

ERIN FITZGERALD



MEN OF THE FIRST BRIGADE, BOOK 6

UNDENIABLE

UNDENIABLE

Adam & Madelyn



Erin FitzGerald

© 2022 Erin FitzGerald

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, products, places, events, media and specific incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of any products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Any similarity to individuals or any particular set of circumstances is purely coincidental or used in a fictitious manner.

This work contains adult themes and is not recommended for immature audiences. Personal discretion is advised.

Contents

1. Madelyn
2. Adam
3. Madelyn
4. Adam
5. Madelyn
6. Adam
7. Madelyn
8. Adam
9. Madelyn
10. Adam
11. Madelyn
12. Adam
13. Madelyn
14. Adam
15. Madelyn

16. Adam

17. Madelyn

18. Adam

19. Madelyn

20. Epilogue - Adam

21. Epilogue - Madelyn

Unrecognizable - Michael

Unrecognizable - Claire

Afterword & Acknowledgements

About the Author

Other Works & Coming Soon

“The wait is long, my dream of you does not end.”

—Nuala O’Faolain, My Dream of You

Madelyn

*D*amn, girl! You big.

He didn't even have to say the words out loud, because I could already hear them in my head.

I had agreed to meet Vin in person at a local coffee shop because it seemed like neutral territory and since I'd met him on a dating app, I wanted to be sure there were plenty of people around us.

Chances weren't good he'd get anything over on me, but I'd had a bad experience in college that had colored all my interactions with men since the tender age of nineteen. In fact, it was only within the past few years that I'd started to dip my toes back into the brackish waters of the over-30's dating pool.

Let me tell you, the water in here was *not fine*. It felt like I was trying to dodge typhoid half the time. The odds were clearly not in my favor and my physical presence further reduced those odds, because the truth was that I. Scared. Men.

In a land filled with ex-Brooklynite hipsters, Onondaga and Oneida men and locals of indiscriminate origin that probably worked out to be some polluted Dutch bloodline—like my own—the pickings weren't exactly great. This was especially the case for someone who looked like me.

“So, Madelyn...” Vin stood, clearing his throat uncomfortably and I knew he'd already clocked both exits. “Uh, nice to finally meet you—you know, in person. You're... uh, taller than your picture.”

Thank you, Captain Obvious. Why is it surprising that I'm bigger than the screen of your phone?

I tried not to roll my eyes, but it was obvious I was making him nervous, the guy who'd admitted to me after the first five messages exchanged that he had “a real thing for bigger girls.” I was several inches taller and had a good twenty pounds on the guy, but it was already painfully obvious that I was not what he meant when he said “bigger girls.” He didn't mean tall and muscular, not at all.

Suppose some clarification on his kink might've been a good thing.

I smiled benevolently, because I'd known the instant I agreed to meet Vin that I was wasting my time. He would disappoint me and I would disappoint him and both of us would be back to the dating app drawing board by the end of the day—or week—depending upon how long it took for us to work our hopes back up.

“Mads?” The voice was incredulous and I watched something like relief wash over Vin’s face as he realized that a distraction meant he could make his escape without so much as a polite goodbye. I watched him do it, too, a sour expression on my face as he snatched his paperboard cup off the table and made a beeline for the door.

I turned to sarcastically thank whoever it was that had recognized me. He’d provided a distraction for the jerk. I wasn’t exactly happy about it, that much was evident by my expression, but when I caught sight of Adam, the scowl turned immediately into an incredulous smile that I couldn’t control.

“Beckman! What the hell are you doing here?”

Adam Beckman was your stereotypical brother’s best friend: tall, built, and gorgeous. And still just as completely unattainable as he’d been the day I first set eyes on him in the fourth grade.

Probably still a horse’s ass, too.

I saw him first, though.

Pffft, like that counted for anything.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?” His voice was warm as he covered the distance between us in just a few long strides. His arms went up immediately like he was going to hug me and I swallowed hard, because to be fair, an inordinate number of my fantasies still involved being held by him, though perhaps in situations a bit more intimate than what was appropriate in a coffee shop.

“Last time I talked to your brother, you were still stationed overseas. Air Force medic, which I knew...but pararescue?”

He'd asked Steve about me? They talked about me?

Stop wobbling, stupid knees.

“Yeah, 57th Rescue Squadron the last five years. Italy.” My voice sounded scratchy to me as he wrapped me up in a tight hug and my face was smashed into all that long, glorious black hair of his. “I’m out now...trying to figure out my next steps.” I had to spit out some of his hair to say it, but I wasn’t mad about it because it was the first time my tongue had been on any part of Adam Beckman.

“Fucking impressive.” He pulled back much, much too quickly. “That makes you an official badass, Mads. The dropout rate for PJ training is insane—but you stayed with it.” He looked proud. *Of me.*

The only time I didn’t hate that nickname was when it came out of Adam’s mouth.

“You know me.” I laughed weakly, still completely hypnotized by the gorgeous man still standing close enough to kiss. “I like a good challenge, so when there was even a whisper a girl could get her wings...”

Pararescue with the Air Force was the *ultimate* challenge.

Adam laughed, a low, rumbly sound that did terrible things to places that had been neglected for far too long. “A good challenge? That’s ridiculous. You know most people have slightly lower standards.”

“Oh, not me.” I grinned at him finally. “You should know that by now.”

Something flashed across his face and was gone. It happened so quickly, I couldn't be sure what it was, but I suspected it might be discomfort although I wasn't sure why.

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Yeah, I suppose I should.”

The barista was the girl regularly on duty and she grinned at me when she held up my standard flat white and I passed her a bill.

“So, no more? What happened, you get tired of it?”

“Aged out. I stayed until thirty-nine, so you could say I was there for my own curtain drop. They wanted to put me on a desk: run the show, not be in it. Wasn't for me.” I grinned, even though I felt a little twinge inside. Identifying as a PJ for the last few years of my life meant I didn't exactly know who I was now that I wasn't in pararescue.

Adam's eyes went wide as he did the math in his head and I knew he was realizing for the first time that I was no longer twelve.

“So, what brings you to New York?” he asked, his eyes tracking my movement as I lifted the steaming cup to my lips.

“Besides growing up here? I've still got some family here, as you'll recall, and maybe work.” I took a cautious sip. “My brother told me his buddy's got a security firm that needs a couple more solid employees. I figure I'm a pretty good

candidate: medical training, security clearance, combat experience...I'm a triple threat."

"Not gonna hurt anyone's feelings to look at you either." Adam grinned at me, and I wasn't sure he knew he'd said it out loud.

"Doubt that's part of the job description," I said smoothly, feeling for the first time I might have the upper hand when his cheeks colored with just the faintest pink.

Yup, he'd had no idea he said that out loud.

Adam and my brother Steve were five years older than me. When I was ten the age gap put me firmly into Annoying Territory and I didn't leave it for the next six years.

Both of them had gone to school locally and it meant that I had them in my life until they were twenty-two and graduated from college.

When they joined the Army as officers, with degrees under their belts, I cried myself to sleep for months.

I missed my brother. He'd lived at home until the day he shipped out, but the truth was that the day they shipped out, I also lost the man I'd been in love with for the better part of a decade.

When you're seventeen, you can convince yourself you'll never overcome that first loss.

"Adam Fucking Beckman." I took another sip and watched his eyes go wide.

What the hell did I have to lose? I was gonna go for it.

“You have *no* idea the massive crush I had on you when we were kids.” I laughed. “I must have been *so* annoying.”

The massive crush I still have.

His cheeks pinked again and I wondered for a second if he did actually have some idea.

“Your brother would’ve kicked my ass.” He grinned, holding his hand out for the cup the barista passed across the counter to him.

My brother would probably still kick his ass—or try to—Adam was bigger than him these days.

“You two are a gorgeous couple,” the barista said softly to us, leaning over the counter, and it was my turn to blush.

“Oh, no. I mean, thank you, but we’re not...that.”

The girl raised an eyebrow with a smile directed at Adam. “I’d call that a shame.”

That’s for damn sure.

Shut up, inside voice. No one asked you.

“You, uh...meeting someone here?” He looked a little nervous.

I looked over my shoulder, toward the door where Vin had pulled a disappearing act.

“Nope, apparently not. My date clearly decided I’m terrifying and pulled a runner.” I sighed as I said it, although I wasn’t terribly disappointed. Vin had been much smaller than

I'd expected and I liked guys who were bigger than me, which was a bit of a tall order, in every sense. That made it fair, I supposed: neither of us had gotten what we were looking for and as it stood, things were already looking up.

"These *are* terrifying." Adam squeezed my bare, very well-defined left bicep, but his expression was full of admiration. "I know PJ's need to be fit but holy hell, Mads, the *guns* on you. You could bench me."

I doubted that, but I entertained the visual anyway because it wasn't at all unpleasant.

"Pffft, whatever. You should see what I can do on the leg press."

His eyes glazed over and I gave myself a mental high-five, because I knew he'd just envisioned my ass. That was something I'd been trying to get him to do for decades and I rejoiced a little as I watched the wheels spin in his brain. I'd been locked in an anti-aging time warp in his mind, quite obviously.

"So, VanBuren..." The expression I remembered so well from my childhood was back on his face: tolerant and amused. "Grab a chair and tell me what you've been up to the last twenty-something years."

"You're free?" I asked, looking around us. It was a weird time of day to be in a coffee shop.

"I'm a med flight nurse," he explained. "It can be a weird schedule sometimes, especially when it's a full moon." He

pointed vaguely over my shoulder. “I just pulled a fireman’s shift.” He grinned. I knew that meant a straight twenty-four hours at the hospital. “I’ll work two or three more days this week, depending on staffing. We haven’t been able to find someone who’s the right fit for years now, not since Harlowe left.” He swallowed hard and I was pretty sure there was quite a lot more story there than he was ready to tell. “She got married; has another little girl on the way in the next couple weeks.”

I didn’t really want to hear about this person he was obviously in love with, so I just made a noncommittal noise, nodded my head and hoped he was ready to switch subjects.

Adam had studied Health Sciences in college, since he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do with his life, and immediately after he’d gone into the Army. Honestly, I think he’d have gone into it right out of high school if he hadn’t followed my brother into college. That might have been the one time Steve was a positive influence.

After graduating college it was Steve’s turn to follow Adam, and the two of them ended up in the First Brigade, out of Fort Drum, eventually moving to Delta Force at Fort Bragg. They didn’t know it, but every time they deployed, I spent sleepless nights praying they both came back. Infantry was dangerous enough, but they went from a specialized combat unit to an elite team, which was code for high mortality rate in my book.

The next time I looked up, it was getting dark outside. Adam’s eyes followed mine and widened in surprise as he

looked down at the face of the phone he'd flipped over on the table.

“Well, how about that?” He huffed out a laugh. “I can't remember the last time I spent so much time just talking! I'd forgotten how easy it was to talk to you, Mads.” He reached over the table and socked me playfully in the shoulder, then spread his fingers and curled them around the bare skin of my upper arm.

I felt that touch in the most inappropriate, unholy places, all the way down to my toes—which curled in my shoes, I'll have you know.

Adam Beckman had absolutely no idea how he *still* affected me, apparently, which was pretty stinking inconvenient, because for his part he seemed totally unaffected. I was still just Steve's goofy little sister.

I may as well have been *just Steve's goofy little sister*, because while sitting with Adam I wasn't an accomplished, driven, strong, almost-forty-year-old woman. In his presence I was all of fourteen again, shy and gangly, hoping he would notice me while simultaneously praying he didn't.

He was a god among men: tall and broad, muscular and handsome, with *really* good hair. And I was just...Madelyn—Mad or Mads, to be precise.

I had always been too tall for a girl, just a hair under 6'1" when I finally stopped growing at seventeen. I had been all arms and legs and teeth, bashful as hell and almost incapable of getting through three words at a time without a nervous

giggle. Because when I was a young girl, Adam had rendered me stupid and it was clear to me that, all these years later, I wasn't all that far removed.

“You hungry, Mad?”

I snapped out of my uncomfortable reverie to realize Adam was asking me a question.

“Hungry?” I gestured toward my person. “I'm burning calories just sitting here blinking, Beckman. Look at my genetics. What do you think?”

His grin was broad and white, even more devastating than I remembered, and I half wished I'd packed a spare change of underwear in the small bag I'd looped over my shoulder.

The two of us walked down to Maggie's, where Adam requested a table outside, overlooking the river.

The food was incredible and by the time I drained my third glass of beer, I had a pleasant buzz going on. I wasn't a big drinker so it didn't take much, and from the four glasses lined up in front of Adam and the way his smile had gone permanent, I guessed he was a lightweight too.

“Where too, Ms. VanBuren?” he teased after refusing to let me pay, and I threw a nice tip down on the table and challenged him with my eyes. It made him hold up his hands in mock surrender and when I rose a little unsteadily from my chair, he held out an arm in my direction.

You'd better believe I took that arm. Tipsy or not, it gave me a reason to touch him, to smell him, and to bemoan the fact

that twenty years had done nothing to diminish the fact I was going to go home and have incredibly pornographic dreams about the boy who was now all man.

Adam

Madelyn VanBuren, as I lived and breathed. She was the last person I'd have ever expected to run into that day in Vito's coffee shop and the instant she turned and I caught sight of her face, I felt like a mule had kicked me in the chest. I kid you not, I think my heart stopped for three or four beats and I staggered a little before I called, "Mads?"

The blinding smile on her face when she'd turned and realized who I was...I would remember the look on her face until the day I died, because it was the look I'd wanted from her for years. She looked happy to see me—no, fuck that. She looked downright overjoyed to see me, like she was so happy she wouldn't be able to keep it all in, and when I crossed the room to hug her my knees almost buckled when she tucked her face right into my neck.

It was at that moment that I died and went to heaven for about five seconds.

Since I'd made it very clear I would walk her home, the two of us trailed down the road with her arm in mine as I walked

her back to Steve and Kennedy's house, just a couple blocks off Main Street.

There was a single light burning in the entryway when we finally came up on the massive Queen Anne house Steve had spent the last eight years of weekends trying to restore.

"I'd invite you in..." Madelyn worked hard not to deliver the "but" blow. "Steve would be so happy to see you—I know you two have been really busy lately and haven't had time to catch up, but..." There it was, cushioned inside a sentence filled with nice words. "Teagan's teething again and she keeps the most God-awful hours. No one's getting any sleep."

I let my eyes drift to the window on the top floor, tucked in under the sharply sloped roof and her eyes followed mine.

"Yeah, I know. The irony isn't lost on me: I'm back in my childhood bedroom—and believe me, I can hear the baby all the way up there."

I remembered Steve buying the home from his parents years earlier, so they could move to some retirement village in the middle of Florida. It was actually named The Villages, if memory served, which stuck with you even without being snappy.

"We must have been out of our minds," I mused out loud, realizing for the first time just how dangerous it had been for Steve and I to sneak in and out of his bedroom window on what was effectively the fourth floor. The drop from the rooftop had to be more than thirty feet.

“Yeah,” she chuckled, unwinding her arm from mine and I felt a little colder without her keeping the air of an early October evening off that side of my body. “Those really were the days, weren’t they?”

Well, they were and they weren’t, but I wasn’t about to admit to that. The last thing I was going to tell her was that by the time she turned sixteen, I’d started to feel like a creep for the thoughts I was having about my best friend’s little sister.

“I remember the last time you slept in this house.” She’d walked up the first two steps on the front porch and she turned slowly to face me, a slow smile spreading across her face.

Yeah, I remembered that too...

“It was a week before you two left for Fort Drum. You two went out for a big sendoff with some of the guys...”

I took a step closer, because I couldn’t help myself.

“You two were such a mess.” She laughed at the memory. “I heard you come in because I’d stayed awake waiting for you. I decided it was time for my grand declaration. I was going to tell my brother’s best friend that I’d had a huge crush on him for the last five years and maybe...” She trailed off and she shook her head, a sweet smile on her face. “I don’t know what I thought. Maybe I thought I’d get to kiss you goodbye or something.”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “Doesn’t seem all that long ago, and yet it seems like a lifetime. Funny how time gives you a different perspective.”

She hummed. “On most things, yes. There are always a few that stay the same.”

I wanted to ask her what those things were. I was sorely tempted to ask her if she’d ever thought about it again, because as far as I could remember, I had been fairly smashed. Still, I was certain I hadn’t kissed her that night.

“It was wonderful to see you again, Adam.” I was being dismissed. “I’ll let Steve know I saw you today.”

Why was I disappointed when she said that?

“I’m sure he’ll be mad that I got to spend time with you and he didn’t.” She grinned. “I’d expect a call or a text from him tomorrow if I was you.

“You stealin’ my friends now, Mads?” Her voice dropped lower in register to imitate her brother and I couldn’t help but chuckle. She sounded nothing like him, but the bluster came through loud and clear. “As if he *has* any friends other than you.”

I gave her a two-fingered salute and waited for her to let herself in through the front door, then I turned and continued down the sidewalk toward my place. It was closer to the river, so I doubled back the way we’d come.

“Lucy,” I called softly as I shut the door behind me, rewarded by a sleepy trill in the darkness. “Where are you, girl?”

I dumped my keys and wallet in the dish near the door, shot the deadbolt and kicked off my boots before a little body

wound around my leg. I leaned down to scoop her up, cradling the sleek black cat to my chest as I walked through to the kitchen to check on her food and water situation.

Lucy was short for Lucifer, which was hardly a female name, but the woman whose porch she lived under didn't really give two shits about gender identification when it came to trapping the feral kitten under her deck. The cat was a vicious killer, she said, lying in ambush under the deck, waiting for the birds to come to the feeder or, preferably, the squirrels.

My friend Harlowe, the woman I'd been hopelessly in love with for three years, ran a dog rescue, so she knew a thing or two about strays. She'd come with me one afternoon to help me trap the kitten hiding under my neighbor's deck and when we pulled all two pounds of the kitten out, I took Lucifer home with me.

Over the last few years, the time I hadn't spent on duty had been at the dog shelter instead. I still spent a crazy amount of my free time there, but I'd scaled it back just a little. Anthony was running operations pretty smoothly and managing the volunteers and now that Harlowe was running a rescue on her farm, so I didn't get to the rescue in Clayton quite as often.

Lucy was a hell of a lot more independent than a dog and while I'd have loved to adopt several of the sweet pits at the rescue, my working hours would have been hard on a dog. So I lived the life of a cat owner, because Lucy and I could peacefully coexist and yet I could disappear for thirty-six

hours at a time and she didn't give a shit as long as there was enough food in her bowl.

There was still some kibble in the bottom and Lucy wasn't a real picky eater, so I left it, but I freshened up her water before I drew a glass for myself and pulled out a chair at the small kitchen table. My brain was still reeling from running into the last person I ever expected to see in Watertown again, and I needed to take a few moments to sort my thoughts and gain some perspective.

Madelyn VanBuren was distressingly hot. Like *move over Satan, because I'm headed straight to hell for the thoughts I'm having* hot.

I remembered the little girl: too tall for her age, gangly, all arms and legs. Her mom always gave her at-home haircuts that left her bangs a little too short, and her teeth had been too big for her face until she was about fourteen or so. But around that age the little tomboy I knew started growing out her hair. She got into makeup just a little bit, and the first time I saw her in a skirt rather than gym shorts or overalls, I just about passed out. Which was wrong in my opinion. Because not only was Mads my best friend's little sister—which practically made her *my* little sister—she was also *way* too young for me.

It's funny, how a five-year age gap means everything when you're nineteen but nothing when you're coming up on forty-five. Perspective, I guess. Life experiences seem to shrink those gaps for the right person when the time is right.

I huffed at myself in irritation and pushed up from the table, making Lucy jump down with an irritated little chirp as she hit the floor.

Madelyn was in town temporarily. Running into her and spending the evening talking, laughing and letting her tease me had been an unexpected bright spot in what had become the fairly dull routine of my life.

The guy she was talking about taking the job with...I hadn't served directly with Katsaros, but I knew of him thanks to my friend Lincoln. His security company had been going through some rapid growth according to Harlowe. She was the inside track on that one, since Aaron had just started working for him. As far as I knew, Katsaros was a pretty stand-up guy. Careful, honorable, but possibly connected.

I put myself through a hot shower and gave my long hair a little extra conditioner, since it was such a hit with the ladies. They could never wait to get their hands into the straight black hair that had been a gift from my mother—about the only thing she left me with, if I gave it any thought. With the exception of my dark hair and eyes and slightly olive skin, I looked exactly like my father: same nose, same smile, same shoulders the width of a football field.

Dad came from hearty German stock, to hear him tell it, and even in his early seventies he was in pretty exemplary shape. The ladies still flocked to him like he was a high school quarterback and his ready, easy smile probably broke more hearts than he'd ever meant to.

Mom broke his heart when she up and died in some parking lot altercation at the casino. Her friend had gotten her a job there and she worked late nights, serving drinks to men who had no business looking at her the way they did. My dad told me that more than once he arrived to pick her up at the end of her shift and had to take a few teeth out of one guy or another who'd tried to follow her out of the building.

Mom was a knockout. I touched the framed photo I kept of her and my dad, sitting on the nightstand next to my bed. She was where my Onandaga blood came from, and though she hadn't been around to raise me, Dad saw to it that I was really immersed in her heritage.

I became friends with Steve VanBuren at the beginning of my junior year of high school. He didn't make fun of me when I told him I wouldn't be attending any weekend sporting events, because sometimes I had tribal events instead.

He didn't call me half-breed or pull my long hair, and not once did he make fun of the way I dressed.

Dad tried, he really did, but I grew like a weed and by the time I turned seventeen, during that junior year of high school, I hit 6'3". I went through such a rapid growth spurt, in fact, it probably looked like I was wearing a toddler's clothes for a while.

My dad was hopeless when it came to noticing things like that and he and my stepmom didn't have a lot of extra money, so Steve dragged me along with him to a thrift shop one day and tossed twenty bucks at me, claiming it had fallen out of

my pocket in his car. I knew that was a lie, but I gave him a tight nod and joined him in digging through an enormous stack of jeans.

Steve's family wasn't wealthy, but they had more money than we did. I worked a lot of odd jobs after school, trying to help out where I could, but we were definitely what most people would have called the *Wrong Side of the Tracks* people.

Both Steve and I went to the local community college and in order to pay for the loans I took out, I joined the Army and Steve followed. He said if I was going to go get my ass blown off in a sandbox somewhere, he was going to be there to patch me up.

He did, too. More than once.

It was getting late and I tapped out a quick text to my dad, letting him know I was free the next couple days if he wanted to have dinner or watch a game together. Chances were good my stepmom was eager to get him out of the house, homebody that he was.

Lucy sauntered into the room about five minutes after I crawled in bed, hopping up on my chest, her standard spot. She rattled with her affectionate purr and I warned her I'd be rolling in about fifteen minutes, since I was a side sleeper. But until then she was content to sit on my chest and knead her paws into the soft sweatshirt I wore to bed.

Yeah, the cat...she was the closest thing I had to a woman in my bed. My own fault, too. I'd gotten too damn hung up the last couple years on a woman I couldn't have and honestly,

together we'd have been a disaster. But that had been enough to keep me from looking for anything even so much as just casual, though I wasn't really bragging when I said I got more than enough attention. I was a chick magnet to hear Steve tell it, which he thought was hilarious, especially since none of them ever seemed to "stick," as he put it.

Drifting off to sleep, I let my mind wander back to the evening spent with a beautiful woman. Madelyn had no idea how gorgeous she was, or what she did to men. She was confident, her movements sure and graceful, the biggest fucking turn-on ever.

She was funny and smart, experienced, capable of witty conversation and had endless crazy stories—genuinely wild, hair-raising ones. She was a woman who'd already lived a *real* life, one that had shaped the incredible person she'd become.

I'll confess that as I fell asleep, I didn't want to think about her intelligence or her sense of humor. Instead, I drifted off to the way it felt to hug her, when she'd folded into my arms and her face tucked into my neck.

Thank God she'd be moving soon for work, because if she stayed I was going to have a real problem. Madelyn VanBuren didn't know it, but I'd been in love with her for most of my life.

Madelyn

It was three-thirty in the morning when Teagan started screaming at the top of her lungs, and even though I was up one floor and on the opposite side of the house, old Victorians weren't exactly built with soundproofing in mind.

Rolling over, I grunted when I saw the time on my phone and since it took a solid twenty minutes for Kennedy to get Teagan to stop wailing, I read through my emails and looked at real estate in the Ithaca area, just to get out ahead of things. If my interview with Scott Katsaros went well I expected to relocate quickly, as it seemed likely I'd be assigned to one of his teams that operated overseas. Sure, his operatives lived stateside, but I had a feeling my rent payment would be for a pricey storage unit, since it was unlikely I'd be home for long stretches of time, at least at first.

Next I goofed around for a while on social media. That was how my fingers typed in *Adam Beckman*, and I spent the next hour drooling over the few photos he had on Facebook. Which was ridiculous. Adam was even more untouchable now than

he'd been when I was a teenager. I'd heard at one point he was married, but he certainly hadn't acted like it tonight and I hadn't seen a wedding band on his finger.

Not all men wear wedding bands, my annoying brain reminded me and I threw the phone down on the bed and rolled my face into the pillow.

He's not that kind of guy.

Somehow I knew that, that the woman lucky enough to nail down a man like Adam would get the whole package. He would worship her because she held his heart. If she was any good, she'd keep his heart safe too, because Adam wasn't the sort of guy you found just anywhere. He was the guy you brought home to your family, where your dog *and* your grandma fell in love with him, and just ask me just how I knew that. My grandmother, already in her nineties, couldn't keep her hands off the man, according to Kennedy.

Eventually I fell back into a troubled sleep and had weird, unsettling dreams that made me feel unrested when I finally woke. It was well after eight and I was annoyed I'd slept so long, which was completely unlike me.

Steve had already left for work and Kennedy looked like she'd been on death watch the night before, deep blue crescents smudged beneath her eyes. I gave her a sympathetic look as I drifted into the kitchen and poured two cups of coffee. I handed one to her and I watched her go through a set of mental gymnastics.

“Pump and dump,” I offered, knowing she was weighing how much she could drink without Teagan reacting badly to it.

“Good idea.” Her voice was hoarse. “I thought her waking up for feedings four times a night was hard, but this is even worse. I was just starting to get back to a normal sleep schedule.” She took a sip of the coffee even without adding any cream, and she grinned at me over the lip of the mug. “But *someone else* was definitely off her sleep schedule last night.”

I didn’t mean to blush, but it happened anyway and Kennedy’s grin went Cheshire. “Yeah...that’s what I thought. You going to tell me about the hottie I saw walking you home, or do I need to ask my husband?”

I swallowed hard. Kennedy knew exactly who Adam was, because Adam and Steve were still best friends. Maybe they hadn’t seen a lot of each other recently, but that was unusual. Both of their schedules contributed to that.

What was more unusual was me hanging out with Adam, but that was because Kennedy knew about my childhood crush on the man. She’d been there to witness some of it, since we’d been friends since we were children.

“Ran into him at the coffee shop,” I said lamely, deciding to refill my cup even though it was unnecessary. “We just had dinner together and caught up.”

“K.”

I looked up suddenly, because she’d let that go far too easily. Normally Kennedy was like a hawk with a rabbit: she

didn't let go and never gave up until she got what she wanted, and she'd been after me for years about the lack of men in my life.

The grin hadn't left her face and her eyebrows were doing a funny jig on her forehead.

"*The Adam Beckman,*" she teased, emphasizing the first word. "Don't think I don't remember the way you used to look at him when we were kids."

Kennedy was exactly two years older than me and three years younger than Steve. She'd been in a similar situation: too young to catch his interest as a freshman to Steve's senior, but by the time he and Adam came back from their first tour, she was all grown up. Steve had fallen all over himself trying to get the willowy strawberry blonde to go out with him and cleverly she'd turned him down time and time again, which only made her more unobtainable, and made him try even harder.

I knew the true story, the one she'd never told my brother. She let him think that his persistence was what won her over, but it wasn't until he and Adam returned years later, home for good, that she consented to go out with my brother. She'd told me the night before they were married that the reason she'd constantly turned him down was fear. She was terrified to fall in love with him when there was the possibility she could lose him forever.

Each time Steve returned from a tour, Kennedy was there. They had the same small circle of friends and attended the

same church, making it inevitable that their paths crossed again and again. Each time Steve asked her out, and each time she gently turned him down.

“My guess is that the way I used to look at Adam when we were kids is the same way you looked at Steve,” I teased, and I watched her tired eyes go all dreamy. She and my brother were still disgustingly in love. It was equal parts annoying and endearing to watch them together, his hand constantly on her butt or around her waist or over her shoulders, making sure some part of him was always touching some part of her.

The obvious truth was that Kennedy was Steve’s security blanket. He’d sworn for years that he’d marry her one day and I’d taken more than one broken-hearted phone call from him when she turned him down yet again.

“I’d be willing to bet good money you still look at him that way, Mads.” She yawned so hard, I heard her jaw pop. “And if you’ve seen yourself lately, I’ll bet he was looking at you the very same way.”

I rolled my eyes. There was no way that man looked at me the way I looked at him. I’d seen the sort he dated in the past: petite, scrawny little girls who weighed as much as my right leg. None of them had been particularly clever or ambitious either, from what I could remember. They were giggling idiots, most of them still living locally, a couple running the Booster clubs and the PTA at our old high school from what I’d heard.

“What was that look?” Kennedy’s tone was still teasing and I rose to refill the coffee I’d managed to gulp down.

“Nothing in particular,” I said over my shoulder as I added the half-and-half.

“Bullshit.” She laughed. “The back of your neck is red and when you turn around your cheeks will be too. Did you just imagine Beckman naked?”

No I hadn’t, not really, but that made my cheeks flame all over again. *Yum.*

“That was your suggestion,” I said, turning to glare at her with the full knowledge that now my face was bright red. “I was just thinking that the girls he used to date when we were kids seemed like they were only in it for a good time.”

Kennedy smirked at me. “Got it. You were imagining the good times, then.”

So what? I shook my head at her. Imagining Adam in just such a scenario was as close as I’d ever get to the real thing, so what harm was there in fantasizing about someone who would never be mine? I’d already spent most of my life dreaming about him anyway; this wouldn’t hurt anyone.

I sat at the table while my sister-in-law spread butter on her toast and she held a triangle toward me in a gesture I knew meant it was a peace offering.

I’d gotten lucky when Steve married her, because the woman wasn’t my sister-in-law, she was my sister in all the ways that counted.

“He’s still so delicious,” I groaned, and she grinned before she took another bite. “Seriously, Kenny. It’s unfair. He didn’t

get old and fat; he's even more gorgeous than he was when we were kids."

"Grams thinks so too," she said breezily, and I snorted at the idea of my ninety-seven-year-old grandmother ogling someone less than half her age.

Eyes off my man, old woman.

I straightened, startled by the vehemence of the thought.

"Can't fault her for good taste," I admitted, and Kennedy choked on a giggle and her toast, quickly washing down both with the rest of her coffee.

"At her age, I'm not sure taste has anything to do with it. That greedy old bat takes whatever she can get." She grinned at me. "Steve wants to have a barbecue this weekend, so you'd better be prepared to beat Grams back with a stick. Your brother was planning to invite Adam and I have a feeling his interest in attending has just intensified." She smirked at me.

Something in my belly flip-flopped when she said that. Something that felt an awful lot like interest I couldn't afford to have in a man who clearly didn't feel the same way about me.

Since the weekend was only four days away, I ran errands for Kennedy, picking up party supplies while she put baby Teagan in a bouncy chair on the back deck and worked on making the yard presentable for company.

My brother and sister-in-law had worked hard on my childhood home and Kennedy's eye for design and color

combinations had taken a stodgy old house to something gracious and beautiful. They'd earned every right to be proud of their lovely home, and hosting often meant they were able to show it off.

The rest of the week I helped Kennedy with decorating, cleaning, and I spelled her off with Teagan when she needed to catch a nap. Finally Teagan's teeth had broken through and at last she was more a cute baby and less a demon, but there had been a couple days I was convinced she was possessed.

Steve had been wildly busy at work and when he finally got home late that Friday night, Kennedy and I were in the kitchen cooking and baking like maniacs—well, Kennedy was. I was just taking orders, since I could only cook basic things and my baking attempts typically involved a fire extinguisher.

“You trying to burn my house down?” my brother teased when he saw me standing at the stove and I lifted a fist, middle finger fully extended, over my shoulder. It made him snort with laughter and he moved quickly to catch Kennedy in his arms, planting a noisy, sloppy kiss on the top of her head.

See what I mean? Disgusting.

“So, Mads...” Steve's voice was full of mischief. He'd always taken his older brother duties very seriously and was still a huge tease. “My wife tells me a certain someone walked you home a few nights ago...and when I ran into my best friend in the parking lot tonight, guess who turned about thirty-seven shades of red when I asked if he had a nice time flirting with my sister?”

Steve couldn't hold it in. He burst into deep, booming laughter and Kennedy whirled to clap her hand over his mouth. "Hush. The baby just went down and if you wake her up, *you're* on duty."

"Whatever." I huffed at my brother. Steve could turn me into a twelve-year-old in a heartbeat, complete with righteous indignation and impressive eye rolls. He'd always known exactly which buttons to push; it was a sibling superpower. "We were just catching up, that's all."

That made Steve laugh even harder. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days? Hey, Kenny..." He wiggled his eyebrows at his wife. "Wanna go upstairs and...catch up?" His grin was evil and Kennedy socked him hard on the shoulder. His smile stretched wider and he trapped her in his arms, raining sloppy kisses all over her face while she squealed and squirmed.

In retribution, Kennedy set him up at the counter with a mountain of vegetables she needed chopped. I could hear the steady *thwack* of the knife as he worked, and she moved between the fridge and the island, pulling out the things she needed to assemble kabobs.

It was late when we finally went to bed and I broke into my secret stash of disposable earplugs, the ones I'd sometimes worn in one ear in active combat zones so I could catch more than five minutes of sleep at a time. The last thing I wanted to hear was my brother and sister-in-law "catching up," and I

made a mental note to suggest their next big home improvement project include soundproofing their bedroom.

Since the party was to start at noon, I was up early. I had paperwork to complete for a background check, so I gathered everything I needed, filled out everything I had, then sent it over to Scott Katsaros to run. My official interview with him wasn't coming up as quickly as I'd have liked, but I was ruthlessly organized because to plan for everything and to keep my ducks in a row made my life easier. In fact, it had even been known to save lives.

I was in the kitchen before nine, slamming back coffee while I helped Kennedy with the last-minute things. The woman didn't know how to do things small, and the backyard had been transformed into a lush paradise in the last few days, a huge new pergola set up with freshly-planted vines starting to creep up the posts.

There was a hanging garden wall along the fence, with vining plants and vegetables and an assortment of pots she'd staggered in between.

She'd strung twinkling lights through the trees and over the pergola and I had no doubt they'd turn the yard into a magical fairyland after dark.

There was a huge fabric awning stretched over the deck to keep it cool and tables full of wrapped or covered food, flanked by two huge coolers packed with water, beer, soda and juice.

Kennedy always thought of everything. She was a professional organizer both on the clock and off. Color coordination and organization ran through her veins. Disorganization was a level of chaos she would not abide, even in theory.

While Steve fired up the smoker on one side of the deck and the grill on the other, I took Teagan from Kennedy and let her buzz around the kitchen like the neurotic little mess she was. I knew better than to get in the way of that cyclone, and I spread a blanket under a tree and played with Teagan until she started fussing.

T's naps were beginning to stretch further and further apart. Gone were the days of a ten a.m., a one p.m., and a four p.m. nap. Now she'd make it to noon, conk out for two hours, then carry on like a champ until 7:30 each night when someone flipped a switch and she turned into the devil.

You think I'm joking? I'm not joking, though it was hard to say which side the Satan gene had come from.

After putting her down for her nap and tucking the monitor in my pocket, I hurried to my room to run a brush through my hair and slick on a little lip gloss. If I did more than that, my brother would notice and he'd tease me endlessly, but I took the chance and with a light hand I also applied mascara. It was pointless. Stupid. But so what?

I'd changed into a soft, comfortable dress with cap sleeves. It highlighted the width of my shoulders and the definition of my arms, draped nicely over my butt and somehow,

miraculously, made my small breasts look a little more lush than was the reality. The point though was that it hid my ink from my grandmother's eagle eyes. She had strong opinions about women in the workforce, the Air Force, and tattoos, and I didn't want to hear any of it.

Kennedy's eyes popped wide when I walked into the kitchen and I knew immediately that I'd taken it too far. "Too much?" I asked nervously, and a sweet smile stretched across her face.

"Not even the big gun," she teased. "Perfect."

The Big Gun? That was what she'd named the *one* skirt I owned. It was tight and short, hitting me at mid-thigh, and it accentuated the crazy muscle definition in my legs and butt. I'd worked hard for that definition and I worked hard to keep it, but wearing that skirt out in public was just asking for trouble.

I helped carry out the last platter while Kennedy lit citronella candles and turned on the water feature along the back fence that filled the space with a soothing ambient noise.

The first knock at the door made my eyes go wide and she grinned wickedly at me. "I think you should answer that. In fact, I'll come with you. I need to go pick up Grams and I want to see what this," she pinched my side, "does to our boy."

