigfoot,” he adds. His voice is serious, but when I look at him, I see that he’s smiling.

“And Bigfoot,” I confirm.

“Oh, man,” he says, and he chuckles. “I did that. As a kid.”

“As a kid?” I snort. “You looked for him on, like, every hike we did.”

He rolls his eyes. “I did not.”

I bark out a laugh. “Oh my God, you totally did.” My phone is still in my hand, and I drop it back in the cupholder as I say, “That one time, at Diablo Lake? Remember that noise we heard halfway through the hike? And that shadow, way back in the trees?” I shake my head and smile. “I’ve never seen you so excited. You took us a mile off the trail, looking for”—I curl my fingers, making air quotes—“Sasquatch.”

Now he huffs. “Fine. That *one* time. But, I mean, it could have been—”

“It was a deer.”

He presses his lips together, holding back a smile.

I point at him. “See?”

He cocks his head my way, lifting his brows. “But, seriously. You have to admit, it would have been so cool if it was Bigfoot.”

I just shake my head.

Steering with his wrist, he reaches over with his free hand and gives me a little punch in the shoulder. “Come on,” he jibs. “Don’t deny it.”

“Fine.” I sigh, giving in. “It would have been half cool, half terrifying.”

He turns his attention back to the road, grinning.

“Ava’s just like you,” I say suddenly, without thought. “Running headfirst toward the unknown, leaping before thinking.”

“You don’t say.”

I nod. “She’s obsessed with anything and everything supernatural. If something is mysterious or paranormal, she’s instantly intrigued. I swear, the child has no fear. Just unlimited curiosity.” I lean back in my seat, draw a knee to my chest. “Drives me crazy sometimes.”

Being Ava’s mother isn’t easy. While not exactly a child prodigy, I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I said she was close, and keeping up with her can be both exhausting and intimidating. Luckily, I’ve had Sam, who’s been around since before she was born, and who knows exactly how to handle a kid with Ava’s quirks.

I wonder how Adrian will handle them.

“Mysterious or paranormal, huh?” Adrian’s voice brings me back, and I glance over just in time to see the corners of his lips dip, just slightly enough to be noticeable. “I wonder what she’ll think of me?”

“She’ll love you,” I tell him, an indirect response to a question I’m not even sure he wanted an answer to. “She’ll absolutely love you.”

Doubts. They’re running rampant in my mind, have been since Sam and I came up with this cockamamie plan and Adrian agreed to it. All of this...this...*fiasco* of bringing Adrian to Minnesota, giving him a job at Midnight Sun. And me, living alongside my fiancé and husband, one just a stone’s throw from the other. It’s beyond batshit crazy. And while I hope it works—God, I hope more than anything it works—there’s a part of me that can’t help but think it’s all going to blow up in our faces.

But then I think of Ava. Of her kind heart, her gentle soul, her openness to love without thought, to give without wanting to take.

I think of my daughter—*our* daughter, who’s just as much Sam’s as she is Adrian’s—and I have hope.

So, yeah. Her loving Adrian?

Of *that* I have no doubt.

The problem here, the only one, is me.

Because...I love Adrian, too.

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Chapter 20

“Josie, come.”

She ambles over, her paws leaving faint dents in the hideous hotel bedspread. As she plops down in front of me, the upper half of her body draped over my legs, I place a hand under her chin and on the top of her muzzle, gently prying apart her mouth. She twists away slightly, sticking her tongue out and trying to lick my fingers. Squinting, I do what I’ve done at least twice since reuniting with her and Adrian yesterday morning: look into her mouth, towards the back of her throat, and search for the heart shaped splotch on her tongue.

And there it is.

Dark against the bright pink, that mark of hyperpigmentation in the shape of a heart is easy to make out, even with her wiggling like a maniac in my lap. Undeniable proof that this is the same dog Adrian left with all those years ago.

Aging. It’s an easier thing to fake with humans. Not so much a dog, though. No breed maintains puppyhood for six years.

I release her muzzle and reach for the dog treats on the nightstand. “Good girl,” I say, giving her one. “Good, Josie.”

Because she is. She really *is* Josie, the same puppy that Adrian and I adopted together, back when we decided that a four-legged kid would, for the time being anyway, be better than a two-legged one.

Now, as I watch her chew, spilling crumbs all over the bedspread’s colorful print, I’m not sure if finding that heart-shaped mark makes me feel better or worse.

Because it’s solid proof that Adrian didn’t run away, that he didn’t have a belated change of heart and decide to come

back after living in the wild, off-grid for six years. He didn't snag some random golden retriever puppy to pawn off as the original with the hopes of fooling everyone—fooling me, specifically—with some outrageous story that he *doesn't remember a goddamn thing about where he's been*.

I glance at the bathroom—the drum of the shower loud despite the closed door—and feel more unmoored than ever.

We're sharing the same hotel room again. After the morning spent in the field, watching as Adrian leaned toward those trees as if ready to run, the thought of letting him out of my sight—even for one night—left a nervous flutter in my stomach. But this hotel happens to be in a fairly large city, engulfed by the carefully planned sprawl of concrete and metal, and the room we're in now is bigger than the one we shared last night. It also has two queen beds, which help to lend a sense of separateness to our arrangement.

A sense of separateness.

As if Adrian and I could ever be separate.

With the shower still going, I scribble a note on the hotel stationary, grab the keys, and slip from the room.

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Chapter 21

I met Adrian's father once, at his mother's funeral.

And once, in my good honest opinion, was more than enough.

When we learned of her death, I was surprised that Adrian wanted to attend the ceremony at all. He left his hometown a few days before he turned eighteen, and he hadn't been back or communicated with his parents since. One of the few contacts he maintained from his past—a childhood friend who was a janitor at the small hospice center where his mother spent her last days and who knew of the family's estrangement—called to let him know about the funeral, and at Adrian's request, I called in sick to work so I could attend with him.

I was surprised at the size of the gathering.

It was huge.

I was also surprised at how few of those people spoke to Adrian. Most doled an accusatory glare before moving on, brushing by his shoulder with an air of authority and judgement. With his father's pristine standing with the town, Adrian was considered the black sheep, the troubled son who ran away, who didn't appreciate what he had, who selfishly left his parents to forge through their golden years alone.

Through it all, Adrian held his head high, ignoring the looks and the hateful comments—some whispered and some purposely said loud enough that he could hear—letting it all go in one ear and out the other. For my part, I bit back retorts of my own, narrowing my eyes at anyone who had the audacity to narrow theirs first.

When, after the burial, we approached his father, the first thing I noticed about the man were the size of his hands. They were huge, meaty, and I remember the way Adrian would describe the knocks he'd take to the side of his head, his jaw,

just below his chin: *The old man could hit hard enough to make my teeth rattle.*

The second thing I noticed were his eyes—so like Adrian’s, and yet so different. There was ice in his stare; his gaze was so cold I’m surprised no one else could feel the chill. And when he turned those eyes on Adrian, that ice cracked; with a blink, a flood of hate bubbled to the surface. “You goddamned piece of shit,” he hissed under his breath. “You’ve got some nerve coming here, you know that.”

Adrian swallowed, took a deep breath. He stood up straight, shoulders squared and chin raised. His voice was strong, relaying no emotion, hate or otherwise, as he said, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

His father’s voice, on the other hand, spit venom. “What, you finally grow a set of balls, is that it? Think you could come back here, get in my good graces, ungrateful little shit that you are?” He sneered. “You’re still nothing but a fucking waste of space.”

“I don’t want anything from you. I just came back to...” Adrian paused, but only briefly. “...to let you know that I forgive you. And that I feel sorry for you. Sorry that you’ll spend the rest of your life alone, without family.”

There was no menace in this statement, only sorrow. But his father took the words as an insult. Face red, breath coming in sharp spurts, the man seemed to swell before my very eyes.

And I couldn’t help it; I stepped back. The hate coming off him was palpable, and I could feel it, every bit of it, a chaotic vibration that pinged against my bones.

How in the world, I thought, did Adrian grow up to be the wonderful man that he is with a father like this?

Adrian didn’t exaggerate his terrible childhood. If anything, he undersold it.

His father’s hands curled into fists, and for one wild moment, I was pretty sure he was going to hit Adrian. And with the rage, the righteous indignation puffing out his chest, I wouldn’t have put it past him to slug me next.

This man, Chief of Police Harold Kelley, was pure evil.

I tugged on Adrian's hand, gently, a silent signal that we should leave, *go*, get the hell out of here, because whatever he thought he would accomplish by attending his mother's funeral wasn't going to happen. It had been, in my mind, a disaster.

As we turned to leave, an older couple approached his father, the man offering a hand, the woman dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. And it was then, in that instant, as Adrian's father turned from us to them, I saw the change. The growl that was suddenly a sad smile, the hateful gaze turned humble and sorrowful. His features softened, the sharp angles receding back into his skin, and he even seemed to shrink in size, his former bulk whittled down to a form less intimidating.

This all happened in a blink. So fast that I had to do a double-take. And it was eerie, so goddamn eerie.

He looked like a different man.

His father's voice filled my ears as we walked away, smooth as butter and sweet as honey, and it was all I could do to suppress the shudder rippling up my back at the strangeness of it all.

We were nearly to our car when Adrian turned to me, smiling for the first time that day. It was then I realized that he hadn't returned to mend fences, or to pay respect to a woman who allowed her husband to assault their child on a daily basis.

He had attended for the sole purpose of letting his father know one thing—that he hadn't been broken.

It was unspoken, but we both knew.

Adrian was free.

Chapter 22

When I return, Adrian is gone.

I drop the Target bags on the bed and call out, as if we're in some large house rather than a tiny hotel room with a mini bath. I peek my head around every corner, my heart hammering in my throat as I do, and even go so far as pulling open the closet door, peering inside that too.

During all this, Josie is prancing around my feet, sniffing at my boots, the cuffs of my jeans, as if I'm hiding treats somewhere in the lining.

"Where'd he go, huh?" I ask her. She sits, looks up at me. "Where's Adrian?"

No response.

"Damn it!" I hiss, stomping my foot like a child, so angry at myself for leaving him alone I could scream.

I scan the room again, make another pointless round of the perimeter, checking between the bed and the wall, like maybe he's hiding there, waiting to jump out when I peel back the comforter's overhang. Adrian has a trickster side, and while our circumstances don't warrant the joke, I can almost see him doing it. Lying in wait, ready to scare the shit out of me.

He's not there, of course.

Though whether he meant to or not, he's definitely scaring the ever-living shit out of me.

I drop the corner of the bedspread, watch as it falls stiffly to the floor. The room is starting to blur, and I have to blink several times to get it back into focus. I'm starting to feel that familiar swoon, that *sway*, the one that sucks all the strength from my body and makes the room spin.

It was the same feeling I had the night Adrian didn't come home.

My mind starts warring with itself, spinning a ridiculous back and forth, desperate to explain Adrian's absence, to fit it in a perfectly rational box.

He's gone.

He's not gone. He'd never leave Josie.

But how do I know that?

You just do.

Nope, no way. I don't trust him. Not...anymore.

Adrian isn't the untrustworthy one here. You gave up on him.

Stop it.

I bet he can't even stand to be around you.

Shut up.

In fact...I bet he hates you.

SHUT UP!

My breath is coming too fast, and my knees are buckling, buckling, and I barely make it to the edge of the bed before my legs give out entirely.

My whole body is shaking.

I grab one of the plastic bags full of the clothes I bought for Adrian and throw it. It ping-pongs off the wall and hits the desk below with a slick *thud*, sliding across the surface and sending various objects skidding off the edge: a pen, empty water bottle, a pad of hotel stationary.

Something else flutters to the floor to join the carnage, and that's when I see the note.

“Oh, you must be Adrian's wife!”

The music playing in the restaurant is low but thick, filling every corner with the deep, melancholy twang of an old country song. I stare at the woman who spoke, take in the silver hair brushing just past her chin, and wonder if I misheard her. “Excuse me?”

She’s sitting at a table close to the entrance, alone for now, though the napkins and empty glasses cluttering the surface suggests she’s accompanied by a few people. Seeing my confused expression, she opens her mouth, says something else, but my attention is focused elsewhere, on the familiar profile of a man at the bar, red jacket turned up at the collar. As if sensing my stare, Adrian looks over, lifts his chin, and then nods, indicating that I should take a seat next to this stranger.

The woman follows my gaze, the overhead lights catching in her hair as she shifts in her seat. “Oh, he’s just gone to the bar with Andrew to get us some drinks. Sit, sit!” she says, turning back to me and indicating the chair across from her.

I just blink, not sure what the hell is going on. How she knows Adrian, how she knows me—on sight—when I’ve never met her before in my life.

After my brief and unnecessary freakout in the hotel room, I read the note Adrian left, relaying that he’d gone to the restaurant next door to the hotel, a place called The Cowboy Saloon. Considering that he had maybe a twenty in his wallet, I figured he wanted a drink, something to take the edge off the last few days. And given my ridiculous response to his absence moments ago, I decided I might as well join him, figuring my nerves could benefit from a drink or two, as well.

I slide into the seat, stiff and awkward, and then rest my hands on the table.

“I’m Polly. Polly Tomlinson,” she clarifies, as if that explains everything. She sticks out her hand, reaching across the table, and I take it, tentatively, not sure what to say. I came to the restaurant thinking I’d find Adrian alone, perhaps bent over a beer at the bar, shoulders hunched and lips dipped. But now, looking over to where he’s standing with a tall man old

enough to be his grandfather, head thrown back in laughter, I'm more confused than ever.

“And you're Lois,” she informs me, smiling.

I nod stupidly, the sound of her voice drawing me back.

“Adrian showed us your picture earlier,” she explains.

“Oh.” I nod again, still confused, and stare into her face—delicate wrinkles spider outward from her eyes, frame the corners of her mouth—and place her somewhere in her mid to late sixties. But her cheeks are pink, her skin peaches and cream, and there's an air of youth about her that's palpable. And before I know it, I'm smiling back. “I'm sorry,” I say, giving my head a little shake. “I don't...I mean...how do you know Adrian?”

Polly laughs. “Sorry, dear. Sometimes I get ahead of myself. When you're on the road as much as we are, no one's a stranger and everyone's family.” She hooks her thumb over her shoulder, and I notice the pink of her nails matches perfectly with the hue of her sweater. “We met your husband in the hotel parking lot. Helped us carry in Andrew's gear. Which, believe you me, is not an easy task.”

Your husband.

I can't help but get hung up on the phrasing. Adrian is my husband, and yet he isn't. What I previously thought of as a simple legal matter—one that could easily be taken care of by the swift signing of divorce documents—is turning out to be a complicated matter of the heart. I wonder how much of our story she knows? And is it worth it—do I even care—to fill her in? Apparently, Adrian didn't, and merely relayed the facts as they stand now: legally, he is my husband and I am his wife.

I decide that I don't have the energy to get into specifics. And if I did, would this woman even care? So many people in the world today are so superficially focused; they have no interest in diving deep with another soul, preferring instead to keep to the surface, only taking in that which is easily digestible.

And our story? It's hardly a light topic.

So I keep it simple. “Gear?” I ask.

Polly swipes at a crumb on the table, then leans forward on her elbows. “Andrew’s a photographer, dear.”

“Wow.” I glance over at the man, who is now in what appears to be deep conversation with Adrian, and raise my brows. He’s lean but not frail, silver-haired like his wife, and sun-weathered. His flannel shirt is untucked, though not untidily so, and on top of that he’s wearing an olive-colored utility vest, the kind with more pockets than anyone could ever need. As he moves down the bar to grab a napkin, I notice a slight limp in his step. “What a cool job,” I say, smiling back at Polly.

She half laughs, half sighs. “More like an obsession. At seventy-two, you’d think he’d be retired, right? Can’t keep that man away from a camera, though. Not that I’d even try. It’s in his blood, who he is.” She raises her brows, a rush of pride brightening her features. “He’s shot print for all sorts of magazines: *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Life*, *The Wilderness Edge*, and quite a few publications over in Europe. Shot his first spread for Nat Geo when he was twenty.”

“Wow,” I say, impressed. “Sounds like he’s had quite the career.”

She nods. “He certainly has. And I’m fortunate enough to have been along for the entire ride. Though my girlfriends were always quick to tell me that playing assistant to a freelance photographer while sleeping in a pop-up tent in the African jungle wasn’t something I should feel all that fortunate about.” She laughs, hardly bothered. “Not that I blame them for feeling that way. Not everyone can handle that way of living. Very few understood our life choices, especially back when Andrew was just getting started. But we didn’t mind. We knew what was right for us. We like to joke that we’re the black sheep of our herd and proud of it.” She shrugs. “But you have to keep your compassion, right? It’s unfair to expect everyone to just magically understand your point of view when they haven’t walked your path. I mean, living the way we do, it’s impossible to look at the world the same way as others, you know?”

I sigh. “Man, I get that.”

Polly studies me, cocking her head as she does. “You know what? Something tells me you do.”

I don’t know what to say to that, and it turns out I don’t need to, because the men arrive just then, drinks in hand. Adrian slides a tumbler in front of me, a dark beverage topped with a little red mixing straw. “Your usual,” he explains, seeing my quizzical look. Then, lowering his voice, “I mean, you know, what used to be.”

Captain and Coke.

I haven’t had one of these in years.

Parenting a child like Ava, not to mention running a lodge that also doubles as an adventure company, leaves little time for bar hopping or overindulging. The closest Sam and I get to buzzed is having a couple glasses of wine once or twice a month, well after Ava’s gone to sleep.

“Thanks,” I say, drawing the glass closer. Peering into it, I see three ice cubes, their edges soft and round, the small holes in the center flushed with drink. I whip my head in Adrian’s direction, surprised he remembered, and then quickly realize that he didn’t, not really. It was me that had forgotten.

Three ice cubes for good luck, is something my dad used to say, and then I’d watch him plop a trio of them into whatever drink he was preparing for me: lemonade, soda, fruit juice. Back then, superstitious as most kids are, I figured my dad and I could use as much luck as we could get, and I naively took the ritual seriously, going so far as to make the special request any time I placed an order at a restaurant or ate at a friend’s house. It was a silly tradition that stuck with me after he died, and one I carried into adulthood.

Somewhere over the last six years, though, I’d forgotten, fell out of the habit. How had I forgotten?

I stare at Adrian—remembering, remembering—my throat closing (again) and my eyes welling (again) and feel (yet again) time slipping backward.

“Thank you,” I say.

He simply nods before turning his attention across the table to where Polly's husband is settling into his seat.

"Ah, you must be Lois," Andrew says, extending his hand. I take it as I took his wife's earlier, giving it a friendly shake. Up close, he looks older, his age more apparent. But his eyes—bright blue—are vibrant, alive. He flashes a friendly grin, displaying perfect white teeth, and nods at Adrian. "Not sure if he mentioned it, but Polly and I want to buy you two dinner. If it wasn't for your husband, I'd be at the hotel, laid up in the room with a sore back." He slips his hand from mine and crosses it over his chest, reaching up to rub his shoulder. "Two flights of stairs, no elevator, and all the hotel trolleys in use. It would have taken us several trips to get all our bags up to the room." He feigns a shudder and casts a mischievous glance at his wife. "Polly's suitcases alone would have killed me."

"Oh, shush you." She slaps him lightly on the arm, her voice teasing. "Actually, it's Andrew's bags that are the real back breakers. We don't like to leave his equipment in the truck overnight, what with the cost of it all. It's worth the extra effort to lug it up into the rooms with us. But," she sighs, "it gets old. Laptop, lenses, tripod, two cameras, batteries, and lighting. It's a lot. Luckily, Adrian was walking your sweet dog—oh, what was her name again?"

"Josie," Adrian says, smiling. He's sitting back in his chair, one arm casually draped across the table, holding his beer bottle lightly. It's the most laid back I've seen him since reconnecting with him yesterday morning.

Polly snaps her fingers. "That's right. *Josie*. Oh, and if she isn't just the most adorable thing. Andrew and I always wanted a dog, but we traveled so much it wouldn't have been fair to the animal. Anyway," she says, pausing. "Now, where was I?"

Andrew reaches over and rubs her shoulder, as if aiding her memory with his touch. "We met Adrian in the parking lot," he reminds her.

"Yes, yes. That's right. Goodness, I get so sidetracked sometimes. Anyway, this young man," she waves at Adrian,

“comes up, sees us struggling, and asks right away if he can help.”

“That’s Adrian,” I say simply. Because it is. I think back to the night we met, when it was me that he was helping, and the selfless way he forged through fire to take my hand.

“So,” Polly says, because apparently, she’s not only a photographer’s assistant but also a mind reader, “how did you two meet?” She props her elbows on the table, folds her hands together, and rests her chin on her knuckles.

Adrian and I look at each other, and one corner of his mouth lifts with the memory. I bite my lip, which makes him laugh. “Go ahead,” he says, grinning.

He knows I love this story.

I turn to Polly and Andrew, take a breath, and lean forward. “So, I was working at this haunted house...”

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Chapter 23

For a seventy-two-year-old with a slight limp, Andrew Tomlinson is surprisingly light on his feet.

“You,” I tell him as he swings me out and pulls me back in, “are a much better dancer than I am.”

He laughs. “That’s because I grew up in an era where dancing took *skill*.”

I just shake my head and smile, letting him guide me through a sort of swing dance to the tune of an old country song with a fast beat.

I look like a dork.

I’m also too buzzed to care.

From the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Adrian and Polly, laughing together as she teaches him to two-step. Neither of us are good dancers, though unlike me, Adrian looks absolutely adorable in his inexperience. I’m more like a bull in a china shop.

With that thought, I step on the foot of the man dancing next to us.

Next to us.

How does one even accomplish this?

“Sorry,” I say to the man, whose face is pinched in pain beneath his wide-brimmed cowboy hat. I offer my own grimace, sympathizing, and then Andrew is whisking me away again, my vision circling back to Adrian, who catches my gaze and grins.

“Graceful,” he calls.

I flip him off.

The Tomlinsons have spent the last two hours plying us with food and drink, and while at first I waved off the latter

—“This is the last one, no seriously it is”—after a while they became easier and easier to accept. Now, though, with all the spinning Andrew is putting me through, the drinks are also helping to turn the floor into a rotating tilt-a-whirl.

As the song ends, I’m flung out one last time—my grand finale, if you will—and straight into the person behind me. I turn to offer yet another apology, only to realize it’s Adrian, the smirk on his face a blur as I’m jerked back into Andrew’s embrace. Then, with one arm around my waist and the other supporting my back, he dips me with swiftness that makes me shriek.

“Andrew,” I say, once he rights me and I catch my breath, “I think you’re wearing me out.”

He chuckles, and as he does, the DJ in the corner slips on a slower song. The poppy beat from the previous one glides seamlessly into this gentler tune, surprisingly so, and as it does, Andrew presses a quick kiss to my hand. “My dear,” he says, rather formally, “it was a pleasure. But this next dance,” he looks over my shoulder, eyes twinkling, “I owe to my wife.”

I look behind me and notice Polly, still standing next to Adrian, and when she sees Andrew, she blushes. She shakes her head and waves him away even as she’s stepping into his arms, into him, probably the way they’ve been stepping into each other every day for the last fifty years.

The sight of them, strangely enough, makes me think of Sam, and as I start to leave the dance floor, I feel a pull in my chest and a lump in my throat. It’s been two whole days away from him, away from Ava, away from my life in Minnesota. I feel so disconnected, as if I’m lost in a void, like my little family is farther away than a single day’s drive.

Distance. It doesn’t only stretch in miles. It isn’t something merely measured by time. Sometimes, and more often, it’s the little things, like a sudden change of heart, that create the biggest shifts in life, those yawning gaps that are near impossible to close.

The lamps overhead dim slightly as I move across the floor, making the white twinkle lights strung from the ceiling seem brighter, more like stars in the night sky than a simple string of bulbs. I'm nearly to the edge when I feel a gentle tug on my elbow.

“Hey.”

Adrian holds out his hand, his expression hesitant, turning from uncertain to hopeful as I stand there, hovering on the brink, somewhere between the past and present.

My body decides before I do, because memory resides in muscle and tissue, bone and blood just as much as it does in mind and spirit. Before I have time to think about it, to talk myself out of it, I'm tearing off old scabs, digging my nails into old wounds. My fingers entwine with his, and I let him draw me back onto the floor, back into the crowd.

Back into feelings so deep they can never be measured.

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Chapter 24

I met Sam in the little alcove off the parking garage of our apartment building, the one filled with sour overhead light and the smell of stale cigarettes that, despite the NO SMOKING sign, was always present. I'd just walked into the drab space, exhausted from a hectic day of work followed by a long bout of grocery shopping after, when one of the plastic bags split, spilling loose an array of purchases: a pack of deli meat, a tub of cream cheese, several oranges, and a few yogurt containers which, upon hitting the floor, burst open, splattering their insides against my legs.

When I saw the OUT OF ORDER sign on the elevator door, I lost it.

I was nearly six months pregnant, Adrian and Josie had been gone for five, and in that time my world had narrowed down to a few work colleagues who were every bit as workaholic as I used to be, offering little in the way of conversation, support, or friendship.

