



**THE
FOREVER
FORMULA**



New York Times & USA Today Bestseller

KENDALL RYAN

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**THE
FOREVER
FORMULA**

HART BROTHERS, BOOK ONE

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling author

KENDALL RYAN

The Forever Formula

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About the Book

Welcome to Kodiak Canyon, where the men outnumber the women, the beards are impressive, and the beer is home-brewed.

Second chances and first loves . . .

Rachel Tyson never expected to be single, unemployed, and starting over in the remote mountain town she'd worked so hard to escape.

After inheriting her grandfather's rustic cabin, her only goal is to sell the thing and move on. The place holds too many memories—not all of them good. But complicating her plan is the big, grumpy, and highly overprotective Noah Hart. They share some ancient history, and maybe a secret or two. But Rachel doesn't need saving this time. Not really, anyway.

Too bad Noah isn't about to let her get away again.

Overprotective hero. Free-spirited heroine. Opposites attract. Slow burn. Small-town gossip and loads of feels. This one has it all. Don't miss The Forever Formula!

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Rachel

After a full day of sitting in the driver's seat of my little car, my entire body ached. But with each passing mile marker on the long stretch of highway, I knew I was being called home. And while *home* wasn't a place I had been in a long time, I could use a little comfort, a little familiarity right now.

Not just because my life had completely imploded a few weeks ago when I broke off my engagement with Roger, or even when I'd been laid off from the hospital where I'd worked for the past seven years. It was so much bigger than that. I'd also recently lost my grandfather, the man who'd raised me, and some days . . . well, the realization that I was officially alone in the world made it hard to breathe.

I twisted the knob on the radio to turn up the volume on a country song I used to know all the words to, and that seemed to chase away some of my more somber thoughts. And if that didn't totally do the trick, well, I had a five-pound bag of red licorice from my last gas-station stop sitting in my lap that should provide a much-needed jolt. Or at least a sugar rush.

I knew what my best friend Megan would say. *Dust yourself off. Put on some lipstick and get on with it.*

And that's exactly what I intended to do.

It didn't matter that Megan was three years younger than me . . . she had always been somehow wiser than her years. She was the one good thing I had left back at the hospital

where we both had worked. We resuscitated a teenager from the brink of death the first day we met, and our friendship was instant after that.

Grabbing another licorice stick, I took a healthy bite and sang along to the twangy country song with my mouth full. Good manners didn't necessarily matter when you'd been alone for going on sixteen hours.

But I was through with most of my trip now. I'd started off in Houston and driven west, appreciating all the details that I hadn't in so long.

The pastures in West Texas. The little adobe-style pink houses in New Mexico. Gosh, even the smell of cow manure as I cruised along the highway was comfortingly familiar. Then, the changing landscape in Colorado, rugged and rocky and colorful. The trees were somehow greener here.

It had been muggy when I'd left Houston, but the humidity was no surprise. I'd gotten used to the Texas summers after living there for the past decade. Even the early morning rain hadn't been enough to cool the air. It had only made it more oppressive—difficult to breathe. Now, though, the air was clean and fresh, and the sky was painted a brilliant robin's egg blue.

I never expected to be ending an engagement at this age. I'd always felt like a late bloomer, and now I would be starting over from scratch. But that's exactly what I hoped this was—a fresh start. A chance to reconnect with myself, nurse my wounds, and maybe even make some new goals for myself. There was no use in looking back.

Maybe that's what my grandfather wanted when he left me his property in the mountains. It was a magical place, after all. Acreage and river access. Miles of hiking trails and towering pine trees. Also, thanks in large part to the family of brothers living next door, the place had always held a special intrigue.

My mouth twitched with a smile for the first time since I began this road trip.

The Hart brothers certainly inspired plenty of teenage fantasies and hope-filled daydreams. We'd spent summers chasing fireflies and catching bullfrogs, and winters building snowmen and sledding on the hills between our two neighboring properties. My first kiss was with the oldest brother, Jameson, which could have possibly led to more firsts had he not been such a gentleman.

With my curiosity piqued, my mind wandered freely.

Would they all be married now, maybe even with a few kids between them? Or maybe they'd all moved away to the city for work, just like I had.

There were four boys in their family. First, there was the stoic Jameson, whose smiles were rare and hard-won, followed by Austen, who was always kind to me. Then came Noah, with a mischievous streak that ran a mile wide, which meant we often got into trouble together—not that I minded much. I would have done anything he asked me to. The youngest of the four was Logan, and he'd followed us everywhere.

But when I thought about the Hart brothers, it was inevitable that my mind drifted to Noah. I still felt guilty about

the fact I went away to college and never looked back, even though we'd both whispered promises of more. I was sure those were only wistful hormone-fueled things that teenagers said but didn't really mean.

Weren't they?

It didn't matter now. There was a lifetime of experiences and broken promises and dreams that had taken detours between us. Even *if* Noah still lived next door, he probably didn't even remember the silly secrets we'd once shared.

The road signs became increasingly concerning the closer I got to home.

Moose Crossing.

Beware of Falling Rock.

And then finally, *Avalanche Area, Next 4 Miles.*

But it was September. There certainly wasn't any threat of an avalanche now.

Years ago, though, when I'd lived here, you'd occasionally hear of some accident up on the mountain—a skier who found trouble, an unfortunate snowmobile accident, or the infrequent, but always terrifying, avalanche.

Finally approaching Kodiak Canyon, I soaked in all the details, both familiar and new.

The little diner called Lotaburger was still there. It had easily been standing for three decades now, and it was starting to look its age. I recalled outings there with my grandfather,

sitting in the sticky vinyl booths, and the green chili burgers on the menu.

A small pinch formed in my chest for the man who had raised me, along with disbelief that he was gone. It still didn't seem real. Surely, he'd be out on the porch to greet me, just like always, when I arrived.

There was a new brick building with a sign that read *Tribal Courthouse*, and a few marijuana dispensaries that must have cropped up with the changing laws over the past several years. There was also a new veterinary clinic called Paradise Pet Hospital, and a vegetarian restaurant that I couldn't imagine Grandpa Paul eating at.

He thought gravy was its own food group, smoked a pack a day, and ate aspirin like it was candy. It was a miracle he'd lived as long as he had. He'd survived two heart attacks and a bout with cancer. He'd had his knee replaced and was supposed to use a breathing machine when he slept. I don't think he'd ever taken a vitamin in his entire life. And yet he seemed invincible like he'd live on forever.

Of course he hadn't. Eighty-four years, and now he was gone.

I hated that we wouldn't have any more long conversations, or Christmases spent together around an evergreen tree he'd cut down just for the occasion, the wood-burning fireplace crackling softly in the background.

Grandpa was completely unnerved by crying. He didn't know how to react to tears, so it was something I learned not to do too often. Maybe *that* was the reason I hadn't cried yet.

As I made the final turn off the main road that led to town onto the dirt mountain road, my nostalgia only deepened.

I finally pulled up to the cabin and parked in the gravel driveway, stepping out into the fresh mountain air. I stretched and let out a quiet groan. A squirrel dashed away at the sight of me.

Grandpa had insisted we didn't have a funeral; he always found those to be depressing. Instead, his ashes would be waiting for me at the funeral home per his carefully written instructions. I was to scatter them around the property.

Considering that I was leaning toward selling it, though, I wasn't sure I'd be able to honor his wishes. Not if I'd never be able to come back to this place and be in his presence.

But that was future Rachel's problem. For now, all I wanted to do was stretch my legs a bit and make sure the cabin was in a livable state, since I was exhausted and would need sleep very soon.

Sticking my key in the old lock, I gave it the familiar wiggle to the right. The thing always stuck, but Grandpa called it our security system.

As the door creaked open, the familiar smell of the place hit my nostrils, sending another pang of loss through me. It was surreal to be here without him.

Noah

“Did you hear what happened to old man Tyson?” my brother Austen asked, joining me in the work shed.

I was hunched over a label maker, trying to get the damn thing to cooperate. “Yeah, Mom said something yesterday. It’s a damn shame.”

Austen nodded, adjusting his ball cap.

Paul Tyson, our elderly neighbor, died a few days ago when his truck hit a moose out on the stretch of two-lane highway. Moose tended to become disoriented this time of year—during rut. Paul had been a good neighbor for as long as I could remember, and I hated to think he was gone. Just like that.

“Probably smelled a female on the other side of the road,” Austen said.

I nodded and smoothed my thumb over the label I’d just affixed to a bottle of beer.

“Looks crooked,” Mom said, coming in behind Austen.

I rolled my eyes. *Way to be helpful, Mom.*

“Brought you breakfast,” she said, placing a couple of foil-wrapped breakfast sandwiches on the workbench between Austen and me.

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

Mom produced a thermos of coffee next and two enamel mugs. “Eat up. It’s going to be a long day.”

She wasn’t wrong. There were three cases of beer bottles that needed labeling and firewood to split, not to mention loading the truck for an upcoming shipment.

Staying on time with shipments was important to our business. Austen and I had a certain reputation of being more reliable than other small brewers. And if every label was going to be as painful as this one to affix, it was going to take me a long-ass time to get this right.

I unwrapped a sandwich and took a bite while Austen inspected the label. It was definitely crooked.

“If we can get a good price on that land next door, we could increase the size of our growing operation,” he said, helping himself to one of the sandwiches.

“The earth’s barely settled on the old man’s grave, and you’re talking about buying the land out from under him?” Mom scoffed. “I’m sure the place is going to Rachel. She’s the only family he had.”

The mention of Rachel’s name shouldn’t still affect me after all these years, but the food in my mouth might as well have turned to dust. I swallowed unevenly and pushed the sandwich away.

Once upon a time, Rachel had meant a lot to me. But that was a long time ago, and there was no sense in rehashing things that might have been.

“He wasn’t buried,” I said.

We'd have definitely attended a service if there'd been one, but Paul had made it clear to people who knew him that he didn't want any fuss about him. He never even let us get him a birthday cake.

"You know what I mean," Mom said, chiding me.

Austen ran a hand over his beard while he watched me, waiting to hear what I'd say on the subject.

"Wouldn't we be helping them out? Can you actually see his granddaughter staying here? *Living* here?" I asked, which only threatened to spark my own imagination of what that would be like.

Not that I knew her anymore. It had been almost ten years since she left town, and when she came back for holidays, her trips were short.

Austen smirked. "It would certainly help the male-to-female ratio in this town."

There was no way Rachel was still single. Even back as a teenager, she had been gorgeous.

I imagined time had been kind to her, but I wouldn't know. Once she left this town in the rearview, she left it for good. Me included. Not that I wanted to take a trip down memory lane right now. I had too much to do.

The farmers' market was tomorrow. In addition to selling things from Mom's garden, plus her homemade candles and honey, my brother Austen and I would be debuting a new craft beer we hoped would be a hit.

The only product we had in our line right now was an IPA, and we needed to sell our new lager if we wanted to increase profits at this point. We had a few breweries who were regulars, but so far, expanding distribution to more places was proving next to impossible. The logical next step was to add new products to sell to our existing customers.

Mom made a displeased sound and scowled at Austen. “That poor girl lost the only parent she’s ever known, and all you can see is dollar signs? I’m sure she’s not selling, and even if she were, we’re not buying.”

“We need to consider it,” Austen said around a mouthful of breakfast sandwich. “I’m going down to the bank today to see if we can qualify for a small business loan.”

I couldn’t remember the exact size of the property, but it had to be at least a dozen acres or so. How we would afford it, I had no idea.

But Austen was right. We should look into it. He and I had to make this work.

We were under a growing financial strain to get everything to come together. Our land—all thirty-five acres of it—had been in the family for three generations. Our great-grandfather had moved the Hart clan out here during the time of the Gold Rush. He’d never found his fortune, but maybe we could claim ours.

It wasn’t gold that my brother and I were after, though. The land was plentiful, and the soil was rich.

We'd discovered quite by accident that we liked making our own beer. Once we had the fermentation process down, it was only logical that instead of buying the hops and grains we needed, that we take a stab at growing them.

Money might not grow on trees, but growing beer in your garden is almost as just as cool. Plus, it's pretty fun showing at to a party with a couple of growlers of ale you'd made yourself. So, while I had figured out harvesting and bottling, my older brother Austen was busy shaping and reshaping the business plan.

If he thought that included adding more land to our portfolio, I was hesitant to question him. He had a certain eye for details that I didn't have. Even if he got on my nerves a lot, we made a pretty good team. I ran the production operation, and he was the money guy.

"Did you get that elk jerky that sold so well last time?" Austen asked.

"Shit." I knew I'd forgotten something.

Austen let out a heavy exhale. I was used to disappointing him—that was nothing new. He was always on me to make a calendar, or a list, to set reminders in my phone.

That just wasn't who I was, though. I was happy to wake up at dawn and work all day, but writing out some list to follow? Not my thing.

All the more reason not to let myself get distracted by thoughts of the girl who broke my heart once upon a time. I needed to stay focused on the vision.

Going back to working while someone else got rich off my efforts wasn't going to happen. I'd spent too many summers already, breaking my back for other people's dreams. After nearly four years of brewing beer for fun and two more years hustling to get this far, nothing was going to stop me.

Especially not Rachel Tyson.

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Rachel

Arriving at the empty cabin where I grew up was harder than I'd expected it would be.

Devoid of any life or warmth, it felt like a completely different place. It looked exactly the same as the day I left, but it couldn't have *felt* more different.

I stood in the entryway for a long time—like if I took a step through the door, it would all be real. But, of course, I knew it was real. Grandpa was really gone, and so I finally made myself go on inside and closed the door behind me.

It was so quiet. Too quiet.

The woodburning stove rested squarely in the corner of the front room. The hallway that led to the bedrooms and bathroom was dark, and suddenly I wondered if my bedroom was still the same way I'd left it. After passing by the kitchen, which was clean and tidy, I ventured down the hall to find out.

The sight of my grandfather's room—with his bed neatly made in the same old green-and-blue quilt he'd used for decades—sent a pang of longing through me. There was a framed photo of him and me on his dresser. I was probably about ten years old at the time and was holding a fishing pole with a big catfish on the hook. Grandpa looked as proud as could be.

Squeezing my eyes closed for a second, I drew in a slow breath.

My bedroom looked much the same. Same twin-size bed under the window. Same tall chest of drawers against the far wall, with a desk next to it. The familiarity of it was both haunting and comforting.

And while it was kind of eerie being here, there was no place else for me—at least not at the moment. I had no job to go to, no place to call home, and no fiancé anymore.

Leaving Roger was for the best, though. He was overbearing, and it took me way too long to see it. I hadn't even realized the implication of moving into his house with him. Now, after two years of paying rent to him, I had to leave with nothing to show for it while he'd actually made a profit.

Even if I was being assaulted by memories everywhere I looked, being here felt better than being in Texas at the moment. I stopped at the dining room window and gazed outside, remembering sledding down the hill in the back and hiking over the far ridge.

Even the creaky floorboard in the hallway reminded me of sneaking out and trying to be quiet. My destination, of course, had been the neighboring land that belonged to the Hart family. It was hard not to feel a pang of emotion as I thought about the family next door. Maybe it was because some hidden part of me had always longed for a big family.

There was always something going on at that house. It was constantly loud. Happy. Four boys running around, with a dozen friends in and out. Their fridge was always stocked full of snacks, and Natalie, the ever-doting matriarch of the brood, loved playing host, even if she complained about it from time

to time. To me, they had the ideal household, like a TV family. The perfect childhood.

Not that my childhood wasn't a happy one. It was. Very much so. I loved my grandfather, and he had done an incredible job raising me. But I'd always longed for more, for at least a memory or two of my parents.

Maybe if I'd had a sibling, I wouldn't feel so alone right now. A sister, maybe, who would fly into town and stay here with me. We would mourn together, and she would help me figure out how things should go.

Grandpa hadn't wanted a fuss, as he called it, so there was nothing to plan. He hadn't wanted a funeral. Waste of money, he'd once said.

He'd been cremated two days after his passing, and at some point, I knew that Mr. Davis from the funeral home would drop off the urn for me. It was something I was dreading, especially with no one here to share it with. I must have gotten used to having Roger around, because at least he paid some attention, however minimal, to my needs.

"Knock, knock!" a female voice called out from the front porch.

Confusion raced through me as I made my way toward the door. "Yes?"

A face I hadn't seen in years appeared at the doorway.
Natalie Hart.

Her hair was completely gray now and cut into an efficient but stylish shoulder-length bob. Her eyes had a few more

wrinkles around them than I remembered, but her smile was every bit as kind. Just seeing her here soothed my ragged nerves.

“Look at you,” she said, smiling. “Even prettier than I remember.”

I smiled right along with her and let her pull me in for a hug when I opened the screen door. When was the last time I’d hugged someone? I savored the closeness of the only person I’d ever remotely seen as a mother figure.

“Are you okay?” she asked, releasing me and giving me a serious look.

I nodded and swallowed a lump of emotion in my throat. “I’m not sure it’s really hit me yet.”

She nodded. “I don’t think it’s hit any of us. We all loved him.”

Her words were a comfort to me. “Thanks for coming by.”

“You bet.” She held up a basket. “I brought you some goodies.”

It contained fresh blueberry muffins and an assortment of tea bags. A couple of shiny red apples. It was a small gesture, but it meant so much to me.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the basket. “Would you like some tea? Surely, I can locate a kettle . . .” I glanced toward the kitchen.

She shook her head. “That’s okay. I can’t stay. But I wanted to invite you to come over for a glass of wine tomorrow

evening.”

I nodded my acceptance. “I’d love to.”

“Great. Seven o’clock?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. We can get all caught up.” Natalie hesitated on the front porch as if there was something else on her mind. “One more thing . . . Will there be a service for your grandfather? We were all wondering. We’d like to pay our respects.”

I shook my head. “No, you know Grandpa.”

“Stubborn as an ox,” Natalie said with a glint of amusement in her eyes, like she was remembering one of the many times he did something outlandish that left us all exasperated.

“Exactly.” I smiled for what felt like the first time in weeks. Just to talk to someone familiar, someone who knew Grandpa, was a comfort I didn’t know I needed.

Toward the bitter end of our engagement, Roger wasn’t comforting about anything. Not that I expected much, since we’d been sleeping apart for a few weeks after I told him we needed to slow things down. He hadn’t taken that well. I guess I shouldn’t have expected much more from him. It’s who he was.

He’d never been the type to offer a shoulder to cry on, even when I got the call from the sheriff that my grandpa had crashed his truck—swerved to miss a moose and hit a tree instead. I hadn’t asked if Grandpa was okay. I could hear it in the sheriff’s voice that he was gone. I also knew my grandpa was notorious for not wearing his seat belt.

It had happened suddenly, so he hadn't suffered, and for that, I was grateful. It wasn't some long, drawn-out battle with cancer, and he hadn't withered away.

But it also meant I hadn't had the chance to say good-bye. The last time I'd spoken to him was two weeks prior. He'd sounded happy—well, his version of happy. I smiled again, remembering how he'd complained about the price of gas in town.

Natalie was still talking, I realized, and the topic had shifted to her sons.

“They're still here?” I had to blink back my surprise.

“Of course they're here. Where did you think they'd have gone?”

“To the city, I guess.”

“No, they aren't the city type. Jameson lives in the suburbs; he's married now. Austen and Noah have a brewery—Kodiak Creek Ale. Logan's still in high school. Junior year.”

Jameson being married makes sense. He was the oldest—probably around thirty, if my math was correct. Austen and Noah running a brewery was a nice thought. I could see them doing well for themselves in business. Though knowing them, they'd be just as likely to get into some shenanigans and drink up all their profit.

A smile crossed my lips at the memory of sneaking sips of whiskey in their shed.

“We can catch up on everything. See you tomorrow,” Natalie said before giving me one more comforting look.

“See you then.”

After Natalie’s visit, I felt somehow a little better. I headed back to my old room to lie on the bed. I’d need to wash the blankets, because they smelled a little stale, but for now it would have to do. Whatever sugar rush and adrenaline I was running on after packing my bags and hauling it here was long gone.

My body felt like it had been hit by a ton of bricks, and my eyes were heavy. But that didn’t mean my brain had turned off yet. I couldn’t stop thinking about the Hart boys. I needed to do a tiny bit of internet sleuthing to satisfy my curiosity.

After grabbing my phone, I started with Jameson, and quickly found pictures of him with his beautiful wife. They looked really happy, as most people do on social media. They had a picture at one of Logan’s football games, so I clicked the tag in the description to go to his profile next. He was growing into just as handsome a young man as his brothers had been at his age. Most of the pictures were of him on the football field. He seemed pretty serious about the sport.

When I got to a photo of Logan at a farmers’ market table boasting about his brothers’ new company, I saw a tag for Austen’s profile. Typical Austen. The majority of the photos were of beer, dead deer, guns, and four-wheelers. He was always the rough-and-tumble type. No pictures of a girlfriend, though. He must have still been allergic to relationships.

Finally, I found an old post with Noah’s profile linked. My heart beat a little faster at the thought that I was about to get a better look at the man he’d become.

But to my disappointment, there wasn't a single photo of him on the page. Instead, it was all nature shots. Fields of grain, streams, a ladybug on the tip of his finger. Noah was always into nature like that, though.

Not that I wasn't a little let down. I mean, who doesn't have one single selfie online?

Noah Hart, that's who.

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Rachel

I slept later than I meant to, and then showered. Then I spent the day washing bedding and going through old photos. I swung by the grocery store in town to stock up on some things I'd need while I was here, and before I knew it, it was time to prepare for my visit with Natalie.

Knowing that it was possible I might run into my old fling, well, let's just say it meant I spent extra time applying my makeup, and I made sure to dress in a cute tunic and leggings. Satisfied that I looked good—but without seeming like I was trying too hard—I set off.

Walking up to the Hart house felt strange. I wasn't sure how much more nostalgia my body could take. It almost felt like I was living in my memories more than in the moment.

The large house was always impressive to me. While my house was a modest log cabin that Grandpa bought when he was in his twenties, the Hart house always seemed like a mansion to me. Now through my grown-up eyes, I recognized it was more average-sized, maybe two thousand square feet or so.

It was still beautifully kept, though, with flowering garden beds and birds fluttering around an almost insane number of feeders. The sun was already starting to drop in the sky, and it cast a pink-and-orange glow across the view out over the valley.

“Is that our beautiful Rachel?” a shaky voice said, startling me.

I whipped around and spotted Dottie.

She looked mostly the same as I remembered. Wrinkled skin and a big smile, short salt-and-pepper curls, and her trademark golf visor from a long-ago Christmas when the boys thought it would be funny to give her an embroidered hat that read *Old Balls*. Little did they know she’d wear it for the next twenty years.

“Dottie,” I said as we embraced.

She rocked us from side to side. The woman might have been eighty-five, but her energy level was clearly still as high as ever.

“Tell me you’re moving back.” She pushed me away and kept hold of my shoulders in the process.

“Leave the poor girl alone, Mom.” Natalie laughed as she walked down the front steps. The gravel crunched under her feet as she walked to us. “Just ignore her, Rachel. She thinks because she’s over eighty that she no longer needs to use her filter.”

“I don’t.” Dottie winked at me. “Why get old if you can’t tell it like it is?”

I laughed softly. “Do you, Dottie.”

“See?” Dottie turned to her daughter. “Rachel loves it.”

“Rachel has been here for three minutes. She’s being polite,” Natalie said to her mother before she turned to me.