I swung the door open with my heart in my throat, butterflies battering their way up my trachea as I stared up into molten chocolate eyes set in the most gorgeous face I'd ever seen. He was more beautiful *every* damn time I saw him.

There was a sharp noise, a wheeze of breath, and I heard Kennedy snort beside me. “Welcome to my home, Beckman. I see you’re already taking in the main attraction.”

Adam didn’t respond immediately, his lips working to form what I thought might be words, but for several seconds no sound came out and his eyes swept slowly down my body and back up before he stuttered, “Wow, Mads. You...you clean up real good.”

I gave him the same slow head-to-toe treatment and he turned quickly to grab something he’d set on the porch, but not before I realized the movement was an excuse. He adjusted himself quickly before snagging a bag in one arm and grabbing the case of beer with his other hand. Conveniently it seemed to hover around his hips and I desperately wanted to get eyes on what was going on there, because I was pretty sure Beckman had just popped one on me.

Silently Kennedy slipped around me, slapping Adam’s shoulder as she hurried down the steps and toward her car sitting in the driveway.

“Guess I’m the first one here,” Adam said uncomfortably and I held out my arms to take the grocery bag from him.

“No harm in that. You and Steve can catch up out back while Kenny fetches Grams.”

“Grams?” Adam’s eyes widened. “I swear to you that woman pinches my ass every time I see her.”

I couldn't help but chuckle. Grams had gotten even feistier in her old age. I could only imagine what a handful she'd been for my grandfather, who'd passed on thirty years earlier. He'd probably died of exhaustion after trying to keep up with her for decades.

Letting Adam walk ahead of me, I took the chance to ogle his wide shoulders and the firm backside partially hidden by his cargo shorts. That probably made me no better than my grandmother, and if he'd turned around he'd have caught me licking my lips. His presence convinced my ovaries they were fifteen again, practically on fire to reproduce.

What beautiful babies that man would make.

That thought stopped me in my tracks and my flip-flop caught on the hardwood, making a sharp squeak that caused him to turn. His eyebrow arched up as he caught me, staring idiotically at him like a deer caught in headlights. "You ok, Mad?"

"Me?" My voice sounded like I'd sucked down helium. "Fine. Good. Great. Sorry, just...remembered I was supposed to..." *Supposed to what? Shit, shit, shit. I've got nothing!*

"No worries." He turned fully and held out his arms for the bag I was toting, a sweet smile spreading across his handsome face. "Hand it over and I'll free you up to manage...whatever it is you need to do."

What I needed to do was none of his business right now, the heat rushing through my body settling in the most inappropriate place. It made the color flood my cheeks and I

hoped and prayed he didn't notice, because the pictures in my head were absolutely pornographic and wrong. I was going to have to deal with that later.

Grams arrived twenty minutes later, helped into the house by a very patient Kennedy. She put up ceaseless chatter, her movement at the pace of a tortoise...and the endless, exhausting, tiresome stories we'd all heard hundreds of times.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my grandmother. It was just that she was still *so* much personality in a tiny body, there was no space for anyone else in the room.

"Is that Beckman boy here?" I heard her ask Kenny, and something about it put my hackles right up.

"You let him be, Grams," I admonished in a voice far more stern than I'd intended to use and I quickly crossed the space to kiss her soft, wrinkled cheek. It made her give me a look and I leaned closer, whispering, "I'm calling dibs."

The sly old fox grinned at me. "Good girl. It's about damned time, Madelyn VanBuren. Go get yourself a helping of that fine man...just so long as I can get in a good pinch every now and then." Her eyes sparkled with mischief and I rolled my eyes at her just as her arm snaked around to pinch my butt.

"You are something, Grams. Really, really something." *A real perv.*

We were clearly going to have a far more serious Come to Jesus moment about her hands being on Adam's ass, especially now that I'd staked my flag.

Deep laughter drifted in from the yard and I looked up to see Adam with Teagan in his arms. She was up in the air, over his head, squealing down at him. It was the picture-perfect moment and I raised my phone quickly, hoping to capture it: Adam's beautiful hair shining in the sun, a huge smile on his face, his t-shirt hitched up just far enough to give me a great display of what looked like the bottom of a six-pack. *Drool.* I quickly wiped a hand self-consciously across my face.

"T's bibs are in the drawer and the fire extinguisher's under the sink," Kennedy called as she breezed past me, an evil smile on her face and a ketchup bottle in her hands. She didn't even look back at me, to watch the confusion play out over my face as she called back, "For your smoking ovaries, Mads."

Adam's face turned toward me as she said it and I had to turn away to hide the blush that rolled up my neck like a storm surge. I quickly dropped my phone. *Busted.*

Grams was already sidling up to him, ostensibly to coo over Teagan, and when I heard a startled noise from Adam I couldn't help but snort. Grams was already making good on her threat and I wondered how many handfuls of his ass she'd help herself to over the course of the afternoon. The woman was a walking sexual harassment lawsuit, cleverly disguised as Betty White.

I stepped through the door just in time for a beer to come whizzing toward my head, and my hand shot out.

"Good reflexes." Steve grunted from where he stood at the grill, totally busted, his hand dripping from the plunge into the

cooler.

“IPA-related TBI at the family picnic...that should make for an interesting write-up,” I huffed, pitching the can right back at him and he ducked with surprising speed and agility for such a big guy. The can slammed into the wooden fence instead, exploding in a shower of foam.

“I don’t know how you two survived childhood,” Kennedy commented, smacking Steve on the back of the head before moving to take Teagan from Adam.

Adam’s eyes were wide. “Good arm,” was all he said, moving toward the cooler and retrieving two cans. He walked one over to me and made a show of presenting me with it while giving Steve a hairy eyeball, making Grams smirk from where she sat on the sofa under the awning.

Over the course of the next half hour, eighteen more people showed up. Most of the guys carried cases of beer and brought hamburgers, while their girlfriends or wives toted potato salad, pie, cookies or fruit salad. Some of them were local rescue personnel, but most of them were Steve’s coworkers from the hospital, where he was an administrator.

With as much as the crowd could put away, the tables were still groaning under the weight of all the food and by late afternoon I was back on duty, ferrying dishes to the refrigerator in the garage. Kennedy was already promising takeout containers to everyone, which was the only way to handle the situation in my opinion. There was no way we could eat all the leftovers on our own.

“You should take Mad with you,” I overheard Kennedy say as I let myself back into the yard through the side gate. “She’s dying a slow death in this house, just helping me with T while she waits for this interview.”

I stilled, wondering what other things she’d let slip if she didn’t know I was standing right there.

“Interview?” Grams called loudly from her corner of the deck, because she didn’t like to be left out. Her hearing was uncanny for someone her age and she had the curiosity of a toddler, especially when it came to business that was not her own.

“Yeah, Grams.” Steve turned and caught sight of me, frozen halfway across the yard, and his eyebrows raised just a little. “Passed her name along to a buddy of mine who has a security company. He was intrigued when I told him my baby sis was a PJ.”

Grams’s lips flattened with disapproval. She still hadn’t caught sight of me. “Man’s job,” she huffed, “traveling the world to jump out of helicopters and parachute into war zones. She’s got balls, I’ll give her that.”

“Big-ass, giant lady balls,” I heard Adam say under his breath, and Steve hid his snort by bringing a beer to his lips.

“Should’ve settled into nursing like you, young man.” She gestured toward Adam and his right eyebrow hitched. It was possible he’d interpreted it as an insult, or she’d meant it as one. She’d just told him he’d made the safer, wiser choice, plainly forgetting his own years of service.

“Should have stayed home and found a nice boy—could have given me more great-grandchildren,” she huffed, working herself into a lather. “Left all the duties to you and Kennedy.”

Adam lifted his head and caught my eye and when he spoke I knew the words weren't for my grandmother.

“Mrs. VanBuren, I'm not trying to be disagreeable, but what Madelyn did is impressive. She's the *only* lady PJ I know of; I hear there are a couple others trying out, but right now she's in the company of about four hundred and fifty guys. The drop-out rate for pararescue is crazy-high and a person has to maintain an almost impossibly high level of physical fitness.” His eyes drifted down my body and back up, slower that time.

“All those muscles.” Grams made a noise. “A man don't want a wife who's stronger than him.”

“Depends on the man,” Steve argued, having caught sight of my face as I stood listening.

Adam cleared his throat and turned away, twisting his hair up behind him and looping a hair tie around the thick bundle. It sounded to me like he muttered something under his breath, but I wasn't close enough to hear it. Whatever it was, Kennedy *was* close enough to hear it, because I saw her eyes widen.

Thankfully, Grams kept the rest of her opinions about my shortcomings to herself after that, but either she didn't know I'd overheard or didn't care, because she acted like she hadn't just been criticizing me when she thought my back was turned.

It was just another late summer barbeque in the VanBuren household, none of which had ever been deemed a success until at least one person was in tears.

I was the one on the verge of tears that night, after Kennedy took Grams home and I'd had a few glasses of whatever poison Steve kept handing to me.

Once things wound down, Teagan in bed, the air warm as the crickets began to chirp and the fairy lights twinkled over the back yard, I sank into the deep sofa to listen to Steve and Adam's conversation. I was still a little hung up on Grams's not-so-subtle insinuation I'd wasted my life and when I looked up I realized Adam's expression was intent. He and Steve had gone quiet and my brother got up slowly, slapping Adam on the shoulder before he walked into the house with a platter in his hand. Kennedy's voice drifted back to me, sweet with an endearment for my brother.

"Don't let her steal your accomplishments." Adam's voice was low and the ferocity caught me by surprise. "People can't understand what it's like to want something different. They'll judge you by their own standards and find you lacking every time."

I sighed heavily. I should have been used to the judgment by now. My mother had stopped asking me, years ago, when I was going to settle down and give her grandchildren. She took every chance she could to remind me of her disappointment, though it was cleverly disguised and delivered in passive-aggressive blows.

Mom had quite a number of zealous apostles at Steve and Kennedy's church too, the church I'd grown up in, the one she and my father attended until they relocated to Florida. Her friends were sure to inform me that I'd neglected God's plan for my life, yet there was time to correct my steps.

I didn't bother to point out I had no plans to become a single mother at forty, sure they hadn't quite thought through the "out of wedlock" part my immaculate conception would most likely require.

I couldn't think of what to say to Adam, so I nodded and we sat in silence for a while. It was weirdly comfortable, the firepit snapping as lightning bugs began to glow in the dark.

Steve was still inside and Adam reached over, handing me a bottle of water. "You do you," he said slowly. "That makes insecure people crazy."

I nodded again. It seemed he was right.

"You've got the training," he led slowly, uncapping his own water and I looked up just as he took a deep chug. I could appreciate the way his Adam's apple moved in a sinuous motion, up and down his big throat. "You ever consider being a medic at a ground-based job? You know, no more jumping out of helicopters?"

I couldn't help but grin at him. "I'm technically on the National Registry of EMTs, and says the man who works a life flight? Really, Beckman?"

“Hey, got no intentions of jumping out of that thing at any point. Heights and me, we don’t get along but when I’m in the bird I’m busy, I’m not looking out the windows.” He shivered a little.

“Maybe I’ll do that someday,” I said, because honestly that was going to require some thought. I’d never before considered it, settling down somewhere and holding down a job that wasn’t on contract. I’d never had a reason to consider it before.

“Doesn’t scare you, the thought of taking a job that might throw you right back into combat?” he asked slowly, and for a second I thought his swoony brown eyes held a note of concern.

“I know what to do because of training,” I said slowly. “My reflexes just take over.”

“Reflexes only take over when there’s gunfire?” He lifted the bottle to his lips again, tipping his head back just a little.

I sat back to consider my answer, firing off a question instead. “Why’d you get out?”

“You know why I got out.”

Medical discharge, I knew that much. Mom had gotten a hold of me at the base, to let me know Adam had been sent home after a mission went wrong. I’d had suspicions he and my brother were a part of the CIA’s Special Activities Division for some time, and when he was shipped home full of bullet

holes from a mission he wouldn't talk about, I couldn't shake the idea.

“Afghanistan?”

He shook his head, plainly not about to tell me.

“And?”

“Took seventeen.” He sucked in a deep breath. “Shredded things bad enough that I was done for. No more running with a pack.”

“Where?”

He scooted forward on the sofa and swiveled his body, lifting his shirt so that I could count seven small scars. I hadn't noticed the eighth on the back of his bicep until just now. Then he stood and hiked up the legs of his gym shorts just far enough that I could see four more. My eyebrows rose as I did the math and he dropped back down on the sofa, a little closer to me this time I thought.

“Can't show you the rest.”

Why ever not?

“That explains the problems with running.”

He barked out a short laugh. “Muscle loss was only part of the problem. Number five went through the left lung. Didn't make it clean through the front—collapsed it.”

Oh.

“Lost part of it; too shredded to save.”

That seemed like a pretty solid reason.

“Oh,” I said quietly, looking down. I had a few scars from combat, only two of them gunshots. “Suppose you get winded pretty easily then.”

Why I blushed when I said that, I’ll never know.

No, wait. That’s a lie. I know exactly why it lit my face on fire.

“There are some times I notice it more than others,” he answered simply, and it did nothing to stop the heat rolling in waves across my face. There were certain images crowding my brain that were beyond inappropriate, and right on time, Steve showed up with a beer in each hand. I took one from him gratefully, though Adam waved him off.

“Turned you into a cheese grater,” my brother said quietly and I knew he’d been listening for some time. The little I knew of that mission, it had been my brother who saved him.

“Wasn’t for you and that little ballpoint trick of yours, I would’ve filled up right there.”

Steve sucked in a deep breath that sounded like he was trying to stem a tide of emotion and he raised the bottle to his lips. I knew the memory was flashing before his eyes as he took a deep, careful swallow. “Yeah, well...don’t give me any reasons to stab you again, Beckman.” His tone was teasing, but I caught it when his eyes darted quickly in my direction.

Adam blew out a laugh. “You’ve been looking for your second chance for years, man.” He stood, slapping my brother’s shoulder. “Not gonna give it to you tonight, since

I'm not feeling like an adventure in the ER, but thanks for having me. Food was great and the company was better, as always. Might need to put restraints on that grandmother of yours, though. Got bruises on my ass."

I heard Kennedy call my name from inside the house and reluctantly I excused myself to see what she wanted.

"Grab those tote bags by the front door," she instructed when I drifted into the kitchen. "I packed some leftovers for Adam, so you'll need to drive him home."

"Kenny, I'm not sure that's a great idea." It wasn't because I'd had all *that* much, but being in a confined space with Adam seemed like a really dangerous idea. I couldn't guarantee I'd keep my hands to myself, and I wasn't sure that was something he'd appreciate, especially after Grams had spent the afternoon glued to his ass.

"Follow my finger," she instructed, holding her index finger up in front of my nose and watching my eyes track it. "You're fine. Now drive the man home so he doesn't have to lug all of this, because you *know* he's not going to let you walk him home and then walk back by yourself."

She was right about that, I was pretty sure.

She tossed me the keys to her car and the smirk she'd been trying to hide for the last two minutes finally made an appearance.

"I hate you," I muttered under my breath, and she leaned over to pinch my cheek just as Adam walked through the door.

“I am the bestest sister in the world,” she sang cheerfully and I shook my head. She was the only sister I had in the world, and she knew it.

Adam leaned in to hug Kennedy and she shoved an enormous, wrapped platter into his hands. “Take this with you. Madelyn can get the rest by the door.” She wiggled her fingers at me in an exaggerated wave. “She’ll drive you home.”

I didn’t see the look on Adam’s face, because his back was to me, but I felt it: I felt him tense, the same way I had when Kennedy floated the idea.

“Thanks for having me,” he said slowly, and as he turned to me I thought his smile seemed stretched awfully tight. Forced. He was at least as uncomfortable with the idea as I was, if his body language was any indication.

“Come on, you wuss,” I teased as I loaded the tote bags up on my arm and I caught him staring at my bicep. “Don’t worry, I’ll do all the heavy lifting for you, cupcake.” I flexed the other arm teasingly, letting him get a good look.

“Oh, please.” He snorted as he held open the door to let me pass. “You could ride my shoulders and I wouldn’t break a sweat.”

I didn’t hear his footsteps behind me and I turned to see him standing on the porch, his jaw working frantically but no words coming out as his brain tried to wind that blunder back in.

I had never in my life seen Adam Beckman blush, but he sure as hell was doing it now and it was just about the most adorable thing I'd ever seen. The man couldn't even handle his own accidental innuendo.

I decided to be kind and let him off the hook, so I dumped the bags into the back and crawled in to start the car.

The trip took all of two minutes, and only because I was doing well under the speed limit on the sleepy city streets. He directed me toward the corner unit of a building and I parked in one of the open spaces, killed the engine and hopped out to pull the bags out of the car.

"It's ok, Madelyn," he said quietly, rounding the car to take the bags from my arms and I startled at his use of my full name. "You go home and get some rest; I can manage." He eyed his front door like he wanted to run and hide behind it, easily balancing the platter on one broad palm.

Maybe he doesn't want you in his house.

"Thanks for the ride." The tight smile was back, if it had ever left. "I suppose I'll run into you again at Vito's one of these afternoons, if you're half the coffee fiend I am." He looked positively uncomfortable.

"Thanks for running interference with Grams." I tried to smile. "Catch you around, I guess."

I backed out of the spot and pointed the car toward home, my eyes drifting to the rearview mirror as I slowly pulled back

out onto the street and my stomach fluttered when I realized he stood there watching as I drove away.

The house was mysteriously dark when I pulled into the driveway, though I'd been gone for all of five minutes, and I rolled my eyes. Kennedy was nobody's fool. She'd probably wanted to get me out of the house on her charitable mission, *Poor Madelyn hasn't had a man in a very long time*, and she could simultaneously take advantage of the fact Teagan's teeth had finally broken through and she was starting to sleep through the night.

Clever, that one. I was going to have to keep a closer eye on her, trying to pawn me off on Adam—and I was definitely going to need my earplugs tonight.

Sleep was an elusive bitch, though I went to bed tired. There was something churning in my gut that I didn't like, and I suspected it would be nothing but trouble.

Adam

Lucy wasn't impressed by the way I twisted in the sheets that night. Usually I fell asleep flat on my back, the cat on my chest and I'd wake in the morning, having rolled onto my side, the cat sleeping beside me. She was always touching me in some small way. Lucy had to have that human connection.

That night I couldn't fall asleep and she got upset with my wiggling, finally settling on the other side of the bed and folding up into a little loaf, paws neatly tucked beneath her body while she waited me out. She was out of luck though, because I tossed and turned, stuck on the look on Madelyn's face, the one I'd seen that afternoon. It kept me awake for hours.

Mrs. VanBuren had always been an outspoken old lady, but I'd seen the hurt in Madelyn's expression when she realized her grandmother was belittling her life choices in front of people who meant the world to her. It had upset me for Madelyn's sake, and since I'd never known anything but pride

from my dad and my stepmom, I couldn't begin to imagine how much it bothered Madelyn to hear her sacrifices reduced to something as simple as a poor choice.

If I was being honest about it, there was more bothering me than just that, and it wasn't nearly so charitable.

I hadn't seen Madelyn in a dress in years, and she certainly hadn't looked anything like she did now, her limbs taunt with a muscular definition I knew spoke of rigid discipline, her ass something that would taunt me in dreams for months to come.

Bad Adam, knock it off. She's Steve's little sister.

There was nothing little about her. The woman was a solid wall of muscle, not nearly as broad as me but defined in a way that made that little bitch run out of the coffee shop like she'd threatened to snap him in half. Yeah, I'd seen that. I watched the way her face fell when she realized her date had pulled a ding-dong-ditch, and I knew just what had happened without her telling me. Because I knew guys like him, threatened by a woman with confidence and presence, and it was clear that her very spirit stirred and irritated his demons.

It was a blessing I wasn't on-shift the next morning, because I didn't drift off into a miserably fragmented sleep until somewhere past three in the morning. By that point Lucy had given up on me completely. She'd moved to the pillow opposite mine and settled in for what looked like a peaceful nap while I tossed and huffed.

Though we'd seen one another just the day before, I rolled into Steve's driveway at ten. Both of us had a rarely

overlapping day off and we'd made plans to go out rafting on the Black River, something we both loved but hadn't done together in years.

"Ok if I bring her with us?" were the first words out of Steve's mouth, and Madelyn turned to look at me with an expectant smile.

Fuck, no. If she comes with us I won't be able to concentrate.

"I called to make sure there was a spot for her and it sounds like we've got a light crew today..." Steve's smile was huge over his coffee cup. He knew exactly what he was doing; he'd always been able to read me that easily.

"I shouldn't," she said hesitantly, her eyes begging me to jump in and reassure her it was ok. "I know you two were planning a guys' day out and I'm...you didn't plan on me."

"It's ok." My voice sounded funny and Kennedy grinned at me, handing me a cup of coffee.

"She needs to get out," Kennedy confirmed. "She's gonna climb the walls here just waiting for all her paperwork to clear—girlfriend needs a job so she can get out of her own head." She smiled sweetly at Madelyn, who looked a little embarrassed.

Clearly Kennedy and Steve had a serious jump on cooking this one up, because Madelyn was already dressed appropriately for the day, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. Then again, for all I knew this was how she dressed every day.

It was a problem, because there was even more smooth skin on display today and immediately my eyes went to her legs. It made me swallow hard, because like it or not, Madelyn VanBuren's legs were a work of art, just like the rest of her.

Kennedy was saying something and I waited for the buzzing in my ears to calm before I could tune into something about a late lunch. Whatever it was, I'd ask Steve later.

"Why are we rafting with a group, again?" I asked Steve. The man had kayaks in his garage and we'd gone out in them repeatedly, both experienced with navigating the river.

"Cheaper." He grinned. "Weekday rates with a group."

That wasn't the reason at all and I knew it, because the kayaks were free.

I drank my coffee quickly and gave Teagan a cuddle, because I couldn't resist that kid. She was everything good about Kennedy and Steve combined, and she was freaking adorable.

Then I followed Steve out to the truck parked in the driveway. Madelyn crawled in behind me and I realized I could smell her, something warm and sweet that made me think of cupcakes. It made my mouth fucking water and the most inappropriate things flashed through my brain.

The three of us trailed into the outfitter's office all of ten minutes later, with me following in Madelyn's vanilla cupcake wake. It was damned unsettling, between that and watching her ass barely covered by the shorts that anyone else would

have considered decent. You could have put the woman in a flour sack and it would have been indecent, that much I'd decided just now, and it was complicating matters considerably.

We went through the safety rundown and strapped into our lifejackets, which made all of us look a little silly and I realized, as we got into the van that would take us to the launch site, that it was just the three of us with a guide. I shot Steve a dirty look he decided to ignore as he made small talk with his sister, but he absolutely knew I was onto him.

“Raft fits eight?” I asked the guide casually as we loaded up, and he shrugged.

“Yeah, but...Monday. End of the season. You know how it goes: The tour groups kind of fall off.”

I sure did, and it went something like Steve was up to no good. Or Kennedy. I couldn't be sure. Those two were fucking devious, peas in a damn pod. They'd engineered this somehow.

This particular outfit started at the top of the rapids, not like the other companies in town who skipped the top two and started the trip further downstream, in order to make things a little less challenging...a little less scary for people who thought they were up for excitement but couldn't handle all that much of it when shit got real.

Since there were only four of us, even the guide grabbed a paddle and we were off. Steve told him we were pretty experienced and he shouldn't spare us, so we took some gnarly

angles at wild speeds and I was surprised to find the river still so active, considering how late it was in the season. The rapids were still going at full bore and as we took the second one and took a breather in a smooth stretch, I heard a low exclamation from Madelyn, where she sat behind me.

“Kayaker’s in trouble,” was all she said and before our guide even noticed, she’d ripped off her life vest and launched over the side of the raft.

“Hey!” Billy sputtered as he watched her cut through the water with sure, powerful strokes. “What are you doing?”

“She’s pararescue,” Steve said casually, shrugging like it was no big deal, like the guide had the first clue what that meant. He was too busy freaking out about her drowning and how he was going to lose his job.

I’d never seen Madelyn in action and I watched in fascination as she came up on the kayaker struggling to right herself. It was clear the woman didn’t have a clue as to what to do and Madelyn must have released the bib, because the struggle ceased for a moment as the woman went under. Then she was back up, splashing and flailing, and even at our distance I knew Madelyn was warning her to be still and calm so she could tow her in. It didn’t look like she was getting a whole lot of cooperation, though.

There was a sudden, sharp slap that echoed across the water and a stunned silence. It gave Madelyn enough time to position herself and we watched, Billy’s jaw practically unhinged, as she calmly towed the woman to shore.

“Might want to radio that in,” Steve said to Billy with a bemused grin on his face. “That’s probably one of your kayaks.”

Billy muttered something in irritation and pulled a waterproof walkie talkie out of a cargo pocket to relay instructions to someone who was presumably on shore.

By the time we reached the bottom of the run and dragged out the raft, the van was waiting for us and we rode quietly back to the office.

Madelyn was already sitting on the steps, drying in the sun, a paper in one hand and a beer in the other. There was some blood on the side of her face.

“They made me sign a fucking waiver,” she sputtered, shaking the paper. “I save the woman from herself and this company’s afraid I’m going to sue them.”

Billy had the good sense to look contrite.

“You give her a concussion?” Steve teased, and Madelyn shot him a side eye like I’d never seen.

“I didn’t slap her *that* hard, just hard enough to get her to stop fighting me. She was going to drown both of us because she was panicking.”

I noticed then that she had a nasty gash above her eyebrow and my feet dragged me over to her without consulting my brain. I knelt quickly, my fingers on her cheek. “She clocked you good.”

“Nailed me with her damn paddle.” She lifted her hand to press her fingers to the cut and I waited for her to wince, but she didn’t. “Whatever. I can stitch myself up at home.”

“The hell you will,” came tripping out of my mouth before I could stop it. “I’m doing it.”

Steve stood there shaking his head at us and I pushed to my feet, holding out a hand to Madelyn, who pointedly ignored it. “Whatever, Beckman,” she muttered. “Treat me like a helpless little girl, just like everyone else.”

“Bullshit,” I said, surprised by the fierceness in my own voice as I whirled and got right down in her face. “You’re a tough chick, VanBuren, but you don’t have to do everything by yourself.”

Would it have killed her to give us a heads-up that she was going in after the woman? She didn’t ask for help, which was an awful lot like the stubborn little kid I remembered. No wonder she made it through Superman school and landed a rare spot with the PJ’s: the woman refused to quit.

Her training took over and she threw herself into the water without a second thought. At that point nothing else mattered to her, because she was on the job and there was no thought for anything or anyone but the task at hand.

Her lips went tight and she gave me a look when I opened the door and waited until she was in the truck before closing it.

“Take us to my place,” I told Steve. “I can stitch her up and get her home later.”

He didn't say a thing, just nodded and put the truck into drive.

"I'll get her back," I promised him again for the second time in ten minutes as he parked next to my truck.

"Take your time," he said easily. "I doubt Kenny was expecting us for another hour, at least. By the time you show up there will be food."

That was Steve, always on about the food. The man could burn calories just thinking about them.

Lucy met us at the door and Madelyn folded in half to scoop up the little fluff ball with an exclamation of surprise and delight. I think I told her the cat's name and it did something funny inside my chest when she cuddled Lucy close and the little cat began to rattle with a loud purr. Lucy didn't accept anyone readily, yet she'd met us at the door and allowed Madelyn to pick her right up. That was saying something in a big way, that my girl had accepted her so easily.

"Follow me," I said, kicking off my shoes in the small entryway and leading her toward the kitchen. She toed her shoes off behind me and followed on bare feet, and I hoped to God I hadn't left the kitchen a mess that morning.

a guardian angel "Pick a spot." I pointed toward the table with two chairs while I dug around in a cabinet for my kit. I pulled out a bottle of whiskey and handed it across the space. "Some for the wound...some for the gut. I have lidocaine cream, but I won't lie and tell you this isn't going to hurt."

There was a sharp sound behind me and I realized it was a snort.

“Seriously, Beckman?” I was pretty sure Madelyn was laughing at me. “I set a bone and practically sewed my own leg back on with fucking fishing line. I think I can handle this.”

Where have you been all my life?

The thought took me by surprise, because I knew exactly where she’d been my whole life: growing up. And then as far out of my reach as she could possibly be, traveling the world with the Air Force. Dropped wherever she was needed, and every time she did her job without fear, without complaint, saving people who needed a little extra help to save themselves. She was a PJ. A guardian angel to those who needed her most.

I cleaned the cut and threaded the needle, and when I took out the lidocaine cream she gave me a look that said *Really?* so I put it back in the kit.

“Might want a bit of that.” I pointed to the bottle and she grinned at me.

“Don’t need it,” she said, but she uncapped it with one hand because Lucy was getting all the pets with the other one.

“Would’ve been nice to have a little nip of something when I was sewing up my guts though, so I’ll take one in memory of that.”

I wanted to hear about that, but I didn't. The thought of her being alone, in pain, totally on her own...something about that scared me and I wasn't sure I fully understood why, because it was obvious she was more than capable.

"Where?" I couldn't stop it.

I meant, where was she when it happened, but she lifted the edge of her shirt, pulling it up almost to her bra line, and the needle shook in my damn fingers when I saw the jagged pink five-inch scar across her abdomen. That looked fairly recent.

"Now you can see why I wasn't a plastic surgeon." She smiled, and I remembered I was stitching her up. I tried to keep the stitches neat and tight, hoping to minimize the scarring on her beautiful face. She sat stoically through it, not a single wince or flinch as I sewed.

"Doesn't matter anyway. It got the job done at the time, though I'd rather not do that again."

"Knife fight in Nigeria?" I asked, eyeing it up and trying to imagine how she hadn't died.

"Rocks off the coast of Crete." Her voice was matter-of-fact. "Mission went sideways. There was a water rescue and a lot of churn. That dive suit was done for, as you can imagine."

I swallowed hard, carefully snipping the thread. I couldn't meet her eyes, afraid of what she'd see in mine.

"You're completely insane," was all I could say, the words too soft for my liking. I wanted to brush the hair back off her face, tuck the strand that had escaped her ponytail behind her

ear, but I was afraid of what that would lead to. I wouldn't be able to stop there. I'd lean down after that and do the very thing she said she'd wanted to do all those years ago...

“What's the prognosis, doc?” Her voice shook me from my reverie and I was pretty sure I had been staring at her mouth. “You think I'll make it?”

Her lips curved up slowly, teasingly, and Lucy blinked up at me as if to say *You're such a fucking hopeless idiot*. Which I was, clearly, because I couldn't shake the idea of leaning down and kissing her.

Just one little kiss...it couldn't hurt anything.

“Adam?” She was looking at me funny.

“Yes, sorry.” I cleared my throat, straightening up quickly and grabbing the bottle to take a chug for myself.

“Thanks for the impromptu surgery.” She grinned at me as I closed up the kit. “Lucy has an excellent bedside manner. Quite the practice you two are running here.”

“Yeah, well...” I moved away from her quickly, tucking the kit back into the cabinet. “You'll get my bill.”

“Pffft, whatever.” I felt the air shift behind me and turned to see her standing, the cat still in her arms. “I'll pay you with dinner.” She grinned. “You can't say that's not a fair trade, because I've seen how you eat. My ER copay would've been cheaper.”

It certainly wasn't a fair trade. There was no way in hell I'd turn her down...and I'd spend that time looking at her and

thinking things I shouldn't.

“Doubt we'll need any dinner at all after lunch at Kennedy's,” I said. It was out of my mouth before I could stop it, almost an excuse, like I was telling her I didn't want to have dinner with her.

She kissed the top of Lucy's head before setting her gently on the floor and I realized there were goosebumps standing on her arms.

“Oh no, I'm not talking about tonight. We'll be in a food coma after Kenny's lunch. No, I meant maybe next week. I have my interview this week and I have to drive to Ithaca to meet with Katsaros.”

She looked so hopeful, I almost forgot to ask her if the AC was too low, and I watched her unconsciously scrub at her own arms.

“I'm an idiot.” It hit me all of a sudden. “You're freezing, Madelyn. Let me get you something dry.”

“Pffft.” She blew out an irritated breath. “I've been through so much worse; I've gone soft in the last month.”

“Don't be ridiculous.” I held out a hand. “The Black River is fucking freezing. Bathroom's down the hall. Drop your clothes outside the door and I'll toss them in the dryer while you get a hot shower. Take your time and I'll make coffee to warm you up from the inside. Then we can head over to Steve and Kenny's.”

She looked like she was going to fight me, but I gave her the sternest look I could manage and pointed in the direction of the hallway that ran past the kitchen.

I gave her a few minutes to get situated and when I heard the bathroom door softly close again, the shower already on, I hurried to scoop up the laundry. My face flamed when I realized she'd left *everything* for me, and I wondered if the delicate pink bra and underwear were supposed to go through the dryer. They looked a little too fragile to survive the baking heat.

By the time she emerged from the shower, wrapped up in my bathrobe, I had her underwear drying over a box fan in the living room and her shorts and tank top were tumbling in the dryer.

“Interesting method,” she teased, appearing in the kitchen with the way-too-lacy bra in her hand. I couldn't help but picture her in it, which made me uncomfortable in all the bad ways.

“Didn't wanna wreck it in the...” I couldn't even finish the sentence and resorted to some caveman hand gestures instead. I had no idea how to launder ladies' delicate things, and just handling them made me feel like I was doing something dirty.

Then the secondary thought hit me, that she was completely naked under my bathrobe. She was swimming in it, her hair wrapped up in a towel, her feet bare and for the first time a very unwelcome thought rushed through my brain: *What would it be like to have a woman in my life again?*

“You ok, Beckman?” She plopped the set on my kitchen chair and stood there, only steps away, looking at me like I’d grown another head.

“Yeah.” I swallowed hard, wondering if it would be weird to take another hit from the bottle still sitting on the table.

“Probably low blood sugar.”

“Huh.” She unwound the towel and let all that glorious wet hair fall down her back. “I’d have guessed something like you had a case of the 36B’s.” Her grin was wicked and predictably, my eyes fell to her chest. I hadn’t actually read the tag on the bra, but that sounded about right. She wasn’t a big girl, not more than a handful—that made my cheeks flame again—everything about the woman was just right.

“Zip it, VanBuren.” I was surprised by how annoyed my voice sounded. I’d teased her mercilessly when she was a kid and here we were, decades later, and I was the one who couldn’t take a joke.

She held up her hands, a small smile on her face, and I remembered the first time I’d realized Madelyn VanBuren was a *girl*. She’d left a bikini hanging to dry in the downstairs bathroom. I’d been twenty-one years old, completely aware of what it meant to be a woman—or thought I knew—and then I walked into that bathroom to find the tiny black triangles hanging over the towel rack and I damn near lost my shit then and there. I’d made some stupid excuse to Steve and left, though we were supposed to be studying for a big exam. I

couldn't very well tell him that his sixteen-year-old sister had just thrown me for a total loop.

Thinking back, that was when I'd begun to avoid Madelyn like a bitch-ass kid, not the grown man I was. She'd been way too young—jailbait—and for a while every time Steve invited me over I'd come up with an excuse or find a way to meet him somewhere other than his house. He must have noticed, because it went on for the next year, until we graduated college and were off to a sandbox.

Steve had a girlfriend he'd been dating on and off since high school, so that took a little of the pressure off me when it came to best friend duties. A lot of the time he was so wrapped up in his girlfriend that I was just a study partner or a hangout buddy. That probably kept him from giving me a black eye, just because he was so wound up with his girlfriend that he didn't see me drooling over Madelyn.

I didn't do anything real serious with the ladies because, 1) I had no money to take them out, and 2) there was this pesky little brunette who kind of took over my thought processes, and that was a real fucking problem.

I poured coffee for both of us and then, since it was ever so slightly closer to five o' clock than it was to noon—and I had Madelyn VanBuren sitting in my kitchen, in *my* bathrobe—I added some whiskey and a dash of cream.

“I see how it is,” she teased, lifting her glass to clink against mine. I had no idea what she meant by that and promptly

scalded my tongue with the boiling liquid now flavored like paint thinner. Perhaps my pour had been a little too generous.

We drank our coffee in relative silence and when the dryer buzzed somewhere down the hallway, I couldn't help but sigh in relief. If I had to spend much more time looking at her in my bathrobe, I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't do something stupid and blame it on the whiskey.

Madelyn dressed in the bathroom and the two of us walked to Steve and Kennedy's place together. I had to fight myself the whole way, not to reach over and take her hand, and I had no idea what that shit was about. Envisioning Steve's face, if I walked into his kitchen holding his sister's hand, was enough to talk me right out of that stupid fantasy.

Thankfully, Teagan did her best to keep me distracted that afternoon. The kid was the cutest thing I'd ever seen, and for some reason she always lit up when she saw me. Kennedy teased that it was because I was "pretty," always grabbing a handful of my hair as she said it.