Plus, I lived on the fourth floor—which, since I was starting at the basement level, meant five flights of stairs—and the thought of toting my exhausted pregnant body along with my heavy bags of groceries all the way up to my empty apartment triggered the tears that were always right there, just beneath the surface, threatening to burst.

I was alone, and I was tired, and I was *done*.

It wasn't the first time I'd thought it, but it was the first time I thought about acting on it. I'd been trying to be strong—not for me but for the baby—and it wasn't working, not at all.

“I can't do this anymore,” I said to no one in particular.

No one in particular, because...I had no one.

Until.

“Excuse me?”

The voice was deep but soft, almost tentative, as if whoever was speaking knew they were confronting a wounded animal who would strike given the chance.

I saw his hand first, reaching around me from behind, offering the tub of cream cheese that had fallen from my bag. Turning, I took in the rest of him: tall—at least six foot three—with broad shoulders and sandy hair that flopped over his forehead and curled just under his ears. A few days-worth of dark stubble covered his square jaw, an edge that softened his otherwise clean-cut appearance. He was handsome—model handsome, GQ handsome—wearing a leather bomber jacket over a crisp white button down and tan trousers. Worn Doc Martens completed the look, and as my eyes traveled back up to his face, I noted a silver pin in the shape of an airplane on the collar of his jacket.

Maybe he was a pilot, I mused. Or a psychopath. Either way, it didn't matter. I was a widow, a pregnant one at that, and I'd lost the ability to swoon over a man's good looks.

What did matter, what made me respond rather than turn away, were his eyes. Dark and haunted, they reminded me of my own. Like they too had seen more loss than anyone had a right to bear.

He smiled then, and even that held a hint of melancholy, a trace of grief that tugged at the curl of his lips. “Do you, uh, need some help?”

It was then that I recognized him; he was the new tenant in the apartment across from mine. I'd seen him through the peephole in my door just the other day, in the same attire, though then he had a messenger bag slung over his shoulder. At the time, I was in the phase of my grief where I both wanted companionship and didn't, and rather than risk conversation, I waited for him to enter his unit before departing mine.

But now, we were face to face. And he was looking at me—those *eyes*—expectantly.

My answer surprised me.

“Yeah.” I pushed my lips together to stall their tremble, and then released a shaky breath. “Yeah, I do.”

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Chapter 25

I shouldn't be in bed with Adrian right now.

But I am.

It's not how it sounds. We're laying side by side, but I haven't crossed a line. Josie is here, in between us, a furry reminder of where I need to be, the distance I should keep.

Not that I kept it tonight, while we were dancing. While I played wife to a husband I haven't seen in years, letting him pull me close, resting my head on his chest, just beneath his chin, the tickle of his breath in my hair. I didn't keep my distance as we moved, running my hand along his arm, over his shoulder, tracing the curve of his jaw...wondering, wondering if any of this was real, if any of this was happening at all or if it was just another dream, another fantasy I'd cooked up in my mind.

And I definitely crossed a line when I pressed myself against him, so tightly against him, feeling as I did all of our broken pieces coming back together again.

It was as if we'd never been apart.

Though, for Adrian, we hadn't.

I'm a woman engaged to another man. Who's built a life with another family. I didn't forget about Sam tonight, about Ava. But...there were moments when I wished I could.

Adrian is back. He's back and he's *here*, with me, and... and...there are times when I feel myself slipping.

My heart is split in two.

I've also had a lot to drink, which may or may not be why my emotions are running on overdrive.

"We never had a first dance."

I look at him over the rise of Josie's head, which I'm stroking. "Well, we never had a reception."

“We didn’t really have anyone to invite.”

I smile, because he’s right. And because it never really mattered that we were alone. Not back then, when we had each other. “No, we didn’t.”

He laughs, just a soft little chuckle, but the sound carries in the darkened room, with the only light spilling out from the hotel bath. I feel a tickle in my chest, a sort of *whoosh* that makes my breath catch.

Has the fact that Adrian is here, really here, caught up with me yet?

No, I don’t think it has.

I reach out, across Josie, and touch his arm. “You are real, right?”

He stares at me for a moment, and my heart is racing in my chest, and suddenly I’m sure, absolutely sure, that this is a dream. That everything—from Able Lotz’s phone call to this moment, right now—has all been nothing but a figment of my imagination, cultivated during a deep sleep. That, in reality, I’m back in Midnight, lying next to Sam, *not* Adrian, and everything that’s happened over the last few days hasn’t really happened at all.

“If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up,” I whisper.

We’re crossing barriers now, and Adrian reaches over Josie, tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Then let’s not.”

I close my eyes as a wave of drowsiness threatens to pull me under. “If only it were that simple,” I say, yawning.

“It can be,” he says, now running the back of his fingers against my cheek. When his thumb brushes over my lips, I sigh.

It can be.

This thought stays with me long after the night takes me under.

Chapter 26

I was never a great cook, but I enjoyed the process of preparing a meal, felt a sense of purpose in supplying sustenance for my loved ones. My mother—who, my dad would describe with a sad smile, was wild at heart—left us a few days before my second birthday, never to be heard from again. And my father—a self-employed drywaller—worked long hours on other people’s homes so we could continue to afford our own. So by the time I was six, I was putting together the family meals—small at first, just things like toasted cheese sandwiches and cereal, peanut butter and jelly smeared on cheap white bread. Eventually I learned to use the stove, expanding my menu to things like canned soups and macaroni and cheese.

After my father passed and I moved in with his sister, I rarely stepped foot in the kitchen. Busy with her PR firm, my aunt opted to employ a personal chef—a short, high-strung little man who called himself Julio but whose real name was Larry—to prepare meals during the week, and because he preferred working in a kid-free zone, you risked a spoon-to-the-butt if you wandered into the room for something as simple as an apple.

After I married Adrian, though, I re-entered the kitchen with gusto, and my range of skills grew. I particularly loved breakfast foods: pancakes from a box, frozen hashbrowns from a bag, and scrambled eggs which, if I had the time and was feeling productive, I’d slap into a tortilla with some cheese and salsa. I threw myself into the routine of prepping these humble meals as if what I was making was far more exquisite than, say, my specialty—Mac and Cheese from a box with chopped up hot dogs. Adrian, for his part, met every meal with the same enthusiasm I prepared it with, and his excitement spurred me on, guiding me out of the realm of boxed goods and into the world of fresh ingredients and more complicated recipes. I looked forward to serving him these new concoctions, seeing

his grin, the way his eyes lit up with so much appreciation. Cooking for our little clan of two, the way I did for my dad and I growing up, brought back a cozy sort of contentment I thought I'd lost forever.

It was one of the things I missed after Adrian was gone, this being of service to someone, knowing I could make their day with just a few simple ingredients.

The first meal I cooked for Sam was for him and another woman.

It was their second date, and he'd knocked on my door, frazzled, asking if I had any cream cheese. As he said this, the smoke detector went off in his apartment, and the comical way his eyes widened before he dashed back across the hall was the first thing that made me laugh in months. I dug out a new tub of cream cheese from my refrigerator (the very one he handed me just the day before, during my meltdown) and waddled over to his place, wondering what in the world I was walking in to.

He'd already turned off the smoke detector by the time I got to his apartment, but the kitchen was, to put it bluntly, a disaster. Vegetables littered the kitchen island. A heaping pile of red onions had already been crudely chopped, and the sharp scent overpowered whatever was burning in the oven. On the stove, something was brewing in a large stainless-steel pot, the steam curling up and beading along the microwave above. The water had boiled to the rim, and every now and then some of it would spurt over the edge, sizzling as it hit the electric burner.

I arrived just in time to see Sam bent over the oven—door open and smoke billowing—and pulling out a tray of what looked to be burnt coals. “And there go the chicken thighs,” he mumbled, sliding the pan onto the cool side of the stove. He turned then, not at all surprised to see me standing there, and shrugged. “Well, it can only get better from here, right?”

Behind him, the pot of water boiled over, sending loose tendrils of pasta slithering over the sides with a soft hiss.

Cradling the tub of cream cheese against my pregnant belly, I couldn't help but laugh. At the whole thing: the mess

in the kitchen, the blackened tray of burnt poultry, the smoke still billowing from the oven, the acrid scent of onions that flavored the air with the scent of sweaty socks. And especially at the man standing in the middle of it all, deflated yet handsome, laughing despite the chaos.

At this point, we hadn't even known each other for a full twenty-four hours, but already I was comfortable in his presence. "Do you, uh, need some help?" I asked with a smile, throwing his words from the day before back at him.

"Yeah," he said, still chuckling, catching the joke. "Yeah, I do."

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Chapter 27

“We’ve had three calls so far.”

Sam’s voice, while not exactly angry, is hard.

I give Josie’s leash a gentle tug, pulling her away from a questionable stain on the hotel’s parking lot. “Same person?” I ask, knowing it’s not.

“Nope,” Sam says, confirming my suspicion. “All different.”

Damn.

Once again, Adrian Kelley is big news.

I sigh into the phone. “It was only a matter of time, I guess.” I follow Josie over the curb and onto the grass skirting the hotel’s property. She does her business quickly, and then, not yet ready to go back inside, we head to a nearby picnic table. It’s early morning, the sun just peeking over the horizon, and the air has that cool, crisp taste, the kind that cleans you from the inside out. Dew still coats the surface of everything, so instead of sitting, I prop myself against the edge of the table, crossing one foot over the other.

Josie mills around in the grass, sniffing.

We’re alone, the majority of the guests still asleep in their rooms, and I’m thankful for it. I need the fresh air and empty space to clear my head.

I knew reporters—professional and amateur alike—were going to come calling eventually. I was just hoping it would take them awhile to track Adrian down.

“Do you think he’ll want to talk to any of them?”

“No.” I don’t hesitate. “Absolutely not.”

“That’s what I figured.” I hear movement in the background, the sound of water running, the clanking of a spoon against glass. I try to picture him, making coffee in our

cozy kitchen with the butcher board countertops and the copper backsplash, the warm lighting and the large windows. There's a black stone fireplace that separates the kitchen from the living room, and when I close my eyes, I can almost hear the crackle of the fire, feel the warmth of it on my skin as if I was there, by his side, drinking a mug along with him. "I'll take care of it," he says, pulling me out of the fantasy and back into reality. "They won't be calling back."

Sam, once again, proving himself too good to be true. His kindness draws to the forefront of my mind the conversation I had with Adrian last night, right before falling asleep:

"If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up."

"Then let's not."

"If only it were that simple."

"It can be."

Lying next to him in bed, boundaries blurred by drink and emotion, I came dangerously close to giving voice to the one thing I refused to admit: that I was still in love with Adrian, and I wasn't sure I could give him up.

"Sam," I start, and then stop. What can I possibly say that I haven't already said about a hundred times in the last few days? Nothing, absolutely nothing. So I simply say, "Thank you."

"Anything for you." His voice is deep, rough with a devotion I don't deserve.

My heart may not want to give up Adrian, but my entire being rebels at the thought of losing Sam.

Feeling guilty (always guilty), I turn the conversation back to the reporters. "Fucking vultures."

"They're just doing their job," he says, playing Devil's advocate. And then, sensing I'm about to argue (hundreds of miles away, and the man can still tap into my moods), he adds, "But yes. Fucking vultures. A hundred percent."

I laugh. "Good save."

“I do my best.”

I just smile, closing my eyes again, trying to recreate the picture in my mind from earlier—of our kitchen, the fire...of Sam. But I don't get far, because a few seconds into it, Josie tugs on her leash, yanking my arm so hard it hurts. She barks once, and I look in the direction she's facing, see Adrian across the parking lot next to our vehicle, lifting my suitcase into the cargo haul. His backpack sits at his feet, and next to that is a new bag—a black canvas case—that contains the hand-me-down camera that Andrew gifted him last night.

When you're on the road as much as we are, no one's a stranger and everyone's family.

Polly's words from last night. Such a broad definition for such a simple term. And yet, I'm finding it to be incredibly, beautifully true.

“I love you,” I say to Sam now, because along with Adrian, he's my family, too. And as I realize this, that already broad definition expands once again, evolving beyond time and space, binding us all together in a way that can never be undone.

If only I could find beauty in this new truth, as well.

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Chapter 28

It's our last day on the road. The miles are flying by faster today than the last two, the hours becoming more pressing with each passing minute. The air in the truck is stifling, heavy with anticipation; I can feel the thickness of it with every breath I take. We'll be in Minnesota by afternoon, Midnight by nightfall...and oh-my-God I need more *time*.

Time with Adrian. Time to be the old me, the other me, the one who still needs to wrap her mind around her husband's return, to come to terms with losing him all over again. There's a part of me that wants to stay right where I am now, in this time flux of the past, scrubbing away all knowledge of the future.

I love Sam. I love Ava. I love my life in Midnight.

And yet I loved my life with Adrian, too.

Right now, I exist between worlds, with the luxury of traveling between both at will. I'm still Adrian's wife, and I'm still Sam's fiancé. But tonight, after we arrive home, those two realities are going to come crashing together, and the metaphysical bridge linking them is going to burn.

"Can you stop?" I look over at Adrian. I'm wearing my sunglasses, so he can't see the desperation in my eyes. I just hope he can't detect it in my voice.

He shoots me a look. He's wearing the clothes I bought for him yesterday—a black V-neck t-shirt and dark jeans that fit just right, hang just so. "You remembered my size," he said when slipping them on. *How could I forget?* I thought, averting my gaze and fiddling with Josie's leash.

Now I'm the one who wants to run, who needs to bellow at the sky and tear apart the Creator of the Universe in the most violent of ways—not for bringing Adrian back, but for taking him away in the first place.

“Sure,” Adrian says after a beat. “I saw a sign awhile back. Should be a rest area coming up any minute.”

I nod, closing my eyes and leaning back against the seat. The rhythm of the road is hypnotic, yet I can find no comfort, no ease in the tires’ steady thrum. I realize, for the first time, that we haven’t once turned on the radio since leaving Washington. We’ve been lost in thought more than conversation, nursing private worries, and the clattering noise of anything other than our own reflections would, I assume, be too jarring to our systems.

This is nothing new, actually. Now that I think about it, now that I *remember*, Adrian and I rarely reached for the radio during long drives. We were always so comfortable together, whether in silence or conversation, that any outside noise only proved to be a distraction, taking away from our time rather than adding to it. Adrian once told me that a lot could be said in silence, that sometimes the quiet between two people could say more than words ever could.

I remember that now, sitting here today, the way he grabbed my hand back then, holding it as we drove the rest of the trip in silence.

He was right.

I look at his hand now, resting on the console between us, and want more than anything to just grab it, hang on tight. Because while this trip—the one stretching from Washington to Minnesota—is almost over, another one, far more tumultuous, is just about to begin.

The rest area is busy, full of families and pets, truckers and couples. They’re clogging the walkways, the parking lot, inside the building where there’s a common area and snack machines. It’s too much, not at all the privacy I craved, so after using the restroom to wash my hands, I wade through the throng, out the building and around the back, where the prairie

stretches to the horizon, where the only sound I can hear is the muffled conversations of those behind me.

I feel him before I see him, his presence at my back, his shadow stretching before me, familiar even now, after all these years. He hops up next to me on the picnic table, pressing his feet into the bench and resting his forearms on his knees. Josie's leash hangs loose in his grip, and for a moment we just watch her as she meanders around, sniffing the grass. When she comes to a pile of crimson-tinged leaves, she drops and rolls onto her back, kicking her legs in the air.

"Little kicks," I say, feeling a sharp twinge of nostalgia as I remember all the times she did this before, back in our apartment in Seattle.

Adrian just nods. This isn't nostalgia for him. No echo of remembrance here. To him, this scene could have easily—and probably had—happened last week, at a park in Washington instead of a rest area in North Dakota.

Nostalgia needs distance; you have to miss something to yearn for it. And Adrian hasn't had a chance to miss what we had yet. It hasn't hit him, I don't think, at least not in the way it has me, that what we had is gone. Forever.

I could choose him right now, choose him over Sam, and still our life would never be like it was.

"You okay?" he asks me, and as he does, I feel the distance between us now, in space and time, body and presence. A gap of twelve inches stretching into a lifetime.

I'm fine is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't bring myself to say it. So I just shrug.

Adrian closes the distance, albeit temporarily, by knocking his knee against mine. "C'mon. What's up?" When I don't say anything, he nudges my knee again, and when I still don't budge, he pushes two fingers lightly against my shoulder, making me sway.

"You know I don't like being poked," I warn.

"I do. Which is why I do it." He continues to poke at my shoulder, soft little jabs all up and down my arm. "Because it

always,” he says, now reaching up to lightly tug my hair, “pisses you off enough to get you talking.”

I bite back my smile, though it’s getting harder and harder to do, what with him now intent on tickling my side. “Adrian,” I say, finally losing face and laughing. “Stop it!” I push him away, giggling. “God, you are *such* a child.”

He just grins, and it’s crooked, and adorable, and makes me feel so many things.

This is another routine of ours. I’d be deep in a mood, Adrian would bug me relentlessly to pull me out, and it would always, always work. Still, I’d act annoyed, calling him out on his antics, to which he would flash a goofy grin and say, “*You love it.*”

And I did. Apparently, I still do. Because I really do feel lighter now. Whereas before it felt like the heaviness of my mood was a tangible thing, as if the picnic table beneath me was bowing from my weight, I now feel normal, like I could push off the bench with little effort.

That’s something, I guess. Isn’t it?

“You love it,” he says now, softly, bringing our familiar routine full circle. A ghost of a smile still plays on his lips, and he knocks his knee against mine one last time, holding it there a little longer than before.

I stare at the space between us—our legs, our hips—and say, “You excel at distraction.”

He nods. “It is my specialty,” he agrees. Then, as if to prove his point, “Do you see that tree?”

I look to where he’s pointing, note a lone cottonwood in a field, far enough away that the giant looks small, even squat against the horizon. “Yeah?”

He just looks at me. I notice his hand tightening around Josie’s leash. “I’ll race ya.”

I blink. “Yeah right.” I say it jokingly, rolling my eyes.

“Oh, come on,” Adrian hounds. “We race all...” He stops, recovers quickly. “We used to race all the time on the trail.”

I draw my knee to my chest, idly pick at something on my shoe. “That was then.”

He lifts a shoulder, as if hardly bothered. “And this is now.”

I toss him a look. “That makes no sense, you know.”

He bumps my knee again, egging me on. “Come on. You know you want to. Competition is, like, your high, right?”

I run my finger over the laces, checking the knot. Good, it’s tied tight. “Not so much anymore,” I admit.

And it’s true. After losing Adrian, winning—being the best—didn’t really matter anymore. It was as if everything my aunt instilled in me since the day my dad died disappeared right along with my husband. It took everything in me just to stay alive; I didn’t have the strength or energy to prove my worth, too.

Besides, the fact that I’m still here—alive, *surviving*—after twice losing those I loved most means I’ve already won whatever game the Universe and I are playing.

Still. Adrian is plucking the strings of the past, tuning my soul to old habits, and as he does, I suddenly feel the desire to play along.

I look at the tree, scan the field, the sky. The sun is liquid gold, and it’s covering everything in a warm glow that softens my inhibitions, appeals to the child in me. The entire scene throws me back to my youth, back to when my dad was alive and the entire world seemed bright and friendly.

“I mean, if you don’t want to, it’s totally okay, you know?” Adrian is pretending that he doesn’t really care one way or another, but I notice he’s leaning forward now, ever so slightly, his feet pressing into the bench. He’s wearing his trail running shoes, and I know those things can hug the ground, give him the grip he needs to pick up speed. He squints at me and smirks. “I mean, you are an old lady of, what, thirty-two now?” he says, referring to the supposed difference in our ages. “I’m sure those bones can’t keep up with a strapping young man of twenty-sev—”

And I'm off.

Adrian curses, obviously hoping to do what I just did—get a head start. I hear him behind me, leaves crunching underfoot as he and Josie race after me. “Cheater!” he hollers at my back, and then he's laugh and huffing, feet thudding against the ground, gaining speed.

The wind picks up as we move—fresh and sweet smelling—and suddenly it's in my lungs, the autumn air swelling my chest, cleaning me out. My legs pump, my arms swing, and the force of the movement is exhilarating, pushing from my mind everything—my life before, my life after.

I focus on the tree, only on the tree, and lean forward slightly. My legs are going so fast I doubt I could stop if I wanted to.

I think I might be able to fly.

Now I'm the one tearing into the wild, the ground turning into air beneath my feet. Now I'm the one running away as fast as I can, avoiding all feeling, losing myself to the run, to the moment, completely unrestrained and free.

A small part of me suddenly gets it—if running away is in fact what Adrian did—the appeal of such an act. It's not only unbridled freedom, it's exquisite escape.

I don't want to stop when I get to the tree, don't want to turn around and face reality, face the future...face the decision I've already made but have been second-guessing these last forty-eight hours. Because as long as I run, there's only now... now...now...

I reach for the cottonwood as I near it, needing to touch it, to grab it and hold on tight, because if I don't tether myself to something right now, I might just continue on, away from this life and all the decisions I don't want to make. The bark is rough beneath my palm, and I let my hand skim along its trunk as I slow to a stop. My legs are jumpy, and my feet long to keep going, but I force them still, digging my heels into the dirt. I fall against the tree, gulping air as I do, and turn my face to the breeze, letting it take the heat from my skin.

A second later, Josie whizzes past me, followed closely by Adrian, arm stretched and leash taut. It's clear he's barely keeping up, barely hanging on, but his face is flushed like mine, and his smile is wide, exuberant. But he's coming too fast, and when he reaches me, his arm slides around my waist, pulling me into a sort of half spin that tugs me along with him, with *them*, the family I had before the one I have now, and together we're running, the wind at our backs, urging us on. We're huffing and laughing, our legs spinning as we try to keep up with our four-legged child, and when Adrian slides his arm from my waist, grabbing my hand and pressing his palm to mine—tight, so tight, like he never wants to let go—I squeeze right back.

I don't want to let go, either.

So we run.

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Chapter 29

Sam was there when Ava was born.

Answering my knock at two in the morning wearing nothing but boxer shorts, he took one look at me—at my face, the way one hand cradled my expanded stomach and the other clutched an overnight bag so tightly my knuckles were white—and sprang into action like any expectant father would.

Of course, he *wasn't* the father. And back then he never tried to act like he was, which, at the time, was something I appreciated.

I was mourning death and celebrating new life. The last thing I wanted was someone trying to wheedle his way in, acting as Adrian's replacement.

What he did do was act like a friend, a very best friend, holding my hand on the way to the hospital, in the delivery room, and all the way through her birth. He brought me flowers, asked the doctors and nurses the questions I was too brain-fogged to remember to ask, and drove us home, back to my apartment, which quickly became baby city central—wipes and diapers and bottles and breast pumps and little baby onesies spread over every spare inch of space. The place was always a mess, always smelled like baby powder and coffee (Sam drank a lot; I drank a little), and the theme from *The X-Files*—a sound that, we discovered one particularly fussy night, calmed Ava down immediately—played almost nonstop from late evening to early morning.

“How do you know all this stuff?” I asked him one day, as I watched him bundle Ava up like a burrito in one of her baby blankets. The thing was pink with little white lambs embroidered on the soft cotton, and it looked especially fragile against Sam's strong hands, backdropped by his even larger physique. The expert way his fingers carefully tucked and folded the material around Ava's tiny body was impressive; he

did a far better job than I did when attempting the very same thing.

He just shrugged, finishing the wrap and lifting Ava in his arms. She stared up at him, cooing happily, more content in Sam's swaddle than she ever was in mine. "I have an older sister. She was still living at home when her first baby was born—working, going to college, stuff like that—so I helped out. Her husband was deployed at the time," he said, answering my unspoken question, the one I didn't want to ask, if only because of my own husbandless situation. Things aren't, after all, always what they seem. "Marines."

I nodded and watched as he eased himself down on the couch, Ava already asleep in his arms. Turning off the music, I dropped to the other end of the sofa, ran my fingers through my greasy hair, and sighed. I was tired, bone tired, and I'd only just entered week three of motherhood. The years ahead loomed, lonely and exhausting, and this sudden realization was so overwhelming, so utterly debilitating, that I could hardly breathe. I felt a crying jag coming on, deep waves of hopelessness that were primal, raw, clawing and desperate. I was wrecked inside, savaged, too broken to properly celebrate the birth of my daughter, and with this new thought, I now worried I'd be too broken to raise her, too.

I must have looked as horrible as I felt, or maybe Sam just had a way of sensing the fluctuating emotions of others (I found out later that he did), because before I could so much as drop a tear, he said, "Why don't you go and take a shower? Maybe catch a few hours of shut eye, too?" He said this calmly while staring down at Ava, as if he didn't sense the breakdown I was about to have. When I hesitated, he looked up, flashed a reassuring smile. "We're good here."

We're.

I was already holding back tears, and then he went and said *that*.

