

the  
*Bigger*  
Picture



VIOLET MORLEY

# **The Bigger Picture**

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### **Credits**

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# Acknowledgments

My wife has taken up the job of cheerleader, and I'm pretty sure I wouldn't get very far without her. Not only because she is the designated driver but because she picks me up when I'm down. Thanks for being my rock, my roll, and my music.

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# **Dedication**

For my wife, without you I wouldn't be here

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# Chapter One

## *Changes*

“Will you marry me?” Marshal asked. He was down on one knee, offering a glittering band nestled in a black velvet case.

Sage stared into the eyes of her soon-to-be fiancé. As she stood under the stage lights, beads of sweat built up on her forehead as Marshal waited for her answer.

Marshal was an arguably attractive man. His surgically repaired eyesight allowed his hazel eyes to shine without the hindrance of the large frames he'd sported in college. The bright ring lights, which helped illuminate the live feed of his social media, outlined Marshal's irises. The proposal was a timed dance, planned down to the minute to ensure it appeared both spontaneous and whimsical. The only thing not previously orchestrated at this moment was the sting of tears in the corner of Sage's eyes, threatening but not ready to spill over as she tried to swallow her emotions.

Her mind filled with memories of the first time she'd found herself in this position. The love of her life down on one knee, asking for forever. Closing her eyes, she pulled the memory close to her chest and summoned years of acting to whisper the three letters everyone in the shadows was waiting to hear.

“Yes,” Sage finally choked out before Marshal scrambled up to wrap his arms around her and twirl them across the shiny ballroom floor.

Flashes burst from cameras near them as everyone in the shadows captured the moment.

“You had me worried there. Thought you were going to say no for a second.” Marshal's words pierced her heart.

“I wouldn't do that to you. We're in this together.” Sage's voice cracked with emotion on the last word.



Before Marshal could respond, someone walked up to their little circle, wrapping long arms around them both. Sage stiffened until the calming scent of mint helped identify the person. “That was fabulous. You two will light up the black and white photos in the newspapers. Friday’s papers will hold the announcements. Local news will be huge, but I also foresee national outlets commenting on this, especially if it’s a slow news day.”

Ivan, Marshal’s assistant, time manager, and general Marshal-herder, barely took a breath as they disentangled from the couple and went back to fiddling on their ever-present phone. Sage stared at the device, wondering when it or Ivan’s fingers would start smoking.

“Just a few more photos, right this way.” Ivan finally put the phone away long enough to gesture to the side where a fidgeting photographer waited for the couple.

“Are you sure we don’t have enough? It’s not like this is the wedding.” Sage gripped Marshal’s arm. The people, production, and limelight were getting to her. She was used to the attention when she worked on a play, but then, there were other ensemble members to take some of the recognition. In an engagement there was no hiding, and the attention was overwhelming.

“Thank you for doing this. I know it’s not easy,” Marshal whispered into her hair as more flashes burst around them, ensuring Sage would see a white blob in the middle of her vision for a few hours.

“It’s the least I can do.” Sage felt her face tighten as she arranged it into a smile. She was out of practice, so the movement felt uncomfortable and stiff. She wiggled her mouth, trying to loosen up her muscles, mindful that she needed to relax or she might look constipated for the pictures that would grace the media outlets.

“Alright, I think I have what I need. Why don’t you grab some food?” The photographer spoke to her camera as she flicked through the viewer.

A hand on Sage's back guided her to the next stop. On the way, she wondered if this would now be her life—a well-oiled dance of preconceived steps. The thought would have been depressing a few years ago, but now it was almost refreshing not to think. Instead, she could float through life, standing, smiling, and wearing what polled best as she became a politician's partner.

A glass of champagne found its way to Sage's hand and she watched the bubbles rise then pop in the smooth glass. The scent of alcohol turned her stomach, but the strawberries floating on top made her mouth water.

She inhaled the sweet aroma and the carbon tickled her nose, making her sneeze. The glass tumbled to the ground, splashing her red heels. A hive of activity bustled around her, sweeping up the mess. Sage was left standing in a pile of destruction, trying to figure out where she fit in this new normal. People filled the room, and she had never felt so alone.

Sage pulled the blanket under her chin, trying to get back to the previous dream. Hair tickled along her thighs as someone worked their way south. Moaning, she reached to the head but found it had disappeared in her wakefulness, the tingle of arousal subsiding as well. Using her hand to rub the last of the sleep out of her eyes, she winced when her new ring scraped along her eyelids. Somehow, even weeks later, she was still not used to the fact she was now engaged to her best friend.

Wanting to catch Marshal before he left for work, Sage grunted as she got out of bed and stood in front of her closet. Over the course of the weeks since the ring went on her finger, her wardrobe had grown to accommodate more suits and skirts that would be helpful for a politician's fiancée. There was even a ball gown Ivan's partner, Leon, had designed for an upcoming gala. Sage wasn't looking forward to dealing with all the people and trying to schmooze for money, but at least the gown was impeccable.

Walking down the hallways, she couldn't help but feel the echoes of someone else's life. Photos of Marshal and his twin sister lined the walls. Toothy grins as they aged showed a history of their lives in the house. She'd been living with Marshal for a year, and still, the walk down this hallway always felt the loneliest.

As she rounded the corner to the informal dining room, Sage's mouth watered. From the doorway, she took full inhale of the sweet and earthy smell of coffee and whatever pastry spread had been placed in the middle of the table.

"Hey, how did you sleep?" Marshal's voice crackled from disuse. He motioned to the steaming French press as she sat down. "A splash of cashew milk, right?" He asked, already sliding the container across the table to her.

"Mmhmm, thank you." Her cheeks warmed when she pulled the steaming mug to her lips. "I still don't understand how you can live in Seattle, also known as coffee-central, and not like this liquid magic." Sage squinted at Marshal's cup filled with black tea. "I'm pretty sure I saw someone gas up their car using the coffee at Starbucks." She scraped the spoon along the mug, wincing slightly at the clang that echoed in her ears.

"You can't sit there and say it's still coffee with the pump of sugar and nut milk you dump in the drink. It's bitter and gross on its own." He passed her a cheeky smile before flicking the paper open further.

"Who reads the papers anymore? You have five electronic doodads. Why not read an article on your tablet?" Sage pulled the device to her and tapped the code. Her code had changed only once since her college days, but Marshal's had stayed the same.

"Doodads? You sound like my sister." Marshal laughed, shaking his head. "I like the feeling of the paper in my hand, and the smell just can't be replicated."

"I should invent a paper-scented candle to burn while reading," Sage mused out loud as she tried not to huff indignantly at being compared to his sister. Of all people. She

bared her lip unconsciously but quickly schooled her features when the paper crinkled.

“It’s probably already been thought of,” he remarked without looking up.

“Probably,” she conceded with a sip of coffee. The sweet and creamy taste hit the back of her tongue. “What time do we have to be at the fundraiser tonight?” She reached for a vegan croissant.

When she had first moved into the house, she was surprised to have food just ready and waiting on the table. Andrea, the live-in housekeeper and general go-to for almost anything around the house, had a way with pastries that made Sage whimper the first time she tried one.

“Seven. It’s loaded in our shared calendar, though. Ivan has someone arranged if you need help with clothes, makeup, and such. I’m going straight from the office, so we’ll have to take separate cars. One will be out front for you at six.”

“I can’t believe Seattle traffic, making us have to leave an hour early to travel five miles.” When she spoke, croissant crumbs tumbled down the wrong pipe. Sage’s eyes watered as she coughed to clear her throat before sipping her coffee to help the rest of the pastry down.

“I know, and it seems to be getting worse.” The newspaper crinkled as Marshal folded it and smoothed it against the table. Concern crinkled his brows, which Sage waved off.

The traffic had been somewhat of a shock when she moved from Central Washington to go to school at the University of Washington. Her expectations of traffic were nonexistent when the most she’d had to deal with was a slight slowdown when tourists were in town. So, it was a rude awakening when she once had to drive from Bellevue to Kirkland, a mere ten mile distance, at rush hour. She was sitting in traffic for thirty minutes before she realized she’d be late for her audition.

“Tasha will be here at five,” Marshal said, picking up his tea and taking a sip.

“Who’s Tasha?” Sage asked, her mind drifting away from traffic.

“She’s who Ivan found to help with hair, makeup, and clothes for the event.” Marshal provided a good-natured eyeroll at her lack of attention.

“I can manage to dress myself, so go ahead and cancel Tasha, but I’m sure Ivan will give me notes if I mess up somehow.” She hid her humor behind the pastry, wondering when she’d get used to a team of people ready to beautify her. It’s not like he was an actor or anything, either. Who knew politicians and their partners required so much assistance?

“About that... Ivan asked if it was possible to ixnay on the pink hair, and instead go with your natural hair color since the ombre isn’t polling well.” Marshal had the good sense to look chagrined as he pointed to the bottom half of her long hair that went from her natural dirty blonde to bright pink.

Sage’s shoulders slumped. She loved her hairstyle, a selection based on needing something new. She pulled at her two toned strands, knowing this was what she’d signed up for. She’d promised to help where she could in getting Marshal elected, and if that meant changing her hairstyle, she’d do it. “Yeah, I’ll make an appointment tomorrow.” Running her fingertips through the strands, she let her hair slip back to settle past her lower back.

Needing to distract herself from the upcoming hair appointment, Sage picked up the device and swiped to another article. The iPad nearly slipped from her fingers when she saw a photo of Marshal’s twin sister. Cops surrounded her while an actress whose name was escaping Sage sobbed in the background.

The headline read: *Trouble continues for screenwriter Jayden Quincy as show drops her.*

Not wanting to read any further, Sage clicked the side of the device and watched the screen go blank. She wished sometimes she could do that with her mind. Even in sleep, her brain kept moving, providing images of the worst day of her life, or allowing her moments of peace as she held onto the

one person she'd sworn to love forever, only to be ripped from her arms through wakefulness.

“Oh, my sister and her daughter are moving into the guest house soon. I'll probably have late meetings, so I was hoping you'd be able to show them around. I think you'll like them. Jayden's had a bit of a rough patch, but that doesn't make her a bad person, and she is doing everything she can for Lila.” His tone shifted from faux cheery to genuine to dark throughout the sentence. The shifts were hard to follow, but Sage picked them up quickly since it was her job to read the room and adapt her acting when needed.

She couldn't help but think the term “rough patch” was an understatement, considering the tabloids were still writing articles weeks after the incident.

“Of course not. I'm excited to see my soon-to-be sister-in-law and niece.” After years of acting, she inwardly rolled her eyes at that fake performance. Jayden seemed to be a shit show and was getting what she deserved for the stunt she'd pulled. She just hoped Lila wouldn't be affected too badly.

Sage inhaled deeply. It would take the performance of a lifetime to get through a conversation with her without wanting to stab Jayden's eyes out.

“I'm glad she'll have you,” Marshal said as he pushed the paper aside and reached for the jam to spread on his now cold toast.

Underneath the table, Sage's knuckles were white as she tried to ground herself. She'd have to utilize every ounce of acting classes she'd received over the years to play nice with Marshal's twin. Sighing, she secretly hoped they wouldn't have to spend much time together while Jayden figured her life out.

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The camera zoomed in on a perfect freckled cheek as ice-blue eyes disappeared behind a wink.

Jayden threw the remote across the room where it landed in pieces. Tuna, her tiny ginger-striped kitten, let out a squeak before pouncing over to the destroyed remote, attacking the object with all the ferocity of a banana.

Watching her protector attack the remote that had clearly done her human injustice, Jayden's face grew hot at her childish reaction. She wasn't sure why she'd turned on the TV, other than to rub salt into her unhealing wound. Or maybe she needed the wake-up call that it wasn't just a nightmare... except full boxes from her recent move littered the floor, so she was definitely awake. No, it was real: She'd been fired from one of the hottest new shows because of a dumb mistake.

She tried not to think of the fact that she'd had to crawl to her brother, who had graciously offered her his guest house on their childhood property. It had taken a little over a week to move her life back to Washington. The guest house had come fully furnished so all she needed to unpack were a few of the decorations that turned a house into a home. After just a few hours in her new space she was already feeling calmer—well, she was until she'd put on the show.

After a few deep breaths that were meant to bring her peace, she could only locate the rage that filled her chest. Sharp knocks on the door broke up her pity party, giving another thing to focus on besides the faded eyes seemingly burned into the now black screen. Another knock brought her back fully as she stared daggers at the door and silently wished for the noise to stop. She sighed when her twin brother's soothing baritone voice sang from the other side.

“Jayden, if you don't let me in, I'll just keep knocking or I'll keep knocking but add this sound—” A sharp howl pierced her ears, causing Jayden to flinch at the onslaught.

“Okay, okay. Mercy, please stop,” Jayden called on her way to the back door. Her feet shuffled in house slippers on the kitchen linoleum.

Marshal's interruption was the first sound she'd heard since settling in the house a few hours earlier. Not having to yell at photographers who were trampling the weeds in her

yard in California was a welcome relief. It hadn't helped that *Brandi*—ugh, Jayden had a hard time even thinking her name—was continuing to talk about the incident to ramp up the press for her shitty show. Well, shitty now that Jayden had been fired from it.

Wincing at her internal swear, she couldn't even find the will to correct herself since Lila, her daughter, wasn't there. She was with her other mom, Lennox, in Alaska so that Jayden could get everything lined up for the move. Surprisingly, the shared visits she'd scheduled with Lennox had been the only smooth thing that had gone right in the past few years. Well, maybe it wasn't that surprising since she was still on excellent terms with that ex, unlike—Brandi. She bit her cheek, hoping the pain would distract her from thinking of her name again.

Reaching for the brass door handle, she stuck out her tongue to her brother, who had his nose pushed up against the glass window.

"I'm going to have to clean that, you know," she said in the way of greeting when she opened the door.

"You know I have a housekeeper. She helps with the guest house as well." Marshal squeezed her shoulder on the way into the room. His head swiveled back and forth as his eyes swept the floor. The object of his searching came into view.

Scooping Tuna up to cuddle near his face, he murmured sweet nothings into his fur before gently placing him back down.

"To what do I owe this annoyance...I mean appearance?" Jayden cracked a smile on the way to the fridge to grab a few beers.

"Can't a brother drop in unannounced on his sister anymore?" He smiled his thanks when she handed him a beer.

"You can, but I'm going to call out your bullshit since you only visited after a certain show aired, and not hours before when the boxes were being unloaded." Jayden tipped the mouth of her beer to her brother, their bottles clicking dully. "Cheers," they said together before taking a sip.



“Oh, was that today? I didn’t even notice.” Marshal’s voice had years of practice from debate not to give much away and his public service as a politician kept his facial features bland, but Jayden knew him better than anyone, and the slight tick in his eyebrows gave away his cautiously curated look. “I’ve been busy. The election is ramping up again, and if I don’t want to get my ass handed to me by Barkly, I’ve got to continue with dull meetings,” he went on, as if Jayden wasn’t about to bust him in the lie.

“Mmhm, and I’m just here in my own little writer’s nest. Not disgraced by the industry and bullied to the point of having to uproot myself and my nine-year-old to a new city. And the headlines! Don’t even get me started on those. ‘Almost killed America’s sweetheart!’ I’ve got to say that one was catchy. It’s all fiddle-faddle. If only they knew the real story.” Jayden snapped her mouth shut before she could say anything more.

“Fiddle-faddle? Are you ninety? I hope not because that would mean I am too, and I’m just not ready for that yet.”

“I think we’ll pull off ninety. Remember Grandma? She used to run circles around people half her age.” Jayden picked up Tuna, who squeaked indignantly at being interrupted in the pursuit of a fly. Although, by Jayden’s eye, the fly might have been winning.

“How are you settling in here? Do you need anything?” Marshal looked around, his eyes falling on the few boxes still piled on the floor.

“I’m just grateful the guest house was furnished. It made moving much easier.”

Grabbing another two beers, she tried not to fidget while Marshal stared at her. “I’m glad you bought this place and kept it in the family,” Jayden finally added, needing to break the silence.

Jayden had wanted to start her life in California, so when Marshal’s political career took off in Washington, he bought her share of the house when their parents passed away. She could have gotten more money if they’d received market

value, but Marshal had promised unlimited access to the guest house, and she didn't need the extra money anyway.

"I'm still grateful for the bargain you allowed when I bought your portion of the house." Marshal slapped her on the back on his way to the living room.

"Well, you might soon regret the 'free stay in the guest house anytime you want' portion of our agreement." Jayden's face hurt with muscles long forgotten as her face contorted into a smile.

"True. I might have to charge a cute fee for this little furball."

Jayden turned and tripped over a box, catching herself before falling.

"Do you need to get your eyes checked? Walk much? Have a nice fall?" The brotherly jokes came fast and furious as Marshal reached over and wiggled Jayden's frames. The movement caused a large smudge that impeded her eyesight.

Huffing, Jayden walked over to try to find spray for her glasses. It was one of the main things that told them apart. With similar facial features, dark hair, and similar builds, the fact that Marshal had Lasik eye surgery and didn't require contacts or glasses distinguished them the most. That, and their smiles. They'd both chipped an incisor during an unfortunate rock fight with the neighbors as kids. However, with his political career, Marshal had gotten his tooth fixed while Jayden refused, insisting it gave her face character. No one saw it anyway, now that she had lost all ability to smile.

"I've got an early day tomorrow. Will you be alright?" His hazel eyes, so much like her own, scanned her as if he would find the wounds. Jayden saw the depth of concern he had as he continued to search her face.

"Yes, I'll get my shit together soon. Maybe even move out."

"You know you can stay here as long as you need. I'm going to like having you and my niece nearby. That reminds me, when is my favorite niece coming back?"

At the mention of her daughter, Jayden felt her heart lighten. It was good for her to be away from the whirlwind of the move, but Jayden missed her and was counting the days until she returned.

“A few more weeks,” she answered. “Twenty days and two hours,” she amended when Marshal gave her a look. “Yes, I put it as a countdown on my phone.” She waved the device with the timer counting, showing even on the locked screen.

“Can’t wait to see her. Maybe we can take a trip to the waterpark?” He bounced on his toes which caused Tuna to attack.

“There should be enough time before school starts for a few fun outings. Will you have time off, Mr. Fancy Pants Representative?”

It was good that Jayden hadn’t taken the next swig of her beer because her brother’s puffed-up chest caused a rumble of laughter to bubble up. She knew he was proud of the title and worked endlessly for the people in his district, but the display of pumped-up pride at her silly words made her chuckle.

“If I can’t, I’m sure Ivan can get a photo op out of something there. Two birds and all that.” Marshal waved her off, pulling out his phone, presumably to send a text to Ivan now that their name had come up. It was a personal record for them—a full beer without Marshal taking out his phone for something. “Oh, there is someone I want you to meet. Can you come to the main house at seven tomorrow?”

“In the morning?” she clarified, feeling her eyebrows enter her hairline at the mention of the time. “You know I’m a writer and get most of my best ideas down in the middle of the night, right? Especially when Lila isn’t around. My sleep schedule gets all messed up.”

“Please, it’s important. You can have breakfast with us.” He blinked rapidly and jutted out his lower lip.

“Grandma said if you do that, it will get stuck that way and a bird will poop on your lip.”

The inside of his mouth disappeared with a pop when he started laughing. “Grandma always had some great sayings. So, you’ll be there?”

Not ready to start on the wrong foot with her brother since he was doing her a huge favor, she sighed in resignation. “If it’s important, I’ll be there.”

“Good.” He lit up as he slapped her hard on the back, making her lurch forward.

“Night, Marsh. Thanks for the subterfuge chat and the fact you kept me mostly out of my head.”

“Could never pull anything by you. Try and sleep, Jay. It looks like you got in a fight, and your eyes decided to bring their own pillows to the party.” Marshal twirled his pointer finger near her face.

“You are always the charmer, and now you’re going to drag me out of bed at an ungodly hour.” Jayden chuckled, showing she was mostly joking, as she followed her brother to the back and waited for him to walk out the door.

They exchanged side hugs, and Jayden waved through the window in the door before turning the lock and heading back for the rest of her beer.

Knowing sadness and drinks never went together, she tried to keep it to two more beers, but the further into the glass she got, the more she enjoyed the numb feeling that developed.

Scrolling through her phone, Jayden had to close one eye, hoping that would keep the screen from spinning. Like a moth that couldn’t pull itself away from the light, she brought up social media and clicked on the profile of the person she’d been trying to avoid. After weeks of staying strong, her ex’s profile fit snugly in the frame of Jayden’s phone. She seemed happy in a new relationship and, if the bump in her followers was any indication, she was well-loved after a positive pilot. The same show that fired Jayden because of a split decision she was still paying for. Brandi hadn’t had any consequences because of that night, while Jayden’s walls were crumbling.

Stumbling along the narrow halls, Jayden fell into bed with an undignified plop and hoped for the bliss of uninterrupted sleep.

# Chapter Two

## *Shaky Beginnings*

Marshal was pattering on about something, but Sage kept looking at her watch, wondering when the prodigal sister would grace them with her presence.

“Does she know about the engagement?” Sage interrupted as Marshal was about to launch into the scintillating topics of polls and marketing. He tended to go on ceaselessly until someone stopped him—something she had figured out about three minutes into meeting him.

“I don’t think so. I mean, I told her in passing that you had moved in, but I’m not sure she remembers. Plus, with all the things she’s been dealing with in the media I know she’s stayed away from the news, so I doubt she knows about our engagement. I wanted it to be a surprise to tell her face to face.” Marshal hadn’t even picked up the newspaper—a feat Sage didn’t think was possible—and kept glancing towards the front door.

Sage hummed noncommittally as she sipped her coffee. The more she learned of Jayden, the more she didn’t care for her and couldn’t believe she and Marshal were twins. Marshal was selfless in his pursuit to help the underprivileged while Jayden appeared to only care about herself.

The front door chime rang and Sage witnessed Marshal’s face glow with excitement as he adjusted his already perfect tie. It was funny seeing her usually put together friend show such eagerness. Clearly, the twins were close, but this would be the first time she’d spend any length of time with Jayden. Trying to tamper her frustration and anxiety would be difficult, but knowing how much Jayden meant to Marshal, she’d try.

Sage could hear the scrape of shoes as Andrea answered the door. Sage had had the whole morning to decide which character to play with the sister. Aloof? Best friend? Icy?

Ultimately, she'd decided authentic would be best overall since she might have to see more of Marshal's twin.

A sneeze resounded around the dining room. Sage's first look at Jayden was an eyeful since the bottom of her shirt was currently being used to wipe her mouth, exposing her midriff. The shirt was so high that Sage looked away, blushing, swearing she saw the beginning swell of her under-boob. Sage's distraction caused her fork to slip from her loose grip. Bending down under the table, she searched for the dropped utensil.

"Jay! You're late, but please sit down." Marshal motioned at the empty space across from her, closest to the entrance of the dining room.

"I told you I'm not a morning person, but this food smells divine. Thanks for inviting me." Jayden pulled out the chair and scooted her knees under the table.

Sage finally had a grip of the fork and straightened back up. Their eyes connected across the table and Sage caught Jayden's wide-eyed surprise but she covered it up by pushing her glasses back up her nose.

A cloud of stale alcohol wafted towards Sage, making her have to hold in a gag. Gritting her teeth, she tried not to say something snarky since the reason Jayden was even staying in her brother's yard was because of alcohol.

"Well, you're here now, have some coffee. There is someone I want you to meet. I think you've met before, briefly, but it was years ago." Marshal motioned towards Sage.

The game of Guess the Feeling was one Sage liked to play with people. As a stage actor, she enjoyed watching people's faces to help gain some insight into their emotions. So far, confusion with a dash of apprehension seemed to be playing loudly on Jayden's face as she slathered jam on her toast.

"Hi, I'm Jayden." She waved with the butterknife, and Sage watched as the jam slid down, almost in slow motion, onto Jayden's shirt.

Jayden stared at the stain across her chest as if it were the most fascinating splotch in the world before shrugging and grabbing a napkin to wipe up the mess.

“I’m Sage, Marshal’s fiancée.” The words shot out of her mouth. Looking at Marshal, she saw they probably shared similar facial expressions. “Oops, I didn’t mean to announce that. I think Marshal had a whole speech prepared.”

That got a chuckle from Marshal, but Jayden had whipped her head towards her brother so hard her neck cracked.

“You’re getting married? Why didn’t you tell me?” She placed the knife at the corner of the plate before white knuckling her coffee mug like it was about to get snatched away.

“You’ve had your own stuff going on lately. I didn’t want to bother you with this and knew you were planning on moving up here, so thought I’d tell you in person. Plus, it wasn’t like it was a secret. We did announce it. Our faces graced several news stories and magazines.” Marshal’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and tossed her one of the magazines with their smiling faces on the cover.

“If it helps, it hasn’t been that long since we got engaged,” Sage added with a shrug.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? You know I’ve been staying away from the media. You have a prenup, right, Marshal?”

“Whoa now, that’s a little unfair. Why are you reacting like this?” Marshal chewed on a bite of his fruit, waiting for a response.

“I just—you know how I hate surprises and this is a doozy of a surprise.” Jayden looked between them.

“You probably shouldn’t drink and drive if you hate surprises,” Sage said under her breath. The statement felt like a retaliation for the prenup dig, but after it left her lips, she hoped Jayden hadn’t heard. It had been meaner in the light of day than she meant.



“How did you even meet?” Jayden asked as her eyes narrowed on Sage.

“You know Sage, Jayden. We went to school together. Our roommates dated at U-Dub.”

Jayden blinked, clearly trying to process the information.

“We reconnected a few years ago when Marshal helped me through...” Sage trailed off, not wanting to get into the specifics of what had happened. Clearing her throat, she started again. “A tough time. We kept in contact.”

“And hit it off,” Marshal finished for her, getting up to stand behind her with his hands on her shoulders. Sage was glad for her best friend’s support. Jayden’s reaction had thrown her for a loop. He squeezed and leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“Well, umm, congratulations. I’m happy you found someone.” Jayden looked between them and for a moment it felt like she was trying to put a puzzle together in her mind. She stood up and went around to hug her brother.

She whispered something in his ear that made him snort, but when they parted, it was with a soft look.

“The car is here, Mr. Quincy.”

Andrea walked in with her crisp shirt and bun pulled tight. When Sage had first moved in she was terrified of the harsh looking staff member, but she was nothing but pleasant. She had helped nourish Sage back to life. If it weren’t for her and Marshal, Sage wasn’t sure where she’d be right now.

“Okay, thanks Andrea. I’ll be right back, I need to grab some paperwork from my office.” Marshal stood and walked out of the room.

Sage stared at her plate, unsure how to handle the company now that Marshal wasn’t in the room to create a buffer.

“Andrea, did you get any food?” Jayden asked, gesturing to the spread on the table.

“I already ate. Thank you, though, Jayden.”

“How’s your grandson, Aiden?”

“He’s doing well. Excited for the fourth grade but upset since he liked his teacher last year.” Andrea held the coat open for Marshal to slip into as she continued her conversation with Jayden.

“Lila will be home in a few weeks. Maybe they can have a playdate?”

“I’m sure he’d love to see Lila again. He hasn’t stopped talking about her eraser collection.”

“It’s the same for Lila and his rocks.” They shared a chuckle.

As the conversation between Jayden and Andrea continued, the depth of loneliness in Sage’s chest started creeping in. She’d always had trouble connecting to people outside of playing a part in a play. Give her lines to learn and makeup to transform her into someone else: she relished in that role. However, she always felt inadequate playing her own self, feeling she lacked the easy camaraderie some people had... People who weren’t inundated with social anxiety.

Marshal walked back in the room, setting his briefcase on the floor before leaning down to kiss Sage on her head. “I’ll see you tonight, Sage. Jayden, do you want to come over for dinner? We can grill,” Marshal stepped next to Sage, tucking his phone into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Not tonight. I’m going to try and slog through my next writing project. Maybe this weekend, does that work?” Jayden started out only looking at Marshal, but seemed to reluctantly turn her head to Sage as if just remembering they both would have some say in things.

“Sure, if it’s alright with Marshal.” Sage wanted nothing more than to not have to host, but part of her life now was finding the grace to throw parties. The thought of a lot of people in the house, most of them strangers, turned her stomach.

“Does this weekend work for you, hun?” Marshal asked as he shrugged on his coat.

“I don’t have anything going on. Just give me a head count, and I’ll get the food together.” Sage tried for a smile, but it felt forced on her face. Since hosting parties were probably going to be a big part of her life now, she might as well get used to conversations with people she didn’t particularly want to talk to.

“I’ll see if anyone from the office wants to come and let you know. Alright, I’m out of here. Have a good day.” Marshal left.

“I’m sorry about the prenup comment. It was uncalled for.” Jayden sipped her coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. “Andrea, do you have any Bailey’s?”

“Oh yes, it’s right here.” Andrea reached up in the cabinet lining the island in the kitchen and walked the bottle over to Jayden.

“Thank you.” Jayden smiled, twisting off the lid.

Sage stared as Jayden poured a generous amount of the alcoholic creamer into the cup. Swirls of clouds mixed in the dark liquid. Sage hadn’t realized how tightly she’d clenched her jaw until it started twitching.

“Want some?” Jayden sloshed the bottle back and forth.

“No.” The word came out sharper than she intended. “I don’t drink,” Sage finished.

“Usually I don’t either, but I’ve had a rough couple of months.”

Sage let the conversation fall. She wasn’t curious and thought Jayden deserved all the rough moments. Her only regret was that a kid was involved, and from Marshal’s stories, Lila seemed like an amazing child.

“Most people have a ton of questions. You can ask if you want.” Jayden broke the silence.

Standing up abruptly, Sage hit her knee on the table but tried to hide the pain with a smile. “I’m not curious. It’s none of my business. I’ve got to go.”

“It is a little of your business since you’re marrying my brother,” Jayden yelled at Sage’s back, but she had already turned the corner to retreat to her bedroom.

In the shower, Sage felt the stench of stale beer that had clung to Jayden. She scrubbed her arms, trying to wash away the blood that coated her memories. Gasping for air, she tried to calm down. Having Jayden near, especially with her current issues in the press, would be bad for Sage’s mental health.

“Can you remind me what’s on the agenda today, Andrea?”

Sage had spent an hour wiping away the traces of her emotions, and with her mask firmly back in place, she was ready to face the day. However, her mind was still scattered. She knew today was packed but currently couldn’t remember what was coming up.

“There is a fundraiser/nonprofit meeting at eleven. You should be home by the afternoon. Oh, and someone sent a script. “ A loud clunk followed the mail dropping on the table, now cleared of breakfast. “The car will pick you up in a half hour.” She picked up a rag on the table and started swiping at nonexistent crumbs.

“Cancel the car, please. I want to take out Margaret.” Sage started parting her hair to complete a fishtail braid. It had taken years of practice, first on dolls, then friends, before she could get the motions needed to have it come out even on herself. They’d had to cut off a good three inches to get rid of the pink, but the dark blonde strands still rested past her shoulder when down.

“You can’t take Margaret. What would Marshal think?” Andrea moved to the table to wipe down Jayden’s many spills and clear the rest of the dishes.

“I don’t care. Margaret’s a part of my life. I can’t have her sitting around waiting for me to show interest.”

“You’re going to be a married woman. You need to protect yourself.”

“I wear protection.” Sage hid her smile in her elbow as she finished up her hair.

“What about your clothes?” Andrea dumped the three crumbs she’d found into the sink before turning back with her hands on her hips.

“I’ll change at the fundraiser. Come on, if I had known saying yes to Marshal would have made it so I couldn’t have fun with Margaret, I might not have said yes.”

Andrea huffed on her way to the living room. “Well, if you want to get there on time, you might want to leave now.”

Sage checked her hair in the bathroom before grabbing her bag for the luncheon and heading to the garage.

Loud music blasted from the guest house as soon as she opened the garage door. She scoffed in Jayden’s general direction as she wheeled out Margaret—her two-year-old Vespa. She had a custom paint job of matte black with blood-red accents and white wheels. Sage pulled on her bright red helmet. The colors might have been an overcompensation because the GTS-300 max speed was only about 80 MPH. But she didn’t get Margaret for her speed; she simply enjoyed the freedom the Vespa provided and the wind caressing her face allowed Sage a moment of relaxation before she had to perform for a crowd of people for donations Marshal needed for his reelection.

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Jayden tried to let the music wash over her body as she scrubbed. Tuna had a field day with her toes as he practiced his ferocious attacks. Tiny needles dug into her socks as she tried to wipe up the mildew from the tub.

Bits and pieces of the morning’s revelations came back in waves as Jayden tried to wash away the feeling of failure. The sense of despair at her reaction, the disappointment of her knee-jerk response. Sage didn’t deserve what she’d said.

The past few months had been unbearable, and no amount of booze and self-loathing had lessened the load. The shrill ring of the theme song to *A League of Their Own* sounded, breaking up her pity party. Flicking the volume on her Bluetooth speakers, she didn't even have to look to see who the call was from since the only contact assigned to that tone was the one person who would be able to pull a smile from the depths of despair.

“Lila! How are you doing, Cricket?”

“Mom! Mama found an eraser that is a moose's head and one that's of a bear, but it's blue. Mama says there aren't any blue bears, so I got the brown one of both moose and bear. The moose is just the head, but the bear is the full body and will fit on any mechanical or number two pencils. They don't work well since it smudges the graphite, but that's okay. Mama says it's okay because they are more for display anyway. I will put them on my shelf when I get home.”

The rapid sentences blended together as Lila recounted her time in Sitka with Lennox, Jayden's ex-partner, who shared custody with Lila.

“Mama wants to talk to you.”

Jayden waited as Lila passed the phone. She heard “Lila” and a thud; presumably, Lennox had to grip the phone before it fell to the ground. They were working on waiting to make sure someone else had a hold of the object before Lila let go. However, Lila always seemed to forget the lesson when extra excited. “Hey, Jay. Oof, sorry, just a sec. Pig got out of the cage.”

Jayden tiptoed to the kitchen for a refill on coffee while Lennox wrestled the hamster back into the cage. Luckily it was a critter that stayed up in Alaska.

“Okay, sorry about that. Lila took Pig out in the wheel but forgot to put her back. How are you doing?”

“Oh, you know, jealous of your job that took you back to Sitka, where you can stomp in the woods, pet polar bears, and skate with penguins.”

“You’ve been to Sitka multiple times. You know it’s not like that, and polar bears and penguins are on opposite sides of the hemispheres.”

The reflection of the microwave showed Jayden mouthing the words she knew Lennox was going to say, which cracked her up.

Lennox stopped mid-rant and changed course, throwing off Jayden’s synchronization. “You were lip-syncing that tirade, weren’t you?”

A snorted laugh escaped before Jayden said, “Yes, yes, I was. I know you so well I can practically guess how this conversation will go.”

“Alright, hotshot, give it a whirl.” Lennox stayed quiet while Jayden took a deep breath.

“First, you’ll ask how I am and if I’m staying away from social media, TV, and the general hubbub of the outlets. I’ll say as much as possible in the age of big brother, and you’ll laugh before checking to ensure the camera sticker on your phone is still secure. I’ll then say I’m okay. It’s been hard, but I’m getting through it. Next, you’ll ask about work or projects, and I’ll harumph back at you without comment. We’ll then sit in silence for a second, and you’ll wonder if there was anything more you could do while I’ll wonder why I went along with what I did. Then you’ll bring up Lila, and we’ll both sigh in relief—internally, might I add—that at least this topic gives us both solid footing. How did I do?”

Silence followed the rant while Jayden tried not to think of the night that led her to have to come back to Washington.

“I wouldn’t wonder what more I could do. During the silence, I’d probably be getting my grocery list together. You were spot on with everything else, down to the phone check for the camera sticker. Want to skip everything and finalize plans for Lila’s flight?”

“Yes, please. Unless you have anything to report in your life?”

“Well, the pilot I had a crush on forever has snuggled up with a photographer. They are living together, all happy. So, I’ll have to find someone else to pine after from afar.”

Jayden stood, twisting her back to crack. “When does softball start? There should be parents to drool over.”

“A few more months still. I’m excited for a few of the juniors. It should be an exciting season. We might have a chance against Juneau this time around.”

Jayden tried to stay neutral but couldn’t hold back a snort. Juneau was the notorious Goliath, holding more resources and a bigger pool of recruits than Sitka. At least that’s what Jayden had learned over the years during the famous Lennox rants while she coached the Sitka High team every year.

“You never know,” Lennox added when Jayden, lost in her thoughts, failed to comment.

“True. Kick butt, go Wolves,” Jayden added with a diplomatic chuckle.

“Yeah, yeah, you were never one for team spirit. Talk soon. Love ya.”

“Love ya back. Give a hug to Cricket for me.”

The click resounded in Jayden’s ear as the silence crushed.

A writing brick wall hit Jayden in the early afternoon as the sun tickled her cheek. She sat at her desk staring at the teasing blinking cursor, steadily counting the time since she had last typed a word.

Rocking back in her chair, she tried to work through the scene but was entirely blocked. Her neck cracked when she looked down at Tuna, who was taking full advantage of the sun streak illuminating a path in the living room. The tiny kitten stretched along the warm area, content with his little world.

Focusing back on her computer, she groaned at the teasing blinker waiting for its next words. A shadow zipped over her screen, causing Jayden’s eyes to dart to the yard and watch



birds, which was infinitely more entertaining than a blank document. Dandelions littered the yard and, since she wasn't getting anywhere with the screenplay she was working on, Jayden saved her pathetic progress and pushed back her chair to stretch out her back.

Walking to the kitchen, she tripped over Tuna's claws. He had pounced when she walked by, trying to dig into her fuzzy socks. Grabbing two beers, she put one in the oversized side pocket of her cargo shorts. Enjoying the sun, Jayden walked her brother's property, searching for the shed she knew was hidden somewhere. It hadn't been built until after she'd left home. The sun beat down, which made the cold beer satisfying as she took a sip. Stumbling over a tree root, she cringed when she hit the ground.

The beer in her hand didn't spill a drop, but the one in her pocket busted open, leaving a trail down her leg. From her new viewpoint on the ground, she saw the elusive shed peeking through a wall of trees. Since she'd found her destination and the beer running down her leg wasn't that uncomfortable, she internally shrugged and let the sun dry her off.

Brushing herself off, she grabbed the shed handle, pulling it open. Musty air hit her face, causing a coughing fit, but it was worth the effort when she saw the riding lawn mower tucked in the organized area. It had been her brother's lifelong dream to own one, and she secretly wished she'd thought to dream something realistic like that.

Shaking her head, she laughed at the key hidden under a rusty can of nails, the only pile of trash in the area. Maybe the spot would have worked if she hadn't known her brother so well.

Nestling the beer in the convenient cup holder, she started the beast and studied the controls, finding them reasonably straightforward. Hitting the gas, she maneuvered the mower out of the shed before lowering the lever to cut the grass. Taking a sip of beer, she worked her way around the yard and found the fresh-cut scent rejuvenating.

On her first turn around the natural slope of the yard, Jayden slammed on the brakes. Sage was standing in front of the mower, her face thunderous. Jayden tried not to notice the clean cut of her skirt but had always been a sucker for a woman wearing a dress. Looking away, ashamed of gawking at her brother's fiancée, she turned off the machine to hear the rant Sage was spouting off.

“What do you think you're doing operating machinery while drunk?”

After hearing what she had to say, Jayden wished she'd kept the motor running to drown out the high-pitched screech.

“I've had half a beer, that hardly counts as drunk.” Jayden swung her leg over the side, but her flip flop got caught in the gear, and she found herself sprawled on the ground for the second time in an hour.

“Right, you're not drunk.” Jayden was able to pick up Sage's sarcastic tone from the ground.

“I'm not. What's your problem anyway?” Jayden's capacity for humiliation had been dwindling for the past year, and she found herself snipping at Sage's heels in her response as she pulled herself off the ground.

“You reek of booze.” Sage's anger blossomed on her cheeks. “Plus, I saw you stumbling out in the yard. God, you're going to kill someone someday. I'd have thought you learned your lesson by now.”

Jayden swallowed down the bile that threatened to come up at the reminder. She willed her stomach to settle, knowing if she puked, she'd give Sage more ammo for misunderstandings. Without another word, she gently placed the keys on the seat and turned back towards the fuming woman. “You might have read about what happened, but don't presume to know my story or what went on that night.” Huffing, she walked back towards her house.

Back at her desk, Jayden tried to ignore the buzz of Sage finishing the job she'd started. The view from her window—Sage on the large machinery—could have been straight out of

her fantasies. Especially since her skirt had been tantalizingly pushed up on her thigh—but the sight was soured by Sage’s haughty attitude and unnecessary judgment. Scoffing, Jayden tried to return to work as the sips of beer soured in her stomach.

# Chapter Three

*It's just me*

“Care for a drink, Sage?”

Marshal’s question brought her back to the present, which was good because she was about to walk into a pillar in the middle of the ballroom floor. At the last second she stopped, keeping her nose from smashing into the brilliant white column. However, it didn’t stop Marshal from ramming into her back when she froze.

“Are you okay?” he asked, holding onto her shoulders with both hands.

The strap of her dress slipped down her arm and he gently fixed the strap before letting go and stepping away.

“Sorry, I didn’t see this massive object in my face.” She chuckled, feeling the heat in her cheeks as a bunch of rich Seattle socialites openly gaped at her clumsiness. “Do you want to take back your proposal now, knowing I can’t think and walk simultaneously?” She wrapped her hand around Marshal’s arm, relaxing when she heard the symphony of laughter from the startled group.

“Oh, what a delight you two are. You bring such youthful energy to these things,” an elegant older woman said. Helen Bright, a woman whose late husband had fallen into money when he invested in tech at the early stages, grabbed Sage’s arm. “Come with me, and we can chat about your charity.”

“Have fun.” Marshal kissed her cheek as Helen’s deceptively strong arms dragged her away.

Sage let herself be led around the room as she listened to Helen talk about a fundraiser she was putting together for transitional housing. The nonprofit worked with inmates who were recently released from prison. Sage had been working on getting her own passion project off the ground. She was trying to focus on helping match jobs for people with disabilities

while providing services on how to interview and complete a resume.

“See, our programs can help each other out. You can integrate your program into our house, which is almost built. We can provide an office and any supplies you’ll need.” Helen’s light brown eyes twinkled with delight as the women walked to the open bar.

“We have had trouble finding a location that would work with our budget.” Sage dipped her head in acknowledgment when the bartender handed her the seltzer she had ordered.

“Open bar and you ordered a seltzer?” A new voice dripping with sarcasm entered their small circle.

“Patricia, how nice of you to join us. Sage, have you met Patricia? She’s working her way through husbands—I mean writing her way through Seattle Hudson.”

Seltzer went up her nose as she coughed at the barb. Sage had indeed heard of Patricia, and if she put any stock into the family drama, the comment wasn’t that far off since Sage’s uncle had been one of the husbands ensnared by the beautiful reporter.

“Yes, Patty, nice to see you again.” She gripped her glass, watching her knuckles grow taut in irritation against the glass. Her image and mannerisms were reflected back on Marshal, especially now that they were engaged, and the appearance cultivated was important. It wasn’t the time to do something that would hurt his election, like pour ice-cold seltzer over the woman’s perfectly braided updo. Although it would be divine watching her satin dress get ruined.

The fantasy played in her head before Patricia’s response cut through.

“I prefer Patricia. I hear congratulations are in order, though. Where is that beautiful boyfriend of yours? Oh wait, no, you’re engaged. I’ve been trying to get him to notice me for years now. I never thought to try *less* makeup. So, you’re not drinking?” She tipped her head to Sage’s glass.

Helen's eyes darted back and forth as if trying to come up with something to change the charged interaction.

"No," Sage responded with a tight smile. This dance always bugged her because people rarely took no as an answer for not drinking. They always wanted to dig into why. Especially someone like Patricia, whose job was to find dirt.

"Why not? Are you pregnant?" She held her throat and gasped. "Is that why you had to get engaged?" Patricia lowered her voice while her eyes darted to Sage's stomach. The fake concern rolled off her tongue smoothly. The glint of juicy gossip couldn't be erased from her eyes, though.

"No, I just don't drink." Though she was used to inappropriate questions just like that, Sage was still struck by the insensitivity of them. She turned to Helen, getting ready to ask more questions about her program, but Patricia wasn't done.

"Oh, so are you in recovery? Or maybe you're allergic." Patricia's voice rose to her previous decibel, causing people to look over at their conversation since it was vastly more entertaining than the regular drivel of asking for money.

"Deathly. If I get a whiff of the stuff my throat closes." She swallowed and clutched at her throat, her eyes screwed shut.

Feeling Helen's warm hand on her shoulder, she peeked one eye open, seeing Patricia retreating into the crowd, her hair flyaways flopping in the wind as she looked around for someone else to bother.

"You're in the clear. I'll have to remember that trick for the next time I get cornered by her." Helen chuckled, sipping her gin and tonic, the lime floating on top, twisting in the ice. "So, shall we set up some time in the next couple weeks to see if the house would work for you? I think if we join forces, we can do some good." Helen's eyes twinkled in the fluorescent lights.

"Yeah, I'll call your office and set something up. Thank you." Sage felt her shoulders relax, knowing the evening wasn't a waste, especially if the office would work out.

“There you are.” Marshal walked up next to them. She smiled up at him, feeling more calm now that he was near. His warm hand rested on her dress and not anywhere near the expanse of open skin the fabric revealed from a designated hole in the material. “Are you almost ready to leave? I think I’ve done enough schmoozing for tonight,” Marshal whispered, leaning close to her ear.

Sage’s eyes closed involuntarily and she felt her head nod like a bobblehead. Fatigue pressed into her knowing now there was an end in sight of social interactions.

“Great, I’ll call for the car.” Marshal kissed her cheek. “Helen, it’s wonderful to see you again. Please excuse me while I try to secure a ride home,” he said before stepping away with his phone to his ear.

Helen provided a graceful wave before reaching into her clutch. “Here’s my card.” She handed Sage a stiff business card.