Kids weren't in the cards for me, though I liked them just fine. But to have kids you need one of two things: a careless accident, and/or someone who plans on sticking around to raise them with you. Clearly I had none of the second and I'd always played a very careful birth control game—not that it had been particularly necessary the past few years. I'd kind of turned into a hermit after Harlowe hooked up with Aaron and the two of them got married. I didn't go out to pick up girls and when women slipped me their numbers, I made no effort

to call. Lucy was my only girl these days, and that was a pretty sad statement.

Teagan loved Madelyn almost as much as she loved me, occasionally tiring of sitting on my lap and reaching out to Mads with a call for “Mah.” Kennedy thought it was hilarious, but I think if she’d called me Dada, Steve might have had a few things to say about that.

I’d fallen into a bit of a rut since Lincoln Bannock, who’d been handling our Special Activities team at the time, told me it was time to find a new career. Being filled up with bullets meant some muscle loss, and having only half of my left lung meant I was no longer able to handle some of the more strenuous requirements.

I’d been back in Watertown for almost eight years now. Steve called it quits on SAD at the same time I did, telling me that if we couldn’t serve together he was going to return to Watertown and make Kennedy commit. He’d met her years earlier, home on a leave, but she’d been gunshy. The guy had asked her out again and again before she gave him a single date. Then he asked her to marry him five or six times. She kept telling him no, sending him back out into the field with a broken heart.

Watertown was the sort of place where things changed slowly. Most of the people who grew up there stayed and raised their families in the same schools, parks and churches they’d grown up in. Sure, some drifted off to the big city, but

for the most part the people I'd grown up with were still locals.

In a way, since Watertown was so familiar, it was comforting. Other times it was maddening, just small enough that if there was any business to know, everyone knew it. Thankfully enough I was boring, so I rarely found myself being tumbled in the gossip mill, but you know: when other people are bored they'll invent just about anything to entertain themselves.

I wondered if Madelyn had missed it at all, during all the years she'd been away. I certainly hadn't missed parts of it, except for the fact it was quiet and predictable, which was attractive to someone who'd lived in chaos for years.

As the afternoon wore on and it became apparent I was in no hurry to leave, I started to notice Kennedy and Steve exchanging some funny looks. Kennedy looked smug, but Steve looked a little more...murderous, something I hoped was just my imagination.

As the sun began to set, I finally excused myself. I had a shift early the next morning and a cat to feed, and sitting next to Madelyn on the too-tiny loveseat for the last couple hours had done nothing for my sanity. She smelled like my body wash and shampoo and I couldn't have told you why, but it was hot. I could only hope she didn't notice that I was constantly shifting, trying to hide my groin from her view. It was too easy to "slip" and brush up against her, which was doing nothing to help.

Kennedy, for her part, knew exactly what she was doing. She'd insisted we all relocate to the tiny den once Teagan went down for a nap, knowing full well that room was furnished for a cozy family of three: two tiny love seats and a single bean bag. She knew what the seating arrangement was going to be, and she spent the rest of the afternoon looking ridiculously pleased with herself when I had to wedge myself into that tiny loveseat next to Madelyn and spend the rest of the afternoon trying not to let my knee drift toward hers or our arms brush. It was fucking impossible, and Kennedy knew it.

When I announced it was time for me to head out, Madelyn hopped up like I'd burned her. There'd been an uncomfortable awareness stretched taut between the two of us the last several hours, an awareness of the other's proximity that made my skin tingle and more than once I'd looked over to see goosebumps on her arm. I would have guessed it was a tell, except that Madelyn seemed to get cold easily...probably because she had no freaking body fat.

"Good luck with your interview," I offered stiffly as I trailed down the hallway after her.

"Yeah, thanks." She laughed a little and her steps slowed. "I haven't had an actual job interview since I was sixteen, the summer I worked at the little ice cream place in town."

I remembered that ice cream place and I remembered that summer. I'd never eaten so much damn ice cream in my life, that being the summer I realized Madelyn was a *girl*, and I

fought the push-pull of knowing I needed to stay away from her when I was almost completely incapable of doing so.

“You’ll be fine.” The words felt wooden and I eyed the distance to the front door, so close to my escape but so far away. The entryway felt narrow and confined, though we were the only two people in it. “You’ll wow the guy with your experience; he’d be a fool not to snap you up.”

Like you’ve been all these years, Beckman.

Stupid, traitorous brain, chiming in when I wasn’t looking for input.

There was a funny look on her face, almost a smile, but it looked painful and before I could stop myself I reached over and smoothed my thumb across the row of stitches I’d sewn into her forehead hours earlier. “These should make for an interesting interview story.”

She said nothing, just swallowed and nodded, and when I let myself out the front door I swear I heard a deep sigh from behind me.

Madelyn

The rest of the week was quiet. I helped Kennedy with a couple projects, babysat Teagan while she was out on an organizing job, and I walked down to the coffee shop every afternoon in hopes of running into Adam again. It was ridiculous, I knew. I was behaving like a teenager with a crush and every time I caught a glimpse of black hair my heart was in my throat.

Kennedy had eased up a little on the teasing, but Steve picked up right where she left off. There were no secrets between him and his wife, meaning he now knew about my lifelong obsession with his best friend.

Scott Katsaros called me on Thursday to tell me my paperwork checked out and confirmed our meeting in person the next morning.

Early the next morning, I borrowed Kennedy's car and made the drive to Ithaca. Katsaros and his wife lived on a farm outside of the city and a fluffy dog met me at the bottom of the

long driveway, barking as he chased the car up toward the house.

The fluff ball pranced and yapped joyfully as I got out of the car, staying just beyond my reach.

“Achilles.”

The voice was stern and sandpapery and I looked up to see a man standing on the front porch with a cup of coffee in hand. It made the dog plop down immediately on his butt and the barking ceased.

“Gorgeous dog,” I called up to him as I scratched one of the Australian Shepherd’s ears. There was no doubt in my mind the dog was smiling at me.

“Pain in the ass sometimes.” There was a small smile on the man’s handsome face. “My wife loves him, so I have no choice but to keep him around.”

“Bullshit.” A voice drifted through the screen door and a pretty, petite woman swung it open and stepped out onto the porch. “You’d cry yourself to sleep if anything happened to that dog.” She grinned up at the man, who tucked her immediately under his arm as she gestured toward the door. “I see we’re heating the outdoors again?”

He grunted at her. “Just saw Madelyn coming up the driveway and thought I’d call off the cavalry.” He leaned down and kissed the top of her head and I kept the wistful sigh to myself, but just barely. *Couple goals.*

“Welcome, Ms. VanBuren.” His eyes crinkled when he smiled and I was struck again by how handsome he was. “I trust your trip was smooth and uneventful.”

“Thank you.” I finally found my voice. “Yes, nothing unusual to report, thankfully.”

I climbed the steps and the woman smiled up at me, holding out her hand. “I’m Mia. Come on in and let me feed you something while this man extracts your life story.” She nudged Scott in the ribs. “I’ve been baking all morning, so I hope you’re hungry, because I’m prepared to feed an army.”

There *was* an incredible smell drifting through the screen door and Scott gestured I should follow his wife. Achilles darted up the steps when she opened the door, streaking past her and she called a warning to him as I followed her through the entryway, toward the back of the house, and into what opened up into a large, beautiful kitchen.

“Don’t even tell me you don’t eat bread,” Mia warned me as she filled a coffee cup and pushed it across the countertop. Then she opened the oven and my stomach roared. I hadn’t eaten a piece of bread in five years, but that was the last thing I was going to tell this woman.

Scott and I settled at the kitchen table, Achilles at his feet, and as we chatted Mia brought plate after plate: pastries, cinnamon rolls, homemade bread, cookies...I couldn’t begin to understand how she was so tiny.

Each time she brought something to the table she found some way to touch Scott and finally I had to say something:

“You two are ridiculously adorable.”

Scott smiled slowly and caught the hand Mia had been trailing across his shoulders, pulling her quickly back to him. Watching the way he clearly adored her, it was hard to imagine the man was a trained, ruthless killer when the situation called for it.

“You remind me of my brother and sister-in-law. I always say that Kennedy is Steve’s security blanket.”

That made Mia nod thoughtfully and she let Scott pull her onto his lap. “He *is* my security blanket,” she admitted with a small smile. “I went through some terrible things at the hands of an ex-husband...” Scott’s face looked absolutely murderous. “But this man loved me through the panic attacks and self-doubt. For the first time in my life, I don’t doubt someone’s love for me. I’m safe with him. Secure. He holds me together.”

Scott’s expression softened and he wrapped his arms around her. His rough voice was affected when he finally found his words. “And you were our miracle worker, *polytíma*.”

She burrowed closer and he raised his eyes to me. “She has been the mother my kids needed their whole lives. She helped us put everything back together when we discovered my daughter was being mistreated, and she saw to it that both of them had everything they needed: therapy, love, home cooked meals and help with their homework...” The big man’s voice trailed off and I thought his eyes looked a little glassy. “She is my miracle.”

“Ugh.” I couldn’t keep the grunt inside. It forced its way past my lips and I hurried to explain. “I’ve stopped looking for that kind of happily ever after. I’m not sure it exists, so don’t give me false hope.” I tried to smile. I didn’t really want to get into my whole college experience with either of them. Admitting that kind of trauma to a person’s potential employer can be off-putting and the last thing I wanted to do was to shoot holes in my only parachute.

“Good.” Mia patted Scott’s cheek before removing herself from a lap. “That’s when it will find you: when you’ve stopped looking.”

“I married a closet romantic,” Scott said, and I heard a snort from Mia.

“Says the man who wrote me wedding vows—in Greek, no less—and recited them to me in bed well before I asked him to marry me. I had no idea what he was saying, but I recall being quite agreeable.”

Scott didn’t blush. He grinned and turned his head toward his wife, which was when I noticed the thin white scars on his neck and immediately I understood why his voice was so raspy: shrapnel.

A heated look passed between them and I squirmed a little uncomfortably. Maybe it was time to dismiss myself, because I wasn’t entirely certain he wasn’t going to jump up and toss her on the kitchen island.

“So, Madelyn...when can you start?”

Scott was still looking at his wife when he asked the question and my eyes went wide for a second.

“I’d like to introduce you to the team and get you settled and into routine as quickly as possible. We have a couple contracts coming up I think you might find particularly interesting, and your skills set will come in real handy.”

“Just like that?” I squeaked.

He held out one big hand and for the second time that day, I received a handshake that just about rattled my bones.

“Anything else you need to know?” he asked. “You check out; I’ve verified your security clearance and I know you’re unattached, so this should be an easy enough transition. We don’t keep your standard office, as you may have noticed.” He held out an arm and my eyes followed, taking in the glass-walled office just off the kitchen. “If we need to have in-person meetings, we usually do it here because this one cooks and all those men do is eat.” He hitched a thumb over his shoulder toward his wife. “The rest of the time we keep in touch thanks to internet-based communications: phone, teleconferencing...you know.”

Had I even asked the size of the team?

“As long as you can get to Ithaca once a quarter for one of our powwows, you don’t even need to relocate. A couple of the guys on the team live out on the West Coast. Boomer lives in Maine; Smit lives in Texas. Seems to me that you, Atholton and McEvoy have the easiest commutes. You’ll be seeing a lot of those two.”

I recognized the name Atholton for some reason, something fuzzy that I suspected was in some way linked to Adam. But... I didn't have to relocate? I was stuck on that part.

“The compensation package was emailed to you this morning. By my estimation, it was right around the time you were hitting I-81.”

What was I supposed to say? I stood there gaping at him, my jaw flapping uselessly. “How did you know you'd hire me?”

He chuckled, a warm, gravelly sound that was thoroughly delightful. I suspected it was something that didn't happen often.

“You had the job two weeks ago, when I had a conversation with Lieutenant Colonel McGill. I have never known that man to be complimentary of anyone, but he had some high praise for you.”

I waited, my eyes still big. He'd gotten in touch with my commanding officers before he even invited me to interview?

“Said you were capable, competent, and quick. I understand you were severely injured during a dive some months back. He mentioned you saved three men that day, and you gave them very necessary medical attention before sewing yourself up.”

I still had nightmares about that dive and how far to shit everything had gone. It was a miracle those three men were alive, and just as much a miracle that I was.

“You’ll meet McEvoy and Atholton in three weeks. You decide you want this job, I’m sending the three of you to the border. FBI’s been homing in on a sex trafficking ring with this migrant crisis we’ve got going on...they could use some help.”

I held out a hand to him and he gripped it tightly, rattling me again. “Suppose I’ll be hearing from you then?” For the first time he looked a little uncertain and I swallowed hard.

“Yes.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Take your time to look over the offer. I think you’ll find it’s generous.”

“No, I mean...yes.”

“Yes?” His forehead corrugated briefly. “You mean yes, you’ll take the job?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t even reviewed the offer, Madelyn.”

“I’ve done a little research of my own,” I said. “I know you’re fair, you’re a good boss, and you don’t ask your people to do anything you wouldn’t do. Besides, if I don’t start working soon I might genuinely lose my shit. I need to keep busy and I need to feel like I’m doing something useful.”

He nodded. “I understand and respect that.” He blew out a breath and held out his hand to me. “Ok, then. You just let me know if any of the terms are unacceptable and we’ll negotiate. But I’ll put you in the calendar and on payroll; you’ll get a

teleconference invite in the morning, in order to meet the team.”

Mia wouldn't hear of letting me leave empty-handed, and she handed me a paper grocery bag filled with baked goods. “Sandwiches in there too, for your trip,” she said, squeezing my arm gently and I shook my head at her.

“I see why you locked her down,” I said to Scott, and his smile was blinding.

“Yeah...she moved in and went full-on Italian mama.” He was doing something obscene to her with his eyes. “I was completely gone over her even *before* I knew she could cook and bake.”

Mia waved a dismissive hand at me. “Don't believe a word he says. He'll fill your head with that fairytale nonsense, but I couldn't even get him to sleep with me. And believe me, I tried just about everything.” Her smile was sweet and indulgent, but a brief shadow passed quickly across both their faces. A memory perhaps, of something or some things bad.

Achilles followed me down the steps and to the car, his graceful, plumed tail swishing with happiness, his eyes bright with excitement and I patted him before pulling a tight circle in the driveway and driving back down the long drive. Achilles chased me the whole way, stopping before he got as far as the mailbox, tail wagging as he watched me drive away.

I'm not going to lie and tell you I made it all the way home. I pulled over before I hit the highway and pulled up my email on my phone. I read Scott's generous offer with wide eyes and

breathed a sigh of relief I hadn't realized had been trapped in my lungs. There was a very comfortable base salary, with performance incentives, healthcare, and a surprising amount of time off. From what I knew of security firms, that was rare. Work-life balance was usually the first thing to go.

Back on the highway at last, I allowed myself to smile. I was gainfully employed now, and the first thing I was going to do was look for my own place. Steve and Kennedy would probably let me live with them until the end of time—might even be insulted when I hinted I wanted to move out—but I couldn't take much more of the acoustics in that house. Even earplugs didn't save me from the uncomfortable knowledge that the two of them still had the sex drives of teenagers. They were probably making up for lost time, since Kennedy had put Steve off for so long, but I didn't see why I should have to suffer for that.

By the time I pulled into the driveway, I'd shamelessly eaten both of the fat sandwiches Mia had packed for me. I'd also been unable to stop eating the wafer-thin chocolate chip cookies she'd packed, something I'd punish myself for in the garage gym later that evening.

Kennedy was all too happy to share in the baked goods. She had a cookie in her mouth even before I got the bag to the kitchen and she swooned when she saw the full loaf of bread at the bottom of the bag. She whipped out her phone, fingers flying.

“Who you texting, Kenny?” I asked as I pulled the wrapped packages from the bag to deposit in the fridge.

“Just had an idea for dinner,” she said casually, but nothing Kennedy did was casual. “Would you grab the turkey and brown it for me? We’re having some chili tonight, to go with that delicious bread.”

Everything Kennedy did, she did well, including cooking, though it was a miracle I managed to brown the turkey without burning down the house. In the meantime, she assembled everything else and by the time I heard Teagan fussing in her crib, Kennedy had the soup cooking on the stove.

Imagine my non-surprise when I heard a knock at the door two hours later, and suddenly I knew who Kennedy had been texting.

“I’ve been summoned to help with a dire baked goods situation.”

I felt Adam’s voice all the way down to my toes: warm, a little teasing.

I was going to murder Kennedy in her sleep.

Teagan had gotten up on the wrong side of the crib after her nap, but she settled right down once Adam picked her up, cuddling her close, and I wondered if it was wrong to be jealous of an infant.

Steve didn’t seem at all surprised to find Adam in his house, holding his daughter, when he got home half an hour later. Kennedy must have called him to relay her nefarious plans,

because most nights Steve wasn't home until after seven. He took his job seriously and enjoyed the challenge of climbing the corporate ladder, much the same way I thought he'd have rank-hopped if he'd decided to stay in the service.

T didn't seem eager to leave Adam's lap and he held her while he ate, carefully, feeding her tiny bites of the soft part of the bread.

Ovaries...dead.

"So, Mad." Steve looked smug. "Kenny tells me you got a great offer."

Adam's eyebrows rose just a little.

"More than I'd have asked and more than I expected," I said, smiling at my brother. I'd been staying with him and Kennedy despite a substantial savings account, because I'd wanted to lock down a solid job before I started looking for a house. Looking for a house was big and scary and real, a tenet of adulthood I'd never undertaken.

"Katsaros said I don't have to relocate—sounds like his team is scattered all over the country, and a couple of the other guys on the team live in New York."

Something in Adam's face went tight and he quickly dropped his eyes, suddenly interested in what Teagan was doing.

"So what are your plans, Mad?" It was Steve again, asking me the question but watching Adam with interest.

“House hunting.” I grinned. For the first time in my life, I could actually put down roots.

“Here?” Kennedy asked, her eyes also drifting to Adam, and I looked over too, trying to figure out why they were suddenly so interested in him.

“Of course here,” I said. “Maybe find something little and cute, with some really poor acoustics.”

Steve looked confused and for the first time Adam smirked. “Yeah, earplugs don’t cut it in this house. I’ve spent a couple nights on the sofa.”

“I know, I wear them every night,” I said quickly and I watched the penny drop for Kennedy, her jaw dropping open as color crept up her cheeks.

“No...” She shook her head slowly.

“Yeah...” I grinned back at her. “There were a few things I didn’t want to know about you and my brother and *that* was definitely at the top of my list.”

Kennedy mumbled something from where she’d dropped her face into her hands, slowly shaking her head and for the first time in the weeks I’d had to listen to their sex noises, it was pretty damn funny.

When I finally stole a look at Steve he couldn’t meet my eyes, and Adam’s shoulders had begun to shake. Admirably, he seemed to keep the laughter on the inside, though he was shaking hard enough that it wiggled Teagan in his lap.

I wonder what sounds Adam makes.

Well, that was inappropriate. I sat up ramrod straight, my eyes wide. That thought had come out of nowhere and it was enough to start a brush fire in the pit of my belly, something that made me break out in a cold sweat as I looked across the table at the beautiful man holding my niece in his lap.

I want to trade spots with Teagan.

Holy shit, I really couldn't get this runaway train under control, could I?

I pushed my chair back, the legs making an ungodly scraping noise against the floor as I jumped up and bolted across the kitchen to refill my water glass.

Kennedy caught my eye and though she kept the smirk off her face, I could tell she knew *exactly* what I was thinking. It was uncanny, the connection I had to this woman who wasn't really my sister. She'd been able to see right through me since the first day Steve brought her home.

"Brace yourself." Kennedy's voice was low as I helped her rinse and load dishes into the dishwasher while Steve and Adam put Teagan in a little swing on the deck and sat out in the cool evening air. It was never this warm, this late into October and we were all soaking up every last morsel of summer before a brutal lake effect winter bowled us over.

"Brace myself?" I chuckled. "What, Kenny? You gonna tackle me? You looked like you were ready to wind up and throw me across the table into Adam's lap."

“Bitch, please.” Her tone was teasing. “Like you don’t want that.”

I blew out a big breath, because I had no response to that. She was right, after all. The unrequited crush I’d had on a boy all those years ago had come roaring back overnight for the man he was now.

“This is the last thing you’ll want to hear from me, but I’m warning you now...you’re in for it.”

I paused, water splashing off the plate I held in my hand and soaking the front of my shirt.

“Once you hit your forties, it’s like someone lights your ovaries on fire. I’m not going to say it means you’ll want to have kids, but it might turn you into a beast for a while.”

What in the hell was Kennedy trying to say? At least she had the good sense to look really uncomfortable.

“How long has it been, Mad?”

Oh, this was a question I didn’t like at all.

Too long.

“A while.” I leaned over the sink to gather the shirt in my hands, twist and squeeze.

“A while, meaning...months?”

“Longer.”

Kennedy’s expression flattened in disbelief and I heard a deep voice ask, “What’s been longer?”

That was something I would not be explaining to my brother, not for love or money or anything I could name in the universe.

“Underwear shopping,” Kennedy supplied quickly and Steve’s hands shot up in a gesture of surrender. That was the best way to get him off a sensitive topic in a hurry: make him uncomfortable. “She’s long overdue to go underwear shopping. We’re planning a trip—maybe all the way to the city.” Her little fib grew.

“Thanks for dinner, Kenny.” Adam appeared in the doorway with a sleepy little T in his arms, her belly full of bread and milk. Something in my belly somersaulted, watching the way the big man handled the little girl with such gentleness. “Suppose I should head home. Got another long shift tomorrow—it’s good news, though. We brought on a new guy; seems to be a good fit. Might not have to work my tail off anymore, although the overtime pay hasn’t hurt my feelings.”

Adam handed Teagan off to Steve and stood there uncertainly for a moment. Then he pressed his lips together, gave me a tight nod and headed down the hallway. I don’t know why my feet took me after him, damn them, but they did. All the way down the hallway, through the entryway and the front door, to the front porch where he’d paused for whatever reason.

Was it my imagination, or had he been uncomfortable around me ever since the day he’d stitched me up in his kitchen?

“Did I do something?”

Shit, did I say that?

Adam’s whole body tensed. I could see it in the way his jaw tightened.

“Why do you ask that?”

“I’m sorry if I was inappropriate the other day and made things weird. I’m not very good at normal human interactions these days.”

“You’re fine, Madelyn.”

Madelyn, not Mad or Mads. That drew me up short.

“Ok, well...” What was I supposed to say? I was making this uncomfortable again.

He reached across the small space and tucked my hair behind my ear, though he looked like it caused him physical pain to do it. It made a jolt run through me, the first time I felt like he’d touched me intentionally when he didn’t have to.

“But, um...” My mouth was as dry as a cotton field.

“Dinner stands. Let me know when you’re free.” I tapped lightly against my forehead, where he’d done a good job of sewing me up.

“Sunday.” His voice sounded weird and he lurched suddenly, his lips landing on the top of my head like he was kissing his sister. “Night, Madelyn. I’ll pick you up at six.”

Well, that was that. I stood there in a daze, watching him walk away with his hands shoved into his pockets. His posture

suggested he was angry and I wondered, for the second time that night, if it was because of me.

Adam

Lucy was experiencing an attack of zoomies when I got home that night, whirling around the house like a little terror with crazy eyes. I knew better than to get in her way when the devil grabbed her butt, because I wasn't about to be mauled by tiny claws and razor-sharp teeth.

Dad came over unannounced, but I was glad to see him. My intentions to make the short drive to his house for a visit hadn't exactly panned out the last couple weeks and though the last person I wanted to admit it to was myself, it was probably because I was distracted by a certain someone.

"Busy lately," he remarked as he settled himself onto my sofa with a beer. He knew better than to drink in front of my stepmom, who had nothing nice to say about alcohol consumption of any kind. She'd been raised a Quaker and though she'd renounced the faith, my father's Catholicism was still a little too loosey-goosey for her. Yet she attended mass with him faithfully every Sunday morning—go figure.

“Kind of.” It was all he was going to get out of me, I’d already promised myself that much. “Been hanging out with Steve a bit more lately...” *Damn it, too far.*

Dad’s eyebrows raised a fraction and I watched him work hard to bite down on a grin. I was like an audiobook where he was concerned: it was all out there, right in front of him, being read aloud for him whether I liked it or not, because I couldn’t find the damn mute button.

“Wouldn’t have anything to do with the VanBuren girl being back home, would it?” he asked casually, setting his bottle on the coffee table. “I heard Madelyn’s out of the Air Force and looking to settle down in the area. Anything to that rumor?”

Dad had never been much of a gossip, so the chances were good he’d heard that from my stepmother. When it came to vices, that one was hers and she treated it like it was her job, one at which she excelled. Bet she’d be getting a promotion real soon. Head busybody.

“Yeah, home.” I had to clear my throat. “Staying with Steve and Kennedy, but she just landed a job, so she’ll be looking for a house.”

“Here?” Dad’s eyebrows hadn’t settled. He could see it written all over my face.

I hope so.

“Cute kid, wasn’t she?” He took another pull from the bottle and I excused myself to grab another from the fridge, hoping it

would be enough to put him off the subject. It wasn't a question and he already knew the answer.

"Bet she's really something now." His voice drifted in after me. "You had a real thing for her back then..."

Oh, shit.

"Yeah, she's...something." It was all I could get out. I popped the cap off two bottles and walked them back into the living room, handing one to him.

Lucy sauntered into the room, finally calm, purring as she hopped up into Dad's lap. She didn't take to new people, but she'd always loved Dad. He had a gentle heart, something the tiny cat could easily sense, and she rewarded him by stretching up to boop his nose with her own.

"Your devil cat loves me." He chuckled as he hooked a finger under Lucy's chin and scratched, rewarded by an astonishing purr that threatened to rattle the cat's bones.

"What does that say about you?" I asked, flopping down in the big chair across from him.

"Touché."

We fell silent for a moment, the calm before the storm. I braced for impact, knowing he'd hit me with the full battery of questions as soon as he'd finished loading them up. I could see him mentally sorting through them.

"So...almost thirty years later, you finally going to man up and ask her out?"

I choked on the swallow, slamming a fist over my mouth to keep from spraying it all over the room.

“About time the two of you admitted it to yourselves.” He continued like my input wasn’t required at all, like this was a foregone conclusion.

“Fuck, no,” I finally sputtered and he gave me the arched eyebrow that said *Watch your mouth*. “Maybe if I want Steve to rip off my balls and shove them down my throat.”

“Spent most of your life without a woman,” he observed casually, something that was painfully obvious. “Whatever that was you were doing with Jess—that didn’t count.”

It sure hadn’t counted. We’d been married for all of two years in our thirties, an arrangement we agreed upon because it meant a better housing allowance. We’d tried on the whole couple thing, but it hadn’t been a good fit. She’d gotten needy and clingy after we decided to cross the line from roommates to friends with benefits, but apparently she had several friends with whom she shared those benefits.

“She still keeps in touch with your ma sometimes.”

That made *my* eyebrows hitch upward. I hadn’t spoken to Jess since the day our divorce was finalized.

“Sounds like she’s been married a few times since. None of them seemed to take real well.”

That didn’t particularly surprise me, because Jess was beautiful. She had always been a flirt and men had been powerless to resist her, a blessing until it was a curse.

“We didn’t keep in touch.” It came out a little more harshly than I’d intended. It made me sound angry. “We didn’t have enough in common then and there’s nothing now.”

“True...sometimes people come together at the wrong time in their lives.”

That felt like a weird, vague insinuation of something negative.

“Seems to me you’ve managed to keep up with what Madelyn’s been up to with some regularity.”

How the hell do you know that, old man?

He was right. I’d had to pretend pretty hard when I’d run into Madelyn at the coffee shop that I hadn’t known exactly what she’d been up to. My jaw must have dropped open, because it was obvious to both of us that my words weren’t working, and his mouth hooked up on one side. “Before her folks moved, her ma was always asking after you. Your ma was always very free when it came to sharing information about you with Mrs. VanBuren.” He paused for a moment, winding up to take me out with what I knew was the big gun. “Madelyn wrote to us after you were hurt and your ma wrote back. Two of them been keeping up a correspondence going on eight years now, I expect.”

The room was so quiet, I could hear the soft wheeze of Lucy’s breaths as she slept draped over Dad’s thigh.

Madelyn had been writing to my parents for eight years because...why?

Dad let me sit for a while and absorb the full brunt of that nuclear bomb.

Conversation was weird after that. He'd finally figured out I didn't want to talk about Madelyn, so we talked about work and planned for me to visit him the next weekend to help with winterizing the house.

When he gently peeled Lucy off his leg and set her on the sofa to continue her nap, he pushed to his feet and walked his bottle into the kitchen. It clinked into the recycling cabinet in the pantry and I heard him muttering to himself as he walked back down the short hallway.

“Wouldn't sit on that one too long, if I were you.” He snagged his heavy sweatshirt from the back of the chair and zipped himself into it. “If I was just twenty years younger I'd have her locked down in a heartbeat.” His smile was weird. “You've got a chance, kid. Don't waste it.”

The door squeaked as he climbed into his battered old pickup truck, and the engine rattled and clanked when he turned it over, a noise that made me wonder if squirrels had been storing nuts and bolts in the engine compartment. I made a note to myself to add that to my list: *Do an inspection of Dad's truck. Bring WD-40 and a head lamp.*

He backed down the short driveway and as the truck rattled and chugged away, he held one arm out the driver's side window in a lazy wave. He couldn't see that I waved back, but I did.

The next few days dragged, and if I was going to admit anything to myself, it was because I couldn't wait to see Madelyn on Sunday night. The little bit of verbal sparring we'd done...some of the looks she'd been giving me...she wasn't like that with every guy, was she? This felt like something could be there, and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I wanted that. I wanted that connection to a beautiful woman who seemed to find me equally fascinating.

By the time Sunday rolled around I went out to Dad's place to help with winterizing the house and to take a look at his truck. I was there early, checking for cracks field mice could squeeze through, making sure the windows sealed tight, hauling up one wheelbarrow of split logs after another to stack in the lean-to alongside the house in order to make their trips out for fuel a little easier. Then I cleaned out the Russian oven they used to heat the house and performed a detailed inspection of Dad's truck.

After oiling the door hinges, replacing the spark plugs and a couple gaskets and changing the oil, it was as good as it was going to get, and I sent him for a trip around the block to make sure she was functioning well.

Hailey, my stepmom, came out to stand beside me while she watched Dad bump down the dirt driveway in the old pickup.

"I hear you have a dinner date," she teased, leaning into my side and I wrapped an arm over her shoulders. She was tiny and younger than Dad, so I teased him mercilessly that he'd

robbed the cradle. For a long time after they were married people thought she was his daughter.

“Just Madelyn.” The pounding started in my ears almost immediately, because the downplay felt like a lie.

“Just Madelyn.” She scoffed. “You mean the sweet girl you’ve had a thing for for the last twenty-five years? The VanBuren girl being the only Madelyn I know of, of course.”

“Eh...” I had no response I could put into words, and nothing that made me look anything less than completely guilty. “Just dinner with her. I stitched up a gash in her forehead, so she said she’d take me to dinner. Payment instead of copay, I suppose.” I shrugged lamely.

“Well, Casanova...” Hailey’s smile was wide and evil. “It’s about time you pulled your head out of your butt and spent some time with a decent woman.”

The insinuation seemed to be that either I wasn’t spending my time with decent women, or I wasn’t spending my time with women at all, which was the truth.

“Define decent,” came tripping out of my mouth, and I flinched. Hailey would sure as hell take that bait and run out the whole bail before she let me reel the conversation back in.

“An adult,” she said firmly. “Someone who’s seen things just like you and that puts her on even footing. You’re a tough man to live up to, Mr. Beckman.” She squeezed me affectionately. “It’ll take a strong woman to put—and keep—you

in your place. Lucy's up to the task, I'm sure, but she's not enough."

I made a scoffing noise that came out of my nose as a snort. "You act like I need to be whipped into shape, like I'm difficult."

"Difficult?" She shook her head. "Not the word I'd have chosen. Set in your ways, maybe, and stubborn as all get-out, but you've got a big old heart in there." She patted my shoulder as she said it, like she was consoling me. "It's about time you found the right woman to take care of it."

"Don't need a woman to take care of it," I huffed. "I'm fine. Me and Lucy are just fine."

She chewed on her lip for a moment like she was trying not to laugh and I could hear Dad's noisy truck coming back up the street.

"Lucy doesn't cook or clean. She may welcome you home, but a man needs a *home*. He needs love to come home to and a home is created by his woman, the one who warms his bed and his heart."

I wanted to gag. This was a disturbing conversation to be having with my stepmother. The thought of her warming Dad's bed made me feel a little green, even if they had been married for nearly four decades.

"Dad said Jess keeps in touch with you." I wanted to throw her off just a little.

“She knows what she lost,” was all Hailey said, her lips set in a flat line like the subject was upsetting. “Madelyn’s been writing to me almost eight years now.”

Why that made a little thrill flip-flop its way through my stomach, I wasn’t exactly sure. If Madelyn cared enough to keep up with my parents, maybe it meant it was a way for her to keep up with *me*.

Dad pulled back up the driveway, a broad smile on his face. “Running like a champ, son. Should keep her going for some time yet.”

“You’ll want to change the filters this spring,” I called to him as he pulled it up to the garage, and he nodded. We both knew I’d be the one changing the filters in the spring.

Hailey was a great cook and when she dragged us into the house for lunch, I kept myself from filling up on her homemade lasagna and garlic bread, wanting to save some room for dinner with Madelyn.

By four I hugged them both and got into my own truck. Dad tucked Hailey under his arm and she cuddled into him as I backed down the driveway and headed home.

They were good together, Dad and Hailey. He was quiet and easy going. Mellow. She was talkative and sociable, seeing to his every need before he knew he had one. And for that, for her care and thoughtfulness, I loved her, even though she liked to drive me crazy with her meddling. Dad needed her long before they’d met, and it had occurred to me more than once

that her love had been what saved him. She'd clearly been the one to save me.

It wasn't a long drive to my place and I put myself through a nice, long shower to wash off all the dust and grease. It's possible I took care of something else while I was in there too, because the thought of sitting across from a beautiful woman all night long and being unable to touch her was torturous. I had to do something to take the edge off, to guarantee I could keep my hands to myself.

I texted her as I stood in my bedroom, wrapped in a towel. I had no idea what she'd planned for the evening, so I asked her how dressed up I needed to get. She responded with "I'm not fancy. Unless you have a better plan, I figured on Roadhouse."

I very nearly fell to my knees as I sent up a prayer of gratitude. My fingers typed a response and fired it off before my brain had actually engaged and I sucked in a breath when my phone said *whoosh* and I realized I'd responded to her with **Marry me.**

Scariest part? I was only half-kidding. The other half of me had been completely serious about that for the better part of the past twenty-five years. Hopefully she didn't know that though, because I was pretty sure that would make things even weirder.

Lucy was so far up my butt, I almost couldn't get ready. I had to keep an eye on her while I pulled on my jeans, so I didn't step on her. Then she reached up and hung onto my leg with her claws, meowing pitifully while I buttoned the warm

chamois shirt over my undershirt. Once I was done I leaned down and picked her up, settling her into the crook of my arm while I shoved my phone and wallet into my pockets, grabbed a pair of socks and went back to the bathroom to brush my hair.

Typically I wore my hair down or in a low ponytail, when I wanted to keep it off my face. While I was working I kept it in a braid because that kept it out of the way and made things more sanitary. But now...what was this? Dinner with a friend? A date? I knew what I wanted it to be and I wasn't sure Madelyn felt the same way...but it was enough to make me second-guess everything, including what to do with my hair.

By the time I needed to leave my hair was almost dry, so I looped a hair elastic around my wrist—just in case—ran a brush through it and gave Lucy a kiss before I left.

For the first time in my life, I was embarrassed to be driving an old pickup truck as I pulled up outside Steve and Kennedy's house. I'd always been content with simple things: a plain, comfortable home. A beat up, serviceable truck. Clothes that fit and kept me warm. Since I'd grown up with next to nothing, I had learned early on to be happy with very little and for the first time ever, I wondered if Madelyn might look at me in a way that suggested it wasn't enough. She didn't seem like that kind of girl, but I hadn't thought Jess was either—and I'd been all kinds of wrong about that one.

“Beckman.” Steve's voice was stern when he opened the door and looked me up and down. It made me feel like a

stranger, like a teenage boy facing down my date's father.

My date. Was that what I was calling this?

“VanBuren.” My voice felt scratchy and I forced out a smile, alarmed by the nervousness jumping in my belly.

“Need to give you the talk about how to treat my sister like a lady and keep all your parts off hers?” His lips twitched a little, his wide shoulders filling almost the entirety of the vestibule's doorway. He wasn't any bigger than me, but he could be imposing when he wanted.

I held up my hands. “No lectures necessary. Hands to myself.”

“Dick's the part I'm worried about,” he said easily, looking significantly toward my middle.

“How old is she again, Dad?” I asked, scratching my head.

“Delicate little flower,” he barked, and it made me snort. The last thing Madelyn was, was a delicate little flower.

“No such thing,” I chuckled, finally climbing the porch steps and leaning in to clap him on the back. “But you know I'll take good care of her.”

Something went very serious in my friend's expression and he stood there for a moment, plainly wanting to say something.

“Yes?” I finally asked.

“She's never let anyone take care of her,” he said quietly. “She'll fight you for it and that woman is stubborn as fuck.”