Sure, I could have been reading too much into it, deciphering meaning and intention where there were none. But still, with Sam sitting there with my daughter, talking like he

was one of us, an assumed member of our team, our tribe, part of the village they say it takes to raise a child, I had a sneaky suspicion that he meant it, that the word held every bit as much significance as my lonely mind desperately wanted to believe. The sentiment alone was enough to push me over the edge, never mind the fact that I was already teetering on the brink to begin with. So I made a hasty exit, took the most delicious shower of my life, and fell into bed, sleeping deeply for the first time since Ava was born.

When I woke, Sam greeted me with coffee and Chinese takeout, both of which I devoured gratefully. And then, with Ava back in my arms, still bundled and asleep, he told me about his girlfriend, about how she died in his arms four years ago when the car they were in was hit by a texting driver. He was stoic, but his voice grew rougher as the story unfolded, as he described the way she looked at him, how helpless he felt as he watched the light leave her eyes, the life from her body. She didn't have a chance to make it to the hospital, dying instead right there on the street beside their totaled vehicle, while the woman who hit them sat in the back of an ambulance, an icepack on her forehead, phone still clutched in her hand.

It was all too visceral, too real, the way he relayed this information. Even though Adrian didn't die in my arms, he was gone, lost to me forever. At least, that's what I thought at the time. So though the circumstances were entirely different, I could understand what Sam felt, what he went through and was most likely still going through. The date that I helped him cook dinner for months ago had ended rather unspectacularly, with Sam simply saying they hadn't been a right fit for each other.

And now I knew why. His heart was already taken.

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Chapter 30

The sun is low and the shadows are long, and I'm pretty sure we're not going to make it home tonight.

"We need to go," I say anyway.

Adrian is sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him, his back against the old cottonwood, which we returned to after our run, our mock escape. His feet are crossed and his body loose, eyes closed and head tilted back. "I know," he says, though there's no commitment in this acknowledgment. It's lazy, loose like his posture, like the way he's casually rubbing his hand up and down my shoulder.

I'm leaning against him, head on his chest, arm around his waist, and my desire to get up and go is just as reluctant as his. Josie is in his lap, chin resting on my leg, which I have tucked up next to Adrian's, my knee pressing into his thigh.

This is what I wanted all those years ago.

This is what was supposed to happen, how it was supposed to be.

"Let's stop time," Adrian says, his eyes still closed, his form still loose and lazy.

"Sure," I joke back, drowsy and content. "Because it's that easy, bringing the entire Universe to a stop."

Adrian shakes his head, and I feel his voice in my hair, his warm breath, as he dips his chin. "Not the whole Universe," he says. "Just us."

I know I need to move. To untangle myself from Adrian, from the situation, and get up, get back in the truck, and drive us the hell home. But I can't. Because I've missed this, missed out on so many years of this, what we're doing right here, right now. And the part of me that still aches for Adrian, for the way things *were*, wants to stay.

It's safe here, with this little family of mine, tucked up against a tree in the middle of a field, the world at our backs, with time stopped as much as it can ever be.

I don't move, and neither does Adrian. Josie huffs a contented little sigh.

I'm not sure how much later it is when Adrian speaks. But the shadows have grown even longer, and guilt is starting to take away some of my complacency. "I wish that whatever happened six years ago would happen again. Right now."

I look up at him, this thought of his pulling me from the trance I've been in since we sat down hours ago.

"I wish," he continues, swallowing, "that it would take me again...this time with you."

"You don't want that," I say, understanding yet unnerved.

"But I do." He glances down at me, knits his brows together. "That's not what you want to hear, is it?" Then, leaning back against the tree, turning his face to the sky, "It's selfish, I know. But right now? I just, man, I really don't care."

I understand why he wants this. It is selfish, this desire to evaporate again, materializing somewhere—*sometime*—else. Though, if anyone deserves to be a little selfish, it's him. Still. "We have a daughter, Adrian."

He sighs. "You have a daughter. You and...him."

I pull away, sit up straight. "Ava is *your* daughter. I know this, Sam knows this. Hell, even Ava knows it."

Adrian nods, but his jaw is tight, his mouth twisted. Birds call back and forth; the warbling cry of meadowlarks resting in the fields around us is light, hopeful, and I find that I envy them, their simple, carefree lives and the freedom that running loose in nature brings.

To be human—to be able to think and feel and do—is a blessing as well as a curse.

"I never really wanted kids." Adrian sighs when he says this, a long, drawn-out exhale, as if this admission is something he had to pull up from the depths of his soul,

digging it out with his breath. “And now I find out that I have a five-year-old daughter who I’ve never met, never even knew about until a few days ago, and who calls someone else *Dad*.”

“I know it’s—”

“And my wife,” he interrupts, and on his lap, his hand balls into a fist, “is engaged to that man.”

He looks at me, and his eyes are filled with such sadness, such heartbreak that I can barely hold his gaze.

“A week ago—a week ago *my time*—I was waking up in our apartment, going to work, putting out fires. And you,” he draws a shaky breath. “You were there, by my side. And, Jesus, we were *happy*, you know? I didn’t appreciate it enough, I know. I mean, I thought we had our whole lives ahead of us. But now? I feel like I’m on another planet or something. Like I’m not...not even myself.” He looks away from me, out into the horizon. “I don’t feel anything for her, Lo. I’m...I’m sorry. But I just don’t.”

I place my hand over his fist, smooth my fingers over his knuckles. “But you will. Adrian, I know you will.”

He shrugs, like he doesn’t really believe me. “Maybe I don’t want to, Lois. Did you ever think about that?”

Yes, I thought about that. But I clamp my lips together, keep the thought to myself.

“Maybe,” he continues, “I don’t want this life, the one you planned for me. Like, what? We’re all going to be one big happy fucking family?”

I pull back, away from him, curling into myself. On his lap, Josie looks up, cocks her head, sensing his frustration. “I’m sorry,” he says softly, looking down at her, smoothing a hand over her head. “I’m sorry, sweet girl.”

We’re quiet for a while, the afternoon sun beating down on our shoulders, doing absolutely nothing to take the chill from my body. “I know this isn’t going to be easy,” I say carefully, studying Adrian’s profile. “But Jesus...” My voice cracks, and I have to take a few breaths before I continue. “I don’t know what else to do, you know? You’ve been gone for six years.

Six years! I thought you were dead! You weren't here, you didn't see or feel or..." My hands are starting to shake, my voice is starting to tremble, and suddenly I'm feeling so much, too much, and I'm worried the scream in my chest—the one I've been swallowing down for days, for *years*—will finally break free...wrecking me, once and for all.

Next to me, Adrian's eyes squeeze shut, and he runs a hand over his face, covering his emotion. Despite this, I continue. Because I have to. He needs to hear it.

"I wanted to die, Adrian. And there were so many times, in the beginning, that I almost...I almost..." I can't finish the sentence, because the memory of those days, the complete and utter hopelessness that I felt is something I never want to relive. That craving for death, of dreaming—*longing*—for it, desperate for the relief it would bring. "But then I found out I was pregnant. With *your* baby. And it felt like a gift. Like you were reaching out from wherever you were and giving me something to hold on to. Giving me a reason to live. It was like...like...I could breathe again." I shake my head. "If it wasn't for Ava, I wouldn't be here. And you would have come back to nothing, to no one."

Adrian's shoulders heave once, twice. And then he's still, though it's a few minutes before he drops his hand from his face, catching mine as he does. He gives it a squeeze, and his voice is rough but strong when he says, "I'm so sorry, Lo. I'm so sorry you had to go through all that."

"You don't have to apologize," I say, and mean it. "For anything."

He just nods, gathering Josie's leash in his free hand. "Let's..." He pauses, takes a deep breath, and squares his shoulders. "Let's go home."

Home.

I wonder if Adrian will ever be able to say that word and mean it.

I hope, more than anything, that someday he can.

Neither of us ready for what the future might bring, but willing to face it together, we get up, brush ourselves off, and head back to the truck.

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Chapter 31

Sam hadn't moved into my apartment, hadn't even stayed over, but yet he was always there, always around, helping in that way of his, one that was never intrusive but always welcomed. It was as if he had a sixth sense when it came to Ava, showing up when she or I needed him, and then slipping away again, allowing us time on our own...to bond, to mourn the husband I lost and the father she'd never know.

In a way, I think Ava healed us both. Focusing on her, having that common ground, gave us a shared interest, entwined our souls in a way that nothing else ever could.

I still missed Adrian so much it hurt. Mentally, physically, I was a constant ache, a wounded heart, a raw nerve. But with Sam by my side to help, to lean on, I was no longer bleeding out. Just...bleeding.

And believe me. Believe when I say that, yes, there's a difference.

Sam came out of his shell the more we were together. He seemed to come alive, in the same way I did, I suppose, after that day in his kitchen, when I helped him put right what went wrong.

I think it's safe to say that we pulled each other out of the grave, back from the brink, out of an existence so bleak that death would have been better.

We had loss and trauma in common.

And then, of course, we had Ava.

After that, we had *The X-Files*.

It was Sam's favorite show, one he'd loved since he was a kid, and when I woke up one afternoon to find him watching it, Ava nestled in the crook of his arm, I asked what it was about.

At first, I was hesitant. With the eeriness surrounding Adrian and Josie's disappearance, with the way they just upped and vanished into thin air, it was like they themselves were an x-file, just another cautionary tale told around the campfire to scare kids and entertain adults.

In the beginning, it was all too close to home.

But then Ava swooned over the music. And the creepy episodes drew me in. I became obsessed with the show, devouring the supernatural, the unknown like it was candy. It helped, I think, to broaden my imagination, to open my previously closed mind to what might exist out there, lurking somewhere in the world, the ether, just waiting for a door to open, a ticket into our reality.

I doubt many would understand why I liked the show so much. Most, I'm sure, would probably think me morbid, maybe even masochistic. But in watching these fictitious stories filled with both horror and wonder, I suddenly found that I no longer felt so...alone.

I know, I know. Like I said, most wouldn't get it.

The episodes passed with the months, unfurling tales of fiction that Sam and I would discuss afterwards, our conversations always evolving well beyond the show. I talked more with him than I did with anyone ever—Adrian included—and my voice would often grow hoarse by the end of the night. Sam was intense and passionate, and he made me think, drew from me thoughts and ideas I didn't even know I carried.

I don't think either of us realized that, in doing this, we were attaching ourselves to one another in a way that could never be undone.

We were halfway through the fifteenth episode of season six—the one about a Tulpa terrorizing a swanky neighborhood—when I fell asleep, Ava a warm weight on my chest and Sam by my side, not even a foot away.

It was common, this scenario, with me having to go back and rewatch episodes I'd been too tired to finish.

What wasn't common, however, was how I woke several hours later: my head on Sam's shoulder, my side pressed tightly to his, his hand wrapped around mine.

It was the first time in months I'd slept without dreaming. More incredibly, though, it was the first time I hadn't been woken by a nightmare since I'd lost Adrian.

From the first day I met him, there was something special about Sam—the way his energy soothed my soul, unwound my nerves to the point that I could function again. So it felt right when the closeness that had been blooming unseen between us for months finally came full circle, manifesting in such a simple yet intimate way.

It didn't matter if we were connected because of Ava, or because we'd each lost a loved one in a horrible way and were united by a desperate sort of shared grief. We were bonded, inextricably linked. And, in the end, that was all that mattered.

I think, in some way, I loved Sam from the beginning.

Still, we didn't jump into anything. We never even discussed it really, our burgeoning relationship, instead just fell into it slowly, day by day, month by month. When we could both stomach the idea of being intimate, *truly* intimate, with someone other than our previous partners, we'd already known each other for a full year. And during our first night together, when my head and heart were consumed by the man next to me rather than the one I'd lost, I realized that love is so much bigger than I ever thought it could be. It hit me in a kaleidoscope of emotions, sensations, each fragment a spark, bursting with new life, incalculable risk, and breathtaking possibility.

It was overwhelming and wonderful, frightening and beautiful, this newfound realization, and in one swift breath, it obliterated everything I thought I knew up to that point. And I felt it, the explosion, a sharp burst of energy coursing through me like an inferno, leaving both destruction and life in its wake.

Afterwards, though, still wrapped up in Sam's arms, I could have cried from the guilt. But I also felt something else

—something that halted the tears—opening wide, wide, as if a portal was pooling in my chest, pulling me out of one life and into another. And it wasn't bad, this swirling sensation of movement, this sense of birthing something new. It was just another version of myself, I knew. Another me, another Lois Kelley, one who felt that maybe, just maybe, she deserved to live again.

The next morning, we decided to leave Seattle.

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Chapter 32

We cross into Minnesota around night fall, and immediately I feel the pull. A tug—gentle at first, but growing stronger with each passing mile—guiding me home.

To Sam, to Ava. To Midnight Sun and everything I love.

The urge to see my family is like a hurricane spinning in my chest, wild and desperate, an out of control need that won't subside until I see them, hug them, hold them.

And yet, by my side, sleeping in the passenger seat, is Adrian, and that pull towards home skips a beat when I think about him.

How is it possible to be so torn? So split that you can't tell one half of yourself from the other?

I tighten my hands on the wheel and lean forward, staring into the darkness. The lights from the truck illuminate only a tiny portion of the interstate, leaving the rest of the land cloaked in mystery, a shrouded world existing in steps rather than miles.

In the end, there's always a beginning; no matter who you are or what you're facing, everything always shrinks down to this last stretch of road.

We'll be in Midnight in less than two hours.

"Tell me about Sam."

I jerk. "I thought you were asleep."

Adrian shifts in his seat, a soft rustle of fabric against leather. "Nope."

"Oh." I take a breath. "Are you sure you want to talk about this right now? I mean, before..." I let my voice trail off, remembering the other day, when the topic was too much for him.

He sighs. “No, I don’t really want to talk about it. But I feel like I have to.” His voice is low, deep, thick with a weariness both physical and mental. “I’d kind of like to know what I’m walking into here.”

I glance at him, and he shrugs. “Sorry,” he says, monotone, not smiling.

“No need,” I reply, just as evenly. “Sam’s a pilot. He ran his own tour company in Seattle. Before that, he flew for a commercial airline.”

Silence next to me.

Nothing but the sound of the road, punctuated here and there by Josie’s snores.

“Anyway,” I continue, “he still flies. We have a Cessna 172 right now. He did have a Cessna 208 Caravan and a Twin Otter float plane, but he let both go when he sold his business.”

“Expensive planes.”

I lift a shoulder, steer around a curve. “Yeah, well Sam worked hard. In fact, when we met, all he did was work.”

More silence.

“He lost his girlfriend a few years before we met. Car accident,” I say, keeping it simple.

“Damn.” Adrian shakes his head. “I suppose you two had that in common, huh?” His words hold little emotion, though his voice does dip temporarily when he says, “You know, with me being...well...at least at the time...dead.”

I don’t say anything, just watch the road, silver under the glow of the headlights.

“Sorry,” he says, again. “So, then you two came out here? Started your resort?”

“Resort is a bit swanky for what we are,” I say. “But, yeah, sort of. We have eight cabins on the property, three of them lakefront.” I glance at him. “You’re in Cabin Eight, which is right on the water. It’s also the most private.”

He makes a noncommittal grunt, like he doesn't care either way.

"We run adventure packages, things like hiking and kayaking tours. In the winter, we team up with a couple who take people out on dog sledding trips. We also offer winter camping with a guide, and in the summer and fall, I host two women's meditation retreats."

He snorts. "Sorry, sorry," he says, trying not to laugh. I shoot him the stink eye as he waves me away. "It's just...I can't picture you meditating. Like, at all."

"We also journal."

"Oh," he says, mock-serious. "Well, then."

"And," I say, holding up a finger, "we do yoga, art, and hike. It's not, like, the airy-fairy stuff you're thinking."

He squints at me. In the dark, his face is moonlight pale. "But sort of airy-fairy, right?"

I sigh. "Yeah. But I really love it, you know? Some of the same women come back every year. We're building tradition, creating a sort of family-away-from-family. That kind of thing. It's really more spiritual. Soulful."

He nods. "Huh. Not an atheist anymore, I take it."

I shrug. "I'm not religious, exactly."

"Not exactly?"

"It's hard to explain," I say, watching the road. It's started to sprinkle, and little flecks of water hit the windshield, flash like snow in the headlights. "All I can say with any certainty is that you can't go through something like, well, what I went through when you disappeared and come out of it believing in nothing. That life has no purpose or point, no greater meaning. You know, the nihilistic philosophy that we're all just sacks of meat riding a rock in space, waiting for our turn to kick the bucket."

Adrian is quiet for a moment. The windshield wipers thud, the tires hum, and the heat coming in from the vents hisses

softly, the forced air warming my already flushed cheeks. I reach out and turn it down.

“So,” he says slowly, “if that’s the case, then what happened to me was supposed to happen? Or, at the very least, there was a reason for it?”

He sounds pissed. Bitter.

I can’t say that I blame him.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But”—and he huffs in frustration—“I’d like to think that there is.”

“Well,” he says, “looks like you made out just fine.”

It’s a snappish retort, a sort of off-handed, knee-jerk response.

This one isn’t followed by a “sorry”.

The closer we get to home, the more on edge Adrian seems to be, his mood sinking into a tangible darkness that fills the entire truck, like a black cloud casting a shadow over everything it touches. Bitter and angry, he’s darker than the Adrian I know and remember, filled with a sizzling *something* that’s burning away his normally upbeat personality.

And then a thought hits me, a download of sorts, not a voice exactly but a knowing, an instant knowing, like a gentle flurry of words I can’t see but feel: *This is not the Adrian that you know.*

This realization sits heavy in my stomach, a weight that only grows when I try to ignore it.

This is not the Adrian that you know.

But, of course he’s not. How could he be? With what he went through—Lord, *whatever* it was he went through—even if he doesn’t remember it, on some level he must. On some deep gut level, perhaps in the deepest recesses of his mind, he has to know every single thing that happened to him these last six years.

My only conclusion is that he’s blocking it out.

But. There's the aging thing. The one thing that doesn't make sense. The one thing that throws his entire reappearance straight into camp eerie.

"I was thinking," I say, ignoring his last comment, "that maybe it would be a good idea to have you talk to someone. Like a therapist. Maybe one who specializes in blocked trauma or repressed memories."

My body tenses as I wait for his response.

The light on the road, pale and otherworldly.

The moon, half-hidden behind a mass of clouds.

The heat from the vent, the tires on the road, the beat of my heart, hypnotic in its pulse.

Adrian takes his time answering.

"No."

I blink. "No?"

"No," he repeats.

"But why not?"

I can't see his face in the dark, but I can sense his scowl, hear it in his words. "I'm not going to talk to some...some... *stranger* about," he waves his hand in the air, flippantly, "all of this."

"All of this." I suppress a sigh. "Don't you want to know what happened to you? Don't you want to know where you've been all these years?"

"I'm fine with it."

"I don't see how you can possibly be fine with it, Adrian. I mean—"

"I am, okay? So just drop it."

"But—"

"Lois!" he snaps, then pauses. Running a hand through his hair, he sighs and smacks his head against the seat's headrest. When he finally speaks, it sounds like it's taking everything in

him to keep his voice calm, even. “Just stop. All right? I just want to deal with it on my own, okay?”

I nod, understanding. Yet still, I needle. I can’t help it. “But you don’t have to. You’re not alone in this, Adrian.” I take my eyes off the road long enough to glance at him, to study his profile, the edges blurred ever so slightly in the dark of the cab. “You know that, right?”

I want him to understand this. To know that no matter what, he’s not and will never be alone.

He doesn’t answer, which is my cue to bite my tongue, however much it hurts to do so.

We spend the rest of the trip in silence.

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Chapter 33

The clouds have shifted by the time we turn onto the gravel road leading to Midnight Sun, blowing eastward and leaving a thousand tiny stars in their wake. Each little pin prick of light blends with another, lending an almost underwater luminescence to the land below.

Home. This is home.

I can feel myself relaxing more and more with each mile that passes, the weight of the past few days lifting, ever so slightly, from my chest.

Next to me, Adrian is sleeping. Arms crossed and body angled toward the window, his breaths are slow and steady, the rise and fall of his chest slight beneath his shirt.

This will work, I think, turning my attention back to the road. Back to the night with its magical light, its luminous glow. *This will work*.

And under that ethereal blush of stars, backdropped against the dark of night, I almost believe it.

We hit a bump in the road as I pull up to Cabin Eight, a jarring that jerks Adrian from sleep. He yawns and rubs at his eyes, squinting to make out the shapes in the dark. There's the log cabin—a boxy structure of about seven hundred square feet—along with a wide floating deck that skirts the front of the building facing the lake. Fragrant pines loom on either side, towering far above the roof, their fresh scent wafting through the window I cracked the moment I turned onto our property.

No matter the weather, I always have a window open when driving through our land. More so than the view, it's the smell that seeps into my chest, filling my lungs and telling me in scent rather than sight: *I'm home, I'm home, I'm home*.

I park in the little dirt drive next to the cabin, turn off the engine, and pull the keys from the ignition. “We’re...here.” I almost say *home*, but catch myself just in time. To Adrian, this isn’t home.

To him, it’s probably Hell.

He doesn’t say anything.

“It’s not luxurious or anything, but it’s comfortable. A bit rustic, though it’s more spacious than it looks from the outside. There’s a bedroom and a bath, and the kitchen is galley-style. It opens to the living and dining areas...and, oh! There’s a woodfire stove, which heats the entire place, even in the winter. Really, the heat that this thing pumps out is, like, crazy hot. And there’s a firewood rack around the back, and it should be full but if it’s not then I’ll make sure to have it restocked tomorrow. Fall nights are a lot colder here than in Seattle, even though the days can be pretty warm. Well, not all days...” I’m rambling, because I don’t know what else to do. The need to fill the space between us with words is desperate, as if the sound of my voice alone will make this uncomfortable situation bearable.

I can’t imagine how Adrian must be feeling right now.

No, scratch that. I can. I *can* imagine how he’s feeling right now. And it’s killing me.

I realize that my voice is, ever so slightly, starting to tremble.

Adrian lays a hand on mine. “Lois,” he says, halting my stammer. He meets my eyes, lifts his other hand to cup my cheek. “It’s okay.” I nod, and he pulls away, grabs the door handle. “I’m going to walk Josie around before we go inside, all right?”

He’s looking at me like I’m the one who’s going to break. And he’s probably right.

This is so much harder than I thought it would be.

I pull Adrian’s backpack and camera bag from the cargo haul while he tends to Josie, and then retrieve the key to the cabin from the grill next to the deck, where Sam left it earlier

that day. When they join me, I unlock the door and we enter together.

“So, I think that’s everything. I’ll be back tomorrow morning to show you around and drop the truck off.”

It’s two o’clock in the morning, hours after we were originally set to arrive home, and I’ve delayed leaving Adrian for as long as I can: starting a fire, showing him around the cabin, helping him put away his clothes.

Sam has to be wondering what’s taking me so long.

He has to be wondering.

I know I would be.

Still.

Still.

I can’t seem to make myself leave.

My feet have taken me to the door, but they don’t seem to want to cross the threshold.

My heart doesn’t want to go back out into the night, into the truck, into whatever comes next...alone.

And my mind. My mind is warring with reality, not wanting to admit that Adrian and I will never again be what we were.

As long as I stay here, in this room, by the door but not walking through it, it’s almost like I can prolong the inevitable, live in the limbo of what was and what is.

“The fire should keep it warm in here until morning,” I say, waving at the stove. “And there’s more wood—”

“—in the firewood rack out back,” Adrian finishes for me. He offers a smile, though there’s no heart in it. “I got it, Lo. You don’t have to worry about me, okay?”

I lift my chin. “I’m not worried,” I lie.

His smile kicks up a notch, cocky and knowing. “You are so,” he says softly.

My eyes are burning, and the tears are starting to well, so I drop to a squat, pull Josie in for a hug. She squirms at first, but then falls into my chest, leaning deeply. “I love you, okay?” I say, stroking her soft fur. “So much I can barely stand it, you hear?” Squeezing my eyes shut, I feel my way across the room, to Adrian. Sensing his presence, I open myself up to him for the last time, dropping all pretenses, demolishing every wall, crossing all boundaries. “I love you so much it takes my breath away, and I always, always will. I will never—never, ever, ever—not love you, all right? You got that?”

Josie snorts, lurches up, and licks my chin before scampering away, running a quick circle around the room before collapsing into a heap in front of the stove. Tail wagging, she looks back at me over her shoulder and yawns.

Adrian glances at her, then me. “This isn’t goodbye.”

I stand, swipe at my eyes. “I know.” “You’ll see her tomorrow,” he says, stepping closer.

I look up at the ceiling. “I will.”

“And you know she loves you, too.”

I nod.

He’s in front of me now, less than an arm’s reach away. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he leans in just enough, so close that I can feel the sigh of his breath on my face. “More than you’ll ever know.”

I raise a shaking hand, place it over his heart.

I’m breaking apart inside. Breaking apart, all over again.

We stand here like this for I’m not sure how long—not embracing, yet neither of us wanting to let go.

Chapter 34

Without breath, there is no life.

Sitting in Adrian's truck, outside of his cabin...I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

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Chapter 35

Sam's awake when I get home.