Sage’s fingertips caressed the top of the paper, enjoying the tactile rise of the ink and smooth surface. She was almost embarrassed to bring out her home-printed one from the pouch in the back of her phone but had promised herself to completely rid herself of these before investing in more.

When Marshal came to collect her, saying the car was out front, Sage provided two cheek kisses to Helen and, with an exhausted sigh, leaned heavily on Marshal’s arm as they walked outside. Her feet were killing her, but these dinners were par for the course of her new life.

As they pulled into the driveway, well after eleven, Sage saw the light still on at Jayden’s place in the distance. For a split second, Sage thought about checking in. They hadn’t talked since the incident with the lawn mower, but the thought of knocking on her door and talking to another person filled her bones with dread. Plus, she wouldn’t know what to say at this point. Best go to bed and recharge.

They didn't say much when walking in the door, but Andrea was already there to greet them and take their coats. Not a hair was out of place in her tight bun, and she appeared as bright-eyed as she had that morning when Sage was still wiping sleep from her eyes.

Sage kicked off her high heels and moaned in relief when her toes were free. Although her feet weren't buried in a plush carpet like she wanted, having them free of their confines was just as good. Even though her feet were screaming, her body sighed in relief at the silence that filled the house. Having to provide an endless trail of small talk took more brain power than Sage was willing to admit.

"Thanks, Andrea. I'm going to check on my sister and then I have some work to finish. Can you bring some tea to my office? Then feel free to clock out."

"Clock out. That will be when I'm too old to climb those stairs to your office," Andrea teased, turning to hang their coats by the front door. "Do you want anything brought up, Ms. Tanner?"

Sage blinked, still surprised at the offer, and not used to people helping with day-to-day things like beverages. "No, no, I'm okay, and please, for the last time, call me Sage. Thank you, though. I'm going to unwind. See you tomorrow."

With each step up the stairs, her thirty-five-year-old body screamed in protest at still being upright. Stumbling to her room, she shoved the door closed and leaned heavily on it, providing some much-needed relief to her feet before grunting as she pushed off the door and walked towards the bathroom, grabbing her Kindle on the way. She couldn't wait to read in a warm bubble bath, knowing it was the perfect way to end the night.

Soon steam coated the mirror as the calming scent of lavender and mint essential oils filled the room. Sage would have married Marshal just for the ensuite in her bedroom. She was sure his room held a more extravagant setup, but the floating tub next to the tiled standing shower created the perfect atmosphere to end the busy day.



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Curled under the covers, Jayden tried to get back to sleep after Tuna had pounced on her face demanding to play—at three in the morning. She'd wanted to cry, only having gotten to bed an hour before, after an intense writing session. Earlier that evening, something had unlocked in her brain, and she'd barely had time to pee. The words were flowing so well.

Even the interruption by her brother, who came to check on her and lectured on the dangers of slouching, hadn't stopped the creative flow. When her brain finally shut off enough to fall asleep, she went down right away. But now, it looked unlikely she'd get to sleep again anytime soon.

Pushing Tuna off her chest, Jayden crawled out from under the comforter. She turned and wrapped her hand around Tuna's tiny body. He meowed lightly, swatting at her hands to show his vicious claws that hurt about as much as an old towel. She headed to the kitchen to see if she had any orange juice left.

Orange juice had been her comfort drink growing up. Whenever she couldn't sleep, she'd sneak downstairs for a glass and usually ended up sharing stories with her grandma. She hadn't known it at the time, but her grandma had chronic pain and couldn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time.

After putting Tuna in his tree house, she shuffled to the fridge and wrapped her hand around the handle. Squinting at the bright fridge light, she let out a groan when her eyes landed on the space reserved for the bottle of OJ. Leaning against the door, her eyes caught the grocery list hanging on the freezer door. Her spirits sank after remembering she'd meant to go to the store before inspiration had hit.

Well, there was one good thing about being attached to her twin brother's property. Slipping on her Hoka slippers, she tiptoed out the door. Tuna bounded under her feet which ensured she did the cat dance of keeping one leg inside to shoo

the curious creature away from the door before closing it quickly.

After hearing cats lived longer if they stayed indoors, she'd decided when rescuing Tuna that he'd be an indoor cat. She didn't want to have a death talk with her daughter yet. The gravel crunched under her feet on her way to the big house. Thoughts of what Lila would think of the surprise kitten when she returned from Alaska brought an excited swoop to her heart as she played an imagined scene in her head.

When she got to the house, she punched in the code to unlock the door. It hadn't been changed since her childhood and was a number she used for all her pins. Not the most secure way to handle life, but she couldn't handle learning a new number set. To her right in the mudroom was a keypad that needed a code entered, or the house alarm would go off. It was a slightly different number but for Jayden, pushing the two different codes was almost second nature. She knew the house like the back of her hand and was able to navigate the halls without turning on any light. Finally reaching her destination of the glistening kitchen, she tiptoed to the fridge.

She could see the object of her journey through the transparent door on the fridge and smiled triumphantly. Gripping the handle of the fridge, she pulled and lifted her spoils up in the air, pretending it was a trophy of some kind.

As she twirled to the cups, someone yelled, causing her to drop the container of OJ.

"I have pepper spray, and I'm not afraid to use it!"

Jayden's heart was in her throat as she slowly turned around with her hands in the air. Her shoes squelched in the spilled orange juice. In case Sage didn't know her voice or see her in the low light, Jayden said, "Don't worry, it's just me. Jay—" Before she got her whole name out there was a hiss.

"Oh shit, it went off." Sage coughed, and there was a clang on the floor as something dropped. "Help me. It's burning my eyes." Jayden could see her arms flapping in front of her face. It took a moment but suddenly it was painful to breathe and tears streamed from Jayden's eyes.

Stumbling to the sink, Jayden flicked the light switch only to jump back when the garbage disposal went off. A pressure headache was starting to build as her heart pounded. She frantically tried to find the off switch on the panel while still fumbling for the correct light switch.

Every breath she inhaled burned. She continued with short inhaleds, trying to navigate the thick feeling in her lungs. Finally finding the right switch to the disposal, she flicked it off and moved one toggle over to turn on the light over the sink.

“Hurry, it stings,” Sage said nearby before breaking into a hacking cough.

“What the hell happened?” Jayden tried to shallowly inhale, hoping that would help with the searing pain every time she breathed in.

“It’s pepper spray. I accidentally discharged it.” Sage’s sentence came out in huffs.

“Where did you get pepper spray?” She wasn’t sure why she asked that question. It wasn’t like the information was pertinent to the circumstance but thinking clearly wasn’t one of her strong suits in a high-pressure situation. She’d learned that the hard way.

Opening the window above the sink, she tried to gasp for clean air, but the burning feeling wouldn’t leave her lungs. Her glasses had delayed the sting of the spray, but the respite hadn’t lasted long. Her half-blind eyes and lungs burned as panic started to rise.

“Let’s get out of here and let the house air out some.” Jayden grabbed Sage’s arm and started dragging her to the door. She let go when she passed a window, struggling to open it to help air out the room. Finally, the window gave way and Jayden continued outside. With each step, her shoes squelched because of the juice. Even though a sitting room separated the front door from the kitchen, they left the door open to help disperse the painful air.

Jayden could breathe a little bit better out in the yard, but her eyes still stung. The motion light attached to the garage came on, causing stabbing pain to Jayden's already sensitive eyes. Blocking the illumination with her back, she finally got a clear look at Sage, whose eyes were fire red.

Pulling off her glasses, she shoved them in her sweatpants pockets. They were hissing out breaths in short spurts to keep their lungs from burning. A blurry sparkle coming from something attached to the house caught her attention. It took a second to piece together what she saw without her glasses, but when she did, her hand flew to her forehead, and a resounding slap echoed around them. "Duh, come on, I've got an idea." Jayden squatted near what had caught her attention and turned on the spigot. A frantic giggle came out as she waited a few seconds for the water to run.

"Come on, put your hand under and rinse your eyes," she said after noticing Sage's palms were rubbing vigorously at her eyes.

Cupping her hand under the water, she leaned forward to rinse out her burning eyes in the water that had gathered. The relief was instant. Hunched over the spout, Sage followed her movements, letting out a moan when liquid hit her face.

"Why didn't we think of that in there?" Sage wondered aloud after straightening and wiping her wet hands on her shorts.

The movement raised the fabric up and since Jayden was still squatting, the view was an unexpected expanse of leg. Not wanting to get caught staring, she jerked her gaze away, causing a slight twinge in her neck.

"I don't know. I was at the sink too, not sure why it didn't occur to me." Jayden did another round of water, finding the cool liquid soothing on her burning skin. "Why did you set it off? I said it was me." Pulling her shirt over her face, she gently wiped the excess water using the inside of her shirt.

"It was an accident. My finger slipped."

Twisting off the spigot, Jayden adjusted her leg to get better leverage to stand. Her leg was going numb from squatting, but her foot caught again, and she landed on her rump, letting out an extended “oof” when the wind knocked out of her.

“Jesus, are you drunk?” Sage asked, taking a step to help Jayden up.

“Are you serious?” Jayden grabbed the offered hand, pulling with more leverage than she meant, which nearly toppled Sage over in the process.

“I was just asking.”

“No, you were judging again.” Jayden brushed off her pants, sighing when she found them damp from the water runoff. Turning the spigot back on, she started rinsing off her juice covered shoes.

“No. Well, yes. Maybe a little.”

“Yup, those are all the options to respond with.” Jayden turned the spout off before shaking her shoes to help air dry some. Tossing the shoes on the ground, she used her toe to get them in place, then shoved her feet back in. Her movements were erratic as she tried to keep her irritation in check.

“I didn’t mean to judge. It was a knee-jerk question.”

“Jerk being the prime word,” Jayden countered. “What were you doing up?”

Jayden noticed Sage rubbing her arms, and for a second, she wished she’d brought a coat to offer her but mentally shook her head at the stray thought. The motion light went off, shrouding them in darkness once more.

“I should ask you that question,” Sage mumbled, probably more to herself since she continued in a clearer voice. “They didn’t have any vegan food at the gala. When I got home, I went to bed but woke up a little hungry.” As if to prove her story, Sage’s stomach rumbled. “What about you?”

“I was in the writing zone and forgot to go to the store. When Tuna woke me up, I couldn’t get back to bed and had a

hankering for orange juice.” She held up her hand, palm facing Sage. “NOT for vodka. I just like OJ when I can’t sleep.”

Dawn was breaking, and a light fog started rolling in. The early morning excitement was waning, leaving a wake of exhaustion pressing on Jayden’s shoulders.

“Is Tuna your dog?” Sage asked, flinging her hands to get the motion light back on.

“No, my kitten. I wanted to surprise Lila when she got back.” Jayden reached into her pocket and pulled out her glasses, which were now dangling at an odd angle. *Of course*, she thought before working on bending them in a workable shape but knowing it wouldn’t be a viable long-term solution. Before long she had them in a semblance of a shape that would keep them on her head until she got back to her house. She knew a backup pair was somewhere in her junk drawer or an errant box that still hadn’t been unpacked.

What she didn’t add was that it was a peace offering for her daughter for having to move from the neighborhood she knew and loved in LA to a cramped guest house on her brother’s property. The kitten was over-the-top, but the guilt she felt as a mother was a tricky emotion to process.

“Oh, I’d love to meet little Tuna. I had a cat as a kid and always wanted another, but my w—” Sage cleared her throat mid-word before starting again. “My ex was allergic.”

“Sure, come over anytime. My hours are flexible. I’m going to check to see if the house is acceptable for people.” The glasses sat crooked on her face, providing a distorted view as she walked into the house.

Making her way to the kitchen, she tested the air with a few breaths. There was a simmer of discomfort but she found the room acceptable, especially if they kept the windows open until daybreak.

The container of OJ still sat on the ground, so she grabbed some dish towels and started wiping up the sticky mess.

“Oh, it’s way better in here.”

Jerking at the unexpected sound, Jayden hit her head on the drawer handle. Her glasses slipped from her face, crashing to the ground. Seeing stars, she held her head until the pain passed. Once it did, she searched the dark tile in the low light for her glasses.

“Are you alright?” Sage walked around the island, gasping when there was a crunch under her feet.

“Yes, I think that’s my cue to head home though.” Jayden couldn’t help but laugh. That seemed to be a fitting end to the interaction. Gathering the dirty dish towels, she decided to take them home to throw in the load of laundry she was planning on doing sometime today. “Don’t forget some food. Night.”

“Hope you get some sleep. Sorry for pepper-spraying you.”

Jayden felt her eyes grow heavy with exhaustion. “And sorry for startling you and stealing your orange juice.”

To be honest, she’d forgotten Marshal had a fiancée living at the house, even with the mower incident. Making a mental note not to just barge into her brother’s house, she waved her rag-covered hands and made her way to the front door.

Getting to the mudroom, she thought about re-arming the house, but with the windows still open to help air the rest of the spray out of the rooms, she left it alone before closing the front door with a louder thump than she meant to.

# Chapter Four

## *Tentative Friendship*

Lack of sleep and traces of the predawn activities played heavily on Sage's eyes as she tried to read through a script her agent had sent. She sprawled on the couch trying to focus on the words but found herself reading the same sentence on repeat—yet, if asked, she'd not be able to parrot back what it said.

Her phone chirped an incoming text. Reaching above her head, Sage searched blindly, trying to locate the device she knew was behind her on the side table somewhere. Another chirp came through as her fingers grazed over the phone's surface, but she had to twist her arm to reach it.

*It would have been easier to sit up and get it,* Sage thought wryly before peeking at the screen with one eye open. Two texts from Ivan showed up in the notifications.

*Can you make lunch with M? 1:30 at John Howie.  
Camera-ready.*

*Please. We'll send the car.*

A rumble started in her chest before she realized it was a groan. There must have been some event that came up, probably with the press. She was still on empty from the night before and the thought of being around more people filled her with dread. However, since it was Ivan asking and they had even added a please... That meant something important.

A glance at the clock indicated she'd have to start moving if she wanted to get there in time. Another groan escaped as she rolled off the couch. A day of recharging had disappeared in the blink of a chirp. The thought of more conversations, especially after her misadventure this morning, brought a prickle of an overwhelmed tear on her eyelash.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she'd signed up for this.



Too tired for a mental pep-talk, she shuffled her way upstairs to put on her mask, one that wasn't only made of makeup.

After a refreshing shower and shimmying into her favorite skirt, Sage hooked her form-fitting suit jacket onto her pointer finger, dropping it over her shoulder as she walked downstairs.

“Sage?” A voice called out from the living room. “Don't spray. It's just me.” Jayden turned the corner with her hands up and a cheeky grin firmly in place.

“Har har. You know it was an accident. Andrea still has the windows open.” Sage made her way down the last steps.

“I know. It was partly my fault. I shouldn't have barged in at night, especially since it's not just my brother's house. I've got to remember and respect that. I'm sorry as well.” Jayden paused before her hand went to the back of her head, where she rubbed at her undercut before saying, “Andrea let me in, just in case you were wondering.”

“It crossed my mind, but I know you grew up in this house. You can come and go as you please. I don't think we got off on the right foot, but I would like to change that. We're forever bonded through the pain of pepper spray.” Sage walked to the front door closet to try to find the shoes she knew went best with the outfit.

“I appreciate that, but it's your house now. I was going to see if you wanted to meet Tuna but dressed like that... I'm not sure you'd like orange fur sticking to the cream skirt.”

Sage felt a flutter of disappointment because that sounded better than some photo opportunity; alas, obligations came first. “I'd love to meet little Tuna, but you're right. Any second, a car is coming to take me to John Howie.” Sage pulled on her jacket, turning around to try to get her arm in the hole. The coat kept twisting out of her reach and she contorted her back, trying to get the second arm in.

“Here, hold on.” Jayden snagged the jacket, shaking out the fabric a little to open it for Sage to slip her hand through.

“You might want to grab a snack on the way if you’re going there,” Jayden added, smoothing out the fabric on her arms before seeming to realize what she was doing and stepping back like she got hit with pepper spray again.

“Why do I need a snack?” Sage asked as she wiggled her toes to try to scoot her shoes closer.

“John Howie is a steak house. I’m not sure how many vegan options there will be.”

The fact Jayden not only remembered she was vegan but also thought to bring up the fact she might need to bring something brought a warmth she hadn’t felt in a long time. “Oh, I didn’t realize that’s what it was. Thank you for letting me know.”

The ringing doorbell interrupted their banter.

“Are you all ready?” Andrea’s footsteps were silent as ever as she walked into the foyer.

Running her hands over her skirt, Sage nodded before remembering the snack she should bring. Restaurants were getting a little better at vegan options, but she was usually stuck with a dry salad or some form of potatoes. “Can you let them know I’ll be right there?”

“Of course.” Andrea went to answer the doorbell.

In the kitchen, she put together a banana, nuts, and crackers with vegan cheese. She’d been craving a smoothie all morning, but the snacks would have to tide her over for now.

“Alright, I’m ready. Thanks for the heads up, Jayden.” Sage waved her banana back and forth as she passed and nodded her thanks to Andrea, who had handed her the purse she’d forgotten. “Maybe tomorrow I can have a date with Tuna?” Sage asked, one foot on the step outside and one inside.

“You move fast, already to the dating stage,” Jayden teased. “But yeah, tomorrow works.”

Settled in the back of the town car, she watched the scenery fly by as she dissected her interaction with Jayden.

Their first couple of meetings hadn't been great—the fact that she kept accusing Jayden of being drunk made shame start to crawl up her cheeks. But she was starting to see more similarities between her and Marshal. They were both kind and thoughtful, something she hadn't assumed about Jayden before.

While the car waited at a light, Sage noticed a cat working its way over a tree branch. She whipped out her phone to take a video of the cat's progress as it worked, trying to get the food left from a white and blue feeder for birds. The cat inched its way on the branch until it was under the food before jumping onto the feeder. The goodies tipped to the side as the cat lost its grip but landed on its feet. The whole thing lasted no more than the time of the stoplight.

Giddy at such a sight, Sage hit the end before watching the whole thing again.

As the car began moving, she felt disappointed that she hadn't gotten Jayden's number yet. She could have asked Marshal, but it felt like an invasion. Instead, she placed the phone back in her purse and watched Bellevue's neighborhoods switch to busier business districts until the car stopped in front of John Howie Steak restaurant.

Flashes of light occasionally burst, but Sage couldn't figure out the target of the photos. The driver helped her out of the seat and tipped his hat as he walked back to the driver's side. Sage could still see the white of his eyes as he watched to ensure she got inside okay.

“There you are,” Ivan said, in a rush. “You're late.” Ivan's ever-present phone beeped with something that had them distracted again. “Marshal's inside. Go ahead and meet him there. I've got a few things to take care of.” They waved their phone, which was already flashing with more notifications.

Not wanting to delay whatever was going on, Sage lifted her shoulders, giving her the confidence to put on her game face, and walked into the restaurant. When she gave her name to the host, he weaved through the tables, immediately taking

her to the back. Sage waited as he held the door open to a private dining room and motioned her to enter.

As all eyes turned to her, Sage avoided them to take in the room, which wasn't what Sage expected. It was well-lit with clean walls. For some reason, she'd pictured wooden panels and the smell of cigars clinging to the curtains. She searched for Marshal, who was in an intense conversation with someone on his left. When the person turned, Sage noticed it was Patricia, whose laughing face pinched when their eyes met. Sage watched as she quickly released Marshal's arm. She had no problem figuring out the look that flitted across Patricia's face as if she'd been caught in a compromising position. The whole sequence almost made her laugh.

*If only she knew.* The words ran through her head as she leaned down to kiss Marshal's cheek. "Hi, Marshal."

"Sage, you made it." Marshal scooted his chair out to stand. "Please sit." He pulled out the chair next to him and, with a flourish of his wrist, indicated to her chair.

She was glad Marshal was between her and Patricia because she wasn't sure what she might say, especially after the lack of sleep. Ivan slipped next to her and breathlessly asked if they'd missed anything.

"Not yet, but I just sat down," Sage mumbled out of the side of her mouth.

Marshal cleared his throat, still standing, and reached over for a glass near his plate. "Now that everyone is here, I have a short speech prepared. Go easy on me. I'm stumbling through this without the beautiful words Morgan usually puts together, making me sound smart." The group laughed and turned to Morgan, the aide who wrote most of Marshal's speeches. Her face now matched her vivid red hair, and she tried to hide behind the glass of water she picked up.

"Alright, stop making Morgan uncomfortable. She's going to be busy. Well, all of us are. I've asked everyone together as a thank you for your hard work. Tomorrow I'm announcing my intent to run for Senate. All of you play an important role in the upcoming elections, and I wouldn't be here without your

support. I want to thank my fiancée, Sage, for providing a safe harbor in the coming storm. You are my lighthouse, and I'm grateful for you." Marshal paused as a round of 'awww' erupted around the table before continuing. "The next few months are going to be a whirlwind, but hopefully worth it in the end. So, a toast—I'm propped up by a team of amazing people. To each of you and the battle to come. I wouldn't want anyone else in my corner."

"Morgan would have written it better, but congrats," Ivan added at the end, to everyone's amusement.

Sage reached for her water glass but found it already had a bright red lipstick mark on the edge.

"Are you ready to order?" The waiter startled her as he stealthily slid up to her side.

"Oh, umm, just some seltzer with lemon and the house salad please, no croutons or cheese. Do you have any vegan dressings?"

He twisted his lips at her question before shaking his head. "No, all our dressings have some form of milk or parmesan."

"What about just an oil and vinegar combination?"

"I can see about that, sure." He shrugged.

"Okay, that on the side, please."

He left without another word. Sage sighed inwardly, not really feeling like a salad but not wanting a potato either.

The hum of conversation flowed as the group got up to mingle before the food arrived. Sage thought about the announcement. She'd known it was going to happen but struggled trying to envision what the coming months would entail.

"Are you ready for some nights with a cold bed?" Patricia asked as she sat next to the chair Ivan had just vacated.

Sage tried not to snort, but that would have given everything away. In all actuality, her bed warmth wouldn't

change. “I’m sure I’ll get used to it,” she said instead before thanking the waiter for her drink.

“Still no alcohol, huh?” Patricia waved to her cup. “I’m sure there is a story there somewhere.”

“Maybe, but it’s not an intriguing one, I’ll tell you that.” Sage tried to study Patricia’s mannerisms and facial features in case she ever needed to play a nosy bitch.

The food finally arrived, leaving Sage to eat alone. The scrapes of knives over plates filled the room as more than two conversations flowed around. Sage forked a piece of lettuce without dressing. After trying the oil and vinegar she decided she was better off eating the lettuce without anything since the ratio of oil vastly outweighed that of the vinegar. The only thought running through her head was how grateful she was Jayden had warned her about the food and suggested a snack.

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Jayden’s fingers were cramping from her writing session. Almost done with the first act, she stretched, needing a moment’s rest for her hands. With Lila back in a few days she needed to use all her free time to make a good dent in the script. However, she wasn’t as successful as she’d hoped since every few words, she had to push back yesterday’s vision of Sage and her suit before she headed to the steak place. It was the combination of power and femininity that had unlocked a switch in Jayden’s brain that she was trying to shove back into a safe zone.

“Tuna, no!”

Jayden hopped up in time, just missing the scalding coffee running down her keyboard. She pulled her backup glasses that had been nestled in her hair for the writing session back onto her face and watched as her kitten bounced to the next thing on her desk, which happened to be a stress ball that flung from under Tuna’s pounce and smacked her in the eye.

“Whoever said pets were nice to have around was lying,” Jayden said to the empty room.

Tuna sat on the desk as his tail spread the liquid around on the desk.

“Knock knock,” Sage called from the front door. “I don’t have pepper spray, so don’t worry.”

Jayden snorted as she stood up. She’d kept the front door open to get better air circulation through the screen door. Sage was standing tentatively in the doorway with the screen partly propped open. Glad for the distraction from the destruction caused by a tiny cat, she waved her in.

“Well, it would be infinitely rude for you to pepper spray me on my turf.” Jayden stepped towards Sage, suddenly unsure what to do with her hands. Sage appeared to be discreetly looking around the small room.

It was her first time seeing Sage dressed down during the day. The sun coming through the window created a reflection off the sequins from the loose tank top Sage wore, which showed off her toned shoulders. Capri sweatpants encased her legs, and flip flops that showed off her manicured toes painted with light pink, orange, white, and purple swirls finished her ensemble. Jayden wanted to point out how similar the colors were to the lesbian flag but refrained, not wanting to make her self-conscious.

“Don’t worry, I left the spray at home and have no intention of utilizing that again. Sorry again, I’m so embarrassed. Almost more than the time my pants ripped on stage and I had to go through the whole scene with my back to the wall. I’m pretty sure the audience in the first couple rows got an eyeful of my underwear. And now here I am word-vomiting in your house.” Sage worried her hands together as an adorable blush crawled up her cheeks.

“I have to clean my table and cat from the mess he made, so I can help clean up word vomit, although I might need rubber gloves for that job.” Jayden waved her in. “Come on, let me give you the tour. Don’t blink, though, or you might miss something.”

“I would have tried calling, but I don’t have your number. Maybe I should have asked Marshal, but somehow that could be weird, and I thought it would be best to ask you when I saw you next. Seriously, I’m not sure where my rambling is coming from.”

“My daughter, Lila, is a rambler; she gets it from me, so I’m well aware of the effects. Was that your way of asking for my number?” The flirty tone fell out before Jayden had time to reroute it, but as soon as it was out, she stumbled. The last thing she needed was accidental flirtation with her brother’s fiancée. Clearing her throat, she added, “It makes sense for us to share numbers in case something happens.”

A loud meow that Jayden was sure could be heard outside was instead right at their feet. Tuna’s large blue eyes looked up at them, his body completely covered in coffee. Little paw prints littered the floor, showing the trail of mischief.

“Oh my heart, is this Tuna?” Sage bent down, scooping up the troublemaker and bringing him to her face. “Let’s get you cleaned up, you poor thing. You’re shivering.” Sage made herself at home by locating the paper towels, wetting them, and cleaning up the kitten while cooing softly.

At a loss of what to do, Jayden grabbed two hand towels, setting one by Sage to use to dry Tuna when she was finished and set out to clean up her desk. On the way, she added mopping the floor to her mental list of chores. Before heading back to the kitchen, she had to test the keyboard and breathed a sigh of relief when it worked as it should.

“There you are. Nice and clean and such a beautiful color.” Sage cradled the hand towel to her chest, a fluffy orange head sticking out the end. “Aww, aren’t you just the cutest snuggle bug ever?” A rumble sprouted from the bundle as Tuna purred contentedly.

“I’ve never seen him so calm.” Jayden ran her hands through her hair, adding another mental note to trim her hair to the growing list of chores. “At night he is bouncing off the walls, managing to ruin the blinds in the bedroom, shred up all the toilet paper in the bathroom, and knock down a plant in the



living room, all before one in the morning.” Jayden started the tour, pointing to all the places Tuna had destroyed in his short stay at her house.

“Well, at least the kitchen is free from his terror,” Sage said, rubbing her face in his fur.

“It’s still early. I haven’t been here that long.” Jayden motioned to the couch. “Want to sit? Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m okay.” Sage bounced when she ungracefully plopped down on the leather couch, creating the sound of someone breaking wind.

Not sure if they were at the teasing stage of their friendship or if she should politely ignore the hilarious sound, Jayden ended up freezing, waiting for a clue as to what direction they were going to play it out.

“That was Tuna,” Sage joked, focusing intently on the now sleeping kitten still bundled in her arms. “Do you have any toys for him? That might help calm him at night.” Sage unwrapped the towel and gently placed Tuna on his back, softly rubbing his belly. “Don’t want him to sleep all day. Might help a little.” Tuna opened his blue eyes and playfully swatted at her hands. Sage switched from rubbing to dancing her fingers in front of his paws.

“I should get him some things to play with. This is my first cat and I’m a little lost at all the things needed.”

“You have a litter box and food, those are the most important things, but here.” Sage leaned back on the couch and started fiddling with her sweatpants.

Jayden watched in fascination as she tried to figure out what Sage was doing as she twisted on the couch, causing more fart sounds. Jayden’s curiosity was finally satiated when Sage held the tie that held up her pants in the air.

“Behold, a cat toy.” She wiggled the string near Tuna, who immediately twisted in her lap, falling to the floor in a heap before pouncing for the string.

“Maybe he’ll sleep tonight.” Jayden moved to the window. Sage was far more personable than she’d first seemed, and Jayden didn’t want to be caught staring at her now loosened sweats. Her eyes roamed over the dead patch of grass near the side of the yard.

The weather had changed since childhood, leaving her needing a portable air conditioner during the summer months. She could remember one hot day when her grandma allowed her and her brother to eat as many popsicles as they wanted since no other food appealed to either of them. Jayden reminisced when they made a MacGyver pool by utilizing a tarp and a roll of duct tape. It lasted a half hour before flooding the yard, creating that dead patch in the grass she was currently studying.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Sage grunted as she lifted herself from the couch. Her flip flops slapped as she walked towards Jayden.

“I need to run to my P.O. box to grab my new glasses. Then someone told me I need cat toys, so I’ll swing by the pet store.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

Jayden watched Sage twist her engagement ring as she waited for an answer. “Sure, but I was planning on grabbing an Uber—unless you want to drive?” Jayden grabbed her wallet and slipped on her Vans.

Trying to hide how uncomfortable the conversation was, Jayden went on the offensive and gave a cheeky grin. She didn’t want to explain that she couldn’t drive. That her license had been revoked and she had another grueling few months before she could get it back. The urge to punch something flowed through her as she thought about why she’d lost it in the first place.

“I don’t mind, come on.” Sage stopped to pet Tuna before walking out towards the garage.

Compatible silence filled the air around them as they walked to the garage, where Jayden waited for Sage to unlock

the door.

“I don’t have a car, but I have an extra helmet.” Sage wiggled her eyebrows up and down. “Maybe it’s time you met Margaret. Hold on, let me change.”

Jayden tried to hold in her excitement at getting to ride on a motorcycle. She’d always secretly wanted one, but Lennox had been opposed, and once she became a mother, she had a hard time justifying the known dangers of riding one of them. Plus, they weren’t practical for commuting with a kid.

As she waited for Sage, Jayden found a basketball in the grass near the house. Holding it in both hands, she squeezed, checking for the air before bouncing it on the driveway a few times. Jayden found the air acceptable and reconnected with the ball, dribbling a figure eight between her legs before throwing the ball behind her back, catching it with the other hand before taking a step to the hoop above the driveway. As the ball bounced off the rim with a clunk, she admitted to herself that she was a little rusty from her college days.

“So close.” Sage came out wearing jeans and a pink short-sleeved blouse with a slight V-neck running down a little past her collar. Gone were her flip flops and, instead, a comfortable-looking pair of stylish boots wrapped around her feet, ending at the ankle. Jayden tried not to stare at the new wardrobe as Sage chased the ball and passed it back to her with a crisp throw.

Snatching the ball from midair, Jayden pivoted towards the hoop and tried for a jump shot that hit the backboard, the ball rebounding before unceremoniously landing between them. Pushing up her backup glasses that didn’t quite work with the frame of her face she said, “It looks like I need to recalibrate my programming. I’m a few versions outdated.” Jayden watched as Sage tilted her head and a bundle of skin formed between her eyebrows. “My nickname was Jaybot in college because I rarely got rattled and hit most of my shots.”

The bundle cleared as understanding lit her features. “Oh, like a computer needing the latest download. I get it now.”

Sage swiped the ball, zipping it back to her. Jayden was glad her reflexes weren't as rusty as her shots, or the wind would have been knocked out of her with the heat Sage put behind the pass. "How long has it been since you played? You've got a killer zing," Jayden asked as she shot again, pumping her fists when it finally went in with a satisfying swoosh of hitting only the net.

"Played for a few years in middle and high school but it wasn't something I wanted to pursue in college," Sage said, motioning for them to enter the garage's side door.

The motion-sensor lights illuminated the area where Jayden stood, scanning the room for Sage's motorcycle. Tools were scrupulously lined against the wall, each holding a puzzle piece perfect for the whole picture.

Jayden tried to locate the bike but was coming up short. All she saw was a— "No, no way." The words were out of her mouth without a thought. "You want me to get on the back of that tiny thing?" Jayden cocked her head and studied the machine critically. There appeared to be small metal handles that lined the back of the comfortable-looking seat. After the initial shock of expecting a motorcycle and seeing a scooter, Jayden had to admit the colors and design were impressive.

Sage looked over her shoulder, eyeing Jayden. "This is Margaret. Don't let her size fool you. She can pack a punch." Tapping her knuckle on the seat, she seemed to be waiting for Jayden's response.

"Okay, so you want me to hop up on this sliver of a seat?" Jayden tapped the back area.

"Yes. Here you go." Sage handed her a fluorescent blue helmet as she donned on a wicked-looking red helmet.

It seemed too late to back out, so, gritting her teeth, she put the blue monstrosity on and swung her leg to situate herself on the raised seat in the back.

The Vespa dipped as Sage adjusted herself on the seat. Glad for the handle behind her, Jayden twisted her arms to grip

the metal. It would have been awkward having to hold onto someone she'd barely started a friendship with.

“Hold on.”

Those were the last words she heard as Sage started the engine for their day out. Hidden behind the helmet was a rare smile. Jayden felt free for the first time in a while. The stress of the move, being fired, and the incident melted away as Sage maneuvered through the streets.

# Chapter Five

## *Games*

“I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages, although I know we had lunch at the steak place a few days ago.” Marshal walked to the island where Sage stood and squeezed her shoulder on his way back. “How are you doing?” Without waiting for a response, he continued. “I have a few upcoming events I’ll need you for and was wondering if you wanted to have lunch soon, just us? Also, tomorrow, I have a political rally in Tacoma. Can you be there to introduce me, then stand on stage?”

Sage turned and walked to the fridge to grab some cashew milk for her coffee. “I’m used to the stage, and if Morgan is the one writing the introduction, I’d be happy to do it.” She turned on the hot water kettle for Marshal’s tea and grabbed two cups.

“Thank you. I also wanted to check in.” Marshal glanced around to see if they were alone. “Are you sure you’re still okay with continuing? Things with the campaign are ramping up, and I just wanted to make sure.” Marshal held his hands up as if cupping the air.

She didn’t answer immediately, using the excuse of doctoring her coffee to think. For some reason, one of the Quincy twins was on her mind, but it wasn’t the one in front of her. When she and Marshal talked about getting married it always felt like an abstract. Marshal had helped her through the worst days of her life, and she could never imagine finding happiness again. The thing was, she was lonely, and living with her best friend wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Walking up to him, she put her arm around his shoulder and pulled him into a hug.

Shaking off her thoughts of her past she said, “Of course it’s still okay.”

“How are you and Jayden getting along? I’m sorry, I know she isn’t someone you signed up to have living on the property, but she needed a safe harbor after what happened. Especially with Lila coming back soon.”

“It’s fine, really. We got off to a rocky start, but Jayden’s fun, and it’s nice having someone around.”

“Oh good. I’m glad to hear that and ecstatic you’re still okay with us getting married.” He waved when Andrea walked in.

“Do we have anything lined up for today, or is it only Tacoma tomorrow for now?”

They walked side by side, discussing transport and the smaller events occurring during the week for which Sage would need to be present. Marshal soon left, leaving Sage wondering what to do with her open day.

Knowing the week was jam-packed, she thought about staying in and seeing if there were any scripts for plays that seemed worthy, but the thought held little appeal.

Pacing the hallway, Sage tried to gather the courage to send a text. She and Jayden had spent the previous weekend running errands together, but new friendships were hard to navigate for her. Was it okay to text? It felt weird to call to see if she was free to spend time together. Changing into athletic clothes to psych herself up into potentially working out later, Sage tried to find the optimal arrangement of words to see if Jayden was free.

Oi, she was overthinking this. With a text already drafted, she breathed in for four seconds, then held it deep in her lungs for seven seconds before exhaling. Finally, she hit send on the last second of her allotted eight seconds to breathe out.

*Would you want to play some basketball?*

One of her grief counselors had told her about that breathing technique. She repeated it a few times to help settle her thumping heart as she waited for a reply.

Instead of the text ping she expected, the shrill ding of the doorbell echoed through the house.

“I’ll get it,” Sage called to Andrea.

She saw Jayden sticking her tongue out through the decorative window in the door. She already had the basketball and tossed it between her hands as she waited.

“I’d love to, but you should know I’m super competitive and worked on my update over the week, so Jaybot is raring to go.” Jayden jumped into the conversation without preamble, bouncing in her high-tops, shorts, and a loose T-shirt that said, “I do what I want,” with a cat knocking over a cup from a table.

“Cute shirt.” Sage slipped on her sneakers and walked to the driveway.

Jayden looked down. “Oh, thanks. My daughter gave it to me for my birthday last year. She loves cats.”

“I love them too. I had to hold back from sneaking into your place to steal Tuna.” Sage lifted her left leg, grabbing the shoe to stretch her hamstring before switching feet.

“I’ve been neutral to negative towards them, but since we got the cat toys, I’m creeping up towards seeing their appeal. Especially when Tuna fetches the little bird toy and brings it back.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to see that trick.” Sage placed a hand over her mouth, bursting with excitement for the kitten. “What shall we play? H.O.R.S.E? Around the world? One-on-one?” She needed to distract herself, or she would forgo basketball and snuggle with the kitten.

“Let’s warm up with H.O.R.S.E, then play a short one-on-one game—to what, do you think? The first one to fifteen, twenty?”

“Let’s shoot for fifteen with the caveat that we might go to twenty.” Sage pulled her arm across her chest as she shook Tuna from her mind and focused on the task at hand.

Jayden may be competitive, but so was Sage.

The shooting game of H.O.R.S.E started well for Sage as she turned her back to the basket and threw the ball behind her



in a trick shot that sank into the net. Jayden then needed to try the same shot in the exact same spot to not get an H. When Jayden flicked her wrist, the basketball soared in an arc but fell six inches short of the rim. The first one to get all the letters in horse lost. However, this was the classic case of peaking in high school when all of Sage's shots from that point fell short of the basket. Even the ones she happened to make, Jayden could follow with near precision, never gaining more than an H.O. By the time Sage had gathered H.O.R.S, she grabbed the ball from Jayden's hands and investigated it from all angles.

"It's got to be rigged. Some sort of pulley system that's allowing your balls to fall gracefully in the net while mine slip out like a carnival game. You've got to be coating it with Crisco or something." Sage wiped the ball before dramatically falling to the driveway with her hands and feet spread out when she picked up the last E.

The late July heat beat down on her as a layer of sweat formed from their exertion.

"Here, don't forget to drink water." Jayden stood over her form, providing a shadow of shade that cooled the area a half degree, which was a degree she'd gladly take right now.

A water bottle sweating down the sides magically hovered above her, pulling a moan as she sat up and reached for the ice-cold drink. She wrapped her lips around the mouthpiece and guzzled at least half the container.

When she finally took a break, gasping for breath, her eyes met Jayden's, who looked at her much like one would look at an exhibit in the zoo. The thought would have embarrassed Sage a few weeks ago, but now that she knew Jayden better, she knew there was no malice behind the look.

"Should we hold off on one-on-one for next time?" Jayden asked, executing a perfect jump shot.

Sage didn't want to notice her defined muscles as her toes lifted off the ground, but she also couldn't *not* see them since they were right near her face as she continued sitting on the driveway.

“Well, should we?” Jayden asked again.

Having to replay the last few moments, Sage shook her head out of her momentary lapse. She’d never say so but she felt grateful for an excuse to stop. Despite the fact that she had stretched and they had only been shooting the basketball, her muscles felt tight. As she stood, she finally answered Jayden. “Yeah, let’s stop for now, or it could have been embarrassing for you. I was just warming up.” A snort escaped, but it wasn’t Jayden’s. Sage couldn’t keep a straight face through her dialogue.

“Next time. You’ll have to show me that over-the-shoulder shot. I was sweating bullets when you went for that basket again.” Jayden picked up the bottom of her shirt and wiped her dripping forehead.

The move provided a view of Jayden’s stomach, which Sage found hard to look away from. This was the second time she’d seen the expanse of skin with a few stretch marks from pregnancy. It was harder to tear her eyes away than Sage would have thought. Her eyes settled on the gutters, wondering if they needed servicing.

Clearing her throat, Sage peered to the side to see if it was safe to look again. To her immense relief, Jayden had covered herself back up.

“I have to pick up school supplies for Lila, and my computer has battery issues. Want to come with me, or do you have plans for the rest of the day already?” Jayden fell into step with her as they walked to the main house, although she stopped at the front door.

“Do you want to take Margaret, or did I traumatize you last week?” Sage asked, waving Jayden into the house.

“We can take Margaret. Can I sit in the riding seat on the way home?”

The ask was simple, but tabloid headlines filled the back of her head as she stood gaping at someone who was waiting for a perfectly reasonable request.

“I—uh. It’s just that…” The words evaporated on her tongue when she looked at the pained expression.

Jayden stepped back, peering around like she was about to bolt. “It’s okay. Actually, I’m not sure I can be in the riding seat, now that I think about it.”

Sage watched as Jayden’s face twisted in something that looked a lot like embarrassment. It took Jayden turning and heading back to the guest house for Sage to find her voice. “Wait, Jayden, hold up. Let’s go get your daughter’s school supplies,” Sage extended, hoping they would be able to move past this moment.

All her training on the stage kept Sage’s foot from tapping at the foyer. Her muscles were on pins and needles, waiting for Jayden’s response.

Jayden turned back. Sage couldn’t make out any of her emotions, but she sighed in relief when Jayden finally responded. “Okay. Let me get changed,” she said with her thumb pointed behind her shoulder.

Sage couldn’t tear her eyes away from Jayden’s hips as she turned and jogged back to the guest house.

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The ride to the big box store was uneventful. Jayden tried to hold onto the handles behind her but found the turns hard to balance which forced her to wrap her arms around Sage’s middle. She tried not to focus on how good it felt to hold somebody. Throughout the ride she continued the mantra, *she is your brother’s fiancée, don’t get too close.*

Before long Sage had navigated to a parking spot while Jayden continued to hold on. It took a moment for Jayden to find her legs after crawling off the Vespa. Handing her helmet to Sage, she shook out her legs as Sage tucked their helmets into Margaret’s seat.

Walking down the fluorescent-filled aisles, Jayden mentally ran down the well-worn list tucked in her pocket, knowing they would be able to get everything they needed. She relished being out of the house but had to bump past other parents as they all tried to figure out what was the best option as they stood in front of the thirty brands of glue.

Beside her, Sage was diligently pushing the cart, following Jayden's lead. Lost in her thoughts, Jayden vaguely realized they had wandered to the electronic section. Her experience usually kept her at high vigilance but focusing on the list had made her careless of her surroundings.

"You're benching me? After all I've done!" Brandi's scream from the bank of TVs along the back wall of the store pulled Jayden's attention to the screen.

"Calm down. You'll get your chance, but that injury needs time to heal." The actor on screen pointed to Brandi. Jayden winced at the dialogue, knowing it could have used another run-through, but she'd been fired before given a chance.

"Come on, Jayden. There are still a few more supplies on the list, let's go." Jayden felt Sage's blouse rub against her arm as she tried to get her attention. Shaking herself out of her funk and trying not to think about getting fired from the show playing on the wall, she pulled the paper from her pocket, looking at the list one more time.

"Why do we need to provide the classroom with tissues?" Jayden asked, pointing to the crumpled paper. "We also need a notebook, crayons, and hand sanitizer. I'm surprised they aren't asking her to get a laptop yet. She might need one soon though, not sure what brand would be best, but maybe I have a few more years before that's needed. She might need some more clothes. Lennox was saying she's already growing out of her pants." Jayden felt herself rambling as she tried to forget the show playing in the background.

"One thing at a time. We're near the clothes so let's look there before getting back to the rest of the supplies." Sage's finger extended towards the televisions. "That was your show,

right? Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, grabbing Jayden’s elbow, trying to help navigate them to another aisle.

Jayden felt her neck twinge as she tried not to look behind her, needing more than anything to move forward in her life. “No, I don’t want to talk about it.” Taking hold of the cart handle from Sage, she tried to put as much distance between them and the show as possible.

“Okay, but if you need to, I’ll listen,” Sage said, rifling mindlessly through some pants.

“I just can’t talk about it.” Jayden held out a shirt that might fit Lila against Sage’s torso. “At least not right now,” she added, wanting to explain but unsure where to start. It wasn’t as if she didn’t trust Sage, which was surprising since they still didn’t know each other that well, but she felt comfortable with her.

The rest of the shopping trip had both Sage and Jayden stuck in their own thoughts. Jayden wanted to break the silence, but the rest of their interactions were kept at a superficial level...until they walked to the checkout area. Lines weren’t very long at the front, so Sage stepped in front of the cart to help place the items on the conveyor belt while Jayden unloaded from the back. She tried to ignore the two customers who had been following her and Sage for a few aisles, and inwardly sighed when they settled behind them in line, even though another checkout was available.

“It’s sick what she did to that poor girl.”

The voice came from a whisper behind her. Trying to take the high road, Jayden placed another item on the belt but was coming up short on topics to bring up to Sage.

Glossy magazines filled her sight, one of which caught her eye. *Writer almost maims beloved actress.*

The title gave her pause as Jayden stared at the photo of that night. A dented car and the now well-known face of Brandi, and herself. Brandi had her hands cupped at the sides of her head while Jayden was captured leaning to the right. It was unfortunate timing because Jayden knew she was

inspecting the car, but the angle of the photo made it look like she was swaying.

“I heard Brandi lost a baby. I can’t believe she’s not in jail.”

The words sliced at her armor. She couldn’t believe how fast the story had gotten out of hand, and that Brandi hadn’t helped in clearing anything up. Of course she hadn’t. She was content living her best life as a new star.

“That’s her, you know. Should we call the cops?” another voice added, a little louder now. “We could be heroes, bringing down the notorious bitch who almost killed Brandi.”