“She’s going to get worse the more wine we drink. I apologize in advance.”

“I can take it,” I told her. “I’m Paul’s granddaughter, after all. That makes me a tough nut.”

“Good girl,” Natalie said as we walked inside the house.

Much like everything else in my memory, not much had changed in their house. Stacks of books on the shelves, mismatched plaid pillows, scattered throw rugs on the pine floor. It was the coziest country house in the world as far as I was concerned. The kitchen was well kept, even if it was a bit nineties in its styling.

We settled in the familiar great room with the vaulted ceiling that impressed me so much as a kid, especially when they had their twenty-foot-tall Christmas trees they had to use a ladder to decorate.

The only big difference was the photos on the walls. A lot of life had happened on these walls since I’d moved away.

“Red or white?” Dottie asked me.

“Mom, we’re a family of brewers now. It’s time to call them by their name.” She turned to me. “Cabernet sauvignon or pinot grigio?”

“Cab, please.” On a hot summer day, I might pick a white, but I was longing for the cozy feeling of a full-bodied red.

Natalie poured three way-too-big glasses and managed to balance all three in her hands. She passed them around as I settled back in the corner spot of the big sectional couch. Dottie sat in the rocker across from me.

“I forgot how lovely your view is,” I said, admiring the big picture window. The sun was just about to dip behind the distant mountain, and it cast a pinkish glow over the entire horizon.

“It never gets old. Then again, maybe it does. Mom, don’t you want to watch it with us?” Natalie turned to her mother.

“These old bones are too cold to leave the fire, sweetie,” Dottie told us. “Besides, you’re just trying to trick me out of this chair.”

“Well, it is my favorite spot,” Natalie said with a laugh.

Natalie insisted I tell her all about nursing. I’d forgotten what it was like to have someone fawn over me, like Grandpa used to do. To hear Natalie tell it, I was a superstar.

Once I’d made it halfway through the giant glass, I braved the question I’d been wanting to ask all night. “I think I passed Noah on my way into town. How has he been doing?”

There we go. That was sly, right?

Natalie exchanged a quick glance with Dottie, almost a warning look, before she answered me. “Noah is great. He’s out in the shed working right now.”

“You should go down and say hi,” Dottie said with a wink.

“Oh, he wouldn’t want to be bothered, I’m sure,” I told them.

I mean, I wanted intel, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to *see* him. Wouldn’t it be weird? Maybe not. A lot of years had passed. Maybe he had forgiven me.

“Nonsense. Of course he wants to see you,” Dottie said quickly and with such enthusiasm that she sloshed a bit of wine over the rim of her glass.

Natalie took a deep breath and gave me a knowing look, in silent conversation about her mother, no doubt. “Go on down, dear. We’ll catch up more later.”

Surely, it would be rude to turn her down, I figured.

“I should say hi,” I said more to myself, and Natalie nodded.

It was dark out by then, and I walked the lighted stone stairs that led down the hill toward the shed. Although, it wasn’t so much a shed as it was a small barn. Inside was a big workbench, and outside was a gazebo with a picnic table.

I had so many memories playing in that shed, as they called it. When I was five, it was our fake storefront where we sold groceries to imaginary customers. When I was fifteen, it was where we snuck puffs of cigarettes. And at eighteen . . . no, I shouldn’t think about what Noah and I had gotten up to in there when I was eighteen.

“That tastes like perfume,” I heard Austen complain as I neared the shed.

“Oh, and yours tasted so much better? Peanut butter beer. Disgusting,” Noah said, his voice a deep rumble.

A zip of electricity buzzed through me. It had been a long time since I’d heard that voice.

When I finally rounded the corner, silence fell over them. Noah’s eyes met mine instantly.

Just seeing him face-to-face, it felt like a tidal wave had crashed right into me. Every memory of our last day together flashed all at once in my mind. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

“Finally. Where you been hiding, stranger?” Austen chastised me, standing to come over for a hug.

Being the same age as me meant that he was eighteen when I left town, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t grown considerably since I last saw him. Hell, he probably gained four more inches, and towered well over six feet. Instead of the patchy mustache I remembered, he now had a neatly trimmed beard.

His hug lifted me right off the ground. Strong men, flannel shirts, beards, and homemade beer . . . what could describe Kodiak Canyon better than that?

“Look at you,” I said brightly, ruffling his hair after he set me down. Thankfully, I sounded a lot calmer than I felt.

When Austen sat down again, Noah still stared at me, blinking. He sure had changed too.

Noah still had a remarkably handsome face. Like, movie-star handsome. His sandy-blond hair was shorter than it had been when we were young, and now he had an even dusting of stubble all over his face. That was definitely new.

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Austen said, his voice somber.

My gaze swung over to Noah. Noah, who I’d once loved with every part of my teenage heart. Noah with his deep blue eyes and playful smile.

But his smile was nowhere to be found tonight.

“Aren’t we, Noah?” Austen said, prodding him.

Noah shrugged. “Of course.”

“Aren’t you going to give me a hug hello?” I asked, unable to resist. There was something surreal about seeing Noah again. Like I needed to touch him to know he was real.

He swung his leg out from under the picnic table, pushing up with his hand as if the whole thing was an effort.

Like Austen, and all his brothers, he had reached the full Hart height. When I’d left, he was only a few inches taller than me. Now he was probably six foot one, and he must weigh easily near two hundred pounds of pure muscle. Whatever he had been doing since I moved away definitely agreed with his physique.

But his expression was impassive. He crossed over to me and wrapped a single arm around my shoulders in a half hug. To say I felt deflated was an understatement.

Looking up at him, I scoffed. “That’s all you’re going to give me?”

“She doesn’t have cooties anymore. Do you, Rach?” Austen joked.

It was true that at one point growing up, Noah did in fact think I had cooties. I was thirteen and he was eleven at the time.

But Austen knew what had happened between Noah and me when we were older. Everyone in the Hart family knew. Noah had zero chill back then, and he’d proudly announced to his family that he was going to marry me, not that he bothered

informing me of that plan. Austen had made sure to tell me. It was just puppy love, though.

Perhaps to make a show for his brother, after giving Austen a dramatic eye roll, Noah wrapped me securely in his arms and lifted me clear off the ground.

“That’s better.” I laughed with a lightness I didn’t feel as he set me down.

Austen patted the spot next to him at the table. “Come have a drink. Settle a score for us.”

“Uh-oh. I don’t want to get in the middle of anything,” I joked as I took the seat.

The table was covered in, well, everything. Several pitchers of beer, jars of every shape and size. All types of food from honey to a can of sardines were scattered over the table. It was pure Hart-brother chaos.

“What is all this stuff?” I asked.

“This, Rachel Tyson, is the makings of genius.” Austen beamed as he gestured to the spread on the table.

Noah might have been trying to avoid my gaze, but we locked eyes at that moment. “He’s obviously insane. He thinks my brew needs something added, which is ridiculous.”

Excited that he was finally speaking to me, I decided not to let the opportunity pass. “How long have you been brewing beer?”

“Well, officially, as far as Mom knows, four years. But honestly, more like six.” Noah gave me that devilish smirk I’d

missed so much. The Hart brothers sure loved shenanigans.

Austen cut in then. “I was a bad big brother. Or a good one. Depends on how you look at it. Because of this dude’s skills, we got a whole business up and running.”

“Yeah?”

“Here, taste this. This is his regular ale.” Austen reached over the table to grab the pitcher of beer and poured me a small glass. Then he turned to his brother, and in a snarky tone said, “With no extra flavors.”

Noah shook his head with a laugh. “Just leave the beer to me, brother. You focus on making us money.”

“Austen is the brains of the operation?” I teased as I took the glass from him.

“I may not be a brainiac nurse, but I know how to sell a product,” Austen said defensively.

“Glad to see all those years of selling candy cigarettes to kids at school finally paid off.” I grinned, enjoying teasing him.

“Oh shit. I haven’t thought about that in years,” Austen said with a chuckle as I tried my first sip of Noah’s brew.

“Oh my God.” I mumbled the words as the bubbles in the beer carried a tangy citrus flavor across my tongue.

Finally, Noah’s relaxed sweet smile stretched his cheeks. “Pretty good, huh?”

I rolled my eyes in pleasure as I took another sip. “It’s incredible.”

“The secret is in the brown sugar.”

Noah beamed proudly and then proceeded to tell me way more than I ever wanted to know about beer brewing. Not that I cared. It was just nice to see him light up about something. Whatever chilliness was there when I first arrived tonight seemed to have melted away. At least temporarily.

By the time I got to the end of my glass, and thankfully the end of the brewing lesson, I told the guys, “It’s so nice to be back.”

Austen cut in. “Don’t tell me you’re back here for good. A city girl like you? You’ll never last out here.”

My mouth formed into a tight line at his words. I don’t know why I cared what Austen thought.

Of course I could hack it back in Kodiak Canyon. I lived here eighteen years, didn’t I? And I didn’t leave because I hated it. I just wanted to see some of the world.

“And on that note, I should be going,” I said with a little more irritation in my voice than I meant to reveal. I nodded to Noah as I rose from the table. “Thanks for the beer. See you guys around.”

I marched off without looking back, but Noah quickly caught up to me.

“Wait,” he called out in that smooth, deep voice of his. “Let me walk you home.”

I scowled at him. “Don’t think I can handle it here either?”

Maybe it was the lack of sleep or everything going on in my life. Maybe it was Noah's chilly reception when I crashed his drinking session with his brother. Whatever it was, I was on the defensive.

"Of course you can. A bear should be worried if it runs into you. I've seen you hit one in the eye with a slingshot, remember?" Noah crouched and slumped his shoulders a little to get eye to eye with me.

I shook my head at the memory. "I was a squirrely ten-year-old, huh?"

"I thought you were a real-life super hero." Noah nodded for emphasis.

At those words, we began the short walk to my property.

"Well, it was pretty cool of me," I said.

I mean, we were safe on my grandpa's porch and could have run inside at any time. I didn't really need to try to hit the bear, but what can I say? I was ten.

"Sorry for Austen. You know how he is," Noah said, his shoes crunching on the gravel road.

I shook my head. "I know how he used to be," I said, reminding him of the years that separated us all.

Noah nodded. "True. I want you to know I think he's wrong, but I also know you were destined for bigger things. You needed to see the world beyond Kodiak Creek."

"I did." My voice was quiet because I was startled to hear Noah say those words after the fight we'd had before I left.

He didn't understand at the time why I couldn't go to nursing school at the local college and stay around here. Had he finally come to see things my way?

"Rachel, listen, we need to talk."

Before he could say another word, I cut him off. "I left and I never looked back. I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "That's what I want you to know. I don't blame you. It's okay, all right? A lot of years have passed since then. We were different people back then."

"You're not mad at me for leaving?" I asked, voicing the question I never thought I'd get to.

"No. You did what you needed to do to be happy. Are you . . . happy?"

The genuine tone in his voice made my heart melt. So selfless and considerate. That's the Noah I once knew.

"I liked seeing new things. I had happy times, I suppose. But right now? No, not really. Being back home is helping, though," I said. I had never been good at hiding my feelings from Noah.

"Dating anyone?" he asked suddenly as my cabin came into sight.

I couldn't help but search his face in that moment. Moonlight danced over his skin, casting a shadow that fell over his square jawline. I wanted to reach out and touch him. My fingers twitched at my sides.

"Not anymore. You?"

We were almost to the door, and we stopped short and faced each other.

“No,” he said. “In case you haven’t noticed, there’s not many women in this town.”

I laughed at that. “Plenty of men, though,” I said with a snarky tone.

“Yeah, but none my type,” he said lightly, making me laugh a little harder.

Then the moment got quiet again. The only sounds were chirping crickets and the gentle breeze ruffling through the evergreens.

“I’m sorry about your grandfather. We all loved him. He was a good man.”

“He was. And thank you.”

I frowned. Truth be told, since seeing Noah tonight, I hadn’t thought much about all the loss in my life, at least for a little while. I wasn’t ready to be reminded just yet. I wanted to rewind back to the moment when Noah’s gaze slid to my mouth, and he looked like he wanted to kiss me.

Instead, time moved forward, and he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Good night, Rachel Tyson.”

“Good night, Noah Hart.”

Noah

I knew taking Mom into town to shop would be a mistake. She loved to offer me life advice, and after seeing Rachel, I suspected she'd have some thoughts on the matter.

"Isn't that Kim?" My mom pointed to the waitress across the diner as we sat and had a bite to eat.

"You know it is, Ma. You see her here every week." I knew my mom's games. She wasn't that hard to figure out.

"Whatever happened with you two?" she asked.

I sipped my soda for a long time, hoping for a subject change, but she kept her gaze trained on me. "I didn't like her." I shrugged for emphasis.

Mom nodded in agreement. "That's right, not like you liked Rachel."

"Smooth, Ma," I said with a groan.

"You'd have to be blind not to notice the way she looked when she asked about you. And for the record, she didn't ask about your brothers."

"Two burgers." Kim cut in then, setting two plates down in front of us.

"Yeah, and how did she look when she asked about me, exactly?" I said, going for indifference before I took a big bite of the cheeseburger in front of me.

Mom wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “With interest.”

Whatever Mom thought, I needed to put any fantasies about Rachel out of my head because we had bigger things to worry about. Austen was set on buying the Tyson property. Unfortunately for us, last night Rachel had made it sound like she was interested in sticking around.

I made sure to keep my mouth stuffed while Mom kept poking at the issue.

“You’ve considered it,” she told me with the certainty only a mother can have.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not that simple.”

“Sure it is, sweetie pie. If you like her, ask her out. Don’t let her get away. What’s complicated about that?”

I snorted at the irony. There’s no way I could tell Mom about Austen’s plan. She’d never sign off on trying to convince Rachel to sell her property.

The bottom line was that it was either my family’s business expansion or Rachel’s happiness. They were mutually exclusive. Someone was going to lose, and I didn’t want to be caught in the middle.

The best thing I could do was stay away from Rachel. If she stayed, that was on her, but at least it wouldn’t be because of me.

“Mom, can we just drop it and eat our lunch in peace?”

She rolled her eyes.

• • •

When I got home, Austen was practically bouncing off the walls. He pulled me aside by waving his hand obnoxiously until I went out back with him, out of Mom's earshot.

The joy on his face meant we were about to have the conversation I'd been worried about all day.

"We got approval from the bank for a loan to purchase the neighboring property." The words tumbled excitedly from his lips.

It took all my effort to balance my expression. "But it's not even listed yet," I said to remind him.

"I know." Austen sounded a lot like a kid who'd just inherited a candy store. "Which is why the timing is *perfect*."

He drew out the word *perfect*, emphasizing it with his hands as he continued.

"We're not going to wait for it to go on the market and have someone potentially outbid us. This is the time to talk to Rachel." He rubbed his hands together. "And since you two have a connection, I want you to be the one to handle this for us."

My heartbeat pounded in my ears.

Everything was happening so fast. Sure, it was what we had been dreaming of, finding accessible land that we could manage. It was a sad loss to see Paul go, but I admit I was excited about the idea of buying the land when Austen brought it up. That's partly because I never expected Rachel to show up and announce she wanted to stay.

I had to think fast because there was no way I could pitch this idea to her. “Why not you? You’re the one who wants this property so bad.”

Austen shook his head. “I want it to secure a future for *us*. For our family. Expanding means more money, means we can keep pouring money into this brewery business *you* want to work so bad.”

I sighed, knowing I’d lost.

Austen was right. He was the one who had been successfully selling farm equipment. He had been making a good living and loved the job. And he’d left that all to help me run this business. I owed him.

“Okay, I’ll talk to her. You happy?”

Austen snorted. “I’ll be happy once she agrees to sell and heads her pretty little ass back to Houston.”

I rolled my eyes, unable to hold it back.

Of course, Austen didn’t let that tell slide. “Why would this matter to you now? You sure you’re not overreacting to your history with her?”

“What? No. Of course I’m not. It wasn’t much of a history, anyway . . . just some teenage fantasies come to life for a few months.”

“Yeah, but we all always assumed you two would end up together. Everyone thought so.”

I couldn’t meet his eyes. If I did, he would see right through me and know that his words cut me. It’s stupid to think your

high school sweetheart, the girl who took years to finally notice you, would turn out to be more than just a fling.

I shrugged off the question. “Yeah, well, things change. Rachel’s not the girl for me. Believe me.”

I tried to sound sure of myself, though I doubted I had the proper conviction in my voice. Not after spending most of last night fantasizing about what it would mean if she stayed, what might happen between us. It was stupid, really.

“You could always try it,” he said suddenly.

My gaze snapped to his, and I frowned. “What are you talking about? You just said to talk her into selling.”

“Yeah, and feeling close to you again might be the way to get her on board. Spend a little more time with her. Feel her out. Remind her she loves the Hart family.”

“Or it might convince her to stay. Ever think of that?” I didn’t mean my words to sound so hopeful.

Austen shook his head confidently. “No, I’m telling you, she always hated this small town. She’ll be gone in a week. Two, tops. Just you wait and see. But we need to make sure when she goes, she sells to us.”

Any serious thoughts I had about asking Rachel out, for real, immediately went on life support.

Talking her into leaving and selling the property and family home where she’d grown up . . . that was the task ahead of me. I couldn’t do that, and at the same time imagine actually being with her.

My mind made up, I nodded at Austen. I needed to stay the course. We had built a viable business and a good life, and Rachel coming to town was temporary.

Austen was right. I needed to get her to sell. Wash her hands of this place and move on once again for good.

But I had to admit, if the tables were turned, I would never sell. And if she and I were together, I'd never let her lose her family property.

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Rachel

I had called up my best friend, Megan, to update her on my plans, as promised. Though I was sure she wasn't expecting what I had to say.

"Wait, what are you saying? You're not coming back to Houston?"

It sounded crazier hearing it said back to me, but I really was leaning that way. I didn't know just how much until Austen had suggested I couldn't make it here. Something in that comment got the wheels in my brain turning, and I knew I was seriously considering staying.

"This is my home. The only place I have roots. And I need roots right now more than anything," I said.

Megan sighed. "I'm sad for me. But, of course, I'm happy for you, babe."

"I know. It's been a long three weeks not working together."

Since I was more senior by a few years, and therefore more expensive, the hospital had cut me and kept Megan on during budget cuts.

"Ugh, you can say that again. I don't even like the place without you, but I have too much student-loan debt to leave now."

Megan had gone into a bachelor's program for nursing at a four-year school and racked up a good bit of student debt. My two-year community-college program had been much more cost-effective, so I didn't have any loans to pay back. One small blessing, I guessed.

"Honestly, I miss you, but I don't miss the job. Maybe I'll do something entirely different, especially if I stay out here."

"What's it like out there? Isn't it a super-small town?" Megan asked.

"You're going to see for yourself in a few days, silly. It's beautiful. But as far as work options go, I'm not sure there's much."

I was thankful she was coming to visit. She had surprised me with the news two days ago.

If I did decide to stay, I wouldn't need to work right away. I had decent savings, no debt, and Grandpa had this place paid off. Plus, he had a life insurance policy that would mean more money coming my way soon. It would be enough to afford food and utilities for months, plus the tax bill.

If I decided to move away, I wasn't sure I'd land back in Houston, though. What was waiting for me there? Nothing anymore. Well, except a good friend. But I needed to make my next move strategically. For now, the most logical thing was to hang around.

After my call with Megan, I walked around the cabin, taking inventory of it.

Could I really stay here forever? I wasn't sure. But a thought dawned on me.

Whether I sold it or stayed, the cabin was run-down and shabby . . . I should do at least some work on it. After all, I'd spent a reasonable amount of time watching HGTV. I knew that you'd get more money for a house that appeared freshly painted, at least.

First things first.

I grabbed a roll of heavy-duty trash bags and set to work de-junking. Grandpa wasn't a hoarder, but he liked to keep as much stuff as he could. He always said, *You never know when you might need it.*

I laughed at that thought as I opened the first linen closet and tossed out a broken snow-cone maker, five mismatched socks, a Connect Four box with a Monopoly board inside, and two left boots. Where the right boots went, I could only wonder.

Grandpa Paul was clearly not organized in the closet department. I managed to fill four giant trash bags by the time I realized I hadn't had a sip of water in hours.

After lugging the bags outside to my car to take to the dump and gulping down a bottle of water, I realized I was starving. I'd gone through the meager supply of groceries I'd bought when I first got here, and the basket of goodies from Natalie, but it was time to get some real groceries.

The only problem was, my car wouldn't start. *Great.*

My only choice was to grab the keys to Grandpa's old red Ford. The front fender was damaged and I hated thinking of the accident, but I couldn't stay here stranded when the truck was just sitting there. I might as well try it. Only problem was the truck was a manual, and while I had learned to drive in it, I wasn't sure I'd retained all that much.

Turning the key in the ignition, I managed to immediately stall it. This was going to be interesting.

• • •

Once I'd made a few trips to the dump, the donation center, and the grocery store, I had the manual transmission down pat, more or less, erring on the side of less. But finally, the cabin was looking so much better.

It was time to take the next step. By the time Megan got here the next day, this place might seem downright modern.

I poured out half the can of pale gray color into the pan and slid the paint roller through it. "Sorry, Grandpa Paul," I said out loud. He had sworn the faded yellow was gorgeous all these years, even when I tried to suggest we simply give it a fresh coat of the same color.

Although most of the cabin was natural log, there were a few walls here and there with drywall. I knew Grandpa Paul would roll in his grave if I painted the exterior log walls, but the inner yellow walls had to be dealt with.

As I rolled the first stroke of paint onto the surface, I felt proud of the work I was doing. I'd always felt like this was my

house, but putting paint on the wall meant something to me, and I knew why that was.

Roger had never let me make my mark on his house. He'd *said* it was our place, but he didn't trust me to make any changes. Not that it was a horrible place, but the idea of renovating always sounded fun to me. Finally doing it for myself, it meant something big.

• • •

After just a few hours, the painting was done . . . not that it was a terribly large cabin. But I stood back and admired my work. A buyer would definitely see the charm in it now. Or, heck, maybe I would still call this place home. I wasn't sure yet.

Now that the walls looked so much better, it occurred to me just how dingy the cabinets were. I tried to clean them, but it was no use. What they needed was a fresh coat of white paint.

I rifled around in the shed and found the can labeled *cabinet paint*. Grandpa Paul was good about labeling, even if the man couldn't make sense of a closet.

As I headed out with the can in hand, my heart skipped a beat at the sight of a black car parked in the driveway.

The man standing beside the car was Mr. Davis, the funeral home director, and also a personal friend of Grandpa's. He wore a black suit, which seemed too formal for the middle of the day, but I supposed that was his regular attire at the funeral home.

He gave me a sympathetic frown as he spoke. “Hello again, Miss Rachel.”

“Hi, Mr. Davis.” I managed a smile. That seemed to put him at ease.

“Sorry we have to meet under these circumstances. Is now a good time?” he asked, his brow creasing.

It dawned on me then that I was wearing one of Grandpa’s giant T-shirts, and it was covered in splotches of paint. Not to mention my hair was a rat’s nest.

“Yes, sorry about this. Just tidying up. Thank you for coming all the way out. You didn’t have to do that. I’d have picked, um, *him*, up.”

I wasn’t even sure how to say that. Pick up Grandpa? Pick *it* up? I shook off the thought.