I knew he would be.

Sitting in the living room, beneath the soft glow of a lamp with a book open in his lap, I see him first, and I stop just outside the room, wanting—*needing*—to soak in as much of this sight as I can. A fire is crackling in the hearth next to him, and his ankle is crossed over his knee, brow furrowed as he reads. The leather recliner rocks slightly as Benji, who's draped across the back, shifts his weight and hops off. When he does, Sam looks up.

I offer him a limp wave, and then try for a smile that—I'm fairly certain—looks more like a grimace.

He's across the room in seconds, drawing me into his arms, cupping the back of my head and pulling me into his chest.

Words aren't sufficient for the moment, not nearly enough to describe what either of us is feeling—the good, the bad, and the ugly. As I stood with Adrian moments ago, I now stand with Sam, not talking but feeling, comforting one another with touch rather than voice.

Like it or not, we're all in this together.

Days ago, when I got the call letting me know that Adrian was alive, Sam offered me an out.

We were sitting on the couch, where he led me when my legs threatened to give out upon hearing the news, and he'd just returned from sending Ava to her room with a book and Benji.

“Look,” he said, grasping my hands with his and dipping his head to look into my eyes. “The only thing in the world I want is for you to be happy. And if that means losing you and Ava...” His voice caught, and he closed his eyes, cleared his throat. When he moved his mouth again, the words wouldn’t come.

I knew what he was offering, what he was about to say, and something in my chest broke, heaved, rebelled at the very thought of it. “No!” I said this passionately, vehemently, with such honesty I surprised myself. Because of course, over the years, I had compared the two men—how could I not?—often wondering if things hadn’t happened the way that they did, would I be more inclined to choose one over the other?

It was a question I never let myself answer.

All I knew for sure was that I loved them—both of them—so much.

Adrian was wiry and bursting with energy. It was hard for him to sit still; he sought adventure, thrived in nature, had a zest for life that was contagious. He could be cocky, sure, but he was always, first and foremost, sweet and kind. Because of the hell he’d been through with his father, he was quick to watch his own temper, though he was so rarely rattled that it never took much effort. He was wild and calm, sarcastic and sincere, and a daredevil to his very core.

Sam, on the other hand, was tall and broad, quiet and stoic. A deep thinker, he loved to read and learn, and took adventure at the pace it came—never openly seeking it out yet never shying away, either. The loss of his girlfriend shaped him into a man who was wise as well as intelligent, open-minded and heartfelt above all else. He knew enough to know that he didn’t know it all, and approached the world around him with compassion and grace. Through death, Sam had learned the value of life, and he cherished every single moment of it, regardless of whether the situation was good or bad. He felt deeply, intuiting the emotions of others around him with such accuracy it was, at times, unnerving, the way he could read me without so much as a gesture on my part.

Both men were handsome, strikingly so, and each had a hero streak in him, one that prevented them from turning away from trouble, from providing help to those who needed it.

I was a prime example.

Both men, after all, saved my life.

Still, the life I had now was the life I wanted. It was the life I'd built out of death, out of ruin. It was a future birthed from the past, strengthened by experience, cemented with the mortar of both love and loss. I was who I was now because of what I went through then. I'd changed—for better or worse—and there was no going back.

“No,” I said again, squeezing Sam's hand. I placed a palm on his cheek, ran my thumb over his cheekbone. “Don't you even say it.”

The thought of waking up one morning and knowing that I'd never again see Sam, never again feel his touch or hear his laugh? It was on par with what I felt years ago, when I realized that I'd never again see my husband, feel his touch, hear his laugh.

Sam or Adrian?

Adrian or Sam?

Back then, it was a decision I thought I'd never have to make.

Until, suddenly, it was.

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Chapter 36

I wake the following morning confused, not knowing where I am—or, perhaps more accurately, *when*.

I've spent the last few days in the past, the past that has become the present, and even though I'm back home, my sleep deprived brain is struggling to adjust. Reality is playing phantom; it's hard to catch. All of my memories are translucent, shrouded in a swirling mist that dissolve as soon as I try to grasp them. I can't seem to hold a thought for more than a second before it flees into the dark, into the black.

I know I'm home, though I'm not sure which one. I keep drawing a blank.

One second, I'm home in Seattle. The next, Minnesota.

It's not until I feel a weight pressing into my side that I open my eyes.

I expect to see Josie.

Instead, it's Ava.

Dark hair framing her cherub face, red bow-tie lips partly open, she's sound asleep. Her cheek is resting on my arm, her breath warm on my skin, and I see so much of Adrian in her that—as it always does when I look at her in this way—my chest swells, aches, the bones in my breast vibrating with a sentimental longing that can never be satiated.

But this time, the once familiar vibration flutters into something new, begins to pluck a different tune. No longer is it a melody wrung with melancholy, ringing of sadness, of loss. Now, it sings of hope, of new beginnings, of possibility.

Adrian—her father, the father of her blood—is back, is *alive*.

There were so many times over the years that I not only mourned Adrian, but the fact that his daughter would never

know him. It seemed so unfair—not only to him, but to her—and when I thought about this, the hole he left behind, the one cratered in my chest, seemed to double in size.

But now, that previously bottomless pit doesn't seem so bottomless anymore. It's like I'm becoming...whole again.

And if it can happen for me, it can happen for anyone.

Hope.

Always.

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Chapter 37

It's close to noon when I knock on Adrian's door, bundled up in a rain jacket and rubber boots, an old laptop bag over my shoulder. The dim morning is turning into a murky afternoon, and rain has been drizzling on and off for the last hour.

I hear Josie's bark through the door and, seconds later, Adrian's footsteps as he makes his way across the cabin to open it.

I have to admit, there's a part of me—a small but persistent part—that is shocked to find Adrian right where I left him last night.

“Morning,” I say when he opens the door, trying to be as nonchalant as I can, doing my best to keep the shock and relief from my face.

He just nods, stepping aside so I can enter. As I do, I see that his eyes are still heavy with sleep, and beneath them are half-rimmed circles, a light purple hue that's already darkening at the corners.

“How'd you sleep?” I ask, shrugging out of my jacket.

He shrugs, moving across the room and dropping onto the couch next to Josie. “Like a baby.”

I look at him, acknowledging his sarcasm with an arched brow. There's a blanket thrown over the cushions, ruffled and kicked to the corner. Beneath Josie's chin is one of the pillows that usually sit on the bed. She wags her tail when she sees me. “Did you sleep out here?”

“More like dozed off and on, but yeah.”

Frowning, I peer into the bedroom. It's small, but the mattress is a queen and fairly new, topped with a comfortable quilt, several blankets, and high-thread count sheets. “Was there something wrong with the bed?”

His eyes bore into mine for a long moment, heated and accusing. “Oh, I don’t know. I guess I’m just used to sleeping with my wife.”

His words hit me like a punch, like a physical blow to my stomach, knocking the wind out of me.

“Sorry,” he says, before I can say anything. “Really. I shouldn’t have said that. I-I didn’t mean it.” He sighs, runs his hands down his face, looking even more exhausted than before.

“Yes, you did,” I say, and as I do, that hole in my chest begins to grow again, expelling the hope I filled it with earlier this morning and replacing it with guilt.

He looks away from me, focuses on the woodburning stove.

I want to go to him, pull him into my arms and tell him that it’s okay. That everything will be okay. That he’s alive and well and here, with me.

But I can’t. Or I shouldn’t. Or...or...I’m not sure what to do. What the appropriate protocol is for this.

And as for being with me...is he really?

No, he’s not.

I hold up the bag, set it on the table. “I brought you my old laptop. Still works great, though the connection out here can be a bit spotty. Still, I thought you might want to create an email address...” He gives me a look that says he doesn’t. “...or something,” I finish.

The air remains thick, uncomfortable, as Adrian’s eyes continue to bore into mine.

“Maybe some coffee will help.” I don’t wait for an answer (which is just fine because I don’t get one) and move to the coffee maker on the counter, taking comfort in the mundane task of measuring the grounds, filling the pot with water. Once it starts brewing and the scent fills the air, I chance a look over my shoulder, see Adrian dozing on the couch, Josie stretched

next to him. His breaths are shallow and even, his mouth slightly ajar.

Whether he's feigning sleep or not, I can tell my presence here isn't wanted right now. At least, not by Adrian.

But when I make eye contact with Josie, she yawns, slides off the couch. Loose and lazy, she pads her way across the room. Coming to a sit at my feet, she pats my boot and whines.

"You need to go outside?" I ask her. Her sit turns into a wiggle, and her front paws tap excitedly against the hardwood floor. Despite my uncomfortable interaction with Adrian, I can't help but smile. "How about we go for a walk, huh?"

At the word *walk*, her ears perk up, and she scampers to the door, her tail wagging so fast it's a blur.

I scribble a quick note on some lodge stationary to let Adrian know where we'll be and set it by the coffee pot, a spot I know he'll check when he wakes. Then, grabbing it again, I quickly add another line, inviting him to join us. The directions I tack on are simple; our house is just up the road, a straight shot, about a quarter of a mile away.

The urge to snatch the note back, crumple it into my palm, is strong, hard to ignore. But I do, focusing instead on strapping a wiggling Josie into her harness, clipping her leash to the ring, and walking her to the door.

Then, with one last look at Adrian's sleeping form, I follow her out into the rain.

Chapter 38

“Josie, sit!”

Josie drops her butt to the ground, and Ava laughs in delight. “Good girl,” she says, fishing a beef treat from the bag I gave her earlier. Josie takes it gently, tail swishing against the grass as she does.

The rain has stopped, the sky is gray, and there’s a slight chill in the air that says winter is just around the corner. Still, my heart is warm, and the dampness clinging to the ground does nothing to dampen the emotion swelling in my chest.

Ava turns to me. Her cheeks are pink and her eyes are bright. “She’s so smart!”

“She is.” I grin, folding my arms and looking down at them both. “Why don’t you try d-o-w-n next.”

Ava turns to Josie, who immediately sits up straighter. She grabs another treat, holds it up, and commands, “Down.”

It’s been like this for the last half hour, Ava and Josie playing and running, learning and bonding. It was the only thing I could think to do, bringing Josie home with me for a bit so she could run loose in the backyard, release some of the energy that had built up in her during the drive from Washington to Minnesota. That, and—I have to admit—I knew Ava would love her. Ava began showing an interest in dogs over the summer when one of the guests brought a beautiful German Shepherd puppy named Harlow along on his visit. We watched the dog during one of the kayaking excursions that wasn’t particularly pet friendly, and she’s been hinting that she wants a puppy of her own ever since.

Now, watching my two-legged child play with my four-legged one, I’m in awe, tearing up and smiling, laughing and biting my lip, wondering how this is all going to work out in the end.

I hand Ava the tennis ball I brought out with us. “Throw this,” I tell her, smiling. She does, and Josie scurries after it, her legs spinning so fast she tumbles as she retrieves it. Ava claps as Josie comes trotting back, and the pair repeat the game, over and over, until they’re both too tired to continue.

Panting, Josie collapses on ground, and Ava sinks down next to her, running her hand over Josie’s side. “I love her,” she says, looking up at me, her little face bright with emotion. “Like, so much.”

I drop to a sit next to them, watch as Josie crawls into Ava’s lap. Rolling over, she offers her belly, and Ava rubs it gently. “I think it’s safe to say that she loves you, too.”

Ava’s giggle is music to my ears. “Can we bring her inside to meet Benji? I think—” She stops abruptly, her eyes sliding past me to something just over my shoulder. When they widen, I twist around, wondering what suddenly has her so entranced.

Adrian.

He’s coming up the drive, hands shoved in the pockets of his red jacket, dark hair blowing in the breeze. His head is down, focused on the ground in front of him, and I can hear the crunch of gravel beneath his feet.

“Is that...him?” Ava’s breath is caught in her throat, and when she speaks, it comes out as a whisper.

“Yeah, bug. It is.” My heart is hammering, a steady beat-beat-beat that I can feel in my ears. I glance at my daughter—our daughter, *our* daughter—and see that her hand on Josie’s stomach has stilled.

Looking up at Ava, wondering what has distracted her new friend’s attention, Josie follows her stare and barks.

At this, Adrian lifts his head, locking eyes with me as he does. Then, slowly, his gaze drifts to Ava, and he stops, takes a retreating step back.

But Josie has already twisted out of Ava’s grasp. Leaping up, she streaks across the yard, a golden blur hurtling toward Adrian at blinding speed.

Ava scoots closer to me, grabs my hand. Though this meeting is monumentally more significant than others, Ava isn't a shy child, and I'm surprised by the way she presses herself into me, leans her head on my shoulder. We've talked about Adrian a lot over the years; her biological father has always proven to be one of her favorite subjects. So this sudden display of timidity, though understandable, is also unusual.

Her intelligence makes it hard to remember how young she really is, how vulnerable her little heart can be, and I sometimes forget that she's only five going on six.

Adrian busies himself with Josie, perhaps to prolong the inevitable. He squats down and ruffles her ears, orders her to sit, and when he presses his forehead to hers, she stills. It's a silent commune I've seen before—a few times before they went missing, a lot more after they reappeared. The two are bonded, linked, their souls interwoven in such a way they'll never come undone, and for the first time I realize—with a sinking heart, a dip in my stomach—that Josie is no longer my dog.

Maybe she was never supposed to be. Maybe the Universe crafted her for Adrian, specifically for Adrian, already knowing—perhaps even planning—the cryptic turn of events that would snatch him out of time and away from me.

In realizing this, in stepping back and pondering the bigger picture, I can admit—for the first time since the pair disappeared—that I'm glad she was with him that day. With him when I wasn't. In the infinite duality of this broken, beautiful world, I'm grateful that Adrian has something solid to hold on to, something *real*, an animal whose love knows no bounds, whose devotion can't be tainted by time or seduced by the arms of another.

“Hey,” I call out to him when he stands.

Adrian nods, runs a hand through his hair, a tell-tale sign of nerves that I recognize. Josie leans against his legs, sneezes. Then, with a bark and a jump, she runs back to us, stopping halfway to look over her shoulder. When she sees that he isn't

following, she backtracks, nudging his knee with her nose before galloping away again.

This time Adrian follows.

He still looks tired, the lines of his face drawn in exhaustion. But his eyes are bright, his posture strong, and the tips of his hair are damp, indicating that he's showered since we last spoke. He carries with him the sharp scent of pine from the soap we stock in the cabins, all fresh and clean.

This...this gives me hope.

“So,” I say as he approaches. “You found us okay.”

“Yeah,” he says, “it would appear so.” He flashes a small smile to soften his sarcasm and looks around, taking in our house—a humble two-story log cabin—and the vast yard flecked with leaves crimson and gold. The towering pines bordering the lot are wet from earlier, and the sound of the droplets as they slip from the boughs and splash against the ground give the illusion that it's raining still. The wind picks up, tossing his hair, lending chaos to this already heightened situation. When he looks back at me, his eyes are soft, sad. “This place you have here, it's...it's really great, Lo. I'm so...” A tremble stutters his speech, and he stops, presses his lips together. He laughs, soft and self-deprecating, and shakes his head. Turning away, he runs a hand over his face. “Oh, man. Sorry. I just...This is too...”

Soon, I finish in my head.

He's right. This is too soon. Too much, too fast, too big. I shouldn't have invited him here today, not just yet. Not to the home I share with Sam, not to meet the daughter he just, a mere few days ago, found out he had.

I push to my feet, to do what I'm not sure. But just as I take a step, about to reach for him, someone else beats me to it.

Ava, her hand so tiny, reaches up, wraps around Adrian's. And her voice, so soft, flutters through the air as if on angel wings. “It's okay, Dad,” she says, and he looks down at her. “It's okay.”

And it's then, right then, that I see the shift. The shine in his eyes, how they widen ever so slightly. The way his face softens, his features relaxing into something that can only be described as awe.

It's what mine must have looked like the moment the doctor first put her in my arms.

Love.

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Chapter 39

I've been watching the two from the kitchen window, where I eventually retreated with the excuse that it was long past lunch and Ava needed sustenance. While true, it was really a chance to leave them alone, to let Adrian get to know his daughter without the hovering presence of an anxious mother bird.

The turkey sandwiches are already made, plated with pickles and the last of the summer's cherry tomatoes. Three bottled waters rest in the crook of my arm, and I was just about to grab the platter of sandwiches and head outside when I saw the pair, backs to me, hunched over a book that Ava had drug out from her bookcase and brought outside. Since Adrian arrived not even an hour ago, she's been like a dog with a toy, hopping up and disappearing inside every ten minutes, dragging out something or other to show her father, prized possessions she holds near and dear to her heart.

Every single one of them has been a book.

After the second item—a dated, dog-eared book about Bigfoot—I retrieved an old quilt from the closet, spreading it out on the grass so we could sit in comfort. With the way Ava was chattering on, and with the way Adrian was hanging on her every word, it seemed we were going to be here awhile.

Now, it's hard to go outside, not because I fear interrupting them, but because this is a sight I've been dreaming about since she was born. One I thought I'd never get to see. And I can't tear my eyes away.

Ava gestures wildly with her hands, obviously in deep explanation of something, and Adrian nods. Their dark heads dip a bit as they peer down at the pages, and as they do, Ava leans against her father's arm, already as comfortable in his presence as she is in mine.

When it's been long enough that I should start worrying about the mayonnaise on the sandwiches—it hasn't been that

long, not really—I grab the platter and head outside, just in time to hear Ava’s sweet voice: “...shouldn’t be afraid of the Unknown because, until we know more about it, it just *is*, you know? But,” she says, barely pausing to take a breath, “we should have a...a...healthy respect for it.” This last part of her speech is spoken purposefully, carefully, as if she’s reciting the strip of words from memory.

And she is. This bit of advice is a direct quote from Sam, given often, never as a warning, but always a reminder: the few times when Ava has expressed fear about something, and the many more times when her investigative nature has her wanting to propel headfirst into what could potentially be a dangerous situation.

I hear the rustle of a page and then Ava again, and what she says makes me stop in my tracks, the platter wobbling a bit in my grasp. “That’s what my dad always says. He’s really, really smart. He reads a lot, like me.”

There’s a brief pause, but—surprisingly—not much of one. I do notice a pull in Adrian’s shoulders, though, the way they tense just enough to alter their shape. Thankfully, he doesn’t give any of this away to Ava. “He sounds really smart,” Adrian says, and I love the way his voice sounds—interested and engaged, as if he’s talking to another adult rather than a child. “That’s good advice, right there.”

“Uh-huh.” Another page rustles. “He flies airplanes. I’ve been in one, like, *a lot* a lot. Have you ever been on an airplane?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

Ava takes a deep breath, bouncing a little as if the most wonderful idea just occurred to her. “Maybe my dad can take you! He flies all the time. We have these people that visit us, you know? And after they get here, he gives them tours of the lake. Well, sometimes. Not all the time. Sometimes they just want to hike or snowshoe. Or just stay in their cabins which is, like, boring. But, oh! I’ll ask him tonight, when he gets home!”

“Wow,” Adrian says, a bit mechanically. “Yeah, that would definitely be fun. But I’m sure your dad is busy working and stuff. I don’t think we should bother him...”

But already off on another thought, Ava interrupts. “Mom says you put out fires. Is that true?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m a...well, I was...a fireman.” There’s a sadness in his voice that Ava, at five, doesn’t catch.

“That’s so neat. Mom says you’re a hero. Like a *super* hero. But not like the ones in movies. She says you’re a *real live* hero, which is a million times better.”

Adrian laughs, and I can tell his spirits are lifted by this tidbit of information. “Well,” he chuckles, “I don’t know about that. I think your mom gives me too much credit.”

But Ava shakes her head. “Nah. She told me you saved her life. That’s a total hero thing.” And then she’s off again, spotting something in the pages of her book and tugging on the sleeve of Adrian’s jacket to get him to look. “See? He’s been spotted in Minnesota! I told you!”

Adrian laughs again—oh, that wonderful sound! —and I figure this is as good a time as any to interrupt.

“I have sandwiches!” I announce, kneeling down on the blanket and doling out the waters.

Ava takes one and, as she uncaps it, announces firmly, “I’m gonna find one.”

I hand Adrian a sandwich, of which he takes a grateful bite. “Find who?” I tease. “Bigfoot?”

“Yup.”

I shift positions, crossing my legs and grabbing the last sandwich. “You know,” I say, shooting a look at Adrian and waggling a finger between us. “We thought we saw one when we were hiking in Washington.”

Adrian swallows, then grins. “We sure did.”

Ava’s eyes are round, and a dollop of mayonnaise drips onto her chin as the hand holding her sandwich freezes. “No

way. For real?” I hand her a napkin, and she rolls her eyes as she swipes the glob away.

“Yep.” Adrian smirks as he chews. “You wanna hear about it?”

Captivated, our daughter nods.

Adrian wipes his own mouth, takes a drink of water, and then leans in, as if what he’s about to share is the world’s deepest, juiciest secret. “So, this one time, your mom and I...”

“She’s amazing, Lo.” Adrian slides his hands in his pockets and looks ahead, to where Ava and Josie are bounding down the dirt path. They’re more than a few paces in front of us, though still within ear shot; we can hear Ava’s little voice followed by Josie’s sweet chuffs as she responds. “You’ve done a wonderful job with her.”

This makes me smile. “Thank you. That means a lot.” Then, cupping a hand around my mouth, I shout, “Not too far, bug. Okay?”

“I know, I know!” Ava’s response is distracted, and she pulls ahead a little more, Josie scampering beside her. I can hear her talking to the dog, telling her all about the books she’s read, about the lake, about Midnight Sun...about this, that, and everything. Ava is a chatterbox, and Josie, with her unwavering canine focus, is the perfect listener.

Unlike my daughter. “Ava! What did I just say?”

She groans, then, in a fit of five-year-old sarcasm, proceeds to slow her walk down to an exaggerated pace, as if she’s moving in slow motion. Josie, confused, stops to look at her new sister, cocking her head first to one side and then the other before leaping ahead and pulling at the leash. This makes Ava laugh, and the pair run a few steps before slowing down to the same slow-motion crawl.

This is repeated, over and over again, and Adrian finds it hysterical. “You asked for that,” he says, chuckling.

I just shake my head. “You think it’s funny now, but just wait until you’re the one disciplining her.” Still, I’m smiling, because I can’t help but love Ava’s antics, the way her mind works. She’s exhausting, yes. But she’s also the love of my life, and I wouldn’t trade her for the world.

“Not sure I’ll be any good at discipline,” Adrian confesses. “I mean, I don’t really feel I have the right, you know?”

Instinct has me reaching out, sliding a hand around his elbow and linking my arm to his. It’s only when he pulls away that I realize my mistake, the slip in time that had me, just for a moment, reaching for him in a way I no longer should.

I quickly draw my hand back, shove it in my own pocket. And then it hits me, why Adrian always seems to have his hands hidden, tucked away in the pockets of his jacket, his jeans. Maybe he’s fighting the same urge, wanting to reach out when he knows he can’t.

“You’ll be fine,” I say, swallowing past the lump that’s suddenly risen in my throat. “You’re her father, regardless of the time you’ve missed with her. And she loves you.”

He tries to smile, but it wobbles. “How can she love me, Lo? She...” He tilts his head back, looks at the sky, and sighs. “She doesn’t even know me.”

“She knows you,” I say. When he shakes his head, I push on. “Do you know that every Easter she makes an egg with your name on it? Yours *and* Josie’s?”

He looks at me, and I’m relieved to see something resembling hope in his eyes. “Really?”

“Yep. And let’s see... She has a photo of you in her room, on her nightstand.” *Alongside one of me and Sam*, I think rather than say. He doesn’t really need to know this right now.

“She does?” Now he looks away, and his laugh is shaky, wet, but...happy. “That’s...wow.”

“And,” I add, on a roll. “She’s always asking me to drag out that old magazine, *Pacific Northwest Bride*? The one with our—” I pause, just for the beat of a breath, because only now do I realize that this bit of information may be too much, too awkward. But I can’t backpedal without making it even more so, so I continue on, hoping it doesn’t throw Adrian into an internal emotional tailspin. “—wedding photos. She loves those. Can’t get enough of them.” I knock his elbow with mine. “She thinks you look very *dashing*.”

He gives me a half smile. “Dashing?”

I shrug. “Her word, straight from her mouth.” He throws me a look, and I lift a shoulder. “Hey, the girl reads, like, *a lot*.” Then, quietly, knowing I shouldn’t but wanting to see that half smile brighten into a whole one, “You really did look, you now, *dashing* that day. For what it’s worth.”

He shrugs, and though I do get what I want—a full smile—it’s sad, and not at all like the one I was hoping for. “I was nothing compared to you. You were...radiant.” He glances at me again, but any trace of a smile is gone. “You still are.”

And with that, he presses his hands deeper into his pockets and picks up his pace, jogging after our daughter.

Chapter 40

Sam proposed out of the blue, under the stars, as the aurora borealis flared in the night sky.

We were laying outside on an old quilt I dug out of the closet, with the intent of watching the show. It was a lazy night, Ava and Benji were asleep in bed, and Sam lured me out with the promise of cheese and wine.