Jayden barely held in an eye roll, but it still hurt that strangers would pick the tabloids over her story. Not that she’d told her story, but wasn’t there such a thing as the benefit of the doubt? Apparently not when it came to a celebrity and someone behind the scenes.

So focused on the words behind her, Jayden missed the interaction in front of her with Sage and the employee.

“It’s my stuff. Does that make a difference?” Sage asked, bringing Jayden’s full attention to the interaction. Nothing on the belt had moved and the teen in a work vest had her arms across her chest.

“We can refuse service to anyone, and I’m refusing to serve her.”

Jayden blinked as if trying to clear the sequence in front of her. No, still the same teen now pointing at her with a shaky finger. The vision didn’t dissipate; instead, the employee crisped up.

Peering around the store, she tried to locate the exits. The corner of her eyes stung, reminding her this wasn’t the first time this had happened. Granted, it hadn’t happened in Washington yet, but it was a near-daily occurrence when the incident had first occurred. Brandi was a rising star and the pictures had been damning. Reaching to the belt, Jayden was about to grab the notebook that had a cat on it. Something she knew Lila would love. The thought of disappointing her

daughter brought a lump to her throat, but she knew if she fought harder, she'd lose even her. Warm fingers enveloped her hand before pushing slightly away.

“This is my merchandise, but I'm happy to go somewhere else that will take my money.” Sage tapped a credit card on the counter.

Her unexpected ally glared daggers at the woman, who somehow held a lot of power in Jayden's life at the moment. Another person came over and introduced themselves to Sage and Jayden as Jane the floor manager and told the employee that they had it and were taking over for now. The checker looked like she wanted to argue but refrained and turned away with a blush creeping up her neck. Jane reached to the belt for the first product. The beeping scanner broke the stalemate, and nothing more was said. As Jayden watched the slightly jerky movements as Jane scanned the items, she used the time to try and calm down.

Whispers started again, but Jayden was determined to provide her best imitation of a statue as she stared ahead while putting the products in the reusable bags she'd remembered to grab. All the while refusing to acknowledge the escalating stories the other customers had heard about her.

Jane read the total back, and before Jayden could slide her card into the reader, Sage already had her card entered. A grunt of indignation escaped Jayden, but Sage reached out to tug her along. Sage leaned in to whisper, “The faster we can get out of here, the better.”

“Thank you. Do you have a cash app of some kind? I can pay you back.”

“We can talk about that later. Let's get out of here.” Sage's shaking hands pulled her hair back to redo her messy bun.

They didn't say much more as Jayden passed one bag at a time to Sage as she played Tetris with the merchandise, trying to get it all to fit in the seat of the Vespa. Jayden flinched when Sage slammed the seat with a resounding thunk, not realizing she was now bagless and staring at nothing in particular.

“You can drive us back.” Sage lifted her hand to pass on the keys.

“It’s okay. I googled the laws when I went to change. I’m not allowed to drive, even a scooter. I had my license suspended for a year. Still have a few more months to go. Plus, I’m not in a good head space for navigating right now.” Jayden’s face burned at the confession.

Hauling herself to the back of the seat, Jayden shimmied on the bright blue helmet. She pulled the visor down, even though Sage’s body blocked most of the wind. Her default mode in situations like this was to run and hide, which was why she had holed up in her brother’s guest house where her daughter would have to start a new school, instead of facing the problem head-on.

“Well, we’ll take Margaret here for a spin when your license is back.” Sage patted the handle and sent a sheepish grin her way before adding, “But I appreciate knowing your boundaries and that you’re not willing to drive when distracted.”

It seemed Sage had more to say on the subject, but now wasn’t the time to divulge stories. Even if Jayden wanted to ask some questions, the roar of the engine starting hindered their ability to hear. So instead, she gripped the back bar and tried to concentrate on the movement of the scooter as Sage drove them home.

“Are you ready to talk now about the show and what happened with Brandi?” Sage had parked in the garage and was handing Jayden bags.

“No. I’ll tell you the story someday, but I need to process things right now. Thanks for going with me to get Lila’s supplies.”

Jayden didn’t wait for a response as she hurried to her house. She closed the door with an extra shove, trying to find peace in the silence.



In Lila's room, Jayden poured the new goodies on the twin bed with a cat blanket. Supplies rained down in a clatter. Tuna came in to see what the commotion was and ended up playing with a pen that had feathers on its end. Jayden crumpled on the edge of the bed. Tears stung the back of her eyes as she tried to push the afternoon's events out of her mind.

“Jayden?”

Jayden heard Sage's soft call from the living room. Swiping her eyes, she tried to pull herself together and thought she'd done a relatively okay job. That was until Sage turned the corner to the open door of Lila's room and murmured something along the lines of, “Yeah, I thought so.”

Jayden couldn't be sure because she crumpled further.

“Where is this water coming from?” Jayden looked at the ceiling, trying to figure out what was dripping down her face. There was a dip in the bed when Sage sat. Jayden felt Sage's arms wrap around her shoulders as she tugged her closer.

“You're crying, Jayden. Just let it out. It's okay. I've got you.”

When Lila was three, she'd had an epic meltdown, throwing everything within reach. Nothing calmed her down, and after hours of listening to the shrill cry, Lennox had to take Lila out for a walk, allowing Jayden to pull herself back together as she hit her breaking point. That had been the last time Jayden ever remembered crying. Even with everything that went down with Brandi, she'd never let go like this.

“I'm sorry,” she repeated over and over, feeling horrible that Sage had to deal with something she hadn't even signed up for. The thought was the cool metaphorical water over her head she needed to pull herself together.

“There is nothing to apologize for. Everyone needs a cry now and then.” Sage rubbed her back, causing Jayden to consciously keep from leaning in further.

Sage wasn't someone she could or should count on for affection since she was her brother's fiancée. A fact that kept slipping her mind, and she had to put the reminder on repeat in

her head as they sat on the bed. “I’m okay.” Jayden stood, trying to put some distance from Sage.

“So this is Lila’s room. I can’t wait to meet her,” Sage redirected, perusing the knick knacks that lined the walls. “Wow, she likes erasers.”

“Yes, she loves to collect them. She also loves cats.” Jayden indicated the blanket with open hands.

“That is one thing I gathered.” Sage walked the room with her hands behind her back. Occasionally she’d pick up something but was careful to place it gently back in the exact spot. After completing a full circle, she ended back at the side of the bed with her hands behind her. “I want you to know I don’t know much, but if you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

Jayden picked up a notebook and used the stiff cover as a shield on her lap. Thumbing through the pages, she tried to figure out a place to start. Writing was her day job, yet she felt lost about where to start. “Thank you. Maybe next time...” It was the coward’s way out, but she couldn’t handle the conversation as she tried to ignore the slouch of Sage’s shoulders while she dealt with disappointment.

# Chapter Six

## *Gathering*

The roar of the crowd pierced Sage's ears when the announcer kicked off the rally for Marshal. The noise permeated the thick curtain Sage stood behind, filling the area and making small talk hard to accomplish with Marshal's team. She wasn't new to the politics game since a few of her family members had run for various things, but none had ever pulled a crowd like this one. Pride swelled in her chest at the thought of all the good her best friend would be able to carry out if elected. She knew how hard he worked, and the sleepless nights he spent trying to fight for the people of Washington.

Stage fright had long ago dissipated in her career but acting in a play for a small crowd in a dark room was vastly different from doing a speech for hundreds in a well lit area. Thousands, if the cameras were any indication. Ivan had outdone himself in locating someone who would come in for her hair, makeup, and clothes. Having the whole ensemble come together always helped her get into character.

Fighting the urge to fidget, Sage waited until the emcee called her name. When first learning a script, she found comfort in holding the document. Being able to hold on to a tangible object helped her concentrate. Now that the speech was loaded on a shared Google drive document and projected onto screens at the podium, Sage felt herself falling into anxiety.

Her phone pinged with a text. Checking to ensure she wasn't due onstage, she pulled the device out of her pocket, reading Jayden's text. The words made her chuckle.

*Relax and picture the audience naked.*

They'd talked about her anxiety and practiced the speech a few times the day before. Jayden knew just what to say to not

only push her buttons but also bring a desperately needed levity.

*That would be an alarming number of boobs,* she responded before Ivan rushed her onstage.

Sliding the ringer off and tucking her phone back in her jacket, Sage took a deep breath. The prompters of her speech started rolling. To her dismay, Sage's voice shook at first, the only indication of her nerves. Once she heard the first swell of laughter, everything calmed down, and once her speech was winding down, she made a mental note to get Morgan something nice for crafting such a well-written speech.

By the end of the event, Sage's feet were screaming. The only indication of her pain was swaying on one leg and then the other to help alleviate the radiating ache. Knowing the camera's recording would be able to pick on any little micromovement on her face, Sage kept her smile in place.

Finally, the last announcement rang through the stage, and the small team was ushered to the side by a group of burly humans.

"How about a barbecue at our house to thank you for all your hard work? Invite your significant others," Marshal announced to the group. Sage walked up beside him and put her arm around his waist, hoping to alleviate some of the pressure off her feet.

When the group responded with excited confirmation, Sage tried to remember if they had enough food for everyone but was having difficulty concentrating. Feeling tired and a little drained she worked on finding the inner strength needed to host after an event like this.

"I'll let Andrea know and, if needed, I can pick up some items," Ivan said without looking from their phone.

"I have to swing by the office to pick up some things for the weekend. Meet you at home?" Marshal asked, turning to her.

“Okay, hurry home though. I’m not sure how helpful I’ll be. I need to recharge a bit but will try and get things set up for the barbecue.” They started walking to the parking lot.

“I’m sorry, I should have checked in before inviting everyone over,” Marshal said, letting Sage lean on his arm as she tried to hide a limp on the way to the car.

“I don’t mind doing the barbecue, I just need a moment to recharge my battery a little.” Sage waited as Marshal opened the door, then she crawled into the backseat.

“I’ll be home as fast as I can to help. See you there. And thanks for the speech, you did amazing.” Marshal closed the door and waved.

When she settled in the backseat, a sigh escaped that lifted the wisps of her hair. Behind the comforts of the tinted windows, Sage ripped off her high heels, digging her thumb into her arches.

A moan filled the backseat as the pain started to dissipate. However, a second later, the car swerved, nearly hitting an oncoming vehicle. Thrown against the seat belt strapped across her chest, she met the driver’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

“My apologies, ma’am,” the driver murmured. Sage watched the tips of his ears go pink.

Her heart thudded. It had taken a year to get into a car after her spouse, Chris, was killed by a drunk driver. She still remembered Marshal’s patient encouragement as she sobbed in the seat while he drove around a cleared parking lot the first time. He’d helped her a lot, especially those first months. She owed him her life as he had dragged her back to the land of the living.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” she snapped, the pain in her feet momentarily forgotten.

The rest of the drive was thankfully uneventful. When the driver turned onto her street, Sage glared at the pair of shoes sitting next to her. The driver pulled up to her house and she ripped the door open without waiting for him, hooked her

fingers under the strap in the back of her shoes, and marched up the driveway barefoot. It was preferable than wiggling back into the torture devices masquerading as fashion.

Walking into the house, she was met with a bustle of activity as Andrea twirled around the house ensuring everything was ready for the impromptu party. “Need any help?” she asked when Andrea shuffled past her.

“I’ve got it. Ivan called a bit ago to let me know and since we already had most everything, it’s been easy to throw together. Maybe you should invite Jayden. She’s been cooped up in that house too long.” Andrea didn’t even wait for a response; she just whirled around the kitchen seemingly onto the next item on her mental list.

Needing a moment to herself before people overran her house, Sage pulled herself up the stairs and flung face-first into the bed. The silence around her brought comfort as she decompressed from the high energy needed for the rally.

A knock at her door made her sit up, not wanting to be caught sprawled ungracefully.

“Sorry to bother you, but I thought you might want this.” Andrea handed her a glistening glass of Diet Coke.

“You are amazing, thank you.” Sage lifted the glass to her lips and felt the stress of the day slip away with a swallow of the refreshing liquid.

“It’s no problem.” Andrea slipped out of the room without glancing back, leaving Sage in silence.

Setting the glass on her bedside table, Sage threw off her clothes before donning much preferable loose and thin sweats and a gray U-Dub sweatshirt that had a wolf in front of a large gold W. Even if it was just for an hour, the clothes brought a level of comfort needed to help restore some of her reserves.

Picking up a script that had held her interest, Sage lay on the bed, reaching over every so often to take a sip of soda. Twisting in bed, she gasped when wetness seeped around her hip. Flinging herself to the floor, Sage rolled her eyes at herself when she saw the spilled glass soaking the sheets,

abruptly realizing she'd fallen asleep with the soda in her hand.

"Sage, the first of the guests are starting to arrive." Andrea's voice filtered through the door.

Ripping the ruined sheets off her bed, Sage called out, "Okay, I have to start a load of laundry, and I'll be right down."

"I can start the laundry. Just put it by the washer," Andrea responded.

Sage piled up the sheets and covers at the edge of her bed before opening her door, not wanting to have a conversation through the barrier. "You don't have to. I don't mind."

"It's no trouble. Plus, Marshal looks a little lost without you." Andrea shooed her back into the room. "Get changed and head on down."

"I'll be just a moment." Sage closed the door again to change and retouch her makeup.

She could have used a whole day to relax but needed to be sociable. The nap had helped and she was ready to relax with good company and delicious food.

Most people were already outside by the time Sage got to the yard. Leon, Ivan's boyfriend, yelled when she turned the corner and almost spilled his fluorescent blue drink.

"You look fabulous. Give us a twirl." The group stopped talking and watched the interaction as Leon grabbed the fabric at her hips and pulled her pleated skirt out for a better look.

The first time he had done it almost earned him a smack on the cheek before Ivan came to Leon's rescue saying he was a photographer and clothes designer and was used to just reaching out and adjusting the fabric models wore. The three of them had a long conversation about consent, and she and Leon had left the gathering in a tentative truce. That had been two years ago, and the tentative truce had grown into a friendship.

“Come on, twirl, girl. Show off that amazing skirt.” Leon swooshed his pointer finger around in the air, hitting his straw on the way.

“I’m not a girl,” Sage said on her way to the grill—more specifically, to the ice chest she knew held most of the drinks. Pulling a seltzer out, she sat back and watched the group. Marshal had dragged out the box of yard toys, and an impromptu game of badminton had started between the marketing team.

Morgan was helping Marshal at the grill, and Leon was recounting something hilarious to the rest of the group if the loud laughter and exaggerated hand movements were any indication.

Sage’s eyes drifted to Jayden’s house. There was a flutter of movement at the window. Without conscious thought, her feet started moving in that direction.

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Jayden closed the curtains again, not wanting to spy on the group letting loose outside. A loud meow brought her attention to the floor just as Tuna batted at her foot. The loose string from Sage’s pants lay next to him.

Bending down, she plucked the object from the ground and wiggled it in the air. In all his furball glory, Tuna leaped and attached his claws to the fabric. Jayden lost her grip and watched the ginger kitten tumble with a thump to the ground but jump right up and attack the curled rope with renewed vigor.

As Jayden walked to the door after hearing a knock, she whispered to herself, “I wish I could bounce right up after a tumble like that.”

Through the window in the door, she saw Sage fiddling with her engagement ring.



“Need to borrow a cup of sugar?” Jayden asked when she opened the door.

“No, but you need to get your butt out here. The group is great for helping Marshal’s campaign, but if I have to hear more about marketing strategies and poll numbers, I will lose my mind. Come on.”

“Tuna, no, come back!” she exclaimed as a streak of orange zipped past her. As if in slow motion, Tuna jumped and attached himself to Sage’s skirt. “That’s so rude. Tuna, come on.” Jayden placed one knee on the ground, trying to disengage the kitten’s claws from the fabric, which was complicated by Sage’s laughter shaking her leg. “Were you raised in a barn? Oh right, yes you were.” Jayden got a hold of the squirming kitten and gently released his claws.

“He was raised in a barn?” Sage’s face was red from laughter as she reached out to help Jayden up from the ground before motioning for the kitten.

“Yeah, a writing acquaintance found a litter of kittens in his barn and offered one to me, knowing how Lila feels about cats.” She waved her inside the house and had to shake her head that Tuna had curled up in her hands and fallen promptly to sleep, perfectly content to purr as if he hadn’t caused havoc just moments before. “She’d been asking about cats for a few years, but I wasn’t ready to commit to one.”

“What made you change your mind?” Sage gently bounced her arms to keep the kitten asleep.

“Guilt. It’s a powerful motivator in giving your children anything they want. I was packing up our house to move out of state. Lila doesn’t make friends that easily, but I couldn’t stay in California. Especially after a particularly nasty run-in with the tabloids outside Lila’s school. I sent Lila to her other mom up in Alaska while I dealt with the move. When my writing buddy offered, I saw it as an opportunity to curry favor with my kid. Hopefully it’ll lessen the blow of a new home and school.” Jayden threw a sweatshirt over her head and walked to the bathroom, keeping the door open so they could continue their conversation.

Sage moved to the hallway outside the bathroom. “I can understand guilt. I think what you’ve done is brave, and once Lila settles here, she might never want to leave.”

“I don’t know. Staying seems so much like hiding. On the other hand, I’m not sure I want to hide forever.” Jayden scooped her hand under the faucet before running her hands through her hair, pulling the strands in a suitable style.

“Or maybe you’re adjusting your goals and plans. It doesn’t have to be because you’re hiding. Life has a way of throwing curveballs. Sometimes you have to adjust your swing.” Sage snuggled her head to Tuna’s body.

“Are you a baseball fan?”

“Yes, I love the game and the Mariners even though they perpetually disappoint year in and year out.”

Jayden watched as Sage placed Tuna in his cat tree. He promptly turned over on his back but stretched out under the beam of sunlight cascading onto his bed. She felt a sense of loss walking out to the yard, knowing she couldn’t hog all of Sage’s time.

“Maybe we can go to a game? Tickets are usually pretty cheap.” Jayden closed the door, not bothering to lock it.

“I’d love to go. Marshal’s office usually gets great deals. I can ask Ivan.” Sage waved to Morgan, who was sitting close to Marshal as they watched the grill.

Jayden nodded to a few people she knew, but most were strangers. A feeling of sadness crept in at how much she’d missed while living in California. She and Marshal had always been close, but she didn’t even know he had been seeing anyone let alone gotten engaged. Being back would rebuild the foundation they’d had as kids.

Sage’s arm brushed against hers as they walked, bringing Jayden back to the present. “Great, well, would you mind if my daughter came? She’s coming home soon, and I’d love to take her to one. She might have a problem with crowd noise, though.”

“I can’t wait to meet her, and yes, of course she should come. We can get her some noise-canceling earphones, but it’s not like the crowd is that rambunctious. It’s not a Seahawks game.” Sage lifted the cooler. “Want anything to drink?”

“I’ll just take that Sprite on top. Thank you.” Jayden pointed to the sweating can, trying not to eye the beer next to it.

“Are you sure you don’t want a beer? I’m sorry I was so hard on you at first.” Sage fumbled with her ring again, twirling the diamond back and forth.

Jayden paused for a second before sheepishly nodding and saying, “I’d love a beer. Thank you.” Sage handed her the cold beverage.

The breeze kicked up, helping cool down the backyard, but Jayden felt comfortable in her loose sweatshirt. “Can you tell me what happened? I’m pretty sure your reaction didn’t come out of left field. There is a story there somewhere.” Jayden tried to keep her tone light, but thoughts of their first interactions had drifted through her mind.

“Someday, yes, I’ll tell you. Maybe we can have a sharing session. I’ll tell you mine and you can tell me your side of the story of what happened with Brandi.” Sage shook her hands before placing them at her side.

“There you are! You are looking dapper as always,” a voice shouted behind them. “Come back from the glitz and the glamor of Hollywood. Tell me, does Gregory Minton use lifts in his shoes? Everyone says so.” Leon talked a hundred miles a minute as he adjusted her shirt. Jayden stopped him when he started pulling at the waist of her pants.

“I wouldn’t know. I only met him once at a party, and oddly enough, his shoes didn’t come up once.” Jayden wrapped her lips around the mouth of the beer, enjoying the trickle of cooling liquid sliding down her throat.

“Pity,” was all Leon bothered to respond before finding the next person in need of clothing rearrangement and chitchat.

Sage had wandered off, leaving Jayden to try small talk with Ivan, who was slowly following their boyfriend around. “Hey Ivan, while I have you here, do you think you could ask Penny to pick better shoes if Sage has to stand on stage all afternoon? She looked miserable up there swaying from one foot to the other.”

For once, Ivan put their phone lower to look her in the eye. “What do you mean?” Ivan took a step forward. “She looked amazing.”

Pulling out her phone, Jayden unlocked it before twisting the screen for Ivan to see. They covered the top to help eliminate the glare and watched a clip already primed for viewing. In it, most people wouldn’t be able to tell Sage was uncomfortable, but Jayden pointed out a few microscopic facial movements and the fact she kept trying to relieve her feet by leaning to one side or the other.

“I agree she did look great, but there has to be a way to balance style with comfort, especially if she has to stand in front of cameras for hours. It was admirable how well she did, but I’m just wondering if it’s possible.”

“If what’s possible?” Marshal walked up arm in arm with Sage. “I’m thrilled you’re here.” Marshal play-punched her shoulder. “So, what are you wondering is possible?” he asked again as Sage was pulled away.

Looking between Jayden and Ivan, Jayden wondered if she was overstepping. It’s not like Sage needed her to fight her battles. While she was having her crisis, Ivan stepped up.

“Jayden just brought to my attention something about the wardrobe for the next rally. It’s a good point, and I’ll see what I can do.” They handed her phone back with a hidden wink. The response left a relieved puff of air to woosh out of her lungs.

“Oh, okay. Well, food’s ready. Come on, everyone, let’s dig in.” Marshal waved his arm to get the group to gather.

Jayden spent the rest of the night catching up with the few people she knew and getting to know the ones she hadn’t met

yet. For the first time in her life, she felt a twinge of jealousy towards her twin brother. He had great people around him, nobody brighter than Sage herself.

Swallowing down her third beer, she waved goodnight to everyone, needing to get away from a bright smile and infectious laughs and wanting to do a few things around the house in preparation of Lila's return home a few days from now.

# Chapter Seven

## *Loss and Laughter*

Rain pattered on the windowpane as Seattle's impossible streak of daily sun finally broke. Sage sat at the table trying to pull herself together. Her vision was so obscured by a bubble of tears that she was unable to see the doughnut from her favorite vegan dessert café sitting in front of her.

She'd asked Andrea to run to the grocery store for some main staples that had been depleted during the barbecue a few days prior. The excuse was as good as any to get the house to herself.

The doughnut had already endured a bite, but the glob stuck in her throat as more tears streamed down her face. After the black hole had opened up three years ago, this day always left Sage stumbling through a pit of darkness.

Unable to get anything more past the rock in her throat, Sage pushed back from the table. She stared at the cooling coffee cup with only half its contents remaining but decided to dump the rest down the sink. Even coffee didn't hold its appeal, which would have been sacrilege a few years ago. Her thoughts were haunted by the whisper of Chris's voice teasing Sage about wasting liquid gold when she'd get wrapped up in learning her lines.

She'd found the love of her life when they were in college, and she was sure she'd never find someone again. In some ways that's why she'd started this thing with Marshal. She knew love and she'd lost it. Entering a partnership with her best friend ensured she wouldn't be alone, but also didn't have to open herself up to the kind of anguish she'd dealt with when Chris died.

On her way to the back door, photos of Marshal's happy childhood taunted her. Her childhood had been fine, but she didn't have anyone she was close to. She stopped in front of her favorite photo of Marshal, who had his arm around Jayden.

Jayden had presumably said something funny since Marshal was in the process of throwing his head back with a prominent smile. Sometimes watching Marshal and Jayden interact made her jealous of what she missed out on with not having any siblings. Stepping outside under the awning, Sage tried to work through the multitude of coping techniques she'd learned from therapists over the years.

Smell: Grass mixed with earth and the slight scent of cherry blossom carried in the wind.

Taste: Sage stuck her tongue out, trying to come up with words for what she tasted. Coffee and the sugary treat still overpowered her mouth, so she went with those.

Feel: She walked out from the protection of the awning and felt the wind rustle her arm hairs. Drops of rain mixed with her tears on her face as Sage spread her arms and started twirling in the yard.

Sound: The splat of raindrops on the grass mixed with the ting of water hitting the roof. There was a trickle to her right, which brought her to...

Sight: The trickle was water leaving the gutter. Tiny birds hopped in the grass, and one shook, sending water droplets flying.

That did it, and a tentative smile grew on her face as she watched the birds feast on the bugs in the yard. They continued to hop, swoop, and shake in a pattern only nature could conceive.

Melancholy still filled her body, but it was better than the black hole trying to consume all her light. Sage could hear squelching in the grass as someone walked towards her.

“Did you know cats can tell when it’s going to rain? My mom got me a kitten. It’s the cutest animal I’ve ever seen, and I just got back from Alaska where I saw a lot of animals. There was an eagle, bears at the sanctuary, and gulls that ate french fries on the rocks at the drive-through at McDonald’s. My mama says the McDonald’s view in Sitka is probably the best view all around, but I can’t say for sure because I haven’t

seen that many places. Are you dancing in the rain? I like the rain. It rained seventeen times when I was in Sitka, but it was okay because my mama let me play my Switch Lite. Do you like video games?”

The questions and random tidbits went on as Sage turned to see a small child with the cutest pair of glasses sliding down her face as she flapped her hands near where Sage stood.

“Lila, remember what we’ve said? You can’t bombard people with so much information and if you ask a question, wait to see what their answer is before you ask the next question.” Jayden walked up to them, placing a hand on the little girl’s shoulder.

Lila’s smile reminded Sage so much of the photos of Marshal and Jayden that lined the house. She felt her pit of despair shrinking.

“I’ve played a goose game on the Switch. One of the cast members of a play I was in had a Switch and showed me that game. I can’t remember what it’s called, though.”

“Can I get the goose game, Mom? Please? It sounds so fun.”

“She didn’t tell you anything about it. How can you know it sounds fun?” Jayden asked, waiting patiently for an answer. The whole conversation was precisely what Sage needed right now, which came as a bit of a surprise since she usually required to be alone on the anniversary of her spouse’s death.

“It’s a game with a goose. How is that not fun? I played this game as a kid where you make a farm. But it got too hard for me. I thought I’d try it when I’m older, which maybe is now. Mom, am I older now?”

Sage couldn’t hold in a laugh. She loved the way Lila’s mind worked.

“It’s not nice to laugh at people. Mom says you shouldn’t make fun and laughing leaves someone out when I don’t know what is so funny.” Lila’s demeanor dimmed, shifting the mood to a seriousness Sage wasn’t prepared for.



Mud and rain be damned, Sage lowered to one knee and kept her eyes on Lila's face but noticed she wasn't looking back. That was okay; she had some damage control to work through, and by darn, she wasn't about to have Jayden's daughter think she was laughing at her.

"Lila, I promise you I wasn't laughing at you. Your mom is right, sometimes laughter can be taken as a joke that you're not a part of, but other times people laugh because they are thrilled with what you are saying. My chuckle was because the question was delightful and caught me off guard. I'm Sage, by the way." Sage held out her hand, hoping she hadn't ruined it with Lila.

"I'm Lila. My mom says I can't talk to strangers, but we saw you in the rain and she said we can come say hi. We're not strangers now."

"You're right. Sage is family. She's going to marry Uncle Marshal, so she's no longer a stranger."

Lila perked right up. "Can I be a part of the wedding? Maybe I can pretend I'm a cat and walk down the aisle chasing a laser pointer! Oh, Mom, can I please?"

Sage had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing again. She had a bad habit of starting things off rough with the Quincy women and didn't want to add more misunderstandings for the child. This girl was too adorable, and she'd give anything to have her chasing a laser for her ceremony.

"I'm not sure if they'll want you chasing a laser down the aisle, or if you'll be in the wedding at all, but we'll have to talk more about it with Uncle Marshal and Sage. How about you return to the house, and I'll make you some hot chocolate."

"Come over to the big house. That is, if you're free?" Sage wasn't ready to part from them, and she was dreading the quiet for the first time today.

"Can I get Tuna and bring him over?"

“Yes! Grab a few cat toys, and we’ll have fun with him,” Sage answered before even thinking to make sure it was okay with Jayden.

Luckily a shy uptick of her lips indicated Jayden was okay with the suggestion.

“Do you need help or can you get him?” Jayden asked as they walked back under the awning and out of the rain.

“I can get him!” Lila ran to the guest house, and both women watched her feet splash in the grass.

“Are you okay?” Jayden asked when they were alone.

Fidgeting with her engagement ring, Sage tried to come up with any words to explain her red-rimmed eyes without going into the whole story. As the silence stretched on, she finally said, “Today is the anniversary of Chris, my spouse’s, death. This day has been close to unbearable since it happened.”

There, that provided enough information without a gut-wrenching explanation, one she wasn’t sure she had the mental capacity for anyway. Sage felt like she was on a tightrope of half-truths stretched to the breaking point under her feet. What kind of foundation of friendship was built on that? The darkness started opening again, but before it consumed her, she felt warm arms wrap around her shoulders.

She pressed into Jayden’s strong body and felt herself melt into the embrace. It had been ages since she’d been part of a hug that enveloped her entire body like this and the emotions that bubbled up weren’t something she was in a place to process yet.

“I’m sorry today is so hard for you. If you’ll let us, Lila and I make some good company, or we can leave you alone if you prefer that option.”

“No!” Sage hadn’t meant to shout it out but had also grabbed Jayden’s upper arms in a grip that would make an eagle proud. She loosened her hold when she saw Jayden grimace while looking at her talon-like hold on her arm. “I’m sorry, I meant to say, no, please don’t leave me alone. I was

promised kitten cuddles and would be sorely disappointed without them.”

“You might not say that when Tuna gets his claws in you, but we’ll be happy to keep you company.” Jayden let Sage walk in first before following. “You’re impressive with Lila, by the way. I’m sorry she can be overwhelming at times.”

“She seems like a great kid. I can’t wait to get to know her better.”

“Moouoommmmmmmmm!” A shout came from near the front door.

Pounding footsteps could be heard as Jayden ran to the shout. Sage wasn’t far behind but marveled at how fast Jayden moved. Jayden wrenched open the front door where Lila was wrestling with a squirming reusable grocery bag. Tucked in all her pockets were toys.

Rushing forward, Sage grabbed the bag while Jayden reached for the bowls that Lila balanced in her other hand.

“What’s all this?” Jayden asked, ushering her daughter inside.

Sage opened the cloth bag and reached in for the struggling kitten. He tried to crawl up her long-sleeved shirt but managed to get stuck partway. Untangling herself, the kitten, and the bag was more arduous than she’d anticipated but finally she had the kitten free.

“Tuna needs to eat. I got his food right here. They have water in the kitchen. I couldn’t grab his litter box, but maybe we can get some sawdust and a box? I saw that once on a TV show. We might have to sprinkle some baking soda on it, but I think it will work. Or I can grab a cardboard box and fill it with the litter we have at the house, but the rain might ruin the litter. So it would probably be best to get the litter container and bring the whole thing over. Yes, that’s what I’ll do.”

Lila went to walk back outside, but Jayden called her back before she got too far. “We aren’t going to be over here long enough for Tuna to need the litter box, Cricket.”

“What if he gets a bladder infection? I saw that happen once on TV, and it was horrible.”

“How about for now we cut up some old newspapers and lay it in a box for him to use as an impromptu litter box, then later I’ll go out and get some toys and things he needs to keep at this house in case you want to bring him over. That way he’ll be comfortable, and you won’t have to continue dragging items back and forth.”

Lila’s face lit up as she continued throwing toys on the ground. The last one was tucked in the hood of her sweatshirt. Tuna jumped from Sage’s arms to pounce on the dropped toy.

“That’s a good idea. What do you think? Want to go all the way to a pet store with me one of these days?”

Little feet bounced up and down as she waved her hands in the air, saying, “Yes, yes, yes. Mom, can we go right now? Yes, yes, yes.” As she jumped her glasses slipped off her nose.

Sage wasn’t sure how anyone could resist the charms of this kid. That day they played with Tuna, drank hot chocolate, and at the end of the day, when Sage crawled into bed, she realized she’d gotten through the rest of the day without crying or plummeting into sadness. It was the first time in three years that laughter left her lungs on the day of the anniversary. If she were frank with herself, she’d have to process her feelings some other time. For now, she’d bask in the lightness that Jayden and Lila had brought.

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Jayden was in the kitchen chopping vegetables when she heard the front door open and Lila’s feet bound in.

“How was your first day of school? Do you like your teacher?” Jayden didn’t look up from her task.

“I liked my old school better.”

The response without any follow-up or a long line of run-on sentences caused her to look up. Sure enough, Lila was on

the couch with her face buried in Tuna's fur as the kitten struggled to get out of her grip.

“Cricket, remember what Lennox and I said when you got the hamster? That you had to be gentle when you held it. The same thing applies to kittens. Let go a little so Tuna can breathe.”

Jerking her hands up, Lila froze, staring at the bundle in her arms who had calmed down and proceeded to curl in her lap.

“I'm sorry, Tuna. I didn't mean to hurt you.” Tears started falling down Lila's cheeks.

“He's okay, Cricket. You didn't hurt him. I was just scared for a second.” Lowering herself next to Lila on the couch, Jayden gently pulled her to her lap. Tuna opened his eyes and huffed before jumping off Lila's lap and into the cat tree.

Lila flung her arms around Jayden's neck and held tight. The only way Jayden knew she was crying was her slightly shaking body and wetness that started trickling down her neck. The silent despair was almost worse to take than if she was outwardly sobbing.

Unsure of the best course of action, Jayden kept rubbing her back and playing with her hair. An overwhelming feeling of failure crushed her as she tried to find the right combination that would help her daughter smile again.

“Where's my favorite niece in the whole world?” A booming voice came from the back.

For the first time since she'd gotten home, Lila lifted her head. Tears still stained her cheeks, but at least there wasn't a fresh batch waiting to tumble.

“Uncle Marshal?” Lila swiped at her eyes and jumped from Jayden's lap. “Uncle Marshal!” Taking a running start, she leaped into Marshal's waiting arms and he spun her in circles.

“Sorry, have you seen my niece? She was this tall when I saw her last so I know you can't be her.” Holding his hand out

nearly six inches below where Lila stood, he looked at her like a math problem he couldn't figure out.

"It's me, I promise. Mama says she bought me pants when I went up there to visit and I outgrew them in three months. She made me drink milk, so my bones are strong, but I hate the taste of milk." Lila gagged at the mention of the beverage.

"You know, Sage doesn't like milk either. Maybe you can talk to her about some alternative drinks. I was actually going to see if you two wanted to have dinner with us."

"Can we, Mom, oh please, can we?"

The tears were replaced by squeals of delight. Jayden would have given a pony if her daughter had asked for one at that moment. "Well, only on one condition." Jayden crossed her arms over her chest and mock-glared at Marshal.

"What's the condition? I'll clean my room and do all my homework. Please?"

"The condition is that we will accept the invitation to dinner only if Marshal has ice cream in his freezer for dessert."

They could hear Lila's giggles through the hallway after Marshal confirmed the status of the treat. If there was one thing she could count on her brother for it was his constant supply of ice cream.

"How are things?" Marshal asked, leaning against the counter. "I saw the interview Brandi did last night. It's pretty shitty they keep bringing it up."

"I get it. The event helped catapult her career. It just sucks that she had to step on my heart, head, and any other part of my body to get into the launch seat."

"Will you ever tell me your side of things?" Marshal's eyes held a depth that Jayden was surprised he still had after all his time in politics.

"Who says I have a side?" Jayden wasn't sure why she was pushing back. Maybe because after all this time, she was afraid the safe harbor Marshal had provided would be taken

away. She wasn't sure she could handle witnessing him not believing her story. Sometimes it was easier to go forward without having to look back.

"I know you, Jay. We might have drifted apart slightly over the years, but I still know you. I can see your pain, and sometimes you physically bite your cheek to keep from saying something. You've always done that when you're holding in a secret."

"Sage has been asking as well. Maybe I'll tell you both tonight. You caught a good one there, Marsh." She bumped into Marshal's arm.

"Mom, can I bring Tuna?" Lila stood in front of her with her lip pouted out.

"We won't be there that long. Let him stay comfortable."

"Go ahead and bring the little turkey. Sage picked up a bunch of supplies to keep at the house. I'm pretty sure she's more excited about the cat than you are, Lila."

"He's not a turkey, he's a cat." Lila tilted her head.

Jayden wanted to laugh at her cute expression but held it in, knowing full well her daughter's views on laughing when she didn't get the joke.

"You're right. Are you ready to head to the big house for some dinner? Maybe we can trick your mom into playing Pictionary with us."

This time Jayden did laugh. She may have had a way with words, especially creating scripts, but she was horrid at drawing a picture.

"As long as she's not on my team, I'm okay with that," Lila responded. Jayden watched as her tight curls, so much like her own, bounced up and down as she bounded on her toes towards the door, Tuna tucked securely under her arm.

"We'll put her on Sage's team. You and I will wipe the floor with them," Marshal said, bumping his arm against Lila's.

“Why? Is the floor dirty?” Lila stopped in the doorway, creating a pileup in the kitchen.

“No, it’s just an expression. It means to defeat them or prove you’re better at something. In this case, you are better at drawing than your mom.”

Marshal’s patient response had Jayden’s heart full. She’d stayed away from her hometown and in turn, her twin, only visiting sporadically for so long that she forgot what a great person he was. The thought brought a sense of sadness at all she’d missed out on.

“Come on. You can almost smell the tacos Sage is making.” Marshal started chasing Lila, who couldn’t get away due to the precious furry cargo in her arms.

As Jayden followed the echoes of laughter into the big house, memories of her childhood came flooding back.

“Hey, there you are. I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages, although it wasn’t that long ago.” Sage opened her arms to greet Jayden with a hug. Jayden stepped into the embrace. When they parted, Sage went on. “I have tickets for the baseball game on Saturday. Marshal has to work, but maybe we can take Lila?”

“Mom, can we go?”

Jayden hadn’t realized Lila had returned to the room and heard the invitation. Not that her answer would have changed if she wasn’t in the room. “Of course. They have some great food at the stadium, and the game should be fun. There’s a camaraderie with other people in the stands watching the game.”

“What’s a comrdry?” Lila butchered the pronunciation.

“Camaraderie,” Sage repeated slowly so Lila could hear the individual syllables. “It’s basically a friendship between groups of people that spend time together. So, in this case, the fans in the stadium build a kinship that lasts the game.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks, Aunt Sage.”



“No problem.” Sage seemed pleased to have been given the ‘aunt’ label. “I’m going to finish dinner. Make yourselves at home, but feel free to sit down at the table.” Sage turned towards the kitchen where Jayden could hear mumbles and her brother’s deep baritone laugh.

Lila played with Tuna while Jayden looked around before calling to her daughter to wash up. When Jayden rounded the wall to the kitchen, she stopped in her tracks as she watched Sage and Marshal part from a hug. The love and trust radiating from their eyes hit Jayden in a place of her heart that she was trying hard to close off the more she hung out with Sage.

Seeing her frozen in the entryway, Marshal smiled. “Here’s a beer.” He handed her a cold bottle that had been sitting on the counter. “Want to come sit down?” Marshal asked, angling his head towards the dining room.

“Can I sit next to Sage?” Lila asked, walking up to Jayden and pulling on her arm.

“You might have to arm wrestle Marshal for the spot,” Jayden replied, sweeping her arm in front of her to indicate her brother who was playing along and flexing his arm.

“I can’t beat him, my arms are tiny and at school we had to do P.E. and I could play the sport games but everyone else wins when we have to do push ups.” Lila glanced down at her arms before squinting at her uncle.

“Can my mom be my stand-in?” Lila questioned, looking between the twins.

“Before these two start a wrestling match, how about I step in here and say I would love to sit next to you and no need to battle it out.” Sage walked in with a steaming plate of vegetables just in time to put the end to the escalating game. “Marshal, will you grab the tortillas and beans from the kitchen counter?” After placing the veggies on the table, she called for Lila who skipped over to her side. “You sit here.” Sage pulled out the chair for Lila who hopped up, studying the meal.

Jayden watched Marshal and Sage throughout dinner. There was a deep connection that Jayden wished she had with someone. She'd been best friends with Lennox, but Jayden had to deal with her own demons that had ultimately pushed Lennox away. Even though Sage and Marshal were sitting on opposite sides of the table, they did little things to help each other. When Marshal dropped a splat of beans on his pants, Sage was ready with a napkin to hand to him. Little looks and inside jokes seemed to be sprinkled throughout dinner. They never excluded Jayden, but still it felt she was outside looking in.

"I don't really like my teacher, but recess is fun," Lila said, turning her whole body in her seat to see Sage better. The movement caused Lila to smack her cup which spilled the contents of her juice over the edge of the table. Jayden jumped up to clean up the mess.

"I'll get it," Sage said, waving her off while standing.

"Don't worry, Uncle Marshal and I are going to wipe you and Mom up with it."

"What?" Halfway out of her chair, Sage paused and looked at Lila in confusion.

"That was in regard to Pictionary, not spills, Cricket." Jayden covered her laugh with a drink of water.

"Oh, right. Uncle Marshal said it was to defeat them. I forgot. Can we play Pictionary now?" Lila's body vibrated with excitement.

"Sure, let me get these dishes cleared out, and we'll get the game going." Sage handed Marshal plates to scrape and stack.

The domestic dance they had down, created a funny feeling in Jayden's chest. It wasn't jealousy, and if she kept telling herself that, hopefully she'd believe it.

"I'm on Uncle Marshal's team!" Lila shouted, grabbing his hand when he got back from the kitchen.

"I guess that leaves us together." Sage pulled up the chair next to her and scooted close. Jayden tried to ignore Sage's

thigh that had brushed up against her leg, but goosebumps had erupted along her arms, making it hard to overlook.

“Just to warn you, I’m a horrid artist.” Jayden pulled the game board out and smoothed it along the table’s surface hoping Sage didn’t catch the hitch in her breath.

“That’s okay. I’m a good guesser.” Sage winked and pulled out the red piece.

“We’re yellow,” Lila stated matter of factly.

Marshal groaned at the declaration. “Yellow, who picks yellow?”

“It’s my favorite color.” Lila replied, crossing her hands over her chest, daring Marshal to say anything more.

“What the heck is that!” Sage shouted near Jayden’s ear after Lila correctly guessed Marshal’s drawing. “That’s an arrow pointing down and some sort of dilapidated wing on the stick.”

“That’s a shovel. Clearly. This is the handle, and those are fingers, not a dilapidated wing. It’s so obviously a shovel I’m pretty sure you need to get your eyes checked.” Jayden squinted at the piece of paper in front of her. Okay, Sage did have a point. The shovel looked more like a downward arrow, and the fingers weren’t really attached to the stick figure’s wrist.

“No, nope. No way in any Marvel universe is that a shovel,” Sage tried to protest before holding her sides in laughter.

Jayden’s face hurt from smiling as she watched Lila move their piece further up the board. It wasn’t even a contest. They, indeed, were wiping the floor with Sage and Jayden. However, it wasn’t Sage’s fault. She’d held her own and was surprisingly adept at guessing.

“Okay, this one is for the win, and it’s an All Play.” Marshal passed the card over to Sage, who raised her brows slightly when she saw the word.

Cracking her neck, Jayden settled in for all the marbles.

“Ready, go!” Lila shouted.

Sage’s hand flew across the paper, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth.

“Pool, swimming, lifeguard, dancing. Oh, I know! Synchronized swimmer.”

“Yes!” Before Jayden could register anything, Sage had thrown her hands around Jayden’s neck, kissing her cheek. She froze, barely breathing as her body registered the kiss.

Guessing the word first only delayed the inevitable as Marshal and Lila handily won the next round. As Jayden walked home with Lila, she tried to ignore the warmth the kiss on her cheek had caused. In a state of panic, she wondered how to stop her growing feelings for her brother’s fiancée.

# Chapter Eight

## *Past and Present*

The sun warmed Sage's face as she waited for Jayden to get Lila ready for the baseball game. They had left the house a few times but kept coming back for something they forgot. The last item was the noise-canceling headphones to help Lila if the crowd sounds became too overwhelming.

Marshal had taken a town car to work, leaving them with the SUV to get to downtown Seattle. Sage's heart rate picked up when she tried to navigate the busy downtown streets. After a quick discussion with Jayden, where they agreed they were okay walking a few blocks, Sage swung the car into a lot that had relatively cheap parking. Following the crowd, they entered the park right before the game started. Lila was in good spirits as Sage handed the tickets to the attendant. Someone was giving out free T-shirts, which excited Lila to no end. They didn't have any in her size, and Sage saw the storm start to brew on Lila's face.

"It's okay, you want a bigger size so you can wear it as you grow. Plus, now we all match," Sage said, pointing to all of them. She then bent down and bunched up the shirt before taking a hair tie off her wrist and tying it around the fabric which kept it from dragging at Lila's feet.

When she finished, Lila looked down and found the fashion acceptable and moved on to a cornhole game that was still out.

"Thanks for that. She can go from fine to a demon in a blink," Jayden leaned in to whisper.

Sage chuckled. "At least she's a cute demon."

"You say that now but wait until it's hour three of a five-hour meltdown." Jayden grabbed the stuffed baseball bat from the employee when Lila sunk the bean bag into the hole. Smiling her thanks, they watched Lila jump in victory.

“Five hours! I’m not sure what I would have done,” Sage said as she gave a slightly red-faced and sweaty Lila a high five.

They walked up the steps with Lila between them, who asked to be swung. With each step, they lifted her and flung her forward. Sage wasn’t known for her upper arm strength and struggled by the ninth step. Towards the top of the stairs, Sage’s stomach started gurgling as they smelled the food from vendors.