“His ashes are back here.” Mr. Davis nodded and opened the door to the back seat of the car. He produced a small black urn and passed it to me.

I took the vessel in both hands, and in an instant, time seemed to slow around me. This was all that was left of my grandfather.

What was the last thing I even said to him? Probably *I love you*, because that’s how we ended all our calls. Had he known how much he meant to me?

A tear broke free and rolled down my cheek. I tucked the urn under my arm and wiped the wetness away, sniffing. “Sorry.”

“I completely understand,” Mr. Davis said kindly. “If you ever want to talk and swap old stories about your grandpa, or if you need anything, just give me a call.”

I fixed a grateful smile on my face and thanked him.

“Then I guess I’ll leave you to it,” he said kindly, and got back into his car.

Once I was back inside the house, the excitement of painting seemed gauche. Even the cheerful music I’d been painting to seemed out of place. I quickly paused the track on my phone and let silence take over.

There it was, sitting on the counter. An urn containing my grandfather’s ashes. The only parent I’d ever known. The only relative I ever had.

I buried my face in my hands and ugly cried. The sobs heaved my shoulders up and down, they were so powerful.

Eventually, though, the tears slowed. I blew my nose and moved the urn to the center of the mantel.

“You’re watching over me still, right?” I asked it.

I waited for an answer before deciding it was a *yes*. Of course he was. Grandpa was still with me. Always. Like he’d always said.

“Buck up, buttercup,” I said to myself like Grandpa used to.

As I headed back into the kitchen, I decided the only thing I wanted to do was keep my hands busy. I grabbed a screwdriver and got busy removing each piece of hardware off

the cabinets, and then set to work giving them a fresh coat of paint.

By the time I finished, it was dark out and I was bone tired.

I looked a mess, needed a shower, and really needed to find something to eat. But before I could do any of that, there was a knock at my door.

My brow creased as I looked at the time. Eight thirty. Who would stop by so late?

I peered through the peephole and saw Noah standing on the other side, holding a plate covered in foil.

Crap. I didn't want him to see me looking like this.

"One minute," I called through the door before I ducked into the half bath in the hallway and splashed water on my face.

I smoothed out my hair the best I could and quickly yanked off the shirt I wore. I grabbed a fresh one from the top of my suitcase and sprayed a cloud of perfume around me. Finally, I sprinted back to the door so fast, I slid and slammed into it.

"Hey, you," I tried to say in a smooth tone, but I was huffing and puffing from my frantic attempt at cleaning myself up.

"Long day?" he asked.

Did I look that bad?

Meanwhile, Noah looked like a thirst trap come to life. All that tall, broad-shouldered swagger, complete with dark jeans

and a long-sleeve T-shirt that showed off his physique. It read *Kodiak Creek Ale* across the chest in bold letters.

I slumped my shoulders. “Very. Is that fried chicken?” I could already smell it, and my mouth was watering.

His mouth lifted with the hint of a smile. “We had it for dinner. I remembered it was your favorite.”

“That was sweet.” I took the plate and walked to the kitchen.

Noah followed behind me. I stood on the other side of the kitchen island and pulled back the foil. A fresh blast of seasoned chicken smell hit my nose.

“Amen for this chicken. I’m starved.”

“Looks like you’ve been busy.” He looked around, taking note of my progress.

“Getting new hardware for the cabinets tomorrow,” I said around a bite of chicken.

Noah looked like he was holding something back. I knew that look.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked him as I dove in for my second piece of the salty chicken that practically melted in my mouth.

He weighed my question, as if he was deciding on how to answer me. “Nothing at all. Just wanted to drop that by. I’ll leave you to it.”

I shrugged, too tired to suggest he stay and hang out. “Thanks again.” I held up a half-eaten piece.

He chuckled softly and shook his head. “See you soon?”

“Hope so.”

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Rachel

“We’re just about there. You can see the roof of the cabin up ahead.” I gestured as we pulled up the last stretch of winding mountain road toward Grandpa’s place.

I’d picked Megan up from the airport and had tried to be a good tour guide, pointing things out as we drove. I knew how turned around you could get up here, driving up these switchbacks along the mountain.

“What’s that drive like in the snow?” Megan asked, sounding a bit worried.

“Eh, it’s fine. Once you get used to it.”

“Wow, the cabin’s adorable. I can’t believe you grew up here.”

Her eyes lit up as she took in the details—the long gravel driveway, the notched-pine-log exterior, the sharply pitched roof, and stone chimney.

It was a unique place, that was for sure.

“Look at that view,” Megan said next.

Seeing it through my friend’s eyes was like seeing it for the first time again. “Yeah, it’s really something.”

From the porch, you could see for miles and miles—all the way over to Missionary Ride. Clouds hung around the peak, and the sun gave everything a golden glow.

“This is like a million-dollar view, Rach.”

“It is pretty,” I agreed, admiring it through a fresh set of eyes.

We stepped out of the truck and slammed the doors.

Megan looked around, still taking it in. “No, seriously. Have you looked up what this place is worth? I’ll bet it’s millions.”

Honestly, I had never thought about it before. Having never owned property or house-hunted, I didn’t really think about things like that.

“I never have. But it can’t be *millions*. Not in this little town.”

“Well, it should be.” Rachel pulled out her phone. “Do you want to see?”

I shrugged. “Sure.” What could it hurt?

She tapped away on her phone for half a second before she found it. “Huh. Okay, you were right. It’s not millions, plural, but it is almost a million. It says it’s worth eight hundred thousand. Girl, you’re rich!”

“Let me see that.” I snatched the phone from her hands. “Oh my gosh.”

The number hit me pretty hard. I’d never realized. We did have a good number of acres, and all the analysts were saying the real estate market had gone up a lot.

That’s when her words really hit me. If I sold this place, I’d have a lot of cash on hand, but the idea of selling Grandpa’s

property made my stomach twist.

Could I really let go of the only roots I had? It made the most sense—to sell it and move on—but could I really do that?

“Come on,” I said to Megan. I grabbed her bag while she marveled at the hundred-foot-tall ponderosa pine at the edge of the driveway.

“They do not have trees like this in Texas.”

“They sure don’t,” I said.

After I showed Megan around, I set her up in my old room. Something about having her stay in my grandpa’s room didn’t feel right. Instead, I moved my suitcase into that space. It was the master bedroom, after all, and I imagined Grandpa would want me to stay there.

Since it was almost dinnertime, we parked ourselves in the kitchen. And while Megan opened a bottle of red wine, we chatted. I was worried the cabinet doors were still tacky, so I was careful, but I had painted them two days ago, so they were probably fine.

We fixed a chef salad for dinner and chatted a little about my grandpa. It was nice having someone here. It had been too quiet, but staying busy had helped. I’d gotten all of the new cabinet pulls installed yesterday. I’d chosen black, and they looked good against the cream-colored cabinets.

“This looks great,” Megan said, adding cucumbers and diced ham to her salad bowl.

Our dinner wasn't gourmet, by any means, but I loved a good build-your-own salad bar.

"We could build a bonfire tonight if you're up for it," I said, sprinkling my own salad with a generous spoonful of sunflower seeds.

"We won't be attacked by a bear, will we?"

"It's unlikely, but if you hear anything rustling around out there, be sure to let me know," I said, only half teasing.

Megan frowned at me. "That's not comforting, Rach."

The look on her face was worth it, though.

I shook my head. "We'll be fine. I lived here for eighteen years and was never eaten by a bear, not even once."

The truth was, there were bears and mountain lions in this area, and we'd seen both over the years. But for the most part, they were afraid of humans and did their best to steer clear of us.

After dinner, we put on sweatshirts, took our wineglasses, and ventured outside. I built us a fire while Megan got cozy under a blanket.

"The stars are insane here," she said softly, looking up at the sky.

I gazed up at the night sky. I guess I'd forgotten about some things that were unique to this place, and I liked seeing it through Megan's eyes. We didn't have stars like this back in Houston.

Once the fire was crackling away, I sat in the chair beside her.

“So,” she said, cutting a glance my way, “are you still feeling good about your breakup with Roger?”

Way to cut to the chase.

I let out a slow sigh. “Honestly? More than ever. I didn’t realize how much he was holding me back.”

Megan made a sound of agreement.

“I think I just liked having a person, you know?”

She fixed a look of sympathy on her face. “Well, I’m sorry, but I never liked Roger.”

I belted out a laugh at her blunt words. “You didn’t?”

“Nope. He was about as exciting as a baked potato.”

I let out a snort. “He was a chemist. And yet still, we were lacking in the chemistry department.”

Megan laughed at my corny joke, and I was grateful.

“Why didn’t you ever say something?” I asked. “If you really didn’t like him—”

“Because I couldn’t. You’re my best friend. And I figured if you were happy, that’s what mattered.”

“Well, I wasn’t. Not at the end, anyway.”

“Then I’m glad you’re free of him. You need to have chemistry with someone. The explosive kind, preferably.” She winked at me.

At her words, my mind instantly went to Noah. Chemistry with Noah was never a problem. We'd always had it in spades. Heck, maybe we even had it now, even though I tried to ignore it. I think he did too.

If I ignored it, maybe it would go away. Let's hope, anyway.

• • •

Once we were back inside, I made sure Megan was settled in my old bedroom. She put her things away, then picked up a framed photograph on my desk.

"This was him?" she asked.

I nodded. "That's Grandpa Paul."

"His nose was like a bird perched on his face."

A soft chuckle escaped me. "Oh, I know!"

"Thank gosh you didn't inherit his nose."

"Preach, sis."

Megan and I dissolved into easy laughter, and I hugged her good-night. It was good to have her here.

Upstairs in the loft, snuggled up in the freshly washed blankets, I felt lonely despite the guest room being filled for the first time since I'd been here.

My mind drifted to Noah.

Maybe it was scandalous to some back then, that I was eighteen and he was sixteen, but he was more mature and just as grown-looking as Austen was at the time.

Noah certainly knew how to charm me with that crooked smile and those blue eyes of his. He was easily the cutest boy in town, somehow more handsome than his brothers. He was always trying to impress me, even from the time we were little. Gathering flowers for me, or an impressively large pine cone he thought nine-year-old me would like.

I smiled at all the memories that I hadn't thought about in so long.

Eventually, he'd caught my eye in a different way, though. I remembered when things changed, and I began thinking of him *that* way.

We were in high school by then, and there was at a party at the hot springs. That was the cool thing to do back then. Sneaking off after dark with a couple of towels, and maybe even a couple of beers in a backpack and out into the woods.

Of course, no one would think to wear a bathing suit, or maybe we just wanted to be sexy in our underwear, but I found myself in a little pool with just Noah. I don't even know how it happened.

"I'd always thought you'd wear granny panties," he had said, teasing me. The confidence of teenaged Noah was astounding.

"You did not. You probably pictured me in a G-string."

I didn't know why I'd said those words; they just came out like that. Maybe I did like the way he looked at me, like I was unobtainable. I wanted to flirt back with him. Dish it out just as much as he did.

After that, he splashed water at me, I splashed him back, and the fight devolved into us wrestling around in the water.

When Noah and I were younger, it was something we'd done often. But now, touching him like this . . . after all that muscle he'd put on during two years of football . . . I felt myself reacting to his closeness. The way his skin felt, the way his ab muscles tightened to hold me off.

Before I knew it, we just stopped and gazed at each other as his arms wrapped around me. And in an instant, our touch had changed from playful wrestling to intimate touching.

He'd loosened his grip and slid his arms around my back. My arms reached up and wrapped around his shoulders. We both breathed heavily as we leaned in close to each other.

Then he leaned in and kissed me.

I was shocked that Noah was kissing me. It wasn't something I'd thought about before, but as soon as our lips touched, I felt my entire body tingle to life. It was electric, like every molecule in my body was suddenly pulsing in time with his.

When I parted my lips, his tongue met mine, so smooth and in perfect harmony with mine. I'd had a few awkward make-out sessions by that time, so it stood out to me how good a kisser he was.

It was Austen who'd caught us that night. I don't know how long we'd stayed there like that, kissing. But as soon as he saw, he shouted to get everyone's attention.

“Rachel's making out with little Noah!”

Noah wasn't little, for the record. But maybe through the eyes of an older brother, he was.

We broke apart in an instant, and like an asshole, I jumped from the pool, grabbed my clothes, and walked off.

It wasn't the last time, though. Noah didn't hold a grudge.

I laughed about the memory as I lay in bed.

Of course he didn't . . . he was a sophomore kissing a senior. That meant something back in the day. Not that the age gap mattered at all anymore.

I fell asleep that night wondering if Noah was still a good kisser.

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Noah

Austen had been pestering me nonstop for three days straight about Rachel.

I had tried to talk to her a few days ago under the guise of sharing fried chicken, which my mom was all too happy to make when I told her I wanted to bring some by to be a good neighbor. But when I saw her putting in the work to the house, and I noticed the urn on the mantel, I couldn't do it. It felt too slimy. I'd just shoved the plate of chicken at her and left like a coward.

Who was I to put ideas into Rachel's head about selling? If she was fixing the cabin up to stay there, then that's what Austen would have to accept.

Then again, maybe she was fixing it up to sell it. When Austen looked it up, it was worth almost a million dollars. I never seriously thought the bank would loan us the money. I knew he had a decent savings account, though, and our business was starting to earn a steady five figures.

Anyway, I had to at least make a little progress toward seeing Rachel, if only so Austen would think I was trying. So I headed back over to her place.

I knocked on her door, and it quickly swung open.

Today, Rachel was dressed in a pair of jeans and a fitted pink T-shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail, and she looked good enough to eat.

If the teenage me had thought Rachel was pretty back then . . . well, grown-up me was having a hard time keeping his thoughts clean.

Her eyes had always been her best feature—gray in color and inquisitive—fringed with black lashes. And while that hadn't changed, the rest of her was every bit as beautiful. Full lips. Small, up-turned nose. High cheekbones. Her curves were perfection, but I fought with myself to keep my eyes on hers.

“You know, some people call before they stop by,” she said with a bit of snark.

I pulled out my phone and opened a contact I hadn't used in nine years. I pressed the call button and held it up to her.

“There. I called,” I said with a grin.

“Good enough for me. I was just messing with you, anyway. Come by anytime.” She laughed and turned for me to follow.

I made sure to keep my gaze off her ass—as challenging as it was.

“Oh, you have company,” I said, noticing the girl eating at the counter.

“This is my friend, Megan. Megan, this is Noah.”

I nodded to the woman who was perched at the counter with toast and coffee. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she said in a tone that I was sure was flirting.

“I won't crash your party. I just wanted to see if you were up for coming to First Friday.”

Rachel turned to her friend. “I was going to tell you, we should go tonight. It’s a little festival where they shut down Main Street and have vendors and music. It’s fun.”

“Sounds great.” Megan smiled at me.

Admittedly, in the back of my mind, a little part of me was hoping Rachel would be riding down with me. I knew I wasn’t supposed to start anything with her, but the thought of being alone with her was all I could focus on lately.

Then again, if we spent time together, maybe I’d realize a lot had changed and we no longer fit together. At least, that’s what I told myself. And if that were the case . . . it would probably be for the best.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you there, I guess.”

As I turned to leave, Rachel stopped me by placing her hand on my bicep. A zing of electricity warmed me. *Interesting.*

“Wait, can you help me with something really quick?”

I looked around as if there might be evidence of an unpleasant task awaiting me. Probably a leftover habit of living with my mother all those years.

Rachel turned and headed to the porch.

“It’s the damn sander. I can’t get it to turn on.” She grabbed the tool and flipped the switch back and forth to show me. “The porch is a mess and I want to re-stain it, but this wood looks like crap. It needs to be sanded first, obviously.”

I didn't mean to find it funny, but the exasperation in her voice was oddly cute.

"Well, you need to hold down that button to make it go. It's a safety thing," I said as I showed her the button.

She depressed it again, and when the sander whirred to life, she slapped her free hand against her forehead. "I'm such an idiot."

"You didn't know. But, um, Rach . . ." I paused.

"Yeah?"

"You don't need to bother sanding this whole porch. That'd cost you a ton in sandpaper, not to mention it would take forever."

She frowned at me, so I continued.

"You'd want to use a power washer, is all. That will have the wood looking good again and would get that layer of peeling stain off."

Rachel closed her eyes a beat, as if frustrated. It took everything in me not to offer to do the job for her, but I sensed she wanted to do this herself.

"If Paul didn't have a power washer," I said, "feel free to drop by tomorrow and grab ours."

"Thanks, Noah." She sighed and followed me down the front steps toward my truck.

"See you tonight?" I asked.

"Yeah, see you tonight."

• • •

“Where have you been?” Austen asked me when I got back.

“At Rachel’s place,” I was relieved to report. At least that should earn me a little more time.

The look of relief on my brother’s face made me feel a little guilty. “Oh, good. Did you talk to her about selling?”

“No. But I invited her and her friend to the festival.”

“Her friend?” he asked. Admittedly, the idea that a new person was in town was enough to make any guy around here curious.

“Her name is Megan. She’s pretty. I don’t know anything else about her. Does that answer all your questions?”

Austen fixed a sly grin on his face. “Just stop me when I get there.”

“You’re sick.” I slapped his hands down. “This is why I get more girls than you.”

He scoffed. “You do not,” he said, then brightened. “So, at this festival, I distract the friend while you butter up Rachel, is that the plan?”

I wanted to shake my head at him, but I couldn’t. The reality was, if he thought I wasn’t going to help the effort, he’d do it himself. And if I could protect Rachel from that while she grieved, then that’s what I’d do.

“Or we could just have fun and not have an ulterior motive,” I said in an effort to ensure that he didn’t hound me all night.

“Okay . . .” Austen looked confused by this.

“You catch more flies with honey, right?” I said, reminding him of the old saying Grandma Dottie taught us.

Austen furrowed his brow. “I guess so,” he said slowly. “You sure that’s all this is?”

Sometimes I underestimated Austen. He was smarter than I gave him credit for.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I snapped, perhaps a little too defensively.

“Just get it done,” Austen growled, clearly losing patience. He turned and stomped out of the house.

Dottie’s chihuahua trotted over, and I scratched her behind her ears. “You believe in me, don’t you, girl? Come on, let’s go get ready.”

I knew I shouldn’t be thinking of this as a date. After all, Rachel wasn’t going with me. She was just going to the same location with her friend. But the stupid caveman part of my brain had me doing exactly what I knew I shouldn’t.

For instance, I pulled out a new pair of boots I bought yesterday when I realized First Friday was coming up. And I might have a new shirt too.

I could only imagine the shit Austen was going to give me about this. He’d either think it was part of my master plan, or he’d know I had my eye on Rachel.

But I still maintain that neither was true. Right?

Yeah, that was sounding weaker and weaker by the minute.

At least Austen wouldn't know I'd done some manscaping. He'd never let me live that down. Not that I thought anything was going to happen in that department.

So, why I had done it, I wasn't sure.

But couldn't a man make himself feel good by sprucing up a bit from time to time? It made me evolved, if anything.

There was no sixteen-year-old inside me begging to finish what we'd started so long ago. Definitely not.

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Noah

When we got to the festival, I did my best to play it cool, but I couldn't help looking every which way, hoping to spot Rachel. I took out my phone and typed a text to her, but I deleted it before sending.

Austen, meanwhile, gave me endless hell about it. "Just ask her where she is," he said on a groan.

"I don't want to seem desperate," I told him, which was for once the truth.

"You promised me a beautiful friend," he whined.

"I have no power to promise you women, you pig."

Austen bumped my shoulder with his, and I maneuvered my beer to avoid spilling it.

"Watch it," I snapped.

"What has been up with you lately? Do you even care about the business anymore?" he asked in a seething tone.

"Of course I care. I put in sixty hours this week, for fuck's sake. Why isn't that enough for you?"

Austen clenched his jaw in frustration. "This pre-approval is on my credit, bro. It expires in twenty-one days. I just want to get this deal done. If we wait too long, we'll miss our chance to till the land before winter, which means we'd miss the planting season early spring, and then we carry a loan for a

year with no chance at profits. It's bad business, any way you look at it."

I paused then as I processed his words.

I guessed I'd just assumed he was rushing because that's what he's known for . . . being a little anxious and hotheaded.

But that wasn't it. There was a strategic reason. Hearing it reminded me why I trusted him to run the business side of things in the first place.

"I guess I didn't realize."

"Well, you should listen to me more," he said, his tone softer.

I nodded. "And you should explain things in more detail. Had I known . . ."

"You're right."

We stood in silence for a few moments.

"Listen," Austen said. "I have the papers drawn up. If you think I should go talk to her, I'll do it."

I shook my head quickly. "No. No. Put them on my desk. I'll do it tomorrow."

"Good. And, bro?"

"Yeah?"

He elbowed me. "Look who's here."

I looked over to where he had nodded, and sure enough, it was Rachel.

She looked incredible. Her outfit was simple, just a tight white T-shirt and a pair of dark jeans with holes in the knees. But to me, she might as well be a glowing angel on a runway. My heart thumped unevenly in my chest.

“That’s the friend?” Austen’s eyes widened. “Holy shit, bro. You undersold her.”

I shrugged. “Did I?”

He whistled and shook his head. “You have it bad, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?” I kept my gaze trained on them as we spoke. They were headed our way, so I didn’t need to follow.

“You want Rachel. Otherwise, you would have mentioned her friend is a smoking-hot babe.”

I guess I hadn’t even noticed her friend. “Shush, they’re close,” I warned him. They weren’t in earshot, but I didn’t want to risk it.

As Rachel spotted me, I nodded, beckoning her over to us.

I introduced Megan to my brother. God help her. He quickly ushered her away to the counter to buy her one of our beers.

“Sorry about him,” I said to Rachel. “How are the renovations coming along?”

“The power washer worked wonders. Thanks for that tip. And the loaner.”

“Glad to hear it.”

I knew what I needed to say next, and I repeated the words in my head. If I didn't have ulterior motives, they would sound natural. Finally, I went for it.

“So, are all these renovations happening with something bigger in mind?” I held my breath while I waited for her reaction.

Rachel shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea.” She chuckled lightly at her own indecision.

Her easy smile told me she wasn't on to me, so I continued.

“Really?” I said in a shocked tone. “I wondered.”

“Things back in Houston . . . well, there are no *things back in Houston* for me.”

“What about your job?” I asked. I knew Rachel had worked her ass off to become a nurse. And I'd heard from my mom that she loved it.

Rachel frowned and her cheeks turned a little pink. “I was laid off.”

My heart sank at her words. “Oh shit, I'm sorry. I had no idea.”

“Yeah. I didn't even tell Grandpa when it happened. I didn't want him to worry about me.”

“What about your place back in Houston? Will it be all right while you're here?”

Curious, I continued to pry. It felt like an overstep, but in the back of my mind, I was searching for anything that might help me figure out her intentions.

She let out a cynical snort. “Funny story. I lived with my fiancé, and we broke up a few weeks ago. I hadn’t had a chance to find a new place yet, since I was out of work.”

Holy. Crap.

Living with her ex while she was unemployed and trapped? I suddenly felt like the world’s biggest ass for asking. That, and I was a little sick at the thought of her having a fiancé.

“Wow. I am officially an ass for prying. Please shut me up.”

She laughed and gave my forearm a squeeze that sent butterflies pattering against the walls of my stomach. “Buy me a drink to make up for it.”

“Of course. What’s your poison?”