But if she lets you...don't you dare screw this up. She doesn't play around, not ever. Not after..." He let the words die and I was immediately curious, because he'd never talked to me before about the event that marked a turning point in her life. All I knew was that the lecture was for a reason.

Well, that was a sobering discussion for what was just supposed to be a casual dinner with his sister.

Who are you kidding, casual? That's not what your nerves are saying.

"Are you terrorizing my date?" Madelyn's voice floated out of the house and when Steve moved aside and gestured me into the entryway my heart stopped beating for five long seconds. Madelyn stood there in an honest-to-God dress and heels, the smoke practically rolling off of her.

"Holy..." I cleared my throat as Steve smirked next to me. "Uh...hi, Madelyn. You look..." The struggle to find my words was real. "You look amazing."

Delicious. I want to take you back to my place and do unspeakable things.

"You don't think it's too much?" She wrinkled her adorable nose, looking down at herself. The sleek black dress fit her like a second skin, everything about it stealing all the blood from my brain to reroute to my groin.

Steve was going to punch my lights out before I even got her out the door.

“Shut up, you look spectacular.” Kennedy smacked Madelyn’s butt and stood there for a moment, admiring what I assumed was her handiwork. The dress’s short sleeves showed off Madelyn’s toned arms, the skirt falling just shy of her knees and highlighting the definition of her calves, something further accentuated by the heels and the fact she was practically standing on tiptoe.

I was going to be the envy of every man we crossed paths with that night, I knew that much.

“I guess I misinterpreted what you meant when you said you didn’t have anything fancy in mind,” I teased, gesturing toward my own clothing.

“This was all Kennedy’s doing.” Madelyn had a sour look on her face. “I was going to wear jeans and a sweater, but apparently I’m not allowed to leave the house looking like I’m homeless—her words, not mine.”

For once I was firmly in Kennedy’s camp and when Madelyn looked down at her shoes I gave Kennedy a surreptitious nod. *You did good.*

Madelyn had been a beautiful teenager, but as a woman she was a knockout. She clearly had no idea how breathtaking she was, uncomfortable with the way she looked in a dress and heels. I wanted to calm her nerves and my feet carried me across the space to pull her into a hug. It was an excuse to slide my hand into that glorious dark hair of hers and I felt a little shiver of awareness run through her body when my lips

touched her ear and I whispered, “You look like a real date, VanBuren.”

I felt the same eagerness run through me, because suddenly I wanted more than anything for it to be a real date. One that involved quiet, intimate conversation and heated glances. There had always been a spark there, a threat or the promise of something more, and I wanted desperately to let it blaze out of control for once. Just once. What a glorious thing that would be.

Madelyn will give as good as she gets.

That thought was sobering enough to make me step back quickly. I could feel Steve’s eyes burning a hole into my back and Kennedy’s grin was wicked. She could see right through me, like an evil sorceress, and I had no doubt she was one hundred percent to blame for all the forced proximity of recent weeks. Not that I was complaining, exactly, but being around Madelyn was like sitting a little too close to a blazing fire: it singed and scorched and made me desperately uncomfortable, even while I wanted to scoot closer, to soak up even more warmth.

“Home by ten-thirty, young lady.” Steve’s voice was firm and my eyes snapped to his in disbelief as he grinned at his sister.

“Fuck off, Twinkles. I’ll get home when I get home and you will not be waiting up or listening or watching the clock.” She exchanged looks with Kennedy and I could guarantee, from

the way Kennedy was looking at her husband, that Steve would most definitely not be waiting up.

Madelyn pulled a knee-length coat over her shoulders and fastened a belt over the front, tugging all that long, dark hair from beneath the collar with a grunt. “Last time I let you talk me into this, Kenny,” she warned and Kennedy tilted her head.

“Mmmhmm, we’ll see.” There was a knowing smile on her face. “Adam doesn’t seem to mind it.”

I sure as hell didn’t mind it, but being called out on it made heat rush immediately to my face and I quickly looked away from Madelyn’s searching gaze.

“Have fun, you two,” Kennedy called as I ushered Madelyn out through the entryway and the vestibule and onto the front porch.

“Where to, then?” I asked her after making sure she was comfortably situated and crawling behind the wheel.

“Still Roadhouse,” she answered quietly, and I wondered if the people at the rough-around-the-edges steak joint were ready for the vision that was about to come floating through the doors of that particular establishment.

“Gonna put me to shame, VanBuren?” I asked, shooting an easy grin over my shoulder. I’d teased her about how much she ate when she was a kid and she’d always doubled down, challenging me to a contest. Sometimes I’d even let her win.

“Probably,” she answered easily, clipping her belt and shifting in her seat. It was something I had always liked about

her, how easily she teased, because it was gentle. Madelyn didn't tease to be mean, at least I'd never felt like that was the case. She teased with affection, something sweet and silly and endearing. That was something the rest of her family hadn't seemed to figure out, because her grams and her mom were downright mean-spirited. Steve could take it too far, as well.

Like everything else in town, it wasn't all that long a drive to the restaurant and I glanced over at her somewhat uneasily. Walking her into a restaurant predictably filled with men was not going to go well. Dressed in a sweater and jeans, it wouldn't have gone well, but she looked like she'd just stepped off a runway. Guys were going to lose their minds.

Now don't get me wrong, I was a confident enough guy. But the thought of men ogling Madelyn—*my Madelyn*—was enough to make me itchy and uncomfortable and turn the edges of my vision red.

As I'd predicted, heads swiveled Exorcist-style when we walked in. A few knives clattered onto plates and I counted eight slack jaws with a quick perimeter sweep, and it sure as fuck wasn't because I was pretty.

The hostess offered us a tight smile and snatched two laminated menus, gesturing we should follow her and I leaned in, my fingers under Madelyn's elbow. "Turned every head in the damn room." My voice scraped over the words, an irritation starting to burn in my gut. *Mine. Back the fuck off because she's mine, mine, mine. She's always been.*

She wriggled out of her coat and hung it on the hook of the coat tree between our booth and the next, self-consciously smoothing her hands down the sides of the dress. I watched other eyes watching her and had an insane urge to find a way to mark my territory, so I leaned slightly toward her and pretended to wipe a smudge of gloss from beneath her lower lip.

Instant, searing heat. I felt her breath catch when I touched her and it stopped me in my tracks, staring at her with her chin in my hand. I couldn't let go. It was like I'd been paralyzed where I stood, watching something heated and real happening in her deep brown eyes.

“Can I get you's something to drink?” The voice was at my elbow and I wanted to punch the person who thought it a good idea to interrupt the moment. It was enough to shake Madelyn from the reverie and she looked over quickly, offering the woman a tense smile. “A lager, please, if you have one on tap.”

“Same.” I didn't trust my voice when I said it, and without looking at the waitress I slid into the booth across from Madelyn. I was tempted to slide in next to her and scoot up close, maybe slip my arm around her to see what she'd do. The look she'd just given me made me think she might lean in. Might put her hand on my leg and tuck her face into my neck, and that was a beautiful fantasy. One I'd entertained in fits and starts for far too long and I was sure there was no therapist who would tell me that was healthy.

When the waitress returned with our drinks she pulled a pen out of her hair and asked if we were ready to order. Since I'd nibbled like a bird at the food Hailey had tried to feed me earlier in the day, I was pretty hungry. I ordered a steak and potatoes and, to clean things up a little, a salad.

"Same," Madelyn said sweetly and I couldn't help but grin at her. *Game on, sweetheart.* She grinned back because, yeah, that was exactly what she was doing.

She matched me bite for bite, a small smile on her face when she realized how closely I was watching her. She knew I was here for this game, one we'd played since she was a kid.

Conversation was easy with her and we danced around the heavier topics like we were saving them for later. Conversations that had no business taking place during a date, and I was going to maintain that was what was happening, even if she disagreed and told me it was just dinner.

"Wanna see a dessert menu?" The waitress was back and I was pretty sure Madelyn gave her a hairy eyeball.

"Think I'm good," I said, leaning back just a fraction and I thought I saw Madelyn breathe a sigh of relief.

"Thank God." She laughed. "I'm so damn full."

She leaned back too, running a hand over her front and I couldn't help but grin at her. "Kept up with me, though."

"Damn straight, and always have. I have a reputation to maintain."

A searing-hot vision of her matching me in the bedroom almost folded me in half and she noticed, because immediately she was looking at me funny. “You ok, Beckman? Steak hit you all wrong?” A small grin.

“Nope, good.” I turned to the waitress, who was waiting with little patience. “Think I’ll take the check if you don’t mind.”

She scribbled a few things on a notepad and nodded, and as she disappeared into the crowded restaurant there was something I had to admit to Madelyn: “I’m not ready for tonight to be over yet.” It was almost painful to admit, something brutally honest, because it hinted at more than friendship.

“Sammy’s still has a couple pool tables,” she led and my stomach flipped in a way that threatened to make me sick. *She’s not ready for the evening to be over either.* “Bet I can still kick your ass.”

“Bet I’ll still let you.” I grinned at her as I said it and watched her jaw drop.

“You didn’t.”

“Sure did, cupcake.” Because the little victory dance she did when she won was so damn cute. I wondered if she still did it.

The waitress meandered back over with a slip in her hand and I snatched it before she could put it on the table. Madelyn gave me a murderous glare when I did, and I smirked at her as the woman said, “Pay up front.”

“What do you think you’re doing, Beckman?” she asked through gritted teeth as she stood and wiggled back into her coat.

“You can get the next one,” I said, hoping the words sounded smooth and easy, because my throat was tight. I wanted it to come out teasing, smooth, because I wanted her to agree to a next time.

“The tab at Sammy’s is mine,” she said as she cinched the belt of her coat. It was the closest thing to a concession I was going to get from her and I bit my lip to keep from smiling.

Sammy’s was little more than a biker bar on the outskirts of town, only about five minutes away, and I eyed the lineup of eighteen Harleys with a little trepidation as I steered Madelyn toward the steps.

It was the same as it had always been: low lights, the smell of beer and a thick haze of cigarette smoke, classic rock blasting loud enough to make intimate conversation difficult.

“Maria!” Madelyn leaned down quickly to hug a short woman wearing all black, her tight, low-cut t-shirt accentuating what there was of her cleavage and the little apron she wore told me she was on duty.

“Look at you.” The tiny woman looked up at Madelyn with admiration. “You’re still a freaking goddess. It’s not fair. Do you ever have a fat, short and ugly day?”

Madelyn grinned at her. “Tomorrow.”

“Ah.” Maria nodded her head at us. “Tequila it is, then.”

Wait...what? Oh hell, no.

I had never seen Madelyn properly drunk before, but something told me I might see it if I let her get too far into the tequila.

“I call the next game,” she shouted over the noise, pointing at one of the tables occupied by six huge bikers. They had the sense to look impressed and the biggest one, wearing a leather vest over a bare chest and arms, surveyed her appreciatively before nodding.

I didn't like the way he looked at her. The way his eyes followed her when she shrugged out of her coat and hung it over the back of a chair tucked under a hightop. I slipped a hand around her waist, my fingers tingling as they brushed the sharp ridge of her hip bone, and I lowered my head to glare at Bandana Boy. This didn't have to get ugly unless he wanted something that wasn't his.

Maria showed up with two flights of shot glasses, something I hadn't known existed. “Weak to strong.” She ran her finger up the board and produced a small bowl of limes from somewhere.

I was pretty sure there was no such thing as weak tequila.

Immediately Madelyn downed the first shot, challenging me with her eyes. “Keep up, big boy.”

“Oh, it's like that?” I grabbed the matching glass and slammed it back, annoyed when I couldn't keep myself from

wincing. I grabbed a lime and shoved it in my mouth and she grinned at me.

“Wuss.”

“Oh yeah?” I said it right around the peel before pulling it out of my mouth. “We’ll see about that.”

Reaching for the second shot, I waited for her to do the same.

Boom, boom, boom, boom. Straight down the row through the four remaining shots, and she sucked in a gasping breath as we both grabbed for lime slices.

Oh, this was going to be bad.

There was a shout from one of the pool tables, halfway across the room, and with a lot of grumbling and muttering two of the men splintered off the group while the others reached into their pockets to settle whatever bets they’d had riding on the game.

“All yours, princess.” The voice was rough and I whipped around to see Bandana Boy standing behind me, eyeballing Madelyn with a leer.

“Fine lady,” Bandana Boy said, and I was fairly certain he’d said it to me, so I nodded. I was taller than him by quite a bit, wider in the ways that counted, and maybe he’d decided not to press his luck. Because Madelyn was worth pressing one’s luck for, and I could tell he knew that.

Madelyn racked the billiards and chose her cue, chalking it with an exaggerated care I knew meant she was starting to feel

the tequila. It made her cheeks a bright pink and her eyes glassy, and I wondered how long I had before I needed to throw her over my shoulder and carry her out.

Looking over my shoulder, I caught Maria's eye at the bar and made a slicing motion across my neck. The smirk on her face was so pronounced, I could almost hear it over all the noise in the room.

"I'll break," Madelyn announced confidently, leaning over to rest her elbows on the table and I couldn't help it, my eyes went straight to the smooth, creamy skin exposed by the V cut into the neckline of her dress. *Holy shit, I'm buzzed.* I couldn't focus on anything else and when I heard her deep chuckle, I knew I was caught.

"Beckman, you hypnotized by some of my lady parts?" She hiccupped just a little, a huge grin on her face. "No pink lace tonight, I'm afraid."

My throat was so dry, I had no response.

"Black satin," she announced firmly, and Bandana Boy started coughing like something was stuck in his throat. "Kenny took me shopping—told me I needed some proper sexy lady underwear." Her face screwed up for a second. "Suppose she was right...ten-packs of cotton briefs are not very sexy."

Bandana boy muttered something low and incomprehensible. It sounded like he had an opinion, laced with a number of curses.

“You looking for trouble, VanBuren?” I was right up in her face before I knew it.

“No.” It took her eyes a moment to focus as she laid her pool cue on the table and drew herself up. In heels she was just as tall as me, which was tall, and I crowded her right up against the table. “Because your new friend appreciated your comment about underwear more than he should have. You trying to push me or something?”

Something in her eyes went all soft and melty and she tucked her bottom lip under her teeth, at the perfect angle with the way I had her leaned back across the table.

“I’d never let a bitch play with me like that.” Bandana boy’s voice rasped out, the unpleasant noise snapping the moment I was having with Madelyn. “Woman wants it bad, friend. You gonna be man enough to give it to her, or step aside and give a real man a shot? I don’t see no ring on her finger.”

I wasn’t that guy. I didn’t get angry often, but now...now I was going to be that guy. I could see the room through a red haze and I felt my shoulders tense as I straightened and turned to face him.

The air changed behind me, the cool whoosh of movement, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Madelyn charging around the other side of the pool table.

“Don’t you *ever* tell a woman you’ve decided she wants it,” she shouted, her arm streaking out like lightning. I watched in slow motion as her closed fist connected with his temple and he went down like a sack of potatoes, drawing startled

exclamations of surprise from the guys I figured were his crew. They were already on their feet, moving toward us, and Madelyn squared up quickly.

“Looks like *you* wanted it, bitch.” She leaned down and inspected his face, then straightened and gestured to one of his guys. “He’ll be fine.”

I stood there shocked. Madelyn didn’t cow to anyone.

“What the fuck?” I muttered to myself, suddenly stone-cold sober thanks to the adrenaline buzzing through my veins.

“Never again,” Madelyn spat, marching over to the hightop and snatching her coat off the back of the chair.

Maria was headed straight for us and I grabbed my wallet, pulling out a couple bills to press into her hands. She looked worried and I muttered something to her about getting the bikers out and that I would handle Madelyn.

She was already in her coat, marching out the door and into the cold night air. I could see my breath as I shoved my way out the door after her and I caught her halfway to the truck, pulling her to a stop with my hand around her wrist.

“Never again what, Madelyn?” I asked, my heart thundering and a murderous rage hammering inside my skull.

Beautiful brown eyes lifted slowly to mine. They were filled with tears, something that weakened my knees. I couldn’t stand to see a woman cry and I watched helplessly as one drop hurtled down her cheek.

“Be the victim,” she whispered. “I’ll never let it happen again.”

Madelyn

I rolled slowly, aware that it felt like my brain was sloshing inside my skull. What on earth had possessed me to challenge Adam to a shots stand-off? I hadn't done shots like that in twenty years.

My vision was blurry, my eyeballs aching, and as I struggled to sit up I realized there was a dark shape filling the chair across the room. I squeaked in alarm when it shifted, made a soft noise, and I realized it was Adam.

Adam Beckman was in my room and I was pretty sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Adam?" My voice was scratchy and his head raised slowly, his eyes blinking open.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was deep and sleepy and suddenly I wondered why he was all the way across the room in a chair and not curled up in my bed with me. Then I cringed, because I knew the answer: I'd been shitfaced when

he brought me home, a completely teary mess, and he was a gentleman.

“Not great,” I croaked, and he rose slowly, the chair creaking. He was across the room in a few steps, leaning over me to rest his palm on my forehead and brush the hair off my face. I looked down to realize I was in soft pajamas and I had no recollection of changing, which made my face flare with heat.

“Did you change me?” I asked softly, and he fumbled with something that had been on my nightstand.

“Here.” His voice was still rough as he dropped two pain pills into my hand, then passed me a glass of water.

Oh, so he wasn't going to answer the question.

“If you're ok, I'll go now.”

What time was it? I squinted at the hazy red letters on the alarm clock: 4:07.

“You sure?” I asked, suddenly, wanting nothing more than to pull him in with me. I'd had a few delightful dreams of being his little spoon and the idea was even more attractive now that I was awake.

“I'm not worried anymore that you'll aspirate,” he said gently. “Steve's gonna shit a brick when he realizes I was here until four in the morning. I imagine he'll have a few things to say about that later, possibly with his fists.”

I could feel his grimace rather than see it and made a note to myself to run some interference with my brother, who was still

stupidly protective all these years later. I knew it was because he felt he was making up for something.

Adam leaned down, his fingers sliding up into my hair as he cradled the back of my head, and he pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Get some sleep, Madelyn. I’ll check in with you later.”

No idea why I did it, but I grabbed his hand just as he stepped back, pulling him closer again and I wrapped my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek to his stomach and immediately his arms came up around my shoulders, his hands cradling my head, holding me to him.

A sudden vision, flashes of what I’d done before, things I’d said, came rushing back to me. *Holy shit, he thinks I’m a head case.*

Adam, holding me in the parking lot of Sammy’s as I fell apart.

Big arms scooping under me to carry me up the steps and into the house while I sniffled into his shoulder.

Gentle hands helping me into pajamas in a darkened room, a soft voice in my ear as blankets were pulled up around me.

I pushed quickly to my feet, my stomach lurching a little as I did it, dislodging his arms so that they fell to my hips as I wrapped mine around his wide back. I squeezed hard and tight, tucking my face right into his neck, my new safe place, whether or not he knew it or even agreed.

He heaved a deep breath and relaxed into me for a moment. It was something soft and easy, and before I knew it we were rocking gently from side to side.

“I’m sorry someone hurt you,” he whispered right next to my ear. “I wish I’d been there; I would never have let anything happen to you.”

I knew that to be true, but he couldn’t have been there because he was in Afghanistan when it happened. No one knew about it except Steve and Kennedy, and only because something had slipped out. I hadn’t even told my parents, but it was what made me drop out of college and jump right into the Air Force. I had to get away, and I had to make sure I never let it happen again.

“You need to give me a name,” he muttered into my hair and I could feel a hot rage starting to boil in him. He’d put together the pieces without me laying them out.

“It’s done,” I whispered back. “I received a settlement years ago. It’s been sitting in my account ever since.”

“Settlement’s not enough,” he growled. “I want to know who hurt you.”

I shook my head slowly, my hair scraping against his shirt. There was no way I was going to disclose that, because it wouldn’t end well.

“I’m fine.” I pushed back finally, unwillingly, brushing my hair back from my face, thankful he couldn’t see the tears

standing on my cheeks in the darkness of the room. I didn't cry, as a rule. Not ever. Certainly not in front of other people.

There was no way I was going to tell him about being cornered time and again by the TA for my Western Civilizations class.

There was no easy way to explain that the settlement had been from his politician father, who knew his son was a predator and would stop at nothing to keep it quiet.

There was no explaining away why the same man was now the governor, a laundry list of harassment, misconduct settlements and lawsuits trailing in his wake.

His arms tightened around me and I relaxed into the realization I could breathe when Adam held me. I'd always been safe with him, even when I hadn't wanted to be. He'd been around almost as long as I could remember, almost as long as my own brother, though that was the last association I wanted to make when I thought of him.

I was the one to let go first, he wasn't, and I sighed regretfully. There were so many things I couldn't say.

"You owe me dinner," he teased as he tucked my hair over my ear and tipped my head down so he could kiss the top.

We crept down the creaky old stairs, all three sets, and I stood on the top step of the porch in the cold early morning air as he unlocked his truck.

"Adam..." My voice was soft and hesitant and he paused, raising his eyes to look at me. "I have a weird question." My

quiet voice seemed loud in the silent predawn air.

He inclined his head to indicate I should continue.

“Did I change something between us? Did I do something wrong?”

His forehead creased and I rushed ahead. “You don’t call me Mads anymore and when you call me Madelyn, I feel like maybe it’s because you’re angry with me.”

He cleared his throat and pushed away from the door, leaning over the hood to lock eyes with me.

“When you were a little girl I called you by that nickname.”

It was my turn to wrinkle up my forehead.

“You’re all woman now, Madelyn. That changes things.”

With that he nodded sharply, turned quickly and got into his truck. He started up the engine and drove away without a single look back.

I wondered if he had some experience with that, the not looking back.



I drove back to Ithaca later that week for a face-to-face with Atholton and McEvoy, which was a little silly in my estimation, considering both men lived within forty-five minutes of me. A local meeting would surely have been better than all of us converging on Scott’s farmhouse in Ithaca, but something told me he wanted to observe our interactions and gauge our chemistry.

I was fifteen minutes early and still the last to arrive, pulling into the driveway to find two enormous blonde men, one even bigger than the other, engaged in what looked like a very serious conversation. The bigger of the two looked worried—no, not exactly worried—more like heartbroken. If heartbreak had a look, it was written all over the guy’s face.

Climbing out of Kennedy’s car, I marched toward them and smiled confidently, sticking out my hand. “One of you is Atholton and one of you is McEvoy, but you’re going to have to set me straight.”

“Aaron.” The smaller of the two took my hand first and his handsome face crinkled into an even white smile.

“Aaron...you’re married to a woman named Harlowe, right?”

The man nodded, his smile dimming just slightly.

“I grew up with Adam Beckman.”

A cautious look crossed the man’s face. “Beckman...yeah, you could say he’s not my biggest fan. Though...” He surveyed me critically for a second. “I can see Beckman has a type.”

“Oh, we’re not together.” I shook my head quickly. *I wish we were.* “I’ve just known him since I was ten. We’ve kind of reconnected since I got home about two months ago.”

Aaron had a funny look on his face, like he’d just found a missing puzzle piece.

“Michael.” The bigger man saved Aaron from an uncomfortable explanation, his hand held out in front of him. “Most people just call me Big Mike.”

Creative, that *most people* crowd.

“Mike.” I smiled. There was something easy and accepting about these two. “I’m Madelyn. Pleased to meet you. Also happily married, I gather?” I pointed to the thin gold band on his left hand.

The man winced like I’d stabbed him in the gut, something about his spirit visibly crumpling and I knew immediately I’d stepped right into whatever steaming pile of shit they’d been hashing out when I’d pulled up the drive.

“I’m so sorry.” I swallowed hard. “None of my business. That was a stupid assumption.”

“It’s ok,” Mike said quietly. “The truth is...not anymore. I haven’t gotten used to it yet—can’t take it off.” He swallowed hard and his eyes were so shiny that I had to look away, because the expression on his face broke my heart.

“I hear we’re headed to the border.” Aaron swooped in to save the day, because I was about to sit down with Big Mike and have a good cry. I hated emotions, all of them, but watching a man cry—something I’d only seen a handful of times—absolutely tore my heart out.

The squawk of the screen door’s spring heralded the arrival of Achilles, all dancing excitement, sparkling eyes and happy little doggy noises as he danced around our legs, and it was

Michael who bent first to accept all the affection the animal had to give. There was a hole in his chest, one I could almost see if I looked hard enough, one that could only be filled up with a love the dog couldn't give.

“Gentlemen.” Scott’s raspy voice silenced Achilles even without a command. “And Madelyn—glad to see the three of you made it. Come on in; the wife’s been at it all morning. She’ll stuff you so full of food, you’ll all have to spend the night.”

I was the first up the steps after Scott, following him into the gracious house and straight into the sneak attack hug Mia launched my way. She was pure affection and kindness, something I’d known little of during my life and certainly not from other women, the women in my family the rule, not the exception.

“Madelyn.” Her smile was warm and genuine. “You must be hungry after that drive. I have quiche and muffins out.” She gestured toward the counter. “Come help yourself to some coffee.”

Aaron and Michael moved in right behind me, passing Mia between them as they each wrapped big arms around her and she disappeared into them.

“God bless you, Mrs. Katsaros,” Michael’s voice scraped as he viewed the spread. There was a hell of a lot more than just quiche and muffins laid out across the island countertop.

“Go on.” She waved a hand dismissively, but the smile on her face indicated she was pleased. “I love keeping my man

full of good food, but these get-togethers always help me to up my game a bit.”

Scott moved soundlessly into the kitchen and pressed a kiss to his wife’s head in a gesture reminiscent of the way Adam kept kissing the top of my head. Maybe, I hoped, the gesture wasn’t as innocent as it seemed. It did seem to convey an awful lot of affection when Scott did it, but I wasn’t sure I had a read on Adam’s intentions yet.

It was funny how you could know someone your whole life and not know them at all.

It didn’t take us long to get right down to it. Scott gestured we should all head into the spacious office, where a large table sat in the middle of the room. We all spread out there with our food and coffee, and he started right in with briefing us.

“Three weeks.” All of our eyes snapped to him. “Timing’s not ideal, but you knew that when you took the job. Wings up on the twenty-eighth. Kiss your kids, your wives, your dogs—” he shot me an apologetic look, “and have an early Christmas if you have to. We have no firm return date on this one and FBI’s pulling point. We’re there to help, so be prepared to stay until they say the job’s done.”

“Weeks?” Aaron asked, a small wrinkle between his eyes. I was pretty sure he had two young kids at home and I couldn’t imagine his work schedule made his wife’s life easy.

Katsaros shrugged. “Maybe weeks, maybe months.”

Aaron winced, but Mike looked relieved and I wasn't about to ask why. I had some idea, probably having to do with keeping his mind off things.

We were each given folders with photos and names, a long list of code words to memorize and numbers to commit to memory: land lines, cell phones, coordinates.

"We don't know just how extensive this is," Katsaros said quietly. "We also don't know whether there's additional military presence involved. It's possible and probable they're involved with the trafficking ring and the cartels, and they're not going to take kindly to ready sources of revenue being confiscated."

I was pretty sure he didn't mean our military.

"Cover story?" Mike asked, and he looked relieved to have his head finally in the game.

"Aid organization, which isn't entirely a lie." Scott tapped the whiteboard mounted to the wall. "There's an organization affiliated with the diocese in Watertown that funds and largely runs a small home for displaced and orphaned children."

My eyes probably widened, because I could confirm that. Every week Kennedy slipped something into the plate marked for the Sacred Heart Children's Fund.

"Obviously none of their staff will be making the trip. You'll be presenting yourselves as employees of the organization and of the children we're unable to reunite with their families, Sacred Heart will take as many as they can.

We're working on lining up other groups; one isn't even close to enough and there's no way they'd be able to handle the number of kids we'll be placing. This is a tragedy all around."

Something cold and clammy wrapped around my heart as I imagined what an adjustment it would be for the children we brought back to New York.

"So our part is the kids?" Aaron asked slowly, his forehead corrugated again. "How many agents do we have on the ground and who's providing protection? If there's trafficking happening, I have no doubt cartels have their hands in this, all in the name of diversification."

"You know this isn't risk-free." Scott's voice was hard. "It's not only possible, but probable that you'll have more than one run-in with the cartels. You're going to see some ugly shit. This is big money for them, on top of the other products they're pushing into the states, why not take advantage of a tragic situation? Why not deliver product *and* kids to Phoenix, Denver, Los Angeles and Chicago?"

Mike looked like he was going to be sick. "I'll do my best, Scott."

I looked at him quickly and kindness and understanding flashed across Katsaros's face. "I know, man. I wouldn't expect anything else from you after what we've seen." Something passed quickly between them. "But not at the risk of your life. You know Claire would never forgive me. I'm still on her bad side after..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

Mike swallowed so hard, I thought something broke in his throat.

Mia tapped on the windows bordering the kitchen and we all swiveled to see the large table set and filled with steaming dishes. We'd been deep in discussion for several hours and hadn't noticed her buzzing around behind us.

"That woman is an angel." Mike grinned in spite of himself and Scott's expression softened into something sweet as he watched his wife hurry back toward the stove.

"You have no idea, my friend."

It was late evening by the time we finished eating, talking and finalizing plans, and the three of us road trained our way back to Watertown in the middle of a snow squall. Going was slow, thanks to near-whiteout conditions, and we splintered off in three different directions once we got off the interstate.

I pulled into the driveway just past two in the morning, not surprised to find the storm had already dumped four inches of powder, turning the pretty house with its twinkling strings of lights into a fairytale.

I chuckled as I climbed the steps, past three frostbitten pumpkins and a sheaf of corn. The tiny orange lights Kennedy had strung across the porch would be swapped out soon for Christmas lights, and the tree would be up and decorated in the large living room even before Thanksgiving.

"You check your phone lately?" Kennedy's voice was accusatory when it drifted out from the kitchen, and I followed

the sound to the back of the house where she sat at the counter with her laptop and a mug of coffee the size of a flower pot.

“Sorry.” I pulled the phone out of my back pocket. “Had it silenced all day because I was in meetings.”

“Yeah, well...” She clicked the lid of the laptop closed and turned to me, rubbing one tired eye. “It’s been snowing here since seven and I’ve been freaking the fuck out thinking you were stranded in a ditch somewhere.”

I leaned across and pulled her into a hug. “Thanks, Mama Kenny. I promise next time I’ll check in.”

Kennedy pushed at my shoulders and leaned back in her chair. “That’s what worries me, Mad. When you’re on the job I’m going to worry like a freaking mother hen and I’ll have no way to check on you.”

Kennedy knew mission protocol by heart, and she knew it meant I wouldn’t be in touch until I was on my way home.

“I’ll be fine.” I tried to reassure her though I didn’t like the unknown elements myself. “I’m sure I’ve been in far worse situations. I’ve had to parachute into combat zones and dive out of helicopters; I think I can handle this.”

“I don’t know what *this* is, Madelyn, and I know you can’t tell me. But you almost died after that dive in Greece; I don’t need to tell you what that would do to your brother. Or...” She let it trail off.

Since when was Kennedy the travel agent for guilt trips? That was my mother’s job.

There was one thing I knew I needed to nail down in the next couple weeks, if there was any hope of cutting the umbilical cord: It was time to find my own place.



I went a little crazy over the next few weeks. I called a real estate agent and gave her a list of twenty-seven houses I wanted to see in the area. While the rest of the country was experiencing a real estate shortage, it seemed I had my pick. Our town was slowly losing a large percentage of its older people to Florida, and the fact I could walk in and put down a cash offer with no contingencies left me in a pretty good spot.

In two weeks I saw all twenty-seven, and I saved the best for last. I was a weirdo like that, the person who liked to set her dessert next to the dinner plate so I could anticipate it for the duration of the meal.

The house I'd wanted since I was a kid was set a little way outside of town, on State Route 12. It was bigger than what I needed, at almost 3,000 square feet, and the mid-century design was unusual for the area.

What sold me on the property, and always had, were the walls of thick-paned windows and the fact the home was set back on a ten-acre lot. If I wanted animals, I could have them. If I wanted a garden, I would never run out of room.

The home hadn't seen a renovation since the eighties and what had been done wasn't good, but I would have time eventually. Scott had a large staff and was adamant about

work/life balance, which was unheard of in the security industry. As a result, I knew I would have stretches of time at home and if I was going to be home, I needed projects. Because if I didn't have projects, I feared what would become of me.

Chances were good I'd find a lot more reasons to hang out with Adam, which was clearly the last thing he needed.

"I'll take it," I said quietly as I stood in the sad kitchen with my realtor. Everything was an aged blonde oak, the linoleum floor peeling up, the formica countertops older than me, stained and chipped. "I would imagine we can close pretty quickly since it's already empty?"

"Owners moved to Florida last winter and it's been sitting here since," the agent said and I heaved a deep breath. I had my work cut out for me. "If you're making a cash offer I think we could have this done in days, depending upon how hard they want to fight you on the price."

They were asking just under a hundred thousand dollars, which was on the higher end considering the condition of the house.

"Eighty-three in cash, closing this week," I said firmly. "I'm leaving for work just after Thanksgiving and I'd like to have this matter settled."

"Reasonable enough," she said, looking around again like something was going to jump out of the cabinets. "You'll have a lot of work to do in here but if you can pull it off, even with renovations you'll have gotten a steal."

That was the whole point.

She must have done her work pitching my figure to the sellers, because by seven the next evening I'd signed the papers, wired the money, and I had keys in my hand.

Steve was astonished. He couldn't begin to understand why I wanted to move out of his and Kennedy's house, much less to the edges of town, and with so much yard to tend—and that was before he and Kennedy walked the house.

“You really do know how to pick them.” He shook his head slowly as he stood in the living room and turned a slow circle. “Good thing you haven't dated in years, Mad. Now I know you'd have picked the projects.”

“I have so many ideas!” Kennedy reappeared, Teagan on her hip. “This really can be a blank slate.”

It was a good thing Kennedy had an eye for design, because I was pretty hopeless. It was something I'd never had to pay attention to, nor had I formed any opinions while I was in military housing. Now that I had the chance to put my personal stamp on something, I didn't know what that should look like.

Steve unloaded the things I'd stored in his garage from the back of his truck. “Sure you want to spend the night out here all by yourself?” He looked a little worried.

“The only thing that'll bother me out here will be owls and mice,” I said, hoping I was wrong about the mouse part. I'd been to the dollar store that morning to buy traps and candles,

since I couldn't get the electricity turned on immediately, and I'd said a prayer before starting a roaring fire in the huge living room fireplace.

Over the next few days, though Kennedy was hosting Thanksgiving, she brought over her laptop and we talked through colors and textures, themes and a cohesive look.

By Thanksgiving morning I watched the parade from my own living room while I assembled furniture. I had agreed to bring a few side dishes to Steve and Kennedy's, so I'd stopped at the supermarket the night before for a cheese platter, some mashed potatoes from the deli and some fresh asparagus.

It was probably nothing short of a miracle that the ancient refrigerator worked and so did the oven, so I shivered my way through a too-cold shower, then roasted the asparagus and tucked everything into the rental car I'd been using for the week. It wasn't lost on me that I'd neglected to shop for a car, something I would have to see to the instant I got home, whenever that might be. As it was, I'd already asked Aaron if I could hitch a ride with him the day we were scheduled to head out.

"Look what the cat dragged in."

Oh good, it was Grams. Just what I'd been hoping: the person who'd be sure to remind me of my numerous shortcomings as she passed the Brussels sprouts. She'd ask whether I was going to give her any great-grandchildren over pie, then make insinuations about my sexual preferences as we

sipped coffee. Not to mention that throughout the day she'd help herself to handfuls of Adam's backside.

Yeah, Adam was there. He was outside with Steve, where the two of them were huddled over the smoker on the back deck. I'd have given a limb to know what they were talking about, but whatever it was, it was obviously serious.

Teagan was crawling all over the place by now, almost ready to start walking, and she zoomed over to the slider and pulled herself up, slapping the glass with her palms to get Adam's attention.

"Geez, between your daughter and Grams, it doesn't look like *I* have a prayer with Adam," I teased Kennedy quietly as we started carrying dishes into the dining room to place over warmers.

"Oh, I think you're the only one in town who has a chance with Beckman." She smirked at me and I chased after her.

"I think you'd better spill some details, Kenny. What have you heard?"

There was a whoosh and a squeal as the slider opened and Steve caught Teagan up against his wide chest. The little ingrate grinned at him and immediately extended her arms, leaning out and toward Adam.

"Madelyn." He nodded, not a trace of a smile on his face as Teagan settled against his shoulder contentedly. "Heard you had a busy few weeks."

Not that he would have known if he hadn't talked to Steve, because I hadn't seen or heard from him since the morning he told me I was all woman now. No way in hell I was forgetting that for as long as I lived.

Kennedy lifted her eyebrows at me and crossed the space to take Teagan from Adam.

"Mads tell you what she's been up to lately?" she asked, clearly leading him, and his smile was tight.

"Nah, but Steve told me you bought a house."

"Sure did." I couldn't help the grin that stretched across my face. Finally I had a place to call my own. "Might get a dog when I get back home."

"Get back home?" He looked confused, and I realized immediately that Steve hadn't told him I was shipping out in a couple days.