“Can we get some food?” Lila lifted her head in the air, her nostrils moving as she took in the aroma. The movement wasn’t unlike a dog. Sage felt her heart swell. Before the accident, she and Chris had just started talking about having kids. Part of her was terrified of getting closer to Jayden and Lila. She knew what it was like to have someone ripped from her. If she kept her heart guarded, she’d never feel that type of pain again.

“Sure, that’s one of the reasons we’re here. Everyone needs to experience the delights of stadium food,” Jayden said as they continued walking around the outer concourse as the game started playing on screens all around.

“Look, Mom! That one has ice cream in a helmet. Can we get one?”

“Yes, but let’s get you some real food first. What sounds good, nachos? Hot dogs?” Jayden pointed at a few things.

They found a vendor that had a mix of food including, to Sage’s delight, a meatless burger of her favorite brand. The crowd roared as they watched one of the players run to first on the screen next to the booth.

“Mom, do you have my headphones?” Lila asked as Jayden reached over for their food.

“Yes, they’re in this clear bag here. Let’s get settled in our seats and we’ll put them on,” Jayden said as she passed Lila’s food to her.

“Here, let me help,” Sage said, seeing Jayden struggle balancing their food and drinks. Her bag kept slamming in the

way, knocking her off-balance.

“Thanks. Alright, I think we’re this way.” Jayden motioned with her elbow.

“Mom, come on! We’re missing the game.” Lila weaved in and out of foot traffic.

“Lila, hold onto my elbow.” Jayden held out her arm for Lila to grip when she got too far away.

Huffing, Lila came back and latched onto her mother’s outstretched arm.

“I think we’re up here.” Sage took the lead, hiding her smile. Lila was Jayden’s carbon copy, and Sage couldn’t handle the cuteness.

Settling in their seats, Jayden rummaged through her bag then secured the noise-canceling headphones on Lila’s head. During the game, Lila asked questions and fidgeted with a small mitt in her left hand. She would jump up and hold her hand up in the air whenever a ball was hit. She didn’t track where the ball landed, just went on the hope that it would just fall into her hand.

By the seventh inning, Lila was fading fast and had crawled into Jayden’s lap. Both her headphones and glasses were askew. Sage tried not to stare, but the slight smile on Jayden’s face as she played with her daughter’s hair was a sight, and she had a hard time looking away from them.

“Should we head back now and beat the crowd?” Sage leaned over to whisper to Jayden. A black sliver rested on Jayden’s cheek. Reaching over, Sage touched Jayden’s face where an eyelash had fallen. “Make a wish.” Sage held the lash at the edge of her finger for Jayden to blow off.

Leaning in, Jayden puckered her lips before a light breeze rustled Sage’s hair, the eyelash fluttering gently away.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” Jayden stood in a fluid motion, keeping her daughter secured from being jostled too much.

Sage gathered the bags, and they worked their way out of the stadium. On the outer ring, Sage saw something that

caught her eye and said she'd be right back.

Not wanting to take too long, she picked up a few souvenirs of the game and was standing in line to pay when a woman stood next to her.

“Excuse me, did I see you walking with that woman out there?”

“Yes,” she answered cautiously. The issue they had when buying school supplies was still fresh in her mind.

“I just wanted to say my daughter is gay, and you two make a beautiful family. That little girl is lucky.” The older woman tapped her arm.

“Oh, umm, well... Thank you.” She wasn't sure why she didn't want to deny that she wasn't with Jayden. Plus, the truth would have taken all day to explain.

Armed with one more bag, Sage walked back up to Jayden who still had Lila cradled in her arms.

“She's almost getting too big for this.” Jayden indicated with her head to walk in front down the stairs.

They stayed silent on their way out of the building. Sage was replaying the day in her head, thoroughly enjoying her time. A kernel of doubt had started to sprout on going through with the engagement. She wasn't sure she'd be able to open herself up again to love, but she also wasn't positive marrying Marshal was what she needed. Memories of herself dirty and unable to lift her head flooded her subconscious, reminding her that she owed him so much. She and Jayden could be friends; she didn't have to get more attached. Holding in a sigh she stepped over a soggy pile of trash.

“Do you want kids?” Jayden broke up the silence.

It took a moment for Sage to pull herself out of her thoughts enough to answer. “I've always seen myself with kids.”

“I'm not sure Marshal wants them. He's great with Lila but never wanted to answer when I asked. I got the impression he



was uncomfortable with the question. Might want to talk with him if you want them.”

After hearing Jayden’s answer, she cursed herself for being distracted. They had talked about it, and kids were definitely off the table. But she couldn’t backpedal and change her answer. “Hmm, sounds like you’re right. I’ll talk with him.”

Lila squirmed in Jayden’s arms. “Mom? Where are we?”

“Good morning, Cricket.” Jayden put Lila down and tucked the headphones Lila handed her back in her bag.

“Morning? Where are we? Is the game over?” Lila stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, looking around.

Jayden exchanged a glance with Sage, one that she couldn’t interpret.

“I wanted ice cream!” The shout from Lila’s tiny body caused Sage to flinch. She hadn’t expected the explosion of volume.

*Ah, Sage thought, thinking back on their conversation before the game. Maybe that was what the face meant. Prepare yourself for a meltdown in 3...2...1...*

“You were sleeping, and I didn’t want to wake you up,” Jayden tried to reason, but that only made Lila yell louder.

Dropping to her knees, Sage rummaged through her bag, gripping the souvenir she’d bought. It was going to be a surprise when they got back but now was as good a time as any to give her the gift.

“I was going to wait until we got home, but I picked these up for us at the shop. See? We can put our own ice cream in here when we get home.”

The small helmet was decorated with the Mariners logo and was similar to what they’d seen when first walking into the stadium.

Fat tears rolled down Lila’s cheeks, but at least she’d stopped screaming, giving their eardrums a break from the assault.

“Can we, Mom?” Lila looked up to her mom, everyone frozen waiting for her answer.

“Of course. You know Marshal always has a supply, and Sage probably has some made of oat milk so she can partake too,” Jayden tried, throwing a grateful look at Sage while helping her off the ground. “What do you say to Sage?”

Lila nodded, holding the plastic helmet to her chest. “Thank you. I love this helmet and will keep it next to my erasers. But I’ll clean it out after our dessert.”

“Wow, that’s high praise. The eraser shelf is the most coveted space in your room.” Jayden’s hands rested on her hips.

“You are most welcome. Come on. Let’s get back to the car and get home.” Sage held her hand out to Lila, who gripped it tightly.

“Thank you. You’re good with her,” Jayden said as they continued to the car.

One of the passing drivers honked their horn, nearly drowning out Jayden’s quiet words, but Sage caught them. She didn’t filter the soft look she gave back to Jayden as she said, “She’s a good kid.”

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“Look how fast I can go!” Lila’s little legs glided in a blur to push herself faster on the roller skates she was wearing. She zoomed past Jayden, who had been distracted by the sun bouncing off Sage’s hair making it appear more golden than dark blonde.

Since going to the baseball game a few weeks past, they’d spent practically every weekend doing something with Lila. Today they were teaching Lila how to roller skate on the nearly three-mile loop around Green Lake, a park and body of water near the University district. Jayden was enjoying

learning little tidbits from Sage's college days and enjoying the nature path the walk had to offer.

"Stay near us!" Jayden called. "Watch out for people and be careful."

The path was perfect for Lila's less-developed motor skills as the group made their way around Green Lake. Since Lila was the only one on skates but was still working on the mechanics, she wasn't going very fast yet.

"I wish I had her energy," Sage said as they made the halfway mark.

"The house might explode in a burst of light if the two of you matched energy levels," Jayden teased, keeping a close eye on her daughter who was now coming back their way.

"Did you see the ducks?" Lila turned to point towards the lake but lost her balance. On instinct, Jayden lunged towards her but was still a step too far away when Sage launched forward, wrapping her arms around Lila's shoulders to steady her.

"Be careful, Cricket," Jayden admonished, trying to settle her heart rate back down.

"Mom, isn't the point of all this gear to keep me safe if I fall?" Lila put her hands on her hips but couldn't bend her wrists because of the wrist pads.

"She has a point. We could have pulled a muscle from the sudden movement of trying to catch her." Sage rubbed her neck, a cheeky grin lighting up her face.

"See, I'll be okay." Lila flung herself backward, landing with a thunk on the ground before anyone could move.

"Well, I don't love this gang up, but you both have a point." Jayden reached down to help Lila, who was struggling to get the skate underneath her to stand up.

"Wait, let her learn how to get up." Sage curled her fingers around Jayden's arm.

Her neck cracked when she glanced down, processing her feelings quickly to determine if she was upset Sage was telling

her how to raise her kid. Ultimately, she pulled away from Lila, who was still struggling to get up, knowing it would help her in the long run if she learned to do it on her own.

“Alright, Lila, twist around so one knee is on the ground and the other leg is bent. Good, exactly like that. Now hold your hand on the bent knee in the air and the other hand on the ground.” Sage adjusted her stance just enough to get her arm in the correct position but didn’t help any further. “Okay, now make sure your feet are pretty close together and push up. You’ll feel your muscles tense in your stomach. Yes, exactly! Good job.”

The execution was a little wobbly, but after trying a few times she transitioned from the ground to upright perfectly.

“Mom, did you see that? I got up without any help.” Lila did a small loop around where they stood before having to grab ahold of Jayden’s wrist to steady her momentum.

“I saw, good job!” Jayden gave a high-five to her excited daughter. “Alright, we’re almost to the car.”

“Aw, I don’t want to leave.” Lila’s shoulders slumped.

“Maybe, if we ask your mom nicely, we can have popsicles in our backyard,” Sage stage whispered to Lila. Jayden watched as their eyes grew in excitement.

“Can we?” Lila asked. Leave it up to Sage and her kid to always ask for treats.

After putting on her sternest scowl that was rewarded with renewed pleading from her daughter, Jayden broke into a smile, unable to keep them in suspense. “Of course we can.” Jayden pulled Lila, propelling her forward.

Jayden watched as Sage showed Lila another way to stop her momentum. She tried to take in the trees and nature that lined the lake but her eyes kept drifting back to her daughter and brother’s fiancée.

“Have you started making plans for the wedding?” Jayden asked when they started walking to the car. It was the last thing she wanted to know about but needed a dose of reality.

She needed to put emotional distance between them and nothing created a barrier quite like Sage marrying her brother.

Sage's steps faltered. "No, it's not something I'm ready to even think about yet. With the campaign and everything, I think we'd both rather wait." Sage fiddled with her ring before looking at her. "Wait, you have a feather in your hair."

Leaning in close, Sage gently ran her fingers through Jayden's hair as she plucked the object from her head. This was the opposite of distance. A brief insanity overcame her as she contemplated running away. Running from her feelings, from Sage's penetrating gaze, from her jealousy. Goosebumps broke over her arms as Sage's hand brushed through her hair. When the offending feather slid from her locks, Jayden finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"There you go, make a wish." Sage held her palm flat out.

"I don't think that's a thing. I think it's only for eyelashes." Jayden held back, not wanting to lean in with her lips. At the baseball game she almost had leaned in to kiss Sage and the urge hadn't dissipated. Jayden needed to get a grip and fast.

"Brandi for life!" A stranger walked by them, shouting the chant.

Jayden's body stiffened as she hurried the last few feet to the car. Reaching for the handle she grunted when the door refused to open. As she glared at Sage who was fumbling for the keys, the chant continued. Finally, the click sounded and, not wasting a second, she opened her door. In the rearview mirror she watched Lila's confused face as she crawled in and buckled up.

"Mom, who's Brandi? Some people at school have mentioned her." Lila pulled up between them, reaching out to hold both of their hands.

Jayden wanted to get off the emotional rollercoaster this walk was turning out to be for her. The one good thing about the situation was that she had never let Brandi meet Lila. They hadn't been dating that long, but it never felt right to have them meet each other.

Sage started the car and began driving them back home.

“Brandi was someone I knew when we lived in California,” Jayden started. She kept her face forward, not wanting to see any reaction from Sage.

“Oh, okay. I thought I’d miss home, but I like it better here. I’ve made a friend at school, and we do more stuff here. Plus, Sage is here and so is Tuna.”

Jayden nodded, trying to keep her hands from shaking. Things had died down a lot since she’d left, but these types of situations still rattled her. Tuning out Sage and Lila’s conversation, Jayden instead focused on the road and her breathing.

Before long Lila’s door slammed behind her, jostling Jayden out of her thoughts. She hadn’t realized they were now parked in Marshal’s driveway. Gathering her courage, she looked over to Sage. She’d expected disappointment or sympathy but all she saw was concern.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sage asked as she unbuckled.

The sun reflected off the hood of the car making Jayden squint, the sparkly glint off the pavement of the driveway providing an odd backdrop to tell her darkest story.

Nodding a few times, Jayden said, “I think it’s time. I might as well tell someone. Let me get Lila situated with a popsicle and we can chat in the chairs over there.” She pointed to lawn chairs surrounding a fire pit. Sage nodded.

Jayden ran to the guesthouse and pulled three cold treats from the freezer. Through the window, she could see Sage pacing.

“Lila, I’m going to talk with Sage. Do you want to stay in here and play with Tuna or run around outside?” Jayden handed one of the treats to Lila who ripped the package open with abandon.

“I’ll shoot the basketball outside,” Lila said, playing with one of Tuna’s feathered toys. A flashback of the lake and feather caused Jayden to sweat.

“Okay. If you need us, we’ll be right there. Have fun and be careful with that popsicle stick.”

Digging her feet in the ground, as if that would save her from having to tell the inevitable story, Jayden went to sit down next to Sage, who handed her a beer before opening her own seltzer.

“Thought you might want this for your story,” Sage said, patting the chair next to her.

Jayden passed Sage her popsicle and opened the beer, taking a healthy sip before jumping right in. “Brandi was someone I was seeing, obviously. We didn’t know each other well, but she was funny and had a great personality. The streaming network had picked up my show a few months before we met, and I can’t help but think about the timing of her interest in me. Not that I had any sway with casting, but I’m pretty sure she only wanted an in with the show.”

“Oh, Jayden, she was lucky to be with you. You’re amazing.”

A blush crept up at her words. “That’s nice of you to say.” She took a deep breath to try to find the courage to tell the rest of the story. “She was cast in the show, and we went out to celebrate. I ordered a bottle of champagne and had a glass. I’d only seen her drink one or two glasses of the champagne but when we were ready to leave, I offered to drive. She’d just bought the Mercedes and didn’t want anyone to touch it. So I let her drive. Anyway, while we were on the road she started driving erratically and admitted her pills were kicking in. I was terrified and asked her to pull over. I’m not sure exactly what happened next, but she swerved fast and jumped the curb, knocking over a fire hydrant.” Jayden took a breath, focusing on the rhythmic bouncing of the basketball on the driveway. She needed to finish the rest of the story. “We got out of the car to check the damage and I was able to convince her to let me drive. I’d pulled my phone out to call in the accident. She was begging me not to report it and crying, saying she’d get fired, that it would be the end of her. Before I could decide anything, the police showed up and since I was in the driver’s seat, they assumed I was driving. Brandi threw me under the

bus right there, saying it was all me. I was so angry because I have Lila to think about. I was .01 over the limit somehow, and the damage to city property was enough for me to lose my license for a year. The part that gets me is a rumor started that she was pregnant and had a miscarriage that night, and she hasn't done anything to deny that. It sometimes seems like she fans the flames of the rumors, and every time that happens, I deal with more of the fallout.”

Jayden turned around, trying to hide her vulnerability. She regretted not fighting harder but the witness that called in the accident had said she was the one driving. The false claim and Brandi's lack of accountability for anything had caused a significant detriment to her life. Telling the story for the first time left her raw. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Obviously, I never condone drinking and driving.” Sage held up her hand when Jayden was about to say something. “With that said, I understand your side better, and I'm sorry I judged you so harshly in our first few interactions. I didn't know the truth and was going off of the stories in the tabloids. A lot of my reaction was rooted in my own issues, but I'm still sorry.”

Jayden wanted to slump against her in relief. Hearing that it was going to be okay, that Sage believed her, meant more than anything Brandi could ever do to her.

Jayden purposefully kept her eyes away from Sage, even though the need to look grew stronger with every second that went by. Her neck started twitching as she tensed, unsure what she'd see in Sage's eyes and terrified to find out.

“Are things going to be weird now?” Jayden asked as she stood, gathering her courage to look at Sage.

“Oh, for sure. I probably won't be able to be in the same room as you for three weeks. Dinners are going to be awkward,” Sage teased on their way to Lila who was still shooting hoops.

“That's what I thought. Well, nice knowing you.” Jayden waved and walked a few steps away.



Sage laughed, grabbing Jayden's arm. "Thank you for telling me." Her breath was hot on Jayden's cheek as she leaned into whisper. The slightly sweet smell from their long-gone popsicles lingered in the air. Jayden playfully pushed her, causing Sage to stumble dramatically.

"You two are silly," Lila said, stopping to watch their antics.

"Careful, Cricket, silly is contagious." She chased her daughter for a few steps. With the element of surprise on her side, she got Lila, who was now shrieking, in a tight grip.

"Silly monsters on the prowl!" Sage got in on the fun, hunched over, walking backward slowly.

Laughter and happiness radiated from their small group. Jayden again tried to push back the feeling that she was getting too close to Sage. Maybe it was time to try dating again? The thought lodged a rock in her throat, but it had to be better than her growing feelings for the unattainable.

# Chapter Nine

## *Accidents and Dates*

Marshal was saying something, but Sage's mind was on Jayden. The restaurant's clatter became background noise as all of her spare thoughts went towards the wrong Quincy twin. It had been days since she'd finally learned Jayden's story and opening up had only brought them closer.

"So, I have to go to Olympia for a few days. Sage, did you hear me? Sage?"

By the second 'Sage,' Marshal's voice finally registered. Dropping her fork, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, what?" Sage tried to focus on his face, but all she could do was compare it to Jayden's. His eyes were slightly darker and more intense than Jayden's playful ones, while his teeth were lacking the chip in the incisor she wanted to see.

"Are you okay? You seem a little distracted." Marshal tilted his head.

She replayed the last few moments as she picked up her fork. "Sorry. You said you have to go to Olympia. When are you leaving?" Sage poked her fork at her sandwich, grateful the restaurant had a plethora of vegan options.

"After lunch." Marshal picked the tomatoes from his salad and passed them her way as she passed him her pickle. "I'm sorry I haven't been around very much. The polls are showing the race is tighter than I'd like."

Sage shrugged. "You know I like having you around, but it's been fine."

Marshal looked away in a surprising display of uncertainty. "Are you still okay with getting married? I know I'm not your ideal partner, but I need to know if you are having second thoughts." He focused on her again, watching her carefully.

Picking up her napkin to wipe her sweaty palms, she tried to think logically, but it was impossible with Marshal's intense eye contact from across the table. The truth was she was sure there would be nobody after Chris. She'd gotten her one love. Marshal was easy, there was no pressure. Opening herself open to someone new after having her heart ripped out was impossible.

"I don't have any plans on changing my mind." She wasn't sure why the words stuck at the back of her throat, but Marshal's shoulders lifted in relief.

Posing for a photo on the way out, Sage wrapped her arms around Marshal and kissed his cheek. "Have a safe drive and see you when you get back."

Reaching into the seat to grab her helmet then throwing her leg over Margaret, she waved to Marshal one more time before heading back towards the house.

On one of the side streets the Vespa wobbled as Sage dodged a car door that was flung open. Narrow streets lined the neighborhoods of Ballard, creating too many obstacles to navigate safely. Between that and yet another staged date with Marshal, Sage's blood pressure soared as she carefully rode home.

Her feelings on the matter were starting to get complicated. Six months ago, she'd jumped at a chance to help pay back a friend who'd helped her through the worst time in her life. But six months ago, she hadn't known Jayden or Lila and the duo was starting to put a smile on her face she thought was forever lost three years ago.

Caught in a web of her own doing, Sage didn't see the car pull out from a driveway hidden behind hedges until it was too late. *I hope Margaret is okay* was her last thought before darkness overtook her.

Sage had been in and out of consciousness since she'd arrived at the hospital hours ago. She was only somewhat aware of the plethora of tests performed on her as they were

moving too fast for her to know what had been done. Her semi-conscious state informed her that all hospitals smelled the same, especially ERs. She never wanted to step foot in one again, but maybe technically, she hadn't stepped foot because she'd been wheeled in on a gurney.

"Can you hear me? Sage? Can you open your eyes?" The voice didn't sound familiar, and all Sage wanted to do was go back to sleep. "No, come on, wake up. Do you know where you are?" As she swiped at her nose to rid herself of an itchy sensation, she felt hands on her wrists. "Keep that on, we're still checking a few things," the unfamiliar voice said gently, then repeated, "Do you know where you are?"

"Hospital," she croaked, remembering that much even if the rest was muddled.

"Very good. Let us run a few more tests and you might be able to go home tonight," the nurse said with a wink then fluttered about the room performing checks on her vitals and a few other things before leaving her in peace.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been out before a comforting, familiar voice penetrated her sleeping mind. "Sage? Oh my God, are you okay?"

Sage could hear Jayden's frantic voice over the hubbub in the room. Lifting her head, she tried to smile but her mouth stung when it stretched.

"What are you doing here?" Sage's voice cracked at the words.

"The hospital called the house. Andrea answered and told me. She's watching Lila and don't worry, I let Marshal know and told him I'd let him know if he has to come back from Olympia." Jayden held her phone out as if trying to prove her story, but Sage was having a hard time concentrating on Jayden's words.

"Are you okay?" Jayden asked, tucking her phone in her back pocket. Sage felt Jayden's fingers brush her hair out of her eyes. Feeling overwhelmed at the unexpected tenderness of the move, she felt a tear escaping. "Are you okay? They

haven't told me much," Jayden said, leaving Sage's brain trying to catch up.

"What was the question?" Sage felt her skin scrunch in confusion because it felt like she was being stabbed.

"Are you okay?" Jayden repeated, leaning forward.

"I think so? My brain is fuzzy, but I believe they said I'm lucky and they were going to let me out soon. Do you know how Margaret is doing?" Sage's eyes drifted to the door when a medical personnel knocked and moved the curtain to the side.

"Hello Sage, I'm Dr. Alto. Oh, you must be Margaret." A beautiful woman turned to Jayden with her hand out.

"What? No, I'm Jayden, Sage's soon to be sister-in-law."

The words twisted in Sage's gut. She was more than a sister-in-law, surely?

"Oh, my mistake, Sage has been asking about Margaret, so I just assumed." Dr. Alto turned to Sage with a reassuring smile. "Sage, you have a minor concussion. It's best not to watch television, read, or do anything strenuous for at least seven days and rest as much as you can. Don't fight your body if it wants a nap. If you feel nauseous or start vomiting, have dizzy spells, or fuzzy vision, please come in right away. Do you have transportation home?"

"Yes, I'll take her." Jayden stepped up to the doctor. "Is it okay if I order an Uber? I don't have a car." Jayden looked away as she shuffled her foot along the square of linoleum.

"That shouldn't be a problem." Dr. Alto smiled at Jayden. If Sage's head wasn't pounding, she might have thought it looked warmer than a normal physician interaction. Dr. Alto turned back to Sage, her professional smile back in place. "Do you have someone who can help with things around the house and keep an eye on you, especially over the next few days?"

"Umm, I think so," Sage said slowly.

"My brother's out of town for a few days, but we have someone at the house that can help and I'm happy to watch out

for her. We live near each other,” Jayden finished in a rush.

Sage had utterly forgotten about Marshal; if she were honest with herself, she hadn't thought of him since Jayden walked in. Turning her head, she witnessed Jayden laugh at something Dr. Alto had said. In slow motion, the doctor's long fingers reached out to touch Jayden's arm before retreating and tucking a wisp of light brown hair behind her ear. The movement unlocked a pit in her gut that she would have to reflect on later when her processing power was back to total capacity. Done seeing her friend's arm caressed, she cleared her throat.

Jumping back into work mode, Dr. Alto handed over paperwork for Sage to sign and asked for a wheelchair to be brought in.

“That's not necessary,” Sage protested as it locked in place.

“It's mandatory, I'm afraid.” Dr. Alto lingered as a nurse helped Sage up and into the chair.

“Great, thanks for all you did for her,” Jayden said over her shoulder as they left.

Sage's head felt heavy, preventing her from trying to figure out the dynamics of the situation. Instead, she propped her head in her hand, which was resting on the arm of the wheelchair, and tried not to focus on anything for too long.

Everything disappeared behind her eyelids. “Do you know how Margaret is?” Sage asked, not opening her eyes.

“I'm not sure, but I'll try to find out for you,” Jayden said from behind as she pushed the chair to the entrance. Hearing the woosh of the door, Sage peeked one eye open but quickly closed it when the fluorescent light stabbed her retina.

“Do you want me to stay at the house tonight? There should be plenty of room for me and Lila, but if you'd prefer quiet time, I'll make sure Andrea looks in on you,” Jayden's soft voice asked as she bent down to lock the wheelchair.

“I'd feel better if you and Lila were there. Thanks for the offer.” Sage's voice cracked as she laid her head on the

headrest.

“Of course, I’d be happy to do it.”

Sage could feel Jayden’s breath on the back of her neck, a whispered kiss of kind words, and tried not to shiver. “Thank you.” Her tone matched the feeling, low and soft. “I know you didn’t have to come, but I’m glad you did.”

“It’s what we do for family. Oh good, our ride is just a minute away.”

When the car pulled up to the front, Jayden provided her arm and helped her out of the wheelchair. Together they slowly walked to the car. Every step was fire in her lungs as she tried not to take too deep of a breath.

She knew there were things to process but currently felt all thoughts were being passed through a deep pool before coming to her brain—all water-logged and distorted.

Jayden settled her in the back and said something to the driver about being right back while she returned the wheelchair. The driver tried to ask Sage something, but her head was already resting on the window, her eyes tightly shut as she slipped partway to dreamland.

When Jayden opened her side of the door and settled in the back, Sage tried to pull herself out of the fog.

Lifting her head, she looked at Jayden. “Can we stop by the crash site to check on Margaret? I have to know if she’s okay.” The movement took the last of Sage’s energy as she rested her head back on the window. The cool temperature helped the pain in her head.

“I already contacted Ivan to see if they could help facilitate the retrieval. She should be waiting in your driveway. But no working on her until you’re better. Doctor’s orders.”

Sage felt her face pull at Jayden’s words.

“What was that face?” Jayden asked.

Lifting her head off the cool glass took a herculean effort. “What face?”

“The one you made when I said doctor’s orders. There it is again.” Jayden extended her finger, swirling it around Sage’s head.

“It’s just my head. I don’t want to hear anything doctor related right now.” The answer sounded hollow even in her muddled brain, but it was all she could think of at the moment. “Can we drive by Margaret? I just need to know if she’s okay.”

Jayden gave her a look. “You already asked that, remember? I had Ivan take care of it.”

She would have nodded, remembering now Jayden had already said something to the effect, but couldn’t find the will to move her neck. “Oh right, I remember now. I hope she’s okay.”

The rest of the car ride was uneventful. Sage settled back against the window while Jayden made small talk with the driver in front.

Unaware that she had fallen asleep, Sage startled when the door on her side opened. She nearly fell out of the door. Jayden’s arms wrapped around her, keeping her steady.

“I’m okay to walk now.” Sage rubbed at her eyes then unbuckled her seatbelt. Jayden helped her out of the car and they continued to the house while Sage leaned heavily on Jayden’s arm.

“Here it is, it’s not too bad. Looks like you’ll need a new helmet though.” Jayden maneuvered them to Margaret who was propped up against the garage door.

It took two tries to get her fingers around the helmet and she saw there was indeed a crack along the back. Once the protective layer broke, the helmet became useless, but she was having a hard time letting go of it since it was one of the first gifts Chris had gotten her when they first married. It was painful seeing Margaret’s twisted metal but what mattered more was that she’d been lucky. She patted the helmet, saying a quick mental goodbye.

“Come on, let’s get you inside. Lila’s going to be home soon, and I want to explain to her what’s going on.”



“Can I have some tea? Do you know how to make vegan corn chowder? And do we have any saltines?” Sage’s stomach lurched at the thought of anything else, but those items sounded terrific.

Jayden pushed the front door open and continued to lead Sage inside. “Marshal is always a sucker for tea, so I’m sure there is something acceptable around. Vegan corn chowder sounds like another language but I will try to learn it, and if you don’t have saltines, I know we have some from the last bout of flu Lila had.”

“I have the recipe somewhere around here for the chowder.” Jayden helped her get settled on the couch and she relished in her attention as she tucked the blanket under her chin. “Are you sure it’s not too much trouble? My mom always made me chowder when I didn’t feel good.”

“No, of course it’s no trouble. There has to be a recipe online. If we need any ingredients, I’ll see if Andrea can run to the store. Don’t worry about a thing. Just rest.”

“You’re a good mom,” Sage mumbled, settling deeper into the couch.

Jayden said a few more things, but all Sage registered after that was the light touch on her hair as she slipped into sleep.

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A few days later, Jayden paced the hallway in her guest house. Sage was taking a nap while Lila was at school. She needed a break—no, what she desperately needed was to talk to someone about her growing feelings for Sage. She was on the mend, but after spending so much time together, Jayden needed to get a grip. Lila was due home in a few hours which meant she had a little time to try to catch Lennox on a break at work. Since she was part of the Quality Assurance team at the hospital in Sitka, she had a little wiggle room for personal calls if she wasn’t in a meeting.

Nestling her AirPods into the crook of her ear, Jayden scrolled to Lennox's name.

It rang once before the timber vibrated through. "Jay, how is my ex-lover and current baby mama doing?"

The poorly timed sip of water she'd just taken spewed across the counter at Lennox's greeting.

"Damn, I wasn't expecting that." Jayden grabbed paper towels.

"Got to keep you on your toes. I have a few minutes, but not much more than that. What's up?"

"It's nothing crazy or anything. I told you about Marshal's fiancée, right?" Jayden paced around the kitchen.

"Lila can't say enough nice things about her. It sounds as if the woman walks on water. Oh no, don't tell me both Quincy Queens are infatuated." The groan that came through the phone practically caused an earthquake. "Jay, say it isn't so. Tell me you didn't catch feelings for your brother's betrothed."

Jayden grabbed a rag to wipe up the water she'd spilled along with a few crumbs she found on the counter. "It's not just one feeling, I can assure you. Len, I have no idea what to do. Should I move? Things have calmed down with Brandi. Maybe I should go back to California."

"No, Lila is getting settled, and you always talked about moving back to Washington. Maybe move out of your brother's guest house, but don't run away. You have this horrible habit of running instead of dealing with things."

"I know. I'm sorry." Jayden hung her head, knowing full well how many times Lennox had had to chase her skittish ass. She'd run one too many times and found out too late that Lennox wouldn't always be waiting for her. Luckily, they made much better friends and co-parents.

"Can you step away from her for a bit, maybe try dating someone else?"

Jayden continued wiping the now completely dry counter, unaware of the movement. "Maybe? She's almost cleared of

her concussion. We spent so much time together. Lila and I stayed in the house since Marshal had to go back and forth to Olympia, so it was almost a glimpse of what it would be like if we were together, and ever since, I've just ached." She moved her hand to grip her chest, but the rag slapped her in the face on the way. Maybe she'd find a metaphor somewhere if she looked hard enough.

"You've got it bad. Try going on a date. But, Jay, hun, this is a lose-lose situation and one you need to try to step away from right now."

"We've become friends, though, and I don't know if I want to lose her as a companion." Jayden felt her eyes itch in irritation at herself and the situation.

"I know, but she's dating your brother. She's going to *marry* your brother. She's probably not even gay."

"Huh, yeah, I guess that's true." Jayden wasn't sure why she hadn't thought of that, but it made sense. "Maybe it will be okay. I just have to keep that in mind, and I'll be good to go."

"Still, maybe go on a date," Lennox teased. "Listen, I have to go. Can we talk soon about Christmas this year? You know, nail down dates that would work for Lila to come up here."

"Oh yeah, I'll send you a text with a few dates. Thanks for chatting with me, Len. You have always been my voice of reason." Jayden's heart sank. She'd forgotten Lila would be in Alaska for Christmas this year. It was still a few months away, but the holiday now held zero appeal.

"Someone has to be. You know I will fill that role anytime and fully expect you to return the favor at some point."

Jayden threw the rag in her laundry hamper. "You know it. I'll give you such kick-ass advice."

"You better. I'm counting on you, Jay. Alright, got to hop to a meeting. Talk soon."

It took a few seconds for Jayden to pull out the buds in her ears. Tuna walked up to sniff her sock. Bending down, Jayden picked up the tiny fuzzball and brought him to her head to rub

her cheek against his fur. The soft hairs felt comforting for her scattered brain.

“I need to go on a date, Tuna. Should I call the doctor who gave me her number at the follow-up appointment for Sage?”

The moment a few days before had left Jayden in a daze. She’d been looking for the bathroom on the way out and ran into Dr. Alto—*Uma*, she corrected in her head—who had given Jayden her number.

Jayden recalled Uma’s crisp words: “This isn’t something I usually do, picking up my patient’s fiancée’s sister, but here is my number if you are inclined to use it.”

“No time like the present,” Jayden said to Tuna, who was still in her arms, and sent a text to Uma.

*I’m sorry. I hope you’re a texter. I have performance anxiety when it comes to calls.* Hitting send, she thought for a moment before drafting the following text. *It’s Jayden, by the way. Are you free sometime this week for coffee?*

A knock sounded from the backdoor, saving her from staring at her phone while she waited for a reply. The noise startled the cat, who jumped down, leaving a trail of scratches down her arm. Slipping the device into her pocket, she walked to the door. Another knock came again as she turned the corner. Seeing Sage’s face made her heart wag its metaphorical tail. *She’s not gay. Not gay. Not gay*, the mantra repeating in her mind as she unlocked the door.

“Hey.” Sage stepped towards her with a hug locked and loaded. “I’ve been napping all day and was wondering if you could help me get ready for this benefit tonight?” A little wobbly, Jayden stepped away from the hug. “Andrea just left to run a few errands,” Sage added when Jayden still hadn’t answered.

Trying not to think too hard about what it would entail to help, Jayden internally gulped. “Sure.” She indicated for Sage to go first before following behind.

*Not gay, remember? We’re just friends.*

She tried to keep that loop up in her head and almost missed Sage saying, “I hope the weather holds. I’d love to play more one-on-one or H.O.R.S.E games with you.”

Jayden wished she hadn’t said that because it gave a completely different image in her head, one that did not include a basketball.

Back at the house, Sage pointed to a small pile of makeup on the table and a garment bag draped over the chair at the kitchen table. “My arm is still a little sore. Would you mind doing my makeup and helping me into that dress?”

Guiding Sage into a seat, Jayden pulled over a chair to sit in.

“So, you have a fancy gala tonight? What’s it for?” Jayden asked, dusting foundation on a brush. Leaning in close she mentally cursed at their proximity. Sage’s eyes were closed which Jayden wasn’t sure was a good or bad thing.

“Yeah, it’s Helping Hand for Hunger and Homelessness. We’re raising money and I’ve been working on getting a project off the ground. There is an auction that should be well attended by business leaders and influencers. I don’t really like having to ask for money, but what really gets me is they never have any food I can eat. Which you learned spectacularly with a certain incident involving spray of the pepper variety. You know, when I came down for a snack after one of the events and a stranger was in my kitchen?” Sage opened her twinkling eyes, a smile creasing the contour Jayden was working on, but she didn’t care. The look went straight to her heart.

Wanting to gasp for breath, she mumbled, “My eyes watered for a week after that incident.” Clearing her throat to try and recenter her equilibrium, she continued. “Close your eyes, I’m going to do mascara next. So, what would you want at the gala if they would provide vegan food?”

“I love fried rice, and the more veggies, the better. But usually, it’s blue cheese tater tots, or bacon wrapped chicken. Maybe a hummus cup with veggies, but it’s not very filling,” Sage answered.

“White or brown rice? And are you allergic to anything?” Jayden pushed her glasses up her nose and leaned back, waiting for her answer. The makeup was done, now she just had to deal with helping get Sage dressed. No big deal.

“Brown usually. I think it gives the dish a heartier texture, but I wouldn’t kick white rice out of my bowl. And no, I’m not allergic to anything—well, nothing vegan that is. Just shellfish, but that’s not an issue. And I don’t mind spice. My motto is the spicier, the nice-y-er,” Sage sang in a sultry voice that shot to Jayden’s core. “What about you? Are you or Lila allergic to anything?” By the grace of whatever Goddess, Sage was mostly covered when she took off her clothes.

Jayden wanted to run to the fridge to find something to cool her overheated cheeks. Trying to keep her voice from cracking she replied, “I’m allergic to latex, but I hope that would never get near food. So far, Lila isn’t allergic to anything, but I’m not sure I’ve introduced her to enough variety yet.” Her phone dinged from her pocket, but she continued. “I’ve heard fried rice is better with rice cooked the previous day, but maybe I’ll see what I can do to have some fried rice waiting for you tonight. I’ll leave it in the fridge.” She slipped the gown up Sage’s shoulders and settled the fabric, trying to touch as little of her skin as possible. She pretended it was lava and sure to burn.

“That’s helpful that Lila’s allergy-free. And the fried rice is a kind offer. Would you want to have a midnight snack with me? Come on over.” Sage turned, swooping her hair out of the way for Jayden to help with the dress in the back.

While Sage waited, Jayden took out her phone and looked at Uma’s name before opening the text.

*I don’t drink coffee, but that’s okay, there are usually other options. I have time off today if that’s not too soon?*

“Jayden, would you mind zipping me up?” Sage asked as Jayden worked on the response to the text. “Everything okay? Your face is flushed.” Sage asked.

Putting her phone face down, she reached to zip Sage up. “Oh, yeah, everything’s fine. It was just Dr. Alto. We might go

for drinks today.” Jayden watched as Sage’s shoulders fell.

“Great! Yes, she seemed nice. Well, I mean, I was out of it for most of my interactions with her but that is great. Just great. Great.” The last *great* tapered off into a whisper as Sage stared off into space.

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Jayden wasn’t sure where the niggle of guilt was coming from. It wasn’t like she was dating Sage, even though it felt like it sometimes, which was a problem.

“Well, thanks for the help. I can get the rest from here.” Sage’s face was tight.

“Of course, yeah. Have fun at the shindig.” Jayden wasn’t sure if Sage heard her response because she was already in another room of the house.

# Chapter Ten

## *Late Night Revelations*

Sage found her trusty wall to lean against and spent the ‘shindig,’ as Jayden had called it, people watching. She’d relegated herself to the wall when the third person of the night asked her if she was feeling okay.

*No, I’m not feeling the greatest. I don’t want Marshal’s sister out on a date.* The thoughts kept creeping in at inopportune times which was why she put herself in a timeout. How had everything gotten so complicated? She went into this with Marshal, sure she’d never find anyone again. Now, after months of spending time with Jayden and Lila, she’d started feeling something for the first time since she’d lost her spouse in the accident.

She wished she could talk to Marshal. He used to be the person she confided in about everything, but this wasn’t something she could talk to him about

“Sage, lovely to see you.” Patricia turned her body to face Sage and leaned one arm against the wall.

“Patricia, to what do I owe this interaction?” Sage sipped her orange juice.

“Oh, nothing in particular.”

Sage squinted at the woman in front of her. She was now looking off to the side, but the calculations were churning. Sage let it go, not wanting to poke the bear.

“Well, if you will excuse me, I should find Marshal.” Sage straightened, stepping away from the wall, already missing its strength.

“It’s just—I suppose there is something,” Patricia started when Sage was already past.

Turning back, Sage followed the pattern of large crisscrosses on the wall behind Patricia as she waited for her to



go on.

Finally, Patricia cleared her throat. “Are you close with Marshal’s sister?”

The question came out of left field, which caught her off guard. “Jayden? Why?”

“I’m just wondering how you got the gig of Marshal’s arm candy while clearly having relations with his sister. There’s a story here, and I want to find it.”

“What? I’m not—we’re not—it’s just...” She petered out, understanding whatever she said could dig her into a hole she hadn’t known existed.

“I have photos.” Patricia’s tone lowered conspiratorially.

Sage’s head tilted back and forth, trying to figure out why she would care about pictures. “We’re not together, but we’re friends. I don’t know what you mean by photos. It’s not like we’ve done...” Sage trailed off, the denial turning to dust on her tongue, hearing how her protests must have sounded to a seasoned reporter looking for dirt.

“I can tell there is something here, and I’ll find it. You just hopped onto the scene on Marshal’s arm, and suddenly, a rock is shining on your hand.” Patricia tapped her martini glass.

She’d be disappointed if she was waiting for more information since Sage just shrugged. “Do what you must, but there isn’t a story. Excuse me, I need to find my fiancé.” With that, she walked away.

The issue was if she dug deep enough, there was a story to find. Maybe not the one Patricia was trying to uncover, but there was a story. Marshal had a secret she was carrying, and yes, they were set to get married, but it didn’t mean what everyone thought. It was messy. Add that to her growing feelings for Jayden. Sage shook her head, wishing her thoughts would scatter.

“Hey, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” Marshal came up next to her.

Sage sighed in relief at his presence and wrapped an arm around him, needing his strength. “Sorry, got stopped by Patricia.” She waved behind her.

“Ah, she stopped me too. Asked if there was *anything* she could do to help with my campaign.” Leaning in, he emphasized the word ‘anything’ in a low, sultry voice.

“You know what that voice means, right?” Sage asked, leading Marshal to the table of food. She groaned at the sight of dry-looking carrots and cucumbers with shriveled skin.

“No? Does it mean more than her helping?” Marshal’s face was pure innocence as, unblinking, he watched her face.

“It means she wants to service you.” She waited to see if anything registered on his face, and when nothing appeared, she added, “You know, sexually.” She lowered her voice when she hit the last word so nobody near would hear.

The timing was perfect. He’d just put a cracker in his mouth which spewed into his napkin when he coughed.

“Eww,” Marshal responded with a shudder.

Sage’s stomach growled, but music drowned out the noise. “Can we go home?” Sage asked.

“Yeah, of course. Thanks for coming with me. I know these things can be draining.” Marshal led them outside, where the car was already waiting.

Marshal was working on the drive home which left Sage to press her nose against the cold glass, contemplating Jayden’s date. The thought made her want to swing from the branches of the jungle to grasp Jayden away from—something. Her feelings were barbaric, but her mind kept helpfully replaying Jayden’s laugh while talking to Dr. Alto at the hospital. She’d been half out of it, but that laugh was a beacon in a storm. She’d clung to that sound for days afterward; even though it hadn’t been directed at her, Sage found comfort in the sound.

When they got to the house, Marshal said goodnight and headed upstairs to his bedroom. He hadn’t noticed Sage

staring at the small house nestled on the property, wishing she had X-ray vision to see if Jayden was home yet. Sage kicked off her shoes and debated changing or eating. The kitchen won when her stomach gurgled again.

Standing near the fridge, staring off into space, she couldn't decide what sounded good.

"There's fried rice in the fridge. It's full of shellfish, so you might want to be careful."

Sage flinched before registering the voice. Spinning around, she couldn't keep the smile off her face. "Well, I hope you have an epi-pen handy." She opened the refrigerator and pulled the bowl out and flicked the sides of the lid off. "Want some?"

"Yeah, that would be great. Would you mind if I had a beer too?" Jayden pulled two bowls down and slid them on the counter.

It felt like they were both dancing around each other. Unsure of their changing dynamic, Sage was dying to hear about Jayden's date.

"I don't mind when other people drink. I'm not a fan of drunkenness, but that's my problem, not yours."

"Have you ever had a drink?" Jayden asked, pulling a beer from the fridge.

The question usually bristled Sage's feathers, but Jayden's tone was smooth and without judgment.

"Yeah, I used to drink on occasion. I just don't anymore." Sage stiffened, waiting for the captious comments.

"That's valid. Do you want any sauce for your fried rice?" She stood at the fridge waiting for Sage's answer.

"Oh, I have to try it, but maybe grab the low-sodium soy sauce. Thanks." Sage was still contemplating the complete lack of response to her not drinking. In her experience people felt the need to ask why, like she owed them an explanation. "Do you have any questions about me not drinking?" Perched on barstools, they settled at the kitchen counter.

“Do you want me to ask questions? Saying you don’t drink is a valid response. You don’t need a reason, and I don’t need to push you to give me one. I know you have a story to tell, but in this regard, I don’t have any questions unless it’s something you want to tell me. Okay?”

The perfectly reasonable explanation sounded foreign in her mind. To have someone not push to have an answer that settles their sensibilities wasn’t something she ever thought could happen. Her period must have been close because the thoughtful tone and response almost brought tears to her eyes.

“Oh.” Sage had to clear her throat. “That’s nice.” Wanting to change the subject and bursting to hear what Jayden and Dr. Alto had gotten up to, she pivoted on the barstool to get a better look at her. “So, I’m dying here. How was your date?” Her gut churned, waiting for the answer.

“Yeah, that’s one of the main reasons I’m here. We left things a little awkwardly this afternoon and I just wanted to see if you and I were okay?”

Sage’s spoon was halfway to her mouth before she put it down and studied the most fascinating piece of rice she’d ever seen. It was unnerving for someone to communicate so bluntly. With Chris, she had to work through layers of information before getting to the meat of the issue. Such a novel concept to just ask about things. “Yes. I was surprised, but I apologize for my reaction. I want you to be happy.” The words caught in her throat.

Jayden scrutinized her for a beat, during which Sage tried not to fidget. While waiting, Sage took the first bite of food and moaned around the spoon. “Damn, this is good.”

Glancing back at Jayden, she swore her eyes flashed for a moment.

“It was fun. Uma’s great, but we’ll probably only be friends.” Jayden gave her a shy smile before turning to her bowl. “I’m glad you like the food. There are extra veggies as per your request.”

“It’s divine. The flavors aren’t something I’m used to, but they work well.” Sage chomped down another spoonful, coughing when rice went down her windpipe.