“Anything but that Kodiak Creek Ale. That stuff tastes like horse piss,” she said loudly, looking around.

I scrunched my nose at her. “All right. Good one. Are we even now?”

“I don’t know. Did I ever pay you back for that time you tripped me, and I rolled down the hill and sprained my elbow?”

“Yeah, pretty sure you got me back when you ran away from me the first night we kissed, and you took my clothes along with yours.”

Rachel belted out a laugh. “Oh my gosh. I forgot about that completely. Well, not the kiss part, but the part where I took your clothes and mine. Sorry about that.”

“You more than made up for it,” I said low, gazing into her eyes. The memory of exactly how heated me to the core.

I left her with that thought, for no particular reason, and ordered her a Kodiak Creek Ale from the beer trailer.

“Here you are, babe,” I said automatically before realizing what I’d said.

Shit. I did not mean to call her *babe*.

When I met Rachel’s eyes again, she was giving me a look of warning, if I read it right.

“We should go check on Megan and Austen. I don’t trust him,” she said, changing the subject.

Relieved, I nodded. “That’s a fair assessment.”

An uneasy truce between us, we headed off through the crowd in search of Austen and her friend.

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Rachel

“Are we doing this?” Megan asked me the next morning. Her tone wasn’t mean, but she knew I was debating it.

I nodded. “He did tell me he wanted his ashes spread here, so yeah, we’re doing this.”

I didn’t say it out loud, but I knew I would feel terrible if I sold the place after. Maybe that was me being silly, though. This was what Grandpa wanted. I needed to honor that.

Megan gave me a sympathetic look. “I know, sweetie. This is hard.”

I inhaled a sharp breath through my nose. “All right. Let’s do it.”

As much as I selfishly wanted to keep his ashes on the mantel, I needed to follow his directions. Grabbing the urn, I headed to the back door. Megan slid it open for me and followed me outside.

“So, do I just open it here?” I asked her, as if she’d have the answers.

“Wherever feels right to you,” she said gently.

Being a nurse in the hospital meant we both had a certain bedside manner when it came to death. I was grateful for hers in that moment.

“Down by the garden. Is that unsanitary?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I think you’re good.”

It was the end of summer, anyway. Nothing would be grown from the land until spring. By my hand, or someone else’s. I couldn’t think about that now, though.

I shook away the thoughts and marched down purposefully to the garden. Grandpa had spent hours out here, toiling in the dirt, growing delicious vegetables and herbs.

As I opened the garden gate, I steeled myself, clenching my jaw tightly.

Pulling open the lid, I pulled out the little plastic baggy inside. It hadn’t occurred to me that the ashes would be in something like that. Seeing the plastic seized my throat up tight.

I let out a sharp inhale and untwisted the tie while Megan held the urn.

Then, as if Grandpa Paul was baby Simba, I held the bag high over my head. “I’ll miss you, Grandpa,” I said, my voice strangled as tears started to fall.

I tipped the bag quickly then, and a puff of breeze took the ash, billowing it out over the garden. I dropped to my knees and cried for the second time.

I couldn’t believe any of this was happening. A month ago, my life made sense. I worked busy, endless shifts at the hospital. I had a boyfriend . . . and a Netflix account. And a paycheck.

Now I was single, jobless, and had no family. And I was out in the middle of nowhere in a rustic cabin that a week ago

I could have sworn I wanted to sell and never see again. Now I was just so confused.

Megan walked me back to the cabin with her arm around my shoulders and served me a steaming cup of spiked cocoa.

After my sobs died down and I'd drunk half a cup of the cozy liquid, Megan looked me square in the eyes.

"I realized something today," she said gently. "You need to stay here. Cleaning up and restoring this cabin could be therapeutic for you."

She paused for my protest, but I mulled over her words. I needed direction. I needed at least one question about my life answered. It felt like she was throwing me a life preserver.

"Stay," she said again. "There's no reason for you to rush back to Houston. Stay and take this time for yourself."

I nodded numbly. "You're right. Nothing in Houston is waiting for me. Except for you, of course."

"Girl, I can come here anytime you need me."

Of course, she was right.

Megan patted my arm reassuringly before giving me a half smirk. "Who knows? Maybe you can see how things unfold with Noah."

"Noah? No. What are you talking about?" I shook the idea away.

"I saw the way he looked at you."

My brow twisted. "And how exactly did he look at me?"

“Like he might drop down on one knee any minute,” she said with a laugh.

I fixed a look of disbelief on my face. “First of all, that’s not a look. Second, the idea of being engaged makes me want to gag. I clearly didn’t get that concept right. I don’t think I’ll be trying that again anytime soon.”

Megan waved me off. “I didn’t mean elope with the guy. I’m just saying, you two have history, and something tells me it’s not over.”

“How many of these cocoas have you had?” I asked her, frowning.

“Not enough,” she said as she walked to the kitchen to get us both refills.

I could hear her moving around in the kitchen, and I couldn’t help that her words unraveled in my head like a long piece of twine. Once that thread was pulled, it would be hard to contain it neatly again.

My first kiss with Noah was at the hot springs, but the memory of our second kiss was just as good. And it was that memory that popped into my brain while I waited for Megan to return with our drinks.

Neither of us had mentioned anything after the hot-springs incident for weeks. But then one night, Noah and I sat under the stars down at the pond at the edge of his property, where fireflies danced in the air and a summer breeze lifted my hair.

I’d wondered all night if this was going to be the night he’d finally kiss me again. Then slowly, during a lull in the

conversation, Noah had leaned across the picnic blanket. Without a word, he pressed his lips to mine.

The shock of his mouth took me by surprise, but I'd eagerly kissed him back.

One kiss turned into two, and then three. I remember the warmth of his tongue and how good it felt moving against my own.

"You're perfect," he had murmured, rubbing his thumb along the column of my throat.

Goose bumps had skittered along my skin. I wasn't perfect, but I felt perfect in Noah's arms.

Megan set a drink down in front of me. "I guess what I'm saying is, I would feel better knowing you were spending time with people like Noah. Jokes aside, the way he looks at you . . . he clearly cares a lot about you. And I saw you two laughing. You need laughter right now. It is the best medicine, they say."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Not about Noah liking me like that, which I seriously doubt, not after all these years. But having his friendship will be a nice change of pace. He's someone I trust with my life, you know? He's just a good guy. I need that to restore my faith in men, after Roger."

"Yes. That's what I'm talking about." Megan set a fresh mug of spiked cocoa beside me and leaned in for a hug. "I'm so proud of you."

"For what?" I asked.

“For carpe-freaking-diem, girl. This is a new chapter for you. Take that bull by the horns. Eat, pray, love . . .”

I rolled my eyes. “All right, I get it.”

“Good.” She sat beside me and raised her glass. “To new beginnings and good men.”

“To new beginnings,” I said, clinking my mug against hers, which earned me another smile.

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Rachel

It was nice having Megan here. She had given me the best gift—a renewed sense of peace, helping me decide to stay indefinitely.

I didn't know what the future held for me long term, but for now, I wasn't going to worry anymore. I would stick around for a while. Heal. Have some *me* time. Pour some of my care and attention into this old cabin.

Which meant this morning, after dropping Megan off at the airport, I was tending to the bees, giving them their monthly treatment of preventive medicine. Hive sickness was no joke, as Grandpa had always said.

That's when I noticed Austen striding over with a folder in his hand.

"Heya, neighbor." I waved enthusiastically. It felt good to say those words.

"Hi, Rachel," he said in a tone that was way too businesslike to have come from his lips.

I took off my gloves and walked over to meet him. Clearly, he was a man on mission.

"What you got there?" I asked as I pointed at the folder.

"Can we sit down and have a little talk?"

I raised a brow. My curiosity was officially piqued.

“Sure,” I said and led him inside.

I was starting to get a bit worried something had happened.

“Is everything okay?” I asked him as he sat down at my kitchen table.

“The place looks different.” He looked around, clearly avoiding answering me.

I sat across from him, folding my arms, done asking polite questions.

Finally, he took a breath and slid me the folder. I flipped it open. Inside was a printout with details of my property.

Confused, I frowned. “What’s this?”

“An offer.” He smiled then, as if that would make this all okay, but my blood was already boiling at the audacity.

“For what?” I asked carefully.

“To buy your property.”

“Why?” I kept my tone businesslike to avoid blurting out something harsher. My mind was reeling right now.

“Rachel, you’re a smart girl.”

“Woman,” I quickly said, correcting him. I found myself going from curious to annoyed in a big ol’ hurry.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Apologies. *Woman.*”

I clenched my teeth. I had never been so irritated at Austen in my life. This was the man he had grown into? One who stomps over to my house and makes an offer to buy my family home? I was furious.

“You need to start making sense,” I said, my voice trembling.

He folded his hands on the table in front of him. “You have no business in Kodiak Canyon anymore. We both know you aren’t a small-town girl. You belong in a city. With people. With jobs for someone like you. You hated it here for eighteen years. Now you have the chance to make good money by selling—”

It was my turn to hold up my hand. “I’m going to stop you right there. This is my family home, and my hometown. And you don’t know the first damn thing about me.”

I didn’t mean for my voice to get as loud as it did. But that didn’t deter Austen. He raised his voice to match mine.

“We’re giving you a fair price. You can’t hack it in the wilderness.”

“I did it for eighteen years,” I said, practically snarling at him.

“Did you? Or were you a little girl living with Grandpa? Didn’t he take care of everything, really? If you’re actually going to stay here, you’d better get to winterizing. Splitting wood to feed the woodstove all winter long, and having your propane topped off before the truck can’t make it up the icy hill come October. Stocking the pantry for the days you can’t make it down the hill in that old truck, getting the tire chains on yourself. You think you know how to do all that?”

I was so mad at this point, I was shaking. My nails were digging into my palms.

Seething, I said through clenched teeth, “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

Austen shrugged and nodded to the folder. “I’ll leave that here for you to think over.”

I grabbed the folder and chased him out the door, tossing it at him. It rose in the air, papers flying out in every direction before floating to the ground as I slammed the door shut.

Throwing my back to the door, I gulped down air, adrenaline rushing through my veins. The worst part was, he was right.

It was only September, but I didn’t realize these were things I needed to be thinking about now. Quite frankly, I’d forgotten they needed to be done. I’d been focused on the cosmetic aspects of fixing the place up, so it was suitable for me. I felt like an idiot now.

Was Austen right? Should I go back to Houston? I could get an apartment somewhere . . .

That didn’t feel right, though. And I was mad that I’d let him get under my skin.

But why did he want to buy my land? That had come as a total shock.

I pulled open the door, and sure enough, the papers were still there, blowing slowly around my driveway. I picked each of them up and saw it. His pitch for expanding their fields onto my land.

So, it was a business decision. The business he and Noah ran.

A new wave of anger coursed through me. Was this the reason Noah had been playing nice—the fried chicken, bringing up our first kiss at the fall festival—was it to butter me up and get me to sell?

I barely had time for my pulse rate to lower before there was another knock at the door.

“If you think I’m selling the only place on earth I feel at home, you are dead-ass . . .” I pulled open the door. “Wrong,” I said in a stunned tone.

Noah stood before me.

I shook my head at him with a deep scowl on my face. “How could you?”

“Austen just told me what happened. Listen, he wasn’t supposed to—”

I didn’t let him finish. I slammed the door in his face.

He knocked again politely and called through the door. “Please, Rach, I promise it’s not what you think.”

He was probably full of shit, but I pulled the door open against my better judgment.

“I didn’t bring it up to you because I didn’t want to sway you,” Noah said as he stepped through the door frame so I couldn’t slam the door again.

“Was this your grand plan all along Was I just a bullet point on your to do list?”

Noah stumbled over his words “I didn’t . . . I mean, I don’t know . . . I just wanted to . . . to do this.”

He stepped closer and grabbed the back of my neck. Before I knew what he was doing, our lips were connected in a searing kiss.

A hundred ancient memories flooded my brain at once. Stolen kisses and whispered promises. First times and the weight of brand-new emotions.

How we went from arguing one second, to kissing the next . . . I wasn't sure. All I knew was, for the first time in long time, I was completely lost in a moment. And in such a good way.

Noah's mouth was hot and hungry, and when I parted my lips for him, he took full advantage. His tongue met mine in hot, confident strokes, and pleasure zinged through me.

I wasn't used to feeling like this—free-falling and out of control. This desperate, achy feeling.

Kissing Roger was never like this, but my ex was the furthest thing from my mind. Noah's hands cupped my jaw, holding my face to his like he didn't want to let me go—like he didn't want this to end. I wasn't going anywhere.

He made a rumbly noise in his chest and my body responded, my heart rate ratcheting up even more.

All my wondering was gone. Noah Hart was a very good kisser.

When he opened his eyes, they were stormy and conflicted. Was he regretting our kiss? Something else?

“Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have done that,” I blurted.

His eyes met mine, but before I could say anything else, Noah was kissing me again. He was even more ravenous this time. It was like he couldn't get enough, and if this was going to be our only time to throw consequences out the window, he was going all in.

I felt the exact same way.

Noah backed me up through the kitchen as our hands roamed frantically over each other's bodies, as if making up for lost time. Suddenly, I desperately needed to explore him, and he wasted no time exploring me either. He kept one hand on the back of my neck as we took a few more frantic steps back, as if he didn't want me to escape. The other hand slid down my back and pressed into my lower back, aligning our lower halves.

I pushed him up against the wall, and he hit with a low thud. The wall gave me leverage to press up against him. It was apparent he was feeling this moment as much as me, if the firm ridge pressed against my hip was any indication.

In one sudden motion, Noah lifted me straight off the floor, and my legs wrapped automatically around his hips. Without missing a beat, he walked us straight to my old room.

What were we doing? I didn't care. It felt too good. The only thing I could focus on was the scent of him, the feel of him, the taste of him.

Noah placed me in the center of the bed and then joined me. My legs parted so he could position himself exactly where I wanted him. The eager movement provided much-needed friction.

He huffed out a sigh in reply and rained kisses down my neck, over my collarbone. I arched my back in invitation, and he moved to suck at the skin on my throat. I imagined him moving lower.

“Noah,” I said, groaning.

He looked up at me for a beat and smirked.

An ancient memory popped into my brain—the first time I’d discovered what his tongue could do—and I knew he was thinking the same wicked thing.

My thought was interrupted at the sound of a loud pounding on my door. It was distant, but the urgency made us stop dead in our tracks.

Then we heard Natalie calling out, “Rach? Is Noah here? I need him right away.”

Noah’s eyes widened in concern as he pulled back from me. He straightened his clothes, adjusting the front of his pants. *Wow.*

He gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry. I have no idea what she could need.”

“It’s okay.”

I rose from the bed and watched as Noah headed to answer the door. I could just make out Natalie’s frantic words.

“It’s Marice, she’s giving birth. I need your help.”

Marice? I wondered who that was.

“She in the birthing pen?” he asked.

I rounded the corner to see him stepping into his shoes. Then it occurred to me, they must be talking about their goats. Natalie had mentioned as we sipped wine last week that she'd started a herd this year. She wanted to make her own cheese.

Natalie nodded. "Yeah. I corralled her in there last night." She looked past Noah, then at me. "You come too, Rach. We could use any medical knowledge you can offer."

I walked quickly to the door and pulled on my muck boots, then sprinted to catch up to them.

I didn't know the first thing about goat delivery, but how different could it really be from human birth?

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We made our way toward the small barn behind Mom's house. The smell of hay hung in the air, and it was chilly tonight, which was a good thing. Maybe the cold would stamp out the lustful urges I was having.

Did I hate that we got interrupted? Of course. But at the same time, I wondered if it was for the best. Hooking up with Rachel while she was in town? That had *bad idea* written all over it. I just needed my body to get that memo. A goat giving birth was the perfect distraction. There was no time to think about how hot Rachel's mouth felt moving against mine, or the perfect way her curves had felt....

Ugh. This was torture. I was still half-stiff and needed to get my head on straight.

"Thanks for coming." I turned to Rachel as we entered Marice's pen.

"I have no idea how I can help, but I'm happy to try." Her face held a worried expression.

Marice bleated as if to say she was also worried that our resident medical professional looked so unsure of herself.

I patted her rough head. "Easy, girl."

"Here are the gloves." My mom returned with a box, and I pulled a glove free.

"Rach?" I asked, offering her a glove.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“Didn’t you work in the ER at one time?” I asked her.

“Yes. With people. Not goats,” she said before tugging her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Just need to check if there are two hooves,” I told her. “You want to do the honors?”

Rachel sighed. “See with people, you want to feel a head. I would have never known that.” Pulling the glove over her hand, she got on her knees behind Marice.

“I’ll hold her steady,” I told Rachel.

She gave me a nod and then fixed a sure look on her face as she checked Marice’s progress. “Holy cow. There are two hard nubs in there.”

I nodded. “That’d be the hooves. Good. That makes this a lot easier.”

Rachel removed the glove and tossed it in a nearby trash can. “Now what?”

“It’ll happen fast now. Get the towels ready. There will be a few kids coming. Ma, you got the nose sucker?” I looked over at the table of supplies.

Mom held up the blue bulb syringe. “Check.”

I nodded. “Good. Sometimes they need a little help getting the gunk out.”

After a few more minutes of Marice looking around wildly like she was processing what was happening, it was time. Two little gray hooves poked out, and I held the towel ready in

wait. In less than a minute, the baby goat slipped out, and I eased it to the ground.

“Just got to wipe the nose in a downward motion,” I told Rachel as I demonstrated. I listened carefully for any indication the baby was able to breathe, but as the kid thrashed around, I knew that probably meant it needed suction.

Before I could even ask, Rachel was kneeling in the dirt next to me with the syringe in hand. She depressed the ball, and I held the kid’s head as Rachel stuck the syringe up the nose and throat, clearing them of fluid.

By this time, Marice was turned around and delicately licking and making soft noises as she fervently cleaned the kid. Finally, the little one bleated a sweet sound.

“It’s so cute,” Rachel said, cooing at the sight.

She was completely right, of course. It was a sweet sight to see Marice with her first kid. She knew just what to do as a goat mama.

After Marice did a bit of cleaning and we all took a break nearby, she was ready for us again. The next baby came out easier, and this time Rachel helped ease it out. Whatever hesitation she had earlier was long gone.

Marice started her cleaning ritual once more as this baby quickly snorted and coughed its airway free.

“The first kid is trying to stand.” Mom pointed to the now fluffy-looking white baby kid. Its little legs were making a big effort to try to carry it toward its mother to feed.

“This is incredible,” Rachel said, her voice filled with awe.

I threw an arm around her shoulders. “Thank you for coming.”

When she didn’t reply, my mind started to spin all sorts of fantasies about working my farm alongside Rachel. If she stayed, if she really forgave me for our plans to buy her out.

After four kids were born, Mom invited Rachel to dinner, and to my surprise, she said yes. I was sure she’d still be furious at Austen. That’s not to say she wasn’t, but at least she was willing to ignore him and give the other Hart family members a chance.

It filled me with more emotion than I was expecting. I guessed the past had much more of a hold on me than I’d been willing to admit until recently.

Rachel left to shower and clean up. But she came back an hour later, just as we were setting the table.

• • •

In the best stroke of luck today, Austen wasn’t home for dinner.

Mom had made her famous shish kebabs, complete with pineapple, mushrooms, peppers, onion, chicken, beef, and shrimp. She piled rice high in bowls on the table as we gathered round, stomachs rumbling, as we waited for Rachel.

At two minutes after six, she knocked on the door.

“You’re late,” my mom said, only half joking.

“Am I? Sorry, Natalie.” Rachel blushed, craning her neck to see the clock on the wall.

“She’s fine.” Dottie strode over and wrapped her in a hug. “How you been, kiddo?”

“Good. How about you, Dottie?” she managed to say, even though Gran was probably squeezing all the air from her lungs.

Logan popped up next from the table and shook her hand, at the urging of my mom. Logan had only been nine when Rachel moved away. He was my mom’s menopause baby, as she liked to call him, much to his chagrin.

Anyway, I doubt he remembered much about Rachel, especially because we always made it a point to leave him behind. After all, he was so young, and we were teenagers, too cool for our own shadows.

Taking my place in line, I gave her a quick hug too.

“We just saw each other,” she said skeptically.

“Just confirming that I’m still in your good graces,” I said under my breath so Mom wouldn’t get wise to our tiff.

If Mom learned what Austen had done earlier today, or what we’d been planning, she’d blow a gasket. She had always been very protective of Rachel . . . rightly so, I guess. She was the daughter my mother had always wanted but never had.

“For now,” Rachel joked.

At least, I hoped that she was kidding.

As we all took our seats, Dottie frowned. “Where’s Austen? Shish kebabs are his favorite dinner.”

Rachel and I exchanged a glance.

Mom caught my eye then. “Where is that brother of yours?”

I shrugged, fixing the most innocent look on my face that I could muster. “Beats me. I’m not his keeper.”

“I saw him today,” Rachel said with an impassive expression. “He came by with a proposal to buy my land.”

The whole table went silent, and everyone froze. Logan mid-bite, Gran mid-sip of wine . . . then everyone looked in Mom’s direction.

“Did he, now?” Her glare fell on me an instant, a frown fixed on her face. “Noah, did you know about this?”

I wondered then if Rachel knew what she was doing. If this was her payback. Maybe not, though. She probably just wanted answers, and we owed her that much.

“I, uh, well . . .” I tried to come up with the right way to explain myself, but it was proving difficult.

“You knew?” Mom asked.

My mouth formed a tight defensive line. “Well, yeah.”

Mom turned suddenly to Rachel. “My dear, I hope you turned these fools down.”

“I did.” She smiled proudly, sliding grilled veggies from a skewer.

“Good girl,” Mom said proudly. “Well, thank you for still talking to any of us. Honestly, Noah. How rude. Don’t worry, Rachel. I’ll be having a stern talk with Austen when I see him.”

Rachel nodded. She was being kind. After what Austen told me he'd said to her, that she wouldn't be able to manage the property on her own, I would have held a grudge. He had been an ass today.

"For the record, Rach," I turned to her, "I know you've got it under control. But remember we're all here to help you however you need it."

"Especially Austen," Mom said.

Rachel snorted out a laugh at that and popped a bite of pineapple in her mouth. "I appreciate that."

"Good neighbors that you can count on out here is essential," Dottie said, and we all nodded in agreement.

Soon after, the conversation turned to Logan, and Rachel asked him a bunch of questions about playing football and his plans for after high school.

Then Rachel's brow scrunched. "Wait. Who all still lives at home?"

Mom passed the steak to Rachel, urging her to take more. "Just Logan now. Austen has his own cabin on the back acreage, and Noah built himself a cabin just down the hill. Noah, you have to show her after supper."

"You did?" Rachel asked me, looking surprised. "That's awesome."

I nodded, a proud grin on my face. "Oh yeah, about four years ago. I'd love to show you."

I didn't mean the words to sound so flirty, but they did. Everyone at the table, especially Dottie, raised their eyebrows at me, and Rachel blushed.

“Uh, sure. Yeah. Sometime.”

I hoped it would be tonight. In fact, I was grateful dinner was soon over.

“Should I help clear plates?” I said in a sudden spurt of generosity.

Mom winked at me. “Oh no. Logan and I've got this. Go ahead and show off your place to Rachel.”

This was how my family had been when they first found out that Rachel and I had a fling going. You wouldn't expect them to put so many designs on teenagers, but they did. It's what they do. Marrying us off and securing grandchildren was their first priority.