"That's on you," was all Kennedy said, clearly directing her words at me and I was surprised by the tone of her voice.

I grabbed one of the pitchers Kennedy had filled and placed on the kitchen island countertop, carrying it toward the dining room and hoping Adam would follow me.

"I ship out on Monday," I said quietly. "I'm hitching a ride with Aaron to our rendezvous point. I don't know how long we'll be gone; it's kind of open-ended."

An expression flashed across Adam's face that I couldn't get a read on. It was a combination of emotions, maybe anger and fear.

“Damn it, Madelyn.” His voice was low and angry and that took me by surprise. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sorry I didn’t check in with you, Dad.” I tried to grin but it was clear that just made him angrier.

The doorbell interrupted us, lucky for me, and I hurried to answer it so I could get away from the heavy feelings swirling around the dining room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Beckman.” I was surprised. Kennedy hadn’t mentioned inviting them. Both leaned in immediately to wrap me in a tight hug and I felt a love and acceptance from them I’d never felt from my own parents, something that startled me to realize, and I was grateful.

“We heard your parents couldn’t make it this year.” Hailey’s voice was soft and kind and I nodded tightly. She’d become a friend in the years I’d written to her since Adam was shipped home.

I hadn’t been home for many Thanksgivings since I’d joined the Air Force, and when I was home Mom and Grams tended to gang up on me. *When is she going to settle down? She’s losing her prime child bearing years. Shame to let such a beautiful girl go to waste on nothing and no one.* They knew I overheard every word, even if the words weren’t said to my face.

Kennedy, in her infinite wisdom, had created place cards for the table, which found me seated next to Adam. It was closer than I wanted to be; closer than was safe. I could smell the

shampoo he used and the woodsy body wash that made me want to climb him like a tree and lick him all over.

“Mr. Beckman, would you say grace?” Steve asked from his seat at the head of the table, holding out a hand in either direction and while I took Mrs. Beckman’s hand easily, I took Adam’s with trepidation. His big hand was warm, his fingers curling gently around my own, and when everyone else bowed their heads and closed their eyes, he gently squeezed. It was a squeeze I felt deep in the pit of my stomach, such gentle strength, something I shouldn’t want to explore.

Adam didn’t let go of my hand when Mr. Beckman drew prayer to a close. Instead, he lowered our hands beneath the table, to rest on his leg and I could hardly breathe. After decades of idolizing the man who sat next to me, the gods had intervened and he was willingly, purposely holding my hand.

Breathe, Madelyn. Deep breaths. Easy, girl.

It was a shame, because the meal was amazing, but I could hardly eat. Adam didn’t let go of my hand, choosing instead to eat with his left hand, though I knew that wasn’t his dominant hand, and I caught Steve watching us more than once.

Teagan kept everyone entertained as she fed herself, frequently missing her mouth, and by the end of the meal there was squash in her hair, mashed potatoes on her cheeks and turkey in her lap. She made eyes at Adam the entire time, probably the only female who could do it without sending me into a homicidal rage, which wasn’t a particularly good look for me.

“Adam, would you take T for me?” Kennedy asked sweetly as she pulled Teagan from her high chair and I felt the hesitation in him as he released my hand and squeezed my knee.

“Might want to put her right in the utility sink,” Steve joked, standing and following them out of the dining room.

“Heard you bought a house,” Mr. Beckman remarked. Word tended to travel fast in small towns, but even I knew Hailey was a notorious gossip. Every letter she’d written back in response to mine was loaded with dirt on the good people of Watertown, so that when I returned it was like I’d never left.

“Out on Route Twelve,” I said slowly. “I’ve admired the place since I was a kid.”

“Oh, that one’s a looker,” Hailey said, like she already knew exactly which house I was talking about, because of course she did.

“There’s a lot of work to be done.” I sighed heavily, the gravity of what I’d gotten myself into beginning to pull down on my usual gung-ho optimism. I had no idea how or when I was going to get everything done, especially with an open-ended assignment stretching ahead of me.

“I’m pretty handy around the house,” Mr. Beckman remarked casually and Hailey’s face brightened.

“That’s true, he really is. I always tell him he should get his certification to be a general contractor. He can fix just about anything.”

“Well, if you want to make some extra money I’m sure I’ll have a million projects once I’ve had a chance to check everything.”

“Tell me you had an inspection,” Hailey said, and I winced.

“Barely. I opted to forego the inspection in order to close immediately. My realtor’s husband did the walk-through with us and pointed out a few things, but he didn’t see anything he found to be worrisome.”

Hailey made a noncommittal noise that sounded like disapproval and Mr. Beckman’s lips twisted a little.

“Heard you’re leaving soon,” he said, pulling the napkin out of his lap to set on the table. “I could take a look around while you’re away, if you’d like. Heard you and Kennedy been planning some redesign and I’d be happy to help wherever I can.”

“You’re going to let me pay you,” I insisted, and his smile was kind.

“Family discount,” he said gently, something that made my forehead wrinkle a little even as Hailey’s grin threatened to split her face.

I could hear Teagan’s delighted squeals coming from somewhere in the house and chuckled to myself. She was probably getting the bath of her life, tended to by two burly, attentive men, and I briefly entertained a very enjoyable fantasy involving Adam and a bathtub while I sat next to his parents.

It was late by the time everyone helped clean up, and Kennedy wrapped leftovers for everyone to take home. It was her thing, constantly feeding people, and I found myself with a stack of containers to slot into my ancient refrigerator.

Mr. and Mrs. Beckman left just before me, and it may have been my imagination but I thought Hailey squeezed me extra tight when she told me to “be safe, or I don’t know what we’ll do.” I had no idea what that meant and I didn’t ask for clarification, mostly because I didn’t want to get my hopes up.

I was still buzzing from the fact Adam had held my hand for the better part of forty minutes, but I hadn’t seen him since he disappeared upstairs with T.

“All fresh,” he called, appearing from the hallway with Teagan in his arms. Her wet hair had been brushed back and she was in her footie jammies, her thumb in her mouth. She was angelic, her blonde hair a halo. She was the very picture of contentment in his arms, and when he kissed the top of her head before gently handing her over to Kennedy, my ovaries exploded like a piñata. I felt the pop, sure I’d find confetti in my underwear later. Because the only thing hotter than Adam Beckman was Adam Beckman holding a baby and looking *happy* about it.

Ugh, that was so inconvenient.

I sidled up to Kennedy and gave her a one-armed squeeze, kissing Teagan’s warm, chubby little cheek. “Goodnight, sweet baby girl,” I said softly, thanking Kennedy for a

beautiful day before scooping up the tote bag on her counter that she'd filled with containers of food.

“I have one for you too, Adam.” She pointed to another tote bag. “Somehow I always overestimate how much food we'll actually eat.”

“Like I'm complaining.” He smiled, giving Kennedy a quick hug and cradling Teagan's head in his big hand before scooping up both tote bags. “Coming, Madelyn?”

You could have heard a pin drop in the kitchen. Even Teagan was silent as she watched us with big, round blue eyes.

“Uh...” I felt like a memo had been put out that I hadn't received. “Yeah, sure. I guess I am.”

“Night, Mad.” Steve pulled me into a hug as he came down the stairs, and I clapped him on the back.

“Night, Adam.” He gave Adam the same hug, with a dash of “bro” to it to keep things manly: less squeezing, more clapping.

I pulled Adam's coat out of the hallway closet to hand to him, then slipped into my own. I held out my hand for the other tote but Adam, already in his coat with both totes in one hand, shook his head.

He followed me to my rental car, waiting for me to unlock the door. Only then did he hand over the tote, before he said the words that made my blood pressure skyrocket: “I'm following you home to make sure you're safe.”

“Okay.” It was all I could get out, the questions swirling through my head but getting stuck before they came out of my mouth. I didn’t know what that meant, or why he felt the need to do it, but for the first time in a long time, I didn’t want to argue.

Steve waved to us from the porch as Adam backed his truck out onto the street and waited for me to back the car out in front of him. It wasn’t more than a ten-minute trip, but my heart was in my throat the entire time as my eyes flicked up to the rearview to see his headlights.

Beckman is following me home. Will he come inside? Does he want to stay?

I’d left a lamp on in the living room before I left the house that afternoon, and I smiled as I realized how warm and cheerful it made the space. Thankfully the driveway was long, the house set back far enough from the road that I wouldn’t have to worry about people easily seeing in through the walls of windows, a completely impractical design for upstate New York.

The two-stall garage was connected to the house by an enclosed breezeway and I hit the buttons on both of the door openers I’d clipped to the visor, my heart in my throat.

If he pulls into the garage, he means to stay.

He pulled into the stall, killing the engine and hopping out easily as the doors closed. “Won’t stay long—don’t want to inconvenience you. My dad said you talked about having some

work done while you were away; thought I'd get a quick look so we can get a handle on things.”

Somehow my house was turning into a real family affair.

He said nothing when I led him into the space, just scrutinized things carefully. He peered into cabinets and flicked light switches, turned on faucets and pressed his foot into certain sections of the floor.

“Basement?” he asked and I shook my head.

“You are completely insane.” He shook his head. “The hell are you gonna do if a tornado comes tearing through?”

I decided not to point out that I was pretty sure his place didn't have a basement either, something that wasn't entirely normal for a northern home.

He wandered through the house slowly and I busied myself putting the containers into the fridge, making some tea and piling wood into the fireplace.

“Your heat's not on yet,” he observed and I almost bashed my head against the fireplace surround as I leaned over it, trying to get it started.

“I'll drain the pipes before I leave,” I said. “The boiler's being inspected tomorrow and I didn't want to take any chances. I'm used to worse.”

Something in his eyes softened. “You are a real trip, VanBuren. I don't know anyone who'd move into a house without heat in November. You are definitely not a princess.”

That felt like high praise, coming from him.

“This is a cakewalk compared to some of the shit I’ve seen,” I said, pushing myself up into a standing position and shoving my hair back over my shoulder. I hated that it was always in the way and I grabbed for the hair tie I perpetually wore around my wrist, looping my hair up at the back of my head. “It beats hunkering down in a Chilean rainforest any day, tell you what. It’s one of the most beautiful, dangerous things you’ll ever see...cold as fuck...and the big cats are scarier than any organized militia.”

“I don’t like you heading back into dangerous situations.” The way he was looking at me made my stomach do backflips. “The thought that you could be hurt and there’s nothing I can do to help makes me crazy.”

I blew out a big puff of air. “I knew what I was signing up for, Adam. I have to do something. I have to make a difference to someone.”

“You make a difference to me,” he said, looking all kinds of uncomfortable.

“Yeah, well...” I struggled to find my words. “You don’t have to be responsible for Steve’s little sister just because of some loyalty you feel for him.”

He took a hesitant step toward me. “That’s not it.”

“Yeah?” I matched him, taking a step forward too. “Then what is it, big guy?”

“It’s more,” was all he said, coming to a halt only inches away from me and my breath caught in my throat as he stood there, his deep brown, almost black eyes staring down into my soul. He could see everything from his vantage point, I was sure, including the heartbeat hammering in my neck.

Now was my chance and I was going to take it. I rested both open palms on his chest and raised my face to his, pressing my lips to his soft ones as fireworks went off like a coronary in my brain and my ears. He didn’t pull away or startle, but his hands didn’t come up to rest on my hips or my shoulders and when I made a slow movement to deepen the kiss one of his hands flew into my hair, squeezing tightly, dragging my face back from his.

“Don’t.”

It took me a moment to clear the haze of lust that had fogged my vision, and I opened my eyes to find him breathing hard, his nostrils flaring.

“Don’t what?” My head was cranked back at an uncomfortable angle and he looked like he was fighting with himself not to lean back down and finish what I’d started.

“Don’t start this now, VanBuren. This is something you can’t finish and we both know it.”

He released his grip on my hair and I stood there with my hands at my sides as he stomped out of the room. I heard the kitchen door slam, the noisy whir of the garage door opener, and the glow of headlights illuminated the room as he backed down the driveway.

What the hell had just happened?

Adam

It took me hours and one really long, cold shower to come down from the way Madelyn had wound me up. It was my fault, too: I shouldn't have held her hand through dinner. I shouldn't have given her that lead. I shouldn't have allowed her to step closer. But there was something about her that made me ignore "shouldn't have."

Now wasn't the time to start something, not with her leaving in a couple days, and I was afraid to emotionally invest myself in someone who might choose her career over me. That was self-centered and childish, I knew, but I'd been on the losing end of a decision-making process before.

Madelyn had a savior complex, I knew that much. She'd joined the Air Force to save herself and over time she associated her value with saving others. She stood up for the weak and wounded; jumped in to fight where others might have shied away. I loved her for it, but it terrified me. One of these days, I worried, she'd get into a scrape too big to get out of and she wouldn't back down. I couldn't always be there to

save her from herself or to hold her together when she fell apart, and I wasn't sure she even wanted that from me.

Chances were good the crush she'd alluded to having on me all those years ago had run its course and her interest in me now was temporary. I was a curiosity, a flavor she'd never sampled, and to hear Steve tell it she hadn't done a lot of dating in the last twenty years.

I couldn't imagine that meant she'd been without attention, because Madelyn was beautiful. She attracted stares everywhere she went, tall and beautiful, with thick, dark hair. That she was in incredible shape only added to her allure, making a man's mind run wild with the possibilities.

I stayed away until I knew she'd shipped out and she didn't call or text before she left, something that was surprising to me. She was the least clingy woman I'd ever met and I wondered if it meant she just didn't know how to play the games most of them did. Because while I hadn't had many women in my life—and that was by choice—the ones I had entertained had quickly grown tiresome.

Harlowe was the first woman I'd been genuinely interested in since Jess, and the fact I didn't have a snowball's chance in hell with her had been a bitter pill to swallow. She loved me in her way, I knew, but it was a love that would never extend beyond friendship.

It was surprising to me that I'd even consider letting another woman into my head and my heart after how badly it had broken me when Harlowe chose Aaron over me. She hadn't

done it purposely; I'd never expressed my feelings or intentions to her, and all was fair in love and war. I'd stupidly hoped she would understand that when she needed me, I dropped everything and ran to her because I was in love with her...but she never seemed to figure that out.

It wasn't lost on me that Harlowe shared a number of similarities with Madelyn: both were tall and stunning, with long dark hair and a piercing gaze. Harlowe was made of even sterner stuff than Madelyn. Madelyn teased, whereas Harlowe didn't seem to know how. She was stern and focused, maybe a little cold, except around Aaron. Something about that man lit her up like a Christmas tree and at first it made me insanely jealous of him. I'd hated him for his ability to pull something from her that I couldn't.

Then I'd been jealous of them as a couple, because they had *that thing*. That connection with one another was something visceral. They could speak without words, with looks and touches, something so intimate that it was hard to watch if you didn't have that connection with someone yourself—and clearly I didn't. It made me a little bitter for a while.

That was something I knew I could easily have with Madelyn. I'd felt it the instant I took her hand at the dinner table: that current of awareness that ran down her arm and through her fingertips, into mine. It had been simultaneously comforting and terrifying, a little like the nerve-wracking time I'd first held a girl's hand as a teenager.

Madelyn made me nervous as hell and calmed me down at the same time, which made no sense. My heartbeat went wild anytime she was near, so much so that I was afraid she'd hear it hammering. But then she'd smile at me or find some way to touch me, and it was like I could remember how to breathe.

The thought of her being gone weeks or months freaked me out more than I was willing to admit, and the reason I'd gone outside to "help" Steve with the turkey he was smoking for Thanksgiving was to ask him for permission to ask his sister out. Properly.

"About fucking time you decided to man up. You've only had a thing for her since we were kids," he scoffed, and I was sure my face had gone bright purple. For years I'd told myself I'd done a great job of hiding it, but apparently everyone else was onto me.

Since the new guy was working out, I didn't have to pull such long shifts at work anymore and though I kind of enjoyed the overtime pay, I didn't mind having time on my hands for once. At first I hardly knew what to do with it and I showed up to visit Steve often the first few weeks she was gone. He thought it was hilarious and teased me endlessly about being my security blanket, a conduit to what I really wanted.

Kennedy had a lull in her schedule since we were in the long stretch of fall/winter holidays and since she had Madelyn's permission to come and go as she pleased, she and Steve were over there on the weekends, painting and fixing.

Steve gutted one of the bathrooms and when I figured out what they were doing, I showed up to help.

By Christmas we'd gutted the kitchen and we made a few trips back and forth, between Steve's garage and Madelyn's house, unloading the crazy stash Kennedy had been amassing for years, right into Madelyn's living room.

I knew the drill: no contact while on a mission, but it had never driven me so crazy as it did this time. I didn't want to think about why. Instead, I tried to throw myself into helping Steve as he put the kitchen and bathroom back together.

By February the kitchen was done, the bathroom was nearly done, and Kennedy had painted the rest of the house while Teagan cheered her on from a playpen set in whatever room Kennedy was working on at the time.

By mid-March spring started to tease us, the long cold spell finally snapping and I swore the snow was melting. It had been a record-breaking winter, even colder and more brutal than usual, and Steve had already ordered a refill for Madelyn's heating oil tank. She'd drained the pipes before she left, preparing the house for a long, cold winter, but she hadn't expected to have a miniature construction crew in there most of the time either, making preparations for her arrival.

It was a cool Sunday morning in mid-April when I pulled into her driveway and Dad and I stepped inside to find Steve already there, devoting what time he had to making sure his sister had a solid, safe, beautiful home.

Kennedy had pulled some strings with an appliance brand and as a result a brand new washer and dryer now sat on the platform in the dry, bright laundry room, just waiting to be put to work.

As it turned out, Kennedy was the first to test it. She came rushing down the stairs with Teagan held at an arm's length. The expression on her face told me it was nothing good, and she set T directly into the utility sink before peeling off her clothes, the most ungodly smell filling the air.

Next to me, Steve dry-heaved and I couldn't help but chuckle. The man could handle compound fractures, gallons of blood and the sight of someone's intestines protruding from their abdomen, but at the sight or smell of baby poop he was ready to toss his breakfast.

"How'd Kennedy ever trick you into fatherhood?" I teased, and Teagan squealed in delight as Kennedy started to wash her down with warm water in the deep sink.

"Your turn next." He grimaced, and I smacked him with an open palm upside the head.

"Shut your mouth. You know that's not happening."

It wasn't exactly that I hadn't wanted it to happen. I'd never been opposed to the idea of kids. It just hadn't happened for me, between the timing and the woman never being right.

"T's enough for me," I finally said. "She'll be spoiled rotten."

There was a thump from somewhere in the house, like a heavy bag hitting the floor, and I glanced around quickly. Only Dad wasn't accounted for and I turned, walking down the hallway that spit out into the kitchen. Madelyn stood in the middle of it with her mouth hanging open, turning in a slow circle. She was tanned, her dark hair highlighted by months spent in the sun, her body just as lithe and defined as I remembered, despite her loose cargo pants and a long-sleeved silk base layer shirt.

“Boots,” I grunted at her, noticing she was standing in a melting puddle of snow and she snapped out of her reverie, a wide smile stretching across her face when she saw me.

“Beckman.” She leaned over to yank at the laces, stepping quickly out of the boots before rushing me and I took two big steps forward to keep the impact from hurling us back down the hallway. She threw her arms out and slammed into me, the force enough to knock the air from my lungs and I grunted as she brought her arms up to squeeze the life out of me. She turned her face into my neck, one hand sneaking up into my hair and I realized I'd unconsciously anchored a hand to the back of her head to keep her right where she was: right where I wanted her, as close as I could get her.

“You smelling me, VanBuren?” I teased and she hummed into my neck, a warm, delightful sound of contentment.

“You try spending months in the desert with intermittent showers, bunking with a bunch of smelly guys. It's a miracle I can still smell anything at all.”

“I’ve done it,” I chuckled and she took another deep inhalation and made an appreciative sound.

I could get used to this.

“What the hell have you done to my house?” She didn’t sound upset and I could hear heavy footsteps coming down the hallway behind us.

“When you’re done molesting Beckman, the rest of us would like to welcome you home.” Steve’s deep voice was teasing, full of laughter, which was typical for him.

She finally released me and stepped back with a sigh, making me think she did so unwillingly and it made my stomach flip a little. I’d never tell her how many sleepless nights I’d spent praying she’d come home safely.

How many candles I lit for her.

How many times a day I reached into my pocket to run my fingers over the rosary beads I kept with me as I sent up silent supplication for her safety.

This was dangerous. How many times had I told myself that? I’d allowed myself to slip into an obsession with a pretty picture in my head, a fantasy that couldn’t be mine, of a happily ever after with a woman who deserved far more than what I had to offer. She deserved a comfortable life, a beautiful home and everything her heart desired. I could never be that guy. I didn’t have a trust fund or a huge investment account, a portfolio of properties, and I’d never be able to buy her expensive jewelry or take her on fancy trips.

“Adam.” Her voice was gentle and I realized she’d called me several times by the time I snapped out of it. “You ok?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat quickly. “Glad you’re home.”

Then Kennedy emerged from the laundry room with Teagan wrapped up in a towel and Madelyn’s eyes went all gooey. She all but trampled her brother to get to the little girl, who had grown tremendously in the months since she’d last seen her.

“You ask her yet?” Steve’s voice was low in my ear and I shook my head tightly.

“Fuck’s sake, VanBuren. She just walked through the door.”

He grinned before punching me in the shoulder. I was grateful he’d taken my confession so well, and though he’d refrained from teasing me about my growing feelings for his sister, I knew it was killing him to keep his mouth shut.

Dad came sauntering out from the back of the house, where he’d been working on a rewiring project and for some reason, that was what made Madelyn all emotional. She smashed Teagan between them in a bear hug and held on for so long, Dad started awkwardly patting her back.

When she finally pulled back, she slashed a hand across her face. “Ugh, so sorry. I’m so happy to see all of you—all in one place! What’s everyone doing in my house and what the hell did you do to my kitchen?” She winced suddenly, covering one of Teagan’s ears with her hand and Steve chuckled. I had no doubt his daughter heard hair-raising vocabulary from him on the regular.

“You home for a while now?” Dad asked gently, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder and she nodded, her teeth sunk into her lower lip.

“Yeah. After months in the field I get to take a break and spend some time at home.” She looked around her for a second, her eyes settling on me, something that felt warm and promising. “But it looks like you didn’t leave me any projects.” Her eyes were still shiny.

“Oh, I think there’s plenty left to do. We just made the necessary parts livable,” Steve said, holding out an arm toward the kitchen.

“Livable.” Madelyn hiccuped. “Kenny, I give you an inch and you take twelve miles.” Her smile was watery. “Let me make good.”

“Oh, you’re on your own for the rest of the new appliances.” Steve grinned. “We used leftover odds and ends from our renovation and from some of Kennedy’s scrap pile from old jobs. The rest...Kenny called in favors. Did some color matching and shit.”

Kennedy led Madelyn on a tour, explaining things as they went, though Madelyn looked completely dazed.

“You must have spent every weekend here, doing this,” she said quietly as she looked around at the freshly painted walls, the sanded, sealed wooden floors covered with beautiful, soft rugs, the new light fixtures and the beautiful new kitchen.

“It was worth it.” Steve’s usual grin was softer, something affectionate instead of teasing. “Welcome home, Mads.”

She gulped, blinked hard, nodded and threw her arms around him, then went around the circle, ending with me. She didn’t let go that time, just hung on while she rested her head on my shoulder.

Steve and Kennedy exchanged a knowing look and Kennedy piped up with, “Well, this one had a horrendous blowout. I hope you don’t mind, Mad, your wash machine is being taken for an inaugural run. I have a change of clothes in her bag, but I just remembered they’re a little too springy for this weather yet...” She trailed off. I knew what she was doing, a small smile pulling at the edges of her mouth.

“Yeah.” Dad cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I told your Ma I’d be home for lunch today. Suppose I’ll head out too.”

It wasn’t even ten-fucking-thirty in the morning. Subtle.

No one had shown Madelyn the back of the house yet, where Kennedy had outdone herself painting and outfitting the three spacious bedrooms. She’d really outdone herself on the master, filling the room with ebony furniture and the softest white rug. The drapes were a heavy black silk but the bedding was a pile of soft, white sheets and a thick feather duvet.

There were heavy brass accents in the room, on the drawer pulls and the huge urns on either side of the fireplace mantle. It was a beautiful, sensual room. Simple. Elegant. Made for comfort and sensory pleasures with all the soft textiles and simple palette.

Madelyn stood dazed while everyone filed out into the crisp spring air, the door closing quietly. The house was warm and beautiful and comforting. It was a real home now, simple, elegant and comfortable, and I could envision Madelyn lounging comfortably in the deep chairs in front of the living room fireplace or curled up in the big bed with a book.

“You ok, Beckman?” Madelyn was looking at me funny—I’d spaced out again.

“Probably just need more coffee.” I grunted at her, hardly capable of using my words now that I was alone with her. I’d imagined this too many times, the moment when I’d see her again, only she looked even better than in my fantasies, and now that she was in front of me I wanted to do all the things I’d imagined.

“Stay for a while?” she asked hesitantly. “It’s going to take me a minute to get used to this and I think it’s going to feel weird to be here all by myself.”

“I might have the fix for that,” I said, pulling my phone from my pocket to text Dad. It would either go really well or blow up in my face.

“Fix for what?” she asked, digging through the heavy duffel she’d dropped on the floor. She was distracted, so I didn’t bother to answer, hoping Dad was quick about it.

She popped up with a sweet smile on her face, a bottle of hot sauce in her hand. “My favorite. I brought some home for you to try.”

I tried to smile but it came out as a pained grimace. I fucking hated hot sauce. I had the intestinal tract of a sensitive toddler and the tastebuds to match. Hailey teased me about it all the time: if there was a single grain of black pepper in a dish, I could find it.

Without a word she pulled open the ancient fridge and surveyed the contents. Kennedy always brought some groceries, since we often put in full days on the weekend, and there was a carton of eggs, butter, some bread, mayonnaise, mustard, turkey and cheese slices.

She pulled out the bread, butter and eggs and smiled when she pulled open one of the low drawers near the oven. “These are beautiful.” She was *petting* the drawer. “I see Kenny unpacked the things I ordered.” She pulled a heavy frying pan from the depths. “No time like the present to learn how to cook.”

My stomach lurched at the thought. Madelyn had never exactly been known as a great cook. Then again, I wasn’t either. I kept myself alive with cereal and frozen dinners and frequent trips to visit Dad and Hailey.

I tried to tell myself there was no way she could screw up eggs.

Don’t ask me where she came up with them, but an onion and a green pepper appeared on the countertop and I watched with disbelieving eyes as she diced things up like a pro, dumping them into the skillet with the eggs and before I knew it there was a steamy, cheesy omelet in front of me.

I watched in horror as she pulled another bottle of hot sauce from her bag and ran a stripe of it right down the center. *Oh, no.* “Uh...”

“Uh, nothing. Try it.”

I tried not to pull a face as I cut it with the side of my fork, cautiously avoiding the hot sauce, and she watched me do it. When she turned to flip her own breakfast in the pan, I cautiously scraped some of the hot sauce off with my fork.

She slid her plate next to mine and liberally doused it with hot sauce and I fought the urge to gag.

“Woman, your ass is going to be on fire.” I couldn’t keep the thought inside. And that was when I made a critical error: I accidentally pressed the fork into the strip of hot sauce I’d just removed, then hastily cut another section of egg and shoveled it into my mouth. I realized my error the second my tongue caught fire and I jumped up, gasping and sputtering, pouring coffee into a mug and gulping it down. It did nothing to quench the burn, only made it burn hotter, and I leaned over the counter on the heels of my hands, gasping for air as my eyes filled with water.

“Holy shit, you’re not joking.” Madelyn stifled a laugh. “I’m sorry, Beckman. I always just assumed you were joking about how sensitive you were to spices.”

I took deep breaths through my mouth to cool the burn on the intake, though I felt like I was breathing fire on the exhale and she hopped up, pulled the small carton of half-and-half from the fridge and popped open the top.

“Mouthful,” she instructed, handing it over to me and I tipped it back obligingly.

“I’m sorry,” she said mournfully as I set the carton on the countertop and she leaned over quickly, pressing a soft kiss to my cheek. It was meant to be an apology, I was sure of that, and it took my mind off the pain for a moment.

The knock at the door startled me and Madelyn was the first to break eye contact, though it was hesitantly.

“Mr. Beckman! Did you forget something?” There was a startled exclamation from her and a chunky red puppy slipped around her legs, running straight for me at a joyful gallop.

“Thanks, Dad,” I called and he snapped off a salute before telling Madelyn he had to run—again—and she shut the door.

“What a beautiful dog,” she murmured, kneeling to run her fingers down the puppy’s wiggling backside, digging her fingers into the sleek red coat. “She’s the biggest Boxer I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, she’s a he, and he’s a Boerboel.” I grinned, my mouth no longer on fire. “They’re wonderful, loving dogs. Fiercely protective. Hard workers. Loyal.”

“I think you just described yourself,” she said softly and I didn’t know what to do with that, so I let it go.

“Kenny and Steve brought your Grams over to meet him; she’s already in love with him. Said her parents had one when she was a small girl. Picked him up when they moved out of

Cape Town and settled to the north, on some farmland. She called him ‘the handsomest creature you’ve ever seen.’”

Her beautiful smile made an appearance and I couldn’t help but grin back at her.

“I’m pretty sure she was talking about you, buddy.” She looked right at me when she said it.

I made a gesture like I was brushing away her words, rolling my eyes as I did.

“What’s his name?” she asked, and I looked down to where her hand rested on the dog’s head.

“That’s up to you. I’ve just been calling him Boel. It’s slang for ‘dog’ in Afrikaans. Your grandmother recalls a surprising amount of it, considering she hasn’t spoken it in fifty years or more.”

“I’m not renaming your dog, Adam.”

“He’s not my dog, VanBuren.” I let that sink in for a moment, and I softened my voice. “The thought of you out here all by yourself scares the hell out of me.”

I swallowed hard. *There, I said it.* I watched her expression harden when I did.

“I’m not saying you’re not completely capable of taking care of yourself. You’re an amazing woman, Madelyn.”

I didn’t mean to, but my hand wasn’t listening to my brain. It shot out to cup her cheek and I cursed myself for crossing a line.

“I’ll feel better knowing you have company.”

“Adam, he’s *your* dog.”

“You said you wanted a dog and I know I didn’t give you much choice, but I volunteer at a dog rescue—remember? I know what to look for. This guy...I’ve been training him. He’s pretty well house-broken and he follows commands, but you have to be the boss. Be firm with him. Be his alpha.” I swallowed hard. I’d kind of fallen in love with the not-so-little guy in the last few months. So had Lucy. But if anything, this gave me another reason to visit her often.

“You got me a dog?” Her eyes were huge and dangerously watery.

“Well, yeah...” The way she was looking at me made me uncomfortable in a hot, itchy way. A way that could quickly, easily turn into something else, and it would mean at least one of us would end up on the floor with the other on top.

“You worry about me?” She was biting that soft bottom lip and I wondered if she knew that made me crazy.

I pushed quickly to my feet, afraid of what would happen if I leaned forward just a few inches. I couldn’t promise it would be anything honorable.

I held out a hand to her to help her up and I tucked her hair over her ear, unable to help myself. “I worry about you all the time, VanBuren. I was just about sick while you were gone, so take it easy on me next time, ok? Maybe pick something less dangerous...something shorter.”

Her eyes spilled over and I knew for some reason it had nothing to do with the dog.

“I have to fix it.” Her voice was just a whisper and I must have looked horrified, because she shook her head at me. “I can’t explain it yet. There’s something I have to finish—to fix. I can’t leave her there.”

I had absolutely no idea what that meant, but the thought of her leaving again scared me half to death.

“Fine.” My voice sounded angry. “Let me know when you’re going and he can stay with me.”

I leaned over and scratched his chin, rubbed his ear and then walked out of the house without looking back, because I felt like I’d just left all of my heart behind.

Madelyn

When Adam stormed out of the house I let myself break down and cry. I hated myself for it, not knowing how else to get out the terrible emotions welling up inside of me.

Gratitude for the beautiful house they'd made for me.

Confusion over what had just happened between Adam and me.

Anger and sadness and gratitude over the fact he'd gotten a dog he'd trained just for me, and I'd felt his love for the puppy who was licking my face as I cried. I felt his heart break as he walked away from the dog.

He hadn't been happy with me when he left, I was fairly sure of that, but I didn't know why and I heard his truck start up, the noise dying off in the distance as the large puppy crawled right into my lap and flopped down.

I hadn't begun to process the things I'd seen in our border camp, and they were things I couldn't discuss with anyone else, since it was an ongoing investigation.

I'd witnessed atrocities against people who were treated like cattle by their own, herded and separated, with no regard for welfare or families.

I'd processed papers for hundreds of children, trying to determine which of the three aid agencies we were working with would provide the best care for each child. But mostly I was learning Spanish as quickly as I could, trying to calm the children who'd been separated from their families, comforting those who couldn't be reunited, and most nights I cried myself to sleep after watching heartbreak and devastation all day long.

I hadn't felt like I was of any use whatsoever.

There had been one family I couldn't get out of my head. They were young, not even out of their teens. From what little I could piece together, since we didn't have enough translators to go around, they'd walked for weeks to get from Venezuela. Fucking walked. With a baby strapped to the girl's back that was little more than a newborn. The baby was sunburned and dehydrated, but her parents were in even worse shape. How they made it into our camp I'll never know, because the boy had dysentery from drinking unclean water and the girl was so dehydrated, she was hallucinating, burning up with fever.

I was completely out of my element. I wasn't parachuting into a combat zone to rescue a wounded soldier.

I wasn't deploying tactical hydraulic equipment to pull men out of a bombed-out building.

I wasn't making a seventy-foot dive into the sea to rescue someone in distress, fighting the churn of the water caused by the helicopter rotors, blinding me, making me work largely by touch to strap an injured person into the basket and attach the cable to have them lifted into the helicopter.

That shit was easy by now; second nature.

Instead, I was pushing papers. Trying to play the part of aid worker successfully while I tried to pinpoint the key players in our camp I knew were cartel members or high-ranking military. As far as I was concerned, the fact they had a joint interest in the mass of humanity crowded at the border made one no better than the other.

The weapon concealed beneath my loose-fitting shirt and the vest identifying me as a volunteer did little to reassure me, should things go to shit. I was surrounded by panicked people and wailing children, and gunfire would do nothing to restore order or peace.

After four months in hell, our replacements arrived and we briefed them the best we could, knowing nothing could really prepare them for the things they'd see every day.

We made the transport trip home in silence, and when we gathered around the table in Scott's office to debrief, all three of us had a hard time putting into words the things we'd seen and the intel we'd gathered.

McEvoy had taken the whole thing really hard, though Aaron and I talked about it on the drive back to Watertown and he told me he thought it had more to do with McEvoy's

divorce than anything else. The guy hadn't been able to process it and being thrown into such a high-stress situation had amplified the emotional mess he was trying to sort out.

Aaron had shuddered when I told him about the baby girl for whom I'd filled out aid paperwork, sending her to the Sacred Heart in Watertown. Her parents died within hours of one another, neither of them able to receive the care they desperately needed in what was little more than a holding tank. They should have been routed to one of the many clinics we had in camp, but instead they were sent to processing.

Disorganization bothered me. After years in the Air Force it was inevitable that routine, organization and ruthless adherence to protocol were ingrained in my very DNA.

My sense of humor was dark, maybe a little sick, but even that hadn't been enough to shield me from the atrocities I saw.

I'd made HALO jumps wearing 150 pounds of gear into dense forest to retrieve soldiers who were missing limbs.

I'd intubated terrified, combative, fully conscious men and started blood transfusions on the edge of mine fields.

I'd watched men die horrible deaths, knowing there was nothing more I could do to save them...and yet I'd always been able to sleep at night, my conscience clear, because I'd done everything humanly possible to save a life.

I wasn't sleeping at night anymore. I was having nightmares for the first time since childhood, and sometimes I woke some of the others in my tent.

Aaron dropped me off halfway up the driveway, since it was full of cars I recognized, and I'd walked into what felt like an empty house and dumped my bag on the floor. Then Adam had materialized from the back of the house and I'd thrown myself at him, able to breathe for the first time in months, realizing very inconveniently just how safe he made me feel.

I hated that, because I didn't need *anyone* to make me feel safe. That was my story and I was sticking to it.

I'd intentionally tortured him with some authentic hot sauce and he'd given me a dog. A dog he'd trained *for me*. Because he was worried about *me*.

That didn't mean he cared about me *that way*, he'd never said as much. But part of me wanted to hope so, because I wanted Adam Beckman to care about me in a way that meant I was more than his best friend's little sister.

The puppy followed me around the house for the rest of the day. He was adorable, big and clumsy with giant feet he kept tripping over. I hadn't asked Adam how old he was, but my guess was that Adam picked him up at eight weeks old and had him ever since.

I learned quickly that when the puppy needed to go outside, he would sit at the front door and bark just once. If I didn't listen to that bark, he left a puddle on the tile landing, though he looked contrite.

That afternoon I had groceries delivered and I wandered through the house, amazed by the progress a team of devoted

friends and family had made in just a few months. This was obviously what Mr. Beckman meant by “family discount.”