“I put some kala namak, or mineral salt, in it, which is supposed to mimic eggs a little. I don’t know about you, but I love eggs in my fried rice, so this was the vegan option.”

“You’re doing some research, huh?”

“Well, I want Lila to eat balanced, good food, and if we have more meals together, I’ll need to learn how to cook things you can eat.” Jayden leaned in to tap their shoulders together. However, she slipped and ended up putting her hand on Sage’s thigh to avoid falling over, both of them turning their heads in surprise.

Sage froze as they stayed nearly mouth to mouth. She wouldn’t be surprised if Jayden could hear her thudding heart as they waited for one of them to pull away. Sage knew it should be her but couldn’t find it in herself to retreat. Jayden’s eyes held an emotion that Sage couldn’t pinpoint. She searched her face, trying to recognize the facial expression.

“Mom?” A sleepy voice broke them apart.

Jayden yelped in pain as her arm hit the counter. Sage scurried over to Lila, who was rubbing her eyes.

“Can’t sleep, Cricket?” Jayden asked, meeting her in the entrance of the kitchen.

“No, and you were gone.” Lila’s voice wobbled as if she was about to cry.

“I’m sorry, I came over here for a quick visit, but I’m glad you found me. Let’s get you back to bed.” Jayden grabbed Lila in a fluid swoop. “Thanks for the company. See you later.”

“Well, thank you for cooking. Bye Jayden, night Lila.”

Sage wanted to keep them there, wanted to talk with Jayden until the wee hours of the night. Marshal’s kind face popped up in her vision as shame burned in her belly.

It wasn’t until later, in the confines of her bedroom, that Sage could pinpoint the look Jayden had before Lila walked

in.

Lust.

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Jayden scanned the backyard for someone to talk to. Marshal had extended an invitation to a dinner party, and the weather was bearable for early October, especially with the heat lamps that littered the area. Catching Lila running by, she quickly zipped up her hoodie and sent her to continue the impromptu tag game she'd started with Ivan and Leon.

She'd caught Sage's eye a few times but tried to keep out of her orbit. Her orbit was dangerous. The moment they'd shared a few nights prior played rent-free in her mind, which only confused her feelings. Her heart ached for something her brother had—something that she wanted. They'd never gone after the same woman before. Well, if she were honest with herself, she couldn't remember a time he'd ever dated—at least, he'd never brought anyone home.

It didn't matter. Jayden needed to shove these feelings deep down. All that mattered was that they stayed friends. Sage got along with her daughter. Jayden tried not to think about how Sage's eyes lit up when Jayden entered the room.

Her head pivoted back to Sage who was currently leaning into Marshal. Today's food seemed to curdle in her gut at the sight.

"I caught you!" Lila ran up to Ivan, who threw their phone in the air to catch Lila mid-leap.

Everyone watched in slow motion as the phone dropped harmlessly into the grass. Ivan didn't even seem to care as they swung Lila around in a circle. Her shrieks could probably be heard blocks away. Ivan stopped spinning her and instead settled her into their arms.

"Guess what? I feel this line right here. It feels like a wire." Still in Ivan's arms, Lila ran her finger along the back

of her head to a spot around her ear.

Jayden made a mental note to investigate the issue. Lila didn't say it was painful, but it still sounded concerning.

"Are you and Ivan ever going to have kids? They're pretty great with them," Jayden asked Leon as he walked by.

"I first have to get Ivan to say yes to my proposal." Leon sighed dramatically, but Jayden caught a wink he sent Ivan's way.

"I told you not to ask me until after the election, but what do you do? Throw a masquerade party with our closest friends two days after the campaign announcement where each party member had a letter on their mask to spell out Will You Marry Me? And yes, there was even a question mark mask." Ivan put a wiggling Lila on the ground and fetched their phone.

"That's good grammar. You're on my side with the punctuation, right, Morgan?"

Morgan stopped walking by and turned to the group. Without missing a beat, she said, "I do appreciate good punctuation. For instance, this one time, I stole the punctuation key from a keyboard. I'm expecting a long sentence." Morgan laughed at her joke before adding, "I love a good punctuation joke." That one got the group laughing. Morgan hid a pleased blush behind the drink she was carrying. "But you still should have waited, Leon."

Leon gasped, fanning his face. "How dare you go against my genius? Ivan didn't know it was happening."

"But Ivan wanted to wait until after the election so they could help with planning. It's their dream wedding too, you know," Morgan said, fighting valiantly for Ivan.

That was the most Jayden had heard Morgan talk, and she was intrigued, wanting to hear more.

"Morgan, do you need another drink?" Jayden held her own empty bottle in the air—a near-universal indication that she would grab a refill, except Morgan held hers out as if toasting. The slightly awkward interaction was exactly what Jayden needed to take her mind off Sage. "Is that a yes?"

“Is what a yes?” Morgan pushed her glasses up her nose.

“Do you want a refill?” Jayden smiled, trying not to look at Sage, who had kneeled to be at eye level with Lila. If her expressive eyebrow movements were anything to go by, it had to be something fascinating.

“Oh, I thought you said, do I need to blink? I was trying to work out if my eyes were dry, in my head, then you raised your glass, and muscle memory took over. Wow, that was a comedy of errors. Yes, I would love one, thank you.” Morgan shook out her arms.

The movement was completely unexpected. It felt like temporary numbing gel had been rubbed on her exposed Sage-nerve, and the relief was highly welcome. “Okay, be right back.”

She passed Sage with a smile but didn’t stop to say hi. Instead, she grabbed two drinks and headed back to Morgan, who was staring in the distance at the tree line.

“Do you think that’s a bird nest?” Morgan pointed in the distance.

Even with her glasses on, Jayden couldn’t see what she pointed at in the distance. “Let’s go take a look.”

Morgan turned to look at her, providing a sly grin before high stepping to the tree line.

Before following, Jayden made sure Lila was being taken care of, but she needn’t have worried at all. It looked like Ivan and Leon had restarted the game of tag, and this time Sage had joined. “How is the campaign going?”

“I’m staying busy with the speeches. It’s inspiring working for Marshal. The people of Washington need to elect him. His ideas could help so many people. For instance, he is working on this project with Sage to create transitional housing for recently released inmates to help facilitate finding jobs. The program is wonderful. He is—they are magnificent.” Morgan shook her head when she corrected herself.

Jayden tried to study her face as they came upon the trees. The way her face lit up when talking about Marshal gave her



pause. Surely she realized her feelings, right?

“Are you seeing someone? I haven’t seen you with a partner.” Jayden scanned the trees, waiting for an answer.

“And you won’t. I’m aroace.” Morgan shrugged, pointing to the nearest tree. “Dang, it’s just a balloon. I thought it was a nest.”

“Can I ask what aroace is, or if you prefer, I can look it up later?” Jayden asked, fully aware of how draining it could be to educate people on sexual attraction and wanting to be mindful of that.

“I don’t mind telling you. I’ve had lots of practice with my therapist to work out why my mom was trying to push me towards marriage and kids when it wasn’t a concept I could wrap my head around. Aroace is a combination of asexual—do you know what that is?” At Jayden’s nod, she continued. “And aromantic. Do you know what that is?”

This time Jayden had to say, “No, I haven’t heard of that term.”

“That one isn’t as generally talked about, but it’s when you don’t feel any romantic attraction to anyone. Someone who is both asexual and aromantic is called aroace. I wouldn’t mind sharing my life with someone, but sexual or romantic feelings won’t be part of the equation.”

“Oh, okay I think I’ve heard of aromantic but didn’t realize it could be combined with asexuality. Thanks for explaining it.” So, the gushing wasn’t a sexual feeling, just passion about her job.

“You’re surprisingly chill about this information. Most people have a thousand questions, and I can tell they think I’m broken somehow. I don’t get that from you, though.”

The comment was similar to the one Sage had said about people who drink. “I might have a slight advantage, being a part of the alphabet soup, since I have heard of most of the terms, just not put together like that.”

They started walking back. Jayden contemplated what Morgan had said along with some of her own biases regarding

romantic attraction. It was hard to wrap her head around, but possibly that's what people who are ace felt when contemplating sexual attraction. She seemed to learn more every day.

Rejoining the group, she continued learning more from Morgan, whose mind was a fascinating, twisty road of random facts and side streets. Project Don't Think About Sage seemed to be working, except it wasn't at all.

"Come on, who took the last spring roll? You all can have anything on the table. Who took one of the last vegan things?"

Speaking of the one person she couldn't get off her mind. Jayden was surprised to hear anger in Sage's voice.

Everyone looked around. It appeared they were trying to catch the culprit red-handed, except whoever had taken it was extremely smooth and didn't leave any evidence.

"Mom?" Lila leaned on her leg, hiding behind it slightly. Her eyes were wide as she looked between her and Sage.

"Yeah, Cricket?" Jayden leaned down to see Lila's face better.

"I ate the spring roll. I didn't know I shouldn't have. I'm sorry. I didn't know. Am I in trouble? Can I still go on the field trip? I promise I didn't mean to." Tears threatened to fall as she looked at Jayden with sorrow and regret.

"Oh no, you're not in trouble at all."

It was unfortunate that Sage raised her voice at that moment, causing Lila to fling her arms around Jayden's neck and burrow deep. Sage was moments away from inspecting all their clothes for trace evidence.

She wrapped her arms around Lila and held her close while working on standing. She knew Lila soon would be too old to lift, but for now, she relished in the ability.

"Sage, can I talk to you?" Jayden asked, having to indicate to the side with her head now that her arms were full.

Flushed cheeks were a good look on Sage, Jayden decided. Nope, that was the opposite of what she needed to think.

Putting on her Mom Mask, she leaned in, not wanting to make a scene more for Lila than herself.

“Lila ate it. She didn’t know you wanted more, but you’re also making her feel horrible with whatever this is.” She could only wave a hand, but the movement was effective when she saw Sage’s face fall.

Leaning in closer, Sage tried to catch Lila’s eye, but every time she craned her neck, Lila would turn in another direction.

“Lila, I’m sorry. I overreacted. Please don’t think you did anything wrong. I’m in the wrong this time.”

At least now Lila had stopped playing keep away with her gaze and was staring straight at Sage. “I didn’t mean to eat it. I didn’t want anything else at the table.” Lila’s voice quivered.

“It’s okay. I promise. Hey, how about I show you how to make the spring rolls? That way, you can have them whenever you want.”

That did the trick. Lila’s face lit up as she launched herself from Jayden’s arms and into Sage’s, who caught her gracefully and plopped her down on the grass.

“Come on, everyone, let’s go inside and play a game. Maybe Pictionary?” Marshal joked, throwing an evil grin Jayden’s way.

Jayden groaned good-naturedly, which caused Sage to throw an arm around her shoulder. She tried not to think of the subtle scent of mint enveloping her as they walked shoulder to shoulder. Her stomach swooped at the contact. No, this wouldn’t help at all.

# Chapter Eleven

## *The Nerve*

Marshal's town car pulled up, causing Sage to move against her seatbelt. Helen had invited her to the grand opening for the program she'd started. Sage's non-profit would still take a few months to get off the ground but planning would pick up now that the building was finished. She was intending on taking Helen up on her offer but still was waiting on the final funding.

The weather had turned to fall in Seattle, which meant layers of clothing. Stepping outside, she pulled her coat closed, trying to ward off the chill in the air.

"Sage, I'm so glad you could make it. Please step this way."

Helen motioned her arms in front of her for Sage to start walking. On the way to the back door of the transitional house, they passed the ribbon they'd cut in a few minutes.

"Want a grand tour before the ceremony?" Helen asked as they entered the building.

The last time she'd visited the place, it had mostly been slats of wood indicating a rough shape of where the rooms would be built. Sage inhaled deeply, enjoying the smells of new construction and fresh paint. Everything was shiny and flowed well. Plus, there was the added bonus of being able to see the layout with walls in place.

"As you can see, we have set up the kitchen with industrial supplies, which can handle the full capacity of thirty residents. We're moving them in waves with the first people moving in this week." Sage stepped over an extra board as they moved to the next room and Helen continued. "This is the recreation center. As you can see, it's filled with resources to help people find jobs." She indicated a wall that held shelves stocked with shiny pamphlets. Having to step aside in the narrow hallway,

Sage waited for someone to pass before following Helen into a small room off the main vein of the walkway. “And over here, we have your program’s office. They will share with the business office, but there’s enough space.”

A window along the far wall provided great natural light. Sage took a lap around the room, seeing it was set up with everything she’d need when her program was ready to lift off. “It’s all so beautiful. The color scheme and decorations... You can tell a lot of detail went into everything.”

“Just because they were incarcerated doesn’t mean they don’t deserve decency and nice things.”

“I agree completely. I’m so excited to work with you.”

“Sage?” A curious voice behind her called out.

Stopping, Sage turned and walked back towards the rec room. Sage’s jaw dropped at seeing Grace, one of her long-lost friends she and Chris used to spend time with. After everything that happened, she’d lost track of her. Shocked, she walked up to Grace, who had her arms wide, waiting for a hug.

Helen walked up to them when they parted. “I see you two know each other.”

Grace grinned while Sage’s back tightened as she stood stiffly, trying to shake off her shock. “I thought that was you. We go way back, but I haven’t seen you in what, three, four years? How the hell have you been? Cutting up the stage every night?” Grace held her at arm’s length, scanning her face.

The scrutiny made her squirm. Grace was someone who knew her previous life, and there were cameras here and reporters milling about. Sage thought she’d even caught a glimpse of Patricia, who would be the worst person to overhear something.

“I’ve taken a step back from the stage but I’m reading some scripts to keep myself sharp. The program we’re starting here has recently taken up a lot of my time. How are you doing? Are you working here?” She tried to navigate the conversation away from anything in her past.

“This program is a lifesaver, I’m grateful you’re starting it. No, I made a stupid decision a few years back. I was sent to jail for scraping off the top of profits and will be one of this place’s first residents.” Sage was about to comment but Grace went on. “And how’s Chris?” Even though Sage had seen the question from a mile away, it caught her off guard, especially with the perky uptick in Grace’s voice.

After stealing a glance at Helen, whose face slacked with polite interest, Sage craned her neck behind her. She didn’t see anyone else around. Lowering her voice, Sage confessed, “Chris was killed by a drunk driver about three years ago.”

Helen’s hands gripped her necklace and Grace took a step back as her hand flew to her mouth. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry. God, if I had known. I’m so sorry, Sage. Are you okay?”

Sage stared at a rainbow caused by the sun’s reflection in the window on the far wall. “It’s been hard, but I’m getting remarried. Marshal, he’s a politician.” It wasn’t like Chris’s death was all that secret, and while Helen knew what it was like to lose a spouse, she couldn’t afford Patricia, who seemed to be hellbent on finding dirt, knowing anything specific about her past.

“He’s a politician?” The question held layers that Sage couldn’t get into now.

Thinking quickly, she pulled Grace into a hug, “We should catch up sometime. I think we need to cut the ribbon soon, but I’d love to talk more. Is your number the same?”

The confusion wiped from Grace’s face. “Yes, it’s the same. I’ll hold you to that.”

Helen continued the tour, showing the rooms, laundry area, and yard. The people who would be able to stay here would hopefully be happy. The ribbon cutting went off without a hitch. Helen answered a few questions from reporters, and the building was officially open for business. They took pictures for the paper with a few of the people staying in the first wave. As the flashes continued, Sage tried to remain present silently, although her mind was firmly lodged in the past.

Back home, Sage crawled into bed, excited to be back in her domain. She knew they were going to do good things, but publicity like that created a drain on her psyche that could only be replenished alone with a good book.

Her phone pinged, which brought a growl to her throat. She wasn't sure she could deal with anything life-related at the moment.

Stealing herself for the worst, she saw Jayden's name flash. The fog of despair dissipated in the wind as she read the text.

*Hi, I have a huge favor to ask.*

That was the whole text, but there were bouncing bubbles that kept popping up and disappearing. Sage was on the edge of her seat waiting. Finally, the text came through.

*I have to meet my agent, then I was hoping to go to her baby shower in the SeaTac area but can't find someone to watch Lila on such short notice. Would you mind babysitting for a few hours?*

Flying out of bed, Sage put on stretchy pants and a loose T-shirt. The comfy clothes would allow her to chase a little nine-year-old around the house. Throwing her hair in a ponytail, she walked down the stairs. Halfway to the door, another text came through.

*I can pay you. And will be in your debt.*

The bubble reappeared.

Realizing she hadn't responded and was just going to pick up Lila, Sage's fingers flew over the pad, trying to stop Jayden from sending whatever she was going to offer next.

*I'm on my way. You don't have to pay me to hang out with family.* She hit send.

She was out of breath when she reached Jayden's door. Raising her fist to knock, she yelped when the door swung open.

“Sage! Mom called everyone she knew, and I kept saying why not Sage? I’m not sure if she heard me, but she finally reached out to you after the fourth phone call. I told her you know how I like my food and how to cook mashed potatoes with just the right seasoning. You also know which books are my favorite for bed, except Mom says she’ll be back before bed. Mom said I could bring my Switch, or maybe we can play a boardgame.”

Sage helped Lila pack a few things for the few hours she’d be over. It was a miracle that both Lila and Jayden didn’t drain her like a lot of people did and she found herself looking forward to the fun-filled afternoon.

“Hey, thank you for coming.” Jayden walked into the kitchen, freshly showered with a light layer of makeup. Sage had never seen her with makeup on and tried not to think about how good she looked.

“Sure, it’s no problem. Lila will be saving me from a quiet house.” Sage tucked the backpack Lila had handed her over her shoulder.

Jayden whirled around the house mumbling about losing her wallet and phone. “I should only be a few hours. Feel free to help yourself to anything in the fridge and have fun. Lila, I love you, and please be nice to Sage for me. The car I ordered to take me to the light rail should be here soon.” Jayden knelt to hug Lila.

“Bye, Mom. If you are back late, can I have a sleepover with Sage?”

Sage and Jayden shared a look, both trying to hide a laugh. It was such a cute thing for a kid to ask.

“I won’t be back that late. Be good and see you soon.” Jayden lingered, looking between them before giving a final wave. “Bye Sage. Call me if you need anything.”

“Will do. Have fun at your meeting and baby shower.” She turned to Lila when she heard the front door close. Holding out her hand she asked, “Want to grab Tuna and come over to



the big house? We can play a game, have cookies, and maybe even make a blanket fort.”

“Yes! Instead of cookies, can we have root beer floats? I know Uncle Marshal has swirly straws. Would root beer floats still taste good with vegan ice cream, so you can have some? I’ve only had it with regular ice cream. Is chocolate ice cream made from milk? I don’t think that would be good with soda, though.” Lila’s butt was in the air as she searched for Tuna under the couch.

“Most chocolate has milk in it, and most ice cream is made from milk, but not all. I just have to read the ingredients to see.”

“Okay. I don’t like chocolate. Sometimes it tastes like barf.”

“Hmm, I heard there was an enzyme that can make it taste like that.”

“What’s an enzyme? Found him!” Lila jumped to the corner, grabbing the struggling kitten around his sides.

“I’m not particularly sure. Maybe we can look it up when we get to the house. Do you have everything? Want me to carry him?”

The fuzzy kitten was thrust into her arms as Lila skipped to her room. Sage tried to find comfort in his soft fur.

“I have my book. Can we read it in the blanket fort we’ll build?”

They started walking to the big house. “Of course. Do you want to read to me?”

“No, sometimes the words get jumbled in my head.” Lila held her hands out for Tuna so Sage could open the door.

“Everyone needs to start somewhere, Bug.” The nickname slipped out as she grabbed blankets from the couch.

“The kids at school make fun of me when I have to read aloud. I freeze up when talking out loud to the class.” Lila started tucking the blankets along the cushions.

“Sounds like you might have performance anxiety.” Sage let Lila take the lead of the build, ready to step in if necessary.

“What’s performance anxiety?” Lila stopped fiddling with the blankets.

“It’s when you have a hard time speaking in front of other people. I used to have it.”

“You did? I don’t want my classmates to think I’m stupid.” Lila’s voice was hard to hear since her head was tilted down towards her chest.

“Is that what they say?” Sage pulled Lila to the entrance and waited for Tuna to saunter in behind Lila before scrunching down and entering the fort.

“Only when I have to speak out loud for a presentation or read a paragraph. I get all confused, and nobody can hear me.” Lila pulled at the fabric of the pillows that lined the ground.

“Want me to give you some pointers? I don’t know if you know this, but my job is usually working on plays as an actor.” It had been a while, but she was starting to feel that itch to get back on stage. Ever since Chris died, Sage couldn’t concentrate enough to learn lines.

Lila’s face lit up. “You can help?”

“Of course. Let’s start with an easy one. If you know you’re about to speak, try taking a few deep breaths. Like this.”

One hour bled into two as they talked, read, played with Tuna, and started a puzzle. Sage was finding Lila a great distractor from the fact Jayden might be with someone right now. She’d need to process these feelings at some point.

“Want to start the floats?” Sage asked as they snapped in the final edge piece of the puzzle.

“Yes!” Lila said, standing up. In her excitement she’d forgotten about Tuna who tumbled from her lap. He landed on his feet and gave a huff before walking to his water bowl.

“Okay, let me get the ingredients.” Sage twirled around the kitchen, letting Lila pick out the spoon she wanted, and asked her to grab their sodas from the fridge in the garage.

The door slammed when Lila came back struggling with the cans. Before they tumbled to the floor, Sage scooped them up and poured them into the cups. “Perfect, and for the final touch, voila.” Sage pushed the straw into the float.

“Mmm. That’s good!” Lila pulled the cup near her face and started scooping ice cream into the spoon.

They worked on the puzzle while enjoying the cold treat. Sage was working on an all-blue area of the puzzle when Lila hmpfhed.

“You okay there, Bug?” Sage stretched her neck, looking towards Lila.

“I can’t drink out of the straw.” Laughing, she tried to suck the liquid.

Sage’s heart thudded as she watched Lila’s lips struggle to wrap around the object. Something was wrong, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“Can you try using your spoon one more time?” She tried to stay calm, but her thoughts raced forward.

“I don’t have any more food.”

“That’s okay, mime it. Pretend you’re eating something. It’s what I do on stage sometimes.”

While she watched Lila put the spoon in her mouth, she worked on her own breathing exercise, trying not to freak out when she saw one side of Lila’s face move while the other stayed still.

“Okay, let’s try one more thing. Can you smile for me?”

*Shit, shit, shit. It looks like she’s having a stroke. Don’t show your panic.*

Sage started shaking, so her voice wasn’t as calm as she’d like, but she asked Lila to grab her coat. At the same time, she checked the app for a car. Her Vespa was still broken in the

garage, and Marshal had taken their other car to Olympia for a conference.

There was a car three minutes away, which meant Sage spent the longest three minutes of her life holding things together.

“Can I bring Tuna?”

“Umm, no, he won’t like where we are going.”

“Where are we going?” Lila looked around as if just fully realizing that they were leaving.

The car pulled up, and Lila wasn’t going fast enough for Sage, so she scooped her up and hustled to the waiting car.

On the way, she called Jayden and tried to leave a message that wouldn’t cause pure panic that she was taking Lila to the hospital, but everything was okay. After hanging up, she sent a shaky text, wanting to make sure she got the message.

“Am I going to be okay?” Lila turned in her seat to get a better look at Sage.

“Yes, sweetie. Of course. You’re going to be fine. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Tears of panic tore at her chest as she saw a radiant smile with one side of her lips perched up.

“I like it better when you call me Bug even though that’s not my name, not sweetie. It feels special, like something just for us. Is that okay?”

“Of course, Bug, I’m glad you like it.” Sage gave Lila a side hug while smoothing down her shirt. A nervous gesture to try and help sooth her nerves.

The car pulled to the hospital, and she rushed Lila to get checked in. While she was answering a few questions from a nurse, her phone dinged with a missed call and subsequent voicemail. Then another notification came through. A glance to the screen flashed Jayden’s name and the text:

*I’m on my way.*

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Jayden had met with Bailey to figure out the next steps while she went on maternity leave before enjoying her baby shower. That was how Bailey rolled, always working. But when the voicemail came through that Lila was being taken to the hospital, Jayden had to ask someone at the baby shower to give her a ride. Bailey's husband, Harv, ended up being the one to offer her a ride to the hospital in Seattle. She had one more month until she could get her license back. It wasn't like she was in any state to drive, even if she could. Why wasn't Sage calling her back? Her hands were shaking too badly when she tried to recheck her phone to see anything on the screen.

"Lila's going to be okay. Whatever happens, she's a strong kid," Harv said, tapping her thigh a few times in comfort.

"True," Jayden responded as she watched the trees lining the highway zoom past.

"Dang, traffic. I'm sorry." Harv slowed the car to a crawl. Jayden tightened the grip on her phone to keep her hands from pulling out her hair.

Terror scenarios were running through her mind. She pictured Lila bleeding from a wound, her body broken on a gurney, tubes poking from all available surfaces. Each image brought an added weight to her chest.

Her phone dinged.

*I got her checked in. Waiting in the ER now. She is okay. Just waiting for them to call her back to be seen.*

She hit the FaceTime button as soon as she finished reading the words. She wouldn't be able to relax without seeing Lila, even if it was in the wholly inadequate square on her phone.

"Hey," Sage answered on the first ring.

Jayden scanned the phone for signs of distress. Her daughter was lying on Sage's chest as the hustle of the ER

lobby buzzed around.

“What happened?” Jayden cringed. She hadn’t meant to yell, but she was hanging by her last nerve and it was frayed.

“Bug, turn around. Say hi to your mom,” Sage said, brushing Lila’s hair from her eyes.

“Mom?” Her voice was a little scratchy from sleep; otherwise, nothing seemed off.

“Hi Cricket, how are you feeling?” Jayden’s heart rate came down from bursting blood vessel levels.

“I’m okay. Nothing hurts except that Sage said we had to go on a trip when I couldn’t drink out of my straw for root beer floats.”

“You couldn’t drink out of a straw?” Jayden saw her face scrunch in confusion in the little box in the corner.

Jayden could hear Sage ask Lila to do something, but the noise drowned out the words. Leaning in closer she watched as Lila turned to the camera and smiled. Jayden’s stomach clenched as only half her lips ticked upwards. She looked like she was having a stroke.

Not wanting to scare her daughter, she tried her own smile. “There is my wonderful warrior’s smile. We’re almost at the hospital. Be good for Sage, and I’ll see you soon, okay?”

The phone went dark, and she was left staring at a screen.

“Is she okay?” Harv asked, glancing over.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I just need to get to her and see for myself.” It helped that Jayden had seen her daughter, but now she needed to hold her.

To distract herself from the demons that were chasing her, she asked Harv, “Are you excited to be a dad for the first time?”

Her phone beeped.

*They are taking her for a CT. I’ll keep you updated.* She breathed a sigh of relief. At least they were doing something.

His face changed from pinched and worried to bright and open. The transformation shed years off his face. “Bailey is amazing. I can’t believe she’s growing our kid. I’m so grateful you set us up.”

“Just remember, this baby will have to be named after me.” Jayden tried smiling but couldn’t quite pull it off. In the side mirror, her face looked trapped in funhouse glass.

The hospital finally loomed into view, but it felt like they were going backwards. She needed to lay eyes on her kid.

“Okay, I’m going to pull up front. Do you want me to stay?” Harv asked, maneuvering through the parking lot to the entrance.

“No, it’s okay. Thanks for the ride, Harv. I owe you one.” Jayden had a foot out the door before the car even stopped. She waved behind her as she ran through the sliding doors of the ER. Thoughts of the last time she’d walked through the doors assaulted her mind. She frantically searched the lobby before finding a staff member who showed her to the room.

Walking in, Jayden wasn’t sure what she expected to find, but it wasn’t Lila sitting on Sage’s lap playing a friendly game of hand slap, where one person tried to hit the top of the other’s hands and the other must quickly get their hands out of the way. Just having eyes on her daughter was calming, but it was Lila’s giggle that broke through the cloud of panic.

It was amazing how relaxed they seemed in a room full of despair. As if sensing Jayden’s presence, Sage looked up, locking eyes with her instantly. An intense flutter of shared emotion passed through them.

Rushing forward, she kneeled in front of Lila. “Hey, Cricket. How are you doing?”

“Mom! You’re here!” Lila flew forward, landing in Jayden’s arms.

Sage got up to offer her seat. A look of relief crossed her face. Jayden settled on the bed with Lila tucked under her chin. Her glasses frames cut into her shoulder, but Jayden

couldn't find the will to move. It felt amazing holding her daughter and knowing she was okay, for now.

“Lila?” A voice called out from the door. “Hi, I’m Sam, your nurse. Just going to take a few more vitals before the doctor comes to talk to you about the results.”

“I’m Lila’s mother, Jayden, and this is her...Aunt Sage.” Jayden tripped over the introductions, nodding to Sage who was pacing in the corner of the room which appeared to lack serious pacing capabilities.

After shaking their hands and applying hand sanitizer, Sam began his gentle ministrations as he looked over Lila.

“Okay, you’re doing great, Lila. I’m going to grab the doctor and have her look over you. Be right back.” Sam left.

Jayden’s face felt tight as she waited.

“How was the CT, Cricket?” Jayden leaned back to meet her eyes.

“It was big and loud. I didn’t like it.” Lila snuggled back into her chest.

Blowing out a breath that Jayden could feel from across the room, Sage looked at Jayden. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Before Jayden could respond, there was a knock on the door. “I hear we have something happening here,” the familiar voice of the doctor called out.

“Oh, Jayden. Hello,” Uma said, taking in the scene of the room.

Jayden couldn’t be sure, but Sage seemed to groan, covering it with a cough.

“Dr. Alto, hi,” Jayden replied tentatively.

Their date had been awkward, and she couldn’t be sure, but she thought she’d talked about Sage a lot during it.

“And you must be Lila. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

Jayden passed on a few things Lila had said, but true recognition lit up Dr. Alto’s eyes when she mentioned the



irritation along the back of her head to near her ear.

After looking at a few more things, she flipped her stethoscope around her neck and stated, “It looks like Bell’s Palsy. It’s rarer in kids this age, but not unheard of. It usually causes half of a face to become paralyzed. The nerve that runs along this area becomes inflamed which is what you were feeling, Lila.” Dr. Alto indicated the line on her head exactly where Lila had said she felt irritated. “I’ll prescribe some steroids, which should clear it up in a few months. Most people will regain full function, but there could be continued facial drooping. Most importantly though, she’s okay. I recommend you follow up with her family doctor in a few weeks, or if anything changes.” Dr. Alto spewed the jargon quickly. When she got to the ‘she’s okay’ part, Jayden felt her knees give out in relief.

Over Lila’s head, she shared a look with Sage. Unsure of what was passing between them, Jayden knew she was falling for her brother’s fiancée, which meant she needed to find a new place to live.

They picked up the needed pills at the pharmacy, and on the way home, Jayden made a checklist in her head of what she needed in order to step away from Sage and her feelings.

# Chapter Twelve

## *The Fun Before the Storm*

Sage pulled the box marked Xmas from the garage and lugged it into the living room. The scent of the sugar cookies Andrea was baking filled up the house, making her mouth water. They were still a few days away from Thanksgiving, but she always decorated the day after. It was a small tradition her parents started, and she wanted to continue it with Lila if Jayden was okay with it.

Speaking of Lila, Sage had held off as long as possible. She needed to see how she was doing.

Putting the box under the window so it was out of the way, she stretched her back before making her way to the door. She was planning to walk over to Jayden's house. However, Lila was already waiting with Jayden when she opened her front door.

"Hi, sorry, Lila here was wondering if she could watch a movie? Our TV broke, and I have one more day until I get my license back."

"Sure, come on in and get comfy. I was actually coming over to check on you."

"Mom says I can stay up late because of my bells—what's it called again? She said I was brave and was glad you could keep me calm. Can we watch *How to Train Your Dragon*? That's my favorite movie because the dragon moves like a cat, and I love cats. Oh no, Mom, I forgot Tuna. Can I get him? He was under my covers last time I saw him."

Before Lila could fire off another question, Jayden stepped in. "Remember what I said about asking questions without waiting for answers? There were three in there that I counted."

Lila scrunched up her nose as she thought back to the questions. "I can't remember what they are now, though."

“That’s why you need to wait. It makes it sound like you don’t want to know the answer.”

Sage bent down in front of Lila, tracing her eyes over her face. She just needed reassurance that she was okay. There didn’t appear to be any changes, but the doctor had said it could take a few months.

“I’ll go grab Tuna. Are you okay to watch her?” Jayden asked, taking a step back towards her house.

“If you still trust me, of course.” Sage stood, holding her hand out to Lila.

Jayden took a moment to respond. When Sage looked up, Jayden said, “Of course I do. You handled the situation extremely well. I trust you with her life.” Without another word, she turned on her heels and headed to pick up the cat.

Sage tried to gauge the look Jayden gave her, but when it came to studying facial features, she couldn’t pinpoint Jayden’s very well.

Focusing back on Lila, she asked, “How are you feeling, Bug?” She led her to the den and tucked the blanket around her.

“School has been hard. Some of the kids tease me, but Mom says they’re just jealous because they want to have a unique look. I don’t know how much I believe that, but Ryder, my best friend, has been nice.”

“Here’s one Tuna salad, ready for more snuggles.” Jayden came back with a hissing kitten, who seemed to settle as soon as he saw Lila.

Sage laughed at the silly joke and tried to share the humor with Lila. What Sage witnessed nearly broke her heart. Lila’s lips ticked up for a second before she covered her mouth self-consciously. It only took a second, but her smile fell away.

Looking for guidance from Jayden, all she got was a brief glimpse of pain as she scrunched her eyes together before her Mom Mask was back in place. “Alright, Cricket, I think it’s a crime to have a movie and not have popcorn. I’ll be in the kitchen making the snack and talking to Sage.”

“Can I have it with caramel? It’s my favorite with caramel. This one time—”

“Lila, hun, you have to pause when you ask a question,” Jayden interrupted.

The light reprimand caused Lila to go silent. Staring at the table in front of her, she didn’t say anything more.

Sage watched the silent wills of mother and daughter. Unsure of the game the two were playing, she broke the standoff. “I’m not sure I have caramel, but I’ll check.”

“Thank you,” Lila said, still not looking at anyone. Tuna crawled in her lap and Lila mindlessly petted his fur.

Jayden lingered for a second before turning on the movie, then pivoting to the kitchen. On the way, she put her hand on Sage’s shoulder and indicated with her head to follow.

Sage’s mind was still on her shoulder even though Jayden’s hand had long left.

“Are you okay?” Sage asked as she watched Jayden work on what seemed like a breathing exercise. She paced the kitchen, mumbling to herself as she opened and closed cabinets without grabbing anything. “Jayden, stop. Come here.” Sage grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face her. “Are you okay? Talk to me.”

Jayden slumped against Sage’s shoulder and wrapped her arms around her tight. She felt tears drip down her shoulder as she returned the embrace. The breakdown was not at all what she had expected, but in a way, she felt honored Jayden felt safe enough to cry.

“I’m sorry. I don’t normally cry, especially on someone’s arm.” Jayden pushed her glasses on her forehead before wiping her face with the back of her hand.

“It’s been a lot. The past few days have been an emotional rollercoaster. Is Lila okay? I saw her reaction. It almost felt like the death of her smile.”

Jayden took her glasses and rubbed her shirt on the lenses before placing them back on. “She hates it right now. I can’t

keep her from covering her mouth with her hand, and sometimes just getting her to smile is a feat in itself. When we first came here, I saw a glimpse of her old self, but then I reprimanded her on how she talks continuously without waiting for an answer and she pulled away again. It's like I can't do anything right."

Sage guided Jayden to one of the chairs around the kitchen island and popped open a beer before sliding it over. Jayden palmed it, looking around at everything and seeming to see nothing. The scent of popcorn filled the air. Sage leaned against the counter.

"Do you want me to take her for a few hours, give you some time off? Or maybe the three of us can go somewhere together? The Seattle Center has an interesting interactive display for kids."

"Are you sure? Shouldn't you spend some time with Marshal?"

The whoosh of their situation swooped down and hit Sage in the gut. What was she trying to do? Create a family with someone when she wasn't available to do so? A headache started prickling behind her eyes.

"I love spending time with you two. I have a rally soon, but most of my days are free. I'm reading scripts and have someone lined up to run my charity. So basically, I have a lot of free time." Sage poured the popcorn into a bowl before throwing in a few handfuls of caramel pieces then shaking the mixture around. Several popcorn pieces flew from the bowl.

"I forgot you've done plays. Would you mind looking over my script at some point? I'm stuck on this part, and I think fresh eyes would help."

"Of course! I would love to read your work."

"Great, and thanks again for letting me treat your shoulder as a personal tissue. I guess I didn't realize how overwhelming everything's been. I had to talk Lennox down from coming here. It didn't make sense since Lila is headed up there in a

few weeks.” Jayden looked so tired; Sage ached to do something.

Sage witnessed Jayden’s slumped shoulders straighten as they entered the living room where Lila was curled up with Tuna, watching the movie.

Watching the transformation created a sense of helplessness. All Sage wanted to do was take these two people and wrap them in a blanket, maybe help carry some of Jayden’s load and bring the smile back to Lila’s face.

“Can you sit here, next to me?” Lila tapped the couch next to her, looking expectantly at Sage.

“Of course.” Sage sank into the cushions, placing the bowl on Lila’s lap and pulling up her feet on the couch that extended outwards on one side. She didn’t even feel the movement of the sofa when Jayden sat on the other end.

Lila craned her neck between them as she leaned forward to set the bowl on the coffee table in front of her before scooting over to curl up against Sage. Jayden just smiled, put the treat near Lila, and took the place her daughter had just vacated.

Sage fell asleep to the sounds of fighting dragons and a feeling of inner peace at how domestic and comforting it was to have her two favorite people near. It reminded her of when she was recovering from the accident.

Sage startled awake to a blaring TV playing the menu song on a loop. Drool dribbled down her chin that she quickly swiped away.

Lila was snoring lightly on her shoulder, Jayden’s glasses were askew, and her neck looked kinked at an uncomfortable angle. Gently moving Lila to the side, she replaced her arm with a pillow and froze as Lila squirmed for a second before settling back to sleep. Twisting off the couch, Sage landed on her knees before pulling herself off the ground and grabbing the other pillow.

She stood over Jayden, trying to slide the pillow under her head without waking her. After a successful transfer, she brushed Jayden's hair from her eyes in a move that felt awfully close to a caress.

"Hi, Sage. I'm finally home." Marshal's voice boomed in the quiet living room.

Sage jerked her hand from Jayden's face, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "Hey, Marshal, welcome home." Turning to face him, she stepped away from the couch and Jayden's sleeping form.

"I think I'll be able to swing things and stay home at least until the holidays are over." Marshal's eyes held a sheen of exhaustion that she was pretty sure would still be there even if he got eight hours of sleep. "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize they were over." He immediately lowered his voice.

"Yeah, their TV broke, and Lila wanted to watch a movie," Sage explained.

Marshal walked over and Sage gave him a side hug. "Hey, Jay. Wake up. Your neck is going to be screaming tomorrow." Marshal hit Jayden on the top of the head, causing her to fling her arms and open an eye to see what had assaulted her.

Her eyes flickered to Sage as she blinked rapidly, trying to clear the sleep from them before landing back on Marshal. "Marsh, you're home. Hi." Jayden stretched and Sage tried not to notice her defined arm muscles rippling in the late afternoon light.

Mumbling came from the other end of the couch as Lila started to stir. "Hi, Uncle Marshal." Lila lifted her head from the pillow and smiled.

"Hey, Lila—whoa, what's wrong with your face? Jayden! Call 911 right now." Marshal ran his hands through his hair as he paced.

"Calm down. We already took her in. She's okay but has Bell's Palsy," Jayden said, her voice calm, but her eyes held a hint of irritation at him making a big deal. Sage glanced at Lila who had her hand over her mouth, hiding her face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t tell him. He hasn’t been home much, and I forgot to warn him,” Sage confessed. The truth was Marshal had been slipping her mind a lot lately.

“You’re okay then, Lila?” Marshal scooped her up in his arms, twirling her around in the air.

It took a few seconds, but Lila’s laughter filled the room which provided a welcome relief.

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“I should get her to bed. Thanks for letting us watch the movie and nap here. Now, where is that damn cat?” Jayden peeled herself off the couch and stood with her hands on her hips. Her brain wasn’t fully processing information, but she saw Tuna dart from under the coffee table and pounce on Marshal’s socked toes. “It’s comforting to know he’ll pounce on other people’s feet.” Jayden laughed, bending down to scoop up the little hellion.

“He knows who gives him cuddles and treats,” Lila and Sage replied at the same time.

A look of wonder passed between the two conspirators as their hands slapped in a high five.

“And that’s my cue to head home. There might be a mutiny forming soon.” Jayden whacked Marshal’s stomach playfully. “Come on, Cricket.” She passed Tuna to Lila’s waiting hands.

“You two are coming over for Thanksgiving, right?” Marshal asked, kissing Lila’s cheek.

“Mom said we are. Last year she created a meal from locally sourced food at a farmer’s market. A few of her writing friends came by and everyone laughed. Someone brought a dog, but I don’t like dogs as much as cats. It was cute but kept jumping all over me and licking my face.”

“I love that idea,” Sage said. Jayden noticed her lip quivering, making it seem like she was trying not to laugh as



she walked them to the door. “Maybe we can create the meal from the vendors at Pike Place Market?”

“Can I come with you to pick it out?” Lila jumped up and down. The kitten in her hands looked ready to claw her eyes out.

“Careful, Lila, you don’t want to create a Tuna shake.” Sage put her hand on Lila’s shoulder to calm her down. “I would love for you to come help pick up some stuff. How about it, Jayden? Are you okay with that plan?” She paused before adding, “I mean, all of us could go.” She put her hand on Marshal’s back.

Jayden glanced between them. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think Sage added Marshal as a complete afterthought, maybe even forgetting he was standing there for a second. Not sure what to think of the situation, she nodded. “Yeah, sounds fun. I get my license back tomorrow so I can drive.”

“I’m going to get some work done at home, but you three have a blast and maybe pick me up some doughnuts from the vendor I love down there,” Marshal said, opening the door for Jayden.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you two tomorrow.” Sage leaned in to hug Jayden with one arm and ruffled Lila’s hair.

Jayden tripped walking out to the yard as she looked back at Sage. She was starting to rethink hanging out with her all day. Then again, people always said she was a bit of a sucker for pain.

The next morning, Jayden stretched in bed, enjoying the sun shining through the slit in her curtains. Excitement surged as she remembered she was getting her license back and shopping for Thanksgiving.

Getting Lila ready was about as easy as herding cats, especially since Jayden spent ten minutes wrestling Tuna from off the top of the curtains. While Jayden stood on a chair

trying to get the kitten, she looked over her shoulder at Lila, who had decided to pick out her outfit on her own.

“No, not shorts. It’s pretty cold. How about your pants and flannel shirt?”

“But I wanted to wear my favorite blue shirt and it matches these shorts perfectly.” Lila flung herself on the bed in a huff.

“I think you got your sense of style from your other mom because I have no idea what’s stylish.” Jayden finally got a hold of the kitten and climbed from the chair, placing him on Lila’s back. The giggle from her daughter was worth it. “How about the sweatshirt you got in Alaska and the stretchy jeans you like?”

“Okay! Can you take a picture and send it to Mama?” Lila grabbed the clothes before posing for a photo shoot.

Jayden reviewed the photos in the living room to see which ones to send. Flipping through them, she noticed Lila was either covering her mouth, looking away, or not smiling.

“Cricket, come sit for a second.” Jayden patted the spot next to her on the couch. “Can you tell me why you’re not smiling here?” She pointed to the photo on her phone.

“My face doesn’t work. I don’t want people to see it crooked.” Lila bent down to pick up Tuna, who seemed to have a sixth sense when she was distressed.

“You are more than a definition of what you look like, Lila. You’re smart, artistic, funny, brave, and one of your best qualities is your kindness. I’ve seen you give your last candy bar to a younger kid, even though I knew it was your favorite. You are so much more than your looks. Plus, your crooked face makes you unique. It’s not a bad thing. It’s beautiful if you let it be.” During the speech, Jayden had turned on the record button and discreetly lifted it to capture Lila’s face.

Watching the light return to her daughter’s eyes was a gift she was glad she’d captured. She let Lila watch the video a few times before sending the recording to Lennox, who immediately wanted to FaceTime. Jayden let the two talk while she got ready for the day.

*Everything is perfect.* The thought slipped through unbidden as Jayden walked through Pike Place Market with Lila and Sage. Even though she'd grown up in Seattle, the market still held a sense of wonder with its fantastic food, cool crafts, and exciting atmosphere.

“Here is the doughnut stand Marshal was talking about.” Sage pointed to a vendor. The cinnamon and fried dough scent wafted by, making Jayden’s mouth water.

“Let’s grab them on our way back. That way, they will be fresher,” Jayden suggested, turning to Lila. “Hey, Cricket, there is something you have to see when you get to Pike Place. It’s a rite of passage, and you can’t leave without witnessing it.” Jayden leaned in, trying to ramp up the excitement.

Sage held Lila’s other hand and bent towards their circle to hear better over the crowd. “This is your first time? Oh, I can’t wait to see the event through your eyes.”

“What is it?” Lila yelled, using their combined hands to bounce up and down.

“Come on, you’ll see.” Sage pulled them to the front of a small group that had gathered in front of the fish display.

Shouts from the workers started, and fish flew in the air. One salmon almost hit them but was snatched out of the air by strong hands. Jayden recorded the first flung fish but was focused on Lila’s reaction. An uninhibited, crooked smile stretched across her face, and Jayden hadn’t realized how much she craved the sight of her daughter’s smile.

“Sage?” Jayden watched as Lila pulled on Sage’s hand. They both leaned in to hear Lila over the shouts of the fish stall. “Did you see that? Oh, look they are throwing it back! Look.” Lila let go and pointed.