I wasn't sure about all that, but I was eager to find out what else might happen with Rachel tonight if I got her alone at my place.

Rachel said her good-byes, and we headed out in my truck. My cabin was close enough to walk, but I wanted my vehicle close by all the same.

As we pulled up to my home, Rachel belted out a shocked laugh. “I thought you said this was a cabin.”

“It is,” I said defensively.

“It's two stories, and it's beautiful.”

Proud of my place, I beamed. A lot of work and money had gone into it. Every penny I made working, in fact.

“A place to grow in, I suppose,” I said casually.

“You want a family someday? Kids and all that?” she asked.

I supposed it was the next logical question, but somehow hearing her say it, it gnawed at me.

When I started building the house, I was only nineteen. Rachel had left three years prior, and I’d never forgotten about her. Never gotten over her.

I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t dreamed of having babies with Rachel Tyson. Little green-eyed babies with chestnut-brown hair running around.

But the work took me years, and I had honestly forgotten about the fantasies I’d had when I started it. After a while, I just wanted a place of my own I could feel proud of.

“Maybe someday,” I said.

As we walked inside, I saw my place through her eyes, and I reveled in every compliment she was willing to give me.

“Noah, this is something else,” she said as her gaze darted around.

And it really was. Top-of-the-line chef’s kitchen with concrete counters and natural stone backsplash. Tall, vaulted ceilings with reclaimed distressed beams, hand-blown globe lights I’d hung with old rope, and a fireplace so big you could walk inside it.

She reached over and slapped my arm as she looked around. “This is like something out of a freaking magazine.”

“Thanks.” I smiled contentedly. It felt good knowing Rachel Tyson saw what I’d been able to accomplish since she’d left.

“Let me show you the game room.” I nodded to the spiral stairs.

“There’s a game room?” She gasped and followed me down.

I had a pool table, and a giant leather sectional with a projector screen.

“Wow. Just wow.” She clapped her hands. “Little Noah Hart, all grown up. You know, this would go for a lot of money if you listed it for tourist rentals, or maybe built smaller versions of it to rent out.”

“That’s a good idea.”

She pointed to my acoustic guitar in the corner. “You still play?”

“Sometimes,” I said, remembering that Rachel always seemed so impressed by Austen’s guitar playing. I wasn’t as good back then, and it was something I envied, the attention she seemed to give him over it.

“Can I ask you something?” I blurted, running one hand over the stubble on my jaw.

“Sure.”

“Did anything ever happen . . . romantically between you and any of my brothers?” I arched an eyebrow and held my breath.

Please say no. Please say no.

“Why are you asking?” she asked, which left an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

I shrugged. “It would have made sense, I guess. You and Austen were in the same grade. I know both he and Jameson had a crush on you. The pretty girl next door.”

“Well . . .” She let out a breath, pausing way longer than I felt was completely necessary. “I wouldn’t really classify this entirely as a romantic encounter.”

When she took another long inhale, I wanted to shout for her to spit it out. Jealousy should have a time limit, but apparently mine didn’t. I shouldn’t care so much. It was ancient history. Still, I wanted to know.

Her gaze dropped to the floor. “Jameson was my first kiss. I was fourteen,” she said with a laugh, “and he was sixteen at the time. But that’s as far as it went. One kiss. And no, nothing ever happened between me and Austen. He was more like an annoying brother to me.”

“Is that what I was too?” I shouldn’t have asked, but I did anyway, because apparently I needed to torture myself.

Rachel’s eyes met mine then, her chin dropping as if the answer were obvious. “I mean, yes, for years. But then I saw something different in you. Something more.”

“That you never saw in Austen,” I muttered, the petty part of my brain confirmed.

She guffawed. “Are you kidding? Look at how he treated me today. That’s how he always was. Thinking of himself first. And yet I still loved him dearly, despite his cocky know-it-all attitude.”

Her words made me smile. “I always wondered.”

I just wasn’t brave enough to ask that back then. Or maybe I didn’t want to feel like I had to compete with my own brothers. I knew they were shocked when out of all of us, I seemed to be the one to get Rachel, at least for a little while.

“Can I tell you something?” I asked, stepping closer to her.

She sucked in her bottom lip, her eyes wide, and gave me a little smile in answer.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I told her in a low voice as I stepped in and brushed the strand of hair that fell into her face.

When I tucked it behind her ear, she leaned into my touch. Then I closed the gap between us altogether.

Where our kiss this morning was fast and hungry and eager, this kiss was slow and careful and deep. This kiss said all the things I was thinking deep in the back of my mind, but didn’t yet have the conviction to tell her.

Rachel

Noah was kissing me in his house. Alarm bells rang like crazy in my head.

I didn't know what had happened earlier today. One minute, I was being torn down by Austen, and the next minute, Noah was there. I wanted to direct all my anger at him, but I couldn't. I wanted to doubt his words, but I couldn't manage that either. Noah had always been honest with me. And apparently he was still my kryptonite.

Even though I wondered whether Noah really hoped I would stick around town long term, or whether he hoped he might get a little action and then buy me out of my property, I wasn't completely sure. I didn't know what his life here was really like anymore.

Who were his friends? What did he like to do for fun? He mostly seemed like the same Noah I remembered, but then thinking about the house he'd built and designed himself, it was a stark reminder that a lot of life had been lived since we last parted.

I wasn't thinking about that in the moment, though, because Noah's large firm body was pressed against mine, and his hot mouth was giving me sweet, slow, expert kisses. When his tongue stroked mine, I gladly accepted the invitation.

He tilted his head to deepen our kiss. I had to stand on my tippy-toes, and he had to lean over me to make it work.

Soon his hand started roaming, tentatively this time. The feel of his steady hand caressing my back, dipping down slowly, reaching around to cup my waist and pulling me impossibly close . . . it was heavenly. I inhaled the scent of him—a woody cologne—and it was so uniquely him.

I could have cried under different circumstances, being kissed like this. Like I mattered more than anything in the world to him. Noah was either the best actor, an ultimately smooth player, or there were still feelings for me buried somewhere deep inside him.

The very idea of that was intoxicating. For years, Noah Hart was the measuring stick by which I'd evaluated all other men.

He was tender and kind, but abundantly masculine. The combination was intoxicating.

Noah took slow steps, walking us back a few paces until I bumped into the pool table. He gently lifted me onto it until I was sitting on the edge.

It was like we were moving in slow motion. Savoring. Testing.

I still couldn't believe I was *here*—kissing *Noah*. But it felt completely natural, like the most normal thing in the world. There was no weirdness, no awkward bumbling. It was as if no time had passed since we'd been together before.

He pulled back and looked at me. His thumb pressed against my lips as he studied me with a serious look, before he

dipped back down to kiss me in that same maddeningly measured pace.

Even though electricity was shooting through me uncontrollably, I let everything linger. Each kiss, each tiny motion of our bodies as they came together. Him inching his way closer, my legs parting to make room, him leaning into me until my back was pressed flat against the table and he had to shift me up so he could crawl on top of me.

He rolled his hips, creating a fantastic pressure between us, and I let out a soft pleasure-filled sound. Noah's mouth moved to my throat where he left wet, sucking kisses.

The moment was so incredibly tender, that the sound of knocking on the door on the first floor almost made my heart explode. It was like waking up from a nightmare, the kind when you realize you're dreaming and you try to scream, and your heart is instantly pounding but you can't react just yet.

Noah snapped up from me, his head tilting to the side as we listened for the knocking again.

His eyes met mine, and we both seemed to silently ask each other who it could be.

One of his brothers, maybe? They had terrible timing, whoever it was.

With a frown, Noah removed himself and then me from the pool table. He adjusted the *situation* in his jeans, and we headed up the stairs to the front door.

When Noah opened it, a woman was standing there, her hands on her hips. Who the hell was that?

“CJ. What are you doing here?”

His tone was calm, but it didn't help my stomach feel any less sick. After all, it was almost nine at night, and a strange woman was at his front door.

“I thought you were coming out tonight,” she said as she tapped her toe. “But I can see you were entertaining.” She leaned around Noah to look at me.

I stood with my arms folded protectively over my chest, feeling completely out of place and a little shell-shocked.

“And you didn't think to text me?” he asked.

“I tried, but you didn't respond.”

“Then I guess that means I'm not coming out tonight,” he said with a certain finality.

Just then, my phone rang, and I was grateful for the distraction. My purse was nearby, and I grabbed my phone.

I was surprised to see Mr. Davis's number pop up. It seemed odd he'd be calling me so late. The only reason he'd called in the past was to make arrangements for Grandpa's ashes—but that was all done now.

“Hello?” I said as I headed toward the kitchen to get away from the surprise visitor.

“Rachel. Thank God. I didn't know who else to call.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. “What . . . can I do for you?”

“It's Tahlia,” he said with no other greeting. I knew that was the name of his granddaughter, but I didn't know much

else about her.

“Is she okay?” I asked, immediately going into nurse mode at the panicked tone of his voice.

“She’s in labor.”

It seemed like it took all his effort to communicate this much to me. I understood, though, from my years in the hospital. When people were worried about their loved ones, all the pleasantries went out the window, and sentences either grew really short or really long.

“How far apart are the contractions?” I asked.

At that question, I noticed Noah look back at me with an eyebrow arched. He seemed to still be addressing the woman called CJ, who was giving me quite the death glare.

“She’s an old friend,” I heard Noah say as Mr. Davis said, “About five minutes.”

I don’t know why it should bother me that Noah called me an *old friend*. I was, after all.

But I couldn’t worry about that right now. I knew why Mr. Davis had called. The nearest hospital was forty-five minutes away, and contractions five minutes apart meant the baby was coming now. Since I was five minutes away, ten at most, it would be best if I rushed over to help however I could while we waited for help.

Confirming that he’d already called for an ambulance and that Tahlia was at his house, I told him I’d be over in five minutes.

I probably should have said good-bye to Noah, but there was no time. “I’m borrowing your truck,” I shouted instead before bounding down the front steps two at a time. I sensed both he and CJ were staring at me, but I couldn’t worry about that now.

After flying down the winding dirt road, I screeched to a stop in Mr. Davis’s driveway and sprinted from the truck. I wasn’t even sure I turned the engine off.

Mr. Davis greeted me at the door. His face held a worried expression. “Thanks for coming.”

“Absolutely.”

“Have you ever delivered a baby before?” he asked, leading the way inside.

“Once or twice,” I said. He didn’t need to know that one of those times was a goat. I smiled at the memory for a second before I heard the sound of a woman groaning in pain.

Things just got very real.

Was I really up for a home birth right now? Ten minutes ago, I was making out with Noah. There was never a dull moment out here in the mountains, it seemed.

“Come on. Tahlia’s back here,” he said, leading me further into the house.

In a back bedroom, Tahlia was lying in bed. Sweat droplets covered her forehead, and her face was red and strained. She looked young, maybe eighteen or nineteen.

“Tahlia, I’m Nurse Rachel. I’m here to help you. Everything is going to be okay,” I told her, then turned to Mr. Davis. “Bring me towels, any gloves if you have them, a bowl of warm water, and a sharp clean pair of scissors.”

Tahlia’s eyes popped wide then.

“Just for the umbilical cord,” I said gently to her. “If it comes to that. How far apart are you now?”

“Four minutes,” she said, breathing out the words.

I gave her my most reassuring smile. “Very good. I’m going to wash my hands and then examine you, if that’s okay?”

The fear in her eyes was apparent, but she seemed to be holding it together. She gave me a tight nod.

Once my hands were clean, Mr. Davis had returned with the supplies. I examined Tahlia, aware that more people were coming into the room.

I turned to a young man around her age. “Are you the dad?”

He nodded, his expressions swinging between looks of panic and excitement.

“She’s dilated to about ten centimeters now. That means you’re going to be a daddy very soon.”

Turning back to Tahlia, I gave her a steady but serious expression.

“Do you feel like you need to push?” Part of me was hoping to delay this a bit. Maybe give the EMTs time to get here. If her body was amendable to that plan.

She nodded and let out a piercing groan.

“That’s what I thought. It’s time to start pushing. Next contraction, okay? You and me, and . . . Daddy.” I looked back to the man in question.

“Lincoln,” he told me.

“Lincoln.” I repeated his name, and that’s when I noticed that for some reason, Noah was standing in the doorway. The sight of him caught me off guard.

“They’re right in here,” he was telling someone in the hallway as he stepped aside, revealing two paramedics.

“She’s four minutes apart, ten centimeters,” I told them.

“Make some room, please,” the female paramedic told everyone. “Except you. Are you a doctor?” she asked me.

I shook my head. “RN.”

“Good. You stay.”

I didn’t have time to tell her that I had no idea what I was doing. She and her partner worked fast, taking Tahlia’s blood pressure and pulse. All her vitals were good, but the contractions were now clearly just three minutes apart. There was no time for them to load her into an ambulance now. It would be too dangerous to be flying down a freeway at seventy miles an hour.

Working together, the three of us readied ourselves, coaching Tahlia while Lincoln held her hand tightly.

Luckily for her, the delivery went quickly. It didn’t take her more than five rounds of pushing before the baby slid out easily and began wailing.

“It’s a girl!” the paramedic announced, placing the baby on Tahlia’s chest.

She and her partner wiped the baby down while Tahlia and Lincoln gazed at their daughter in wonder, both of them now crying. It was the most miraculous thing in the world to witness. My heart was so full, I was almost crying right along with them.

Instead, I switched into professional mode and watched how they cut the umbilical cord and tended to Tahlia. I took mental notes on how they swaddled the baby and checked her blood pressure again, just in case I was part of any more deliveries out here. It was all so fascinating.

Since the birth had been so smooth, they waited for a bit before loading her into the ambulance, baby in her arms, to take them both in for monitoring.

As the stretcher left the living room and I watched them load her up, I turned to Noah, who’d been sitting in the living room keeping Mr. Davis calm.

“She going to be okay?” Mr. Davis asked, his brow still worried into a knot.

I patted his shoulder. “She did great. Congratulations, Grandpa.”

He smiled big. “I’m so glad you’re home now, Rachel. We need more good people like you around here.”

An unexpected wave of emotion at his words flooded through me. My throat tightened, and I nodded at him.

We said our good-byes after that, and Noah drove me the short distance home.

“How did you find me?” I asked curiously.

“I tracked my truck on my phone and got Logan to drive me over.”

Huh. I didn’t even know that was a thing. Then again, I’d only ever driven an ancient car.

“So, was CJ okay?” I asked, cocking a brow at him. “She seemed mad.”

“She’s just a friend,” he said defensively.

“Like how we’re friends?” I asked.

He let out a long, slow breath. “So, here’s the thing about me, and you may already know this . . . but I tend to speak first and think later. So, when I answer your questions honestly, just be sure you’re ready to hear the answer.”

“I’m ready,” I told him. As far as I was concerned, honesty was always the best policy. I didn’t want him censoring the truth to spare my feelings. I would rather know.

“She and I used to hook up once in a while, but no, she and I aren’t friends like you and I are.”

It stung a little to hear about their history, but I did appreciate his honesty. I also noted that he spoke in past tense. They *used to* hookup. “What do you mean?”

We’d pulled into my driveway then and Noah cut off the engine, turning to me. “We have a deep friendship. Hell, Rachel, you were my first love. I’m not sure that’s even

something a person ever gets over. CJ's a casual acquaintance. That's it."

His words crashed into me like a tidal wave. I felt like the wind had been knocked from my lungs.

I guess I'd known as much. Not that either of us had said it, but I'd known I loved him back then, and I'd thought he'd loved me too. To hear him say it, though . . . it was overwhelming.

Instead, I went for humor, because that's what I tended to fall back on in awkward situations. "You usually sleep with your casual acquaintances?"

Noah chuckled and shook his head. "When I said there wasn't very many available females in this town, I wasn't kidding. CJ and I used each other. Believe me, we were on the same page."

"Were?" I asked, raising one eyebrow.

"I told her I needed space. Whatever I might have shared with her is in the past now."

I couldn't help the smile tugging at my mouth. It felt like a small victory hearing him say this, even if it shouldn't matter to me. Noah wasn't mine. I didn't have some type of claim on him.

I buried my face in my hands.

"You okay?" he asked, bringing an arm around my shoulders.

I let my head fall into him as he held me.

“Today was a lot,” I murmured, exasperated.

“You delivered five babies today,” he said with a laugh. “Isn’t that a normal day for a nurse?”

I looked up at him, a deranged smile on my face. “Maybe for a labor and delivery nurse, which I was *not*. And are you really lumping together four goat babies and one human baby?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. How different is it, really?”

A high-pitched squeak bubbled from my throat. “Very.”

“You were great in both. So calm and steady.”

Realizing the full weight of it all . . . was a lot. But Noah was right. I did well, and I let the feeling of pride burst through me. I’d felt more fulfilled today than I had, well, ever in my life.

Being with the Harts, they were like my second family, even if I was still mad at Austen. Being in my childhood home again. Being needed by my neighbors. Having a good man like Noah . . . *if* I had him, I wasn’t entirely sure.

Maybe if I stayed here, I wouldn’t be so lost and alone in the world.

Rachel

“You will never guess what I did this week,” I said to Megan, taunting her as I set my phone against a stack of books on the counter so I could have a good video chat with my friend.

“You robbed a liquor store?”

“Ha. No. Good guess, though. Nope. I delivered four goats and one human baby this week.”

Megan’s face twisted in disbelief. “Robbing a liquor store sounds more likely.”

“I’m as serious as an arrhythmia,” I said proudly.

She shook her head. “Things in the sticks sure are different.”

I nodded. “Very. The goats were Noah’s, and my down-the-street neighbor’s granddaughter was delivering at home, by accident.”

“I don’t even know my neighbor’s first name,” Megan said with wide eyes. “I can’t imagine delivering babies for them.”

“That’s what’s so different about Kodiak Canyon. That’s like a normal Tuesday here. I missed this.”

She pursed her lips and bobbed her head. “Selfishly, I want you back.” She paused to smile big. “But I’m so happy for you. This is what you needed.”

“There was just something about helping out Tahlia—it was meaningful, you know?”

Megan waited, sensing I wanted to continue my rant.

“That was why I got into nursing in the first place, not to battle hospital politics. It had started to make the job feel pointless and even combative.”

“What are you saying?” Megan asked. “You want to be a small-town nurse who does house calls now?”

“Is that even a thing?” I laughed, but the idea intrigued me.

“I have no idea, but maybe you could make it a thing,” Megan said with all the conviction I needed to believe her.

“Well, I have no idea what I’m saying. I’m just sort of figuring things out as I go.”

I didn’t mean to backtrack, but that’s how I’d always been. Wondering if every decision I made was the right one, or whether I’d later regret it. That’s probably why I stayed with Roger for so long.

“You deserve happiness,” Megan said. “Which means, I think, that you need to stop overanalyzing everything and just have some fun. Hell, have a fling with Noah. He’s hot!”

I laughed at the assessment of Noah. “I’m not here to have a fling, but being kissed did feel pretty amazing.”

“You kissed him?” she practically screamed into the phone as she rocked around in her seat, her hair bouncing wildly.

I nodded with a laugh at her over-the-top reaction. “Settle, lady. Yes, I kissed him. Twice.”

She waggled her eyebrows at me.

“And it was *amazing*.”

“You’re killing me.” She fanned her face. “I need a boyfriend.”

“Or just some sex,” I said with a wink.

“True.” She nodded thoughtfully. “But you absolutely deserve some hot kisses. Replace Roger the baked potato with some good memories with Noah the hot tamale!”

We devolved into a fit of giggles before ending the call.

For once, though, I felt downright hopeful.

I leaped up from my seat and continued changing out the faucet on the kitchen sink. I’m pretty sure that job shouldn’t take four hours, but if I just stayed patient, it would all come together. I was sure of it.

After two more hours of fussing around with the sink, I called Noah. “Hey, are you busy?”

“Always,” he said with a laugh. I could hear the sound of goats bleating in the background.

“Oh shit. Sorry.”

“But not too busy for you. You need something?”

I debated ending the call, but the truth was, I was fixated on finishing this job. “Well, you do owe me for the goats.”

“And here I thought that was out of the kindness of your heart,” he said with a chuckle.

“If now’s not a good time . . .”

He cut in quickly. “I can be over in five. What do you need?”

It felt good, hearing that Noah would rush over to help me.

That was a trigger I knew I’d been holding on to from Roger. He’d never make time for things I needed done.

Sure, when it came to me helping him prepare to host his friends for a night of watching a football game, I’d be expected to happily agree. But when I asked him to help me clean up the house so I could host a girls’ night, he’d told me he had too much work to do, and then proceeded to play five hours of video games.

So, yeah, it meant a lot to me that I was a priority to Noah. I hadn’t been treated like that in a long time—like I was a priority. Not since I lived back here and had Grandpa Paul and the Hart family in my corner.

As promised, five minutes later, Noah was at my door. Hell, I think it might have been four minutes. I don’t even know how he got here so quickly.

His hair was perfectly disheveled, sticking up in the front. His facial hair had grown into the perfect five o’clock shadow.

“Hey, you,” he said as he pulled me into a hug.

“Hey, yourself,” I said, which was totally cheesy, but neither of us seemed to care.

We watched each other for a second, grinning like two idiots.

Damn, he’s handsome.

“So, what are we doing?”

He hadn't even asked. I swear, that shouldn't have shot straight to my heart, but dammit, it did. I was sorely lacking tending loving care, and here Noah was providing it to me.

“Something with water?” he said with a laugh as he took me in.

My shirt was soaked. I had been so close, I thought, to finishing finally. But when I tested it, water sprayed angrily from the handle.

“It's this darn thing.” I sighed and gestured to the sink where a half-assembled faucet taunted me.

Noah unbuttoned the cuffs of his plaid shirt and rolled up the sleeves, revealing his thick, tanned forearms. In that moment, I wanted to say, *Forget the faucet, let's make out again*, but I had to behave myself, despite Megan's advice.

With Noah, I needed to be careful and feel him out. The last thing I wanted to do was to rush into something. I wasn't even sure if he wanted a relationship with anyone. He'd certainly kept CJ at a distance, from what he told me.

I knew plenty of guys like that. Happy for the sex, but talk about anything more than that, and they ran for the hills.

Not to mention, I was sure I needed time alone to heal. That's what people did, right?

Lying flat on his back, Noah inspected under the sink. “Everything looks good down here,” he called out.

“It was spraying from here.” I pointed as he came out from the cupboard.

He leaned in to investigate. “You tighten this screw?” he asked, pointing to a tiny hole in the side of the handle.

I shook my head and leaned in to examine it. “Didn’t even realize that was a screw.”

“Hand me that Allen wrench.” He nodded to Grandpa Paul’s toolbox, which had become a permanent resident of the kitchen counter.

After a few twists, Noah turned on the water and the faucet ran smoothly.

I sighed in frustration. “I was so close.”

Noah chuckled, a kind look on his face. “Was that your first time?”

“Yeah, can’t you tell?” I gestured to my shirt.

“Not at all. You did amazing. One little screw, three little turns. That’s all I did. You did the rest. Good work.”

His praise shouldn’t have mattered to me, but dammit, it felt good. I smiled at him.

“Listen,” he said as I smiled to myself. “I have some work to do still, but we should get together soon. Hang out.”