I’d learned some basic cooking in the camp and I made a simple dinner, realizing I had nothing to feed the dog, so I made him chicken and rice.

It was late afternoon before I finally picked up the duffel from where I’d dropped it and carried it back to the master bedroom.

No words. I stood in the middle of the room, amazed by the miracles I knew Kennedy had worked with a few simple pieces and some paint, and I whipped my phone out to text her: **Holy shit.**

Her response was quick. **Bed’s sturdy, fireplace works, Mr. Beckman wired the house for sound. Put on some sexy music, light a fire and invite that man over for a bed frame stress test.**

Uh, no. That would not be happening. The only man in my bed tonight was a redhead I hadn’t yet named, and the only thing we’d be doing was snuggling, thank you very much.

I took a quick shower, admiring the beautiful bathtub Kennedy had clearly refinished, and when I patted the edge of the bed the puppy looked at me in confusion. He was a quick study though, because when I did it again he took a wild jump and sprawled across half the bed.

“You and me, buddy,” I said a little sadly as I switched off the lamp and, not for the first time that day, I wished I’d said

something to make Adam stay.



Adam didn't call or text. He didn't even come over to see the dog, and I couldn't help but think we'd had our first fight without really fighting at all.

A week went by, then two. It was a beautiful spring, the trees finally in full leaf, the grass lush and green and reminding me I needed to buy a lawnmower—and a car, unless I wanted to drive a rental for the rest of my life, or rely upon the fraying patience of friends.

Steve and Kennedy came over a few times with Teagan, and once they brought Grams to view the final fruits of their labor.

I hadn't decided how to repay them just yet, since it was obvious they'd spent a great deal of time and effort on my house. And though Steve claimed the house was renovated with scraps and favors, I knew better. Someone had dumped a significant amount of money into it. There was no way Kennedy called in favors and full furniture sets and marble tile showed up.

In those two weeks, I'd been to the facility run by Sacred Heart five times to ask after Daniela, the infant I'd shunted to the organization after her young parents died. For some reason I felt a personal responsibility to the child who'd been left alone in the world.

Initially they'd been hesitant to let me see her, though one of the sisters recognized me. "You are a VanBuren," she'd said

with a smile, and I knew Kennedy's generous Sunday offering plate donations were buying me grace.

"Yes, sister. I'm Steve VanBuren's younger sister."

"I know." She smiled. "I remember your family from years ago. You no longer attend, nor do your parents, though I see your brother each week with his family."

I sighed. Explaining my lapsed faith was going to get me in trouble, so I glossed it over. "I've been away, serving with the Air Force since I was nineteen," I said, hoping that was enough.

"I trust you'll return," she said with a gentle smile and I realized she wasn't much older than me.

"Yes." I hesitated. If it would get me to Daniela, I'd promise her anything. "I've been here several times to ask after Daniela, the Venezuelan baby you took in recently. I was responsible for processing her paperwork and routing her here."

The woman's smile softened with understanding. "You have a personal connection to the child."

Nodding, I bit my lip. "I can't explain it. I'm just...I feel responsible for her."

"Come." She gestured I should follow her, leading me through a series of locked doors, deeper into the facility. "All of our children need all the love they can get."

Was it that easy? I just had to find the right sister and tug at her heartstrings? Something that felt hopeful soared inside my

chest.

The sounds of children laughing and playing filled my ears as she led me through a large, bright room filled with toys. I scanned the children, realizing several of them were new to the facility and had undoubtedly arrived on the same transport as Daniela.

She led me down a quieter wing. “It’s not quite as common to have infants as it is toddlers and, more often, older children.” She sighed. “It is a difficult transition for the older children and we try desperately to place them with loving families and keep them out of the system.”

Was that some kind of a guilt trip?

The small room at the end of the hallway smelled like antiseptic and formula, and my heart lurched when I saw the tiny bundle in the arms of another nun. She too smiled at me patiently, holding the baby to her shoulder and patting her back gently. “Ah, sweet girl,” she said gently. “It would seem you have a visitor.”

“May I?” I asked, my voice shaky.

I had no idea what to do with a baby. Teagan was the closest thing to a baby I’d ever known, and by the time I’d gotten home she’d been well past the infant stage.

“This is Mary Ignacia,” she announced as she settled the sweet little bundle in my arms and without meaning to I felt my expression pull into one of horror.

“Her name is Daniela,” I insisted. “It’s the only link she has to her parents and her heritage.”

“She has been given a new name, one that has been recorded,” the sister insisted gently, but her expression was firm. She was ready to fight me on this one. “She has been given an auspicious name to guide her through life.”

Auspicious, my ass. They were stealing the only thing she had left of her heritage.

I was going to get myself branded as a troublemaker. “Sister Mary Ignacia was Colombian,” I protested. No idea where that came from. I must have had it drilled into me as a child, because that level of recall was uncanny.

“It’s not important.” The sister smiled again and I ground my teeth together. It *was* too important. It was very important, and apparently I needed to make it a fight.

The baby’s weight settled against my chest as I bounced her gently, something new and scary aching inside my chest. *This is what Grams is always going on about.* I was a little too late to the party, too late to do anything about the urges and pulls happening somewhere in my heart.

“Sweet girl.” I settled into the rocking chair the sister had vacated and both of them smiled benevolently at me.

“If you’re willing to sit with her for a moment, there are other tasks I must tend to,” said the second nun and I nodded mutely. I’d sit here all day if they’d let me.

The door closed almost silently behind them and I sank back as the baby made tiny gurgles and coos of contentment, her belly full.

“Your mama’s name was Mariella,” I whispered to her as we rocked. “She was beautiful, only seventeen years old and with long, dark hair.”

I couldn’t give her much, but I could give her a link and when I realized that, I began to understand just how much trouble I’d gotten myself into, because I cared.



It was early June before I drove back to Ithaca to meet up with the rest of the team on Scott’s payroll.

I’d conducted careful research and employed Steve’s opinion and experience when purchasing a car. Since the man had family on the brain—he and Kennedy were trying again—I had to threaten to gag him if he tried to extoll the virtues of one more minivan or mid-size SUV. I wanted a workhorse, I told him. Something that would keep Teagan safe if I drove her somewhere, but something I could load up with groceries or lumber or stuff to take to the dump.

“You want a truck.” My brother rolled his eyes. This was the man who’d driven a low-profile Audi since the day he’d gotten his license and though the baby seat was a weird fit in the back, he couldn’t be convinced to give it up, despite his freaky love affair with minivans.

I ended up buying a work truck off one of Steve's friends. He called it his "tootler." It was in great condition, low mileage, but he'd purchased it almost a decade earlier when he got out of the Army and decided to be a general contractor—but then ended up working at the same hospital Steve was now a part of. So the truck sat in his garage season after season, only occasionally coming out to haul yard waste to the dump or to make a trip to a big box store, and because he knew it would be used and loved, he gave me a pretty sweet deal and I handed over cash.

I promptly named the truck "Huey," after the old faithful helicopter, known for a decent load capacity, and Huey and I made the trip several times a week to the Sacred Heart facility—an orphanage, for want of a nicer term.

After introductions to the rest of the team, some who'd flown clear across the States for the meeting, Scott presented an update on the situation at the border. I noticed him watching Michael closely, and he indicated several key players in the trafficking ring had been identified and summarily dealt with in the past month. It didn't eliminate the need for eyes on the situation, and it looked like our involvement was indefinite, at least until the FBI decided to end our contract.

"Mutt, Blitz and Boomer have another six weeks to go on the ground. At that point we'll swap them out for you three." He gestured toward the back of the room where three men with heads shaped like anvils sat with their arms crossed over their chests.

Something told me that with one look at the mountain ranges those men had for shoulders, the opposition would wave the white flag of surrender. Those guys were fucking terrifying. Then again, they were from Texas, where it seemed people generally didn't fuck around, so that explained a lot. I suspected all three of them lived along the border to begin with and had strong opinions about the situation that hadn't been influenced by their employment.

Mia waved at Scott from the kitchen and I watched every eye in the room light up at the promise of food.

“Break for lunch,” Scott announced in his gravelly voice and the guys rushed for the door like it was every man for himself.

“VanBuren.” He stood looking at me and there was something in his expression that made me nervous. “Something you need to tell me about why you've requested not to do a second border rotation?”

I swallowed hard, because I was about to put into words the very thing that could kill my new career.

“I processed an infant at the border...placed her with Sacred Heart.”

His left eyebrow pulled up just a little, like *Get on with it*.

“Her parents were hardly more than babies themselves—they died in that camp.”

What looked like understanding started to dawn in his eyes. “You fell in love.” His smile was slow.

“I think I did.” I sighed, looking down at my feet, because this was a big, difficult kind of love. Maybe the most painful kind, because it could never be equal.

“You know you’re going to have a problem,” he said and a loud whoop from the kitchen momentarily distracted me.

“Catholic charity? You might have a few differences of opinion if you’ve...drifted over the years.”

I scoffed. “We’ve had one of those already. They want to name her after a saint or a famous nun or something. She should be allowed to keep the *only* thing that was hers.”

Scott’s eyes were kind. “They’ll do a home study. Ask for character references. Mia’s the best character reference you could hope for; use her for a personal and me for a business reference. Atholton would be a good one, too.”

I swallowed hard. He knew my train of thought before I could speak it.

“Hardest job you’ll ever have,” he said gently. “Anyone interested in helping you out?”

“I know my brother and sister-in-law will do what they can, and she’d have an older cousin—maybe two cousins if Steve and Kennedy have another soon.” I paused. “Oh. That’s not what you meant.”

Yeah, I didn’t know about that part. I was in this alone.

Hey Adam, wanna be my pretend husband so I can adopt an infant from a foreign country?

That seemed likely to go over well.

“If anyone can do this alone, it’s you. But it’s awfully nice to have an extra set of hands for the mess and an extra set of arms for hugs—for the kids and for you, because you’re gonna need them too.” He looked out at Mia as he said it and her eyes tracked to his like she’d felt him reaching for her, and I tried not to gag.

He noticed and the corner of his mouth lifted. “Ask me how I know.”

Atholton and McEvoy ate lunch with everyone else in the kitchen and I squeezed right in between the two of them with a “Lemme just scooch right in here, boys...” It made both of them grin at me and they wiggled over to let me slide in between them. We’d become close during our months at the border, to the point we’d developed our own shorthand version of communication filled with acronyms, hand signals and eyebrow raises.

“How you holding up, big guy?” I asked softly as I leaned left and into the mountain of muscle named Michael McEvoy. Big Mike sure lived up to his not-so-creative nickname, probably 6’5”, all blond-haired, blue-eyed Nebraskan farm boy with muscles that were positively unnatural.

“Been better,” he answered under his breath, and under the table I squeezed his knee. The man still wore his wedding band, clinging to the thinnest sort of hope. He’d spoken of his beautiful wife in reverential tones during our time in the camp and I’d spent hours sitting with him, listening to the stories

that brought him joy. “She’s extended her time in the city and renewed her sublet.”

I felt Aaron heave a deep sigh on my right. “Can’t let her sit and stew all by herself,” he said around a mouthful of what was probably his ninth cookie. I had no idea where he was putting all the food I’d watched him shovel into his mouth. “You’re going to have to remind her of the good things; remind her of what she’s missing.”

“She’s not missing anything,” Michael said bitterly and I knew that couldn’t be true. There was no way the love he had for his wife, something so strong it was positively visceral, was one-sided.

“That’s not true and you know it,” I said.

“There are a lot of things I thought I knew,” he said, and looking down at his plate I watched him pick at the huge slice of cake Mia had set in front of him. “Turns out I didn’t know those things at all, if ever.”

I rolled my eyes slightly to the right to catch Aaron’s worried look. His lips were drawn into a compressed line and when I sucked in a deep breath he mouthed a single word: *Later*. Clearly he had some opinions to share.

Leaning into Mike’s shoulder, I wrapped one arm around his wide back and sighed. “Call me if you need to talk, my friend. I’ll meet you anywhere. Just don’t go dying of a broken heart without sending up the bat signal, k?”

That got a small smile and a tight nod out of him and one of his big arms reached up behind my shoulders to squeeze me back.

“Grab a coffee, everyone.” Scott was ready to get back to business. “I figure we can wrap this up in the next hour and get some of you on the road back home.”

Home. There was a word I was still learning.

Adam

I managed to stay away from Madelyn for three whole, long, terrible weeks. I couldn't explain to her why I was so irrationally upset by the thought of her leaving again, because I couldn't even explain it to myself.

In the end, fate intervened when I very nearly rear-ended her at the supermarket, and I mean with my shopping cart. I'd had to break down and replenish my cat food and people food supplies, but I was distracted by a statuesque brunette in the produce section and stood there dumbstruck, like I didn't have a list in my hand.

"Beckman." Her voice was warm and welcoming, like she'd forgotten that I'd been a bit of a dick just a few weeks earlier.

"VanBuren." My voice felt scratchy. "Guess I don't have to ask the obvious."

"You'll be pleased to know that with my downtime I've been learning to cook." She raised one eyebrow. "I'll never have my own cooking show, but I haven't managed to poison

myself yet so things are looking up.” She peered over into my cart, at the stack of frozen pizzas and pre-made breakfast sandwiches and made a face. “Yuck. That’s not food, Adam.” She would know, wouldn’t she, the finely-tuned machine that she was?

I returned the favor, sweeping a condescending glance over her basket, astonished by the number of vegetables I couldn’t actually name. I was pretty sure Hailey had fed me most of that stuff at one time or another, but I couldn’t have differentiated between a rutabaga and an artichoke to save my soul.

“I still owe you dinner,” she said quietly, shifting her cart so the woman behind her could get around us. She was rewarded with an impatient clucking sound and I fixed the woman’s back with a hairy eyeball she must have felt, because she turned her head and startled when she caught my eye.

“At this point I think I owe you every dinner for the rest of your life.” She started laughing then stopped suddenly, like she’d just realized something really uncomfortable and she looked down again, squirming a little.

“Bailey misses you,” she said softly and I couldn’t help the small smile that slipped out.

“You named the dog?”

“It was close to Boel, and I named him after a character in my favorite Christmas movie.”

I raised an eyebrow. That meant Madelyn had a shred of sentimentality in her after all, a softness, something that surprised me.

“You didn’t get a Christmas this year and it’s your favorite holiday, isn’t it?”

She shrugged. “These things we do, that others may live.”

“Your motto?”

“Yeah, the PJs. It’s our job to sacrifice for the good of others. You boys call us guardian angels.”

That made me swallow hard, thinking of her selflessly sacrificing all those years, diving or parachuting into danger, skipping right over holidays, birthdays... I stepped forward suddenly and wrapped my arms around her and she squeaked. “Adam, what the...”

“Thank you for your service,” I said against her hair. It had a different meaning when I said it: it was far more in earnest, because she’d saved men like me. Men who’d been trapped in desperate situations, bleeding out, everything lost, and she’d been a beacon of hope and promise to those who needed it most, even if she was only there with them through their last breath.

“Sweet talker.” She thumped a fist against my chest and I could feel the muscles of her face pulling into a smile. “I could say the same to you.”

“No.” I pulled back a little and brushed a thumb over her cheek. “Not really.”

“Come see Bailey?” she asked suddenly, and I realized it was because she was nervous, so I let her go and stepped back just a little. “I’ll make you dinner.”

Looking at the contents of my cart, her offer was pretty damn tempting. “Yes.”

Her face lit up.

“To see the dog, of course.”

“Of course. Just...show up whenever you’re done. I’ll be out of here in fifteen minutes anyway and I’ll get started on dinner right away in the fancy new kitchen someone put together for me.” She grinned at me, like I was solely responsible for all the work that had gone into her home. The truth was that she probably owed Steve and Kennedy babysitting for the remainder of Teagan’s childhood.

I couldn’t tell you what else I shoved in my cart in my hurry to get out of the store, but it was probably crap. I had a list in my left hand that I hardly glanced at as I hurtled through the aisles, throwing bananas, cereal, eggs, milk and what may or may not have been partially-cooked turkey bacon into the cart.

I was in such a hurry, I almost forgot the cat food and had to double back for that, because Lucy was the queen of my castle and would have had some squeaky, unpleasant things to say about my forgetfulness.

She’d probably also nibble my toes in my sleep, as retribution.

By the time I pulled into Madelyn's driveway it was nearing eight, the sun sinking low on the horizon, and I could hear excited sounds from the dog.

"Go get your boy." Madelyn opened the door and the dog flew out into the yard, nearly taking me out at the knees as he wriggled and hopped, winding himself around my legs. She stood there watching him with a huge smile on her face, chuckling when he kept throwing his butt against my calf.

"Bailey," she finally called when he'd circled around my legs forty or fifty times, keeping me from walking toward the house, and to my surprise he went immediately to her.

"He's a very good boy," she said, stepping back to let me into the house. "We've had a trainer come in the last few weekends and she's been impressed by his rapid progress. She says he's very eager to please."

So am I, but I'll never tell that to you.

"Thank you for him, Adam." Her eyes were all soft and melty. "I'm completely in love with him and I know it must have broken your heart to leave him." She swallowed hard. "I know there's a strong bond between a man and his dog."

Yes, it had broken my heart, but it soothed me to know he would guard her with his life; protect her with a ferocity most people would never see or understand.

"Maybe we should work out a joint custody plan." Her smile was sweet and I realized she was serious. "He loves you so much, and you must miss him."

“I’ll watch him when you’re away for work,” I answered slowly. “It’s not a good idea to continuously take him out of his familiar environment, so if you’re ok with it I’ll just stay here in one of your guest rooms. I’d have to bring Lucy, though.”

Something that seemed like disappointment flashed so quickly across her face, it was gone almost before I registered the micro-expression. Something was there, something we were dancing around, and I’d keep dancing as long as I could before I gave in.

Caved.

Asked her to be mine, knowing I had absolutely nothing to offer her but myself, and that wasn’t nearly enough.

In hopes of lightening the mood a little, I told her about the time I spent at the dog rescue in Clayton. Harlowe was running an expansion of the rescue at her farm, typically housing between thirty and fifty dogs at a time while she and a handful of other volunteers worked tirelessly to rehabilitate, train, and socialize dogs before carefully vetting applicants and placing the dogs in loving homes.

Harlowe was rarely at the rescue in Clayton anymore. Anthony largely ran it now and since his wife had passed on, he’d devoted an inhuman amount of time seeing to the staffing, budgeting, compliance, and fundraising. He kept it humming along like a well-oiled machine and even Harlowe admitted he was a far better business manager than she’d ever

been. He was so efficient, she said, that he managed the majority of the paperwork for her branch as well.

“I’d love to see it,” Madelyn said with a smile on her face. “I’d always thought maybe one day I’d adopt a Pit. They’re such sweet, loving family dogs. If I did it soon—if I got a puppy—I could raise them together.” She gestured toward Bailey.

“You mean I’ll raise them.” I grinned. Unless she planned on no more than one or two assignments a year, she wouldn’t have time to properly train the dogs and with big, potentially aggressive breeds, that was essential. You had to know how to handle your dogs, because an inexperienced owner with an untrained or poorly controlled dog was a nuclear bomb just waiting to detonate.

It wasn’t an if, it was a when.

She didn’t respond to that right away. She dished something onto plates that smelled amazing, handed one to me and pointed toward the small table that sat at the far end of the kitchen, next to the huge bank of windows.

“I’ve asked Scott not to put me on a second border rotation,” she said quietly as she carried her own plate and a pitcher of water across the space, and I waited for her to elaborate. My stupid heart was hammering in my chest, hoping that just maybe it had something to do with me, and that was completely irrational and ridiculous. It was both of those things because the last thing I was going to do was get—or put myself—in her way.

“I’ll take the occasional overseas project,” she said, and from the way she was looking at her food I knew there was something big coming. “Most of my contracts will be domestic so that I’m not gone for more than a few days at a time, and he’s agreed to give me some scheduling consideration.”

Why?

I sat back, my fork on my plate, and waited for her to finish.

“I’ve been volunteering some time the last few weeks...” She still hadn’t lifted her eyes to mine. “We were at the border, providing security, assistance and extra eyes to one of the three-letter agencies.”

She couldn’t tell me much more than that about something ongoing, but I knew already she was talking about the FBI. I had buddies on the inside who’d made more than just casual mention about the humanitarian crisis to which it seemed they had a front-row seat.

“My cover was Sacred Heart.” She cleared her throat. “All three of us. Officially we were processing the kids who couldn’t be reunited with their families for whatever reason. I compiled official reports, took stats, then tried to place the kids with the agency I felt best suited them.”

That something heavy was still in the air and I didn’t like it. Something that filled her voice with an emotion I knew wasn’t joy.

“And,” I led slowly, the word dragging out in a way that made it clear it was a bridge, not a question.

“And today I submitted a formal request to adopt a baby girl I placed with them.”

You could have knocked me over with a feather. I sat there with my mouth open, eyes wide, and Bailey nudged my leg a few times before I even realized he was there and reached out to pat his head.

“You’re insane.” That wasn’t at all what I’d meant to say—I’d thought it, but I’d intended that to be an inside voice sort of thing...and now it was out there and she looked hurt. “You’re going to adopt a baby? Madelyn, do you have any idea what that’s going to do to your life?”

Why was I getting so worked up over this?

Oh, right: Because if I’d thought I didn’t have a chance in hell with her before, this really did me in. She’d have less than no time. She’d be exhausted caring for an infant, up at all hours of the night, learning all the new parent things all by herself.

She shrugged slowly, but her face was stony. I could tell I hadn’t just offended her, I’d deeply hurt her feelings.

“I know you’ve spent most of your life being a lot of things to a lot of people.” I took a halfhearted stab at the food on my plate. “You don’t have to be anyone’s guardian angel anymore, VanBuren. You hung up the wings.”

She stood suddenly, grabbed the plate of food she hadn't touched and walked it back into the kitchen. I heard it scrape across the island counter and turned to see her leaning over the island, her arms spread out to brace herself.

"No, I didn't."

I almost didn't hear her.

"You didn't what?"

"Hang up my wings."

What the hell was she talking about?

Bailey gave up on us and flopped down on the floor halfway between Madelyn and me.

"It's who I am, Adam." She still hadn't turned to face me. "Big, scary situations give me purpose and meaning. The adrenaline rush gives me focus. It lets me block out the doubts, the voices, the noises in my head that tell me I'm not good enough, or that I don't get a second act, or that I'm damaged goods and I don't deserve to be loved."

What in the actual fuck?

"I dropped out of college six weeks into my second semester because someone decided what he wanted was more important than what I wanted."

A ringing started in my ears.

"I went to the university clinic for a rape kit. I was completely lucid for the entire exam, so I *know* there was one."

Bile started to rise in my throat and my right fist curled against my thigh. Whether or not she told me his name, I would find out and I would see to it he left the world in agonizing fashion.

“When a cop showed up to take the report, I gave him a very detailed, accurate description. He said I was too calm to be a rape victim, that I should be hysterical and I was dispassionate and clinical, which didn’t make me very believable.”

“What the fuck?” I finally exploded. I couldn’t keep it in any longer.

“When I gave the officer the name, he stopped writing. He went and talked to the doctor and I was left sitting in the room by myself for hours...I was freezing.” She still hadn’t moved. “I don’t suppose I need to tell you the kit and the test results, if there were any, went missing.”

Something about my stance made Bailey nervous and he jumped up, rushing to sit beside Madelyn, tucked right up against her leg, facing me. He was protecting her already.

“You said something about a settlement.” I was reminded of the night she’d clocked the biker at Sammy’s, just before she went to pieces in the parking lot.

“Pyrrhic victory,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t press charges without hard evidence, but my roommate took pictures of the bruising. She corroborated my story to university counsel and I threatened to sue the university for collusion with the

Benedetti family. Mario had a lengthy record of assaulting women, and over and over and over it was hushed up.”

I stumbled back to my chair and sank weakly into it.

The governor. The fucking governor, who was eyeing a presidential run on the Democratic ticket next term, had done this to her. Not only did he have family money, he had the sort of connections that would get and keep him in office by any means necessary.

She pulled in a deep breath. “That’s when I got my wings.”

“Huh?” It was the only word I could manage, and in slow motion she wrapped her fingers around the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

“My wings.”

Words. I had none.

The entirety of her back was covered in an enormous, intricate tattoo depicting a full pair of unfurled angel wings, stretching from the caps of her shoulders all the way down to her lower back, where the tips of the feathers dipped into her jeans.

Sweet mother of God.

“I’ll fucking kill him,” I vowed in a low voice, the words coming out like a snarl.

If she heard me, she didn’t seem to register what I’d said.

“I can’t change what happened to me and I can’t change what happened to her,” she said, shivering a little, “but I can

be her guardian angel. I can keep some of the terrible things from happening to her.”

“Madelyn.” My voice cracked and I stood again, taking swift strides across the space to wrap my arms around her from behind. She flinched at first, like I’d startled her, then relaxed with a deep sigh, sinking back into my chest.

“He’s already dead,” she whispered, tapping the side of her head, “in the ways that count.”

I had no idea what that meant and I didn’t want to push her, but as far as I knew the man in question was very much alive, living in Albany, and still running the state like a crime boss.

Neither of us ate the dinner she’d prepared that night. Instead, I gave Bailey a low command before scooping Madelyn up and carrying her down the hallway to the bedroom that had given me some very impure thoughts while I’d been hanging curtains and putting together the bed.

“I’ll be back,” I said, setting her down on the bed and hurrying back down the hallway to put away the food.

Bailey still sat, firmly anchored to the floor where I’d left him, his tail swishing across the tile in anticipation of praise.

“Good boy.” I smoothed a hand down the side of his head, grabbing the plates filled with food and wrapping them quickly to slot into the fridge.

There was a little kitchen cleanup, but it took only a few moments and quickly I took the dog out to the backyard to do his business before locating his food in the pantry. I fed him

while I finished loading up the dishwasher, then checked to make sure the doors were locked and turned out the lights.

There was a small voice of reason somewhere in the back of my brain, telling me it was a very bad idea to allow myself to be so close to Madelyn when she was in a weakened state. The last thing I needed to do was take advantage of her, even if it was something she indicated she wanted right now.

I didn't listen to that voice, the one that told me I should make sure she was settled for the night and go home.

I listened to the voice that told me Lucy would be fine, since I'd fed her as soon as I got home from the market and put away the groceries.

I listened to the voice that reminded me of how wonderful it would be to fall asleep with a woman in my arms. *Madelyn*. The woman who'd infiltrated my every thought these last months.

The voice that told me I'd have to go to confession on Sunday to fill the priest's ears full of terribly descriptive fantasies and the lucid dreams that plagued me in my sleep.

The room was silent when I crept back in. She was so still in the bed, I thought perhaps she'd fallen asleep in the short time I'd been in the kitchen.

I stood there, stock-still for a long moment. I was conflicted: crawl in with her, or save her from me and go home? This was dangerous. I was choosing to walk into a minefield.

This is going to go badly. You're going to make a very big mistake.

There was a soft rustling noise as she shifted in the bed.

“Oh.” Her voice was soft. “I was sure you’d left.”

“Should I?” I asked hesitantly, frozen to the spot in the dark room.

There was a noise behind me as Bailey sauntered in and Madelyn chuckled when he jumped up on the bed. “You might have to share your spot, Bay.”

I scooped the dog up and set him on the floor, then pulled back the sheet and climbed in. Madelyn rolled immediately toward me, warm and soft, and the instant I had her in my arms I realized she had exactly zero pieces of clothing on.

“Uh...Madelyn?”

“Yeah.” It wasn’t a question. She knew exactly what she was doing.

“Not a good idea. I’m just a guy, you know.”

She fucking snuggled *closer*.

“Madelyn.” My voice was firmer. “I’m not fucking touching you right now, especially not after what you just told me. That would make me a total douchebag.”

“You’re touching me right now.” She giggled, and I had to admit she had me there.

“Technicality,” I grumbled, fighting with myself to keep my hands on the areas of her body that were safe. Problem was, I

wasn't sure there *were* any safe areas.

This was such a bad idea...I sucked in a deep breath and tried to envision things that would kill the predictable reaction to all her warm, smooth skin.

Mangled limbs and injured men.

Listening to Steve talk baby talk to Kennedy...gross.

Grams grabbing my ass.

Well, that last one should have done it but it seemed more likely I was in for a night of serious discomfort. I'd already told her I wouldn't touch her and I wouldn't do it, damn it. Even if she pushed me. Even if it killed me, and it might.

I could feel her waiting for me to make a move and when I didn't she shifted slowly.

“What is this, Adam?”

Hell if I knew.

“Why did you come to check on me?” Her voice was husky and she pushed up on one arm so that I knew she was hovering over me in the dark.

“Go to sleep, Madelyn.” I knew I sounded angry. “I promised I wouldn't touch you and I won't.”

“And if I want you to?” The woman was going to drive me insane. “Tell me why.”

I sighed heavily and squeezed her, careful to keep my hands on just the smooth skin of her back.

“You mean something to me. You always have.”

She was silent, like she was processing, and the air shifted as she lowered herself back down, resting her head on my shoulder. She sighed again, but it wasn't a sound of discontent, and pressing her face into the side of my neck, she kissed me there and made a soft hum against my skin before she went to sleep.



When I woke, it was to someone licking me. That was weird, since Lucy was a cuddler, but she didn't slobber all over my face.

There was a soft noise in the bed behind me and I popped one eye open, nose-to-snout with Bailey, catching him in mid-lick as his tongue shot out to drag up my nose. I made a snorting sound, startling the dog as I dragged a hand over my face and suddenly I was just conscious enough to realize how very comfortable I was. The bed was soft, the thin blanket draped over my body was keeping me just the right temperature, and...oh. That was the other reason. There was a warm, naked woman wrapped around me from behind.

I hardly dared move. Instead I lay there, trying to breathe in the scent of her skin and hair as she mumbled something against my back while she slept.

She'd thrown an arm over me and I reached carefully to take her hand in mine without waking her. I didn't want to break the moment, to wake her and make things heavy and

awkward, and when I felt her stretch and sigh behind me, I snapped my eyes closed and pretended to be asleep.

I could feel the change in her breathing and knew she was awake, and she cuddled closer for a long moment, tucking her knees up behind mine, something that made my heart hurt. I'd never received any tenderness from Madelyn because I hadn't been looking for it. I'd denied myself, and to receive it from her even in small measures made me feel weak. She was giving me what I was supposed to give her.

Soft lips pressed a warm kiss through the back of my t-shirt and I ached in places that hadn't known a woman's touch for a very, very long time.

Slowly, carefully, she unwound her body from around mine and with a gentle squeeze she removed her hand from mine. I could feel the bed shift and almost passed out when she walked around the bed, completely naked, and into the bathroom.

Holy shit, that woke everything up.

I was so shocked, my eyes were still wide open when the door opened again and she sauntered out, treating me to a view that made me gasp.

"Morning," she said sweetly, rounding the bed again and crawling in beside me, cuddling right back up behind me.

"Holy shit, Madelyn," was all I could say for a long moment. "You sure do know how to wake a man up."

She chuckled behind me, her nose pressed between my shoulder blades, and she kissed me again through my t-shirt. “I love Bailey, but this is much better.”

Telling me, woman.

By the time I worked up the courage to roll to face her, she was lying on her side facing me, a hand tucked under her cheek. The blanket covered all the parts I was really interested in seeing, but the vision was seared into my memory as it was.

I reached out and tapped a fingertip against the pronounced white scar beneath her collarbone, in the soft tissue between her chest and her arm.

“Sniper fire,” she said matter-of-factly, then pointed to another scar on the underside of her arm.

“Total?” I asked quietly and she screwed up her face in concentration.

“Five bullet wounds, two mystery scars—probably flak—two knife wounds, and you already saw the spot where I opened myself up on the rocks.”

I really wanted to see that scar again, especially now, to trace it with my lips and tongue.

Like she read my mind, she slipped her fingers under the sheet and pulled it all the way down to her hip. “And one kayak paddle, of course,” she said with a small smile.

The last thing I needed to do was lie there and stare at her, but I couldn’t help myself. It was the vision I’d entertained for almost as long as I could remember, and I had no doubt my

brain would resurrect this moment again and again as I laid in my bed alone at night.

“I’d like to meet her,” I said suddenly, surprised that was the thing to come out of my mouth, and a huge smile stretched across her face. She knew what I meant.

“I’d like you to meet her too. I was planning to go again today if you’d like to come with me.”

Lying in bed with a naked woman I’d sworn not to touch, asking to meet the infant she wanted to adopt without me... that was the beginning of the end.

Madelyn

Maybe it should have embarrassed me that Adam didn't readily respond to my bold overture. There had been only a handful of times in my life I'd gone after a man I wanted, and I'd never been turned down, but I'd never wanted anyone the way I wanted Adam and to think of him rejecting me was one of the scariest things I could imagine.

Adam's response to me had been at odds with his words, considering what I felt when he rolled up behind me during the night, and he'd grunted in his sleep when I wriggled against him.

Adam Beckman was the unicorn in fairy tales: gorgeous, honorable, hard working, humble and protective. And damn it, if I couldn't seduce him into being mine, I was going to have to find some other way. The problem was that I wasn't sure there *was* another way. He seemed like the sort who didn't play.

I fed him breakfast and he made coffee, then I rode with him to his place. He showered while I laid on my back in the

living room and let Lucy terrorize me. She was tiny and adorable, a miniature terror who let out a squeaky, attention-seeking meow every time Adam walked into the room.

“I get it, girlfriend,” I said gently to her after he’d set her down and hurried off to the bathroom to shower. “He makes *all* the girls that crazy.”

The little black cat wore herself out dive bombing my feet and finally she stretched out across my stomach, where I lay in the ray of sunshine shining down through the large window.

“You two are a pretty picture.”

My eyes snapped back open. I must have fallen asleep again, because Adam stood in the opening that led to the kitchen. There was the sweetest smile on his face, his wet hair pulled back into a knot secured by an elastic.

Something had changed between us. There was a new current of gentle understanding running between us, something that felt like a communication that didn’t require words. It was something sweet, like we’d been in tune with one another for years and for a moment I wondered if we had. Maybe we’d finally gotten out of our own way and unblocked something, a frequency of sorts.

I didn’t have to direct Adam to the facility. He was even more familiar with the town than I was, and that it was across the parking lot from the church we’d both attended most of our lives made it pretty easy for him to find.

Sister Theresa Grace was the one to buzz us through that morning. She looked like she'd had something sour for breakfast, an unpleasant almost-sowl on her face that seemed to be her natural expression. But I tell you what, the instant she saw Adam standing behind me that scowl dropped right off her face: slid down her chin and disappeared.

“Madelyn!” she exclaimed in surprise as she eyed him up. “I had no idea you were bringing your young man with you. This is...a singular surprise.”

I had no idea what that meant, and whether it was good or bad.

I also had no idea where she'd gotten the idea I had a “young man.”

“Adam wanted to meet Mary,” I said, gritting my teeth against the name. *Daniela*.

“Yes, well...” She very nearly resumed her scowl. “I see no harm in that, dear. It will bode well for you with sister Emanuelle, that you have an intended. It's not something I should tell you, but she has expressed some concern that your situation does not reflect the...well, the sacred family unit.”

Adam must not have caught that nuclear bomb of a word, *intended*, because he didn't seem at all surprised, whereas I was rocked by a bolt of cold adrenaline.

Suddenly Adam was all charm and flirtation: “Sister, my sweet girl has told me wonderful things about what you've done for these children.” He gave her an astonishing smile that

probably fried her synapses, because I was sure I smelled smoke. “I’m certain the reason she’s felt such devotion to baby Mary is a direct reflection of the love she feels these children are given, and that she wishes to continue to provide the baby with the care she’s learned from you.”

I almost gagged. He was pouring it on thick and I wasn’t sure why, unless he could sense something I couldn’t.

My sweet girl? Oh Beckman, you can call me that whenever you want.

“Well...” Sister Theresa still had a look on her face like something smelled bad. “I shouldn’t tell you this in so many words, but...” She scooted closer to Adam and laid a hand on his arm. “Sister Emanuelle runs a tight ship and she has certain standards.” She cleared her throat and her eyes darted around the room like someone was going to pop out of hiding and jump-scare her. “Madelyn will not be approved to adopt, being an unmarried woman.”

I felt all the blood drain from my head.

“I can’t adopt her because I’m not *married?*” My voice was about two octaves too high, and there was a weird look on Adam’s face.

“It’s a shame no one thought to ask us,” Adam said slowly, and his words started filtering in through a high-pitched ringing in my ears. “I don’t think Sister Emanuelle was given an understanding of the full scope of the situation.”

Sister Theresa had stepped across the room to collect the baby from her crib and, walking right past me, she deposited her in Adam's arms.

I watched something in him melt as he looked down at her little face, and he cuddled her close like she was the most precious thing he'd ever held.

"She's beautiful." There was deep emotion in his voice.

Down, ovaries. Nothing to see here.

Daniela hardly squirmed, content to stare up at Adam with her huge, dark eyes, one little fist in her mouth.

"She would be believable as your child," Sister Theresa said quietly and I must have looked up at her with astonishment or shock in my expression, because she shrugged like *Just sayin'*.