Sharing a look with Sage, Jayden felt a warmth grow in her chest. After watching the entertaining show, they soon worked in tandem to maneuver from the crowd who had gathered around and worked deeper towards the craft section of the market.

“Do you want to check out some of the crafts? Is there anything you want to do?” Jayden pointed to a few things she thought Lila would like.

They walked to the end of the market where Lila got a glimpse of the Ferris wheel overlooking the water. “Can we go on that?”

Jayden’s heart started pounding as Sage said yes. Heights weren’t her thing. “Maybe you and Sage can go on it together?” They started walking towards the waterfront. It would be quite the hike back up, but the fantastic view of the area’s mountains and Puget Sound was worth it.

“No, you have to come on with us,” Lila declared with a hand on her hip. “You told me today I was brave. So, you have to be brave too.”

“Yup. It’s happening, don’t fight it.” Sage paid for the tickets. The line to get in wasn’t long since the wind had picked up, creating a chill in the crisp air.

The large container opened, and the small group stepped inside. The doors closed, trapping them in a rounded contraption with windows around the whole area, providing a 360-degree view of the water and city.

Lila pressed her face against the glass as they started going around. It was surprisingly smooth, and even at the peak, Jayden’s acrophobia hadn’t kicked in. Relieved, she sat on the bench looking towards the water.

“How are you doing?” Sage sat on the bench next to her, scanning the ocean as the sun started lowering.

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be.” The view surrounding them was too romantic and the urge to hold Sage’s hand overwhelmed her. She curled her fingers into her fist.

“In my experience, that’s usually the case.” Sage rubbed Jayden’s back a few times before pulling her arm back to her side.

The slight contact was enough to send her body into overdrive. Jerkily she stood and tried to walk to the other side

of the booth. The sway of the container rocked her to the side, but Sage wrapped her hands around Jayden's waist. The unsteady movement caused her to fall into Sage's lap. Being this close was the opposite of what she'd been trying to do.

"Sorry about that. I didn't expect that much of a sway." Jayden was about to stand again to scoot off her lap, but Lila had turned and was running to join them. Leaping in the air, she landed on Jayden, where they created a sandwich on the bench.

Lila wouldn't move, which meant Jayden continued to stay stuck on Sage's lap. She was acutely aware of Sage's breasts pushed up against her back and her breathing on her neck caused a tingling sensation down her spine. She used the rest of the ride to try to keep her body under control. As the container slowly descended, she felt a ghost of a brush on her hip and side. The movement was so light she wasn't sure if she had made the whole thing up.

The ride glided to a stop and Lila hopped off Jayden's lap, allowing Jayden to stand on shaky legs. On the walk back, Lila couldn't stop talking about the ride and sights she saw. At one point, Lila mentioned Transformers protecting the ocean, leaving Sage and Jayden to guess what she meant. It wasn't until she went through the photos later that they learned it was the cranes for the cargo ships.

Sage and Jayden were quiet on the way back to the market to pick up the rest of their items. With bags swinging in their arms and Lila's hands firmly in theirs, Jayden kept replaying the feel of Sage. Her daydreams were interrupted when she heard the first loud pops that sounded like gunshots firing through the market. People started screaming and chaos erupted around them.

# Chapter Thirteen

## *Aftermath*

People were running all around them, pushing, pulling, and screaming. Sage had Lila's hand in hers one moment, and the next, it was empty. There was no clear view of where Lila or Jayden was, but she started working her way to where she thought they could be.

"Lila! Jayden? Where are you?" Another round of bullets drowned out Sage's call.

Ducking down, Sage felt panic start to claw at her chest. People pushed at all sides, trying to escape the sound of gunfire. Screams pierced her ears as people rushed from the lower levels to get to the exit.

The rapid shots echoed off the old walls that encased the market, making it almost impossible for Sage to locate which direction would be the safest. But first, she had to find Jayden and Lila.

Screaming their names again, she clawed her way to the place she'd last seen them. Pushing off people's shoulders, she tried to walk through the panicked crowd. A new wave of people ran up the stairs. More than one had what appeared to be blood splattered on them, their eyes clouded with shock. Bile rose in her throat that she had to swallow down. There was no way she was taking her eyes off her surroundings to puke.

Another round of shooting started, which caused someone to force Sage to the ground, telling her to stay down. The person whispered to the few people around them to get behind the booth. Someone stepped on her hand as they huddled in a corner hidden behind a few boxes. She was about to call out in pain, but a man's voice stopped her.

"Shh, be quiet. The shooter is coming this way," a man who looked a little like her grandpa told them.

In the face of tragedy, Sage focused on the mundane as she counted the group. There were five people in total bound together by the most horrible glue imaginable.

Cries of pain and shouts for help came from all directions. The echoey chamber made it hard to identify how many people were calling out. Sage focused on lights from behind other booths, trying to make out where they were coming from.

It took an embarrassing amount of time to figure out that the lights were cell phones people were holding out. Sage knew from experience her brain ceased to function correctly in the face of a traumatic event. Reaching for her pocket, she groaned, realizing her phone must have fallen out. Cursing women's pants and their ridiculously small pockets, Sage tried to think about her next steps but her brain wasn't cooperating.

She pressed her hand against the empty pocket where her phone had been. She hadn't even realized she'd started crying until the drips landed on her hand.

Sage wasn't religious, but she sent out a silent mantra of hope and safety for Lila and Jayden. She focused on sending good omens towards the two people who had grown to mean more than she'd ever wanted or thought she'd have again.

The shots were still exploding around them but were getting further away. Sage desperately wanted to get to the car, but fight or flight had kicked in, and that pesky third option, freeze, was rearing its ugly head.

"I think we should run for it," the person who had guided them like little ducklings to safety said, motioning to the side where a hidden door to the alley bid them like a siren.

Other groups hidden behind booths were making their way towards different openings in the market. This gave Sage the strength she needed to get her legs moving.

Peeking around the corner, she saw the light of safety a few booths down. Realizing it wouldn't take much to get to the exit, she continued to duck while trying to waddle as fast as possible, huddled over and rushing through the door to

freedom. Stepping aside to keep from blocking the exit, she stood with her hands over her head, trying to pull enough oxygen to her lungs.

More shots continued behind her, which caused a surge of adrenaline. Muscle memory took over as Sage ran for the car. She didn't see the buildings, people, or streets but her legs knew where to go as she continued to where they had parked earlier that afternoon, though now it seemed like years ago.

Seeing the car, Sage found another speed she hadn't realized she was capable of until she got to the passenger side of the door and saw the driver's side was empty.

Her heart sank as a wave of despair crushed her heart. Not sure where to go from here, Sage's hands fell to her knees as she gasped for breath. She couldn't get enough air. Everything was going fuzzy. People from the market were milling about, confused and panicked, trying to locate their family members. Sirens blared as the entire department of first responders came barreling down the road.

"Sage! Oh my God, you're okay! I've been trying to call you, but no calls are going through."

With all the noise in the area, Sage hadn't heard the back door of the car open. Spinning around, she saw Jayden leaning halfway out of the door. Peering into the car, Sage saw Lila bawling and clinging to her mom.

A rush of relief she hadn't known was possible left her boneless as she tried to take the two more steps needed to get to them, but it was nearly impossible to steady her legs.

When she finally reached them, Jayden grabbed Sage's arm and pulled her into the protective cover of the backseat. Grabbing the door handle, Sage pulled it shut, wanting another layer protecting them from the outside. Relishing the muffled silence, Sage let out a shaky breath knowing that they were all okay.

Jayden twisted in the middle seat, wrapping Sage in a hug so tight she felt it could have crushed her. Sage felt Lila's arms join around them, and for the first time since the sound of the



first shot, she felt safe. Nobody said anything for the longest time as they shook and held each other.

Pulling back slightly, but not losing contact, Sage asked, “Lila, how are you? Are you okay?”

The first thing Sage noticed in Lila’s eyes was shock. That look on a nine-year-old would be something that would haunt her for the rest of her days.

“You let go of my hand. You let go, and we couldn’t find you. Mom picked me up and told me to cover my ears and close my eyes really tight, like this.” Lila’s face scrunched up as she demonstrated the concentration it took to squeeze her eyes shut and cup her hands over her ears. The side still paralyzed from Bell’s Palsy didn’t move. “See? Like that. And she held me tight while she ran. I bounced up and down in her arms, and people kept running into us, but we kept moving.”

“You were so brave, Cricket. I’m so proud of you.” Jayden pulled her daughter into her lap.

“We came to the car and tried to call you. We called so many times, but it wouldn’t connect. Where were you?” Lila’s curls flopped across her forehead.

“I didn’t let go. I’d never let go of your hand, Lila. People jostled into me, and we got separated.” Sage shook her head. “I shouldn’t have worn these pants. I knew the pocket was too small for my phone, and it must have fallen out during the rush.”

“Can we go home now, Mom? I want to see Tuna.”

The declaration made Sage ache. After something like this, she knew she’d want to hold her loved ones tight. But what if the ones she wanted close were already in the car?

“Of course, give me a few more minutes.” Jayden’s voice was still shaking.

“I can drive if you want. That way you can stay in the back with Lila,” Sage offered even though she wanted to stay cuddled in the back, gathering comfort from this family.

Jayden's eyes filled with gratitude as she pulled Lila closer while fishing the keys out of her pocket. "Thank you." They held eye contact as their fingers lingered on the exchange.

"It's no problem. It's never a problem," Sage whispered before opening the door and stepping around the car to the driver's seat.

There was a roadblock they had to stop at and answer a few questions, but they soon found themselves heading home. Sage kept glancing in the mirror, making sure they were still okay. She was close to pulling over a few times, but deep breathing exercises allowed her to calm back down enough to continue.

"I'm going to try to see if I can get a hold of Marshal." Jayden pulled Lila closer as she leaned forward with the phone on speaker.

"Jay? Is that you? Oh my God, are you all okay? I've been trying your phones nonstop." Marshal's voice filtered over the phone, his voice tense and scratchy.

"We're all here and okay. We're headed home now," Jayden responded.

Sage said, "Hey Marshal," just as Lila said, "Hi, Uncle Marshal."

"Is that them? Are they okay?" Andrea's voice could be heard in the background.

"We're almost home, we'll see you soon. Love you, Marshal." Jayden sat back after they disconnected. Sage met her eyes in the rearview mirror.

The closer they got to the house, the harder it was to stay calm. Panic gripped Sage's chest as soon as she pulled into the driveway. Ripping the door open, she fell out of the car on her hands and knees and puked up their lovely lunch—bile and snot mixing in a mess on the ground. Everything faded in and out as Sage tried to find a way to ground herself until a warm hand on her back helped her find reality again.

"Come on. Let me help you." Jayden guided her up, and the three walked arm in arm to the big house.

“Are we staying here tonight, Mom?” Lila asked at the door.

Sage nodded, unaware she was doing so, wanting them to stay at the house. She almost screamed when Jayden said, “No, not tonight.”

“Why?” Lila asked, and Sage silently cheered. That question was on the tip of her tongue and probably would have sounded desperate.

“I—umm, well actually yes, if that’s okay with Sage and Uncle Marshal. It would be nice to have all of us together. I do want us to return to our routine as soon as possible, but today we should lean on each other.” Jayden sounded unusually monotone. The shock was catching up to all of them.

“Okay good, I don’t want to sleep alone in my bed. We can stay here like we did when Sage had her accident. Sage wouldn’t mind, would you?” Lila leaned into Jayden’s body. Her demeanor was more subdued than Sage had ever seen, even when they were in the hospital waiting for the physician.

“You are always welcome here, you know I don’t mind.” Sage shuffled from one foot to the other.

The front door flung open and Sage watched as Marshal rushed out followed by Andrea. “I’m so glad you’re okay.” Marshal first went to Jayden, who was closest, and Sage found herself wrapped in Andrea’s arms. She sank into the familiarity before Marshal and Andrea switched.

“Let’s get you all inside.” Marshal kept an arm around Sage’s shoulders as Lila and Jayden walked ahead. Sage watched as Lila took a step away from her mom but quickly found her way back to her side.

They stepped into the house. Sage turned in a circle not knowing what she should be doing.

“I need to go get your jammies and Tuna. Are you okay staying with Sage and Uncle Marshal? Maybe we can play a board game when I get back.” Jayden handed Lila’s clenched hand over to Sage, who took it and tried to take a step further inside the house.

Lila tugged on her hand, keeping her from getting too far. “Can you pick up Kitty Blankie?”

“You haven’t had to use Kitty Blankie in a while.” Jayden ran her fingers through Lila’s hair. “But yeah, of course.”

“Hurry, Mom.”

“I will.” Jayden peered down at her daughter before meeting Sage’s eyes. They held eye contact for a beat before she glanced at Marshal only to land back on Sage again.

“We’ll watch her. Go grab what you need.” Sage indicated with her head.

Jayden turned slowly before walking towards the guest house while Sage followed Andrea, noticing for the first time her typically put-together hair, clothes, and general attitude were coming apart at the seams. Guilt churned Sage’s stomach and she wasn’t even sure why.

“I lost my phone in the shuffle,” Sage said abruptly. “It fell out of my pocket, and Jayden and Lila are going to stay here tonight.” Sage glanced down. Lila hadn’t let go of her hand and had practically suctioned to her leg. She hadn’t wanted to say anything that would be triggering.

“Oh good. I would hate for everyone to be split up right now and much prefer everyone here.” Marshal ran his hands through his hair, appearing unsure what to do with them. “I’ll ask Ivan to get you a new phone. Did you have a case that held your credit cards? License?” Marshal seemed to want a project which was fine by her.

“Oh wow, I completely forgot I had all of those in the wallet case on my phone. I drove without my license.” Sage patted her pockets, still feeling nothing.

“It’s okay. I’ll take care of it.” Marshal glanced between Sage and Lila. “I’m so glad you are all okay. I’ll go see if Ivan can get started on those things.” He stepped out of the room to make the call.

“I’ll make some tea for everyone. Are you hungry?” Andrea asked Lila and Sage.

“Tea sounds good. Thank you. I’m going to get Lila settled on the couch,” Sage said, walking towards the living room.

Bone-deep tiredness fell over Sage. The adrenaline had worn off, and everything felt too loud, bright, and aggressive. Even concern from people she liked was a bit much. She wanted to wrap Lila up in a blanket of comfort and hope that she’d be able to heal after an incident like that.

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Jayden had been standing back at the guest house for—well, she didn’t even know how long. Her eyes were open, but she wouldn’t have been able to describe anything if someone asked. She’d tried to hold it together in front of Lila, but her body was crashing.

The day’s events were pressing against her as she tried not to break down. She wasn’t sure there would be signs of stopping once she started. After losing Sage to the crowd, she’d covered Lila and ran as fast as possible to the car. Part of her felt crushing guilt for not staying to try to find Sage, but she had her daughter’s safety to worry about and hoped Sage would meet her there—and that she would have done the same thing.

Pulling out her phone, she dialed Lennox. She deserved to know, especially since Lila was returning to Alaska in a few weeks.

“Hey, Jay, I’m about to go for a run. Can this wait?” Something on Lennox’s side of the call crashed to the ground.

Jayden steeled herself for the conversation. “Actually, I really need to talk.” Her voice cracked at the end as she tried to cover up a sob.

“Shit, Jay. Are you okay? Is Lila? What’s going on?” It sounded like Lennox sat on her couch. The cushion squeaked under her weight. “Was there a reaction with Lila’s meds for Bell’s Palsy? Come on, Jayden, what’s going on?”

Trying to calm herself, she relayed the story. Lennox gasped at times, and in a few parts, she could tell Lennox was trying to keep in her own emotions. They had known each other too long for Jayden not to know when she was holding back tears.

“I can be down there on the next flight, Jayden. You shouldn’t be alone, and Lila—God, Lila. We need to get her into therapy.” At this point, Jayden could hear Lennox’s wooden floor creak with her pacing, which was something she did when she was nervous or had to think.

“No, I’m okay. Lila wanted to stay at the big house tonight, and you’ll see her in a few weeks. We’ll be okay. Sage has been helpful. I love that you offered, though.” Jayden leaned her head against the wall, letting the structure hold most of her weight.

“Are you sure?” Lennox’s voice was almost a whisper as she asked again.

“I love you, Len, but I don’t think it’s necessary. I should go, though. Thanks for talking with me and have a good run.” Jayden pushed herself off the wall and started looking for Tuna.

“If you or Lila need anything, just tell me. I’ll be on the next plane.”

“I know you would. Bye, Len.” Jayden hung up, feeling moderately better for getting to talk with her best friend. At least the panicky feeling of her chest caving in had dissipated.

“Now, where is that cat?” she asked the empty room.

Laughter met her in a wave when Jayden walked into the house a while later with a squirming kitten in her arm wrapped in Lila’s baby blanket, Kitty Blankie. Tuna meowed in her arms, trying to get to Lila when he heard her giggle. She stopped by the kitchen to drop off a backpack and computer before heading to the living room.

“Hey, Cricket, look who I found trying to *catapult* his way here.” She held Tuna in the air like Simba.

“Mom!” Lila launched herself at Jayden, who caught her but quickly lost balance and fell to the floor. Tuna landed on his feet and promptly started to lick his sides while the blanket fluttered to the floor. “Sage showed me how to have a dance party and said that if you were okay with it, we could order pizza. Mod has a good vegan option for her. Can we?” Lila climbed down and grabbed her comfort blanket, bringing it close to her chest.

“That’s okay with me.” Jayden turned to Sage. “So you’re having a dance party?” It wasn’t the question she wanted to ask. She wanted to know how her daughter was doing but didn’t want to ask with Lila looking between them.

“Yes. Lila knows all the hip moves. I might have to put tiger balm on my aching back after our session.” Sage bent over, making Lila giggle.

“And you,”—she poked Lila’s tummy—“I think you should get in the shower. Clean off the day if you will.”

“Can you stay in the bathroom with me? I know I’m big enough, but I…” Lila trailed off, her eyes unfocused.

Jayden froze, unsure what the best option was. Did she let Lila have her way today, or allow for a setback knowing all that she went through, then try to get everything back to normal as soon as possible? Was it coddling if she stayed near, or did Lila need to learn how to cope? Would these decisions in the next few days provide lasting impressions, either negative or positive, for her child?

A decision tornado flew around in her mind as she tried to process what would be best. “How about we compromise a little? I know your mama wants to hear from you, so why don’t you call her while you’re in the shower? That way you can catch up, you won’t be alone, and you also won’t miss anything tonight.” Jayden smiled, handing Lila her phone.

Lila tried chewing on her bottom lip, but with one side paralyzed, she gave up and instead pet Tuna while looking at the far wall.

“That works. Thanks, Mom,” Lila finally answered, grabbing the device. “Did you tell her what happened?” she asked, hovering around their little group.

“Yes, she knows.” Jayden stood and started walking to the kitchen where she had left her computer and Lila’s change of clothes.

Lila became her shadow as she walked a step behind Jayden. Sage created the caboose of their emotionally vulnerable train as they all walked in a line.

“Here you go.” Jayden handed Lila her backpack. “Do you want to dial, or do you want me to?” Jayden indicated with her head towards the phone clutched in Lila’s hand.

“I’ll do it.” Lila navigated to her favorites and hovered over Lennox’s name.

“You’ve stayed here before. Do you remember where everything is?” Sage asked, pulling her laptop open and working her way to the pizza website.

“I remember.” Lila stayed, not moving upstairs. “Can I bring Tuna with me?”

Jayden winced, thinking the poor cat wouldn’t want to be trapped in a small, hot room, but ultimately deciding the cat wouldn’t mind it too much and would probably prefer to be near his favorite human.

“I think that’s fine. All right, go ahead, kiddo. The faster you get in, the faster you can come down here for pizza and a movie.”

That got her feet moving. Jayden watched her daughter take tentative steps away from them for the first time since the incident. Lila looked back four times; each time was another tear in Jayden’s heart.

She flinched when Sage put a hand on her shoulder, but once it was there, she was glad for its comfort.

“She’s so strong.” Sage broke the silence with the only declaration that would shake Jayden from her trance.



“I agree. Okay, I need a distraction from running back to her and wrapping her in bubble wrap or something. Can I show you part of the script? I know we won’t be able to get much done right now, but it would be helpful to get out of this loop I’m in with it,” Jayden asked, trying not to lean closer into Sage.

“Let me order the pizza really quick, then since we don’t have much time right now before Lila’s out of the shower, how about you tell me what the script is about, and sometime this week we can go over it together?”

Jayden gave her and Lila’s normal pizza order while trying to gather her thoughts on how to communicate what she wanted to accomplish with the script. After Sage put in their order, Jayden took a breath and delved in from the beginning of her story. Sage’s eyes lit up a few times, and for the most part, she stayed silent, asking questions only when necessary.

When Jayden finished, she tried not to fidget, waiting for Sage’s thoughts.

“Well, damn. I’ll want to steal the lead if the script is half as good as that story. It sounds amazing.” Sage put her hand on Jayden’s arm.

“I’m basing the play off of a true story I heard about the characters. You would make a good Octavia/Felix.” Jayden smiled, feeling warm at Sage’s praise.

“She would be fun to play, but the real emotion is from Helvia. Hmm. So many options. I can’t wait to read more about it.”

They held eye contact. Jayden tried to decipher Sage’s look but couldn’t—or maybe she didn’t want to project her yearning. Holding back her emotions was becoming increasingly difficult.

“Everything is taken care of with your phone and cards. The police have it, and it’s waiting for you tomorrow at the station.” Marshal’s voice got closer, and Jayden felt the loss of Sage’s hand.

“Mama’s got to pack for Juneau, so she had to go.” Lila, freshly showered and in her pajamas, came bounding back with Tuna in her arms.

“All right, the pizza is on the way, Lila gets to pick the movie, and I’ll go grab more pillows and blankets for the couch.” Sage clapped her hands together.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, which was precisely what they needed. All of them stayed close; even Marshal seemed to need reassurance that everyone was okay. Jayden woke up the following morning with a blanket around her shoulders. Lila had fallen asleep on her leg, and Sage was sleeping in the crook of her arm.

# Chapter Fourteen

## *Side Chatter*

Sage's nose carried her to the kitchen where Marshal had started the preparation for Thanksgiving. Since their bags had been crushed during the chaos at Pike Place, Marshal had things delivered from a smaller farmers market.

"Are you ready for the festivities?" Marshal asked when she walked in to grab some coffee.

"I think so. How many people are coming again?" All Sage wanted to do was stay in her pajamas and read scripts or watch old movies. She hadn't slept well since Jayden had insisted on staying at her house. The only peaceful time she'd had was when they were all in the living room. Lately her sleep was fraught with nightmares, as evidenced by dark circles lined under her eyes.

"My staff and their partners, Helen, probably Patricia, although I know you don't care for her, and hopefully Jayden and Lila, but I'm not sure if they will. Lila's still pretty skittish about crowds. Jayden found that out the hard way when she took her to the park yesterday. Lila wouldn't leave Jayden's side and started hyperventilating when someone got too close." Marshal handed her the potatoes he had just washed.

"It was terrifying. I can't believe eleven people are dead, just like that." She'd heard the number on the news. Another senseless act. Anyone in their group could have easily been one of them, and that thought haunted her.

"Will you be okay with the crowd?" Marshal asked, cutting veggies for a few lasagnas they were making.

"I think so. Honestly, I don't know, but I want to try. The longer I wait the harder it will become, but I hope I'll be okay with the crowd. It's most of my job right now as your fiancée," Sage added, playfully poking him with her elbow.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. Sage, I’m going to ask again, are you sure you want to go through with this?”

Marshal’s kind eyes searched hers and understanding shone through as her silence spoke volumes. He had asked her that before, but this was the first time she wasn’t sure of her answer. She’d started this thing with him while still grieving for her spouse and had been positive she’d never find someone again.

“Can’t we tell Jayden? I mean, you two are so close, and it just feels wrong keeping this from her now that we’re friends,” Sage said. At first, she had understood why he didn’t want people to know, but now it almost seemed wrong keeping everything from Jayden. Sage ached to let everything out, but she also didn’t feel comfortable telling Marshal’s secret. Everything was tied together and Sage couldn’t find her way out of the mess.

“I know, and I promise we will, but I can’t even wrap my head around it yet. It’s something I have to mentally prepare for and with the campaign, I just don’t have the capacity to think about that conversation. I promise we will, just not now.” Marshal placed a hand on her arm. Sage leaned into a hug, feeling better that they were going to at least talk more. The doorbell rang, and Sage heard Andrea’s steps moving toward the front door.

“I’m sorry. I get that it could be a hard conversation. Especially since I’m one of the few people that know.” Sage leaned her head on his arm, enjoying his embrace. A smile found her face when he kissed the top of her head. Marshal wasn’t affectionate, which was part of why it worked for them. But sometimes, it was nice to have physical touch.

“Hi, I thought I’d bring Lila now in case we need to leave early.” Sage lifted her head from Marshal’s arm and watched as Jayden turned away from them when she entered the kitchen. “Oh, sorry, should we come back?”

The tentative question from Jayden caused Marshal to look at Sage in a way that screamed, ‘translate, please.’ Leaning in,

she whispered, “She thinks we are about to hook up.” Sage laughed when Marshal shook his head.

“No, no, stay. Lila, do you want to cut up some apples for the pie? Jayden, I’m sure Sage can give you a task. I’ll work on the salmon and oysters when the time is closer.”

“Nothing should take that long. We just need to get the potatoes boiled and the lasagna noodles cooked.”

“I don’t want meat in mine.” Lila looked at the ground beef Marshal had just set on the table.

“We’re making two. Mine will be smaller but better and there will be enough for you to have some.” Sage winked at Lila, whose shoulders relaxed.

“How are you all doing?” Marshal asked as he seasoned the meat.

“I keep having nightmares. I don’t remember them, but my mom says I scream in my sleep. I’m excited to go to Alaska soon, but I hope my mom is okay. She seems sad. I like it in Washington and hope we can stay. Someone keeps calling Mom, but she doesn’t answer.”

The group looked to Jayden, who was glaring at her daughter. “Do you want to watch a movie? I think there are probably enough hands in the kitchen right now.”

Lila hopped off her stool, bounding out of the kitchen like she hadn’t just dropped an emotional mess for Jayden to clean up.

“Who’s been calling you?” Marshal got straight to the point once Lila left.

Jayden picked at an apple peel and seemed to try to gather her thoughts before answering. “I think Brandi saw the news of the shooting and somehow found out we were there. Or she just assumes. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t want anything, but she’s always been a bit of an attention seeker. She probably thinks there’s a way for her to weasel her way into this for publicity.”

Sage's heart ached at the pain in Jayden's voice. She knew Jayden didn't want anything to do with Brandi, but she also knew people could be pushy. "Are you going to talk to her?" Sage hated asking the question, but she had to know.

"Not right now. I have nothing to say to her. I just wish she'd stop calling."

As if they had planned the whole thing, Jayden's phone rang. Pulling it out of her pocket, Jayden's shoulders tensed and Sage immediately knew who it was. When Jayden put the phone on the counter, they all leaned forward to watch the device.

In a burst of adrenaline caused by the pain on Jayden's face, Sage leaned forward and pressed the answer button.

"Your ears must be burning." Sage's voice could freeze water. She'd pulled it from a boss she played on the stage once. It was the most liberating performance of her life, playing the frigid ice queen, and reprising the role was giving her a rush of power.

"W-what? Who is this?" Brandi said, her voice changing from confused to angry.

"Me? I'm just Jayden's girlfriend, and I don't appreciate seeing your name on her phone when she's going down on me." It took all the energy from acting classes not to break.

Sage watched as her words caused the twins to both choke on water. On the line Brandi's spitfire seemed to be dimming, which was precisely what Sage had wanted, being so crass.

"Oh, she's seeing someone. Can you put her on the phone? I just want to talk to her."

"The thing is, though, her mouth is a little busy at the moment and she doesn't want to talk to you." Sage held her breath, afraid to look over at either twin, unsure what would be on their faces. Instead, she dug deeper into the role.

"I wanted to make sure she was okay. She's okay, right?" Brandi's tone tried to convey concern, but she was a trained actor, and Sage could see right through the fake performance.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m taking excellent care of her.” She dipped her voice at the end and tried not to look at Marshal. “Don’t call again.” She hung up, letting out a whoosh of breath. “I hope that was okay.” Sage lifted her hand to her cheek, feeling the flush of excitement on her skin.

“I—um, no, it was fine. Thank you.” Jayden’s eyes twinkled.

“That sure was insightful.” Marshal looked from Jayden to Sage, seeming like he was trying to piece something together.

“It was to help out a friend. Nothing to it at all.” Sage tried to downplay the conversation, but her pulse was pounding. She felt the pull of defending her girlfriend for a second, but that wasn’t what was happening.

Needing a moment, Sage excused herself and stepped outside. A blast of wind hit her face, cooling off her overheated cheeks. Standing in the driveway with her hands on her hips, she held an internal debate on whether she should grab a hat. She was about to turn when a tug at her arm kept her rooted.

“Sage, can I ask you something?” Lila shivered in front of her.

Reaching down to grab a basketball at her feet, Sage bounced it to Lila, hoping the movement would keep them warm. “You can ask me anything.” She watched as Lila tried to shoot. The ball slammed into the rim with a clunk and bounced away, leaving Sage to chase it.

“Do you like my mom? Sometimes I wish you were dating her instead of my uncle. I guess it’s okay because you’ll still be in the family, but I think my mom is happy when you’re around.”

Why did she think Lila wouldn’t pick up on whatever was happening with her and Jayden? Sage wondered when the blunt outburst of questions would dissipate. In some ways it was refreshing having someone say what they meant. Chasing another rogue ball, Sage used the time to gather her thoughts.

“Bug, these are questions I can’t really answer. I love that I’ll be in your family when—if I marry Marshal.” Everything was so gray, and pain spread in her heart.

“But Mom’s eyes light up with happiness when she sees you. She was so sad in California. When she doesn’t think I’m looking, she’s looking in your direction. So, that means she likes you, but you like Uncle Marshal?”

Oof, these questions were not something she could deal with right now. “I’m not sure these are questions I can answer. Maybe your mom can help with some of them?”

Sage threw the ball, which bounced on the rim a few times before going into the net. If she had looked a little to her left, she would have seen Jayden in the shadows.

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Jayden watched Sage chase down another basketball as she and Lila moved to safer topics. The answer she’d given wasn’t one Jayden wanted to hear, but maybe it was the one she needed to hear. Sage was marrying Marshal. She was straight, even if she looked at Jayden like she could eat her up. Lila was getting too attached, and Jayden needed to look for a new place to try to get some space. Those were the facts.

Trying to put on a face that wasn’t somewhat crushed, she walked from her hiding place into the light. Lila smiled and waved when she saw her.

“Mom, can you show me your form?” Lila zipped the ball over to Jayden, who bounced it a few times.

“Let’s see, this one?” She sent the jump shot toward the basket, giving a fist bump to her daughter when it went in.

“It’s all in the legs.” Jayden helped Lila bend and adjusted her arms. Lila sent the ball. They watched it fly before landing a few inches short of the rim. “See, your strength is there. Now guide the ball with your hands where you want it to go. Perfect.”



It was wobbly but still went in. Lila jumped up and down. “Mom, you should coach. Mama coaches softball, and you can teach basketball.”

The whole time Jayden was trying to ignore the pull of Sage, but it became impossible when she walked up.

“You would be a good coach,” Sage said as she scanned Jayden’s face. “Are you okay?”

She had never been a good actor. Every emotion usually played on her face, which was why she’d stuck with writing, but she tried to force a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Turning to Lila, Jayden asked, “Are you okay with the crowd today? There will be a few people at the house, and if you’re not comfortable with everyone, we can grab some food and go back to Tuna.”

Lila’s body seemed to shrink as she pressed herself to Sage. “How many people will be here?”

Jayden finally met Sage’s eyes as she looked intently between them. “I think about twenty to twenty-five. Remember when we had the barbecue outside a few months ago? It will be the same people plus a few more. Unfortunately, this dinner is more formal, and I’ll have to put on my face for it.”

Lila had blanched at the number but settled when she heard it would mostly be people she knew. “What do you mean to put on your face? Is that not your face?”

Jayden snorted but caught herself last minute and turned it into a cough knowing how much her kid hated thinking people were laughing at her. The problem was she was unintentionally funny, which made laughter harder to hold in.

“She means makeup,” Jayden helped clarify once she regained control of her emotions.

“Oh, okay. I think it will be okay to stay, but if I get overwhelmed can we go?”

“Of course. If you want, we can have a codeword. Like, ‘Time to feed Tuna.’ And I’ll know you’re ready to leave.” Jayden held out her hand to start walking to the house.

“Why can’t I just say I want to go home?” Lila asked, which caused Sage to catch herself in a snort this time.

“I mean, yeah, that works too. I thought it would be cool to have something just for us. A secret,” Jayden stage whispered to her daughter, who laughed at her antics but still looked puzzled.

“Mom, you said secrets are bad.” Lila pulled up short.

Jayden had been focused on walking the steps to the front door but stopped to look back when her daughter put her foot down. In doing so, she caught sight of Sage, who looked stricken. She quickly wiped it away, but for a split second, her face told no lies. The look caused Jayden’s heart to race, unsure if she wanted to uncover what secrets Sage was carrying or keep them under wraps.

“I did, but this isn’t a secret. This code would be more of a... Well, never mind. If you get overwhelmed, you can tell me you want to go home.” Jayden was relatively sure her daughter would make a fine attorney someday if she wanted.

“Okay. Do you think we could play Pictionary?” Lila asked next, causing Jayden to groan. Sage’s burst of laughter followed them inside.

Thanksgiving was a success. Lila stayed close to the few people she knew best. The only drawback was when Ivan dropped a plate that crashed to the floor. The noise had Lila curled in a ball on the couch for a good twenty minutes, but between Sage and Jayden, they were able to coax her back to the party.

Jayden turned the corner to a private conversation between Sage and someone whose name was escaping her. *Harper–Gold–no, Grace!* That was it.

“Chris would have loved this.” Grace said, sipping from a mimosa flute.

“Right? She would have had us all cracking up with her stories,” Marshal said, walking up to the duo. Jayden was

stuck. She either needed to announce herself now or try to sneak away.

Did Jayden catch that correctly? She? The small word held such a significant meaning. Jayden had assumed Sage's spouse was a man. She stumbled, causing the group to turn on her very smooth arrival.

"Are you okay?" Marshal shuffled over to lean near Jayden.

"Gotta watch out for that invisible step," Jayden joked, looking back at the nonexistent obstacle.

"Jayden, have you met my friend Grace? We go way back." Sage motioned between them but wouldn't make eye contact. Questions flew through her head, but it wasn't the right time to bombard the group.

"Yes, I'm Jayden, hi. Marshal's twin." If she could make a face-palm look fabulous, she would have tried at that moment, but instead, she stood there awkwardly, unsure what to do with her hands.

"You do look a lot alike, although the glasses set you apart." Grace glanced between them, probably noting the forty other similarities between her and Marshal.

That didn't matter! She wanted to scream, "Excuse me, can we get back to the fact Sage might have been married to a woman?" Would that change things? Jayden wasn't sure, but it was throwing her for a loop.

"I had corrective surgery, but this one here has always been afraid of lasers." Marshal bumped her elbow.

"To be fair, I don't mind lasers when they are used to entertain cats, but I draw the line for when they are gouging out layers of my eyeball." Jayden felt herself shudder at the thought.

She wasn't sure how to bring up Chris again, but when Grace went on, she had to fist her nails into her palms to keep from showing how much she wanted to know more.

Conversation continued to flow around her, but Jayden wouldn't have been able to tell anyone what was talked about. She was trying to work out whether the knowledge of Sage possibly having had a relationship with a woman was good or more damaging because all that meant was she had found the love of her life and healed from the loss to find someone else. Her twin of all people. She and Sage had a connection, of that Jayden was sure, but that's all it could be. Everything pointed to her brother having what she wanted, and she wasn't about to stand in the way of his happiness.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Jayden stumbled back to the party to find Lila and see if she was ready to leave. Unfortunately, it was just as Ivan pulled out the Pictionary box and started gathering people around. Not sure if she could take more blows, Jayden retreated to the relative quiet of the kitchen, wanting Lila to laugh and have fun but needing a break from everyone.

"Aren't you going to play?" A voice descended on her from the side.

"Not if they don't need me." Jayden's response was calm as she leaned against the kitchen counter, trying to untangle the nest of her thoughts.

"You're Marshal's sister, aren't you?" the stranger asked, though clearly she already knew.

"Since birth, yes," Jayden responded with a smile, not wanting to hurt Marshal's campaign if she was important.

"Were you two ever competitive?" The question came off laid back; however, the intense look in the stranger's eyes made her swallow her snarky response.

"No more than most siblings." Jayden tried to maintain her smile, but the woman's eyes narrowed, which stole the movement straight from her mouth.

"So, you've never had to deal with overlap? Going for the same woman, for instance?"

Warning tingles ran rampant up her arms. Her tone indicated there was something more to the questions, but she

wasn't sure where she was going with it. "No." She kept it at that. "I'm not sure we've met. I'm Jayden. You seem to know me, but what was your name again?" She held out her hand.

Whatever the woman was trying for missed its mark since she just sneered at her hand and introduced herself as Patricia.

"Mom, we need you on the team. Come on." Lila pulled her to safety, but the feeling of filth lingered.

# Chapter Fifteen

## *Sick Bay*

Sage woke with a pounding headache, and every time she swallowed it felt as if shards of glass were scratching down her throat. She was unsure if she'd gotten sick from something at Pike Place, or someone from Thanksgiving, but either way she cursed whoever had passed on their sickness. Groaning, she pulled the blanket over her head, trying to ward off the shivers that wracked her body.

A knock sounded at her bedroom door and before she could respond, the door was opening. "Sage, do you have a moment? Oh, you're still in bed. Sorry." Marshal turned around quickly as if terrified she was indecent.

"You can come in. I'm just feeling under the weather." Sage gathered all her strength to sit up against the headboard. She tried to ignore the steady beat behind her eyes as she pondered what Marshal's look meant.

"Umm, okay." Marshal turned back, his eyes widening at her disheveled state. Besides the first few months after Chris had died, Marshal had only ever seen her put together. "You don't look so good." He pulled his shirt over his mouth and stepped closer to feel her forehead. "Hmm, yeah, you are a little warm." His words were muffled in the fabric.

"Did you need something? I was going to see if we had any cold medicine and try to sleep whatever this thing is off," Sage said before shivering.

"Yeah, I wanted to see if you saw Patricia's article about you and my sister. It's nothing that my team can't handle, but I wanted you to be aware of it."

"What about us? What's the article saying?" Sage's mouth filled with a metallic taste and her stomach rolled. "Hold on." Sage stumbled from the bed, hitting her knee on the corner of her bedside table before limping to her ensuite. She just

reached the toilet before spewing yesterday's beautiful Thanksgiving meal.

"I—umm, the article is in the newspaper on your bed. I have to get to work. Rest up and talk soon."

Sage barely heard what Marshal said through the sounds of her sickness echoing in the bathroom and when she returned, he'd already retreated from the bedroom. Grabbing the paper, then hauling herself downstairs, she plopped on the couch. Ever since Sage was little, she had always craved sleeping on the sofa when she was sick. Her eyes felt like sandpaper as she tried to read the article. After reading the same sentence three times she folded it back up and placed it behind her on the side table before falling back asleep.

Light music was playing from somewhere and a comforting smell of cooked onions wafted from the kitchen. Sage tried to sit up, but something was pressing into her stomach. Disoriented, she tried to figure out why she was stuck on the couch. Something wet fell from her head and landed on her chest.

"Oh, you're up. Here, let me get you a fresh one." Jayden's voice got quieter as she walked away just as Sage figured out she had talked at all.

Confused at what the 'one' was in the sentence, she tried again to sit up but looking down she found a foot weighing her down and cutting into her stomach.

Following the foot, Sage's eyes finally landed on Lila, who was sprawled on the other end of the couch. Jayden picked up the wet washcloth that was lying on her chest before replacing it with a fresh one on her forehead. The cool fabric helped immediately and cleared some of the confusion.

"I hope you don't mind. Marshal came over saying you were under the weather just as I was cleaning Lila's sickness from the floor. It appears you two have the same thing, and I thought it would be easier to help you both if you're in the same area. It looks like she migrated. Sorry about that."

Jayden gently scooped up Lila and scooted her to the other side of the couch, where her legs spread out on the extension of the sofa. “Is this okay, or would you rather be alone? Andrea watched you both while I ran to get some supplies. So you should be fully stocked. I can leave you be if that’s what you prefer. I just thought I could help both of you simultaneously.”

If Sage were feeling better, she would have laughed. Instead, she said, “I see now where Lila gets her babbling nature.”

Jayden looked away, a blush creeping up her neck. “Do you want me to go?”

“No, Lila and I are in this together. You can’t take away my emotional support person while we battle sickness.”

“That’s not a thing,” Jayden said teasingly.

“It is now. What smells so good?” Sage felt her head tip towards the kitchen as she tried to figure out why the scent was so familiar.

“It’s vegan corn chowder. I remember you saying you crave it when you aren’t feeling well. I’m not sure if your stomach can handle it, but I thought I’d freeze it for when you’re feeling a little better.”

The thoughtfulness created a flutter in her heart.

“Mom?” Lila’s voice croaked.

“Yes, Cricket? Do you need anything? A pot is by your side if you can’t get to the bathroom.”

“Can I have a ginger ale? And can we watch cartoons?”

“Of course. Let me get you some crackers too, see if you can keep those down.”

“My throat hurts.” Lila closed her eyes, frowning.

Sage could relate. She’d rather spit than try and get something down, but a refreshing drink sounded good.

“I can make some tea that’s supposed to help with your throat. Hold on, let me get a few things. Sage, do you mind



watching a Disney movie?”

Sage craned her neck to look for the remote, locating it on the coffee table that felt miles away. Jayden picked up the remote and handed it to Sage who took it with a grateful smile. “Not at all. I haven’t watched some of the newest stuff. What’s your favorite, Lila?”

“I like *Moana*, *Brave*, and *Tangled*.” The words took out what little energy Lila had, and she slumped back against the cushions and closed her eyes.

Not having seen any of those titles, she navigated to the streaming service and looked through the films. *Brave* showed up first with an image of a girl holding a bow and arrow, which Sage thought was awesome, so she selected that and waited for Jayden to return. She was hoping she’d stay with them.

Jayden’s slippers slid across the wooden floor as she slowly maneuvered into the room. “Here you go.” Jayden placed a tray filled with beverages, crackers, and meds on the coffee table. “Here are some things that should help with nausea.” Jayden handed a can of ginger ale to Lila along with chewable baby aspirin to help with her fever. She hovered since Lila was complaining of the taste and seemed to want to make sure she’d swallowed it. “Now you.” Jayden nudged a can to Sage, who tentatively took a sip.

The feeling of glass cutting at her throat gave way to relief at having bubbles in her stomach. “Thank you,” Sage managed.

“Sure,” Jayden said, turning her head away from Sage. Before Sage could ask what caused the sudden movement, Jayden continued. “What did you pick?”

“It looks like she picked *Brave*,” Lila mumbled, looking at the beginning credits as she took another drink of her soda.

“Ah, this one always makes me sad.” Jayden hadn’t sat down and was staring at the screen, lost in thought.

“Are you going to watch with us?” Sage tried to sit up to make room but stopped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Stay and get comfortable. I’ll be over there if you need anything, and neither of you should fight sleep if it comes. You need your rest.” Jayden felt the cloths that lay across their foreheads, but didn’t move them before fading from Sage’s vision. She could hear rustling from the other couch as Jayden presumably tried to get comfortable.

Sage tried not to wonder why she was feeling the loss so acutely but hadn’t come to any conclusion before sleep pulled her under about halfway through the movie.

As Sage gradually swam to wakefulness, a new movie played in the background, but she was focused on the voices behind her.

“No, Marshal, you know I would never do that, don’t you? How dare you even ask?” Jayden’s angry whisper came through loud and clear.

“I’m not. That’s not what I’m saying, Jayden. My team needs to know what to say. The article is pretty persuasive, you have to admit, and the photos... Jayden, come on, even you have to see why I’m asking.” There was a crinkle of paper after Marshal’s words, but Sage couldn’t picture what he was doing.

“I know. I promise you we’re just friends. She’s a great person, and you’re lucky. You were the one who wanted us to get along. We’re friends, only friends. I would never act on any feelings I might have.” Jayden was rambling again, but the context didn’t make sense.

“I trust you, Jayden. It’s been great having you and Lila back. I just had to ask. Ivan wants to put something out and possibly set a date for the wedding.”

Sage couldn’t tell if the nausea that bubbled up was from the words or being sick. The comments made what they were doing sound real, and it wasn’t, was it? She wished her body wasn’t so weak, or she would haul herself up and try to talk about what was happening. Instead, she found sleep pulling her under again.

“I really don’t want to get sick. With the debates and everything coming, I can’t afford it. Maybe we can move them to some of the rooms upstairs?” Sage heard Marshal say as she woke from another nap.

Lila was still cuddled on the couch, eyes glazed over as a movie played softly on the television.

“Or maybe the guest house, but that might not help the rumors.” Sage could practically see Jayden’s eye roll at her brother but wasn’t sure what she meant by rumors, or moving to the guest house for that matter. Wasn’t that where Jayden lived already? Her head hurt too much to think more about it. Closing her eyes she let the sounds of Jayden’s soothing tones lull her back to sleep.

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Jayden wiped Sage’s sweaty brow, looking over to Marshal, who was organizing his homemade hazmat suit in the dining area. They’d discussed options, and ultimately, Jayden thought it would be easier to help take care of everyone if the sick bay was moved to her place—even though Marshal’s house had more than enough room to accommodate everyone. Meanwhile, Marshal was going a little overboard in his sickness prevention. Case in point, he was currently using hand sanitizer on his gloved hands.

Secretly Jayden had to agree Sage and Lila both looked miserable and having them in the smaller house would be easier. Ultimately, she wanted to help them. The rumors were easier to deal with than whatever sickness Sage and Lila had.