“Yeah, sure.” I held back any snarky remarks about his friend CJ, even though the immature part of my brain wanted to say something petty. “Anytime.”

“Great. I have to head out of town for a few days, but after that?”

“After that,” I said with a nod.

He stepped closer, hesitantly but expectantly.

In a panic, I stuck out my hand. He smirked and took it in his, pulled it to his lips, and kissed it.

All at once, I melted into a puddle as the six-foot-something hunk strode from my house. Keeping my cool around Noah was going to be a Herculean effort.

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Noah

I carried a fresh batch of bottled lager from the shed and handed it up to Austen as he stood in the bed of the truck. It was a small order we needed to fill today at a brewery a few towns over.

“You apologized yet to Rachel?” I asked.

He scowled. “I can’t believe she tattled on me.”

I held back a laugh. Mom had given him hell the next day.

After heading back down to the shed, I returned with another cartload of boxes.

“So, that’s a no,” I said, taking the straps off the cart and handing Austen the first box.

“That’s how she and I are. I tell it like it is, and she comes around eventually.”

He neatly stacked the umpteenth box and reached for another. We were a well-oiled machine by now.

“If you’re sure,” I said warily, highly doubtful that Rachel approved of his words.

Who would want anyone to suggest they couldn’t run their own household? Just thinking about it, even the version he told me, pissed me off.

“Speaking of Rachel,” he said, and I shot him a warning glance that he promptly ignored as he stacked the next box.

“You think we still have any chance of convincing her to sell?”

“Listen. There’s something you need to know.” My tone was definitely harsh. I was offended on her behalf and starting to seriously question my brother’s sanity. “I don’t want to put words in her mouth, but trust me, she’s not going back to Houston.”

“Did she say she’s staying for good?” he asked, raising an eyebrow as he took the last box from me and spun around to place it.

I hopped into the truck bed with him to secure the straps around the cargo.

“She lost her job there, okay? So, no, I doubt she’ll be leaving anytime soon. She has no reason to rush off.”

I didn’t mean to snap at him, but Austen had me loaded like a gun over here when it came to Rachel.

“She doesn’t belong up here. You know that as well as I do.” He shook his head as he cranked on the strap.

We hopped from the truck and hit the gravel with a thud.

“Why do you keep saying that?” I asked.

He looked thoughtful for the first time since he’d gotten on this Rachel-selling-us-land kick. Then he shrugged. “I just never pictured it.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean anything. Luckily for us all, what you picture and the reality of the world are two unrelated things.”

I was starting to get really irritated at him then, and felt the strong urge to defend her. I broke out into a passionate speech as he walked around to the driver's side door.

“The other night . . . you should have seen it. She delivered a baby in town, and she was practically glowing after that. I think she likes feeling useful here.”

I was beaming at the thought of it. Seeing Rachel contented filled a hole inside me that I didn't know I had.

“Surely, there's more land available around here?” I said, challenging him.

Austen wore an exasperated expression as he slid into the driver's seat. “You don't think I've looked? There's nothing in town that's suitable for sale.”

“Then go further out,” I said as I leaned my arm on his door frame.

He shook his head. “That creates other logistical issues. It's time for Plan B. I didn't want to have to suggest this option, because it's not the best move for us financially, but what if you convinced Rachel to lease us the land?”

He turned the key, and the engine roared to life.

His idea might have had merit, but his little outburst at Rachel the other day meant that I wanted nothing to do with anything involving the words *convincing* and *Rachel*.

I scowled. “We just need to find another option. That's all there is to it.”

Austen shook his head. “Dammit, Noah. Thinking with your dick again.”

Normally, he’d be right. He might have been right the first time, about why I’d pushed off talking to her for so long. But not now. For once, I actually wasn’t thinking with the wrong head.

Would my dick like to be parked inside of Rachel? Absolutely. But that’s not what this was . . . plus, we seemed to have cosmic bad luck. Anytime we tried to hook up, an obstetric emergency conspired to keep us apart.

“That’s not it.” I tried to argue, but it sounded feeble and just gave Austen more ideas.

“You still in love with her, bro? After all these years? After how she left you?” Austen raised a brow as if to say *checkmate*.

I shook it off. “No, I’m not still in love with her. And I’m not mad at how she left either. But I still care about her, of course. We all do.”

Austen shrugged. “I haven’t seen her in ten years. I don’t really know her anymore. You know?”

I huffed out a breath as he reached out and gently pressed me back.

“I don’t want to be late. Just think about what I said. Don’t fuck me over in this business, Noah. Not for a chance to hook up.”

As he drove away, his words swam in my head.

Was Rachel a hookup?

She'd been on my mind a lot, but we hadn't actually spoken in three days. I'd texted once or twice to check in with her, but I had to attend a brewing workshop I'd committed to. I knew she'd been busy restoring the cabin—mainly addressing the long list of shit Austen had reminded her of.

She'd definitely taken Austen's advice about winterizing, because I saw the AmeriGas truck hauling a load of propane up the hill yesterday to where her grandfather's tank was buried.

Could she really be staying through the winter?

I knew she was toying with the idea, but there was a fear in the back of my mind that she'd decide to leave after all. I guess because that's what happened when I was sixteen.

I knew she'd just graduated, but I was immature and didn't think ahead back then. It had never occurred to me she was leaving. And she didn't bother mentioning it until the end of the summer, only a few days before she was set to fly away and out of my life, seemingly forever.

The loss I'd felt back then had been all-consuming. I'd sulked for days.

At that moment, as I reflected on it all, those memories burrowed deep in my gut and strengthened a new resolve in me. If I had a shot with a girl like Rachel, I wasn't going to waste it.

As soon as I could finish up my work today, I was going to see her. And I'd be damned if I was mentioning Austen's new

harebrained scheme of leasing her land.

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16
MAKING UP
Rachel

My phone pinged around three in the afternoon. It was Noah. Before this week, I hadn't seen a text message from him in so many years, we didn't even have an existing thread anymore. Hell, that was four or five phones ago.

Noah: Can I take you on a real date tonight?

My heart beat harder at his words. A date? Was that where we were heading? Maybe he just meant it in the old-fashioned sense, as in plans between two people. Two friends.

I could try to tell myself that was all I wanted, but it was pointless. Megan's words played in my head, urging me to have a little fun. That's all it had to be, after all. A little fun.

I texted back a casual "sure" with a smiley face, and he replied with a time. Five o'clock.

Looking at myself in the mirror that hung in the hallway, I let out a wild laugh. I looked like a ragamuffin, as Grandpa Paul would have said. What that was, exactly, no one could ever figure out. But he said it to me when I needed to comb my hair.

Apparently, it was time to do a little self-care.

I stepped into the steaming shower and looked down. How long had it been since I'd shaved? My legs weren't too bad, but I was definitely, *ahem*, overgrown elsewhere.

As quick as I could, I jumped into the cold air that bounced off the wetness of my skin and shuffled through my bag for a razor. Thankfully, I'd packed one. I didn't even remember tossing it in my bag, but I thanked my past self for whatever intuition must have been there when I was hastily throwing everything I could into a suitcase.

After my shower, I set to work on my hair and then my makeup.

How long had it been since I'd made a real effort? I was clearly out of practice, because two hours flew by so fast that I was just buttoning my jeans when Noah knocked on the door.

A date. With Noah Hart.

I tried not to inflate it, but it was useless. The butterflies were already fluttering around inside me.

"Hey, you." I managed a casual smile as I pulled open the door.

"Wow. You look . . . incredible," he said, his eyes wide.

I frowned and playfully slapped his arm. "Don't you dare sound so surprised."

"You have on makeup," he said, as if this was proving his point. "And you curled your hair."

I put a hand on my hip. "Aren't men supposed to be blind to those sorts of things?"

He pulled me in for a hug and laughed. "I'll let you in on a secret. We're all lying when we pretend not to notice. You look beautiful tonight."

Our eyes connected then. A little part of me wanted to say *to hell with the date* so I could drag him back to my bedroom.

But no. I needed to behave myself. And besides, I really needed a normal night out.

When was the last time I'd left the cabin, other than to hit the hardware store? It was worrying to think about. I'd become a hermit. A hermit who was seriously learning her way around a toolbox, but a hermit nonetheless.

"You look handsome too." I lifted my eyebrows, taking in Noah's dark-washed jeans and soft gray button-down shirt. "So, where are you taking me on this date?"

I couldn't help myself. I wanted to find out what he was thinking.

The way he softly let a breath fall from his nose told me he had caught my meaning. "To dinner at Marcelo's, and then a surprise location."

"Never heard of that place. Is it new?"

"A few years old, and one town over. You still like Italian, right?"

"You remembered." I practically whispered the words. I had, in fact, once told him that I wished I could live in Italy so that everything I ate would be Italian. It was definitely my favorite.

"You ever get to visit?" he asked. "Italy, I mean."

I shook my head. "Not yet." I grabbed my purse and followed him outside. "It's still on my bucket list. What about

you? Any international adventures?"

"Like backpacking through Europe?" He laughed. "I'm a cliché, I'm afraid. Jameson, Austen, and I went when I graduated. Logan's been reminding us lately that it's his turn soon."

"Are you going to take him?" I asked.

"It's hard now, with Jameson married and me and Austen so busy, but we hope to find some time."

As we drove to the restaurant, I asked Noah a thousand questions about his travels.

"But Italy is still on my to-visit list," he said as we pulled into a parking spot at the restaurant.

I couldn't help my mind from wandering . . . picturing a romantic scene that involved Noah and charming cobblestone streets, great wine and long walks through the piazza.

Pulling in a breath, I shut down my outlandish thoughts. Noah, as handsome and sweet as he was, wasn't my boyfriend. I wasn't even in the market for one of those. Like, at all.

The parking lot was crowded, and my stomach rumbled. I worried for a minute that I'd have to wait forever for food, but when we got to the hostess counter, I learned that Noah had made reservations. Knowing the thought he'd put into tonight made my stomach do a little backflip.

The hostess led us to a table in the back near a large stone fireplace. It was perfectly dark and cozy. The kind of place where you could linger over a delicious meal and great conversation.

“So, tell me more about what it’s like owning your own brewery,” I said, swirling the red wine in my glass.

“What would you like to know?” He met my eyes with a sincere look.

I shrugged. “What’s the best thing about your job, and the worst thing about it?”

His answer must have popped into his head immediately because he chuckled. “Working with my brother. It’s both the best and the worst.”

I smiled, watching him. “How so?”

“Well, getting to work with family is a cool perk. I know I can generally count on the guy, but at the same time, Austen is Austen. He can be a pain in the ass.”

I nodded, still grinning. These were facts.

Noah lifted the bottle of red wine from its resting spot on the table and poured a little more into my glass. “Thanks for saying yes to tonight,” he said, his voice low.

After we ate piles of pasta and more bread than is good for any human, I swiped a mint from the hostess stand and passed one to him too.

“You trying to tell me something, Rach?” He laughed as he held the door open for me.

“Yeah, that I plan on kissing you later,” I said with confidence I didn’t know I had.

“Good to know.” He smiled.

“Where to next?” I asked, excited to see what else he had planned.

He shook his head. “You’ll see when we get there.”

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Noah

There really was no reason to keep it all a surprise, but a little part of me worried Rachel would laugh, or worse, turn down my idea.

This spot meant something to me, though. I had a thousand fantasies about it. About being here with Rachel. About things ending very differently the next time around.

“You’re kidding,” she said with a chuckle as we pulled off on the side of the road.

“Not even a little. You game?” I raised my eyebrows, daring her.

She held back a smile but nodded. “Yeah, I’m game.”

We climbed out of the truck, and I grabbed a couple of soft throw blankets from the back. When I looked up, Rachel was already jogging across the big field to the hot springs.

I knew where she was headed. We both knew.

Our pool. The one where we first kissed.

She stopped at the water’s edge, tugging at the hem of her shirt, then paused. “You sure this doesn’t hold bad memories? I did steal your clothes.”

I eagerly shook my head, a big smile on my face. I wasn’t even going to pretend. “Hell no. Anyway, I was thinking tonight we might make some new, better memories here.”

In reply, she peeled off her shirt, and I stood there for a second, staring like a horny idiot. Her curves were killer. Black bra. Lacy. Cleavage that I wanted to bury my face in.

I drew a breath and looked up at the stars, pleading with myself to find some self-control.

Then I followed suit, unbuttoning my own shirt, but paused before I dropped the garment. “Just promise me one thing?” I fixed a very serious look on my face.

Rachel’s smile fell, and she gave me a solemn look.

“Don’t run off with my clothes?”

Her shoulders bounced as she laughed, no doubt remembering my walk of shame in wet boxer shorts. “No promises.”

I shrugged. “Fair enough.”

We watched each other closely as we stepped out of our pants. Her skin was starting to get little goose bumps all over. It was fall now, and the air tonight was chilly.

A few seconds later, we slipped into the warm water in our underwear, giggling and giddy, as if transported back in time.

“This is so weird,” she said, grinning.

“Being back here?” I asked her.

“I guess, yeah.”

I slid closer to her. We had changed so much since we were kids. We used to be roughly similar heights, but now I towered over her.

“Good weird?” I asked.

She bit down on her lip. “Yeah.”

Her voice was throaty, and I knew that voice. She might have changed in a lot of ways, but I knew that voice.

“So, tell me something about grown-up Rachel,” I said.

She smiled. “Honestly? I’m still figuring her out. I thought I had my whole life planned out back in Houston. Being a nurse, living downtown . . . it was my identity for the past several years. Now, though? I’m starting to imagine a new future for myself. Feeling it out as I go.”

I wanted to ask if that new future included me, but I wasn’t anywhere near brave enough. There was still a chance Austen was right, and I was going to take what I could get with her while I could get it. I didn’t want any regrets or what-ifs between us when she left.

Rachel tilted her head back, her eyes wide. “The stars are amazing. I’d forgotten how peaceful it is out here.”

The stars were nothing compared to her, though. I didn’t even bother looking up—I just kept gazing at her. She was the most beautiful thing around, by far. The curve of her lips. The soft skin at the base of her throat.

“I used to have dreams about bringing you here. Making you mine,” I said softly.

She lifted one delicate eyebrow. “How very caveman-like of you.”

“I’m serious.”

She flashed me a smile. “So am I.”

I let out a low chuckle.

“You mentioned something earlier, about kisses,” I reminded her.

“So I did.” She smiled and nestled closer to me, the water shifting around her in the steamy pool.

I leaned in then and took her lips with mine, greedily, hungrily. We’d been interrupted too many times. But out here in the middle of nowhere, I wanted her and her alone. Unless a squirrel stumbled by and needed her help birthing a kit, I had Rachel all to myself.

Wasting no time, I lifted her easily and pulled her onto my lap. Feeling her bare thighs against mine sent a new wave of naughty thoughts racing through my mind.

I pulled her closer because I wanted her to feel exactly what she was doing to me.

She gasped in response, then moaned in my mouth. “Noah.”

“I want you.” I growled the words. “Every inch of you.”

No use in denying it. The choice was hers entirely, but she might as well know where my head was at.

She let out a sharp breath of approval that spurred me on.

My hands found the curves of her ass, and I groaned when she rocked her body over mine.

She wrapped her legs around me then and resituated herself over me. I knew a lot more now than I did at sixteen. I knew

she was getting my hardness right on her sweet spot. Taking full advantage, I rocked my hips up, and she groaned in reply.

Sliding my hand up her back, I unclasped her bra. The younger me would be so proud at my skill now. That thought gave me a new idea. There was something I'd never been able to do properly with Rachel, and I wanted more than anything to correct that now.

“Sweetheart, you’re killing me,” I groaned.

“Well, we can’t have that,” she murmured, pressing one more soft kiss to the stubble on my jaw.

Her lips felt wonderful, and though I shouldn’t, I couldn’t help but wonder how amazing they would feel on other parts of my body.

“Should we get out of here?” I asked, and she nodded.

In one motion, I stood up, lifting her in the process, and spun with her, setting her down on her feet and then wrapping her in one of the throw blankets. We dried off in a big hurry, which was fine by me.

The mineral water felt amazing, but staying in it too long could dehydrate you, and I had other things on my mind. It seemed Rachel did too.

Rachel

When we stepped out of the water, a devilish smile crossed my face. I swooped down quickly and snatched up Noah's clothes. He froze, half out of the water, his eyes locked on mine, a look of pleading on his face.

"You wouldn't. Please," he begged.

I shook my head slowly. "I'm so sorry, Noah, but I have to. You know that."

In a flash, before he could utter one more word of protest, I darted off into the field.

Was I freezing? Yes. Did my feet hurt running over rocks and sticks? Yes. Did I give two hoots? Not a chance.

Noah tore after me but was more affected by the rocks. "How are you running on this?" he called out after me as he picked his way through the field.

"I'm tough as nails," I called out triumphantly.

"You're insane!" he shouted across the distance.

When I reached a small group of trees just before the road, I finally stopped. I certainly couldn't be stripped down to my birthday suit next to the road. It might be late, but people could still drive by and see us.

I dropped his clothes in a pile and peeled off my wet underwear. My pants stuck to my legs because my skin was still a little damp, but I managed.

I was fully dressed by the time Noah caught up to me. I watched in fascination as he peeled off his boxers and slipped on his jeans.

“Isn’t that . . . uncomfortable?” I nodded toward the zipper.

“It’s not bad. Not ideal, but not bad.”

“Huh. The things you learn,” I said thoughtfully.

He laughed easily, and we turned for the truck.

Then, for the first time in nine years, Noah Hart laced his fingers through mine. We walked away from the hot springs with new, better memories, just as he’d promised.

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Noah

The drive back was excruciating, but it passed quickly. When I pulled onto the road that led up the mountain, Rachel leaned over and put her hand on my knee.

“Let’s go to my place.”

Those were the sweetest words I’d ever heard. I had wondered if I should be a gentleman and just drop her off. But hearing her say she wanted me to come over, well, let’s just say it did all kinds of things to my already overactive libido.

I maneuvered the truck up the gravel drive and pulled to a stop in front of her cabin. I cut the engine and hopped out, crossing around to help her down from the truck. Not that she needed it—I just wanted another chance to be close to her.

Rachel’s hands landed on my shoulders, and then our mouths found each other.

The kiss went from zero to scorching-hot in a big damn hurry. I’d never wanted anyone more.

I lifted her into my arms and kicked the door shut behind us as I carried her into the house. She wrapped her legs around my waist—just like she’d done in the hot spring.

Carrying her straight toward the bedroom, I knew it would be pointless to ask her if she wanted another glass of wine, or to talk in the living room. She was kissing me like she was

every bit as desperate for this as I was, and making little pleasure-filled sounds when my tongue stroked hers.

After setting Rachel down in the center of the bed, I stood for a moment, just appreciating the view. It wasn't one I'd ever planned on enjoying. The girl I once loved, back here again. If this was the only night I got before she came to her senses about this place, I wasn't going to waste it.

“Noah . . .” She reached one hand toward me, beckoning me to join her.

I sat next to her on the bed and wasted no time bringing my mouth down to hers again.

Kissing was usually just okay, something you had to do to get from point A to point B. But with Rachel, it could easily be the main attraction. It was that good. Her hot little mouth was doing wicked things—stroking my tongue with hers, trailing warm, sucking kisses down my neck. My heart rate was out of control and my body was primed and ready.

Easing my hand under her sweater, I found her perfect tits. They were soft and warm, and her heart was beating wildly. She brought one hand between us and grazed the back of her knuckles along my denim-covered shaft.

Our eyes connected, and a thousand things were communicated between us. Neither of us was backing down from whatever this was.

I moved down the bed, positioning myself between her legs, and pulled her jeans down. Her panties were damp, and I pulled those off next, running my hands up her thighs.

Finally, I couldn't wait any longer.

I kissed a path along one slender leg . . . from her knee down to the curve of her inner thigh. She shifted and made a needy sound. I grinned and repeated the same slow kisses down the length of her other thigh. When I glanced up, she was propped on one elbow, watching me. I stroked my thumb along her center, and she whimpered.

Rachel was so soft and wet. Perfect.

I couldn't wait any longer for a taste.

Burying my face, I inhaled her, tasted her, and then set to work moving my tongue steadily over her sensitive flesh. I started slowly, gradually building until I heard the little gasping sound that confirmed I'd found what she liked. The only thing that mattered was making her feel good. And based on the eager sounds she was making, I knew I'd found the mark.

My hands wandered up her belly to her breasts. They perfectly filled my hands.

"Oh—my—Noah—don't—stop," she mumbled between halting breaths.

It took everything I had not to smile, and to ignore the ache between my legs. But there would be time for that later, I hoped.

For now, I was driven purely by the need to show Rachel how good we could be together, to give her the pleasure she deserved.

Her hands snaked through my hair, and she clenched at the short strands, tugging harder than I expected. I figured she was close, and I wasn't disappointed.

Not a second later, she let out a strangled moan, her once-smooth motions devolving into jerky spasms. I eased back and looked up to watch her unravel. To my shock, she was looking right at me. Her eyes blazed wildly.

"Noah." She gasped, her tone pure surprise. Her chest heaved as she fought for breath.

I guided her to the pillow and lay beside her, kissing her throat.

She giggled. "That was . . . I have no words."

"Amazing?" I said helpfully with an innocent shrug as I tilted my gaze.

She laughed and leaned closer, so our bodies were perfectly aligned.

"Is there anything better than amazing?" she asked as she ran her toes up the side of my leg.

"Extraordinary?" I suggested.

Her hand rested on my knee, and my cock twitched with anticipation. I wasn't going to press anything else on her tonight. I was happy to give and not receive in return. But I sure as hell wasn't going to turn anything down.

"Extra-credi-mazing," she said decidedly.

"That doesn't sound real, but I'll take it."

"An unreal word for an unreal performance."

She laughed and skimmed her finger along my belt buckle. My body practically jolted in response.

“You don’t have to return the favor,” I managed to say through a dry throat.

She moved lower in reply, landing back on my lap, straddling me. “I want to.” She practically hummed the words.

Anticipation shot through me.

We both leaned in to kiss. I did my best to keep cool when her fingers unbuttoned my jeans, and then she slipped her hand below the waist of my boxers. She gripped me and gave me a light squeeze, then broke our kiss.

“I forgot how big you are,” she whispered, then squeezed me in her palm again.

“Fuck, Rachel,” I rasped.

Her hand on me, talking about me like that . . . it was all I could do not to pick her up right here and lay her down and bury myself inside her.

She stood up then, and knowingly, I swung my legs over the side of the bed while she perched herself on the floor between my feet. She eased my boxers down, and I lifted my hips to help her.

At the sight of my straining cock, she licked her lips.

It was enough to send me over the edge . . . well, not literally, but emotionally. I was done for. There was no way this was going to last long. And here I’d thought I would be

impressing her with my maturity, and I was already fighting back the urge to sail right over the edge.

She gripped me then and lowered herself, her mouth coming down around my tip, her tongue swiping over the sensitive notch under my cockhead.

Fuck. I was in trouble. Rachel knew things too now, apparently. Things she didn't know before. Her mouth was the best thing I'd ever felt, hot and wet and perfect.

She moved slowly, deliberately, as if to draw out my pleasure. I made a helpless sound—something between a groan and a curse—and her gaze lifted to mine.

“So good, sweetheart,” I said low, encouraging her.

My fingers stroked absently through her hair as I tried to catch my breath, but nothing was stopping this train. Her mouth was perfect, but when she worked me in her hand too, it was un-fucking-bearable.