"She *will be* our child," Adam said with a fierce conviction that sank in even before I processed what his words meant.

Sister Theresa smiled a small, secret sort of smile and glanced at me. "Does that mean the two of you have plans on the horizon?"

Would everyone just stop talking in damn riddles for a second? I couldn't get a read on what was going on, but it seemed like Adam and Sister Theresa were three chapters ahead of me, and with absolutely no questions between them about the plot twist.

"I'm sorry." My voice was scratchy when I finally took a step toward Adam and found my voice.

“I am, too.” Adam cut in right over me. “We should have relayed our intentions to Sister Emanuelle when Madelyn filled out the application, but we had no idea it would influence the outcome—not that it should have. That’s wildly unfair to this sweet baby.” He looked down at me, his smile blinding, something in his expression that I wanted more of. Tenderness, I think.

“We would like to speak to Sister Emanuelle, to clear up any misunderstandings,” he said in a strong, firm voice and I felt like the earth was crumbling under my feet.

What are you doing? I turned my head to mouth the words so Sister Theresa couldn’t see my face.

The right thing, he mouthed back and my eyes widened in horror. He was going to solve the problem for me, sacrificing himself so I could have what I wanted.

“If you’ll follow me, I believe we’ll find her in her study,” Sister Theresa said with a smug smile on her face.

I trailed after Adam, who still held Daniela in his arms, disbelief clouding my vision and ringing in my ears. This wasn’t happening. This wasn’t the way any of it was supposed to happen.

Sister Theresa rapped gently on the door and a firm “Come in,” rang out from behind the solid wood panel. It reminded me of being called to the principal’s office when I was a young girl, an abnormal panic gripping my heart.

“Way easier than HALO missions, babe,” Adam whispered, kissing the top of my head just before Sister Theresa swung open the door. “You’ve got this, badass.” It made me smirk and lean into him just a little, my heart filling with something that scared me: hopefulness. I didn’t stop to think about why or what that meant and whether it meant hopefulness for something with him, or Daniela, or both of them, but it put a genuine smile on my face right before we stepped through the door to meet the sour-faced old lady I remember all too well. She’d always looked like she was two hundred years old, but additional time had further pickled her features and the same bitter expression she’d always had.

Sister Emanuelle had been the bane of my existence as an eight-year-old. She had been headmistress of the small Catholic school I’d attended from the ages of six to nine, when I was officially “uninvited” back to Sacred Heart Elementary, because I was deemed “entirely too much trouble.” In fact, according to the sisters, I’d invited the devil into my heart, leaving no room for the Holy Spirit’s gentle corrections.

To be fair, I’d earned that reputation pretty hard. I’d been the kid to lead others into temptation. I was the one smuggling in fireworks to light in the girl’s bathroom and slipping fat, slimy frogs out of my pockets and into the teacher’s desk drawer. I was trouble and I knew it, but in my mind I wasn’t doing it to *be* trouble. It was just fun.

It *was* fun, until my parents were called to collect me from Sister Emanuelle’s office for the eighth or ninth time, which

was when I made the unsanctimonious transfer to the local public school.

Public school hammered most of the spirit out of me over the years, though that was probably less the fault of public school and more the fault of Leia Batabor, the Filipino girl who arrived three weeks after I did, and made my life a living hell. Her neurosurgeon father had done something to lose his prestigious position in the Columbia University hospital network and found himself relegated to our little backwater hospital, something Leia punished me for from the fifth grade through our senior year of high school.

“Ms. VanBuren.” Sister Emanuelle’s voice was just as sharp and unpleasant as I’d remembered, even three decades later. Some things just stuck with you, like the fact she still had a tremendous wart on the left side of her nose that made her whole face look lopsided and like it was about to slide down her neck.

If you’d asked me at nine, I’d have told you that wart was what made her so pissed at life and now, thirty years later, I decided I maintained that opinion.

“Yes, sister.” It wasn’t a challenge to sound meek, because the woman still scared the shit out of me.

Daniela began to stir ever so slightly in Adam’s arms and Sister Emanuelle looked put out, so I held my arms out. When he carefully nestled the little bundle in my arms, I put her right up to my shoulder to bounce her gently.

“I understand you have something of an attachment to our youngest ward.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

There was that look again.

“I have reviewed your application, my dear.” Her tone suggested I was anything to her but dear. “I’m afraid I feel you are not positioned as the best applicant for a number of reasons.”

There were more applicants? The thought filled me with more than alarm, it made a cold panic start to twist my guts.

I couldn’t have explained my connection to Daniela if you’d held a gun to my head, but I knew she belonged to me. The thought that I might not have a chance, because Sister Emanuelle considered me the broken half of a whole unit, made my eyes suddenly fill.

“Sister,” I gulped, looking up pleadingly, furious that a tear tracked down my cheek. “I was the one to send her here and I need to be the one to save her. I fell in love with this little girl in a migrant camp.”

There wasn’t an ounce of pity on the woman’s face as she stared me down, and I knew she was seeing an eight-year-old hellion with tangled hair and a scraped knee.

“Sweetheart.” Adam’s voice startled me when I realized the endearment was meant for *me*. “Why don’t you take her back for her bottle and sit with her for a while? I believe the sister and I need to catch up.” He caught my eye, seeing all the

words of protest that piled up behind the lump in my throat, and he leaned over to kiss my temple in a gesture that would have seemed tender to anyone looking on. I was pretty sure it was just a show, though I didn't know why.

“I'll explain everything to her.”

I rose carefully, Daniela squirming just a little against my shoulder, and he squeezed my elbow before Sister Theresa opened the door and led me out into the hallway.

“I'll have a bottle prepared,” she called, bustling down the hallway, which I took to mean I should take the baby back to her room.

Daniela and I settled into the rocking chair in her little room, where I fed her the bottle, burped her, and we rocked until I lost all sense of time, lulling her into a nap filled with sweet little kitten snuffles and tiny baby gurgles.

She was tiny for her age, estimated at only three months old, but still in newborn clothing. I suspected her teenage mother had given birth to her during the long walk from Venezuela and wondered not for the first time if the girl hadn't died of dehydration, but of complications from childbirth. She'd been small, slight and lovely, with narrow hips, and I had a feeling her daughter would take after her.

It was a long time before I heard the faintest noise in the hallway and I looked up to see Adam leaning against the door, a sweet expression on his face as he watched the two of us.

“I don’t want to put her down,” I confessed in a whisper, my eyes dangerously close to filling again and he crossed the room quietly, squatting down in front of me.

“The home study will be conducted in three days,” he said softly. “I’ll keep Bailey at my place so he doesn’t spook the social worker. There will be some questions, some might be a little uncomfortable, but I have a good feeling about this.”

My forehead pinched a little and my eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What did you do?”

“Only what had to be done,” he said easily, taking the baby from my arms and kissing the top of her head before he held her up for me to kiss, then tucked her into her crib.

“What had to be done,” I repeated suspiciously, double-checking the blanket he’d tucked loosely around Daniela, and I smoothed a hand down her little body before kissing my fingertips to press gently against her chest.

We were outside the building before I could draw a deep breath and instead of walking toward his truck my feet led me across the parking lot, toward the formidable church. He didn’t try to stop me, simply followed me like he knew what I was doing and when I turned slightly to tell him, “I wanted to light a candle for her parents,” he nodded and took my hand.

We both lit candles.

We both slid into a pew, crossed ourselves and said silent prayers facing the altar and the statue of Jesus mounted on the cross behind it. My prayer was longer than his and he waited

silently for me to finish, my forehead wrinkled, eyes closed and my fingers folded so tightly together, my knuckles were probably white. My prayer was serious and he knew why.

I was the one to take his hand as we stepped out of the church and into the warm early summer sunshine, and I squinted as he looked over at me. “What was it that had to be done, Adam?”

He smiled at me, like it was going to temper whatever reaction I fed back to him once he answered my question.

“Well...really, there aren't many things left to do. The sisters have already conducted the necessary background search and I've provided them with the additional information they requested.” We reached the truck and he followed me to the passenger side to unlock the old girl with the set of keys he held in his hand. Then, making sure I was settled and shutting the door behind me, he rounded the front and unlocked his door before crawling in behind the wheel.

“What else?” I pressed. There was more, I could feel it, and the way he rolled his lips in told me that he didn't want to say the words out loud.

“You know what else,” he said gently, and instead of starting the truck he reached over to take my hand. “We have two and-a-half days to get married.”

Adam

I managed to do some quick scheduling swaps with a couple coworkers, which was a real blessing because there weren't more than a couple of us and as of this morning I'd committed myself to a very different life path than the one I'd been on just yesterday. I needed a few days to get things sorted.

Madelyn didn't explode or protest like I'd expected. She'd just taken a stuttering breath, clipped her seatbelt over her lap with her free hand and leaned back against the seat.

In the interest of passing the devoted couple with a stable and loving home test, I brought a few of my things over that afternoon to leave out on the other bedside stand and put into the closet. Once the home study was completed and we were cleared to bring Daniela home, I'd move those things to one of the other rooms or back home. I wasn't sure where she'd want me to stay just yet, and I hadn't asked her, and my mouth had gone and made a really big promise without consulting her or my brain.

For an extra-real touch, I threw a few pieces of my laundry into the open hamper in her bathroom and left the cap off my tube of toothpaste.

She was sitting in the living room when I finished, her back to me as she stared at the dark TV, Bailey at her feet. I could almost hear her brain whirling, plotting and planning, and I thanked God the house had been so recently completed. The arrival of a baby would put everything else on hold for some time.

“I need to buy some baby things,” she said quietly. “I have to look like I’m serious about this. I have to be prepared for her...” She looked completely freaked out, clearly shell-shocked by the fact she’d gone from *No* to *Probably* in the space of an hour.

“Call Kenny and Steve first,” I said and she gasped.

“Adam, what are they going to say? This is crazy. How can we pull this off before the home study?”

Settling onto the sofa next to her, I took her hand and squeezed gently. It seemed to calm her, reminding her to breathe.

“They’re going to be completely shocked and Kennedy will tear around here like she’s off her meds, which is to be expected. She’ll be overjoyed.

“Your mother will flip her shit and demand that her baby girl have a proper wedding—which we can arrange later if you’d like.”

“Your parents,” she said weakly, and I felt a smile pulling at my face.

“Yeah...my parents. They’ll lose their shit too, but in a good way. Hailey’s been telling me for years...” I bit off the end of that sentence real quick, because it was something she wasn’t ready to hear.

“Telling you what?” she asked absently, pulling at her bottom lip with her other hand.

“Oh, you know...that I needed to get married and I was running out of time.” My smile had grown tight on my face, because that was only half of what Hailey had told me.

You’ve been in love with that VanBuren girl since you were kids. She’s a good woman, Adam, and I’m not out of line when I tell you I know she feels the same way about you. Do something about it. Do something before it’s too late, because another man’s not going to be half the fool you are—he’ll snap her up.

I knew that to be true. I’d watched the way men’s eyes followed Madelyn and though she didn’t belong to me, I had to work to keep my lips from curling into a threatening sneer or my eyes from narrowing, because I wanted to jump in and shout “Hands off” every time, even though she wasn’t mine to claim.

“Tomorrow we’ll get a license from the courthouse and I’ll make an appointment with the JP,” I said matter-of-factly. “You’ll remember him...that kid who used to blow up his

lunch bag on the bus and pop it every day? Scared the shit out of you.”

“Fucking Gary Torvald,” she answered with a wrinkled up nose. “That kid was disgusting. He used to pick his nose and wipe his finger under his desk in homeroom. The teacher made us switch assigned seating three times that year and no one wanted his desk. Mr. Balantine made him carry it with him to his new spot each time.” She chuckled as she remembered. “Are you really telling me Gary’s a Justice of the Peace these days?”

“Afraid so,” I answered. I’d had no idea about the boogers. “Hopefully he doesn’t pick his nose anymore—at least not in public.”

She made a face. “I’m not shaking his hand.”

“Good idea.”

I waited a beat, until her expression was serious again.

“After that we’ll head down Main Street and get some simple bands. This has to look real.”

Her face fell when I said that and I hurried to explain.

“I mean...you know, we have to make this real for Daniela.”

She nodded slowly. It looked like she was having a hard time processing the twist I’d thrown at her, but if anyone was up to a challenge it was her.

We swung by my place again to pick up a few more things and she smiled when Lucy squeaked and tried to climb the leg of my pants.

“Can we bring her?” she asked, scooping up the little ball of fluff, cuddling her close, and I loved that Madelyn loved my cat. I hadn’t been much of a cat person when I took Lucy in, but the devious little sneak had wormed her way into my affections with her funny personality. Bailey had taken to her too, during the time he’d been with me, and it was obvious the little shit ran the joint.

I threw some clothes and more toiletries into a bag—I’d forgotten soap, I noticed—then grabbed Lucy’s dishes and food container. It was possible this meant Madelyn wanted me to stay, at least until our farce proved effective, and I’d be lying if I tried to tell anyone I wasn’t looking forward to the days and nights we might spend together. The picture of domestic bliss was a pretty one in my head.

She helped me hang up clothes in the closet and since she didn’t have a lot of clothing herself, I was able to claim a set of dresser drawers. I’d only brought a duffel bag, and the meager five pairs of underwear I’d shoved into the top drawer didn’t look very convincing, so I announced I’d bring more that evening.

“You’ll have to actually sleep in here for a couple days,” she said and I thought her voice sounded nervous. That was weird, because she hadn’t been at all nervous the night before.

“They’ll know if you’ve been staying in one of the other rooms.”

I didn’t ask how or why someone would know, mostly because I didn’t want to stay in one of the other rooms, and I nodded my head quickly in agreement. I was going to suffer through this. Being so close to Madelyn all the time was going to be a problem, especially in light of the stupid promise I’d made to her and myself. It made no sense that I’d promise not to touch her and then tell the nuns we were getting married, but I was in it now. There was no going back.

“I suppose we have no choice but to tell our families,” she said slowly, hauling her phone out of her back pocket, her fingers flying over the tiny keyboard. Then pausing. “Let’s do it together, all at once. Dinner tonight. I mean, at least Steve and Kenny and your parents. I’m going to have to call mine, since they moved to the other side of the continent.” She rolled her eyes.

“Maggie’s?” I asked hopefully, and she grinned.

“Duh. Beer and tacos for my new fiancé,” she teased. “The perfect ending to one of the craziest days of my life—and that’s saying something, Beckman.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, sweetheart.” I grinned at her, something genuine that filled up my chest with sunshine. I hadn’t felt so hopeful, so excited about something that was probably *so wrong*, in a very long time. Who cared how we’d gotten here, as long as this thing happened.

Unsurprisingly, Bailey was delighted to see Lucy again. He threw himself down on the floor in front of her and let her rub her little face all over his. Then she completed a circuit of his body, leaning up against him and purring, stopping to mark him by rubbing her face against him in intervals.

“Ok, so here’s the problem...” Madelyn chewed on her bottom lip for a second. “I have exactly zero doubts that someone’s going to contact our family members as a part of this process. Everyone—Steve and Kenny, your parents, my parents—everyone needs to think we’re so wildly in love that we just can’t wait another minute. This can’t look like we’re being underhanded.”

I nodded, but inside my head the words were frantically swirling in an effort to get out. *That won’t be a problem for me. I won’t have to work at all to make this believable.*

Madelyn blew out a shaky breath. “Kenny’s going to be the toughest sell. She’s not going to believe this for a second—it’s too rushed. I don’t know how we’re going to pull this off.”

“Breathe, VanBuren.” I stepped forward and smashed her into my chest because I couldn’t stand to *not* touch her a second longer. “We’ve got this, cupcake.”

I felt her lips curve up against my shoulder when I said it and she chuckled. “As far as nicknames go, I don’t hate it—but don’t let anyone hear it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I let her step back, though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

She made a face but she didn't say anything, just shook her head like *What am I going to do with you?*

Her phone dinged suddenly and she blew out a big breath. "Kennedy says yes to Maggie's. She's told Steve to take off work early to meet us there at four. Apparently I have a big announcement." Her eyes narrowed as she stared at the screen. "How the hell would she know I have a big announcement?"

I chuckled, stepping forward to hug her again, because holding her was like taking a hit of heroin: it fucking lit me up every time.

"Better go get cleaned up, cupcake. Suppose we should look the part if we're springing such a big announcement on our nearest and dearest."

"You realize we're doing a penance run at dawn, right?" she teased as she turned to walk out of the room. "Because tonight I'm totally celebrating our fake marriage and eating my weight in tacos."

Then she disappeared, presumably to shower, and there were only two words that kept ringing in my ears.

Fake marriage.

She had no idea, but as far as I was concerned there would be nothing fake about this—not on my end. I'd wanted her for too long; now I just had to not screw it up.



It was the perfect early summer afternoon, not too hot or cold, the slightest breeze ruffling the new leaves on the trees. The sun was bright and golden, the humidity of late summer still just a distant threat, and for some reason I had no qualms about lying to the people who were the most important in my life—probably because as far as I was concerned the news was sudden and startling, but the idea of Madelyn being my wife didn't freak me out. As far as I was concerned, maybe it was sudden but it certainly wasn't a lie.

I tried not to dwell too much on the whole no sex thing, because we'd figure that out later. If I could convince her this was more than something temporary, I didn't see any harm in renegotiating that particular point.

We arrived five minutes early, which meant in services time that we were already late, and Madelyn made a startled noise when she saw Hailey and my dad already sitting with Kennedy and Teagan on the patio. Apparently they'd gotten some kind of urgent memo and had decided to show up early, which was a real accomplishment for Kennedy. That woman was going to be late to her own funeral.

“Cheers.” Kennedy lifted a tall, frosty glass as Madelyn sank down opposite her. “I finally got this one to give up the boobs.” She leaned over and kissed the top of Teagan's head. “Thank God, too. Those teeth...it's like stuffing an angry rat in your bra.”

Dad choked on his swallow of beer and Hailey rolled her eyes but smiled. She was used to Kennedy's mouth by now,

and thanks to Kenny's Irish heritage and huge family full of boisterous brothers, she wasn't exactly shy.

"So, Adam..." Dad had finally recovered and his eyes swiveled up to the server who deposited a full glass in front of Madelyn and me before handing us menus. Madelyn took a sip and made an appreciative noise.

"What's the reason for the fire drill?"

"No drill, Dad." I cleared my throat, and the big hand that clapped my shoulder signified Steve's arrival. "Just, uh... wanted to get together with the people who are most important to us."

There was mischief lighting up Hailey's eyes and I knew I was about to give her the scoop of all scoops. I had no doubt the gossip would be around town even before the next mass.

"There are two reasons to call a summit like this," Kennedy announced as she lifted a hand to wave the server over, gesturing toward Steve. "One of them is that the two of you have decided to stop playing and you're finally doing it." She nodded resolutely to cap her sentence and Dad choked again. "The only other reason I can think of is that you've knocked her up. So...either way, doing it."

That was Kennedy, full of class and grace, and only three sips into her drink.

There was a weird smile on Steve's face when I finally looked at him, and his eyebrows raised slowly then lowered again, but he didn't say a word.

“Not exactly either of those things—or that thing,” I said slowly, and Kennedy looked disappointed. “But let’s not rule all of that out just yet.” I grinned at Madelyn.

Hailey started bouncing in her seat like a little kid, reaching across to take Kennedy’s hand like she needed the emotional support for the next words out of my mouth.

“The thing is…” Madelyn’s chair scraped and I felt her lean into my side, so I lifted an arm to put around her shoulders when her fingers wrapped around my thigh. “We’re doing something sort of unconventional—and quick.”

Hailey had a hand over her mouth and she was squeezing Kennedy so hard, the poor woman’s eyes were bugging out.

“We’re getting married at the courthouse on Thursday morning.”

There was an explosion of sound that startled Teagan, who started crying, and Steve leaned over to scoop her out of the high chair.

Dad was slack jawed, Hailey was clapping her hands together and chanting, “I knew it, I knew it!” and Kennedy was holding what were probably the broken fingers of one hand with the other.

“Just in time for the home study,” Steve said so softly that no one but Madelyn and I heard it, and I looked quickly down at her. She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug, so that I knew she’d told him something about Daniela, and probably recently.

Shaking my head tightly at him, he read the *Don't you dare* in my eyes and he nodded once, but I saw the disappointment in his expression. He looked disappointed with *me*.

“Holy shit, Mads!” Kennedy’s face was bright red. “Way to pull one over on us—I didn’t see this one coming.” She paused for a moment, her expression sobering. “Oh, but your mother...” She pulled a real face. “She’s going to lose her shit.”

A collective chuckle rounded the table, because saying something that mild about Mrs. VanBuren’s predictably nuclear reaction was a kindness. She could invent drama where there was none, and launch a guilt trip like it was a military invasion: with speed, precision, and perfectly dialed-in verbal missiles.

“I’ve decided not to tell them.”

That shut everyone up real quick.

“That seems like a bad idea,” Steve said slowly, clearly the other VanBuren expert at the table. He had even more experience with their mother, due to being older than Madelyn, and his teeth were set in an uncomfortable grimace. “When she finds out, and she always does, there will be massive fallout.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“We can have a fancy one later.” Madelyn waved her hand in the air and I knew what that meant: she didn’t want one, and if no one brought it up we wouldn’t talk about it again. Her

fingers squeezed my leg as she said it, maybe involuntarily, like she was reassuring me.

“How on earth are you going to be ready for a wedding in less than two days?” Kennedy squeaked, her eyes wide.

“When’s the last time you even went dress shopping, Madelyn?”

Madelyn looked confused. “I’m not wearing a dress.”

Well, this was an interesting turn of events.

For the first time Steve cracked a small smile. “Only you, Mad.”

“What?” Kennedy looked confused.

“I’ll wear my dress uniform,” Madelyn said, and I couldn’t help but tighten my arm around her, because I loved the idea. “I mean...I can’t give my fiancé a heart attack on our wedding day.”

She had me there, and I decided to keep my mouth shut because if I saw Madelyn in a tight white dress, it might actually stop my heart. The one she’d worn the night we went to the steakhouse had featured prominently in some very inappropriate fantasies already.

Kennedy made a face. “Mads, you can’t. That’s just...”

“Perfect,” I interjected. “I’ll wear my uniform too, badass. I can’t think of a better way to do this.”

“Badass?” Steve grinned at me.

“Cupcake,” I threw out there lamely, and it made him snort.

“Cupcake? For fuck’s sake, Beckman. You went from bad to worse.”

“Fissake!” Teagan screamed and Kennedy leveled her husband with a glare.

“Nice work, VanBuren. Your daughter will know every iteration of the f-word by the time we have her in pre-school.” She sighed heavily before turning her face toward Madelyn. “You and me, sister. Tomorrow night. Bachelorette party.”

Madelyn burst into a deep belly laugh. “Kenny, I have exactly zero friends here. That’ll be a pretty sad party.”

I had some idea it would be an absolute clusterfuck if Kennedy was organizing it. Her entire family would be there, since the FitzSimmons family jumped on any excuse for a party they could find. It took nothing to get those people bombed, and when they were bombed they were *loud*.

“I guess that means I’m getting a babysitter.” Steve sighed deeply. “Can’t let this go unobserved, Beckman. The little woman’s taking out your woman...we have some hell to raise.”

There would be no hell raised. I’d have exactly three beers and be in bed by ten, and so would Steve. He talked a much bigger game than he played these days.

They were taking this surprisingly well, I thought, and when the server appeared with refreshed drinks and a pad of paper, Madelyn and I both ordered platters of their tacos.

If there was such a thing as a flight of tacos, Maggie's did it and did it well. Fish tacos, beef tacos, soft shell, hard shell, spicy, vegetarian... There were four hardshell and six soft tacos on each of our plates and without me even giving Madelyn a look, she whispered to me, "Game on, Beckman."

This woman. It made a huge grin stretch across my face, because I remembered her at fifteen, the first time she'd challenged me to an eating contest. I'd made some crack about her being all skin and bone, gangly arms and legs, and she'd grabbed the stack of pizza boxes out of my hands. Steve and I were known for ordering six or seven pies at a time and eating ourselves into a carb coma after finals week and we'd shown up with seven extra-large pizzas and two two-liters of hillbilly crack, as we called the soda.

Madelyn sat down right on the front porch and ate an extra-large pizza and-a-half while Steve and I watched in astonishment, and I never teased her about being too skinny ever again, because that had been an expensive lesson.

We both finished our plates—practically licked them clean—and Steve gave his sister a knowing smile. It would have killed her to let me win anything. Her competitive streak was so strong, she'd always given as good as she got.

There was no doubt in my mind that Madelyn would match me step for step. I wouldn't gain an inch on her, and I liked it.

Madelyn

Kennedy spent all of the next night trying to worm “the real reason” out of me and I just kept telling her that we’d had a real Come to Jesus talk and decided to stop wasting time. I knew she didn’t buy it for a second, and I worried a little that she’d be disappointed in us once she knew about the home study. I couldn’t risk that information getting out to just anyone yet, though it was killing me not to tell her.

True to form, Kennedy’s idea of a bachelorette party meant inviting people from high school that I hadn’t seen in decades, along with several of her brothers who still lived locally and while they shut down the bar, I kissed Kennedy on the cheek and thanked her for a wild night before driving my pretty sober self back home before ten.

This wasn’t the way I had envisioned marrying Adam, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to fuck it up and show up hung over on my wedding day. If this was all I ever got, I was going to remember every moment of it, even if it was pretend. I had no problems living in a land of make believe for a while.

Adam's truck was in the garage when I pulled in and the lamp was on in the living room. It was weird coming home to someone else and I was surprised to find that I didn't hate it. In fact, it made me feel kind of warm and fuzzy.

Bailey's nails clacked across the floor as he sauntered into the kitchen, pushing his butt up into the air as he dipped into a deep stretch.

"Such a good, handsome boy," I cooed, leaning over to pat his butt and kiss the top of his head. Adam couldn't have had the first clue when he gave me a dog, but that was it for me. I didn't want a fancy car or designer shoes. Expensive jewelry was pointless, but that was pretty obvious coming from the woman who spent \$10 on a six-pack of underwear.

But a dog? Bingo. Bailey was a priceless gift, and that Adam had been training him for me meant even more.

"Every man wants to hear that at the end of the day."

Adam was standing at the other end of the kitchen, in the doorway that led out to the hall. His hair was wet from another shower and he was bare-chested, wearing only a pair of soft joggers that were making my brain flatline.

"Holy shit," I breathed, because I couldn't stop myself. "And every woman wants to be greeted by this when she walks through the door at night."

A small smile touched his lips and he raised one eyebrow. "You saying you think I'm cute, VanBuren?"

Cute was not the word, and I knew I was standing there with a glazed look on my face as I imagined dropping to my knees in front of him and making him groan filthy things when I took down those joggers.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I finally snapped out of it and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. I forced a grin across my lips as I said it, so he’d know I was teasing. “You’ll do in a pinch, but just know I’m making sacrifices.”

“Sacrifices.” His chuckle was low. “Yeah, sure. I suppose you don’t much hurt my feelings, VanBuren. You’re acceptable. You know, by most standards.” He held up two fingers in a microscopic measurement.

I snorted as I uncapped the water, tipping it back. I liked this, the easy teasing, something I knew could devolve quickly into throwing him down on the kitchen floor and kissing him senseless—and to be honest, that was a theory I really, desperately wanted to test but I was pretty sure he’d shut me down like he had the night before.

Turning to put the empty bottle in the recycling bin, I gave myself a little pep talk so I could keep my head on straight. *He’s marrying you to rescue Daniela. He’s doing this for you and for a helpless little girl, so don’t go getting any ideas. He’ll never want the things from you that you dream about from him.*

“You ok?” he asked softly, and I realized the defeated little sigh I’d let out in my head had actually come out of my mouth. “That wasn’t a very happy sound.”

“Yeah.” I pasted a bright smile on my face. “I’m good. I’m just tired—you could say the last couple days have been a lot.”

That made him smile again. “Sure have.”

He looked like there was something more he wanted to say, but he stopped himself and I was incredibly tired, so I didn’t push it.

Bailey followed me down the hallway and flopped on the floor on my side of the bed.

It had taken Bailey all of two nights to figure out he’d lost his spot in the bed and he’d taken it well, alternating between Adam’s side and mine, curled up into a tight little bean on the floor. He couldn’t decide which of us he liked better, though Adam claimed it was me, and already we’d contacted the trainer about holding a special session to teach us how to introduce the baby to the dog, because already we were living in hope. It was something bright shared between us, and I got the feeling he was as excited about it as I was, which was weird. He’d adopted my dream so quickly, I half worried at some point he’d wake up and realize he’d made a stupid mistake.

Steve must have let it slip to Kennedy, because she’d been busy all day, calling in favors and getting in touch with friends who had announced they were done having children. Thanks to her and her network of friends, family and professional contacts, she and Hailey had shown up that morning and transformed one of the bedrooms into a nursery.

Adam had jumped right in to take directions, rolling out a rug, hauling in a dresser and a changing table, setting up a bassinet on my side of the bed in my room—*our room*—and carefully hanging things on the walls.

Hailey put him to work washing the several bags of baby clothes she'd brought over and he sat on the floor with her to fold tiny onesies straight out of the dryer, tucking each new stack carefully into the drawers.

“You really do go big, don't you Mads?” Kennedy teased as the two of us stood in the doorway watching Adam and Hailey. “The guy *and* the kid? You sure don't let any moss grow. Bet Grams will have something real interesting to say about this.”

I hoped Steve hadn't let my confession slip, that Adam was marrying me because the sisters wouldn't give me Daniela unless I had a husband. I was afraid it would make Kennedy angry enough to stop giving money to the home, and my hurt feelings and general outrage weren't so important in the grand scheme of things that more kids needed to suffer or go without.

That afternoon we sneaked out to get our marriage license and Adam said he'd called in a favor with Gary, who could squeeze us in at 11:30 the next morning.

We strolled down Main Street, his arm protectively around me, and I could have sworn he bit back a snarl at the man who'd given me an appreciative nod.

When we ducked into the little jewelry store, the guy behind the counter greeted Adam by name, a big smile on his face. It didn't surprise me. After eight years back in town, Adam knew everyone and they certainly knew him, and the guy kept assuring Adam he would give us "the best deal" as we looked at simple gold bands. We'd agreed that fancy was unnecessary, money better saved for future doctor appointments and toys.

That night I took a change of pajamas into the bathroom with me and shut the door. I didn't like wearing pajamas during the summer, because I was a hot sleeper, but Adam's reaction to me two nights earlier had been enough to convince me that I'd either crossed a line or he didn't feel the things for me that I felt for him.

That seemed a pretty likely scenario, now that I thought about it. Of the times he'd commented on how nice I looked, he was just being nice, because Adam was a nice guy.

Of the times he'd hugged me, it was because he could sense I needed a hug and that was what he did. Adam Beckman was kind and thoughtful, protective and caring. I was like a little sister to him—of course I was—and he wouldn't let anyone hurt me or get in my way.

Toweling myself dry after a quick shower, I sighed again. Of course that was the case, and I was just going to have to accept it for what it was and be thankful if he decided to stick around for a while once Daniela arrived.

"I heard that sigh too," he called, his voice muffled by the bedroom door, and I chuckled to myself.

The truth was that I was trying to talk myself out of being attracted to Adam, because it had always been an uncomfortable truth and now that we lived under the same roof, even if it was only for a short period, it seemed likely that I was going to make things awkward.

Like he had the last two nights, when I crawled into bed he reached out and pulled me right up against him, tucking my head into his shoulder.

It was when he did things like that that it made me all melty. The pit of my stomach felt funny when he did sweet things, and it always made me question for a moment whether he was just being nice or whether he liked the closeness.

“Sleep well, Mrs. Beckman,” he said sleepily into my hair, and my eyes snapped back open. I reached for the hand he had curled around my stomach and brought it to my lips so I could kiss his open palm, then I tucked it into my neck, beneath my chin, and smiled my way into sleep.

I've wanted that last name since I was ten.



Apparently we were a very non-traditional couple, because when we woke the next morning we didn't panic about seeing one another on our wedding day.

We both pulled our uniforms out of the closet and laid them out on the bed, inspecting them for wrinkles and giving our boots a good polish.

He made coffee while I put together a quick breakfast, and while he got dressed I cleaned up the kitchen, fed the dog and the cat, and stared out the huge windows into the beautiful yard filled with early morning sunshine. It was our wedding day and there were butterflies in my stomach for no good reason other than that by the end of the day I could call Adam Beckman my husband.

The smile slid off my face as I stood there sipping my coffee, the cold realization washing over me yet again that Adam was marrying me for Daniela. He would be my husband in name only, and it hurt my heart more than a little to think of the day when he'd announce that we were settled and he'd be on his way.

“Hey, what’s that look for?”

I startled when big arms wrapped around me from behind and I leaned my head back against him. I’d gotten used to it in just a few days, having him here, having him dialed into my looks and sighs, knowing that God broke the mold and I would never find another man like this one.

“Just taking in the situation.” I tried to keep my voice light, finishing the coffee and reaching out to slide the cup onto the nearby counter. “We’ve made a lot of really big life decisions this week.”

“Good ones, I hope,” he said, and he slipped one of his arms out to tuck my hair behind my ear, pressing his face up alongside mine as he cuddled me close.

That. Things like that. I couldn't take it when he was all sweet and gentle with me, like he genuinely cared. It hurt my heart to think of opening up to that, learning to expect his kindness and his gentle ways and then to lose them. To keep my heart walled off would hurt less, even if it meant I experienced less.

“None of these decisions were bad ones,” I said quietly, letting myself sink into his embrace and trying to commit the feeling of his arms around me to memory for the days and nights I wouldn't have him anymore.

He hummed a sound of assent in my ear and I reached up over his shoulders to hug him in reverse. My hands drifted over the back of his head to slide down his glossy hair, toward his neck, and I gasped. “Adam!” I jolted out of his arms and spun to face him. “What happened to your hair?”

That long curtain of thick, black, glossy hair was nearly gone.

“I had to keep my hair pretty short back in the days I wore this uniform,” he said softly, running a self-conscious hand over the hair that barely reached his chin. “It seemed disrespectful to wear it with long hair.” He looked a little apologetic. “I just kind of took the buzzer and...well, it feels weird. Does it look weird?”

“It's just...it's...” I couldn't stop staring, it was such a foreign thing. “I'm not used to it, that's all. I haven't seen you with short hair in a really long time and I wasn't expecting it.”

What I *really* hadn't expected was Adam in his dress uniform, and it was hot AF. I wanted to throw him on the kitchen island and give him some idea of just how much I appreciated it.

He was disappointed with my response, I wasn't sure why, but I could see it in his face.

"I should have just kept it the way it was." He dropped his gaze. "You don't like it."

The tiniest flicker of hope flared to life in my heart, because it seemed like he cared about my opinion.

"Yeah, you're right," I teased. "Wedding's off because you cut your hair." His eyes snapped up to mine in surprise, like he thought I was being serious.

"Are you crazy?" I smiled, taking his chin in my hand. "I don't care about things like that; I'm not that shallow. This...I see this." I tapped his heart gently with my index finger before gesturing to his face and admitting with a grin, "But this has never made me cry myself to sleep, either."

He dropped his face quickly to leave a kiss in my palm and my body flared with the most inconvenient need. "Go get dressed, Mrs. Beckman. We have a wedding to attend, and call me crazy, but I don't think they can have it without us."

I nodded and hurried to the back of the house, where my ABU waited for me on the bed.

I had no such qualms about long hair, but I worked mine into a loose French braid and pinned the end under so that it

wouldn't trail below my collar and I could still fit the maroon beret on my head. It was likely the last time I'd wear any of these things, and I smoothed a hand over the uniform that symbolized the passage of a significant portion of my life. There were a lot of terrible memories associated with this uniform, but a lot of good ones too, and those memories made me who I was.

Adam's lips tipped up in a small grin when I walked back into the kitchen. "I've never seen you in your uniform before, VanBuren."

I'd kind of been hoping he'd call me Beckman again.

"You would not *believe* how many I tried on before I decided this was just the right fit." I grinned back at him. "I knew it was the one the minute I put it on, so I said yes to the ABU."

"You're ridiculous, Beckman." His grin was sweet.

There it was, like he'd already gotten used to it. I loved it.

He lifted his arm like I was meant to take it, but instead I stepped close and threw my arms around him. "I'm just gonna scooch in real close like this for a second," I whispered, and I loved his warm chuckle in my ear. "Seriously, Adam. This was—is—a big deal, and it's a huge sacrifice on your part, so thank you. I promise to do the best I can for as long as you want to be around me."

That last part hurt.

“Why wouldn’t I want to be around you?” *Oh, so he saw through that one.* He pulled back, keeping his hands on my shoulders, and the lump in my throat was so thick that I couldn’t respond. Instead, I waved a hand in the air like I was shooing away the very thought and I managed to croak, “Come on, soldier. We’re going to be late.”

He was the consummate gentleman, opening the truck door to help me in and closing it behind me. Then he drove us the short distance to City Hall, where we parked in the small municipal lot. Kennedy’s SUV was already there, as was Mr. Beckman’s beaten old truck, and I pulled in a deep breath.