“I’ll get Lila. Meet you at the house.” Marshal’s voice was muffled behind his mask as he adjusted his goggles to ensure they were airtight. His breath fogged up his eye protection, but there wasn’t much they could do now. He took tentative steps through the quarantine area until he reached Lila. Sliding his hand under Lila’s legs he lifted her from the couch. Jayden

eyed Sage, wondering if she could do that with her. Probably best not to try, lest she drop her on the ground.

“Come on, sleepy head.” Jayden gently shook Sage’s shoulder. Dim eyes peeked up at Jayden as she blinked into consciousness. Finally, the confusion cleared and she tried to sit up. Jayden reached under her arm and tried to leverage to help her stand, but her grip slipped, causing Sage to fall back against the couch with a thud.

“Ow, what are you doing?” Sage’s voice may have been scratchy from coughing, but it still held venom.

“Sorry, I was trying to help you up. We’re going to have everyone who is sick back at the guest house.” Jayden held out her hand, waiting while Sage processed what she’d said.

“I don’t want to move.” Sage snuggled back into the couch and pulled the blanket over her head.

Jayden tried to decide where to go from there. She stared at the bundle of blankets on the couch, feeling like she might have missed something. “Come on, Sage, we can treat it like a slumber party. Remember when you crashed Margaret?” She tugged at the blanket only to see Sage’s eyes open wide.

“You remember I called her Margaret?” The awe in Sage’s voice broke through, almost making Jayden blush.

“Of course I remember her. She’s almost fi—” Jayden stopped mid-sentence; if she’d gone on, she’d have ruined Sage’s Christmas present. “Family,” she finished instead.

Sage’s head turned but she didn’t comment as she slowly blinked.

“Come on, Sage, let’s get you settled, then you can sleep as long as you want.” Jayden reached her hand under Sage’s head, attempting to lift her.

In a surprising show of strength, Sage wrapped her hands around Jayden’s neck and attempted to press her lips against Jayden’s cheek. Jayden froze, wondering where the surge of affection came from. Sage’s lips were warm from fever and didn’t linger before she leaned back but kept her arms wrapped

around Jayden's neck. It was both everything she'd wanted for weeks—months if she was being honest—and all wrong.

“What's taking you so long?” Marshal walked back into the room. Jayden peered over her shoulder, which dislodged Sage's arms from her neck.

Sage slumped back, her eyes sliding shut, leaving Jayden wondering if she hadn't known, or perhaps she'd mistaken Jayden for Marshal? It was possible, especially in her fevered mind. Jayden's head felt like soup in a microwave, her feelings overflowing in the bowl as she tried to figure out all her feelings.

“Need help?”

Jayden flinched, not realizing Marshal had silently worked his way to her side. She was draped over Sage, but there was now a little more space between them. Jayden touched her cheek, wondering if it was as bright as it felt. The area where Sage's lips had grazed felt like a beacon of guilt was burning directly on the spot. “Yeah, that would be great. Is Lila okay?” She wanted to change the subject quickly.

They worked in tandem to get Sage sat up, who somehow became a floppy mess. “I'm pretty sure Lila's already drooling.” Marshal's voice was muffled behind his mask.

“I'll come back and clean downstairs once I get them down for their seventeenth nap today.” Jayden had one side of Sage while Marshal had the other. Sage hung limp between them, only providing the barest of help with each step.

“Thank you, and thanks for taking them.” Marshal looked over Sage's head.

“It only makes sense. I can watch them easier, and you don't have to worry as much about your debate.” Jayden stuck her tongue out in jest, feeling better at having a moment with her brother. “How is the campaign going anyway?” They stepped outside, and a blast of frigid air ruffled her undercut. Jayden could feel Sage's shiver.

“I've always wanted to help people, but it's hard when they don't want to help themselves,” Marshal said as they

slowly made their way across the driveway. They had to maneuver around the hidden icy spots.

“What do you mean?” Jayden could see her breath, embarrassed at the extra puffs, and vowed to start working out after the holidays.

“For instance, I had a meet and greet a few days ago. My predecessor had campaigned for people in healthcare to get extra money. Everyone was for it until the fine print came out when it passed. Yes, the workers got a whopping \$600, but their spouses, children, friends, etc. who were working in the schools got the pink slip. I’m sick of platforms talking about one thing while completely ignoring what it would mean for other people. That’s why I try to be transparent, although that doesn’t always win me many brownie points.” Marshal struggled to open the door as he finished.

“I will never for the life of me understand why you went into politics, but 100% support your vision. I think we have all lost a little faith in the system. So, if you’re showing us the fine print, I don’t see how that’s bad. And hey—you have my vote.” Finally getting inside the guest house, they placed Sage on the sectional and pulled a blanket over her body.

“I should hope so.” Marshal laughed and turned towards the kitchen. “Do you have a beer in this place?” He opened the fridge and pulled out two drinks, handing one to Jayden. “How are things with everything?” Marshal’s eyes scanned between Sage and Jayden before he stepped outside and started taking off his impromptu hazmat suit.

Jayden followed, not sure if the look was subconscious or not. She leaned against the rail and shrugged. “Moving from California was easier on Lila than I expected. She’s made friends at her new school, and up until the shooting, she was well adjusted. Also, since Sage put Brandi in her place, she hasn’t bugged me, which is a bonus.” Jayden drank down a large swig of beer.

“I’m glad she’s settling in, but what about you? We haven’t talked much since the campaign announcement.”

Jayden tweaked the tab of her beer, trying to figure out how to answer that question. Who knew it would have been such a loaded question? “You know me, I’m basically a succulent.”

Marshal’s beer sprayed out of his nose. “That stings.” He pinched his fingers against the bridge. “You did not just compare yourself to a plant, did you?”

“It’s better than a cactus, which I’m pretty sure would have been the comparison when we first moved back, but now I’ve downgraded myself to a succulent.” Jayden smacked his shoulder. “It’s good to talk to you.”

“You’ve never been a cactus. I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.” Marshal provided his winning smile. “It’s good to catch up. I know I said it before, but I’m glad you’re both back.” Marshal’s phone rang. “Sorry, I’ve got to take this. It’s Ivan with some work-related emergency. Thanks for the beer.” Marshal waved as he walked down the steps towards his house with his phone to his ear.

Jayden stayed outside for a beat before turning back inside and taking stock of the kitchen, smiling at the fridge full of photos and artwork Lila had done since they got to Seattle. There was one of Lila, Sage, and her trying to take a selfie at the baseball game. Lila had said something funny, which caused a shared look between them. Looking at it with fresh eyes after the article, she wondered if something hadn’t been brewing for a while. Her face felt branded by Sage’s kiss, and it hadn’t even been real.

With Marshal gone, Jayden was left wondering why the tiny house filled with people felt lonely.

“Mom?” Lila called from the living room. “Where’s Tuna?” Her voice sounded small and halfway through her question, she started a coughing fit.

“He’s right here.” Jayden tried to chase him but only had a bruised shin to show for her efforts. The little turkey crawled under the table and swiped at her hands.

“Mom, please. I need Tuna.” Lila’s voice floated past the pressure in her ears as she bent down, trying to get to the cat.

“I’m going to be sick,” Sage declared, trying to get up to the bathroom.

Hearing Sage’s announcement, Jayden lifted her head from under the table and groaned when she heard the heave that led to the sound of splatter reverberating through the room. Jayden tried not to gag at the smell that filled the small area. Sage’s heaves set off Lila’s, and Jayden wondered if she could hide under the table with Tuna.



# Chapter Sixteen

## *Quarantine*

Something was brushing against Sage's head. Leaning into the touch, she tried to chase the movement, moaning at the cold compress on her forehead. The comfort retreated, leaving Sage shivering and feeling empty.

Dreams intersected with reality as Sage tried to fight more sleep. Light filtered behind her eyelids as she tried to block out the pain. Her joints still screamed in protest at any movement, but the soft music playing in the background was soothing, and the smell of cooked carrots and celery coming from the kitchen smelled delicious.

"Mom, can I have some more ginger ale?" Lila's gravelly voice came from somewhere by her feet. They'd both taken separate sections of the u-shaped couch.

"I'll get you one." Sage rolled over to squeeze Lila's foot on the way to the kitchen. Her wobbly legs made her feel like Bambi learning to walk.

"Yikes." Sage caught her reflection in the microwave. Her hand flew to her head to pat down the unruly strands. Suddenly self-conscious, she wasn't sure how long she'd been in and out, but her skin itched for a shower.

"Oh, you're up. Do you need anything? I'm making more soup. You might be due for some meds." Jayden's glasses fogged over when she leaned over the stove to check the soup.

"No, I'm fine, thank you. I needed to stretch my legs." Sage threw an arm over her chest, keeping it still with her other arm as she posed.

"That's your arm, not your leg, Sage," Jayden pointed out, gesturing with a cutting knife.

Sage tugged at her shirt, smirking at Jayden's quip. "Funny. Lila's asking for some ginger ale. Is it okay if I bring her some?"

"Sure, there's one on the counter. Lila doesn't like hers cold, but there are a few in the fridge as well if you want one." Jayden resumed chopping more vegetables.

"Thanks. Ugh, I need a shower. I think I'll try and battle the driveway. Hopefully being fresh and clean will help me feel a little better."

"Oh, uh, Andrea dropped off some clothes. You can shower here. That way, you don't have to deal with the dreaded driveway or go up stairs."

Jayden seemed to be putting on false cheer, but Sage's brain was too muddled to figure out why. "I think I can make it." Sage shrugged, grabbing Lila's soda. When she returned to the kitchen, her brows furrowed when Jayden blocked the door, keeping her from leaving.

"Marshal's pretty worried about you being contagious. He'd prefer you stay here until your symptoms subside." Jayden had the decency to look embarrassed.

Sage felt tension wrack up in her shoulders as she tried to hide her dismay. It wasn't as if she didn't like being with Jayden and Lila—she did, but there was something about using Jayden's shower that made her blush.

"Oh, umm. Okay. Do you have extra towels?"

Sage's heart clenched when Jayden cupped her chin to tip the spoon into her mouth for a taste of the soup. The near domesticity of the moment meant Sage needed to retreat. Her head was still fuzzy, and she didn't trust herself not to do something drastic, like kiss her.

"No, we only have paper towels to dry off. Don't worry, they are extra absorbent." Jayden winked. "There are a few supplies in the hall cabinet. Help yourself to anything you need."

With a quick thanks, Sage was behind the closed bathroom door in a flash. Well, not a flash; she had to stop halfway to

catch her breath and grab a towel. Slumping against the bathroom door, she tried to sort her mind, but all that came through was a jumbled mess of confusing thoughts and pain.

The handle started digging into her side. Sighing, she pushed herself upright before wobbling to the counter to dump the towel. It was there she got a good look at herself for the first time in a few days. Her blond hair was stringy, disheveled, and in need of a cut. Large rings hung under her glassy eyes, giving her a haunted look that she wasn't sure was entirely from being sick. Her eyes drifted from the mirror to the clawfoot tub beside her. In a rush to get in the bathroom, she'd missed the prominent feature of the room.

As she pictured herself sinking into the warm water, Sage couldn't suppress another groan which settled a debate she hadn't known she was even having: bath or shower. Bath won out when Sage found a half-filled bottle of bubble bath in the cabinet. A smile that felt foreign stretched across her face when she saw the packaging had a cat on the bottle.

After pouring a healthy dose, Sage undressed while waiting for the tub to fill. Stench clung to her old clothes and she was reasonably sure her hair held puke in the strands, although she couldn't find any on her first run-through.

When the tub filled, she sank into the depths, loving the silky feel on her sticky skin. Sage let her head rest on the back of the tub, slipping under the water a little. She let her mind relax and wander, sifting through her thoughts like a prospector looking for gold. Although in this case, it wasn't gold she was mining, but memories of her time with Jayden and Lila.

Everything was a blur and thinking intensified her headache. Trying to cut out her thoughts, she slammed her eyelids shut, hoping that would quiet her thoughts. When the water cooled, she let out a little before turning the faucet back on.

“Sage, you forgot your clothes. I'm leaving them on the count—” Jayden's sentence cut off as she let out a garbled

noise. She stood at the door with her eyes directed at the ceiling.

“Oh, whoops, I’ve still got a foggy brain and didn’t remember to grab them.” Sage sank further down in the tub and turned off the water. The foam had thinned out quite a bit, leaving a dusting of tiny bubbles clinging to her breasts. “Umm, you can put the clothes on the counter. I’ll be out in a second.” Sage wanted to laugh as Jayden fumbled towards the sink without looking down.

“I’ll start a load of laundry. I’m sure Lila could benefit from a bath soon.” Jayden still hadn’t removed her eyes from the ceiling, which Sage found especially charming.

Sage tugged at the curtain to partially hide her body. Feeling less exposed, she twisted to see Jayden a little better. “Thanks for everything you’ve done. I’m still not feeling great, but I appreciate you.”

“Oh, it’s no problem. Umm, I’ll see you out there.”

Sage watched Jayden’s retreating form. Shaking her head, she pulled the plug and tried to stand, waiting for the water to drain before starting the waterflow from the showerhead. She had just enough energy for a shower to wash her hair and rinse off the slime of the bubbles. A dizzy spell hit her as she was rinsing the conditioner from her hair, causing her to slip. With a yelp, she tried to get up but found herself hitting a wall of depleted energy and couldn’t get up.

A knock sounded with Jayden’s question following on its heels. “Sage, are you okay?”

“Jayden, I need help.” Those four words were hard to say, but people didn’t seem to ask for help when needed, and her pride had disappeared the first time she had to run to the bathroom with diarrhea while Jayden cleaned up her puke. That had been a humiliating day, so she might as well add to it.

“I’m coming in,” Jayden called, presumably from the open doorway. Sage was covered behind the shower curtain and couldn’t reach over the lip of the tub to pull it open. “Sage?” Jayden moved the curtain to peek inside. “Oh God, are you

okay?” Seeing her on the tub floor, Jayden ripped the curtain open and shut off the water in a seamless motion.

Twisting slightly to see Jayden better, Sage only saw her chin and a towel hanging from her fingertips. “I need some help getting up.” Putting her hand on the tub, she tried to lift herself before her arms gave out. The last of Sage’s dignity splayed at the bottom of the tub when she fell back on her butt.

Jayden squatted, lowering the towel over Sage’s body before edging her hands under her armpits. She lifted Sage up as if she weighed nothing and steadied her while she gathered her balance and stepped out of the tub.

“Okay, pull your leg up over here. Good, now the other. Great. Now can you hold onto the counter here while I help get you dressed?”

“I think I can, but not sure for how long.” She gripped the cold tile and waited as Jayden sorted through the pile to grab her undergarments.

Watching Jayden handle her underwear while she was practically delirious was a special kind of hell because Sage knew this could have been fun. Instead, she was standing there swaying like a sapling in the wind. The bug that was raging through her body ruined the moment.

After getting a handle on what direction the underwear went, Jayden leaned forward, her head nearly nuzzling Sage’s stomach. “Feel free to use my shoulder if you need a better balance. Lift this leg up.” Sage felt a tap on her calf, which she promptly raised. “Good, now this one.” Jayden shifted her weight in order to adjust to Sage’s needs.

Jayden’s fingertips traced a path on Sage’s outer thighs. As she maneuvered the underwear up, a shiver echoed along the trail. It was good that she needed to hang on to the counter, or she’d be half-tempted to run her fingers through Jayden’s hair. For her part, Jayden appeared to be trying hard to keep her head respectfully turned, but the blush creeping up her cheeks told Sage she wasn’t as unaffected as she pretended.

“Can you take it from here?” Jayden’s voice was husky as she stood, leaving Sage’s underwear near her thighs.

Sage tucked the towel under her armpits, then kept a hip leaned against the counter to shimmy up her garment the rest of the way up. One piece of clothing down, at least three more.

“I don’t think I can handle a bra. Just the shirt and pants.” Sage motioned to the stretchy pants in the pile and a loose shirt.

Clearing her throat, Jayden helped her into the rest of her clothes. When she handed her shirt over, Jayden quickly turned to give her more privacy. Sage dropped the towel, wishing her head wasn’t pounding.

“Alright, let me help you to my b–bed. Just bed.” Jayden wrapped her arm around Sage’s waist. “Go ahead and lean on me.”

Sage’s eyes felt as if they had five-pound weights attached to them as she struggled to keep them open. Snuggling into Jayden’s strong arms, she felt there was a word that was escaping her at the moment as they worked their way through the hall to Jayden’s bedroom. It was the first time she’d been in the room, but she didn’t take any of it in as Jayden tucked her in.

“Where are you going to sleep?” Sage murmured as she wiggled her head deeper into the pillow. Jayden’s scent enveloped her.

“The couch in the living room pulls out.” Jayden tucked the blanket under Sage’s chin and pushed her hair off her cheeks. “Get some rest and if you need anything, let me know.”

The world was dark behind Sage’s closed eyes, but she felt the air grow colder when Jayden walked away. As she drifted to sleep, the word came to her: *safe*. She felt safe in Jayden’s arms.

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As she turned for a more comfortable position, Jayden's back screamed in discomfort. Lila had wanted to sleep with her on the sleeper sofa, so she currently had a foot jammed into her kidney. Starlight filtered through the window, and an owl hooted nearby.

The house was shrouded in odd shadows, hiding the secrets of Jayden's mind. She tried to avoid thinking of the snapshot of Sage's nude form in the tub, but the image burned behind her eyelids. Even though her whole body sagged with exhaustion, sleep eluded her.

Twisting out of bed while trying to keep from jostling the area and waking Lila, she walked to the kitchen for some more soup. Something warm might help put her to sleep.

"Mom?" Lila called out.

"Yeah, Cricket? Are you okay?" Exhaustion pressed into her body as she tried to keep her voice even when all she wanted to do was pull out her hair.

"I'm going to be sick."

Jayden ran to her side but was too late with the bowl. Liquid splashed on the ground at her feet. Irrationally, tears pricked her eyes as she made sure Lila was okay being alone in the shower before cleaning up the mess. There were hidden, unpleasant parts of being a single parent, and Jayden was currently in the nitty gritty.

Another load of laundry, change sheets, spray carpet solution, rinse, and repeat.

After knocking on the bathroom door, she peeked in her head when Lila said to come in.

"You okay, Cricket? Need anything?" Jayden made eye contact with her reflection and cringed. She also needed a good scrub, but it would have to wait.

"Can you find Tuna? I want to snuggle with him." Lila's voice came from behind the shower curtain.

“Sure. Your clothes are on the counter here, and I’ll have Tuna waiting for you in your room.” Jayden turned to find the cat.

Exhaustion pulled her shoulders when she finally saw the little scamp curled up between Lila’s dresser and bookshelf. One of Lila’s sweatshirts had somehow gotten wedged there, and the kitten had burrowed into the hood.

“Come on, Tuna. Please?” Jayden called, rubbing her fingers together as she tried to squeeze through the crack to get to him. All she got for her effort was a yawn and a few slow blinks from the kitten.

“Mom?” Lila walked into the room. “Did you find Tuna?” She sat on the bed, pulling her feet up and swinging around to snuggle into the blankets.

At her voice, Tuna stood, arching his back in a languid stretch before jumping up to Lila’s legs and quickly falling back asleep. Jayden played with Lila’s hair as she watched her daughter’s blinks lengthen.

Soon, Lila’s breathing turned into a light snore which was Jayden’s cue to tiptoe out of the room. Crossing the hall, she opened her door and sank into her bed. It wasn’t until she turned to sleep on her side that she stifled a scream, having forgotten Sage was sleeping in her bed. She placed one foot on the floor and was about to get up when an arm landed on her side and pulled her closer.

Jayden wasn’t really one for snuggling since she didn’t like feeling trapped but being wrapped in Sage’s arms wasn’t constrictive at all. Jayden relished in the feeling, knowing it was all wrong, but couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

That was until Sage wiggled her head into the crook of Jayden’s neck. She could feel her lips graze at the sensitive part below her ear, a place with an effect only her lovers knew of. Shivering despite the heat, Jayden tried to pull herself together. Sage was sick.

More importantly, Sage was marrying her brother.



Inch by inch, Jayden worked her way to the edge of the bed. The last part was tricky, trying to get out of Sage's grip. In a move that would make Indiana Jones proud, she replaced her body with a pillow and snuck back to the living room—placing as much space between herself and temptation as she could.

In the morning, a new wave of sickness from Sage and Lila left Jayden in a cycle of repeating her actions from the previous day. Between cleaning new messes, doing laundry, and cooking a veggie soup—the only thing both could keep down—she started looking for a new home for her and Lila.

She didn't want Lila to change school districts again, but she couldn't live in such close quarters to Sage and Marshal. How was she supposed to get over her crush if she lived right next door? No, time and distance were imperative for Jayden to be able to look herself in the eye again.

On one of the sick days, since they were all blending at this point, Andrea offered to watch the ladies so Jayden could finally get some shopping done and get a much needed break. She decided she would use the time to tour a few places. Lennox would say she was running away, but in this case, it was running for self-preservation. For once, she was running not to leave or blow up a good thing, but to get away before there was a chance of heartbreak.

The landlord at the second place she looked at seemed decent enough. The apartment had more room than where they were staying now, but it was missing something Jayden couldn't put her finger on. Instead of thinking about it, she reached for the pen and provided the swish of her signature. Just like that, Jayden secured a new place to rent. She tried to outrace her self-doubt while driving back, ensuring that she wasn't running away but instead running towards her future.

Enjoying the crisp fall day and not ready to go home, Jayden stopped at the store to restock some items for the sick ladies: drinks that would help replenish their electrolytes, and some mom juice for herself—she needed something to help her unwind from the tense past few days.

When she pulled up in the house's driveway, Jayden sat in the car feeling the steering wheel under her hands. Her thoughts turned to the twisty path that had led her back to this place. If she hadn't unintentionally taken the fall for Brandi, she might not have come back home. With everything that had happened since, she couldn't find it in herself to be upset with Brandi anymore.

"Hey, need a hand?" Marshal jogged up to the car, his breath puffing in the air with each exhale. The small amount of early snow had already melted but left a layer of patchy ice.

"Sure. But you might want to leave it near the door. It's still a red zone in there," Jayden teased, handing him the case of beer she'd picked up at the store.

"Yeah, Ivan's down for the count too. I don't think it's food poisoning." The beers clanked in Marshal's hands as they walked to the guest house.

"No, it definitely isn't food poisoning. Lila and Sage would be better by now. Just some bug." Jayden was about to tell him about the new place she'd found but decided to hold off.

Marshal placed the beer down at the door. "You look like you could use one of these. Mind if I open it?"

"No, go ahead," Jayden said, still making her way to the porch.

Marshal took a knife from his pocket and cut open the case before grabbing two bottles. Flipping the knife over, he used the handle to pry open the cap and handed it to Jayden, who unceremoniously dropped the bags she was carrying before reaching out for the brew.

Even though the wind bit at their skin, there was something peaceful about sipping beer with her twin. They stared out into the yard, each lost in thought—only the occasional glug from the beer or a noncommittal "Mmm" from one of them interrupted the quiet of the yard.

"Did you know I knew something was wrong that night? When you were with Brandi?" Turning to her, Marshal broke

the silence. “I’m not sure if it was exactly when you crashed, but my heart started racing for no reason. I was playing a game on my phone, so there wasn’t any reason for my heart to start pounding like that. I mean, Candy Crush isn’t *that* exciting. It didn’t occur to me until later that something might have happened to you.” He looked away, almost embarrassed about the admission.

“I wouldn’t have thought something happened to you if it occurred the other way around.” Jayden squeezed his shoulder.

“The next time I felt like that was when you, Sage, and Lila were at Pike Place Market during the shooting. That time I thought I was having a heart attack.” Marshal shivered. “I was on a Zoom call with a few staff members and almost had Ivan call an ambulance. That time, though, I knew it was something with you. We heard about the shooting not long after the feeling came on. Those were the longest moments of my life, waiting to see if you all were all right.”

Jayden turned to see Marshal’s features more clearly. His political face was tightly secured, but his eyes could never lie, especially to her. Jayden felt a punch to the gut. She hadn’t realized how much pain was behind her twin’s eyes—she was so locked in her own world and issues that she’d neglected to check in to make sure he was doing okay. The oversight was distressing. Forget about her pining for Sage, there were multiple levels of relationships she needed to repair.

“I had no idea. I’m so sorry.” The platitudes fell flat, but at least it was a start. She would do better.

“You can talk to me, you know?” Marshal turned to face her head on, his eyes searching her face. For what, she wasn’t sure, but part of her was terrified to find out.

She tried not to think the truth as she chewed on the inside of her cheek: *I’m in love with your partner*. Somehow, she had a feeling that wouldn’t go over very well, no matter how understanding Marshal was. “Of course, I know. You can as well,” she added, hoping to brush off some of her uncomfortable feelings.

It didn't seem to work because when Marshal looked away, he appeared disappointed, if not a little sad.

"I need to get some more work done. Thanks for the beer." Marshal gave a wave as he trudged back to the house.

Jayden stayed outside for a few more minutes, not realizing her fingers were going numb as she tried to figure out what the conversation meant. The only thing she concluded while walking back to the house was that she was glad for the new lease and hoped she would still have a close relationship with her brother when all of this was over.

# Chapter Seventeen

## *Coffee Shop Confession*

Finally feeling better, Sage was now back to sleeping in her own bed, having been invited back by Marshal once both she and Lila proved they were on the mend. Even then, she hadn't seen much of Marshal, who was working hard. It suited her just fine since her energy hadn't returned, and she moved between one room and the next like an unsettled ghost, unsure what was causing her restlessness.

Sage tried to picture the previous week when she'd played patient to Jayden's nurse. Most days had blended together in a blur, but her skin felt the whisper of Jayden's soft caresses on her cheek and forehead as she tested her temperature or replaced a cold washcloth. Dreams of holding Jayden permeated her waking thoughts, but Sage could never tell if it had only been the fever making it feel realistic, or if it had really happened. Jayden never mentioned it, so she was inclined to think it was just a fantasy she'd made up in her head to help her through whatever bug she'd caught.

Needing a moment to work through her thoughts, she lifted her head and went to the bathroom to freshen up.

Her mind was still in a fog as she finished her shower and put on real pants for the first time in what felt like weeks. With her energy zapped, Sage curled on the couch and picked up a script for a play that, with a bit of work, had some potential. Lately, she found herself picturing being back onstage more, and that hadn't happened since Chris had died. The thrill of the stage was starting to have a certain appeal.

She read along, finding a line that made her chuckle and think of Jayden. Lifting her phone to check the date, she realized it had been over a week since she'd seen her.

That wouldn't do. Crawling off the couch, Sage waved to Andrea, who was helping Marshal practice dialogue for an ad he was filming soon. Once outside, the light layer of snow crunched under her boot as the nippy wind fluffed her hair. It wasn't until she was halfway to Jayden's house that it occurred to her she probably should have been the one practicing with Marshal but instead was trekking through the cold for his sister.

The closer she got to the house, the deeper a pit in her stomach burrowed. The guest house appeared dark, cold, and, most importantly, uninhabited. The crunching under her feet ceased when she stepped to the back door and held her hand up to knock. Midway, she unclenched her fist and instead used it to cup her face and peer into the window on the door.

Her nose froze at first contact with the glass. She couldn't make anything out, but something was amiss. It wasn't until a car drove by and briefly illuminated the area that it hit her. Gasping and taking a step back as if the door bit her, she stared at the guest house in disbelief.

The counters had never been cluttered, but the fridge had held pieces of art by Lila and many photos, and now it was completely bare. In a daze, Sage wandered to the garage, where she saw snow cover the area that had held Jayden's car as if it had never been there in the first place.

Pulling out her phone, she returned to the main house and sent a text.

*Where did you go?*

Maybe not the most elegant question, but she wanted answers. Why would Jayden just leave, and Marshal not tell her? It wasn't just Jayden's absence that struck her; Sage found herself already missing the thousands of questions that Lila asked and Tuna's playful pounces.

Her phone vibrated with an incoming text.

*I found a place in Ballard, and they offered a cheaper deal if I could move in sooner.*

Sage couldn't see the words as they blurred on the screen. It wasn't like Jayden had left town, never to be seen again. Ballard was a ten-minute ride on Margaret, but that wasn't the point. Everything was a mess of her own making, and she didn't know how to fix it.

Back at the house, Sage found herself staring at nothing. Unsure of how long she'd been standing in the living room, she startled when Marshal touched her shoulder.

"Sorry, I called your name. I thought you would have heard me." Marshal dipped his head, assessing her with piercing eyes so similar to Jayden's that her heart rate picked up. "Are you okay?" he asked when she didn't say anything.

"Yes, sorry I was..." She pointed behind her before shaking her head. "Did you know Jayden moved?"

Marshal's head tilted. "Uh, yeah, I did. You were in the room when Andrea and I were talking about it." Reaching up, he rubbed at his forehead.

With the reminder, the conversation did ring a bell, but she'd just woken from a nap and had zoned out, thinking they were talking about someone from Marshal's office. She didn't remember hearing Jayden's name in that conversation.

Confused and a little hurt, she tried to smile but she wasn't sure she pulled it off. "My mistake. I must still be a little off from being sick."

"Want me to make you something? Chicken noodle soup—oh wait, umm, I mean just noodle soup for you." Marshal headed to the kitchen.

"I think Jayden said she froze some corn chowder. I can heat that up, thanks for the offer though." Sage walked to the kitchen, passing Marshal who had switched directions.

"Okay, I'm going to finish up this workload and call Morgan about the speech coming up." Marshal walked out with the phone to his ear.

Sage pulled out the frozen soup and waited for the microwave to ding. The slight whirring of the appliance was her only company as Sage realized how alone she felt.

“I’m glad to see you’re eating. You’re still a little pale.” Andrea startled her, having gotten all the way next to her without Sage realizing. When she’d first met Andrea, she’d thought she was severe, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. She was warm, helpful, and cared deeply.

Guess that was the issue with first impressions—they were not always the correct ones. Sage’s mind flitted over her first few interactions with Jayden, having pegged her incorrectly for being a petty drunk.

“It is nice not to be hovering over a toilet playing a guessing game of which end it will come out of this time.” Sage cringed at her words. “Sorry, that was too much.”

“My grandson was sick last month. So we were playing that game as well.” Andrea patted her arm on the way to start the kettle. “Would you like some tea?”

Apparently, even tea reminded her of Jayden now, as her face flashed in Sage’s mind at the sound of the word. “That would be great, thank you.” She blew on the spoon and her taste buds danced when the soup hit her tongue.

Sage wasn’t sure how a house with two people could feel so empty, but knowing Lila and Jayden weren’t in the guest house created a hole of loneliness she hadn’t realized had been filled with them.

“Are you ready for Christmas? I have a few more things to pick up. Do you want to go shopping together?” Andrea placed a mug before her and Sage leaned over, letting the steam hit her face.

The idea of getting out of the house did have a certain appeal, even if the thought exhausted her. She couldn’t believe Christmas was just a few weeks away. “Sure, sounds good. When?”

“After our tea.” Andrea picked up her mug and blew a crater into the liquid while looking over the cup at Sage. The scrutiny made her fidget, unable to distinguish what the look meant.



“It will be nice to get out of the house.” Sage wrapped her fingers around the string of the tea bag and watched the waves rolling off the top, more to break away from Andrea’s look than anything. Really, it would be nice to get away from the place that held so many memories of Jayden.

They finished their tea in relative silence, and Sage practically licked her bowl after eating the rest of the soup. Andrea kept prodding, but Sage was having a hard time staying present. Her mind kept falling to Jayden and the empty house. After they gathered their coats and got into the car without speaking, both were lost in their thoughts. When they were on their way with nothing but the road ahead of them, Andrea finally asked, “What’s going on between you and Jayden?”

The direct approach threw her for a loop, and Sage was glad she wasn’t the one driving because she probably would have crashed the car.

“What do you mean?” she asked, watching the trees that lined the highway zoom past the window. Her heart pounded and the truth about everything was on the tip of her tongue. Marshal asking her to wait was the only thing keeping her quiet.

Silence pressed in on Sage as Andrea continued to wait. Sage froze, unable to untangle the story at the tip of her tongue. When Sage didn’t respond, Andrea sighed. “Nothing, forget I mentioned it.”

The rest of the drive was covered in a layer of tension that Sage knew was her fault. Andrea had been helpful while Sage navigated learning how to be a politician’s partner, and how was she repaying the kindness? Deceit, betrayal—hell, throw forbidden feelings in the mix, and you have a recipe nobody wants to eat.

Unsure where to start unraveling the web of lies, she vowed to reach out to Jayden to see if there was clarity to be found. Having a plan helped eliminate some of the tension in her neck. She still couldn’t come clean to Andrea about what was going on, but maybe someday they would all look back on

this period of their life with a fondness only time would be able to provide.

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Empty beer bottles lay around her as Jayden drank her fifth beer and surfed the channels, trying to find something that wasn't Christmas related. Her new place didn't feel like a home, and since Lila had left for Alaska the day before, she felt even more unsettled but couldn't find the will to start unpacking.

Darkness she hadn't felt since the incident with Brandi started creeping in as she looked around at the empty walls. She thought they were an appropriate metaphor for her own emptiness inside. Happy music filtered through the TV, and Jayden had to slam the remote on the other side of the couch to keep from flinging it at the wall.

Why was it so hard? She'd texted with Sage sporadically, but not a lot more after Sage had asked where she'd gone, purposefully keeping her answers short. Ultimately, Jayden needed a break. She was tired of holding back her feelings, and when the article came out suggesting she was having an affair with Sage, well, that had done it. Marshal didn't need to deal with that in the middle of his campaign. Even though they'd never even kissed, Jayden couldn't say for sure she hadn't been having an emotional affair, and that was just as bad.

No, it was time to let go of the ridiculous notion that Sage was anything more than a friend. However, to detox from her, she needed space. Stumbling to the kitchen, she grabbed another beer and swallowed half of it in four gulps.

Her phone dinged. Seeing the name on the screen caused a little jolt of unease and pleasure. This detox thing was more challenging than she'd thought it would be.

*Do you want to meet and talk about the script?*

The words blended together as the four beers caught up to her in a swoop. She couldn't just leave Sage on read even though her muddled brain couldn't think clearly at this point. They were still friends, right?

*Okay. How about a coffee shop somewhere at 2 tomorrow?*

Suggesting they meet at a neutral location somehow felt safer than going somewhere familiar where memories would batter at her jealousy. However, her muddled brain couldn't think of any coffee places.

Sage's response came soon after.

*Wherever will we find a coffee place in Seattle? 2 is perfect. How about SeaCaf near Discovery Park?*

Jayden snorted at the response.

The location surprised Jayden for a second until she realized Sage remembered where she had moved and had picked a spot between them. She tried not to let the thought warm her. This was going to be a disaster, but one she wasn't sure she could look away from.

Taking down the rest of her beer, she typed: *Sure. See you then.* Jayden's feet carried her to the fridge for another beer. Her phone chirped, and her heart fluttered at the sound. Cursing her body, she saw Lennox's number with a photo attached. She smiled when she saw Lila and Lennox with the hamster, Pig.

It appeared Lila had lost a canine tooth in front, which somehow made the house's emptiness more pronounced.

*Mama says the tooth fairy is coming to Alaska! I was scared for a second, but she said they fly on dragonflies.*

The text came through in spurts, making her wish she'd taken Lennox up on the offer of staying in the guest room for a few days over the holiday. They'd done that a few times throughout the years, but Jayden was all over the place emotionally and didn't want to ruin Lila's time with Lennox.

Tuna jumped out from his cat tree and arched his back before settling his little head on her lap. It was one of the first

times he had willingly come near her to snuggle, and she didn't know what to do with her arms.

Tentatively she reached down and scratched behind his ears. "I miss her too. She'll be back, though."

Jayden couldn't believe she was talking to a cat, but maybe it could work. She squinted at the remaining beer in the bottle and decided it was probably time to go to bed if she was thinking about talking to the cat to work out her problems. If she were honest with herself she knew most likely detoxing from Sage would be impossible, and at this point, she'd need to catch a ride to Mars in order to get through the fact she had fallen hard for her brother's fiancée.

The next day, Jayden hiked her laptop bag over her shoulder before gripping the door to the coffee shop. The unmistakable smell of sweet treats and a rich blend of coffee made her mouth water automatically. Looking around, she didn't see Sage, so Jayden dodged a chair that hadn't been pushed in and got in line. It would be her second cup of the day, but after the beers last night, the caffeine jolt would do her bloodstream good.

"Hi, welcome to SeaCaf. What can I get you?" The barista held the perky smile of youth, or life not having gotten her down. It reminded her of a meme she saw once of Yoda being all jaded about work while baby Yoda sat optimistically, ready for the job.

"I'll take a double americano, a chocolate croissant, and, umm, a breakfast sandwich," Jayden continued, adding more food. Her hungover belly was in the driver's seat when ordering.

Glancing down at the tip jar, she saw a 'Fund for Pike Place shooting.' There were photos of the victims, one of whom looked to be around Lila's age. Her heart thudded as she tried not to get pulled into memories of that day.

Gripping her card tighter and wishing she had cash, Jayden asked, "If I write a tip in, could some of it go to this?" She

indicated with her card to the machine and then the overflowing jar as she tried to keep herself together.

“Yes, I can indicate how much you want to go to us versus the fund.” The woman’s high ponytail bounced as she nodded.

“Okay, great. Fifty-dollar tip, please.” Jayden watched the barista’s eyes widen at the number. “Twenty-five for you and twenty-five for the fund.” After signing the electronic device twisted in front of her, she quickly retreated from the gushing praise from the barista.

She found a chair nestled away from the bustle of the shop, a spot where she could still see if Sage walked in. Opening her laptop, she dug into the scene that was giving her trouble. There were many great scenes in her head, but the dialogue wasn’t coming, no matter what she tried.

Hunched over the computer, she tried to rework a scene. It wasn’t until someone cleared their throat above her that Jayden was able to pull her head from the document. Glancing up, she saw Sage standing in front of her with her order and a tentative smile. “Here, I heard the barista calling your name. Hungry?” she joked, setting down the coffee and plate piled with food and sliding them around both sides of her laptop.

“Thank you. Yes, starving.” She pulled the gooey breakfast sandwich near, ripping into it without abandon before spitting it out on the plate. “Hot,” she said sheepishly. Sage’s look was part mirth and disgust, but Jayden wasn’t sure which one won out.

“I’ll be right back.” Sage spun on her heels and headed back towards the counter after someone called her name. The move shouldn’t have twisted Jayden’s stomach, but even after a few days of not seeing Sage, all the work and walls Jayden had tried to build were crumbling at her feet with a damn twirl.

Wanting to growl and put her head on the table, Jayden just barely refrained as she pulled her laptop closer.

“Did you do it on purpose?” Sage asked when she came back with her food and drink.

Jayden's eyes felt dry as she tried to work out what Sage meant. "Do what on purpose?"

"Sit at the one table with both seats looking towards the door and protected with a wall behind them so that nothing can sneak up on you."

Glancing behind her, Jayden saw she was right. "I'm not sure if it was an unconscious pick or something I would have done before. I wonder how many things have changed because of that day. I'm hoping to get Lila into a counselor after the holidays. I'm not looking forward to New Year's fireworks." Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she was babbling but couldn't seem to stop. She'd tried hard to get Lila to break the habit, but maybe it was one of those things ingrained in her DNA.

"Are you nervous?" Sage asked, pulling up a chair.

"No. Why?" Jayden wasn't sure if that was a lie or not.

"Some people ramble when they are nervous. I hadn't noticed it before, but maybe something has changed." Sage took a sip of her coffee.

A glob of presumably coconut whipped cream sat on Sage's upper lip, and Jayden felt her tongue trace the path on her own lips, imagining what it would be like to li— Clearing her throat, Jayden pulled her computer closer, trying to focus on anything but the compelling vision across from her.

"How are you feeling? Did you see the article?" Jayden hung her head. Asking multiple questions was something she was trying to get Lila to stop and here she was doing it.

Thankfully, Sage had licked off the tempting treat, her lip now blissfully bare. "I'm feeling much better. Thank you for your help." Sage paused, taking a nibble of her treat. "Is Lila feeling better?"

"Yeah, she's in Alaska with Lennox for the holidays but was finally showing signs of her old self before she left." Jayden held back another question, one that was more to fill in the silence, and decided instead to bite into the now cooled-off sandwich.

“That’s good. Glad she’s feeling better. And to answer your other question, yes, I did see the article. Patricia seemed to be threatening the story during the last event. I completely forgot about it, though. I have to say she got some pretty good shots. That one where I’m touching your face at the baseball game, getting the eyelash? I was confused for a second because it looked like we were leaning into or away from kissing. I had to wrack my brain to ensure we hadn’t made out, but I hope I’d remember something like that.”

This was why things with Sage were easier and at the same time more challenging. The slight tease and flirt in her voice did things to Jayden’s stomach. She wanted to tear out whoever had given the butterflies access to a trampoline because they were bouncing about in her gut, tumbling at Sage’s words.

“Patricia told you she was going to publish that? Sage, come on, why didn’t you say anything?” Jayden wasn’t sure why that was what she was focusing on but she needed something to direct her energy towards.

“It was a mistake. She told me, and it slipped my mind because it didn’t make sense. We haven’t done anything besides become friends. Right? There’s nothing more?”

Sage’s conflicting tone made it sound like she was asking if it were true and stating a fact at the same time. Jayden closed her eyes, trying to hide from Sage’s imploring look but found the image burned behind her eyelids.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. You’re marrying my brother,” Jayden said with her eyes shut, needing a moment. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she felt like she’d danced, dipped, and tiptoed around the topic, but it was something she needed to address, finally.

When she gathered enough courage to open her eyes, she saw the truth flash on Sage’s face. It looked like some part of Sage wanted Jayden, and she wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“Jayden, it’s not what you think. We’re not really... together.” Sage’s pained whisper carried through and hit

Jayden in the chest.

“What do you mean, not together? You’re not marrying him?” Jayden’s heart slammed in her chest.

“It’s not that. I was planning on marrying him, because he needed me. But it’s not real. Well, I mean it is real. I just didn’t think—ugh.” Sage ran her fingers through her hair as she grunted in frustration. “This isn’t how I was supposed to tell you. But I can’t keep doing this. I like you, Jayden, and yes, it’s complicated and there are things I can’t tell you, but I like you.” Sage’s eyes held hope as she waited for Jayden to say something.

What could she say? Glancing at her arm, Jayden scanned her skin for wounds. The first cut of betrayal was painful. Well maybe it wasn’t betrayal so much, but whatever it was hurt her heart. “Why? Why did you do this? Why did Marshal need you? What’s going on?” Jayden asked. At her questions she saw the light dim in Sage’s eyes as she started looking around the coffee shop.

“It’s not my story to tell, Jayden. You have to ask your brother.” Sage reached out for Jayden’s hand.

Jayden’s brain, heart, and body were all elbowing each other for attention. Overwhelmed, Jayden did what she did best. She ran. Picking up her computer and leaving the rest of the food, Jayden mumbled, “I can’t think right now. I’ve got to go.”

She caught Sage’s face falling in pain. “What about your script?” Sage threw out seemingly desperately as she went to grab her arm.

“I just need to process this, Sage. We’ll talk later.” Jayden hustled out of the comfort of the shop and into the cold winter air.

She’d needed to clear her mind and had walked around her new neighborhood enjoying the Christmas decorations. She tried to piece together what had happened at the coffee shop but felt her thoughts were a row machine. So much energy, but



not going anywhere. She knew she'd need to talk to Marshal and Sage, but right now she couldn't shake the betrayal. Why couldn't they have told her? What did Sage mean when she said it wasn't real? Did they not trust her? Pain jabbed right under her ribs. Unable to turn off her thoughts and needing to get warm, she headed back to her apartment.

# Chapter Eighteen

## *The Whole Truth*

Having spent most of the night tossing and turning, Sage pulled herself out of bed and tiptoed downstairs. Down in the kitchen she made some coffee then turned on the Christmas tree.

Sitting at the table with her steaming cup she forced herself to place her phone, screen down, on the table next to her and demanded she not look at it for a few minutes. Yesterday's events traveled through her mind at lightspeed, zooming through her tired brain as she watched the lights on the tree twinkle and change colors.

She sat in the silent house, trying to find the moment she fell in love with Jayden. There were little moments for sure, and she hadn't realized what was happening until Jayden ran away. With the absence of her and Lila, Sage was forced to face the fact that she'd fallen for her best friend's sister.

"Couldn't sleep?" Marshal shuffled into the dining room on his way to the kitchen. The fridge light came on as he grabbed orange juice and a cup before coming to sit across from her at the table. "Are you ready for Christmas?"

The smell of juice triggered memories of the pepper spray incident with Jayden. Was that when things had changed? Mentally shaking off her thoughts she reached over to grab his hand.

"Marshal, we need to talk." Sage gulped. Through her sleepless night she'd tried to come up with conversation starters, but nothing she'd practiced started like that. Marshal nodded but didn't say anything. Sage plowed on. "I told Jayden yesterday." She held out her finger when she saw he was about to interrupt. "I told Jayden about my feelings for her. I would never break your trust and it's your story to tell, but I couldn't stand it anymore. Marshal, I love her, and I'm so

sorry. I didn't mean to fall for her." Needing to pull herself together, Sage let go of his hand to take a sip of her coffee.

For his part, Marshal didn't seem angry, not that she was expecting anger. He just seemed contemplative. "I'm sorry I asked you to keep this a secret," he said after a moment. "I could have handled things better. I've been so wrapped up in the campaign, I lost sight of what matters most." He paused and looked out the window. "Thank you for telling me. Let me think about things." Marshal got up and held his arms out for a hug. "It's going to be okay, Sage."

Sage scrambled up from the table and launched herself into his arms. They swayed together and finally the tightness in her chest loosened.