My balls tightened to my body, and I felt the pulses of pleasure coming fast and hard, a deep heat building down my spine.

“Rachel, I'm coming.” I managed to warn her, but she didn't release me. “Rach,” I said once more, desperation in my voice.

She didn't let up, and the heat shot through me. I stroked her hair and gazed down on her with adoration as she took every inch of me apart, piece by piece.

I felt dizzy with pleasure. When she finally released me, I took a few deep breaths.

I must have had an insane look on my face, because Rachel's expression turned serious.

"Are you okay?" she asked curiously.

I held up a finger. "Just. Need. A. Minute." Each word took immense effort on my part.

Her face relaxed then, and she sank back into the spot beside me.

Finally, when my heart had settled down, I wrapped her in my arms, inhaling her scent. "I missed this," I said with a sigh.

She leaned back to look at me. "Hooking up? The way I hear it, you get plenty."

My smile dropped, and I turned her chin with two fingers until she was looking at me. "No, Rachel. I missed us. Missed you."

The soft look returned to her eyes. "Oh."

"And for the record, what we did tonight, that isn't anywhere in the same universe as hooking up with anyone else."

I could see her fighting off a smile.

"I've never been in a healthy romantic relationship as an adult. Be gentle with me," she whispered, tucking her face in close to my neck.

"Always. I promise."

“Do you, uh, have anything I can wear?” Noah asked, his tone doubtful.

I chuckled. His clothes were still in a heap on the floor.

Crossing to my bag, I rifled through it and held up a pair of big pajama pants with white hearts all over them. “Will these work?” I waved the fabric around enticingly.

He shrugged as if this was all perfectly normal and took the pants from me. Amazingly, they actually sort of fit, at least his trim waist, though the legs were halfway up his calves.

I slipped on clean pants and a T-shirt and cut the light. The darkness was blinding as I shuffled to the bed. He was waiting for me under the covers.

Noah Hart. In my bed. The thought was still unreal. Megan would have been proud, of course.

His arm was outstretched, ready to scoop me into his side. I rested my head on his shoulder.

“This won’t be practical for sleeping, but it feels nice,” I told him.

“Not practical? Says who? I can hold you all night like this.”

I snorted. “You’ve had people sleep overnight before, right?”

A shockingly long silence passed.

“Not like this,” he finally told me.

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I didn’t really want to ask. It suited me much better to be none the wiser.

“I can’t believe I’m really here with you,” I said with a giggle.

Noah squeezed me harder to his side. It was the perfect moment—comfortingly familiar, tender and sweet.

After a while, when I thought he might have already fallen asleep, he stroked my hair lightly. “Thank you for staying.”

I breathed out softly at the thought in his words, and my eyes welled up with tears.

I didn’t want to be constantly comparing Noah to Roger, but I couldn’t help it in that moment. My heart was filled with this feeling . . . like I was whole suddenly. Like I was cared for completely. Like everything was going to be like this from here on out.

There were too many thoughts in my head just then.

How stupid I’d been for not realizing that Roger didn’t really love me. He’d never go to sleep with me, even when I begged. He said he hated cuddling, it was too cliché, and he never whispered sweet words to me.

I’d been missing out completely on all of that. The stuff that makes a relationship . . . the moments that let you know you are the center of someone’s world. I wasn’t even sure if

Noah felt all that deeply about me, but I could already see it was a hell of a lot more love than Roger had for me.

If Noah was game, I was going to take the chance to be with him. I didn't need to rush it, I had all the time in the world . . . but I knew I wasn't going to hold back anymore.

Maybe all this had happened for a reason—losing my job, leaving Roger, having to come back home to take care of Grandpa's affairs. The universe was pushing me right back to where I needed to be.

And right now, I needed to be in Noah's arms.

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Rachel

Everything was falling into place. Things I didn't think I needed or wanted. Things I could have never known to wish for.

Like the cabin, for example.

Renovating the cabin had been so much fun. So far, I'd painted every paintable inch of it, replaced the hardware on all the cabinets, changed out all the outdated faucets, and stained the deck. Now it was time to change out the light fixtures. I mean, a house only needed so many seventies style globe lights.

For the first time in my life, I had money. Grandpa's life insurance had come through quickly, and it was more than I'd expected. Still, I felt guilty, knowing there were six figures sitting in my bank account.

I mean, Grandpa could have sold the house a long time ago and had an easier retirement. He could have canceled his life insurance policy and used that money for himself. I wouldn't have blamed him.

A little part of me knew, though, that he'd kept this house for me. It was where I'd grown up and the only house I'd ever known. And he had that insurance policy to make sure I was taken care of. Even if he was gone, he was still very much here with me, caring for me like he always had. It was a comforting thought.

All of that meant there was really no need for me to rush out and find work. The house was paid for, after all, and the bills were pretty low. I could easily take another year off, at least, without denting my new savings.

I was sure I wouldn't, though. As soon as I finished the renovations and the winter preparations, I was going to figure out how to set up my new travel-nurse business.

Megan had already sent me some resources. It totally was a thing. Nothing would be more satisfying than helping my local community with the skills I'd honed over the years.

And then there was Noah. I smiled every time I thought of him. He'd left so early the next morning, I hadn't even woken. He left me a little handwritten note on his pillow that said he had to do chores, signing it with an *xoxo*.

I unboxed the lights and cut the power to the house. I'd watched a few videos online, and it seemed easy enough. The old fixtures were simple to remove, and soon there were just a few wires sticking from a hole in the ceiling. The instructions said to connect the black to the black, the white to the white. The only problem was, these wires were both brown.

Climbing off my ladder, I pulled out my phone to look it up.

A beeping sound distracted me, and I glanced out the window. A truck with a load of wood, enough to last the winter, was backing down my driveway. I slipped on my boots and coat and ran outside.

The driver hopped from the truck.

“Rachel Tyson?” she asked, squinting at me.

“Stephanie Freeman.” I chuckled and strode toward her. Steph had been one of my best friends in high school.

We embraced in a hug, both of us a little shocked.

“I didn’t know you were in town. You should have called me,” she said sternly.

“Sorry, Steph. I know. It’s been so crazy.”

Then a look of realization crossed her face. “Oh shit. I’m so sorry. Your grandpa Paul.”

I nodded. “Yeah. But silver linings . . . I’m moving back.” I beamed at the thought.

Stephanie squealed so loud, it hurt my ears. “Shut. Up. This is the best news ever.”

“What’s going on out here?” a man asked as he jumped from the passenger side of the truck.

“Babe, you’ll never guess. Rachel Tyson is moving back.”

“Rachel?” he asked, walking over to us. He held his hand up like a visor to block the sun.

I couldn’t place the man. He looked vaguely familiar, but then all at once it hit me. “Nathan Prescott.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s Stephanie Prescott now. I’m still getting used to saying it,” Steph said and held up her hand to show me her ring.

“So, this is your business.” I nodded to the truck, realizing then I’d called Prescott Wood Delivery.

Nathan threw an arm around Steph. “Yup. And I’m lucky enough to get to work every day with this beautiful gal.”

Steph looked at her watch then. “Speaking of which, we do have a pretty tight schedule. Can we meet soon to catch up?”

“Oh yes. Sorry. Yes. Of course.” I stumbled over my words.

We hugged once more, and I showed them where on the porch to load the firewood, then headed back inside.

Could things get any better? Maybe it was the nine years that had passed that made me forget about all the people I loved in this town. Thankfully, Steph and I were clearly going to pick up again without missing a beat. I was feeling very lucky.

When I got back to my phone, I had a text from Natalie inviting me over for coffee the next morning. I wrote back and accepted, still marveling at how full my life had become.

I finished my search to troubleshoot the lighting install, and as it turned out, one brown wire had ridges, and that one got matched to the white.

After managing to install five out of fifteen lights—who knew there were so many lights in a house?—I wolfed down a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then I dragged myself to the shower. I knew Noah should be just about done with the day, so I was all set to cuddle up on the couch and text him a hello.

That’s when I heard the sound of someone moving around in the kitchen. Could it be Noah? He’d at least have knocked, but maybe not.

My heart leaped at the thought, and I sprinted out to see him.

But it wasn't Noah.

In fact, it was the last person on earth I cared to see just then.

It was Roger.

"What . . . where . . . why . . ." I stammered in disbelief, shaking my head. I was in a state of utter shock to see him. I needed to sit down.

"Hey, babe," he said innocently, as if nothing had happened.

As if we hadn't called off the wedding weeks ago. As if I hadn't been job and apartment hunting just before I left, my stuff packed up and stacked in a corner of his house.

"Why are you here?" I said through clenched teeth. My words were in no way welcoming, but that didn't seem to bother him.

He smiled. "To see you, of course. Your grandfather died."

"I know that." I frowned. "I released his ashes two weeks ago."

Roger's face was unsettling. Seeing him reminded me of every way he'd let me down. I walked like a trapped animal, slowly sizing him up.

All he said in reply was, "That's a shame." Then he launched into a story about himself. "Listen, I have great news

that will cheer you up. My boss has offered me the lead of a new team in Milwaukee.”

“Congratulations. But you shouldn’t be here. You need to leave,” I said calmly.

He shook his head, taking two steps closer to me. “Listen, babe.” I cringed at the nickname. “Now that we’ve had time to think, I’m sure we both see how we were just getting cold feet, is all. It’s perfectly normal.”

“I don’t have cold feet,” I said, seething.

“Listen, listen. I need you, okay? I need you with me in Milwaukee.” In an instant, he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around me.

My arms stayed at my sides, and I struggled to get free of him.

“Get off of me!” I barked out the words, and he stepped back.

Then I heard a knock at the front door, and my stomach sank. What if it was Noah coming by after work to surprise me? What would he think about my visitor?

I rushed to the door, and my heart tightened. As I pulled it open, a white envelope fluttered to the floor, and I saw Noah’s truck driving away.

I turned back to Roger, my emotions raw and raging. “Leave. Now. I will not ask again. We’re done, Roger. I don’t want you here. Go.”

My shoulders rose and fell with each breath.

“Now!” I shouted for emphasis when he didn’t move.

Finally, that seemed to motivate him, and he frowned, crossing the floor.

“I’d always known you were a coldhearted bitch. You can’t even take an apology right. Good luck to you. I’ll find a woman ten times better.”

“Good luck with that,” I said with a sneer, following him to the door. Seeing the back of Roger was the only good thing about that whole encounter.

After he drove away, I reached down and picked up the envelope.

I’d have some explaining to do, but Noah was levelheaded, I hoped. Surely, he’d understand that Roger showing up here was *not* part of my plan.

After opening the flap, I pulled out the papers and squinted as I tried to make sense of them. It couldn’t be. Not this again.

They were legal papers with my address on them. Could he really still be trying to pressure me into selling this place?

Or was that his plan all along? Was the date just a big ruse to butter me up?

Any desire I’d had five minutes ago to chase Noah down the street went straight out the window as I crumpled the papers and tossed them on the floor.

“Assholes!” I shouted to no one. “Men are all assholes.”

Noah

When my watch alarm vibrated at five a.m. that morning, I had been in the same position I was in when I'd fallen asleep.

I knew right away that it would be hard to focus on work all day today. Leaving Rachel's bed this morning would take every fiber of my being. After all, I never took sick days . . . surely, I could play hooky for just one day?

No, Austen would have my hide if I missed work. There was always too much to do now.

Soon, I'd definitely need to hire some more help, even if it ate into our profit. With this business, I'd happily learned, the more we spent, the more we made. So far, at least. I'd hoped the trend would continue.

With great effort, I hauled myself up. I wrote a quick note to Rachel and kissed her cheek. She groaned groggily but didn't wake up.

She looked irresistible, and yet I had to leave. I was already thirty minutes late. By the time I reached the fields, Logan was already there waiting, very grumpy.

"You're late," he said, stating the obvious.

"I'm sorry." I ruffled his hair, and he ducked away from my hand.

"I have school in an hour and a half," he said to remind me.

"I know. I'll still pay you for two, though."

He smiled at that. “Fair enough.”

We were harvesting a first-year crop, which meant we had to pick all the hops by hand. It was labor I probably should have hired out, but honestly, it was some of my favorite work.

Logan climbed into the cherry picker and started the engine while I climbed into the bucket. We’d done all the low rows first, so it was time to get the high parts of the vines.

As soon as I could get a chance, I wanted to show Rachel my fields. The towering plants created this little private aisle of greenery that made me feel like I’d traveled into a different dimension.

After I lost Logan for the day, I headed to the shed to boil the hops to make a new batch of wort. This batch would be what we put on shelves the next year, so it was an exciting first step to be taking in the process. I thought back to my very first, very experimental small batch. I was so young then, totally unaware that this could even be turned into a business.

Things were so different now. Young me would have been so proud . . . I now had a business that was fairly successful already, on the verge of a major expansion, and a beautiful woman back in my arms again. I swear, my cheeks were going to ache later from smiling so much.

Austen strode into the barn. “Smells terrible in here. Which is, of course, a good thing.”

I laughed. Austen truly didn’t like the smell of the brewing process. It was unique, but I personally loved it.

“What’s that?” I nodded at a thick envelope in his hand.

“This, little brother, is my final peace offering.” He slapped the envelope across his hand proudly.

“Okay,” I said cautiously, taking off my apron and meeting him at the table. I sat across from him and folded my arms. “What is it?”

He set it down and slid it to me. “This is a lease agreement I had drawn up. It would allow us to use part of the land . . .”

I started shaking my head, so he paused, changing tack.

“Yes, little brother, Rachel’s land. But listen for once, please.”

I dropped my chin in defeat and rolled my eyes, but I let him finish.

“This will be a pure profit deal for Rachel. She doesn’t need all that acreage. She isn’t using it for anything. We would pay her fairly for the use of the land, and could renew the agreement annually.”

“How fair?” I asked him.

“Very. I had an agent do comparables on its value and everything. We’d offer ten percent above average in this area.”

I sat back and grabbed the envelope, turning it around in my hands. Thinking.

It didn’t sound horrible, to be honest. I still wouldn’t push anything on Rachel. But if she wanted to make money, it seemed only fair to offer it to her.

Austen’s face was frozen, his eyebrows halfway up his forehead as he waited. Just to fuck with him, I waited a little

longer before giving in.

“All right,” I said.

He sighed obnoxiously and let his shoulders sag in relief.
“Finally.”

I held up a hand. “I’ll show this to her. You will *not*.”

I said the last part sternly and shot him a warning look.

“But,” I said, and he tensed again, “I will only do so after you’ve apologized for being an asshat.”

He nodded. “Consider it done.”

“So, you’ll head over today?” I asked. “And text me when it’s done?”

“I can’t today, but I’ll do it first thing tomorrow. Got to head all the way over to Temple Creek Brewery to see if I can get a sale locked down.”

I nodded. It was a two-hour drive each way. But it was also three times the size of any other brewery we currently dealt with. If we secured them as a customer, we’d be in a good position for the winter.

“You just keep growing money on trees, and I’ll keep, um, selling that money?” Austen finished, unsure of his metaphor by the end.

I laughed. “Sure thing, brother.”

• • •

Finally, my day was done. I hadn’t heard from Rachel yet, but I wasn’t worried. She was busy crushing it in the home

renovation department. If she decided to quit nursing, she might want to try flipping cabins. She definitely had an eye for décor.

I spent a little too much time showering and picking out an outfit. I shouldn't be so nervous—she'd seen me in pink heart pajama pants last night—but I was.

After speeding the short distance to her place, I pulled in the driveway, my heart soaring in anticipation. That is, until my brain did a double-take at the sight of an unfamiliar SUV. The license plates were from Texas.

Instantly, I got a bad feeling in my gut. Who would have driven here from Texas?

I pulled up near the door where I could see through the window. It was a man, our age. Smiling happily, hell, lovingly, gesturing widely, walking toward Rachel. He wrapped his arms around her.

My heartbeat thumped in my ears and the world went silent around me, all except a high-pitched squealing in my ears.

Was this *him*? Her ex? What was his name? Ralph? Roger?

The hug was never-ending. I felt certain in that moment that everything was crashing down around me.

Of course it had been too good to be true with my first love coming back into my life. There was no way. It felt too easy—too right, of course it couldn't have been real.

Austen had been right all along. Rachel hated it here. Always had. Maybe she'd been fixing the place up to sell to the highest bidder all along.

I was only sure I didn't know anything anymore. All my worst thoughts and my worst fears, they played on a loop in my mind, all at once.

My legs moved without me even thinking. I grabbed the envelope that had been sitting on the front seat of my truck and stomped to the door. I tucked it in the screen.

I turned to walk away, but then I was too mad. I needed her to know I saw. I needed her to feel as shitty as I felt.

Was she sleeping with him? Was she agreeing to marry him?

The idea of Rachel with anyone else sent a new wave of rage coursing through my veins.

I knocked twice on the door and then walked fast back to the truck. I slammed the door as hard as I could, which wasn't nearly as satisfying as I'd hoped. Then I peeled out of the driveway, gravel flinging as my tires carried me away.

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As I sped away from Rachel's, I headed straight to the only place that made sense to go, and I called Austen on the way.

"Talk to me," he said, sounding happy with his stupid life completely intact.

"We're going to Velma's," I said in a dead tone.

"Whoa, you okay?" he asked, his tone switching instantly to worry.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean, shut the hell up and get in the truck already. I'm in front of your cabin." I flashed the lights in emphasis.

"Give me five," he said, and we ended the call.

A few minutes later, he came outside and slid in the passenger seat. "You going to tell me what happened, or am I going to guess?"

"Neither," I barked out and sped away.

He fastened his seat belt and grabbed the door handle. "That's cool. Just slow down a little so we don't die."

I eased off the gas and exhaled sharply.

We pulled up to Velma's Tavern and headed inside without another word. I slumped into the back booth, and Austen brought over two beers.

We sipped for a while in silence while I tried to focus on anything but my thoughts . . . the sound of people laughing at the next table over, the pool balls clacking against one another, the rockabilly playing from the radio. None of it was working.

Had I really lost my shot? Did some guy just swoop in and steal Rachel out from under me?

This was history repeating itself.

Me falling for her, only for it to end abruptly and fill me with shame and emptiness. I mean, it wasn't exactly the same. I knew that. But it felt the same. That feeling of loss, of Rachel flitting away without giving me a second thought.

Finally, Austen cut off my thoughts with a question. "This is about Rachel then?" he asked pointedly.

I lowered my eyes at him.

He nodded, his lips in a tight line. "So, it *is* about Rachel. Listen, man, I tried to warn you about her."

"Don't," I said, taking a long gulp of the almost finished beer.

"You want another?" he asked.

I nodded, and he stood up and returned quickly with two more.

"These two beers will be celebration beers," he said with a grin.

"Why's that?" I asked.

He shook his head as if shaking off a thought. "The meeting today. You didn't even bother to ask."

“Shit, sorry. It’s good news then?”

Austen beamed. “Better than good. We got the deal, and they bought out every single bottle of our stock from this year.”

“Well, that is good news,” I managed to say, holding up my glass to clink it against his.

“You aren’t even smiling.” He frowned before taking a sip of the bubbly golden liquid.

I shrugged. “It’s one of those days.”

“So you keep saying,” he reminded me with a suspicious look. Changing the topic, he nodded to the door. “See who’s here?”

CJ had just walked in with two friends.

If I called her over, CJ would flirt with me. It would be easy enough to take her home, something I’d done plenty of times before out of loneliness.

I watched as she ordered a round of shots with her friends. She caught me looking and smiled, giving me the go-ahead. She hadn’t stayed mad at me for being with another woman. Why should she? We weren’t exclusive.

Hell. Is that what was happening with Rachel? Had I not taken my shot? Did she think we were not an item and . . .

No. I shook off the thought. It was stupid. That was her ex-fiancé. Not some fuck buddy from the bar. She had agreed to become that man’s wife. That meant something.

CJ looked over my way again and I stared at her, my face impassive. Hell, I might have been frowning. I could have CJ tonight, if I wanted. I could use her to forget all about Rachel.

But it wasn't CJ that I wanted.

It was Rachel.

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Rachel

I woke up with red puffy eyes. How long had I cried? My whole face looked blotchy.

I made my way to the kitchen and grabbed two cubes of ice from the freezer and held them over my eyes. They began to melt instantly, but they felt incredible.

My alarm rang on my phone then, reminding me that I'd happily agreed yesterday to see Noah's mom this morning. *Excellent.*

At least it was unlikely that Noah would be there. I hoped.

I slathered my face in makeup to hide the crazy splotches and puffy eyes as best I could, and then walked over to the Hart house. I was going to have to wear my big-girl pants today and buck up.

There was no erasing the past, and these were my neighbors now. At least that much still felt right, being here. I was going to perk up, even if I wasn't sure about Noah's intentions anymore.

"There she is," Natalie said brightly.

She ushered me to the sunroom, which was oddly warm for October, and handed me a cup of coffee. I gratefully sipped the warm liquid as Dottie's little chihuahua, Mrs. Biggles, hopped into my lap. Thankfully, I managed to keep all the coffee in my mug and avoided scalding the tiny white creature.

“How are things going over there? Noah said it was looking beautiful.”

“Did he?” I asked, my ears perking up at his name.

“He did. Said you have quite the eye for design. I might have to get you to give me some tips to refresh this old house.” She looked around. “It is getting a bit out of date.”

“If you like it, then that’s all that matters,” I said.

Natalie stirred her coffee and smiled at me. “I’m just so proud of you. Paul would have been too.”

I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear that right now. “Thank you.” I almost choked on the words, my throat had suddenly gotten so tight.

She tilted her head. “What’s wrong, dear?”

Then, like a volcano erupting, everything flew out of my mouth all at once. “Yesterday was so perfect. I worked on the house, I made a plan for my future, and Noah . . .” I trailed off, not meaning to mention him.

Natalie raised an eyebrow slightly at Noah’s name, but she kept her face steady as I continued.

“But then my ex showed up uninvited yesterday, trying to win me back, and I sent him packing.”

I couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. They fell freely from my eyes.

“Down, Mrs. Biggles.” Natalie shooed the dog away and then grabbed a box of tissues for me.

I pulled one free and wiped my face.

Natalie sat patiently while I composed myself before she asked, “Pardon my question, Rach, but that all sounds like good things.”

Was I really going to tell Noah’s mom? I wanted to. I really did. She was like a mother to me. One of the only wise people I could count on.

I decided then and launched into a retelling of Roger’s hug and Noah’s poorly timed arrival, about the envelope in the door and Noah speeding away.

When I had finished, she chewed the inside of her lip.

“I could kill those boys,” she said in a scornful tone.

She was mad on my behalf, and I loved her for it. But I couldn’t tell her my true fear, that Noah was playing me all along just to get my property.

“Well, if you want to know what I think . . .” Natalie paused, waiting for my approval.

I nodded.

“I think you and Noah need to talk and clear this all up. You two seem good together. And I know it’s selfish of me to say, because I’d love you as a daughter-in-law and I’d love some little grandbabies . . . but I’m also saying it as someone who cares about *you*.”

She was right, of course. I needed to at least tell Noah about Roger’s impromptu visit, and let Noah explain the papers. I should give him the benefit of the doubt.

Last night, all my worst fears were swirling and building off one another. But in the light of day, and hearing it from someone who cared about me, who knew us both, all these problems suddenly seemed solvable.