We ignored both and, beneath those dancing waves of spectral light, made love instead.

After, in his arms and beneath that magical glow, I felt more content than I ever had in my life. Maybe happier, too. Though admitting that out loud would have brought too much guilt. Because I still thought about Adrian every day. Of course I thought about him every day.

But he was gone, and Sam was here, and I was glad for that.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of these,” I said with a sigh, resting my head on his chest and burrowing deeper into his side. The northern lights were a spectacle seen often in our neck of the woods, but just as the snowcapped mountain vistas of western Washington often held me in their grip, I could forever feast on the sight before me now and never tire of its beauty.

“And I,” Sam said, pulling away for a moment before falling back in beside me, “will never tire of you.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” I joked, curling into his arms again. It was already late summer, and the nights were as cool as the days were warm, and I appreciated Sam’s heat, craved it, entwining my leg with his, getting as close to him—this man who I loved more than anything—as I could.

To say that I was grateful for him was hardly sufficient.

Still, when I felt him slip something over my finger—the one that had been bare for so long—it didn't hit me, his intent. The weight was unfamiliar, for I still carried the ghost-weight of Adrian's ring—the small diamond that had been worth more than one three times its size. I held up my hand, studied the slender new band, the three stones held in its trellis setting. I didn't know much about diamonds, but I did remember the ring that sat on my aunt's finger—a large, two carat princess cut—and the one I wore now was comparable in size.

“Sam,” I breathed.

He rose up on an elbow and looked down at me, a smile playing on his lips. “Am I being presumptuous by not asking first?”

I grinned, looked up at him. “Absolutely not.” Then, lifting a hand to his cheek. “You know I love you.”

His answer was in his kiss; soft and firm, forceful but not overbearing. Just like him.

When he pulled back, he nodded at the ring. “It's not a traditional engagement ring, I know. The salesman actually said it was more representative of an anniversary setting. But,” he reached down, traced a finger over my knuckle, “it reminded me of us. More than any of the others. Three stones. You.” He lifted my hand. “Me.” He kissed it. “And Ava.”

“The three of us against the world,” I whispered. Tears welled then, blurring my vision. They were tears of joy, of sorrow, of guilt and shame and hope. I pressed a hand over my eyes, turned my head away. “Sorry,” I said. Sitting up, I pulled my knees to my chest, dipped my forehead so the only thing I saw was the dark of my thighs.

Rising with me, Sam wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Hey, what's wrong?”

I lifted my face but, unable to look at him, I stared ahead, at the row of evergreens bordering our yard. This was supposed to be a happy moment, and I was ruining it. “I just... Sam...I don't think I deserve this.”

He sighed, though not with annoyance. It was an exhale of understanding, the type he gifted me with often. Because I didn't have to tell him what was on my mind right then, what emotions his proposal brought up. He knew what I was thinking, as he always did.

"Lois." His voice was tender, reassuring. "You deserve this and, hell, so much more."

When I shook my head, he pulled me closer. "Look, you know I understand. You know that I know *exactly* how you feel." He tucked a finger under my chin, gently turned my head. When I looked into his eyes, they mirrored my own. Like the day we met in the parking alcove, all those years ago. Like the way they have ever since.

His pain, as always, was my pain.

The present, as perfect as perfect can be, was built on the ashes of the past.

Our future, so beautiful, bred from loss.

"After Cora... Well, like I've told you before, I didn't think I could go on. But then I *did* go on: threw myself into work, started a business, succeeded in that business. And I thought that was enough, you know? Because I didn't think it was possible to love someone again. Love someone as much as I loved...her." He rubbed his hand up and down my arm, and I leaned into him, having heard this story before but needing to hear it again. "Until I met you. God, that very *day*, I knew. It was like my eyes were open again, like I could actually see the world around me. I'd been asleep, and I hadn't even known it. *You* woke me up." He sighs. "And yeah, I fought it. For a long time, I tried to convince myself that what I felt for you was wrong. That I didn't deserve a second chance at happiness. But, Jesus...I just...I couldn't stay away from you."

Survivor's guilt. If you let it, it will tear you apart.

"Sometimes," I confessed, "I can't believe this is my life. It's so much, too much, and it's all so damn wonderful. But it would never be like this if...if..."

“I know. Believe me, I know.” Sam pressed his lips to my temple. “It feels wrong to be thankful, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. It does.” I looked down at my new ring, not caring about the size but only the meaning behind it. So much had happened to bring me here, to this very spot, and I couldn’t help but believe that there was a reason for it all.

At least, I hoped there was.

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Chapter 41

Adrian is kissing me.

And I'm letting him.

The day started out innocently enough.

It was the morning after our afternoon with Ava, and when I knocked on Adrian's door, he answered it wide awake and fresh. His mood was a stark contrast to the one he was in yesterday, when he woke bitter and sleep-deprived and was agitated by my very presence.

Today, though, he was upbeat, jolly even, moving around the cabin with ease and offering me coffee that was already brewing. We poured generous amounts in some to-go mugs and, after a couple sips and a few pleasantries, loaded into Adrian's truck for a tour of the property. The goal was to have him working here by spring, maybe even winter, assisting with the excursions (with his outdoor skills, he was more than capable) and providing medical assistance should the need arise (with the types of adventures we offered, it was going to be handy to have someone with Adrian's medical skills on staff).

The man needed money, a permanent income. And with the majority of the small-town fire departments in the area being volunteer based, a job like the one he had in Seattle wasn't an option. Still, thinking he might like the outlet of working with a team again, I offered him the phone number to the crew that served our area. But he declined, saying that a position at Midnight Sun would be just fine for now.

I took his answer to mean that maybe, just maybe, he wasn't feeling as up-to-par mentally as he tried to portray. And how could he be, with what he went through? Was *still* going through?

But I was wrong. Sort of.

It happened in the barn where we store the gear, a renovated building that housed all the kayaks and canoes, wetsuits and paddles, camping and snowshoeing equipment. I was just telling him about the kayaking tours we offer, how Lake Superior is a beast in her own right, when he took my hand, the one that had been pointing at what I can't even remember now, and brought it to his chest.

"I'm not giving up," he said simply.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"I'm not letting you go without a fight."

Oh.

Oh, shit.

"Adrian, this isn't something...I mean, it's not really up for discussion. I'm sorry, but..."

There wasn't much distance between us to begin with, but he closed it in seconds, gently bringing a hand to my cheek and bending his head to mine. His lips took me by surprise, soft at first, as if giving me the chance to pull away.

I should have pulled away.

It's familiar—the pressure, the fullness of his lips, the slow rhythm of his tongue against mine. Like savoring a piece of candy that I haven't had since childhood, I'm instantly transported to the past, falling back through time to the point I can barely remember the present. I can taste our history on his lips, the sweetness of it, all raw and naked...our ups and downs, the good times and the bad.

I'm unsteady on my feet, though I'm not sure if it's due to the shock of his kiss or the emotions sawing through my chest.

He pulls away first—again, I'd like to think it was the shock of being kissed when I wasn't expecting it that kept me frozen, attached to his lips in such a traitorous way—and when

he does, I sway a little on the spot, my lips parted, my cheeks flushed.

I feel like I'm on fire.

It wasn't a long kiss. It wasn't even all that passionate, to be honest.

Instead, and more troubling, it was a promise, a gentle but firm punctuation mark on the end of his declaration.

I'm not letting you go without a fight.

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Chapter 42

I should stay away from Adrian.

But I can't.

The thing is, Ava adores him. And Adrian, for all his talk about not wanting kids, is completely and totally under her spell.

The pair are like two peas in a pod.

At first, I stayed by their sides, unable to leave her alone in his company. Not because I didn't trust him, but because... well...maybe I *didn't* trust him. Not that I feared he would hurt her or run away with her. Nothing at all like that. But the more I saw the two together, the more I realized how alike they really were.

Adrian's adventurous personality often had him leaping without thinking, and as Ava has grown, she's proven to be the same. Sam, thankfully, has always managed to gently reel her in without crushing her unique spirit, for her sense of adventure is something I never want culled. But at her age and with this particular trait, Ava—when in the wild, in nature, the place she finds most alluring—needs constant supervision.

And I'm not so sure Adrian is the one to give it.

He's as easily distracted as she is.

Just yesterday, when out hiking with the two, I lost track of them after waiting for Josie to take a bathroom break. When her business was finished and we headed back on the trail, it took me nearly twenty minutes to track them down. Having caught wind of something off the path—I still don't know what they think they saw, because one thing led to another led to another—they'd veered nearly a quarter of a mile off the trail, into the thick woods, losing their way as they headed deeper into the overgrowth. I only found them after hearing the tinkle of Ava's laugh followed by Adrian's deeper boom.

After catching up with them, I realized the two had no idea how far from the trail they actually were, nor did they seem to care. In their minds, they were simply having a great adventure, and I was being a buzzkill.

“Relax,” Adrian said after I caught up with them, red-faced and chattering like an angry bird. He draped an arm over my shoulder and, much to my annoyance, drew me to his side. Slung over his other shoulder was the camera that Andrew Tomlinson had given him. When I pulled away with a huff, he brought the damn thing up and, with a smirk and a wink, took a picture of me. “You worry too much.”

To which Ava piped in, “Yeah, Mom. You worry too much.”

So, you know, *that’s* how it’s been going.

Now, with Ava sleeping over at Adrian’s for the first time ever, I can’t shake the feeling that something is going to go wrong.

“I’m going to go and get her.” I make a move to slip out from the blanket we’re under, but Sam, calm as ever, stays my hand, folds the blanket back into place. I flop back against the Adirondack bench we’re sitting on, feeling edgy. “What?” I ask, and I’m annoyed by how sharp, how close to hysterical I sound. “You don’t think I should?”

Sam takes a sip from the wine glass he’s holding. “No,” he says simply. “I don’t.”

We’re sitting outside, huddled together by the firepit, with the purpose of having a much-needed romantic night alone, but I can’t seem to settle. Instead, I stare moodily into the flames, random scenarios of what could go wrong running through my head. I can’t stop on one long enough to explain away its irrationality before another one pops in, taking its place.

“Adrian doesn’t know anything about kids,” I say, more to myself than to Sam. “And it’s only been a week since they met. What if she wakes up in the middle of the night scared? What if she wants to come home?”

“She’s the one who wanted to stay over, remember?” Sam squeezes my shoulder, plants a kiss on my head. “But if she wants to come home, then she’ll use the cabin phone like you taught her, and we’ll go pick her up.”

He says this like it’s simple.

“It’s that simple,” he says, as if reading my mind.

I huff, frustrated.

“Nothing is simple when it comes to Adrian,” I mumble.

Nothing.

It’s been a week since he kissed me in the barn—and I say that *he* kissed *me*, because I can’t quite admit to myself that I kissed him back. Because what would that mean? The obvious answer is that I have unresolved feelings for my husband, which is understandable, given the circumstances. I mean, it wasn’t like we had a bad marriage when he disappeared. Everything was good, great, grand even—and then, in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

And then I fell in love with Sam, fell harder than I ever have before in my life.

And yet...and yet...If that’s true, then why is my heart so split in two?

Why is seeing Adrian every day *so damn hard*?

“I hear it’s supposed to snow this week.” Sam looks up at the sky, clear and dotted with stars. His breath comes in plumes when he says, “You can smell it in the air.”

I follow his gaze, take a big breath in, and realize he’s right. *But*. “Are we really talking about the weather right now? On date night? The first time we haven’t had impressionable ears within ten feet of us?”

He laughs, though it’s bitter. And Sam never sounds bitter.

“What do you want me to say, Lois?” He shifts positions, so that I’m no longer under his arm. Facing me, he lifts a knee onto the bench and drapes an arm over the back. “You can’t seem to focus on much tonight besides Adrian. So yes, I’m

resorting to trivial talk about the weather, because..." He sighs. "Because I don't know what else to say." After a moment, he admits, "You've just been so distracted lately, and no matter what I do or how I try to help, I can't seem to reach you."

I roll the stem of the glass between my fingers, feeling first guilt and then anger—anger because guilt seems to be the only thing I'm able to feel lately, and I hate it. Guilt is an ache that can never be soothed, the splinter in the wound that doesn't heal. It's constant and crushing; a heavy shroud that's damn near impossible to pull off.

But anger...man...that's like a breath of fresh air. It's light, full of fire and freedom, and it feels good—amazing, grand, fucking *wonderful*—to feel it moving through my veins right now.

Sam, of course, does not deserve my anger, but I hit him with it anyway.

"Jesus, Sam! What do you expect? Of course I'm distracted! I'm trying to please everyone, and...just...fuck! I can't make anyone happy!" There's a victim whine to my voice, but I don't care. It's a knee-jerk reaction, this retort, and only a small part of me cares that it's a childish way to respond to a man who only has my best interests at heart. "Look," I say, slowly, trying to calm down, "I'm just trying to do the best I can here."

His eyes are narrowed, and his mouth is a thin line. "I know," he says.

And that's all he says.

And it pisses me off.

"You know," I repeat, irritated that's all he has to say.

He sets his wine glass down on the cooler next to us, and then leans toward me, reaching for my hands. I let him take them, annoyed that, even now, when I'm as angry as I am, his touch gives me chills, little tingles that zig and zag like electricity up and down my arms. It's dampening the fire I

don't want doused and replacing it with an entirely different kind of burn.

So I snatch my hands away, ignoring the hurt on Sam's face as I do.

I know I'm being horrible, positively difficult. But it also feels good to be this way, as if I'm finally in control of *something*, as awful and misdirected as this rage might be.

"I know," he says, "that this is a terribly difficult situation —"

I huff.

"—for everyone involved."

"Terribly difficult?" I roll my eyes. "It's hell, Sam! It's fu —" I swallow, take a breath. "No matter what I do, I'm hurting someone I love. I spend time with Adrian, I'm hurting you. I spend time with you, I'm hurting Adrian." I shake my head, grit my teeth. "I have to ask my husband for a divorce. After all that he's been through, what he's survived—and who the hell even knows what it was that he survived! —and now... this. Because of me. I mean, if the situation were reversed, and I came back after six years to find him with another woman? And then he told me he'd rather be with *her* than *me*? Jesus! Can you even imagine how awful that would be? It would... God, it would ruin me. And that's what I'm doing to him." I tilt my head back, take in the night, wishing with all my might that I could claw every star out of the goddamn sky so there would be nothing left but black, black, black. Just an endless stretch of nothing, as far as the eye could see.

And then the whole world would be shrouded in my misery.

I never thought that Adrian coming back would be a bad thing.

Then again, I never thought it would happen.

"Sometimes," I say, looking down at my hands, at the chipped nails and faint lines that weren't there a few years ago, "I wish he hadn't come back, you know? And yes, I'm aware that makes me an awful person. But sometimes I can't help it.

It would just..." I let out a shuddered breath. "It would just be easier." I hang my head, ashamed of my admission, knowing even as I say it that it's not true. Not really.

"You don't mean that," Sam says, in a voice not meant to shame, but to alleviate it.

I'm not letting you go without a fight.

Adrian's words drift back to me, firm and resolute, triggering a question I never thought to ask, but do now.

"When we got the call about Adrian, you were willing to let us go. Me, Ava." I arch a brow. "Why? Why didn't you, I don't know, stake your claim? As barbaric as that sounds? Why didn't you try to hold on to us? Why were you so quick to give up, lay down the sword, just let us walk away? Is it because..." I bite my lip, scared to give voice to what's in my head. "Is it because that's what you'd do? If...if Cora came back? Leave us?"

My heart is beating fast, a dull pounding in my ears. I'm not sure I want the answer to this loaded question.

And yet...I do. I need to know.

Sam takes a while to speak—which, in my mind, says more than words ever could. As Adrian said so long ago, so much can be said in silence.

Remembering this, I move to rise, because I've heard enough, even when I haven't heard anything at all.

"Lois." And the way he says my name, full of so much emotion, so much passion, makes me stop, sink back down into my seat. This next part looks like it pains him to say, but he does it anyway. "I can't tell you what I'd do, because I'm not in that position. Not like you are."

I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me. Because what I wanted to hear was that, unequivocally and without a doubt, he'd chose us.

That he'd choose *me*.

"Well," I say, my voice tight, "that's good to know."

“Lois—”

I hold up a hand. My posture is stiff, rigid; I can feel every single muscle in my body, taught, as if any part of me could break, snap at any moment. “Nope, no need to explain. What you’ve said has been very...helpful.”

“You need,” he says, slowly, “to let me finish.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve said all there is to say.”

He curses under his breath, and leans back, away from me. “What I’m trying to say is that right now, off the top of my head, of course I’d chose you. God almighty, I’d chose you and Ava in a heartbeat.” He laughs, and this time it’s filled with a tinge of exasperation, maybe even a hint of anger. “There’s no doubt in my mind. I love my life here. *Our* life. And the thought of losing it? Of waking up and not having you by my side? It kills me. I can’t even entertain the idea, because just the thought of it...”

I’m motionless, without feeling. Because even though he confessed his love, his devotion, there’s a *but*. I know it, I can feel it.

Because I have the same *but* about us.

“But,” he says, and there’s a weariness in his voice that wasn’t there before. “I’ve seen how you are since you’ve been back. You’re torn.” He allows a half smile to soften his features. “As much as you try to hide it, I can tell. And I don’t blame you. I know how much you loved him. *Still* love him.”

At this, I soften. Just as I’ve tried to hide my feelings for Adrian—from myself as much as everyone else—Sam is now trying to hide his hurt, the pain that all of this has brought him. The worry that he might lose his family, the people he loves most...*again*.

I’ve heard it said that we’re only given what we can handle. That whoever or whatever it was that created us would never be so cruel as to burden our shoulders with more weight than we could bear. And that...man...that is such *bullshit*.

“I’m sorry.” It’s all I can offer, and it’s nowhere near enough.

Sam doesn't wave away my apology, just nods, as if this too is all he can offer.

“As for your question about who would I pick? I can say, without a doubt, I'd pick you. Even if Cora were here, I'd pick you, Lois. *You.*” He sighs, works his jaw. “But she's not here, so how can I honestly say for certain? When, in the beginning, I gave you an out, so to speak? And you told me that under no circumstances did you want to lose what we had? You were so adamant, so sure. But after seeing Adrian—seeing him in the flesh? It made a difference. I know it did. And I'm not, by any means, trying to blame you. But given what I've seen, what I *know* you're going through? I just...I can't give you the answer you want. I'm sorry if that's not what you want me to say, but it's the only answer I can truthfully give. And you deserve the truth. We all do, whether or not it's something we want to hear.

That out I gave you in the beginning was a choice. It was allowing you the freedom to do what was best for you and Ava, my feelings be damned. That's how I was fighting, Lois. I was fighting—ignoring what *I* wanted—to give you the freedom of choice.”

I don't know what to say to this. Shock—at his selflessness, his near sacrifice—has my voice.

“But,” he says, his features more severe than I've ever seen them, “If you want me to fight? Then, yeah. I'll fight for you.”

With that, he pulls me to him and, in a moment that takes my breath away, crushes his lips to mine.

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Chapter 43

I've never been kissed like this before.

It's not passionate, exactly. And it's in no way loving or sweet. If I had to describe it—Lord, I can barely hold a thought to save my life right now—I'd say it's *primal*.

Sam is staking his claim, the way I wanted him to in the very beginning.

I don't care who you are, or what your values consist of. Every woman, whether she admits it or not, wants to be swept away like this. Wants to be wanted, absolutely needed, by the person she loves.

For the first time in my life, I want to be devoured.

It's not long before Sam is tearing at my shirt, and I'm clawing at his pants, and before I can so much as blink, think, pull away to catch my breath, his arms tighten around me even more, swinging me up and onto his lap, onto *him*, and suddenly there's no past, no future, only what's happening right here, right now.

The steady rhythm of us.

Here and now.

Sam's skin, the taste of it.

Here and now.

His strength, the crushing way his body is crashing into mine.

Here and now.

It's desperate, this lust, like passion and pain all rolled into one. Our bodies move in response to—in expression *of*—everything we aren't saying, everything we don't dare say.

As it was with Adrian, so it becomes with Sam. Time isn't what it seems, isn't what we're led to believe. It's malleable,

as easy to manipulate as the air we breathe. But instead of falling into a memory, I'm making one. I'm taking charge, staking my own claim. Forging my future from a place that's older than time, older than my very existence, and from a perspective that's not just me, but *all of me*.

I don't care who you are, or what your values consist of. Every woman, whether she admits it or not, wants to be swept away like this. Wants to be wanted, absolutely needed, by the person she loves.

And she wants this, in my opinion, so she can give it right back.

In this moment, here and now, I give Sam all that I am.

It's a few hours later, when I'm in bed with Sam, more content and at peace than I've been in weeks, that the call comes in.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

I.should.have.*known*.

At first, all I hear is breathing. Shattered breaths interspersed with mumbled curses followed by a clatter as something drops, presumably the phone's receiver. Then, Adrian's voice, frantic and raw, high-pitched and strangled. The tremble in his words vibrates through the line, rumbles uncomfortably in my ear.

"Adrian?" I say, and the way my voice mirrors his, all twitchy and choked, has Sam swinging his legs over the side of the bed, reaching for his jeans. I shoot him a look, and his eyes catch mine. "What's going on?"

Adrian lets out a moan, deep and miserable, thick with everything he's not saying. "Lo – oh, God – I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Chapter 44

We all die, in some form or another, before the final, physical transition takes place.

Some of us more than once.

We die into light, into dark, into wakefulness and sleep.

We die when we lose those we love, forever stuck in the shadow of their absence.

We die so that we can be reborn into someone else, something else, anything else.

We die, we die, we die.

And with every death we survive, we step closer to the edge.

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Chapter 45

The lights, too bright.

The voices, too loud.

The dark, too cloaking.

The scene...all too familiar.

“We were playing with my night vision goggles,” Adrian told us when we got to the cabin an hour ago. His eyes were wide, crazed, and he paced the gravel driveway as he talked. “And she loved them, just...” He paused, laced his fingers behind his neck, and looked up at the sky, choking back a sob. “...just like I knew she would.”

I remember those night vision goggles. They were a birthday gift for Adrian, one I bought the year before he disappeared, figuring his adventurous spirit would enjoy the novelty of having them on our early morning hikes when the sun was still an hour away from the horizon. He kept the damn things in his backpack, making them one of his few possessions that made the journey from then to now.

I remember how excited he was the first time he used them, and how contagious that excitement was.

I can only imagine how Ava felt tonight, when the two set out on their little journey. How exciting he made it all seem, and how that delight stayed with her, long after he'd tucked her into bed.

Adrian has a way of turning everything into an adventure.

But this...this is not an adventure.

Because earlier tonight, after their little trek in the dark woods and hours after they'd gone to bed, Adrian woke to find Ava gone. Along with the night vision goggles and Josie.

Now, I'm with Sam, pushing through those same dark woods, flashlight clutched in a death grip, calling my

daughter's name. Like Adrian's, Ava's coat is red, and I'm squinting, eyes peeled, desperate for a glimpse of that crimson fabric.

This is all too familiar.

Sam's hand is wrapped around mine, so tight I can't tell where his ends and mine begins. He too is calling for Ava, brandishing a flashlight through the thick brush. Once in a while, the beam will sway, sweeping upward as he pushes a tree branch aside, like a phantom taking flight.

"Why haven't we found her yet?" My voice is shaking, trembling, wet. "We should have found her by now, Sam."

"We'll find her."

His hand against mine twitches once, twice, like the beat of an erratic heart.

In the distance, I hear the voices of Jenna and Roy, the jack-of-all trades husband and wife team that help us run Midnight Sun. In their late fifties and with no children of their own, they love Ava, consider her to be a grandchild not of blood, but of spirit. They came as soon as Sam called—faces drawn, bathrobes flapping beneath their coats—and their disembodied shouts ring ghostly in the terrible night.

This is all too familiar.

"*Josie!*" I call—frantic, frantic, frantic—because though Ava is my child by birth, Josie is my daughter by bond, and she's missing, too.

Again.

This is all too familiar.

My voice, raw and ravaged.

A scream stuck in my throat, stealing my breath.

This is all too familiar.

Men from our local volunteer fire department, the one I thought Adrian might want to join, are arriving now, the rumble of engines announcing their presence. The flashing lights atop their trucks send scattered rays of red and blue light

through the mess of trees, giving the whole forest an otherworldly appearance.

And it makes me think.

God, it makes me think.

“What if,” I say, and then clamp my lips together, as if holding in the thought will make it less likely.

“What if what?” Sam asks, distracted, as he sweeps his flashlight side to side.

The motion of the light is making me dizzy. “What if...I mean...” I can barely get the words out.

“Lois.” Sam stops, pulls me into his chest. “I know what you’re thinking. And we’ll find her. We will, okay? Alive and well.”

I wonder if he’s saying this for his benefit or mine.

He sounds so certain, but how can he know?

He can’t.

And anyway, that’s not what I’m thinking.

I wish it was that simple.

But the thought—the one that’s making my heart beat faster and faster with every second that passes—is that maybe, just maybe, whatever took Adrian all those years ago is back...for Ava.