On Christmas morning, Sage tried to find the giddiness she'd had as a kid, but it felt buried somewhere, maybe under her summer clothes. Bringing the coffee mug to her lips, she contemplated what to do next as she watched the tree lights navigate through different colors. She needed to see Jayden but wanted to give her space. The conflict was playing tug-of-war with her heart, and she wasn't sure how much more limbo she'd be able to handle.

Presents filled the space underneath the tree, and a scent of pine hung in the air. Still, Sage couldn't find the peace she'd been searching for since she'd woken up two hours earlier.

"Merry Christmas," Marshal said as he walked up beside her.

She'd been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't heard him come down the stairs. He'd even turned on light instrumental holiday songs. "Merry Christmas." She leaned into his embrace as they watched the snow together.

"I wish Lila were here. The holidays are always better with kids around."

Sage could only provide a grunt in response, and to her horror, a tear slid down her cheek. Turning away, she dabbed her face with the arm of her sweater. She and Marshal had

talked a little more after her confession. She was glad her feelings hadn't caused a riff with her best friend. Marshal was as good as they came.

"I should have asked this earlier, but do you have any traditions for breakfast today? I can start something if you're hungry." Sage tried to pull herself together. A smile that felt fake stretched against her mouth.

"I got it started already. Since I gave Andrea some time off to see her sister, you'll have to suffer with what I make. We always have cinnamon rolls. Don't worry, I found a vegan recipe that I think will work." Marshal flashed a smile, but it wasn't the imperfect one with a chipped tooth she was craving to see.

Sage laughed. Marshal wasn't a bad baker, so there would definitely be no suffering— well, maybe her stomach when she would undoubtedly eat too much. "That's sweet, thank you." Sage crouched by the tree to rearrange the gifts.

The doorbell rang when she was on her fifth try at the gift arrangement. Currently, she was trying for smallest to largest in a straight line. It was impractical, but it gave her something to do with her hands as she mulled over how to break the ice when she reached out to Jayden.

"Merry Christmas." The voice that had permeated her dreams filled the room, warming Sage's insides.

"Jayden." Even to herself, the word sounded breathless with promise.

"Marshal invited me. I'm sorry I haven't reached out, I've just been trying to mull everything over. It's been a lot to think about, but it's Christmas and maybe we can talk, or just enjoy company. Plus, with Lila gone, it's so quiet." Jayden took a few steps, and Sage saw her arms were filled with bags.

Doing her best to hide a smile, Sage's lips twitched from her ramblings. If Jayden's speech was any indication, Lila would have a hard time breaking that habit. "Of course. I'm glad you're here. Let me take those." Sage reached for them from her spot on the floor. Giving up on her arrangements, she

mixed everything in a pile, the way Christmas presents were meant to be organized. “Want some coffee?” Sage stood, brushing some fallen needles off her pants.

“Here’s coffee.” Marshal walked in with a second cup.

Jayden looked between them, her eyes dancing with the twinkling lights. “Great minds think alike.”

“The question of the day is: presents or breakfast first?” Marshal clapped his hands together.

“Presents!” Sage and Jayden replied in unison and shared a look. Sage’s heart fluttered in her chest. If she deciphered correctly, it was a look of promise.

Most of the gifts referenced inside jokes between the group. Jayden got Marshal a tie he was to wear when he won his campaign, while Sage gave Jayden a can of pepper spray but made her promise not to retaliate. Sage gave Marshal a Halloween hazmat suit and latex gloves which was met by joking banter from the twins. The house was filled with laughter as the three of them worked through their gifts.

When most of the gifts were opened and a heap of wrapping paper littered the floor, Marshal and Jayden both said, “I have one more.” Then, again in unison, “Twin thing.” The way they pitched their voices made it sound haunted.

“Don’t do that again,” Sage admonished with a shudder while they shared a high five.

“You do your present first.” Marshal motioned to Jayden. “I’m going to start the cinnamon rolls.”

“It’s outside.” Jayden stood, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Sage reached for a coat, but Jayden stopped her.

“I should have been clearer. It’s in the garage, no coat needed.” Jayden linked fingers with Sage and gave her a soft look. It took everything in Sage not to look down at their hands but to call attention to it would be the quickest way for the action to end, and that was the last thing she wanted.

Jayden opened the garage door and grandly swept her arm into the space, indicating Sage should go first. She didn't want the contact to end, but curiosity got the best of her as she dropped Jayden's hand and walked down the steps.

The automatic lights flooded the room. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust and fall to Margaret, newly fixed with a tidy bow on top of the handlebars. Squealing, Sage skipped to the bike as her inner kid took over.

The shiny paint and unmarred body showed detail had been taken to fix her. "It's perfect. This must have cost you more money than the bike was worth." A new helmet sat on her seat.

"It took longer than expected since they didn't have the paint in stock, but once the weather clears, you'll be able to ride her again." Jayden stroked the handle.

"Thank you. I love it." Sage jumped into her arms, almost knocking the bike over in the process.

"Careful, she's been through a lot. I don't want you damaging her paint job." The words sounded breathless against the shell of her ear.

Pulling away, they shared a look. Sage could read the longing before Jayden turned. "Shall we go back and see what Marshal's gift is?" Jayden walked up the few steps and held the door open. Before walking through, Sage looked back at the Vespa then brushed against Jayden to get inside.

"Do you like it?" Marshal asked from the kitchen.

"Love it, thank you," Sage gushed as she refilled her coffee mug.

"It was all Jayden," Marshal said, twisting dough into a spiral.

"You said you had one more gift?" Jayden looked around, her face flush with excitement, presumably at the well-received gift she'd just given.

"I do. It's on the table." Marshal finished the cinnamon rolls and slid the dish into the oven.

“Who is it for?” Jayden picked up a thin box and turned it around to look at all angles.

“Both of you,” Marshal replied, his tone unreadable.

“Go ahead and open it. I’m still overwhelmed at getting Margaret back.” Sage nodded, curiosity burning at what gift Marshal could give for them both.

Tearing open the flap of the box, Jayden put some crumpled paper to the side before sliding out a picture frame. From her angle, Sage couldn’t see exactly what the picture was, but it caused Jayden to gasp.

“What’s this, Marshal?” she asked, pushing the picture frame to Sage.

Inside the frame was a picture of Sage leaning in towards Jayden. There were a bunch of people surrounding them and Lila was sleeping on Jayden’s lap, her headphones askew and the tiny mitt hanging loosely at Jayden’s hip. If her memory served, Sage had just plucked an eyelash and told Jayden to make a wish. She knew they hadn’t kissed, but the photo captured a longing they both must have felt, even back then. The photo was beautiful.

Sage tore her eyes away from the photo to seek out Jayden then Marshal. She wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but she wanted to keep the picture forever.

“Do you know what ace is?” Marshal asked. The question might have seemed random, but Sage knew where he was going with it.

“Yes, Morgan and I had a conversation about it.”

Surprise flickered across Marshal’s face at Jayden’s response. He nodded before speaking. “My poll numbers were down, and people were saying I seemed untrustworthy, but it wasn’t something they could put their finger on. When Ivan dug deeper, they discovered that most people didn’t like that I didn’t have a partner.” Marshal played with the seam on the tablecloth.

Seeing Marshal struggle, Sage picked up her part of the story. “Marshal had helped me through the worst six months of

my life when Chris died after being hit by a drunk driver. I owed him my life for getting me through that time. So, when he came to me with his idea, I didn't mind. He promised we would never sleep together." Her heart jammed in her chest, glad to finally have everything out in the open. "I didn't think I'd find anyone again, and if I could help repay his kindness by going through with this, then yeah, I thought it would be easy. I wouldn't be alone, but I could help a friend and glide through life without getting hurt again. Chris's death almost killed me. I closed everything off."

Jayden's eyes shone with understanding. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Sage. But Marshal, why didn't you tell me you were ace? You must know I wouldn't have cared, right?"

Sage and Marshal shared a look. Marshal rubbed his forehead. "You have to realize that I haven't told many people. The one person I told a long time ago said I was broken—that because I was ace, I was less of a man. I didn't even tell Sage until almost a year after Chris died, and she's my best friend."

Jayden sat still as she listened. Sage ached to go to her but wasn't sure what boundaries were being reestablished.

Marshal went on. "Just because I'm ace doesn't mean I'm blind." He pointed to the frame. "I see the way you look at each other. I can't in good conscience go through with this marriage just because it would make my life easier. I'll figure something out with the polls. But you two deserve happiness, and I won't stand in your way."

Sage felt months of anxiety lift with his words. Her shoulders lost their heaviness as the whole truth finally came out.

"Can you say something? Please?" Sage asked. The longer Jayden stared without saying anything, the more her gut twisted. As the silence stretched, even Marshal started squirming in his seat.

Finally, Jayden let out a breath in a long exhale that fluttered her hair. "I've got to go."



With that, Jayden pushed away from the table and stood. She reached the door in record time. Silence followed the snick of her exit as Marshal and Sage sat at the table, stunned.

“Should I go after her?” Sage asked, breaking the moment.

“Give her a few moments. She’s a runner, and you’ll only make it harder on yourself if you chase. Let her calm down, then yes, go after her.” Marshal looked down at the picture left behind. “You’re not mad about this, are you?”

“Mad? No, not at all. I’m glad you finally told her. That took a lot of courage. You’ve done so much for me. I was scared this would ruin our friendship.”

“It would take a lot more than you falling in love with my sister to rock our foundation. I’m grateful for all you’ve done. And just so you know, I’m not kicking you out on the streets. You’ll always have a place to stay here, and nothing has to change right now except my sister knowing. We can work out anything else in the future.” Marshal slid his hand over to hers. “I’m excited to have you be a part of the family. Maybe not in the way I thought, but I’m happy for you.” He squeezed her fingers before declaring the cinnamon rolls were almost done.

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The walk around Green Lake was a cold one, but Jayden needed to clear her head, and she didn’t feel the empty apartment would provide the right ambiance. Blood pounded in her ears as she tried to walk fast, to hurry away from her thoughts.

“Ace? Marshal is ace, and their engagement is one of convenience. Their relationship is fake, in a way?” She hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but a group of kids turned at her voice, giving her a look of concern for their safety.

Jayden played back the times they had been together. The pull, give and take, the emotions and feelings of unfairness that her brother had something she wished she’d found. She should have been relieved to know the truth, but instead, a new

ball of tension developed. What if what they had been working toward was an illusion because of the perceived barrier? Now that the wall was down, would the magic still be there? Her thoughts tumbled as she speed walked around the lake, not at all closer to her goal of untangling her brain.

Chasing the demons of her mind, she couldn't find clarity. Nearing the car, she slipped on ice and windmilled her arms to keep from falling. The event raised her heart rate as she tried to steady her feet.

Sitting in the driver's seat, she ripped off her hoodie. The walk had worked off her initial anxiety, but now she wasn't sure what to do with herself. It wasn't doing any good reflecting in a loop. She needed to see Sage. Pulling out her phone, she sent the text she'd been subconsciously drafting since halfway around the lake.

*Can we meet?*

Sage's reply was instant, arriving almost as soon as her thumb hit send.

*Yes. Where? Is SeaCalf open?*

Jayden wasn't sure since it was a holiday, but honestly, she didn't want to meet somewhere safe with the buffer of people around. It was time to play with fire. *How about my new place instead?* Jayden replied before sending off her address, unsure what her end goal was.

On the way back to her place, she hit the speed dial to Marshal's number.

"I thought you'd be calling soon," Marshal answered in lieu of a greeting. "Sage just left like her hair was on fire. Did you have anything to do with that?"

Jayden took a second to try and decipher his tone. Cautiously she replied, "Maybe?" She needed to know where they stood. "Marshal, are you okay with this? For real?"

"Jay, Sage and I were never together. Not really. I was desperate, and she wanted to help out of an obligation for me showing up when she'd lost everything. It wasn't fair of me, and I saw you two falling deeper and fighting, but selfishly I

stayed silent because it was easier for me. But I can't look in the mirror and be the reason why you are fighting so hard. I can't be the reason you run again." Marshal's little speech ended in silence as Jayden tried to find the words she wanted to say.

"Thank you, Marshal. You are the best twin a person could ask for." Jayden let his words soothe some of her anxiety.

"We can talk more about it, but I've never been surer of anything in my life."

The conviction in his voice finally unlocked something in her: Anticipation for the future.

Unlocking her front door, she frantically scanned the area to see if anything needed to be picked up. She still hadn't unpacked, and boxes littered the rooms; the walls seemed bare, and nothing about the place screamed *home*. There wasn't much she could do with the area because a knock sounded, sending her heart fluttering.

On the way to the door, she tripped over a box, chuckling to herself at how the universe apparently wanted her to fall. Maybe she already had?

The door wasn't locked, but she took a moment before opening it. Sometimes a person knows their life will change in a single instant. This was her moment. There might not be any going back. After a deep breath in, she slowly exhaled, trying to keep from shaking.

Jayden opened the door and was met with Sage's blown pupils and heaving chest.

"I love you," Sage blurted out before she slapped a hand over her mouth.

"How about you come in?" Jayden held the door wider, inhaling the scent of sugar cookies and cinnamon.

Sage brushed against her shoulder, and she wasn't sure if it was intentional but the zaps running through her body were real, making it hard to concentrate.

“Do you want anything? I still don’t have much, but there might be juice?” Jayden walked to the tiny kitchen, unsure what to do with her hands.

“No, I’m okay. Your place is nice.” Sage’s eyes flitted about the room before locking on Jayden. The heat of her gaze burned.

“Thanks. Sage, listen, I walked around Green Lake trying to figure out my feelings. How can you know? How can you walk in here with the confidence of a goddess and declare what I’ve been trying to put my finger on for three hours? None of this makes sense. Do we even work? Where do we go from here? What do—” The words were cut off when Sage threw her arms around Jayden and landed a soft, sensual kiss, effectively halting any continued ramblings.

Jayden’s mind blanked as she focused on the lips she’d been dreaming of for months. Jealousy, lust, love, and the pit of numbness she’d tried not to fall into all fell away as their lips met. Sage’s mouth opened slightly, revealing her tongue, which tentatively swiped at Jayden’s bottom lip.

Groaning at the intrusion, Jayden welcomed the exploration with tentative swipes of her own. In the fantasies she played in her head, Sage had always been timid, shy, and unsure. But this was why reality eclipsed fantasy. She couldn’t have imagined the raw power Sage used to surge forward. Anything Jayden had tried to envision was wiped away with the pure strength of desire.

Sage walked Jayden to the wall, her back smacking against the smooth surface as their mouths explored. Sage ran her fingers along the back of Jayden’s undercut, the short hairs pulsing down her neck.

“You asked how I can know. Jayden, we’ve practically been dating for half a year. Look at the photos from the article, the one Marshal framed. You can see the proof of our falling. I see it in your eyes. Your touch. Your look burrows deeper into me every day.”

With that, words were no longer needed. Sage reclaimed her mouth, moving to her neck. Her tongue brushed over the

pulse point before nipping. Jayden's arms fell to Sage's back, pulling her closer.

"Ow." Jayden looked down, seeing Tuna attack her feet. "Get out of here, hellion." Jayden waved her foot in the air, trying to dislodge the kitten latched to her sock.

Sage's forehead landed on hers. She watched for a second before scooping up the kitten and cuddling him close to her chest. "I need a few moments with your human. I'll be back to give you snuggles, but first, I need to taste Jayden." She placed the cat down with a scratch to his back before grabbing Jayden's hand and pulling her towards the back of the apartment.

"You don't even know where to go." Jayden laughed as Sage dragged her through the halls.

"It doesn't matter. It's this way. That's all I need to know." Sage swung her around and captured her lips again, this time roughly.

The bruises her back and lips would develop were worth it. She shivered when Sage twisted her jeans button open, pulling Jayden's pants down over her butt and searching for the heat throbbing in her core.

Sage's fingers teased over the fabric of Jayden's briefs. Jayden would have been embarrassed at the copious amount of liquid coating her briefs, but Sage's flushed skin and enthusiastic moans kept the embarrassment at bay.

"Bedroom, now." Jayden recognized the strain in Sage's voice as she pulled her fingers from Jayden's briefs and stumbled towards a room.

"No, that's Lila's room. Over here." Jayden stopped her from opening her daughter's door. Even though she was in Alaska, it might have dampened the mood. Not willing to take any chances, she pulled Sage a few more doors down, passing the bathroom and closet before fumbling with the handle of her bedroom door.

The room was sparse, only holding a mattress on the floor like a college student. She hadn't even bothered to put her bed

frame together—a fact Jayden had completely forgotten about until that moment.

Sage faltered, taking everything in. After a beat, she pulled off her shirt and said, “Well, at least we don’t have to worry about falling off the bed.” Sage’s lips swallowed Jayden’s chuckle as they reconnected. Jayden felt a tug at her shirt. She took a few precious moments to lift her hands as Sage relinquished the garment.

“I’ve pictured this a thousand ways in my head.” Sage pushed Jayden down where she bounced once before settling on her forearms.

Sage started a slow striptease, lowering her own pants and underwear in a heap. The downshift from frantic to sensual started flutters in Jayden’s belly as she watched Sage sway her hips to a beat she could only hear and waited for her to move closer.

“I’ve got to say, Sage, I didn’t expect you to take control like this.” Jayden grabbed Sage’s waist when she was close enough and twisted them around so Sage’s back was against the bed while Jayden hovered over her.

“What can I say? I like what I like and go for it.” Sage opened her legs, letting Jayden settle between them. When she settled, she felt Sage’s abundant wetness coating her stomach, and Jayden wished she’d taken the time to rid herself of the pants still hanging halfway off her hips. “Fuck me, Jayden. Please. I’ve wanted you for so long.” Sage pulled her down for a scorching kiss that pulled a groan from them both.

Jayden moaned at Sage’s crass words as she gently caressed the outside of her folds, teasing her by holding off. If Sage’s bucking hips and flushed skin were any indication, Jayden was succeeding in her goal. Wiggling further down, she spread Sage’s legs, unable to hold off tasting her any longer.

“Please.” Sage’s hips undulated at the first swipe of Jayden’s tongue. “Jayden, please.”

Slipping a finger in, she relished the feeling of Sage's walls that seemed to pulsate around her. Jayden lapped around Sage's clit, knowing she needed more pressure but savoring the taste.

"Jayden, more." Sage pulled at her hair. Her hips tried to chase Jayden's mouth.

Unable to hold back, Jayden added another finger and unleashed her tongue, trying to find a rhythm with her fingers and Sage's thrusts. For their first time together, they were incredibly in sync. Sage's vocal ministrations created a perfect blueprint for her body; all Jayden had to do was be willing to follow the outline.

Sage's hips lifted off the bed while Jayden's mouth filled with her flooded orgasm. Their ragged breathing crowded the room. Jayden rested her head on Sage's belly, waiting for her heart rate to come down. Pulling her fingers out slowly, she relished the aftershocks of Sage's body. Lifting her fingers to her mouth, she cleaned her essence off as she studied the glazed look in Sage's eyes.

"Come up here," Sage demanded, pulling at Jayden's arms to help her settle at the crook of her arm. "My turn."

Nothing more was said as they continued to learn their bodies through the night.

# Chapter Nineteen

## *Morning, Beautiful*

Sage opened her eyes, feeling a flutter of panic as she looked around the unfamiliar room. Lifting her head, she realized the mattress was on the floor and remembered exactly where she was. She stretched towards Jayden, finding her side of the bed empty.

Settling in, Sage took stock of her body and mind. All she could find was pleasant soreness and blissfully blank thoughts. Jayden wasn't the first person she'd been with since Chris. For a few months after the accident, she'd tried to numb her feelings through meaningless one-night stands, but all it proved was she wasn't ready and didn't think she'd find someone. Last night had been the first time with feelings involved, and her heart expanded at what they'd shared together.

She winced when she replayed her breathy voice declaring her love. Although everything she said last night was true, it didn't mean she didn't feel crippling anxiety about the possibility of everything being one-sided.

"Morning, beautiful." Jayden walked in holding a tray. Coffee scents followed her as she walked to the mattress and bent down at her waist.

Sage dragged her eyes across Jayden's body, feeling slightly bereft at having missed her getting dressed. Her body ached to touch Jayden's skin, punctuated by her nipples hardening in the cool air. She didn't bother with the sheet, loving how Jayden's eyes drank in her breasts. The words may not have left her mouth, but Sage could see the affection in her eyes.

"Thank you, and you brought my favorite." Sage reached out for the steaming mug while eyeing Jayden, who hovered over the bed. "Want to join me?" Sage flipped the covers open



as an invitation. She might have flashed more thigh than strictly necessary, but Jayden's reactions were fun to read.

"I feel like we should talk, but all I want is to snuggle in your arms." Much to Sage's chagrin, Jayden stayed out of arm's length, squatting to put the tray on the ground.

"How about we talk in each other's arms?" Sage suggested, reaching out to pull her to the bed.

"If we stay here, I'll want to do this..." Jayden wrapped her lips around Sage's nipple and tugged, grazing her teeth along the skin in the combination that had almost made Sage come from that alone the night before.

"I see," Sage grunted as tingles tickled at the contact to her core. "In the interest of fairness, what if I put on my shirt?"

Jayden's eyes danced as she leaned back. "I suppose in the interest of fairness, by all means."

Sage leaned over the bed to put her coffee on the ground before grabbing her shirt. The fabric rubbed against her sensitive nipples that had puckered under Jayden's ministrations.

"What do you want to talk about? Do you think the Mariners will ever win the World Series?" Sage asked, not seeing the pillow Jayden launched playfully at her face. She barely heard Jayden's laughter through the muffled slap.

"No, not that. I feel like we went from zero to a thousand in a blink. I'm the type of person who needs a foundation to sleep with someone. This bombshell occurred, and I don't really know how to process it." Jayden played with a string coming off the edge of the pillowcase.

Sage thought for a second, trying to replay the previous day. Her thoughts continued down a dirty path as she remembered all they did, but Jayden's serious expression shook off the thoughts and she tried to focus. "To me, we have been setting a foundation. I may have been engaged to Marshal, but if you think about it, I was basically dating you. We've gone on dates, been through sickness together. I pepper sprayed you and you still did that amazing thing with your

tongue.” Sage took a breath before continuing. “Don’t you see? We haven’t gone from zero to a thousand in a blink. We’d already started little steps to get to where we are now. I’m in love with you, and I’ll wait for as long as needed to hear those words from you. Now I’m the one with a rambling problem.” Sage laughed self-consciously.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about. I wanted it just as much as you. It’s just I’ve wanted you for so long that it’s hard to believe you’re here and that you want me too. I’ve been fighting my feelings for you for so long that it might take a little bit for me to trust that this is okay, that I’m not hurting Marshal, and that you want me.”

Sage leaned forward to kiss her. It felt like forever since the last time she tasted Jayden’s lips. “After you left, Marshal and I talked. He’s happy for us.”

Jayden searched Sage’s eyes. Settling her head against the pillow, she opened her arms to let Sage curl at the crook of her shoulder. “Can you tell me what happened? Tell me everything?” Jayden asked, rubbing Sage’s back.

“It started with my wife’s death three years ago. I was a mess. Wouldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. Marshal dragged me back to life, kicking and screaming. He moved me into his house and ensured I ate, showered, he even got me back in a car. When he asked if I would consider marriage, I didn’t want to go through anything like that again. I thought I’d found my one love and was okay helping his campaign. It would have been a marriage of pure convenience.”

“Because he’s on the asexual spectrum?” Jayden asked.

“Yes. He said his polls were dipping. He needed someone he could trust, who could speak in public, but not someone who would expect more from him. I’d closed myself off to love and thought it would be a good way to pay back Marshal and spend my life with a great friend who had done so much for me. Little did I know I’d fall in love with his sister. That was a twist, especially after our first few interactions.”

Sage’s head bounced up and down at Jayden’s deep laugh. “Yeah, who knew I’d fall for my brother’s fiancée after she

accused me of being drunk not once, but multiple times.”

“Do you mean it?” Sage lifted her eyes, scanning Jayden’s face.

“What? That you accused me of being drunk? Of course, I mean it,” Jayden teased, earning a light slap on her arm.

“Ohhh, you mean falling for my brother’s fiancée. Yes, I meant every word. I love you, Sage. I was cursing Marshal’s name for his luck that he found you first.”

Sage scooted up and gently bit Jayden’s lower lip before soothing the pain with a zinging kiss. Throwing her leg over Jayden’s, they began grinding together, seeking friction while Sage started her way to the side of Jayden’s neck just below the ear. She’d found out last night it was a major pleasure point for her new lover. Cursing that there were so many clothes between them, she was about to rip off her shirt when Jayden’s phone pinged with a tone Sage knew to be Lennox.

Trying to cool her jets, she reluctantly pulled away, resting her forehead on Jayden’s arm.

“Sorry, I need to get that. It’s probably Lila; she said she’d call this morning.” Jayden felt around on the floor for her phone.

“Don’t apologize. I know Lennox and Lila are important. I’ll start breakfast.” Sage twisted to get out of the bed, but an arm stopped her progress.

“You don’t have to leave. Want to stay and talk?” Jayden danced the phone in the air, which was still flashing Lennox’s FaceTime call.

“Of course. Thank you.” Sage settled back on her shoulder.

“Hey Cricket. Oh, Len, it’s you.” Jayden smiled into the camera.

The face that filled the screen was gorgeous. Dark thick hair was pulled to the side, tattoos occupied her arms, and a warm, teasing smile played at her lips.

“Lennox, this is Sage. Sage, Lennox.” They exchanged waves as Sage tried to hide the blush creeping up. Even

though Lennox couldn't see her legs, she still tugged at her shirt to try to get the fabric below her knee.

“Oh, the famous Sage. Hmm, looks like we have more catching up to do, Jayden, especially with Sage having bedhead.” Lennox tried to wink, but both eyes closed.

Sage waited to see if a bout of jealousy would come, but all she found was contentment in Jayden's arms.

“Plus, I need to tell Sage all the embarrassing Jayden stories.” Lennox laughed while Jayden tapped the screen. Having zoned out in her thoughts, Sage had missed some of the conversation but loved the banter between the two.

“We'll have to go out for coffee if you come here. I'll be all ears for Jayden stories.” Sage snuggled into Jayden's arm, inhaling the scent at her neck.

“Marshal's okay with this?”

The question shouldn't have shocked her, but it did.

“Of course. You know me, I was wracking myself over this. I wouldn't have done anything to hurt him.” Jayden's teasing tone disappeared, and Sage saw a hard glint enter her eyes through the small window in the corner of the phone.

“I know. I'm sorry, I should have known better.” Lennox held up the hand that wasn't holding the phone. “I called because Lila wants to come home early. Pig isn't enough of a distraction, and she misses Tuna. I know we try to discourage her from leaving early, but I'm worried about the shooting, and if she's more comfortable at home right now, I don't see why we should discourage that, right?”

Jayden turned to Sage. It wasn't like she was asking permission but more acknowledging that things would change slightly when Lila was home. Not that Sage cared. She'd fallen in love with them both and already considered them to be a melded family.

“Of course, that's probably best. She's been there two weeks already. It's unusual for her not to have settled.”

“Yeah, those are my thoughts exactly. Okay, I’ll let you two talk and I’ll get Lila’s ticket sorted. Text ya the details when I know more. Sage, it was great to meet you finally. Lila talks about you constantly.”

“You too, Lennox.” Sage played with Jayden’s thigh as they waited for Lila to appear on the screen.

“Mom, what’s bedhead? Oh, hi Sage. What are you doing? Merry Christmas even though it was yesterday, but I didn’t talk to you yesterday. Is Tuna okay? I miss him and hope you are petting him the way he likes. Are you two together now? Can we get out of the apartment if you are and go back to the house? I liked it when Sage played basketball with me. Mom, look, I can blink a little better, watch.” Lila concentrated on the screen. The eyelid on the side that was paralyzed closed slower, but she was right; it seemed to be a little better.

“Good job, Lila. It looks like the medication is working.”

Sage tried to go through the list of questions but was lost after bedhead.

“Does this mean you can be my other-other-mom?” Lila asked on her way to the wall. The camera work was shaky as she reached into a cage and pulled something out.

“I’m not sure about other-other-mom yet, but yes we are together. I hope you’re okay with that.” And just like that, Sage had a family she loved. Her heart expanded as she thought of the path that had led her here.

“I wanted you to be together.” Lila shrugged, holding a pet hamster in her hand. “Sage, this is Pig. He’s not as fun as Tuna but he stays in my room.” Lila juggled the hamster and phone. Sage was glad that it was the phone when one fell to the ground.

Getting a good look at the ceiling, then Lila’s nose as she bent to pick up the object, Sage knew she was right where she was supposed to be.

“Alright, Sage and I are going to grab some food, and your mama is getting you a return flight, so I’ll see you soon, okay? Love you, Cricket.”

“Love you too, Mom. Love you, Sage, bye.”

The words squeezed a happy extra thump out of her heart.  
“Love you, Bug. See you soon.”

Once the phone went blank, Sage took a few seconds to watch Jayden’s reflection on the dark screen until it faded completely. It felt like she’d just had a bowl of warm soup. Her body felt full and loved by the people surrounding her.

“I’ll go make some breakfast.” Jayden’s neck cracked as she turned to kiss Sage’s temple.

“And I’ll help you.” Sage crawled out of the bed, unable to keep from kissing and touching Jayden on their way to the kitchen.

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“What if you stay engaged until after the polls?” Jayden asked the small group. She caressed the top of Sage’s hand that lay softly along her thigh.

Ivan, Marshal, Sage, Morgan, and Jayden were sitting around the table in the big house a few days after Christmas. They were brainstorming ideas on how to handle things going forward but hadn’t gotten very far.

Cartoons were playing in the living room. Last time Jayden checked, Tuna was curled up around Lila’s neck, and both slept soundly.

“I don’t know. If it came out that you were in a marriage of convenience, things could go downhill. People might not trust Marshal.” Ivan rubbed at their chin.

“Plus, I don’t want to have to hide,” Sage added.

“I wouldn’t want you to either.” Marshal took a sip of the beer he was nursing.

They’d been going back and forth but still hadn’t found a solution.

“What about me?” Morgan asked the table. Her voice filled with strained embarrassment.

The answer was almost too obvious. Jayden was left wondering why she hadn't thought of that before.

“I don't want a physical relationship. Purely platonic. We know each other and have worked closely for years. Although I'm not as good of a public speaker as Sage, it might work.” Morgan finished her points as she ran her finger across the seam on the table.

Jayden looked at Marshal, whose eyes had lit up at the suggestion.

“Hmm interesting, how about we sit on that? I don't want you two to jump into anything you're not ready for. Let's deal with the information of the breakup first, then if you still want to move forward, we'll work on the next phases. After that, we can talk more about it, but I'm absolutely beat.” A sparkle returned to Ivan's face now that there was something to work towards.

The group dispersed. Sage and Jayden crept to the living room to check on Lila, who was still asleep.

They stayed, hovering over the couch in each other's arms. Jayden's life had brightened when she started getting to know Sage. Now with her cuddled in her arms, she wasn't going to let go.

“Will you move back to the guest house? We can build onto it, or the property is big enough to build another house.” Marshal walked up, talking quietly in order not to wake Lila.

“Lila's been bugging me to move back to the guest house. She thinks Tuna's more settled there, but I believe that's her way of saying she feels more comfortable,” Jayden said, peering at her sleeping daughter.

“I'll get a moving van tomorrow. It's settled. Time for you to come home.” Marshal clapped his hands together before wincing when he realized how loud it was.

“Want to move in with me?” Jayden whispered in Sage's ear. Her smile stretched across her hairline when she felt Sage

shiver.

“Really?”

Instead of answering, she nodded against her cheek, nibbling her neck. “We’ll need a U-Haul and extra key,” Jayden said, loving how Sage squealed in excitement and wiggled around in her arms in a victory dance. “Get it? U-Haul.” She wagged her eyebrows and ducked when Sage went to lightly whack her arm.

“Did you just make a lesbian joke?” Sage whispered loudly.

“It’s right there. We’ve been together for thirty seconds and we’re already talking about moving in together.” Jayden held up her hands with an exaggerated shrug.

“I hate to ask, but Sage, can you be at my side at the rally in two days?” Marshal asked quietly.

“Oh crap, I completely forgot about that.” Sage ran her hands through her hair.

“I wouldn’t ask, except this one is important, and we won’t have enough time to go through our timeline for the breakup.”

“Of course I’ll be there, and if you need me to speak at future events, just let me know. You’re a vital candidate, and more importantly still my best friend.”

Marshal’s body slumped in relief while Jayden’s heart swelled. She’d never felt closer to her brother and was ecstatic knowing all their relationships were as strong as ever.

Two days later, Jayden weaved her way through the crowds, trying to get a good spot to see the stage. Someone from security was trailing her since Marshal wasn’t taking any chances for the event. He’d doubled security since the shooting and added even stronger gun control to his platform. A few family members whose loved ones died in the shooting stood behind the speaker, showing their support.

The venue was packed and loud. Reaching into her pocket, Jayden pulled out a pair of earplugs. She hated the muffled



sound, feeling like she might miss something important, but it was better than the headache tomorrow would bring.

“As a lot of you know, I’m Sage, Marshal’s best friend and ex-fiancée.”

Sage’s voice was distorted through the microphone, and Jayden choked on the water she’d just taken a sip of. The crowd had gone silent, giving Sage their full attention.

“Our relationship might have taken an unexpected turn, but it will be lovingly dissolved. Now, you might be asking what the heck am I doing up here? We might not be continuing our journey together, but he will always be my best friend.” Sage paused and lowered her voice.

The crowd leaned in, trying to catch everything she said. Jayden was proud of her ability to hold an audience of this size. Not that she was surprised but watching her in action elicited a warmth that spread through her body.

“Marshal’s campaign is solid. Listen to his points and hear what he’s saying because this type of candidate doesn’t come along every day. His stance is real, and his views are real. He doesn’t take big corporate handouts.” Sage had to wait for the crowd to quiet their surge of support. “Marshal will do what’s best for you. I know this because he asked me to stand by his side, which I gladly did, thinking it was the best way to fight for the middle class. Jobs are coming back to Washington.” The crowd cheered again. “You’ve heard enough of my voice, so everyone please welcome my very best friend, Marshal Quincy.” Sage swept her arm behind her, and Marshal grabbed and kissed the back of her hand.

The crowd yelled for more, but all Sage gave was her two-hand wave at the crowd. It seemed impossible, but her eyes locked on Jayden, and she blew a kiss before walking back to the huddle of people behind the podium.

Marshal started speaking, but Jayden only had eyes for Sage as she digested what had happened. For Sage to go so off script, something had to have occurred.

Working her way backstage, Jayden showed the pass that allowed access and took out her earplugs as she waited in the lounge for everyone to finish. She didn't have to wait long, not realizing how long it had taken her to work her way to the room.

The buzz of conversation filled the space as Jayden scanned the unfamiliar faces until Sage's came into view. Sage ran up and jumped into her arms when she saw her standing in a corner. It was lucky Jayden was able to brace fast, or they both would have ended up on the floor. Instead, Jayden relished in cradling Sage's upper thighs as they wrapped around her waist.

"Hi, miss me?" Sage asked, her lips millimeters from Jayden's.

"Always," Jayden replied, turning to prop her back against the wall. "Was there a game change?" Jayden asked, burrowing into Sage's neck.

"Patricia came to us before the speech saying she was outing the story tomorrow, saying she had proof that it was a marriage of convenience. Morgan was amazing and rewrote the script in fifteen minutes. We needed to get ahead of Patricia, hence what came out today." Sage leaned in to press her lips against Jayden's.

"Get a room!" Marshal yelled from the other end of the room.

"We have one, you're just in it," Sage called back to the absolute cackles of everyone else.

Jayden pulled Sage closer. "I can't wait to have you alone in our room."

Sage shivered, which was the intended reaction. "Come on. I have a few more things to take care of before I can get out of here. Will you stay?" Even if Sage weren't running her fingers over her undercut and biting her lower lip with abandon, Jayden would have stayed.

"Do what you need to do. I'm not going anywhere." Jayden lowered her to the floor. The look Sage gave her sent a

trail of shivers down her spine.

“You were amazing. Good job.” Ivan came up beside them, completely interrupting the moment they were having.

“Thanks, Ivan. Morgan did beautifully, as always, but whoever changed my wardrobe seriously wins. That was a game changer.” Sage twisted her dress and pointed a foot out to show her comfortable yet stylish shoes.

Jayden stared at her exposed leg but tried to recover quickly with a cough.

“Jayden was the one who suggested a few months back that more comfort over pure style would yield better results. Looks like she was right,” Ivan said, swiping through their phone.

Jayden clenched at Sage’s arm, trying to ground herself, unsure how Sage would react.

“Really?” Sage’s eyes lifted to meet hers. “You did that for me, even back then?”

“It’s not a big deal.” Jayden tried to shrug it off. “It was literally a two-minute observation and conversation.”

“See, but that’s where you are wrong. It is a big deal. So often we are taught to grin and bear it. My toes remember the previous event. Seriously, it’s amazing.” Sage’s lips met hers. Pulling back slightly she whispered, “Thank you” in the shell of her ear.

Jayden could only nod as she relished Sage’s warm breath on her neck. Thinking back on where they’d started, Jayden couldn’t believe they had ended up where they did.

When Sage finished up the rest of her list, Jayden turned to her and held out her hand as the words, “Ready to go home?” left her lips. She couldn’t believe her luck when Sage nodded.

# Epilogue

*The Bigger Picture: About one year later*

“What the hell is that?” Jayden yelled, running her hand through her hair. Sage tapped her pencil against her lips, trying not to laugh at her girlfriend.

“You’re the one drawing. How do you not know?” Sage pushed her gently. “Come on! Draw something other than that circle over and over again over the square thing.” Even after a year, Jayden was still bad at Pictionary, but Sage found her antics hilarious, which meant she was always on her team.

“Time’s up!” Lila screamed, pointing frantically at the timer when the last sand granule fell.

“It’s *The Ring*.” Jayden sighed, tossing her pencil on the table.

“*The Ring*? So instead of drawing hands and a diamond on someone’s finger, you pick an obscure movie reference, knowing I hate horror movies?” Sage threw up her hands. “Who wants to trade partners with me?” The outburst was met with vigorously shaking heads from the other side of the table.

“You told me I couldn’t draw details anymore, and I didn’t want to get in trouble when I put fingers on the hand. I panicked. I can’t work under these conditions.” Jayden’s arms crossed over her chest, but she barely held back a grin.

“I put the detail rule down when you put eyelashes on a person.”

“What if the word was mascara?” Jayden challenged.

“It wasn’t. It was a kneecap,” Sage deadpanned, shaking her head.

“You cheated. This game is rigged.” Jayden turned an accusing eye to her daughter.

“How?” Lila looked between Marshal and her mom, confusion twisting her face. There was still a slight tilt, and her

glasses would probably always look crooked, but all things considered she was a well-adjusted, delightful kid.

“I don’t know the logistics yet, but I know you had something to do with the time moving faster for us than it does for you and Marshal.” Jayden stuck her tongue out at Lila, who rolled her eyes while petting the sleeping cat on her lap.

Sage looked between the group, feeling a swell of love for the family she now felt officially part of. Well, hopefully, officially, if Marshal and Lila played the game of Pictionary right. Because Jayden was correct: The game was a bit rigged. Her heart pounded as they approached go time. It was going to be three hours before the ball dropped on New Year.

A month into dating Jayden, Sage had had a ring picked out but wanted everything to be perfect, so she enlisted the help of Marshal and Lila along with Morgan, who was planning to move in sometime after the new year.

Instead of jumping headlong into something convenient or fake for the public, Morgan and Marshal, dubbed lovingly the M&M’s, took things slowly to build a foundation and found themselves compatible in many areas that mattered. Marshal came out as asexual to the rest of his closest friends.

Sage shuddered to think of what would have happened if Marshal had originally asked Morgan instead of herself to play the role of a wife. She definitely wouldn’t be sitting at the table waiting for the timing to be suitable to ask her ex-fiancé’s twin if she would marry her.

“Are you already falling asleep, Sage?” Jayden teased, snapping Sage out of her mental picture of how she would draw the clue coming up.

“Sleep? How could I possibly be falling asleep with all the yelling? Who would have thought we’d need throat lozenges to play Pictionary.” Sage rubbed her throat dramatically while Marshal and Lila whispered on the other end of the table.

“Oh, did you see in the news that Brandi was forced to go to rehab?” Marshal asked as he reached for a new sheet of paper to draw on.

“No. Do you know what happened?” Jayden asked, taking a sip of beer.

“Apparently she was pulled over for erratic driving and elected to go to rehab. The show is sticking behind her though.” Marshal winced when he said the last piece.

“I honestly hope she gets the help she needs,” Jayden said, shrugging. Under the table she reached for Sage’s hand and squeezed. “If I was still on the show, I wouldn’t have met Sage, and I can’t find it in me to be upset about that.” Jayden leaned to put her head on Sage’s shoulder.

“Ahh you two.” Marshal threw popcorn in jest across the table. “Let’s get back to the game.”

“Okay Sage, it’s your turn to draw.” Jayden lifted her head and kissed her cheek. “I can’t wait for the show.”

Sage blushed. Jayden might have meant the play Sage was in that was opening in a couple of weeks. However, the timber in her voice told her she might be indicating the bedtime activities they would be having shortly.

“Mom, did you already pack my sound machine?” Lila looked up from moving her piece.

“No, I’ll carry it to the new place tomorrow. You know how the fireworks like to go off the day after New Year’s. We also have your noise-canceling headphones, and I can create a fort in the closet if it gets too overwhelming, okay?”

Lila processed the information, looking exactly like Jayden. Sage put her hand on Jayden’s leg, who unconsciously leaned into her touch.

“That works,” Lila said, doodling on the paper in front of her.

Her face was starting to lose some color. Sage knew her well enough now that she was trying to put on a brave face, but the previous year’s firework display had her in a constant state of anxiety that hadn’t seemed to dissipate until February. The year of counseling seemed to have helped, and Sage hoped the distraction of helping her propose would also relieve some stress.

Marshal was whispering something to Lila, and he discreetly pointed to the card Sage knew was hiding under a stack of their paper. Sage's heart raced, knowing it was soon go-time.

The card she picked wasn't what she expected, and she dejectedly had to draw a pen. Jayden guessed correctly about fifteen seconds in and triumphantly moved their piece four more spaces.

"Alright, this is an all-play." Lila slid the card over to her mom, who nodded and cracked her neck.

"Ready, go!" Lila screamed, leaning over her own paper and drawing frantically. Her tongue stuck out to the side, exactly like Jayden's. A bubble of anticipation ran down Sage's spine, knowing the next time she drew would be life-changing.

"Walk?" Marshal guessed, bringing Sage's attention back to Jayden's paper.

There were two figures, and one looked—no, that couldn't be right. Sage glanced up at Lila who was still scribbling away. "Umm, it looks like a blow job, but that can't be right," Sage whispered to Jayden, who snorted, shaking her head. She glanced at Lila, who luckily hadn't heard her.

"It's definitely not that. Come on, we have to beat them." Jayden added fingers to one of the figures which made it look like a hand job, which wasn't any better.

"Beachcombing?" Marshal guessed and a scrape came from the other side of the table, but Sage was focused on figuring out the scene unfolding on Jayden's paper.

"Bad back? Back thrown? Muscle spasm?" Sage rapid-fired guessed, still at a loss to the scribbles Jayden was throwing out there on the page.

"Maybe this will help," Jayden said, pointing to Lila across the way.

When Sage turned, she gasped. Lila had a velvet box open with a ring nestled in the fabric.

“Mom asked me to help three weeks before you did.”  
Lila’s eyes shone behind her glasses.

“Can you guess what it is now?” Jayden pointed at the badly drawn ring from before with an arrow to a finger. “You are everything I hoped to find in a partner, and I can’t tell you how often I went to bed cursing Marshal’s luck at finding you first. So, when you finally showed me the bigger picture, I of course ran from it. But, because you are you, you pulled me back and revealed to me everything I’d been wanting. You’re my best friend and an amazing co-parent to Lila, and I hope we can add ‘wonderful wife’ to that growing list.”

Sage sat back, stunned at the turn of events. “Mama Sage, what do you think? Or do you need this as a reminder?” Lila pulled out the container that she’d know anywhere.

Jayden leaned back. “You were planning on today too?”

“Not only today, but the exact same way, although I practiced my drawing. I’m pretty sure you would have guessed it.” Sage blinked, trying to regroup.

“You still haven’t answered.” Jayden reached over and pulled the rings closer.

“Of course.” Sage launched herself from the chair and into Jayden’s lap. Lila’s squeal could be heard from five houses down as she dropped Tuna in the chair and ran over to greet them in a hug.

“Welcome to the family, Sage. I knew you’d fit right in.”  
With twinkling eyes, Marshal raised his glass to them.

Who knew that she’d start with a fiancé of convenience and end up with a real wife and kid? Sage couldn’t have been happier at the way her life was turning out. She’d like to think Chris was smiling in the corner, having played some part in bringing her happiness again.

Later that night, Sage stared at her ring. In her periphery, sitting on their bedside table, was the photo of them at the baseball game Marshal had given them almost a year ago. As Jayden’s lips met hers, the fireworks burst to bring in the new



year. Sage felt her heart fill with everything that had come into her life and was excited to start the new year with her new family.

The End

# Other work by Violet Morley

Contemporary sapphic romance:

[Sprinkled in the Stars](#)

[Under the Sitka Sky](#)

Historical sapphic romance:

[Promises in Pompeii](#)



## About the Author

Violet Morley (she/her) grew up on a small island in Alaska. She decided to trade rain and trees for trees and rain in the beautiful state of Washington, where she resides with her unbelievably supportive wife and their ferocious cat named Pigeon.

Writing has always been a hobby for Violet, but just recently, in 2021, it became a passion as she published a novel with plans for many more. When she isn't writing, she's getting lost in Sapphic books, especially since they don't require her to leave the house.

Violet uses humor in her own life to tackle the more challenging times and humor again in everything else. She loves a good pun and a nice hearty beer.