When I left the Hart house, I texted Noah. *We need to have a talk.*

Then I set to work on the house for the day. I'd picked up a new toilet and was determined to replace the old one, no matter how gross the job.

By the time I got the old toilet free, hours had passed—the bolts had been very rusty—but Noah hadn't texted back. That was okay. It was still early. He was probably just busy working, and when he saw my text, we would talk. Surely, he'd inherited that level head from his mother, right?

By four in the afternoon, there was still no reply. But the workday hadn't ended. I wasn't giving up hope just yet.

That is, until eight p.m. rolled around.

I decided to drive up to his house. His truck wasn't there, so I sat on the porch in the rocking chair and played on my phone as the hours ticked by.

Around eleven p.m., my stomach ached with worry and dread.

What was going on? Was he okay?

I dialed his number, but there was no answer. I was going to have to give up for tonight.

Maybe he just needed more time to cool off. I'd find him soon enough, and we'd figure this whole thing out.

Hopefully.

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Rachel

Noah could hold a grudge. I hadn't known that about him.

A few days passed, and he managed to ignore all my texts. I was feeling entirely tilted off my axis, but I wasn't about to let another man dominate my world. Kodiak Canyon was going to be my home now. It was time to get on with life.

With the renovations I could manage myself complete, I worked upstairs in the loft while a company sanded the hardwood floors. I hadn't opened my laptop in forever, it seemed. My email, mostly junk, had really piled up. After sifting through it, I clicked the message Megan had sent me with a link from a nurse who had written a detailed blog on how to start a home-care business.

The steps seemed manageable. First thing was to apply for a business license, set up a website, and get a phone number.

I spent most of the day on the setup tasks. When my phone pinged, I leaped up and crossed to grab it from the bed. Hopeful it was Noah, I let out a little sigh of disappointment before recovering. After all, it was my old friend Stephanie asking if I was free for lunch.

My stomach growled in response, and we made plans to meet in thirty minutes downtown.

Parking Grandpa's old red truck—I had gotten much better at driving it, for the record—I couldn't help the smile on my face. The lunch spot was loaded with happy memories. I'd

skipped classes to eat lunch here, hanging out over a single plate of fries for hours. Those poor waitresses . . . I'm sure we tipped like crap and spent next to nothing all night. I made a note to myself to leave a bigger than usual tip to make up for it a little.

“Rach!” Stephanie shouted and hopped up to hug me.

The waitress showed up to get my drink order before we could even sit down. I ordered a diet soda and then turned to Stephanie.

“You off work today?” I asked her.

She blushed. “We only work a few days a week. The perks of owning your own business.” She lifted her glass of iced tea victoriously.

“I think I'm about to join those ranks,” I said, and filled her in all the details about my travel-nurse plans.

“That's actually great to know, because Nathan's grandma is getting to the point where she really does need someone to stop by and check on her from time to time. As soon as you're ready, we'll be your first clients.”

This community continued to remind me how important it was to have a network of close friends who looked out for you.

“I'd be happy to stop by anytime she needs me,” I said, and I really meant it. I didn't have a family of my own anymore. The people of this community were my family now.

Stephanie sipped her tea thoughtfully. “Businesswoman to businesswoman, let me give you some advice. Don't do things

for free, even for friends and family. If they love you, they should be happy to pay for your hard work.”

My face scrunched up. “I’d feel bad charging friends and family.”

Stephanie waved her hand in the air as if to swat the thought away. “Nonsense. Anyway, in this town, everyone is friends or family. So, you’ll need to get over that quickly.”

I chuckled. She was right, of course.

It would be important to take my work seriously and make sure the business paid for itself. After all, there were license fees I’d have to cover, medical supply costs, gas and mileage . . . I’d know more when I had time to figure out the costs.

“Now I have to show you my beautiful baby. I know I’ve become *that* mom, but I just have to get it out of the way.” She pulled out her phone and held it out to me.

“You have a baby? I absolutely have to see.”

I took the phone and flipped through the photos of a beautiful baby girl, blue-eyed with blond curls and big chubby cheeks. She was cute enough to be a baby model.

“Stephanie, my word. She’s gorgeous.”

Steph took her phone back. “I promised not to be *that* mom, but it turns out I can’t help it.”

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

“We have to have you over for dinner soon. So, who else in town have you caught up with? The Harts, I assume?” She cocked an eyebrow at me.

What a loaded question that was. “I saw them. All but Jameson, since he moved a few hours away.”

Stephanie nodded. “Yes, near Denver, last I heard. What about Noah? He got even cuter, didn’t he?”

She was prying, and for good reason. She’d known how fast and hard I’d fallen for Noah the summer before I left for college.

“He did,” I said carefully, holding back as much as I could. I didn’t want to scratch those scabs today if I could help it.

Stephanie lifted a brow. “He’s single.”

Okay, so this topic wasn’t going to drop easily.

Sighing, I said, “We had a date.”

Her eyes went wide, a contented smile on her face. “I love it.”

I shook my head. “I think we might have already fizzled out, to be honest.”

I hated admitting it, but I couldn’t hide from the truth forever. Noah had effectively ghosted me. If that was how he wanted it, I was going to respect it.

• • •

It was Friday night, which from May to September meant the best place to be was the downtown festival. But now that it was October, everyone was focused on one thing tonight: high school football.

Small towns like mine loved their football, and the Kodiak Canyon Cubs had the stands packed. I might not have gone if

it wasn't for Stephanie reminding me how much we used to love the walking tacos from the snack stand.

So, Friday night, I bundled up in the old KCHS hoodie I found in the closet of my childhood bedroom, threw on my wool jacket, layered some leggings under my jeans—because the metal stands made my butt freeze—and headed out.

I was late, and the parking lot was already packed. Hoofing it from the grass overflow lot, I finally shuffled my way through the bleachers.

It was such a weird feeling being back. How long would this intense nostalgia last? Every inch of this school reminded me of something or someone. Things I hadn't thought about in years were suddenly at the forefront of my mind.

“Rachel!”

I spun around as a voice shouted my name.

Natalie, Dottie, Austen, and Noah were all sitting together. All of them waved me over except Noah. He managed to pretend to be so absorbed in the game that even a nudge to the ribs from Austen had no effect.

Dottie moved over and patted the spot between her and Natalie. I was grateful, because it meant the space was already warm.

“Good to see everyone,” I said, giving Dottie and Natalie a little side hug before waving down the row to the Hart men.

“I didn't know you were coming,” Natalie said.

“I didn’t either, to be honest. I ran into an old friend, and she reminded me about how much fun the games could be. I figured I couldn’t stay cooped up in the cabin all weekend.”

Natalie nodded and patted my hand. I knew she was probably wondering if Noah and I had worked our issues out.

“There’s tailgating before the games too. Food trucks, that sort of thing,” Austen said.

I was surprised Austen was talking to me, to be honest.

Was I still offended by his suggestion that I couldn’t hack it? Hell yes. But I knew our years growing up together meant that we shared a certain level of tough-love honesty between us. Plus, it had been a while since the fight, and I was crushing my winter preparations, so I no longer gave a damn what he thought.

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

Austen raised a brow at me, sensing the peace offering. “The green chili burgers from Lotaburger are to die for.”

I nodded and made a mental note to check the football schedule to see if next week’s game was home or away. I hadn’t had a green chili burger in ages.

Austen fixed an apologetic smile on his face. “How’s the place coming along?”

“Great. Thanks for offering such a helpful to-do list.” I snorted out a laugh.

“Anytime.”

Austen reached out a fist, and I bumped mine against his. It was that easy with him, I guessed.

Maybe it could be that easy with Noah, if he'd just talk to me.

"I'm getting nachos," Noah announced suddenly, and he stood and shuffled through the crowd.

"Half the reason I came tonight was for the walking tacos," I said casually and stood to follow Noah.

The man had long legs and walked fast, so by the time I got to the bleachers, he was already standing in line, his hands tucked in his pockets.

"Hey, you," I said as I walked up behind him.

He looked back briefly at me and then turned forward. "Hey."

"Noah, can we please talk?"

His shoulders lifted and fell. "Nothing to talk about. It's all good."

Stepping up beside him, I leaned forward a little to see his face. "There's a lot to talk about. You didn't see whatever it was you thought you saw when Roger stopped by."

A couple walking by waved to Noah, and he smiled and nodded at them.

He looked around then. "Not here."

I followed as he abandoned the line and stalked over to the edge of the parking lot where we could speak more privately.

“About the envelope you left me. You should know first that I’m not selling the land. I want to stay.”

“Good,” he said flatly.

“Good?” I parroted the word that seemed entirely out of place. “What do you mean? I thought you and Austen wanted it.”

“Yeah. But I want you to be happy more than I want to buy a piece of land. But did you even read what was inside the envelope?”

He’d wanted me to be happy? That was nice to hear.

“It was more of those papers for selling,” I said, though no longer exactly sure since I’d only glanced at them quickly, and a lot was happening at that particular moment.

Noah shook his head. “It was a lease agreement. Austen had it drafted. If you wanted to, you could lease some of the unused land to be farmed. We’d pay you rent, and you’d have the option to renew annually.”

I felt my face heat. I’d had it all wrong. What he was telling me meant I’d be able to put my land to work for me and make a profit off of it. That . . . was actually a great idea.

“Why did you just leave the papers in my door that night?” I asked next. I thought I knew the answer, but since I’d jumped to an assumption about the envelope in the first place, now I wasn’t sure about anything anymore.

“Because I’m petty and jealous.” Noah’s answer was so honest, it caught me off guard. He folded his arms across his chest and widened his stance. “Who was that guy?”

I let out a breath and braced myself. “That was my ex-fiancé, Roger. He’d driven out here completely uninvited. I had no idea he was coming.”

“So, he came into town to win you back?” Noah had an unreadable expression on his face. He seemed to be studying me.

“He did,” I said plainly.

“Congratulations,” Noah croaked.

I shook my head vigorously. “Nothing happened. He hugged me—without my permission. I shouted at him to leave. He eventually did. And that was that.”

Noah’s arms dropped as I stepped closer to him. That’s why he ghosted me. He thought I was back with Roger the baked potato. There wasn’t a chance in hell of that happening.

“I don’t want Roger.”

“What do you want?” Noah asked, stepping closer to me.

I didn’t answer in words. Instead, I stepped into Noah and crashed our lips together. My body finally relaxed as he accepted my kiss.

Could it be this easy? Was that possible? It all felt so familiar with Noah. Like I was his and he was mine. Despite all the time and distance, it was so natural between us.

I pulled back from the kiss just to admire him. He looked a bit dazed, but happy as he blinked his eyes open slowly.

My heart leaped. Noah Hart would be very easy to fall in love with. Part of me wondered if I’d ever really fallen out of

love with him in the first place.

Dropping my gaze, I said, “I know we can’t just pick up where we left off ten years ago . . .”

He stepped back in and kissed me again. “Who says we can’t?”

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Noah

Rachel and I left the game in my truck without telling anyone. I shot a quick text to Austen so no one would send out a search party. The last thing I wanted was another poorly timed interruption. I wanted Rachel all to myself tonight.

As we drove home from the game, we were laughing about it already.

“Let’s vow to never make assumptions again. Deal?” she said, grinning.

I reached across the console, and we shook on it. “Deal.”

Inside, I was buzzing with anticipation. I think we both knew what was going to happen tonight. We didn’t even need to say more. After she suggested—in so many words—that she wanted to pick up where we left off, I wasn’t going to let that chance slip away again. Wasn’t going to let *her* slip away again.

As we parked the truck, I turned to her. “Will you be my girlfriend again?”

She giggled at me. “Do people our age still call it that?”

“Hell yes. I don’t want any more confusion from this point forward. So, will you?”

She exhaled sharply. “Yes.”

“Good.”

I raced around the truck to open her door for her. When she stepped out, I leaned down and scooped her into my arms. She immediately broke out into nervous laughter.

“What are you doing?” she said with a chuckle.

“Carrying my woman inside. You got a problem with that?” I asked, leaning down to kiss her before she could answer as I walked us up the steps to the front door.

Opening it with one hand was tricky, but I managed, and soon I was marching her toward my bedroom.

I wasn’t messing around tonight. I was a man on a mission—a mission to make up for lost time. To claim Rachel as mine. And to make her moan in pleasure.

As soon as I laid her on the bed, I started to strip her down, peeling off a jacket, a sweater, a T-shirt, her bra, and then moved on to her pants.

“How many layers are there?” I groaned in frustration as I pulled off a second pair of pants and finally found her panties.

She laughed. “It was cold out.”

“I’m going to warm you up,” I told her as I stood beside the bed and pulled my shirt off.

She watched me carefully, so I slowed it down and gave her a show. Hell, I was proud of my body, and watching her reaction was worth it. My jeans and boxers came off next, and then finally my socks.

“Come here.”

She whined at my delay, and I complied, crawling up the bed to settle myself between her legs. Our mouths came together in a scorching-hot kiss. I pulled the sheet over us.

The feeling of her body—which had been cold but was quickly heating—and her soft skin, it felt . . . just right.

Rachel pushed me gently, and I rolled over. She shifted down the bed, her hands splayed out on my abs, her fingers tracing my muscles, which tightened in response.

She looked up at me with a smirk. “Showoff.”

“For you, always.”

Rachel shifted down then, and without giving me any warning, she kissed a path along my abs. I watched her in fascination.

“Sweetheart,” I murmured when her lips grazed the most sensitive spot on my body.

She smiled and then brought her mouth around me. Damn, it felt good.

I groaned, clenching my muscles in reaction, and slammed my eyes shut to maintain my control. I took a few breaths to steady myself, and then opened my eyes to see her in action. And damn, was she beautiful like that.

I pulled her up toward me then. I needed her. Not her mouth on me—I needed *all* of her. Now.

My heart beat unevenly as I felt her silky heat slide across my hard length. Her breathing was just as ragged as mine. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes hazy.

I sucked at the sensitive skin on her neck and her ample chest. She arched back on a moan, and I shifted us up and pulled her close to me.

Her legs wrapped around my waist, squeezing me impossibly close. My hips were moving of their own accord. I needed to slow things down, but she was rubbing herself all over me, and I loved it.

“Sweetheart . . . condom.”

I barely got the words out before Rachel nodded her approval of this idea and went right back to kissing my neck. I managed to grab a little foil wrapper from the bedside drawer and wrangle the condom on.

As soon as that task was done, she rose up on her knees to find just the right angle.

We both let out a sigh of pleasure. It was the perfect moment—the calm before the storm. I knew that this meant she was mine, and I sensed that she did too.

I pressed up without another thought and sank inside her.

“Noah.” She gasped, her voice strangled.

I couldn’t speak, even if I wanted to. I was focused solely on the feel of her, the sight of her, how everything about this woman was consuming me in the best possible way.

My hips gave a little thrust.

Her hands roamed my back, her nails lightly brushing against my skin.

Our mouths locked together, our tongues lapping softly, slowly, while we began to move together, her writhing in time with each of my thrusts. It was painstakingly slow, but it had to be. We were making up for years of lost time right now. It was something that couldn't be rushed. More than a decade of longing had gone into this moment.

"You feel so good," she said softly, kissing down my jaw and throat, around to the sensitive spot under my ear that she'd discovered years ago.

"Rachel, baby." I moaned in reply, getting closer to the edge of losing my control.

My hips rocked, quickening the pace. She arched and moved into me, taking what she needed from me.

I needed to slow things down if this was going to last.

"More . . . there," she murmured.

She made the most fantastic sounds as she sought her pleasure, and I loved that I was the man giving it to her. *Finally.*

I picked up my pace, frantic, desperate, ready to come apart at the sight of her.

Rachel gasped and moaned, her body tensing and shaking. I could feel her clenching around me, and it was the final straw.

A few more firm thrusts, and I followed her right over the edge.

“Happy turkey day,” Dottie said as she brandished her arms above her head triumphantly.

We all took one look at her and everyone cracked up. She was wearing a hat that was . . . well . . . a turkey, I guess.

“Where on earth did you get that?” Natalie asked with a chuckle.

“It’s awesome,” Logan said, walking around his grandma to take in the details. After all, the little legs of the turkey were wearing Santa hats.

“Where all good things come from, of course. The internet,” she said.

Noah walked over to her and planted a kiss on her cheek. “You look cute as a button.”

“Damn straight,” Dottie said. “Now, get Grammy a spiked cider.”

Noah shook his head as he walked to the bar counter in the kitchen.

“Me too,” I called after him, and he saluted me in confirmation. “What next?”

I turned to Austen, who was reading me the recipe for Grandma Dottie’s famous apple pie. We’d been tasked with the job, and so far, Austen was good for reading off the steps, so I’d take it.

“Lay crust over pan and gently press into pan,” he recited in an uninterested tone, as if he were sulking.

“Anything wrong?” I asked him for the second time that afternoon.

He sighed. “Nope.”

Austen was lying, I could tell, but about what, I had no idea.

His plan about leasing my grandfather’s land, well, *my* land now, had come to fruition. And his and Noah’s brewery business was really taking off. What he was upset about, I had no idea. It was Thanksgiving—a day to hang out with family, be happy and to eat a lot of turkey, of course.

Noah came over and handed me a glass of apple cider spiked with what smelled like whiskey. He planted a kiss on my cheek. I took a sip of the spicy warm liquid as Austen grumbled again.

“You two make me sick.”

“He’s just jealous. Ignore him.” Noah patted my bottom stealthily and sauntered back to the living room where he and Logan were preparing the Thanksgiving bingo game prizes.

I’d been here just over two months, but it felt like I’d never left. This family was like my own family, and in a way, I guess they were.

Later that evening, we sat down to a table filled with loud, boisterous conversation and steaming dishes of delicious food. I piled my plate with smoked turkey, green bean casserole, stuffing, potatoes, and mac and cheese, made by yours truly. It

was something Grandpa always requested at Thanksgiving, and it just felt right to make it this year.

I realized I was most thankful for Noah and this family who had accepted me into the fold as one of them. Not as an outsider, or a neighbor . . . but one of the family. This was something I'd always dreamed about since I'd known the Harts, and now I was actually a part of their clan, more or less.

We went around the table, at the request of Natalie, and shared what we were thankful for.

Austen was thankful for me signing the lease agreement, he said as I rolled my eyes in unison with Natalie. Logan was thankful he was ahead on all his classwork and could take a nice break from school. Dottie was thankful that she'd hit her first hole-in-one on the golf course earlier that year. Natalie was thankful for her goats and her family—in that order, she insisted. I said I was grateful I'd been brought back home.

Then it was Noah's turn. He stood up, and everyone looked at him curiously.

"It's not a speech, son. You don't need to stand," Dottie joked.

"What are you—" Natalie said and then snapped her mouth shut.

We all looked around in confusion until Noah spoke, looking right at me.

"Rachel, I'm thankful that you took a chance on an awkward sixteen-year-old me. And that you came back to me and were patient through all my bullshit. And that you agreed

to be my girlfriend after all these years. I can honestly say that I've never been happier. And I wanted to know . . .” He paused then and lowered himself to one knee in front of me.

Everyone gasped, and poor Austen choked on a sip of spiked cider.

My heart thumped wildly as I wondered, hoping, guessing, praying, that what I thought was happening, was really happening.

I doubt I even took a single breath as Noah reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box, flipping it open to reveal a tear-shaped diamond ring. The most beautiful ring.

“Ask her already!” Dottie shouted, and everyone chuckled nervously.

Noah shot a glance at her, and she giggled. He met my eyes with a small, sweet smile, and I did my best not to pass out from excitement as he spoke the words.

“Rachel Rose Tyson, will you be my wife?”

I nodded and jumped from my seat. He stood, and we hugged as he lifted me off my feet. Everyone clapped as he set me back down.

“Is that a yes?” he whispered on a chuckle amidst the noise from the table.

“Yes. Yes!” I shouted and kissed him. “A thousand times yes!”

When the excitement of our proposal finally died down—my new ring secured on my finger—Dottie clapped her hands.

“All right, now. Time to eat before it gets cold.” She was always great at telling it like it is.

After we’d stuffed ourselves, Natalie came into the dining room carrying the wishbone, and she waved it at the table. “Whose turn is it this year?”

“I need it more than these ungrateful people,” Austen grumbled.

“Me too. I’m old. Might not have many wishbones left,” Dottie said thoughtfully.

Natalie groaned at her mother, but no one made a challenge.

Austen and Dottie looped a pinky finger around each half of the delicate bone and tugged. When it snapped, Austen had secured the larger half and smiled.

“That’s a good omen,” he said more to himself than anyone else.

Dottie bugged her eyes at him. “Well, what are you going to wish for?”

Austen blushed then, which was a rare sight. He was normally confident, cool, almost cocky. He looked slowly around at each of us. “Jameson’s married. Noah’s getting married. So, I wished for a wife. It’s probably about time, I guess.”

The room seemed to freeze in shock at his words. Everyone raised their eyebrows and gave each other little questioning glances. Natalie looked like she’d never been more surprised. I worried for a second that Dottie might have a heart attack.

Was this his idea of a joke? But no one laughed, and Austen's expression was completely serious.

Austen hadn't had so much as a girlfriend as he did a revolving stable of women who came and went when his mood struck. Now he wanted to settle down with a promise of forever?

That would be interesting.

Finally, we moved on with dinner and I ate entirely too much, but it was perfect.

Later, as Noah and I cuddled up on the couch for a family movie, I leaned into him and spoke softly. "What do you think about Austen saying he wants to find a wife?"

Noah shook his head. "That came out of left field. I've never heard him mention anything like that before."

I nodded, guessing as much, based on the shock on everyone's faces after his big announcement. "You think Austen would make a good husband?"

"I have no idea," Noah said. "Never really thought about it before."

I nodded again, still wondering where this idea had come from.

Noah continued. "But when Austen wants something bad enough, he usually makes it happen."

I couldn't wait to stick around with my new-old big crazy family of Harts and see what would unfold in the coming year.

Natalie turned down the lights, then passed around bowls of caramel popcorn, as if anyone had room.

When the credits began, Noah kissed my cheek. “I love you, Rachel.”

“I love you too, Noah,” I told him.

“Hey, Rach.” Grandma Dottie interrupted and nodded to the glass of hot cocoa in my hand. “You want me to spike that for you with the good whiskey?”

• • •

Don't miss [*The Marrying Kind*](#), up next in this series!

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THE MARRYING KIND

Ella Westover and Austen Hart are about as different as different can be. After losing her parents in a tragic accident, Ella is determined to live her life to the fullest. So she sets off on an adventure, complete with a hand-written bucket list tucked safely in the worn pages of her journal.

Her first stop? Kodiak Canyon, elevation nine thousand feet, population just over six hundred. The views are breathtaking, the mountain air is sweet, and the pace is slow . . . it's everything she's dreamed of.

Austen is a real-life mountain man. A local with a knack for surviving in the toughest of climates, he's got everything a man could need . . . *almost*. The only thing he doesn't have is a wife. A pretty maiden to warm his bed at night, someone to share his homestead with . . .

Kodiak Canyon has a lot to offer, but female companionship isn't one of them. He isn't about to let the beautiful and strong-willed Ella get away so easily.

Ella might take him up on his room to rent, but she'll never be someone's *wife*. She's got a plan. A life to live.

But as she starts ticking off items on her bucket list . . . one that she never imagined starts to take center stage.

Fall in love.

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