Chapter 46

Phenomena or phantom, whatever took Adrian six years ago and spit him back into the present wasn't natural.

It's something that I've been too scared to admit, too afraid to contemplate, have always pushed away, because just thought of Adrian and Josie being held at the whim of some out-of-this-world influence was enough to send me over the edge, turning normal, run-of-the-mill grief into sheer madness.

But it's leaped from the back of my mind to the forefront with Ava's disappearance. Has been a foul taste on the tip of my tongue since early this morning, when Josie ran out of the woods, covered in twigs and leaves, the leash dragging empty behind her.

Ava was nowhere in sight.

Logic would argue against this ludicrous scenario, the one that believes that whatever snatched Adrian now has our daughter.

Paranoia, however, has a tighter grip.

She's been missing for twelve hours, twelve long hours, the twelve longest hours of my life.

We should have found her by now.

"We should have found her by now," I say again, for what has to be the millionth time and to no one in particular.

I'm sitting on the front deck of Cabin Eight, refusing to leave the last place she was seen. Sam and Adrian forced me into this unwanted break after I tripped over a tree root and scraped my forehead, using the incident as a ridiculous excuse to relegate me to the sidelines. Initially, they wanted me to go home—can you believe it!—and get some sleep—as if! —but finally settled for this brief respite on the deck steps. Now, leaning against the railing, drowsy but awake, I'm not sure if I'll ever sleep again.

Someone presses something warm in my hand, and I look up, see Jenna dropping down beside me on the step. “I’m not even going to ask how you’re doing.”

I snort, then take a sip of the coffee, not even tasting it. “Why? Do I look that bad?”

She chuckles, a dry sound, as if she’s forcing it. “Yeah, you look that bad.” Then she sighs, her voice tight as she says, “About as bad as I look, I’m sure.” I turn and stare at her—amber hair in a loose bun and streaked with gray, dark eyes framed by laugh lines and reflecting my own worry—and feel like, for the first time, breaking completely and wholly down. This woman is the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever known, and being this close to her right now is pulling from me the emotions I’ve been holding back all night.

That’s the thing. No matter how old you are, you never stop longing for your mother, for that one person who has the power to bestow unconditional support, provide you with that proverbial shoulder to cry on. The one person you can feel free to let loose your ugly side, your wasted side, the side that you hide from everyone else. Who doesn’t judge, who takes you in without question and, if only for a moment, makes everything better.

I know not all mothers are like this.

I don’t remember my own mother, though I’m familiar with her absence. I know the shape of it; like a phantom limb, invisible but there, always there, a presence I can’t sever no matter how hard I try. The weight of the space she left behind is as tangible as her touch would be now. I’m as close to her ghost as I am to my own soul.

It’s why I try to be the best mother I can be to Ava. I never, ever want her to feel the loss that I do. The weight of an absent mother, one who used her freewill to leave rather than stay.

Thinking this now, feeling the loss of not only Ava but of a mother I never knew—one who never cared to know me—I finally, finally shatter.

When Jenna offers her arms, I fall into them gratefully.

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Chapter 47

I dream of coffins.

Little white coffins with white satin and white trim, popping up one after another in never-ending rows, until the only thing I can see, the only thing that fills my vision, are tiny doll-sized caskets, empty and waiting.

Then finally, the last one, not empty, not empty at all, because it's filled with Ava's body. The sight of her pale face and gaunt cheeks, blank eyes staring up at me, shocks me awake.

I'm in Adrian's bed, his smell all around me, and for a moment it overpowers the dream, holds back those nightmare images of coffins and death. But when I turn over, see Adrian dozing in a straight back chair next to the wall, everything comes back.

My heart lurches in my chest when it hits me that I've been sleeping—honest-to-goodness *sleeping*—while my daughter is out there, lost in the woods, completely and utterly alone. I spring up, grappling at the nightstand for a phone that isn't there, trying to remember how I got here, when I got here...*and oh-my-God what time is it and where the hell is my phone?* The covers are smothering, constricting, and they cling to me like a mess of spiderwebs when I try to fling them off. My limbs are still heavy with sleep, and so is my brain, because I find myself falling more than sliding off the bed, pushing myself from the mattress with all the grace of a loosely jointed marionette.

"Adrian," I gasp, pushing hair out of my eyes and stumbling to his chair. "Adrian, wake up!"

His eyes are closed, but his voice is clear, alert. "I'm not sleeping, Lo."

"What time is it?" I demand, struggling to focus.

“It’s after six.”

After six? At night? My heart is beating like a trapped bird against my sternum, and I’m all jittery, like I’ve had too much caffeine.

Oh, wait. I have. Then how did I fall—

“You fell asleep on the porch,” he says, his voice hollow, full of misery. “I brought you in here so you could get some rest.”

“Have they? I mean...” I wring my hands, scared to even ask.

“No.”

Just one word. The most horrible word I could hear right now.

The tiny flicker of hope I had upon waking dies. Somewhere inside of me I feel movement, like I’m swaying, as if my equilibrium is off and everything that’s holding me steady, holding me upright, is draining away.

I only make it one step toward the door before my legs give out.

“Lois.” Adrian is on me in seconds, his voice a choking sob, and we stay like this, huddled together on the floor, losing ourselves to the moment.

“You must hate me.”

My back is against the bed, alongside Adrian, who is hunched over his knees, head in his hands. His mumbled words pull from me both anger and sympathy, because yes, I hate him. And because no, of course I don’t.

“It’s not your fault.” I feel dead inside, and it takes effort to speak.

Adrian's laugh, filled with self-loathing, tells me he doesn't believe me.

I sigh. "It's not, Adrian. Or, at least, not entirely your fault."

"I was the one with her," he says, his voice cracked and broken. "I was the one who was supposed to—who *should have*—kept her safe."

"And I," I say, "should have known it was too soon. And when I realized my mistake, I shouldn't have listened to Sam, who basically told me that I was worrying for nothing." Sam feels guilt about this; I know he does. Though he hasn't told me in words, the indefatigable way he's leading the search—not sleeping, not eating, not drinking, jaw set and expression grim—tells me enough.

Minutes turn to hours, and still we sit here, side by side, grieving, hoping...dying, little by little, though hardly fast enough.

"Is this what it felt like?"

It's been a while since we've spoken, forever since I've moved, and when I turn to look at Adrian, I feel stiff and ungainly. "What *what* felt like?"

He waves a hand, indicating our situation. "This. When I didn't come home that night. The entire time I was gone. All of it. Is this how you felt? Like you'd gone crazy, lost your mind? Like...like it's hard to even breathe?"

"Yeah," I say. "This is exactly how it felt."

He doesn't look up, doesn't even make a sound, but his shoulders shake, and without thinking, I wrap myself around him, bury my face in his hair.

We stay like this long after he stills.

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Chapter 48

It's been twenty-hour hours.

It's been thirty hours.

It's been thirty-six hours.

Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine...

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Chapter 49

The Tomlinsons came rolling into Midnight Sun at the forty-hour mark.

Though I recognized their old Jeep Wagoneer with the wood paneling as it pulled into the driveway to Cabin Eight, I had to do a double-take when I saw it, spotted their pale faces beneath the glare of the sun-washed windshield.

Adrian was gone, out with the rest of the search party, and I was alone, manning the cabin on the off-chance that Ava miraculously showed up. Not able to sit inside, not able to sit still, I was out on the porch with a thermos of coffee, pacing, and barely had a chance to shrug off my surprise before Polly was out of the passenger seat and drawing me into her arms.

Apparently, Adrian did use my old laptop to create an email address. For the short time he'd been in Minnesota—less than two weeks—he'd been emailing with the Tomlinsons almost daily. As a result, they knew all about us—about Adrian's disappearance and our extenuating circumstances.

And, now, Ava.

They came, they said, as soon as they heard.

They brought groceries, and it wasn't long after Polly had me rolling up my sleeves in the kitchen to help prepare a giant pot of potato soup that Abel Lotz and his wife Nancy arrived in the shiny new SUV they'd rented after flying into the Duluth airport.

Yep, Adrian had been corresponding with the old detective, too.

Now, with life mingling the way it is, nothing is the past and everything is the present. I'm finding it hard to focus, yet at the same time I'm thankful for the distraction.

"To be honest," Polly tells me now, handing me a dish to dry, "Adrian did tell us a little bit about your situation the

night we met.”

Polly’s idea to show up with food was a blessing; the soup was a hit, feeding everyone twice over with enough left over for the next meal. Considering that none of us had had anything other than coffee and stale bagels in close to two days, the hot meal was more than appreciated, and it seemed to pump new life into the volunteers.

Myself included.

I take the plate, draw my damp towel over the surface. “He did? I wasn’t aware that he’d mentioned it.”

She plunges her hands into the sink, soapy water swishing. Dishes and spoons clank-clatter as she says, “It was before you arrived that night. It sort of just came tumbling out of him, the poor kid.” She rinses a bowl, and I reach out to take it. “He doesn’t have any family, does he?”

I bristle a bit at this. “He has me.”

Polly’s smile is sad, and she pats me on the hand, leaving soap suds on the cuff of my sleeve. “I know he does, dear.”

I just nod. It’s an awkward moment, as it stands, with her knowing more about me than I do about her. The details about my life that she now possesses are intimate, tragic, and ruin-filled. I suddenly feel stupid, guilty about the way I acted as Adrian’s wife that night—like I was still his wife, in every way—when, all along, the Tomlinsons knew the entire truth. At least, the truth as it stands from Adrian’s point of view.

“I’m sorry if, you know, that night, we...I mean, *I*...”

But Polly interrupts me with a tsk. “That you what? Somehow deceived us? By omission?” She laughs. “Nonsense. We didn’t mention it because it was obvious how much Adrian loves you. Before you even arrived that night, when he was telling us about what you two were going through? And then how proud he was when he showed us the picture in his wallet? That beautiful wedding photograph? I guess we just thought you both deserved a night of normalcy, is all.”

I don’t know what to say to this. On the one hand, I appreciate the time we spent with Andrew and Polly more than

I can say. On the other, it made everything more difficult. The part of my love for Adrian that laid dormant in his absence bloomed again that night, making me doubt, making me question, making me second guess...everything.

“I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for you, all those years he was gone. The not knowing...” Polly passes me the last bowl, and then dips a hand back in the water, pulling the drain. The water gurgles as it swirls away, and for a moment all I can do is stand here, listening to it, as if it represents so much more than liquid going down a drain. For a moment, it’s my life that’s rushing away—the one I had with Adrian, the one I have now with Sam and Ava—like water slipping through my fingers.

I’m not sure who I’ll be when there’s no one left to lose.

And this...this is such a terrifying thought.

“It was hard,” I tell Polly, pressing the towel into the bowl, scrubbing harder than necessary. “It still is.”

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Chapter 50

It's the not knowing.

As it was with Adrian, so it is with Ava.

"It's the not knowing," Adrian says around hour forty-nine. Shadows darken the skin beneath his eyes, and no matter how I try to get him to eat, he only picks at his food before taking to the gravel driveway, pacing back and forth.

I'm outside with him now, pacing, waiting for word from Sam, who's been out since nightfall. My phone in my pocket is a bomb; any moment it could go off, bringing either destruction or salvation.

At this point, I don't even care which.

At this point, it's the not knowing that's killing me.

"I know," I tell Adrian, and then take his hand, matching my stride to his.

Moonlight spills over the path, and the shadows shift with the hours.

Somehow, the world is still spinning.

Jenna and Polly are passing out donuts and coffee.

Abel and Sam are hovering over a foldout table, a map in front of them, going over the day's plans. Roy is beside them with a notebook, taking notes, crossing out areas checked and rechecked.

Andrew is walking Josie, who is being incredibly patient considering his slow gait. She paces herself, prancing slower than usual to accommodate his limp.

The Freemans—a family of two adults and two teenagers—have given up their vacation to help with the search. We didn't even know them until yesterday, when they checked in among the chaos, having reserved a spot at Midnight Sun months ago. When they asked about the cluster of people surrounding Adrian's cabin, Jenna told them about Ava, and they immediately dropped everything to assist in any way that they could. They're out now, all four of them, combing the area between the beach and the forest, a stretch of land we cover at least twice a day.

All of these people, coming together, for no reason at all other than to help.

I look at Adrian often, see the disbelief in his eyes that mirrors mine.

We're not used to this type of kindness.

We didn't grow up with it.

At times, it's hard to accept this help, to relax into it without worry of having to give back—give more back than we can afford—in return.

In my world, as well as in Adrian's, there's always a price.

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Chapter 51

My aunt was a cold woman.

From the moment I moved in at ten to the time I escaped at eighteen, she belittled me every chance she got. I was too fat, my chin was too pointed, my fashion sense was abominable, and I was never, ever smart enough. My cousins, who were all older than I was and had already spent over a decade under her influence, were much the same, and their snide remarks followed me around the house like a flock of relentlessly pecking birds.

In their eyes, I was a joke, and constantly treated as such.

Life with my father was good; I knew love, I knew acceptance, I knew comfort and stability. And although we struggled to make ends meet, the one thing I never knew was lack. With him, I had everything I needed, even when I didn't have much at all.

But after I moved in with my aunt, I began to see how little my dad and I actually possessed. I became aware of what wealth was, the sort of power and acceptance that money could bring. I was young and impressionable, and after just a few months in their company, I began to question everything I was brought up to believe. I witnessed the validation from my peers at school when I wore something from my new life versus something from my old. The swift way I seemed to climb the social ladder by simply donning a pair of three-hundred-dollar hand-me-down boots from my cousin versus the worn twenty-dollar pair I'd gotten from Walmart (and, secretly, preferred). Under the roof of my aunt's hilltop home, I was offered a bird's eye view of life and the way it worked.

My aunt dished out approval rarely, and after losing my father, after having no one but her to depend on, I learned to crave it. It was survival, this desire, a way to earn love, affection, attention—even if only for a moment. Gaining her praise became a game; the harder I worked and the closer to

her version of perfect I became, the more distant she'd become. So I'd try harder and harder, then harder still...losing everything I was in the process.

Looking back now, I think it might have been better if she had ignored me entirely, left me to my own devices, to stew in all of my imperfections. Provided food and shelter and nothing more. At least that way I wouldn't have lost so many years trying to please someone whose respect I was never going to gain, no matter how hard I tried.

As Adrian once said: *Those who need to be impressed will never be impressed.*

The last time I saw my aunt was at my law school graduation. Instead of a congratulatory card, she'd arrived at my ceremony with a bill. The college tuition she offered after I graduated high school—on the stipulation that I studied something sensible like law or medicine, business or banking—had in fact been nothing more than a loan. Without blinking, she demanded the entirety of it, right then and there, knowing full well I had it in the form of my father's meager life insurance, something I'd obtained when I turned twenty-one.

Fortunately, in my pursuit to please her, I'd earned a fair share of scholarships. So the amount I was forced to fork over was nowhere near as expensive as it could have been. Still, paying her back took the entire thing, every single scent... leaving me with nothing.

Adrian had many choice words about the situation, most of them revolving around the fact that he was glad she was out of our lives, that now I didn't owe, according to him, "that witch a goddamn thing".

"Now that you're out from under her thumb," he told me, "you're free."

But the thing was, I wasn't free. Not really.

I had a degree in a career I hated, that I only pursued to please someone who was never going to be pleased. Under my aunt's scrutiny, I'd become a people-pleaser of the highest degree, making myself a second class-citizen in my own life.

But I also had a new—and damning—view of humanity.

No one, absolutely no one, did anything out of the goodness of their heart.

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Chapter 52

Sam and Adrian don't speak much during the search other than to discuss the next course of action. The two have obviously come together on behalf of Ava, and with Sam knowing what he does about the area and Adrian knowing what he does about tracking, the two make a damn good team.

Though, it still isn't good enough to find her, because she's been missing for close to seventy hours now.

The days are chilly, and the nights are cold, and the hope I have left is hanging by a thread.

There's been no sign of her. Nothing to prove that she's even walked these woods. Aside from Josie returning the morning after the pair went missing, no trace of Ava has been found.

"It doesn't mean anything," Sam tells me now. "We'll find her."

We'll find her. It's become his mantra.

We're home now, but still outside, sitting on our own porch because I can't bear to be indoors when my daughter is somewhere out there, in the dark, cold and alone.

Or maybe she's not.

We should have found her by now.

Sam's face in the moonlight is pale, the new hollows under his cheeks and eyes dark. As much as he tries to hide it, as much as he tries to hold it together, I can tell he's a wreck.

We all are.

"I can't feel her, Sam. I should be able to *feel* her." I hug my middle, bending at the waist, and feel like I'm about to throw up. Though I'm not sure what would come up, considering I can't eat. No matter how much food Polly tries

to get into us—me, Sam, Adrian—we can never stomach more than a few bites. Sometimes not even that.

Sam draws me close, buries his face in my hair. His voice flutters against my ear. “We’ll find her.”

And then he grabs his flashlight, rises, and heads out into the dark, his voice joining the others, a chorus of disembodied cries echoing through the night.

Ava.

Ava.

Ava.

Ava.

Ava.

Ava.

Ava.

We talked to everyone.

The few guests that were staying at Midnight Sun.

The few neighbors we have.

She wasn’t snatched up, at least not by human hands.

And if there had been an animal attack—Jesus, I just...I can’t *even*—there would be signs. Or so they say. Shredded clothing, drag marks, blood (oh, God, *blood*) indications of a struggle. Though whatever struggle a five and a half-year-old could manage against a wolf or a coyote or a bear, in my opinion, would hardly make a dent in the surrounding environment. Still, Abel Lotz, who has seen his fair share of animal attacks out west, believes that there would be some evidence, something inedible left behind, no matter how small.

Like those damn night vision goggles.

.
.
Hour seventy-seven.

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Chapter 53

They say that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Maybe I'm insane.

But I can't eat, and I can't sleep.

So I'm walking.

Walking through woods and along paths I've trekked at least a dozen times in the last four days. Over the same boulders. Under the same trees. Pushing through the same brush. Sometimes with a flashlight, other times not.

Eyes peeled, as always, for a little red jacket.

When I call out, her name hangs in the air on my breath.

It's so cold.

It's Adrian, all over again.

It's the scream inside my chest, tickling my throat, a banshee of a howl that if let loose will never stop.

It's the hole where my heart should be, growing, taking over.

It's grief, turning into anger, turning into blame.

It's...wait...

What is that?

Oh, my God.

Chapter 54

Ava didn't crawl any earlier than other babies.

She didn't start speaking earlier, either.

She was a quiet baby, rarely squalling or fussing, and she seemed to take in everything around her with a quiet seriousness that often made us laugh. It was like she was taking notes in her head, jotting everything down in her little brain, a mental Rolodex of the world.

It was when we started reading to her that things... changed.

Ava was just under two years old when she fell in love with books, and it wasn't long after we finished one that she'd somehow parrot it back to us, reading from the pages as if she was reciting from a script, pulling the text from memory.

But she wasn't.

She was *reading*.

It wasn't my intention to raise a child prodigy. I didn't tote her around to toddler classes that pushed classic literature instead of Dr. Seuss or encouraged Beethoven over cartoons. Nor was her diet a strictly holistic array of organic vegetables and ethically raised meat alongside homemade bone broth laced with iodine.

Sam and I fed her baby food from the grocery store, danced with her to 90's rock, and sat her between us as we watched old movies. We took to the mountains often, taking long hikes in the fresh air with her strapped to Sam's back in a baby carrier. As for toys, she played with blocks and the boxes they came in, dolls and the boxes those came in, and a little handmade wooden puzzle set that Sam purchased from a toymaker friend in Minnesota...and the box *that* came in.

And Sam, being the voracious reader that he is, lined her bedroom walls with books.

Ava was a normal baby, and then a typical toddler.

Until she wasn't.

We started with books that contained more pictures than words, and as soon as we'd crack the cover, she would still, lean her little body against ours with a contented sigh. She'd sit for the entire story, eyes glued to the page, little brow furrowed in concentration. It was while Sam was reading *Where the Wild Things Are* that she began reading the words along with him. Thinking that she'd been engrossed with the beautiful artwork, we discovered it was the text she'd been following along with, listening to our voices and associating our tones and inflections with the letters on the page.

She learned to count—from seemingly out of nowhere—soon after.

Everything seemed to escalate quickly after that—the way she caught on to things, how she was able to master a task before we were even halfway through showing her how to do it. Her curiosity shot through the roof; she was constantly on the go, running here, there, everywhere. She wanted to investigate everything, touch and taste and smell the world around her while learning about it all at dizzying speeds.

It was amazing, wonderful...and exhausting.

Especially when the sleep issues began.

While sleep was easy for her to slip into as a baby, things changed as she got older. As energetic as she was during the day, she was a true night owl in the purest sense, always sneaking out of bed to peer through the drawn curtains at the dark beyond. She loved the moon, the stars, the quiet way the night would fold in around her, as if something in the nocturnal stillness soothed her sensitive nature.

By the time she was three, it was a challenge not just to get her into bed, but to stay in bed. Sleep wasn't something that we could force, however, and I'd often lay awake at night, listening to her move about in her room, pulling books from shelves or working puzzles or having one-sided conversations with Benji the cat, always in hushed tones, as if she thought

we didn't know she was up and about, awake instead of asleep.

This past year, though, she'd started falling into a routine, crashing a little harder, sleeping a little more. While she still never made it a full eight-hours, she did get in a good straight six, usually from eleven to five or midnight to six or ten to four, depending on, well, who knew, really.

And I told Adrian this.

I told him all of it.

I told him.

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Chapter 55

The first thing I see is red.

Ava's jacket, slumped against Sam's chest.

And then I see her, arms wrapped around his neck, legs around his waist.

They emerge from the trees like this, within eyesight of Adrian's cabin, and in an instant, my mind takes a snapshot of the two—the pre-dawn light, gray and hazy, the way they materialize right out of the dark like a dream.

The scream I've been swallowing for the last four days leaps into my throat, escapes bit by bit in whimpering gasps as I close the distance between us. I've never run so fast, moved so quick, and within seconds I'm crashing into them, my hands all over her, cupping her chin, swiping the hair away from her face. There's color in her cheeks from the cold and life in her eyes in the form of tears, and though her lips are a little blue, she appears healthy, unscathed. The sleeve of her jacket is torn, and the cuffs of her pink flannel pajama pants are rimmed with dirt. Her boots are mucky and the laces have come undone.

But she's here. She's whole. She's *alive*.

"Mama," she says, sniffing. "I lost Josie."

This is her concern, after everything she's been through. "Oh, no, bug. No, you didn't. She's here, okay? She came back all on her own."

I look up at Sam, who's smiling wearily, his face drawn in exhaustion. His eyes are glassy but clear, and when he looks at me, he nods. Then, letting loose a shaky breath, he grabs me by the waist and pulls me to him, and together we walk back to the cabin, back to our people, back to the ones who came to help when we needed it most.

Who, I know now, expect nothing in return.

“She thinks she’s only been gone for a couple of hours.”

We’re home, hunkered down in the living room and bent over steaming mugs of hot coffee. It’s been hours since Sam found Ava, and after having Adrian check her over, we got her into a warm bath and then straight into bed. Thankfully, she fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow, with Josie and Benji playing sentry, one on each side of her. I don’t think I would have been able to leave her room if those two weren’t there, keeping her safe.

As of now, it’s just the three of us—me, Sam, and Adrian. After getting Ava settled, everyone else left so that we could have some privacy, heading back to their cabins with the promise of a celebratory dinner tomorrow, one to thank everyone who dropped everything to come to our aid.

And while I’m looking forward to it all, right now, there are other matters to discuss.

“Well,” I say slowly, “she’s been through a lot. I’m sure her perception of time is just off. Or...” I bite my lip, cut my gaze to Adrian.

Or maybe not.

He doesn’t say anything right away. This is the first time he’s been inside our home, and so far, he’s just been taking everything in: the plush and worn furniture, the large stone fireplace, the rustic log walls and floor-to-ceiling windows framing a distant view of Lake Superior. On the wall lining the hallway hang a gallery of family photos, one marking each year of Ava’s life. The first picture, in which she was barely a year old, is of just the two of us, her and I alone, the way we started. All the rest, though, include Sam.

Adrian looks at these now, then slides his eyes my way. Unlike me and Sam, he isn’t sitting, instead shifting from one foot to the other, clearly uncomfortable. From what I can tell, he hasn’t taken one sip of his coffee.

He swallows. "I don't think so."

I frown. "Don't think what?"

He finally takes a drink, and it's clear he's forming the words in his head, thinking about what he's going to say before spitting it out. "She wasn't dehydrated. Her color was good, eyes clear. She was cold, sure, but there were no signs of hypothermia. In fact, she doesn't show any signs of being gone for more than an hour or two." He shakes his head. "Certainly not over eighty."

"He's right."

Sam is sitting next to me on the couch, and I swing my head his way, level him with my gaze. "He's right?"

Sam sets his mug on the coffee table and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I'm not trained like Adrian, of course," he nods at Adrian, who reciprocates, "but it makes sense. Well, as much sense as this situation can make."

I shake my head. Why I'm so against this is beyond me. But I am.

"Look," he says, "when I found her, she was on her feet, steady, not even scared. The only thing she was concerned about was Josie." He reaches for my hand. "Lois, she had no idea she was even lost. Which, brings up my next question. I found her in an area that we searched, hell, at least a dozen times."

"Maybe she was hiding." I say this, knowing in my heart that she wasn't. But I'm in denial, pushing aside the facts and replacing them with whatever scenario my doubting mind wants to believe. And what I want to believe is that my daughter was lost and then found, simple as that.

I don't want another odd, unsolvable mystery in my life. That strangeness, always hanging over my head, worrying my heart. The subtle anxiety such an occurrence leaves behind, the never feeling safe, never knowing if it will happen again.

Like with Adrian. Sometimes I still don't know how to act around him, what to say. Forget the divide in our marriage, the inevitable separation looming. Lately, especially since we've

been back, I feel myself fumbling around him, not knowing what to say, how to help. There's a distance between us, one that has nothing to do with Sam.

And I can't bear the thought of that happening with my own daughter.

If Ava was just lost, then fine. I can prevent that from happening ever again.

But if there's something else behind this, if we're at the whim of some external force that I can't control, then I'm... Jesus...I'm going to lose my mind.

"Lois." Adrian, who this entire time has been hovering some distance away, sets his mug down on an end table and takes a step toward us, pushing his hands deep into his pockets as he does. I see them ball into fists beneath his jeans, and feel my own hands clenching in my lap. "There's something I should..." Adrian's eyes flick to Sam, who—perceptive, as always—picks up on Adrian's reluctance.

Rising, Sam brushes my shoulder with his fingers. "I'm going to go check on Ava."

I nod and watch him go, then turn back to Adrian. Raising my brows, I wait.

He doesn't speak right away, just stands there, staring into the fireplace, his jaw set. I want to hurry him up, yank whatever it is out of him, because I have a feeling that whatever it is he has to say is directly related to what happened with Ava.

That maybe, this entire time, he knows more than he's been letting on.

"I was young, maybe seven or eight," he says finally. When he looks at me, there's guilt in his eyes, but also fear. Though when I look closer, I realize that it's not terror or dread, exactly. It's more like...vulnerability. Like he's about to cut himself open, expose the deepest, most intimate part of himself. A part that, apparently, he's never shown to anyone. Including me.

“My dad had just gone on one of his rampages,” he continues, starting to pace. “Got in a few knocks to my head, gave me a black eye so bad it swelled shut.” He chuckles, trying to make light of a lightless situation. There’s no humor in this story. Nothing good.

I want to get up and go to him, but I’m in my home, the one I share with Sam, and instead I stay rooted to the couch, feet pressing into the floor, as if I’m about to spring.

“So, you know, I took off into the woods. To my spot, this little fort I’d made a few miles from the house. Just a bunch of logs propped against a tree, so nothing much. But back then, it seemed like a goddamn palace.” He stops in front of the window, sighs, whether at the view or what he’s about to reveal next. “Anyway, I was only there for a little while. I didn’t bring much food with me when I left. The old man didn’t give me a chance to grab much. He caught me sneaking cans of soup from the cupboard, and I barely got out of the house without another fist to the side of the head. After that, I always made sure to keep a stash at my place just in case.”

My heart hurts. He says “my place” as if that little handmade shelter was more of a home than the one he was born into. Though, that’s exactly what it was. I picture a seven-year-old Adrian there now, a lost, beaten little boy with nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to, and feel both sorrow and anger burning in my gut.

Sorrow for him, bless his little heart. And anger at the people who hurt him, who caused so him much pain that he felt safer sleeping in the woods—with who knew what wild animals lurking nearby—than his own bed.

“Adrian, I just...God. I’m so sorry.” I swallow past the lump in my throat, knowing full well that the words I just offered sound pathetic and generic, entirely inadequate for the situation.

He shrugs. “It’s okay, Lo. It was what it was, and it is what it is.” He turns and looks at me, hands still in his pockets. The light coming in from the window frames his profile, highlights it in a way that makes him look almost celestial.

And I realize suddenly that he's always looked this way to me.

Adrian, my hero.

"But when I got back home, I found out that I'd been gone two weeks." He turns back to the window. "Two weeks went by, and I thought it had only been *two days*."

Again, this can easily be explained away as perception. Due to the trauma he experienced and his young age, it's completely plausible that his awareness of time back then was warped, skewed in such a way as to better cope with the abuse.

"And no, if you're wondering." He turned from the window and walked over to me, sat on the opposite end of the couch. "No one was looking for me." He gives me a wry smile. "My dad rarely drew attention to my absences, unless asked, of course. Then he made it out to seem like I was just being a rotten, hard-to-handle kid who ran off to hang with the wrong crowd." He forms air quotes with his fingers and tries to play it all off as a joke, but the tightness around his eyes, the stiff set of his shoulders tells me otherwise.

He's still hurting from this.

"Are you..." I start and then stop, worried, not wanting to throw doubt into my voice, not wanting to question his memories. After all, I wasn't there. "Are you sure it was only two days? I mean, after what you went through, and then being alone in the woods like that? At such a young age? I can't imagine how scary that must have been. Maybe it, I don't know, messed with your sense of time?"

Here I am, trying to explain away Adrian's experience in much the same way I was denying Ava's earlier.

People. We believe what we want to believe, don't we? Regardless of the evidence presented.

"No, Lo. I'm sure. One hundred percent." He looks at me, and his gaze is clear, unwavering. What he's telling me is the truth. Or, at the very least, the truth as he believes it to be. "When I left, my eye was bruised, swollen shut. And it stayed like that until the second morning. I remember, because when I

woke up, I could see out of both eyes. Then, when I got home and looked in the mirror, my eye was completely healed. No black and blue marks, no yellowing or swelling. Just clear skin, as if I'd never been touched."

"Well." I fold my hands together and then unfold them. "Maybe it just healed. I mean, I'm not sure how long a black eye takes to heal, but—"

"Two weeks," Adrian interrupts. "Give or take."

"The amount of time," I say, slowly, "that you were gone."

He nods. "Exactly."

I don't know what to do with this information. My mind wants to go in a hundred different directions, and none of them good. Because what I'm starting to realize, what I don't want to believe, is that if this happened to him when he was a kid, then maybe what happened to him six years ago wasn't some random event.

And if that's the case, then—being of Adrian's flesh and blood—maybe Ava's missing time isn't so random, either.

"But that's not all."

I can feel the tension in my shoulders starting to tighten, pull at my neck, the back of my head. "There's more?"

"Yeah." Adrian swipes a hand down his face, takes a deep breath. "A few days before that hike to Jasper Peak, before Josie and I went missing," he uses air quotes again, but this time it's not to make light of the situation, "I had a doctor's appointment. Over in Bellevue."

I frown. "I don't remember you having a doctor's appointment."

Because he didn't. He couldn't have. I would have known if my husband had gone to the doctor. Even if it was just for a routine check-up, I would have *known*.

But now, I can see it in his eyes. It's in his grim expression, as if he's been hiding something and it's just now cracking the surface. Either my memory is failing me, or he never told me.

“That’s because I never told you,” he says, confirming my suspicion.

I shake my head. “That makes no sense. Why in the world wouldn’t you tell me?” Even after all these years, even after everything that’s happened, I feel hurt, almost betrayed, as if it wasn’t a simple doctor’s appointment that he failed to tell me about, but dinner with another woman.

This is ridiculous, of course. There’s no comparison between the two scenarios. But still, I feel deceived. Adrian and I were as close as two people could be, the only family we had, and we told each other everything.

“I didn’t want to worry you. At least,” he sighs, “not until I knew.”

Even though this happened years ago, my heart is hammering, as if it’s expecting bad news and needs to pump my blood faster, filling my cells with as much oxygen as it can before whatever Adrian’s about to say steals all of my breath.

“I’d been having headaches,” he says. “I thought they were just tension headaches, at first. You know, like maybe I needed to stretch more, drink more water.” He glances at me, smiles wryly. “Meditate.”

I lift a brow, and he laughs.

“Yeah, yeah,” he continues. “Anyway, it got so bad that I couldn’t ignore it anymore. My, uh, vision blurred at work one day, blurred so bad that the only thing I could see were colors. And damn, Lo, if that didn’t scare the hell out of me.”

“Jesus, Adrian! Why didn’t you tell me any of this? And how could I not have noticed?” Guilt sits heavy on my chest, and I think back through the years, back to our time together, remembering all the good, all the bad. How, over our marriage, our work schedules slowly shifted to opposite hours. How I spent so much time at the office and not nearly enough time at home. How, even when I was home, my mind was usually elsewhere, brooding about the past or worrying about the future. How I knew my priorities were mostly wrong, but

never made the effort to remedy them because I was always *so damn tired from work*.

How I thought that I—*we*—always had tomorrow, and that I'd do better then.

I would,

I would,

I would.

And then, one day, tomorrow never came.

Adrian was suddenly gone, and now I'm learning that there's more to this story than I ever dreamed.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry. And," he rubs at the back of his neck, "truth be told, I was scared. It was like by not bringing it up, it wasn't really happening." He shrugs. "I'm sorry."

As if he has anything to be sorry for. "What happened then?" I ask. "At the doctor. What did they find?"

"A growth. More than likely terminal, because of the location. According to the specialist who ran the scan, it was in an inoperable area."

He says this all with a smile, and he's still smiling, though I'm not sure how, because my stomach is sinking, sinking, and my eyes are burning, positively on fire. I'm at a loss for words, my hand over my mouth in a pathetic attempt to cover my shock.

"They knew it was terminal? For sure?"

He nods. "Just by looking at it, the location, the size of it." He holds up his fingers, making a circle with his forefinger and thumb. "About the size of a large marble, give or take. The doctor was, to put it mildly, less than optimistic. There was talk of doing a biopsy, but again, because of the location, there was worry that any procedure would do more harm than good. Radiation was brought up, but I never had the chance to pursue that avenue. Because," he waves his hand, "well, you know what happened next."

I close my eyes, rifling through my memory, and try to remember if there was something I missed in one of our conversations, a hint or a sign that would have told me there was something wrong even when he didn't. But the way he acted those last few days, everything seemed normal.

"Wait." I hold up a finger. "I never got a bill."

"Insurance," he explains. "Credit card for the rest. Unless you looked at the statement, you wouldn't have known." The look he shoots me is one of understanding. "And I take it you didn't?"

No, I didn't look at the statements back then. I was numb, shut off, shut *down*, running strictly on auto pilot. I paid what came in without question, without looking or caring where the money was going. At the time, I'd stopped spending entirely, and any balances we had dropped quickly.

Then a thought hits me, jarring me so much I actually flinch with the realization.

"But what about now?" I ask, my voice hoarse with emotion. "Adrian, are you...oh, my God...are you *dying*?"

It's a question I don't need to ask; I know he is. He must be. If he didn't age, if in his reality he's merely three weeks from that appointment rather than six years, then the damn tumor has to still be there, inside of him, growing, taking over.

I want to scream, throw something, hit something...take the vase I'm looking at right now and fling it against the wall. Because how the hell is this *fair*? What kind of...of...*monster* is running this show? This fucking shitshow called Earth where everything hurts and anything good just gets beaten down or ripped away?

Did the Universe give Adrian back just so it could snatch him away again?

And...oh, God...Ava.

How is she going to take this? On top of everything...

"Hey." Adrian dips his head, his eyes catching mine. "Baby—" He catches himself, clenches his fists, takes a deep

breath. “Lois. You’re spinning.”

I open my mouth to argue—even though I know he’s right—when he beats me to it.

“Just let me finish, okay?” He smiles again, and the corners of his eyes crinkle in that way that I love, the way I’d forgotten about until just now. “I’m not dying.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, try to calm myself. “I don’t understand. If you were before, and nothing has changed...” I motion at him. “I mean, you haven’t aged...”

He nods. “You’re right. I haven’t. Not in the way I should have, anyway.” Then, before I can react, he’s reaching out, grabbing my hands. “But the tumor, the growth, or...or... whatever the hell it was, is gone.”

“Gone? How is that possible?”

He shrugs, and his smile widens. “That’s the thing. It’s not possible. But when I went in for an exam the night I got back, I asked them to check. They did the works, and everything—the scan, bloodwork—came back clear.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. Our hands are still clenched, neither of us eager to let go. “Maybe the first diagnosis was wrong, then. That’s possible, right?”

A shadow falls over his face, and something in his eyes flickers. It’s frustration, disappointment. He wants to believe this. That this miraculous healing happened. That something good came out of something bad. “I haven’t had one headache since I woke up on that mountain,” he tells me now, almost defiantly. “Not one. So no, I don’t believe the first diagnosis was wrong.”

I don’t push it, though a part of me still believes that this supposed miracle could boil down to a simple misdiagnosis. Then again, stranger things have happened. Adrian and Josie reappearing the way they did is proof of that. “But why didn’t you tell me?” I ask. “After? On the way here?”

“Yeah,” he says, grimacing. “Maybe I should have. But I was healthy, in the clear. And you,” he looks around, indicating my home, my life, “had moved on. I really didn’t

think it would matter one way or another, whether I told you or not. And besides, I didn't even really start putting it together until today, with Ava. When I heard about her missing time, I just...I don't know...something finally clicked. I remembered those two days in the woods when I was a kid, the time flux and the way my eye healed almost overnight. That's why I believe her." He squeezes my hands. "*That's* why, Lo. And that's why I don't think that this—whatever happened to her—is necessarily a bad thing."

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Chapter 56

“I’ve been thinking about it.”

Polly takes a sip from her tea and closes her eyes for a few seconds, relishing the flavor, as if what she’s drinking is the most delicious thing she’s ever tasted. That’s one thing I’ve gotten to know about Polly Tomlinson in the short time we’ve been acquainted; she appreciates everything.

We’re sitting in the living room, in two squashy armchairs by the windows facing the lake. Dinner is over, and everyone except for Polly and Andrew have left, heading home, eager to sink back into their routines. I’m more than eager to sink into mine. It feels like forever since I’ve had a normal day, an effortless day, one where I get lost in the mundane, losing myself in the little things that make this simple life so great.

The Tomlinsons, at our invitation, have decided to stay at Midnight Sun awhile longer, with Sam promising to take them up in the air tomorrow to get a bird’s eye view of the lake.

And I’m glad to have them here. Their presence is a comfort as well as a distraction.

Until now, with Polly bringing up the one thing I’d rather not talk about.

I take a sip from my mug and wince. “Please don’t say it’s aliens.”

“More like interdimensional beings. And sure, I guess it could be. Father and daughter, DNA tracking, all that.”

“You’re making me feel so much better.”

She laughs. “Don’t read into it. From everything you and Adrian have told me, I truly don’t think that’s what’s happening here.” She takes a drink, purses her lips. “It sounds like a trauma response. The first time Adrian says he experienced this, he was what? Nine?”

“Seven or eight.”

“That poor boy.” She tsks, shakes her head. “So there you have him—young, alone, hurt, and scared. And same goes for when he was older, getting that diagnosis. How terrified he must have been.” She nods to my right, where Adrian and Ava are bent over a board game at the kitchen table. I can hear the low murmur of their voices, an occasional laugh. “And Ava—I’m sure being in the woods at night and losing Josie threw her into a panic. Maybe the stress ignited a sixth sense, kicked some latent ability into high gear. One they both share, given their genetics.”

I study her face, waiting for the punch line. When she doesn’t crack a smile, I laugh. “A sixth sense? I don’t know. That sounds so...so...farfetched.”

She lifts the mug to her lips. “More farfetched than what happened to Adrian? Disappearing for six years only to come back, having not aged at all?”

“There has to be an explanation,” I say by way of defense.

“Of course there is. There’s an explanation for everything. Doesn’t mean we always understand it.”

I sigh. The more we discuss this, the more I even think on it, the more frustrated I become. “Okay. So say you’re right, what latent sixth sense would you be referring to? Because as far as I know, humans only have five, and the mysterious sixth sense is just a myth.”

“Oh, well.” She waves her hand. “It could be any number of things, really. All-inclusive. It’s theorized that we as humans have many more capabilities than what we believe. That when it comes to consciousness, the five sense we use to navigate this three-dimensional plane are just the tip of the iceberg.”

“And you believe this?”

She shrugs. “I’m open to it. And given the seemingly impossible things I’ve seen on my travels, it’s more likely than not.”

“What have you seen?”

Polly purses her lips. "It would take me all night to speak about the things I've seen. But, to keep it brief, I've witnessed a man in Japan levitate. I've seen a tribe in New Mexico conjure rain while another group in Africa dropped the temperature around their village by forty degrees and made it snow. I've talked to people that have had near death experiences, most of whom woke from these ordeals entirely healed from whatever ailment or injury that brought them to the brink in the first place." She takes a sip, lowers her mug. "And that, my dear, barely scratches the surface."

I can't help it; the look I give her is one of skepticism. "Sounds like coincidences. A trick of shadow and light. Or maybe the plot of a sci-fi movie." I think of the man who levitated, picture Adrian doing the very same thing, and feel ridiculous. "Very X-Men."

Polly cocks her head. "Ex who?"

"Never mind. What I mean is, is that it's hard to believe. That, you know, we have these hidden or undiscovered abilities that are, what, supernatural or something?"

"They only seem supernatural because the majority of us haven't tapped into them yet. If more of us did, then they'd simply be natural."

"Hmm." I give her a look. "You know, you sound very Mulder-like right now."

She laughs. "Now that show, I do know. And I'll take that as a compliment." Shen leans in and mock-whispers, "Now, don't tell Andrew, but I've always had a little crush on that David Duchovny."

She wiggles her brows, and I sputter into my tea. "Don't worry," I promise, alternating between coughing and laughing. "My lips are sealed."

"You know what? Actually," she pauses, nods, "yeah. Never mind. He knows. I can't hide anything from that man." She says this as though she's happy about it, and I'm sure she is. "But anyway. Back to it, then."

“Ah, yes. Back to the theory that Adrian somehow has a *natural* ability to both heal himself and time travel.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s time traveling. But I do think he healed himself. In a way.” She settles back in her chair, crossing one leg over the other. “Do you know that some say there are multiple versions of reality. An infinite number, in fact?”

I arch a brow. “Who says this now?”

“Scientists. Mystics. Though they use different terminology, of course.”

“Well, I’m not a scientist or a mystic, so I doubt I would understand either.”

“And neither am I. So I’ll probably butcher the hell out of this. But let’s just say that there really are multiple versions of reality. Different veins of time, if you will. Then it would stand to reason that in each one, there’s another version of you. And each life choice takes you further away from who you were to begin with.”

“Okay. I’ve heard of something like that. Like, every time I make a decision, reality splits. Like a fork in the road. So suddenly there are two versions of me, one who, say, decided to move to Minnesota, and another who stayed in Washington.”

“Yes, exactly,” she says, snapping her fingers. “And by doing that—so they say—a new reality is born. And each decision you make takes you farther and farther away from the fork in the road. Take me, for instance. My parents were straightlaced, proper and traditional in the most claustrophobic sense. And when I started dating Andrew, why, with his long hair and hippie clothes, they hated him. With a passion.”

“Really.” I look over to where Andrew is sitting with Sam on the couch, paging through photo albums of the Tomlinsons’ travels, and can’t imagine anyone ever hating him.

She nods. “Oh, yes. It was quite the ordeal, but also the typical love story. You know how it goes: he was from the wrong side of the tracks while I was from some hoity toity

well-to-do family. Anyway, my parents tried everything to get me to stop seeing him. One night, they lured a young man from my father's office over to the house for dinner. Sprung him at me right out of the blue!" She flutters her hand in the air and laughs. "My word, was he ever a *square*. But I felt sorry for him, so I was pleasant. He was handsome enough, and the perfect gentlemen. Asked me to go to a movie with him the next evening, and I declined, of course. But I do admit that, for just a moment, I considered it. I'd been getting so much grief from my parents about Andrew, and it was making life so difficult—they refused to let him in the house, we couldn't spend holidays together because, according to my dad, no goddamn hippie was going to sit at *his* table. So when Doug—that was his name—asked me out, I honest to goodness thought about accepting. Because it would have made everything with my family so much easier. And there was still a part of me that longed for my parents' approval. But in the end, I couldn't do it. I loved Andrew. And forty some odd years later, I still do."

"Wow. That's quite a story."

"Well, the point of it is, is this: what if while I said no to Doug, there's another version of me out there who said yes? What if we went to that movie, I ended things with Andrew, and then ended up married to an accountant? How different would my life look? Why, it'd be unrecognizable! *I* would be unrecognizable. Maybe instead of moving around so much that I couldn't even claim responsibility for a dog, I would have lived in the same house my whole life and had kids. Or maybe I would have spent thirty years working as a receptionist in my husband's office instead of traveling the world as a photographer's assistant. Maybe," she pretends to shudder, "I would already be dead, having died of boredom."

Her humor pulls from me an actual smile, which is unlike the ones I've been forcing all day. "That's an interesting theory," I say. "But I really don't see what it has to do with Adrian." *Or Ava*, I add silently. Because I still refuse to believe that their experiences are in any way connected. Blocked time and missing time are two entirely different things.

“Well, if that theory is correct, then that one split second decision—where I could have said yes or no—would have created an entirely new branch of reality, stemming from *that very moment*. A reality that looks nothing like the one I’m living now, with a whole new set of experiences, like wealth or, in Adrian’s case, *health*. And certain circumstances specific to that new reality could have led to sickness, disease. As for Adrian, perhaps he—unconsciously—found a way to jump realities. Or timelines, as I’ve heard them called. Maybe he tapped into a version of himself that wasn’t sick, that never had that growth in his brain, and somehow, he brought that reality into this one. Like a survival mechanism.”

“That’s not possible.” Then, daring to hope, I say, “I mean, is that possible?”

Because yes, even though this is a theory that I can’t even begin to wrap my mind around, it’s better than aliens.

“I’ve seen a lot of things during my travels with Andrew. Met all sorts of people. And let me just tell you, the only thing I know for sure is that *anything* is possible.”

Anything is possible. That’s a beautiful and terrifying thought.

Watching Ava and Adrian now over at the kitchen table, I’m struck with the thought that I could lose either of them—again—at any time.

But really, that’s the way it is with anyone, isn’t it?

Here one minute, gone the next. Regardless of age, whether or not they’re healthy or sick. It doesn’t matter if the good-bye is long or short, or whether you even get a good-bye at all.

“It’s the not knowing,” I say, more to myself than to Polly. “Constantly wondering if it’s going to happen again. Always on edge.”

Polly sets down her drink and leans over, taking my hand in hers. “Sweetie, anything can happen at any time. Doesn’t matter if it’s natural or supernatural. That’s why we live in the

moment, appreciate what we have right now. It's the only certainty we'll ever get."

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Chapter 57

Anything can happen at any time.

Polly's words stick with me. Day after day, week after week, as I sit on pins and needles, waiting for something to happen.

So far, nothing has.

And according to Sam, it probably never will. "We don't know anything for sure," he told me the other night as we sat in bed, him with a book and me with my computer, searching—as I'd been doing every night since Ava's return—for answers. Something to explain what happened, reduce it to terms I could understand and, therefore, work to prevent.

Now, two months later, I've been down a few rabbit holes, but they just lead to more questions. I'm learning that there's so much more to this world than I ever could have imagined, and that Adrian's and Ava's experiences are just a small drop in a random pot of wonderful and terrifying weirdness. It's scary, sometimes, learning about those things hovering just beyond the reach of our understanding.

Always, though, it's liberating.

In the end, wouldn't we rather know than not?

Adrian, on the other hand, is quite content with everything. Though he hasn't said it, he acts as if he has a special bond with Ava now—one that Sam doesn't share. He's easing into the role of fatherhood more and more as the days go by.

As for us, we're cordial, polite, even friendly. But it's like what we had is slipping away, dissolving into something else, something I can't quite name. There's still so much love between us, so much that I feel it every time I'm in his presence. The swell of emotion in my chest whenever he's near comes in waves, breaking over me like a warm caress.

And it's good, whatever it is that's happening between us, this new role of no-longer-lovers yet so-much-more-than-friends.

I'm happy he's back.

During Ava's absence and perhaps even more after, I've felt closer to Adrian than I ever have before. But not in a romantic way, in the love-or-die desperation that you see in movies, read about in romance novels. It's as if there's another level of love beyond what knew as husband and wife, a connection that runs deeper than the flesh, transcends carnal desires. Adrian is my soulmate; he filled in the broken parts of me that I never thought could be healed.

And he gave me Ava.

I'm learning that not everything can be expressed in words. That some things—like the feelings we have for others—can't be put into a box and labeled, all nice and neat. Sometimes, they're just too big, too intense, too deep to express in simple, earthly terms.

“I know now.”

Adrian says this to me one day, right before Christmas, when we're making a run into town for provisions. The Tomlinsons are still with us—they've pretty much adopted Adrian as their own—and Jenna and Roy will also be at the table. Sam's sister is flying down from New York for the holiday and bringing her husband and three children with her. Our cozy little cabin is about to get even cozier, and I couldn't be more excited.

“You know what?” I crack the window a bit, because I'm always hot, and the cab of Adrian's truck feels like a sauna. The frigid air rushes in, a welcome relief, and bites at my cheeks.

Adrian, who's always cold, gives me the side-eye, making me laugh. As always, he anticipates my needs and, feigning annoyance, reaches out, adjusting the heat. Then, directing his attention back to the road, he says, “How it was for you. What you went through while I was gone.”

I don't know what to say. We haven't talked about his disappearance in a while, choosing instead to keep our focus in the present. Most of our conversations revolve around Ava. It's the one thing all three of us—Sam, Adrian, and myself—are comfortable with. United by love, we're able to push our own issues aside.

“When Ava went missing, it was like my entire world ended. I know we'd only met the week before but, damn Lo, I already loved her so much. And when I woke up that night and saw that she wasn't on the couch? I lost it. It was like time stopped, and I was caught in this never-ending moment that felt like hell. I didn't know if she was hurt or scared or...or...” His jaw tightens. “I don't even want to say half of what I was thinking at the time.”

“It's okay,” I tell him, remembering. “I'm pretty sure we were thinking the same things.”

He gives me a sheepish smile. “Yeah. I'm sure we were.”

We drive for a few minutes in silence, the old two-lane road flanked by fields of towering evergreens. Heavy with snow, their branches bend from the weight, but they don't break.

“I can't imagine how you made it through six years. I barely made it through four days.”

“I had Sam.” This is a gut response, an answer I give without thought. Because it's true. Even before Ava, it was Sam that held me up, gave me the desire to keep going. Helped me heal in much the same way Adrian did, all those years ago.

“I know. And I'm glad.” Adrian looks at me, lifts his brows. “I am. Believe me. Now that I know how it felt? I wouldn't want that for you. Alone, raising Ava on your own. I'm sorry I wasn't able to say it honestly before, but I can now. I'm happy you had someone.” He swallows, takes a deep breath. “I'm happy you had Sam.”

I smile my thanks, even though there's still a slight air of discomfort around this topic. Though, thankfully, it seems to

be diminishing, because Adrian grins back, and when he does, it reaches his eyes.

“So,” he says, changing the subject, “you know the Tomlinsons are leaving after the holidays, right?”

“Yeah. Heading to Texas, aren’t they?”

Steering with his wrist, Adrian turns the wheel slightly, veering from the left lane to the right. “Yep. Buying a condo. Andrew wants to get to warmer weather. This cold isn’t doing his leg any favors. Anyway, I was thinking—”

“Ope! There’s the exit.” I point and, almost missing it, Adrian steers us off the highway and onto the ramp faster than he should, causing me to slide in my seat. We skid on some black ice, and as Adrian struggles to steady the wheel, the tires skim sideways across the pavement. Spinning, they can’t grab any traction, and we skate off the road and into the ditch, slamming into a snowbank with a dull thump.

Or maybe the thump was my head as it smacked the window.

The world goes black, but only for a second, because Adrian is on me, palms against my cheeks, warm and trembling. “Lois!”

I wince, try to push up in my seat. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

But Adrian has me pinned, hands still on my face, his breath tickling my lips. “Look at me.”

I do, and smile when I see the concern in his eyes. “I’m fine,” I say again.

He doesn’t listen, instead lifting a finger in front of my face and forcing me to follow it from side to side while assessing my pupils.

“I’m fine,” I insist, and again he ignores me.

“Do you feel nauseous? Headache?”

“No, and no.” I reach up, running my fingers over the side of my head. “But there’s a lump already. It’s small but—”

Adrian is already nudging my hand away, feeling the spot I was referring to, his brows drawn, his expression grim. Then, gently, he moves his thumb over my forehead, brushing aside a lock of hair, causing me to sigh, because his touch is still so familiar, so soothing...so wanted.

I thought I was past this.

I may never be past this.

“I think you’re fine,” Adrian says, though he doesn’t move, doesn’t pull back or take his hand from my face. His body is hovering just over mine, so close, too close.

“I told you I was.” My voice comes in a whisper, because anything louder would be unnecessary.

Also, he’s taking my breath away.

His eyes are on me, and his lips are there, right *there*, and it’s the memories, those damn memories, that almost do me in. Because when I’m around Adrian, I can’t seem to stay in the present. I can’t hold onto the Lois I’ve become—fiancé, mother, owner of a resort on Lake Superior. A woman who waded through waves of grief so deep they almost pulled her under.

I thought I survived, reached the surface, was safe from the pull of the tide.

But I was fooling myself.

“Adrian, I—”

Two sharp knocks on the driver’s side window jerk us apart, and my head throbs with each smack of the glass. I look over Adrian’s shoulder, see a man with a bright orange stocking cap and bushy beard peering in at us. His nose is bulbous and red with cold, and he presses it against the glass along with a mittened hand.

“You two need a pull?”

Chapter 58

“Adrian thinks you should go to the hospital. Just in case.”

I’m in bed, the covers up to my chin thanks to Sam, who swept me up and tucked me in the moment I got home. After getting pulled from the ditch, Adrian tried to get me to go to the nearest hospital for a quick check, but I refused, insisting that we continue on to the store and finish our holiday shopping.

Adrian, of course, drove me straight home.

Now, confined to bed with a million things to do in the next two days, I’m cranky. “I’m fine. Honestly.”

But Sam, like Adrian, doesn’t listen. “He says to watch for headaches, nausea, slurred speech...” He looks at me. “Say, ‘Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.’”

I glare back. “I’m not saying that.”

He smirks. “Stubborn, defiant...beautiful in bed. Yeah, I’d say you’re fine.”

“Stop,” I say, blushing, and then try to squirm away when he drops down next to me. He buries his face in my hair and tickles my sides, making me laugh, making me smile, reminding me that this is the life I chose, the life I wanted, the life I came back from the dead for.

And it’s the life I still want, even though Adrian is back.

It’s just really, really hard to remember this when I’m around him, close to him. Like this afternoon, when—for just a few heady moments—we were little more than a heartbeat away.

“You’re terrible. Seriously.” I’m breathless from laughing. “Besides,” I say, batting his hand away from my waist, “don’t you have things to do? Reindeer to wrangle? Christmas shopping to finish?”

“My Christmas shopping is finished,” he says. “As for the wrangling...” He dips his head and, with a low growl, goes for the sensitive spot between my neck and shoulder.

I squeal even before his lips make purchase, closing my eyes and twisting my body away only to have Sam pull me against him even tighter. I’m laughing so hard I’m wheezing, and tears spring to my eyes, wetting my closed lids, my lashes.

When the sense of being watched nudges them open, I see a blurred outline in the open door to our bedroom, hand raised as if to knock on the frame. I blink and Adrian comes into focus, a Tupperware container in his hand, his expression blank, arm frozen in midair.

Our eyes meet, and as if on cue, he knocks on the door frame, twice, belated and unnecessary at this point.

Sam and I push apart, our faces flushed, the ghost of a laugh still on our lips. “Hey,” I say, loudly, unnaturally. I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, and then immediately brush it forward, if only to cover the rush of blood in my cheeks, which is glaringly opposite to the pale of Adrian’s.

This is the first time that Adrian has ever seen the two of us in an intimate situation. Out of respect, Sam and I have refrained from our usual displays of public affection, waiting until we’re alone to indulge in even the smallest act of intimacy.

“Polly,” is all he says.

I lift a brow and Sam clears his throat, sliding off the bed. “Ah,” he says, so casually you’d think all of this was perfectly normal. “Polly’s infamous potato soup.” He takes it from Adrian, and cracks the lid. The smell hits the air, making my mouth water despite the awkwardness of the situation. I haven’t eaten all day, and suddenly I feel ravenous.

Adrian’s smile is forced, though I doubt anyone but me would be able to tell. “She claims the stuff can grow back a limb.”

Sam chuckles, handing it to me. “I don’t doubt it.”

I take the soup, noting that Polly has added a copious amount of black pepper, just the way I like it. My heart warms. “Tell her thanks for me.” Then, looking around, “No spoon?”

“Shit. I’ll go and—” Adrian starts to turn away, but Sam stops him.

“No need. I was just heading downstairs before you came. Lois,” he says, turning back to me and smirking, “wants her laptop so she can look up information on concussions to prove she doesn’t have one.”

I groan. “Because I don’t.”

Adrian rolls his eyes. “You might.” Then, to Sam, “I brought the groceries in. Put away the stuff that needs to be refrigerated. But I wasn’t sure where to put the rest of it, so I left it on the counter. Hope that’s okay.” He holds out a key, which Sam takes.

“No problem. I’ll take care of the rest. And hey, thanks for doing that, by the way. Gives Lois one less excuse to try and get out of bed.” Sam gives me a wink before disappearing through the door.

We listen to the thud of his footfalls as he jogs down the steps, the silence between us stretching uncomfortably while we do, and I get the sense that Adrian is waiting for privacy before he speaks.

“So...” he says, shoving his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels. He takes in our bedroom: the view of the water beyond the windows, the forest green comforter, the antique dresser and nightstands. The pictures on the walls—an engagement gift from a local photographer friend of ours—display different perspectives of Lake Superior, and the framed photograph on the nightstand next to my elbow is of me and Sam, a candid shot taken the day we got the keys to Midnight Sun. We’re mugging for the camera, arms wrapped around each other and smiles bright.

“You went back out to the store?” I ask. So that’s why he’s here, in the house. I thought it strange that he would just walk in, unannounced.

He nods. “Well, figured I might as well. I found your list in the truck.”

My stomach drops. “You...I mean...you found it.”

“Yeah.” The look he gives me is flat, emotionless. “I did.”

“Oh.” For a moment, it’s all I can think to say. Then, “Well, thanks.”

I wonder if he got...

“I got everything on it,” he says, answering my unasked question. “*Everything.*” He steps closer, pulling a small paper bag from the pocket of his coat as he does. “I wasn’t sure if you wanted this left with the rest of the bags downstairs, so...”

I take it from him, feel the rectangular shape against my palm.

“I guess congratulations are in order.” Something flashes in his eyes, a flurry of emotions I can’t even begin to decipher, and before I can get my befuddled tongue to work, before I can gather my thoughts enough to spit out a word, he turns on his heel and leaves.

Gone, just like that.

I open the bag, and a box containing a pregnancy test slides into my open hand.

Chapter 59

Christmas Eve is busy and full, and it's such a sharp contrast to the quiet holidays of my past that it becomes, at times, almost overwhelming. After an early turkey dinner with all the trimmings, Sam hands me my coat and, with a knowing smile, tells me he'll clean up. He knows how much I'm aching to escape outside to the quiet, the cold, the serenity that only nature can bring. Tucked away in a corridor off the kitchen, away from prying eyes, I lift up on my toes and kiss him hard, this man who knows my heart, who never judges my quirks but tends to them with kindness and understanding.

He rests his hand on my stomach before we part, dropping a kiss to my forehead.

This morning, curled up in bed and with snow falling outside our windows, I told him he was going to be a father.

I've never in all my life seen someone so excited.

There's a fire in the back yard, burning bright in our stone pit, one that Sam started this afternoon for the kids while they played in the snow. He kept it tended for guests who wanted to step outside with a warm drink, and as I approach it now, I see someone beside it, a form melting out of the shadows, shoulders hunched against the cold, hands deep in his pockets.

We haven't spoken in two days, since that afternoon in my bedroom, when he handed me the test that would tell me I was pregnant with another man's child.

He's been around, of course. Sharing the holiday with Ava, with the Tomlinsons. Even Jenna and Roy have grown fond of him, of the way he helps around the property, often remarking on his diligent work effort and kind heart.

But we haven't spoken. Our paths haven't crossed; rather, they've wound around each other in an almost sinuous way, one of us always managing to skirt the other at the last minute.

I suspect we're both to blame for this.

"Hey," I say to him now, and when he turns, the way the firelight catches his face alters the beat of my heart, sends it racing in my chest. This is the way I used to feel when I saw Adrian, when he would walk into a room or turn to look at me...that first glance, my heart never ready for it, despite all of our years together.

Everything has changed, and yet nothing has.

"Taking a breather?" I joke.

He makes a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "You could say." Rocking back on his heels, his boots crunching in the snow, he nods, his gaze drifting over my shoulder. "Full house tonight."

I twist around, take in the view of our home. Light, the color of honey, spills out of the windows, casting a warm glow over the snow. Every once in a while, someone will appear in the frame, their shadow stretching across the yard, as if their soul is with us, out here in the dark, even when their body is not.

"Yeah. Sort of overwhelming, isn't it? I mean, in a good way."

"Of course," Adrian says, his head bobbing. "Definitely in a good way."

I wonder if he's thinking back to our quiet Thanksgivings, Christmases, when it was just the two of us, alone, spending the day binging television or gearing up for a lung-bursting hike in the Cascades. Together, with no one else to please but ourselves, we could do whatever we wanted. But when the day was over and the holiday tucked behind us on the calendar, I always felt a strange sense of lack, as if I'd just lost something and could never get it back.

And now, surrounded by people, all of whom I love, I feel that strange sense of lack, as if I just lost something and can never get it back.

It's always this or that, one or the other. And in the end, we're never satisfied with either.

I cross my arms over my chest, bounce on the balls of my feet. It would be warmer by the fire, but I stay where I am, hesitant to get too close.

To the flames.

To Adrian.

I thought things between us were getting better. I thought we were evolving. But maybe we'll always be this way, awkward in each other's presence, fitful in the roles we chose.

Only Adrian didn't choose his role, *this* role, the one I've pushed him into.

Maybe I need to let him go.

Maybe bringing him here was as much for me as it was for Ava.

Maybe even more so.

It's funny, isn't it? The lengths we'll go to satisfying our own desperate needs?

I convinced myself that this was the best place for Adrian to be.

Now, I think, I might have been wrong.

Because how can he start a new life with the old one—at least, an aspect of it—staring him in the face?

I'm looking at his shadow in the snow, not daring to bring my eyes to his, and when he shifts, steps closer to the fire, it merges with mine. Two tangled phantoms, our past a muted echo of who we are today.

“Do you remember that Christmas we hiked up to Rattlesnake Ledge?” he asks. “Had turkey sandwiches and wine? I think it was Whidbey Island Port?”

I can't help but smile. That Christmas was, to date, one of my favorites. “It was sleeting the entire time. I totally biffed it halfway up and landed in a puddle. Spent the rest of the day with a wet ass.”

Adrian laughs, and when I chance a glance at his face, I'm relieved to see that he's smiling, his eyes crinkled at the corners, his head thrown back. "Yeah, you were the epitome of grace, that day."

I huff, pretend to be annoyed. Truth be told, I was always a klutz on the trail. Never as nimble or sure-footed as my husband, who trekked those mountains as if he was a very part of the land itself, more wild than tame. Still, though, I try to defend my honor. "It was *icy*, Adrian."

He gives me the side-eye. Because we both know I would have fallen whether or not there was ice on the trail.

"Whatever," I mumble, stepping closer to the fire and putting my hands out.

Adrian just shakes his head, grinning. "But what I remember most about that day—aside from your wet ass—is how, once we got to the top, the sleet stopped, the sun came out, and stayed out for our entire meal." He's close enough now that he nudges my arm with his elbow. "Remember that?"

"You're right," I say, thinking back. "Didn't it start pouring again though, like, the minute we were done?"

He nods. "Yep. The sky opened up a few seconds after we packed everything away."

"We got lucky," I say, rubbing my hands together.

"Maybe."

A burst of laughter, muted and soft, seeps from the house, followed by the soft thrum of music. Sounds like Sam has gotten out his guitar. Which means I should get back inside.

Adrian turns to look, the sound drawing his attention. "Or maybe not."

I breathe deep, taking in one last lungful of the clean cold air. "Maybe not what?" I ask, my mind already back inside, thinking about pulling Ava onto my lap, my chin resting on her head, while we listen to Sam play our favorite holiday carols. It's our tradition, has been since she was born, back when we were simply friends and nothing more.

“The timing. The way the sleet stopped and the sun came out, but just long enough for us to eat. To have our holiday meal.”

I swing my head back his way. “It was a fortunate coincidence.”

“I don’t know. I mean, it was more than a break in the bad weather, Lo. It was too perfect to be random.” He shifts, works his mouth for a second, as if working up the courage to say what he’s about to say. “It was the first time—the very first time in my entire life—that I thought maybe, just maybe, there might be something out there. Something more than just the nothing I always believed. And I’m not talking about a god or anything like that. But some sort of intelligence, that’s possibly even an extension of us, of the...the *soul* we’re supposed to have. Like, on some level that day, you or I or maybe even both of us, affected the weather. Hell, I know that sounds crazy.”

“That doesn’t sound crazy at all.”

He looks at me, cocks his head. “No?”

I shake mine. “No.”

“I’ve been starting to think lately that everything has a point. That everything that happens to us—good and bad—has a purpose. Like,” he gives me a self-deprecating grin, “you were saying earlier.”

I remember. Back on the road, when I confessed how I was beginning to believe that everything happened for a reason, that nothing was a random chance of convenience, and how he bristled at the very thought, at the idea that what happened to him on that mountain six years ago—the thing that took him away from his life, from *me*—was supposed to happen.

Somehow, I feel his next words before he says them.

As always with Adrian, our communication happens on another level, a higher plane of existence.

“I’m leaving.”

Chapter 60

I'm leaving.

Even though I was ready for it, hearing this declaration spoken out loud feels like a punch.

“You’re leaving?” I ask this with shock in my voice, as if I’m actually surprised. As if I didn’t already know this on some level, as if I wasn’t contemplating this very scenario only moments ago.

Tight-lipped, he nods. Then, blowing out a breath, he says, “I’ve been thinking about it. You know. For the last few weeks. But after...” He pauses; I know the words he’s swallowing right this minute and can pretty much finish the sentence for myself.

...finding out you’re pregnant.

“It’s just...it’s time,” he says instead.

I nod. I can’t dispute this. It’s not fair to keep him here, tethered to a wife who’s having another man’s child. Even taking Ava into consideration, the circumstances are... extenuating.

“What...” I clear my throat, surprised at the way my voice catches, at the tears that threaten but don’t fall. With Adrian, there’s always so much emotion, sometimes too much, and I can never seem to ground myself with him around. “What are your plans? I mean, where are you going?” Because still, I worry. I suppose I always will.

“To Texas. With Andrew and Polly. I think it’s for the best. A change of scenery, something entirely different from everything I’ve known.” He nods, as if needing to convince himself as much as me. “I think it’s the best way to...forget.”

“Forget?” It slips out without thought, a smokey wisp of a word, pluming white in the cold night.

He tilts his head, his lips drawn in a sad smile. “You know what I mean. Maybe *move on* is more accurate.”

“I get it,” I say, and I do. But I don’t like it. The thought of him moving on. Which is selfish, really, because I already have. Though, with Adrian here, it’s like I’ve been caught in a game of tug-of-war, slipping further from the life I’ve been living and into a new one altogether. One that in no way mirrors the present, yet doesn’t fully reflect the past, either.

This is for the best.

This is too damn hard.

“And I’ll be in touch with Ava every day,” he says. “Because I still want to be a part of her life, Lo. I don’t want you to think that just because I’m leaving that I’m leaving *her*.”

“I know,” I say. “You’re leaving me.” I laugh, though the emotion swelling in my throat cuts it short. It sounds more like a choked sob, though my eyes are dry, the tears at bay.

I have no reason to feel bad about this, to feel sad and abandoned.

Because Adrian isn’t mine. Not anymore.

“I’m sorry, Lo.”

I wave him off, like I’m not dying inside. I made my choice, as painful as it was to make. This is the end result. The consequence I couldn’t avoid.

Because regardless of who I chose, I was always going to end up with a broken heart.

We don’t say anything for a while. The fire crackles and snaps, dying slowly, as I am, as I’m sure Adrian is.

We’re dying so we can live again.

“You had six years,” he says, finally, “to forget me.”

I jerk, my breath snapping out of me in a sharp gasp. “Adrian, I never—”

“Lo,” he says, holding up a hand. “I didn’t mean it that way. What I meant was, you had six years of separation, I guess you could say. Distance from me, from our life together. I haven’t even had three months. This,” he swings his arms around, “feels like a dream. Or a nightmare. Or...or...what I’m trying to say is that it doesn’t feel *real*. I look at you, and I still see my wife.” He shrugs, and for a moment, his face crumbles. “I can’t help it. I miss you, Lo. Every single day I miss you. And the more I see you? Hell, it just makes me miss you more.”

And here I thought, all this time, that Adrian and I were slipping into a different type of relationship. How foolish.

“I’ve been selfish,” I say. “Keeping you here. I said it was for Ava—I *told* myself it was for Ava—but really, honestly, it was for...me.”

He takes a step closer, then another, and suddenly he’s so close that his breath mingles with mine. “That may be true, but it wasn’t the only reason. You were right,” he says, shrugging. “Where else was I supposed to go?”

Where else indeed?

There was nowhere.

Until now.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” I ask, looking up at him, into his eyes, in a way I’ll probably never do again. “How things work out? How you met Polly and Andrew at exactly the right time, out there on the road, in that hotel parking lot?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he says, taking his hands out of his pockets and reaching for mine. “If I really think about it, it’s not that weird at all.”

And he smiles.

Chapter 61

When you're on the road as much as we are, no one's a stranger and everyone's family.

Polly's wise words.

However, I think I need to amend them just a bit.

Whether you're on the road or not, no one's a stranger and everyone's family.

It's the co-worker we merely tolerate, the person behind the cash register at the grocery store, the waitress we see every week working hard to serve us our meals. It's the UPS driver who tells jokes so lame they're funny, and the customer service rep on the other end of the phone, who's just trying to do her job and support her family in the best way that she can.

It's the people we pass on the street, whose eyes we ever meet, and the ones we outright avoid, lingering on the corners, signs in their hands and a dirty backpack at their feet.

It's the politicians with their fake smiles and slimy wit, and the teachers who work their tails off to teach our kids while receiving too little in return.

It's even Bobby Mead, who made me cry my junior year of high school because he called me fat, and Jenny Stokes, who was standing right beside me when he did and told him to fuck off.

It's the people we never even see, the ones who are hundreds or thousands of miles away, living lives so different from ours that we can't even begin to fathom what it would be like to step into their shoes.

This, right here.

This is our family.

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Chapter 62

Adrian left on a Wednesday.

Josie would be staying with us; already attached to Ava, it was Adrian's gift to his daughter, a gentle soul to watch over her while he was gone.

Snow had fallen the night before, and when Ava and I brought Josie out to say goodbye, it was to a world cast in crystal, the sunlight a golden overlay, catching each fallen flake and making it sparkle.

It was magical and it was terrible, and the way the frigid air kept catching in my throat made it hard to breathe.

Or maybe it was just being so near to Adrian.

For the very last time.

Because he was going to go out into the world, start living a life that I wasn't—and would never be—a part of. He would have experiences that we wouldn't share, ones we couldn't laugh about or joke about or cry about together. He would make friends, meet women, have relationships...maybe even get married again. He might even have children, maybe a boy this time, a miniature version of himself with the same dark hair, bright eyes, cocky grin, and free spirit.

I almost lost it then—picturing Adrian in this new life with a new wife and baby—until I remembered the little being of my own that I was carrying, that intuition hinted was a boy, a little version of Sam, someone who'll mirror his father's quiet strength, soulful eyes, and deep intelligence.

When I thought of *this*, my strength returned.

And I was able to let Adrian go.

Epilogue

In time, I was also able to let go of the circumstances surrounding Adrian's disappearance, along with my worries concerning Ava's time in the woods, where she seemed to skip days, slowing time until we could find her.

She has little memory of it, in fact, and rarely talks about it at all. When she does, it's always remembered as a great adventure, but one she promises—with a teenage roll of her eyes that's beyond her years—not to embark on again without, in her words, “parental supervision”.

The unanswered questions no longer haunt me as they once did.

Like Adrian, I'm moving on.

In the beginning, after he left and it was just us again—us and Josie—I thought of Polly's words often. The woman, for all of her worldly experience, is full of such wisdom.

“...anything can happen at any time. Doesn't matter if it's natural or supernatural. That's why we live in the moment, appreciate what we have right now. It's the only certainty we'll ever get.”

I think of this now, as we stand in the same spot that we stood a year earlier to bid Adrian farewell.

And now...as I watch Adrian's truck lumber up the drive, see his grinning face behind the windshield, and warn Ava to hold tighter to Josie's leash so she doesn't bound away.

And now...as I reach behind me to grab Sam's hand, who's standing steady at my back, our son bundled up in his strong arms.

And now...as I watch Adrian hop from the cab of his truck, his skin kissed by the Texas sun, his arms spread wide as Ava rushes into them.

And now...

And now...

And now...

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About the Author

Lisa lives a quiet life in the country with her husband and dog. In 2022, she received her certificate in end-of-life studies, and is currently volunteering as a Death Doula. I'LL BE SEEING YOU is her eighth novel. Her next book, SOLSTICE, is scheduled to be released in late 2023.

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