“Having second thoughts, Madelyn?” Adam’s voice was low, no hint of teasing in it.

“You?” I asked, looking worriedly over at him as he adjusted the hat on his head.

“Not one,” he said firmly, and I melted a little. Maybe there was just a little hope he was in this for personal reasons, too.

I was getting everything I wanted in the space of a couple days. It was too good to be true and it scared me a little, to think that it was a fluke or that I’d owe some kind of cosmic debt when the universe got around to balancing her books.

Kennedy pounced on us when Adam opened the main door to usher me into the building: “You’re coming with me.” The tone of her voice made it clear there was no arguing allowed, and she shooed Adam away. “Go find Steve—he’s sitting on the bench with T.”

Dragging me into the bathroom, Kennedy threw her large tote down on the counter. “This is exactly what I was afraid of. For fuck’s sake, Madelyn, it’s your wedding day and you look like you’re ready for roll call.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wearing this to get married,” I protested. “Members of all branches of service get married in their uniforms all the time.”

“It would have killed you to wear a damn dress, wouldn’t it?” Kennedy huffed while she dug around in her bag. “Give that man a taste of what’s waiting for him underneath all those clothes.”

I was thankful she wasn’t looking at me, because I felt the heat start to creep up my neck. I’d already given him a sneak peek and he’d flat out turned me down.

“Aha!” She yanked a tube of lipstick from her bag like she’d extracted Excalibur from a rock, and she brandished the bright red bullet.

“Hell, no.” I backed away. “I put on lip gloss, Kenny. That’s enough.”

“I don’t care how flawless your ridiculous skin is,” Kennedy huffed. “Give me the face.”

It was pointless to fight with her. The woman always got what she wanted anyway, something my brother could confirm, and I didn’t dare look as she ran her ring finger over the lipstick and started tapping at my cheeks, then dabbed gently at my lips.

“You trust me?” she asked as she held up a tube of mascara, and I grimaced. I wasn’t very good at putting the stuff on without smearing it all over my eyelids, so I didn’t usually bother because it took so damn long. Still, when she told me to look up, then blink, I did. I was very good at following instructions when I applied myself.

“See?” She turned me to face the mirror and I had to admit my face looked brighter and better rested. The color made me glow just a little, like it was coming from the inside.

The way she was looking at my beret made me nervous. “That stays,” I warned her. “My hair is already beyond regulation length. I wore it like this for a long time to keep from getting in trouble.”

“You little rule breaker.” Kennedy grinned. “Clever workaround, too.”

The way she lifted her right eyebrow made me think she might not be talking about the length of my hair.

She smoothed here and fluffed there, then dabbed a little perfume just behind my ears and in the hollow of my neck.

“We’re going to talk about manicures later, Madelyn. I hope you’ve taken better care of the Promised Land than you’ve taken of these fingernails, or that man is going to need a headlamp and a damn compass.” She shook her head at me and I snorted, because there was nothing wrong with my fingernails or the Promised Land, thank you very much. I’d waxed my way back to the age of eight.

“What if he’s just doing this to be nice, Kenny?” I couldn’t keep my fears to myself.

“I don’t know any man who’d marry someone just to be nice, Mads. Have you lost your mind?”

“You know...” I looked around the empty bathroom, because suddenly my voice seemed awfully loud. “Because I want to adopt a baby.”

I watched the penny drop on Kennedy’s face. It was in slow motion, something that might have been funny if the subject matter were lighter.

“No,” she said finally. “No way. Steve would have said something. He wouldn’t let either of you do that to yourselves if he felt like you weren’t doing it for the right reasons.”

Steve *had* said something to Adam, I was pretty sure of that, because I’d caught the way he’d been looking at him the night before, while we ate dinner.

“You’re not doing this just for Daniela, are you?” she asked, her voice suddenly very soft in the quiet bathroom. “I mean, I know you’d do anything for her in a heartbeat. But that’s not why we’re here today, right? You wouldn’t do that to him... lead him on like that?”

I looked down at my feet and had to close my eyes against the boiling liquid I could feel firing up in my tear ducts. She knew better than that—Kennedy was probably the only person in the world who knew what I felt for Adam.

“Oh, no you don’t,” she whispered gently, able to see right through me. She tipped my face up and carefully pressed the corner of a paper towel to the inside corner of each eye. “Not after we put mascara on those ridiculous eyelashes of yours. Now pull yourself together, woman. There’s a gorgeous man waiting for you down the hall and I am absolutely certain that, in his mind, Daniela is just frosting on the cake. *You* are the cake, you got me?”

I sucked in a shaky breath and nodded gratefully at my sister-in-law. She understood me like so few people did, and for the nine billionth time I was thankful my brother had finally gotten his shit together, and Kennedy finally said yes when he asked her to marry him. Again. For what was probably the twenty-seventh time. She joked that he’d finally worn her down.

Teagan’s chatter carried down the hall as we emerged from the restroom and Steve smiled at both of us as he walked closer with T on his hip. “You two ready? You’ve got a real impatient man there, Mads. He’s about to knock down someone’s door to get this show on the road.”

Kennedy stepped in to take Teagan and I leaned when Steve wrapped his arms around me in a tight hug.

“You’ve made a good decision, Mad. So has he.”

That didn’t make me feel any better, not at all.

Steve tucked my hand under his arm and led me down the hallway, into the room I recognized as the room in which the city council convened.

“Got you two the fancy room,” Gary Torvald crowed from the front, and I cringed. I hadn’t seen the man in decades, but I was fairly sure he’d shove a finger up his nose while having us repeat our vows to one another. He was just taller now.

“Thank you, Gary.” I managed a weak smile and he reached over to sock Adam’s shoulder. It looked like he put some swing behind his fist, but it didn’t budge Adam, who stood watching me like his life depended upon maintaining a laser focus.

“Little Maddy VanBuren.” Gary laughed delightedly. “Never thought I’d see you again. Good on you, Beckman, she’s a real looker.”

Torvald had always had a big mouth and it seemed he hadn’t outgrown it.

Adam’s mouth went tight and I suspected he disapproved of Gary’s inability to keep his opinions to himself. “Don’t have all day, Gary. Would like to marry this woman before she changes her mind.”

He looked serious about that.

Gary ran a hand through his thin, mousy hair and gave me a lecherous wink that made my ovaries threaten to shrivel up and die. When Adam’s nostrils flared, I knew he’d noticed.

Steve and Kennedy settled on chairs in the front row and when Teagan slipped off Steve’s lap and toddled over to Adam, he scooped her up with a smile.

Adam's parents sat in the front row as well, on Adam's side, and Hailey was already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

"This a problem?" Gary gestured toward Teagan, and Adam's eyes narrowed.

"Never a problem. This is my best girl—was my best girl. Now she's my *other* best girl." He gave her a kiss and me a wink.

"Ok, ok. Just checking." Gary cleared his throat and glanced down at some note cards he held in his hand. He launched into what seemed like an impromptu speech about how he'd known me growing up, but he'd only gotten to know Adam—who was older than him—when he moved back to town post-Army.

Since Gary's personal recollections were few, it didn't take long to get to the vows and he fumbled through the cards for a second before he announced, "I almost forgot!" He slapped his forehead exaggeratedly. "Adam, you wanted to personalize the vows?"

My eyes widened, because I hadn't known to prepare anything and I wasn't very good at winging things involving words.

Adam leaned over to set Teagan down and he directed her toward Steve with a gentle pat on her butt. Then he straightened, reaching for both of my hands and he looked into my eyes with such seriousness, everyone else in the room ceased to exist.

“Madelyn Christine VanBuren.” He sighed, like that was the sweetest name he’d ever heard. “I’ll never forget what a pain in the ass you were, growing up.”

Steve guffawed loudly and the sharp slap that echoed through the room was something I’d thank Kennedy for later.

“Always following me and Steve around, trying to figure out what we were doing. If we were going fishing, you wanted to go. If we were going hiking, you’d grab your boots.

“The first time I said I was taking a girl out, I think I was seventeen. You were so *pissed* when I told you that you couldn’t come with me.”

He paused, the smile still on his face, and he made a scooping motion over my cheek with his fingers, brushing my skin gently.

“Then you grew up all at once, and because you were always trying to prove to Steve and me that you were just as good as we were at anything we did, you had to go do one better. I laughed when Steve told me you were heading into PJ school, because I thought that sounded like just the sort of thing you would have done to prove yourself.”

He was looking at me funny now.

“I’ve treated you like my little sister my whole life, even when I didn’t want to.”

I really didn’t want to unpack that statement, because I was pretty sure it would be disappointing.

“Now I understand it was because I wanted to save you for myself.”

My breath caught in my throat at what I hoped was a sweet admission, and I had to bite my lip to keep the smile in. It wasn't my turn yet.

“I will keep you safe, if you'll let me.” There was a ghost of a smile on his face. “You'll never have to fight a battle alone and I will step up and pull my weight. We'll make a home together, with Daniela and Bailey and Lucy, and when you're away on missions, I'll worry every damn second. But when you come back I'll be there, keeping everyone safe and fed and well maintained, because marriage is teamwork. I've learned that from Dad and Hailey—and I can't wait for us to be on the same team.”

“Team Beckman!” sounded from the front row and I knew it was Kennedy, being a cheerleading idiot. I could always count on her for that.

“Well said.” Gary cleared his throat. “Now, uh...Madelyn? Anything you need to say to Adam?”

“Yeah.” I stifled a giggle. “First of all, Beckman, I'll be the one keeping you safe. But that's ok, we don't have to tell anyone else—well, except them, but I think they already know.” I tipped my head to the side. “I'll still arm wrestle you for the last piece of pizza, and I'll get mad when it's obvious you're better at something than I am. But don't expect me to go easy on you; I will compete with you every step of the way.” I had to pause for a second as I moved into more serious territory.

“But you know I’m loyal and I’ll work hard for us. You’ll always know I’ve got your back.” I swallowed hard. There was so much more I wanted to say, but as far as fake weddings went, I was pretty sure I’d already crossed a line somewhere when I’d started admitting all my real feelings.

Gary nodded, like he’d decided I was done and I let him make that call, keeping the rest of what I wanted to say locked behind my lips.

“Got the rings?” Gary asked, and Steve stood, fishing in his pocket before handing the simple bands over to Adam.

Gary directed us through the process and my heart fluttered when I slipped the band over Adam’s knuckle. That thin gold band made him *mine*.

Mine to the rest of the world.

Mine as far as any other woman was concerned.

Now I just had to work on the other parts.

My concern now was finding a way to convince him he’d done the right thing for himself, and I had my work cut out for me. I was determined to make him fall in love with me the way I’d been in secret, soul-crushing, unrequited love with him since childhood.

He’d always been the ultimate man: calm, quietly confident, kind and dependable.

Gary was saying something but I just heard indecipherable noise, because I was too busy soaking in the look on Adam’s face. All I heard was, “Go for it, man—kiss your girl.”

Both of Adam's hands came up to cup my face and he leaned in slowly, keeping eye contact with me as he whispered, "I can't tell you how long I've wanted to do this." Then his warm, soft lips brushed mine gently and I pushed closer to wrap my arms around him, because there was no way I was letting him end it before I was ready—which was never, to be clear.

There was a chuckle nearby, something that made me think the room was growing uncomfortable waiting for us and Adam leaned back, brushing a thumb over my mouth. There was an unmistakable fire in his eyes as he stared down at me, and my stomach flipped.

Maybe this will work after all.

There was polite laughter as Gary made some remark about us being unable to keep our hands off each other and when he announced us as Mr. and Mrs. Adam Beckman, Steve shot me right in the face with a confetti bomb. Thought he was clever, too, but the noise freaked out Teagan and she started wailing.

"The hell did you hide that thing?" Kennedy slapped him upside the head. "You're such a child."

Adam peeled off a piece of confetti stuck to my lip and grinned, then leaned in and kissed my forehead.

Great. Right back in the friend zone. Clearly this was going well.

"Since this was so last-minute, I hope you two aren't expecting anything fancy." Kennedy pulled a sour face and I

knew she was teasing me. Her middle name was Fancy.
“Grams wanted to be here, but she had an important doctor’s appointment this morning, so we’ll swing by to pick her up on our way home.” She paused to give me a hairy eyeball. “That means you’re expected at our place in...” She glanced down at her nonexistent watch. “An hour.” Steve’s eyebrows wiggled when she said it, and my mouth dropped open at what I knew was a bold assumption.

“First of all...” Adam slapped Steve’s shoulder. “An hour? You insult my manhood.”

I had a few questions about his manhood, but it didn’t seem like he’d be sharing anything about that with me.

“Just sayin’, man.” Steve looked inordinately pleased with himself. “Seems you’re both a bit out of practice. Things might take a little *less* time than you’d like.”

As unfortunate as it was, I was most definitely out of practice with anything that didn’t involve batteries.

“Our place,” Kennedy said firmly. “One o’ clock.”

Adam didn’t say a word, just took my arm and led me after Gary, who indicated we needed to sign a few things in his office. We followed him, signing the paperwork he needed to file before drifting out to the parking lot, where Adam unlocked the truck and let me settle before closing the door behind me.

The fact he’d been silent for such a long stretch wasn’t unusual for him. He was a thoughtful person, who generally

weighed things before he spoke. But that he was so quiet now meant he was thinking about how to say something, and that made me nervous.

Getting in behind the wheel, he closed the door and sat for a moment, almost like he was in suspended animation. Then he looked over at me and gave me a sweet smile, turning over the truck's engine before he reached for my left hand and brought it to his lips. He kissed the gold band encircling my finger and shook his head slowly. "Can't say I ever thought I'd do this again."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just nodded like I had every idea what he meant, but really I wondered what the time that stretched between us held in the way of secrets. He surely had some and I had a few...I let my mind wander through that for a moment.

"Did you date much?"

I was going about this all backward.

"In the Army?" His forehead furrowed just a little. "No, and what I did in my younger years wasn't what I'd call dating. Then I met Jess and we decided we liked each other well enough to give it a go...we didn't get into it for the right reasons though, so it ended."

I sighed. I didn't know much about Jess, just what Hailey had disclosed here and there and that hadn't been much, which was surprising considering how much Hailey liked to talk shit. I knew she was still semi-close to Jess, though I'd gotten the hint that was a keep-your-enemies-closer kind of arrangement

and I didn't have to know why, to know that Jess and I would not be friends.

“She lives here, though?” I should have better evaluated my competition in advance, but to be fair there hadn't been a lot of warning. I'd thought Jess was completely out of the picture.

“Oswego.”

That was a yes, as in: too close for comfort, only forty-five miles away.

I was quiet the rest of the ride, letting my arm hang out the window, my fingers trailing through the slipstream of warm summer air as we drove through town. I was lost in thought, paying no attention to where we were going, assuming it was my home, or Kennedy and Steve's place.

When the truck slowed and he pulled into a parking spot, I snapped out of my reverie and looked around.

“The park, Beckman? Why are we here?”

Adam unclipped his seatbelt and got out of the truck, walking around the back this time to open my door.

“You and me, we've jumped into something big and for some really good reasons.” His expression was extremely serious. “We've known each other our whole lives, but we don't know much about the last twenty years. Wouldn't hurt us to spend a few quiet minutes together.”

Ok, tell me something I don't know, big guy.

I hopped out of the truck, removing the hot beret and the stifling jacket before I pulled the pins holding my French braid and ripped out the elastic. Adam's eyes dilated when I did it and his hands shot out automatically to take the braid from me, working his fingers through it to free my longer-than-regulation hair into waves down my back.

So that was his thing: Adam liked long hair. Don't know why that was a surprise...

Almost as if he snapped himself out of a trance, Adam grunted suddenly and ripped off his jacket and shirt, so that both of us stood in the parking lot in boots, pants and tank tops. We had quite the coordinated couple look going on, if you were into armed services cosplay.

"Come on." Adam grabbed my hand and we started off down a path. "Urban legend has it there's a vortex here, somewhere in the park—it's not fixed, so if you find it, it's pretty much by accident."

I'd heard tales of this time warp, but I liked to mess with him: "Better not astrally project me, or whatever, right back into the eighth grade." I made a face, and he stopped walking, turning and lifting his hands to cup my face.

"I wish I could go back and do it right," was all he said, then he leaned down and kissed my forehead again.

The forehead kissing thing had to stop. I'd hoped that with the ceremony we'd graduated to the kinds of kisses adults give one another, with lips and tongues and teeth and the little noises that make your belly flip. But apparently he'd decided

that chaste and grandfatherly was the route for him, because here we were...right back to forehead kisses.

Hadn't he confessed the deep, dark desire to kiss me just half an hour before, when he'd slipped a gold band over my finger and shared his last name?

I couldn't begin to understand him and the way he kept his feelings under wraps. He'd always been quiet and serious, but things were different now. Now he was *mine*. Now he was supposed to let me see all the deep, dark things he kept buried deep inside, even if this thing was sudden. We could adjust, adapt, get used to each other...I hoped.

We walked hand-in-hand for some time, silently, and I wondered if the physical activity helped him to process the things happening in his head. He hadn't looked particularly happy about his partial confession, when he said he wanted to go back and do something right.

When we arrived at one of the park's iconic sets of stairs, he made a half-turn, placed his hands around my hips and quickly, easily lifted me up to sit on the sloping ledge. He stepped forward then, right between my knees, and said, "There were things I couldn't say to you in front of anyone else, because they were too personal."

"Too personal for our wedding?" I teased.

"That wasn't a real wedding and you know it."

Ouch.

My face must have fallen, because he shook his head at me. “I’ve always wanted what I couldn’t have, Madelyn.” Then he tipped his forehead to mine, his eyes closed.

The fuck did that mean?

He was going to kill me with his riddles. The man had always been a vault, but now he was *my* vault, and it seemed I didn’t have a key or the combination or whatever it was that would swing the door open. I was going to have to work hard on this one.

His arms went around my middle to pull me closer, so that I was pressed right up against the front of his body, and with a sigh he tucked my head under his chin. I turned my face so that my ear rested right up against his chest, comforted by the strong, rhythmic beat of his heart.

That was my favorite sound in the whole world: a strong heartbeat. I’d spent too many years of my life listening to heartbeats flutter and skip and stutter, struggling to maintain the rhythm that promised life, and the steady thump-thump of Adam’s heart soothed me on some level that was cell-deep. Something primitive and wordless. Just comfort and warmth and the closeness of the man I’d loved since I was ten.

Since I was ten.

My eyes snapped open and a terrible lump started to spread up my throat, because now I had what I wanted, or so it seemed to the outside world. He had sacrificed himself for a greater good, for Daniela and the fact he knew I wanted to give her a home. He’d always been that sort of person,

sacrificing himself for his country, his family, his patients, then the dogs to whom he gave so much of his spare time and care. There wasn't room left for me. How could I expect him to give more when he'd already given everything he had?

"We're going to be late," I finally announced, and I hoped he didn't hear the sadness in my voice.

He lifted his head and gave me a little squeeze before he dropped his arms, and immediately I felt like I'd lost the most precious thing in the world.

"Thanks, I...I just needed a minute away from everyone else. They can be a bit much, Hailey and Kennedy and Steve...this calms me—you. Nature."

Didn't I know it, though, and now the two of us had to spend the afternoon with them, putting on happy faces when the mood between us was clearly something that didn't call for celebration. Whatever it was, it was heavy and painful, something that felt weirdly like a loss.

Yes, that's what it was, I thought: the loss of my lifelong dream, so close and yet so far away.

Kennedy gave me a sour face when we arrived twenty minutes late to our own party, and I hugged her quickly. It took her a minute for the sisterly ESP to sink in, but when it did she cupped my cheek with one hand and took a depth reading from my eyes. "You ok?"

"I will be." I tried to shrug a little, something that had always been my tell when I was feeling down, and her

eyebrows drew together in confusion.

“This is not ‘ok,’ Madelyn. I know your moods. You’re the X in all of Steve’s chromosomes. You two are so much alike, it freaks me out sometimes.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I was much more serious than Steve, who could turn into a twelve-year-old in a heartbeat. He’d never been capable of maintaining any kind of serious behavior for more than a few minutes at a time. He was the prankster, the big goof who told jokes and teased and laughed loudly, while I worried and planned and observed.

“I’ll figure it out,” I told her quietly, and I had every intention of doing just that. Because the truth was that both Adam and I had only had a few days to get used to the idea of taking vows and maybe it was hitting both of us hard now, probably for different reasons.

There was a clinking noise coming from the dining room and Kennedy grinned wickedly at me. “I do believe you’re being summoned by your adoring public—get your enviable ass in there and lay a good one on your delicious husband.”

Now that was something I could get behind, and Lord knew when I’d get to do it again, if ever, so I hurried into the dining room and plopped down on Adam’s lap. He looked startled when I dove in and twined my arms around his neck, but this time I wasn’t letting him drive the bus. Hell, no. I swooped right in with a hard, urgent kiss, reaching one hand around the back of his head to hold him tight with splayed fingers.

I could feel his resistance to me growing weaker, his lips becoming softer and more pliant under mine and slowly, hesitantly, he opened to me.

Now was not the time to kiss him the way I wanted to, demonstrating the years of longing I'd suffered at the hands of this unobtainable man. The one sitting beneath me, fingers digging into my thigh and butt as I felt him growing hard against my other thigh.

Game on, big guy. I will Wear. You. Down.

“Yow!” Steve hollered, breaking my focus just as I touched my tongue to Adam's for the first time, listening to his breaths turn ragged. “Now *that's* a proper kiss. I almost feel sorry for him—Beckman, you've got your hands full with that one.”

There was polite laughter around the table and I allowed Adam to break the kiss, his eyes glazed when he raised his lids.

It wasn't enough. It was never going to be enough, and I leaned back in to give him one last soft, closed-mouth kiss, giving him a loaded look I hoped he could interpret.

“Good show!” Steve whooped and without breaking Adam's gaze I snatched a cloth napkin from the table, weighted with a napkin ring, and blindly chucked it at my brother's head. For all the PDA he'd subjected me to with his wife, he was going to get some back.

“Just you wait.” I turned my head to stare down my brother. “Clank that glass again and I'll show you things that'll put hair

on your head.”

Adam shifted beneath me and heat rushed to my face. I wasn't small, and I was probably crushing the guy beneath the dense load of muscle and bone that tipped my scale to almost twice what I knew Barbie-tiny Kennedy weighed.

“Sorry,” I whispered softly, which was an apology for crushing him, but not for kissing him.

“No complaints here.” He grinned up at me, sinking his fingers deeper into my hips to keep me from getting up.

“Come on, everyone.” Kennedy clapped her hands together loudly, indicating the room filled with people should help themselves to the buffet she'd set up along the back wall.

“Help yourselves. Most of the seating is outside, in the backyard, but it was easier to set up in here.”

Mysteriously, a small table had appeared in the entryway that had already been piled high with gift bags, envelopes, a few mysterious boxes and stacks and stacks of diapers. I knew I had Kennedy *and* Steve to thank for that. The two of them had spread the word quickly, even before the home study had been completed, that I was adopting and in just a few days they'd pulled together more gifts from friends far and wide to help Daniela.

All of Steve's work buddies had shown up with their wives and kids, and mutual friends of his and Adam's were there, as well their families.

Mr. and Mrs. Beckman were there, along with Grams, who'd been sworn to secrecy, which I was sure meant my parents already knew. Couldn't wait to play Guess the Guilt Trip with my mom the next time she called, which would likely be tomorrow.

It wouldn't matter that the reason had been good, or honorable, or anything at all. It would still be used against me, with astonishing precision.

Everyone knew Adam and everyone loved him. He pulled me close as people sidled up to talk to him, needlessly introducing me to each with a huge grin on his face, as "This is my beautiful wife, Madelyn." It made my heart swell every time, with something that felt simultaneously like grief and hope, because I wanted it to be real—and if this was as real as it could ever be, I wasn't ready to lose it.

Grams took every chance she could to grab a handful of Adam's ass that afternoon, every damn time he had to walk past her, and finally I hollered, "Hey, old lady! Hands off my man!" and when the yard erupted into laughter, I knew people had been watching her grab at him, waiting for me to explode.

It was no secret in Steve and Kennedy's friend circle that Grams was a total lech, and finally someone was calling her out on it.

Innocent as a newborn baby, Grams held her hands up, eyes wide, and I held up two fingers to my eyes, swiveling them to point at her, *I'm watching you*, and she giggled like I was no threat whatsoever.

“I like it when you call me that.” Adam’s voice was low in my ear when he sidled up behind me to cut the small cake sitting on a table under the deck awning.

I liked flirty Adam. He was warm and handsy, but maybe that had something to do with the fact he’d also had five or six beers over the course of the day, which was a lot for him, and I couldn’t decide whether he was celebrating or drinking to forget.

The sun was sinking low in the sky when I heard a startled sound from Kennedy and I looked over to see a tall, gorgeous blonde crossing the yard in the direction of Hailey, her eyes fixed on Adam. I’d never seen her before in my life. She wasn’t one of Kennedy’s friends, and Kennedy wouldn’t have allowed a woman who looked like that to be one of Steve’s friends, and when I felt every muscle in Adam’s body tense, I had my answer.

The blonde barely hugged Hailey before turning toward us with a bright, expectant smile on her face. *Oh, hell. I was going to have to throat punch a bitch.*

“Adam!” Her voice wasn’t the shrill Valley-Girl-laced-Barbie I’d expected. It was low and husky: pure, disgusting sex. “I’m sorry I’m so late.”

She moved toward us with her eyes focused on him like I didn’t even exist, and as she stepped into our space and leaned in to kiss his cheek, Adam smoothly moved us back a step.

“Jess. Kind of weird for you to show up here.” He sounded upset, and Adam never sounded upset. I looked up at him,

trying to interpret what he was feeling.

“This is my beautiful wife, Madelyn.” He smiled when he said it and I would never, ever tire of being introduced that way, even if it was just for show, but especially if it pissed off the gorgeous woman looking at my man with freaking hearts in her eyes.

“Madelyn.” There was a smile on her face, but she said my name like it tasted bad, and when she leaned in to give me a disingenuous hug I wondered if she was going to bite me.

“Wait...” She stepped back and fixed him with a look that would have melted stone. “*Madelyn?*” There was disdain in her voice and I waited for her eyes to flick back to me for the once-over I hadn’t yet gotten, because she’d been so busy eye fucking my man on her way across the yard.

“Sure is.” Adam’s grin was wicked, like he enjoyed the fact the information was frying her synapses. “*The Madelyn, in the flesh and all mine.*”

He sure was a sweet talker when he was talking about me to other people. Too bad he didn’t mean a word of it, because if I pushed him on that “all mine” part later, I knew I wouldn’t like his answer.

“I thought she was in the Air Force.” Jess’s face wrinkled up, and I realized she was determined to talk around me, so as not to include me in the conversation at all.

“Pararescue,” I interjected smoothly, watching Malibu Barbie’s face.

“I don’t even know what that is.” She huffed out a laugh.

“It means she could strap your dead weight to her ankles and land a parachute jump without breaking a single bone.” He grinned. “She can run and swim and bench like a beast, and she’ll dive out of a helicopter to save a drowning man, in frigid water, in the dead of night.”

Adam sounded proud, something that made my shoulders rise just a little, more so when Jess’s face stretched into a sulky expression.

“That does not sound like a fun job.”

“It’s the best job,” I informed her shortly. “I got to save lives and feed the need for the adrenaline rush at the same time. There’s nothing like it.”

“Well...” Adam interjected with a slow drawl that told me he was teasing me. “Except for running a life flight.”

“Yeah, well...” I slapped his stomach playfully. “You take it where you can get it, old man.”

“That’s what she said,” drifted across the lawn and I bared my teeth at my idiot brother.

Jess’s eyes were bouncing back and forth between the two of us like a cat watching a laser dot. “Well...congratulations then.”

The look she was giving me, when she finally looked at me, told me everything I needed to know: the last thing she wished me was congratulations. Death seemed a more likely contender.

Grams caught my eye, where she sat on the large sofa on the deck, with Teagan beside her. She gave me a wicked grin and drew a gnarled index finger across her throat in a slashing motion that made me work hard to clamp down on the snort that threatened to erupt. I could only imagine Grams would slash this woman's self esteem to ribbons with her sharp-as-hell tongue if left alone with her for thirty seconds. Right now that seemed like a pretty entertaining idea.

"Right, then." Jess looked disappointed Adam had kept me firmly anchored to his side and hadn't stepped forward to touch her at all. "Give me a call sometime, Adam. I'd love to take you for coffee or lunch and catch up. I'm in town all the time for work."

"You know, I don't think that would be all that appropriate." Oops, it seemed that was me. "You know, inviting another woman's husband for lunch without her...kind of a morally gray area." I tipped my flattened palm like a scale and she wrinkled her nose at me in obvious distaste.

"I'm not inviting him to do anything inappropriate, *Madelyn*. I just want to catch up."

"I'm sure he appreciates the offer." I smiled, when what I wanted to do was give her a black eye. "It's just that *I* didn't appreciate the obvious offer for a nooner, since I'm a little quicker to pick up on those things."

Her jaw dropped at the same time Adam turned his head away and coughed so hard, I was sure he was laughing.

With a huff, the woman whirled and marched away from us, straight for Hailey, who was watching us with obvious interest and a devious smile on her face. The woman was up to something, I was certain of that...I just wasn't sure exactly what.

Looking across the lawn, I noticed Kennedy pulling a sleepy Teagan from the sofa, where she'd fallen asleep with her head in Grams's lap.

"Ready, then?" Adam leaned right into my ear to say it and, not expecting it, I shivered.

I sure as hell was ready for something, but that wasn't what he was offering.

A weak tinkling started up, growing quickly as people caught us eyeing our escape and decided to get another kiss out of us. It made Adam sigh in a way I hoped wasn't unhappy, and he turned me toward him with a "C'mere, Beckman."

I loved that.

He took my face in both his hands, something I'd begun to think was his signature move, and leaned in. He was gentler and more reserved than I was, as every one of my attempts over the course of the afternoon could have been classified as an attack.

That was Adam, in everything he did: controlled. Reserved. Calculating and cautious, assessing the risk vs. reward, and I wondered what it would take to make him wild. Lose control.

While that would have been a useful personality trait in my prior line of work, I was the thrillseeker: balls to the wall. Heart racing, stomach flipping while I waited for jump clearance, welcoming that spike of adrenaline that came from the freefall.

Everything about Adam was a freefall.

Adam was a purposeful kisser, with soft, full lips that moved gently against my own. He took his time. He didn't rush in like me, opting to drive me to the edge of madness before he progressed to the next micro-step.

The crowd grew restless and someone hollered, "Come on, Beckman. Kiss her like you mean it!"

I suspected Steve had put someone up to it.

With that Adam anchored one arm at the middle of my back and his other hand slid into my hair to support the back of my head as he dipped me backward into what was a deep arch. I gasped in surprise, and he caught my lower lip in his teeth, tugging and nipping before opening his mouth against mine to let our tongues tangle and slide in a wet battle for dominance.

It was a point he wasn't about to concede, and he won because I couldn't hold in the breathy whimper that escaped when he kissed me like that, like he'd been dying to taste me and was drinking his fill.

There were a few subdued whoops from the peanut gallery and my heart sank when I remember Jess was watching.

He's doing it to antagonize her.

When he brought me slowly upright, my heart sank to my feet as he looked over toward his parents. Mr. Beckman saluted us from where he and Hailey sat with Jess, a clear indication we were free to leave without further engaging the enemy, but it made me wonder if he'd been looking for a reaction.

That left us free to make our way toward the deck, where Steve was helping Grams up from the sofa and into the house.

“Hey.” Kennedy’s voice was soft as she came down the stairs. “Don’t forget all your gifts—and let me send some food home with you.”

“Can I come back for everything after the meeting tomorrow?” I asked, wincing just a little. It was a big ask, especially after ducking out on someone who’d thrown us a last-minute wedding reception and rallied all the troops for the baby I was desperate to adopt. Kennedy was a saint, one who could out-curse a sailor, but she had a heart of gold.

“Yeah.” Her smile was sweet and I stepped forward to hug her, squeezing and rocking because I didn’t have the words to convey the thanks I owed her. “We have a ton of leftovers, in fact. Why don’t you two come over tomorrow night for dinner? You can tell us how it went.”

“Thanks, Kenny.” Adam leaned in right next to me and wrapped us both up in his big arms, and Kennedy giggled. “This is a love sandwich and I’m the slice of onion. No one wants an onion in their sandwich.” She wriggled to free herself, a devious grin on her face. “Now get out of here, you

two, before Grams decides to help herself to another handful of Adam's butt. Besides..." She nudged me with her elbow. "I'm sure you have some similar ideas." Her eyebrows started bouncing again.

The entryway was just dark enough that I couldn't see Adam blush, but I could feel it. I heard him swallow hard and wondered if he was remembering the dozens of times people had begun banging on their glasses during the afternoon and evening—Kennedy had made sure there wasn't a plastic cup in sight.

I'd gotten in some good ones over the afternoon and I had to admit to myself I wasn't eager to see the day over. Now we'd establish some kind of temporary new normal and I was fairly certain I would have no such delightful chances to kiss him again—not without blatantly throwing myself at him, which had been historically unsuccessful.

Though we drove in silence, he held my hand the whole way home. But rather than feel the butterflies slamming into my stomach, I got the distinct impression he'd done it to tell me, *We're in this together now*. Solidarity was great, but it wasn't very sexy.

Bailey stumbled sleepily to the door and we both leaned over to pat his solid rump and scrub his ears. He groaned in contentment as he leaned against Adam's leg while Adam rubbed his ears and I scratched that hard-to-reach spot near his tail.

“We make a good team.” Adam chuckled quietly, straightening, and the dog sauntered into the grass to take care of pressing matters.

“Makes the dream work,” I muttered, feeling suddenly, ridiculously down for what was supposed to be the happiest day of my life.

“Yeah.” He stared out into the yard, waiting for Bailey to finish, and I caught the same note of wistfulness in his voice.

“Do you regret it?” I asked softly, kicking myself immediately for the words that should never have come out of my mouth. I was opening a door that shouldn’t be opened.

“Divorcing Jess?” He turned to look at me, and I was surprised that was what he’d chosen, but I could work with that.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Or marrying you?”

Nice diversion, Beckman.

“Uh...both.”

“You’re not the jealous type.” He moved toward me with a smile on his face. “It’s cute.”

“Curiosity isn’t jealousy, and neither of them are cute.” I huffed. I was totally jealous and he was right, that *wasn’t* like me.

“Both things were for a very good reason,” he said, and Bailey came flying toward me from the yard, knocking into

my leg hard enough to drive me backward and Adam's hand shot out to steady me. "And I wouldn't mind...no one's ever been jealous over me." He smiled tentatively, but there was an insecurity in it that I couldn't understand. How he'd fixated on that I wasn't sure, but I didn't know what to say to it.

"I can sleep in the other room," he offered softly, and I looked up in surprise.

"Why would you do that?" That was the last thing I wanted. It was our wedding night, damn it, and fake marriage or not, I had some opinions about how the night should end.

"I made a promise to you." He swallowed hard. "But I also made a promise to your brother."

Thanks a lot, Steve. Butt out.

"I made a promise, too." I waited until he shut the door and flipped the light off. There was just enough light in the kitchen that I could still make things out clearly enough, and I knew he was avoiding me as he filled up Bailey's bowl with food.

"I promised I wouldn't go easy on you, and that I'd be loyal. Remember that pesky part where you're my husband now?"

He turned to face me again, his jaw tight as I considered peeling the tank top over my head. I had very little hope it would work this time, but I was tempted to give it another shot.

"You've promised to love and cherish me," I reminded him, my fingers toying with the edge of my shirt and I knew he

could read my intentions. He swallowed so hard, I could hear the dragging noise in his throat. “And I’ve promised to do the same. So you can call this a pretend marriage all you want...” I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. “But to me this is going to be real.”

I can't tell you how long I've been in love with you.

He stood like he'd been frozen in place and I could feel his eyes burning into me.

“This is a farce, Madelyn. I’m just holding someone’s place for you and Daniela.”

Who the hell had done such a number on this man? I had a suspicion, and it made me hate Jess even more.

“Just so you’re aware of how this is gonna go...” I trailed my fingers down my neck slowly and I watched a shudder ripple through his body. “I don’t believe in divorce—maybe something I should have mentioned before. You’re stuck with me now, Beckman.”

I will make you fall in love with me. Somehow. Please, God...

He ran one big hand through his hair; the only other sound in the room was that of the dog crunching his way through the dish of food.

I stepped forward, lifting my palms to place on his chest and immediately his hands went around my hips. I wasn’t short, but Adam was tall, and I let my fingers drift to the hem of his shirt before pulling the tank over his head.

He was all smooth, warm skin and I leaned close to kiss the curve between his neck and shoulder, something that made him sigh softly. It sounded like desire and resignation, and when I pulled back to look at him his eyes were hard and glittery.

“I can’t, Madelyn, because then I can’t remain objective.”

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“I’m not asking you to be objective.”

That’s the very last thing I want.

I swallowed before lifting my face to his, running my thumb slowly back and forth across his bottom lip. “I’m asking you to stop fighting it and let *us* happen.”

I’m asking you to love me.

With a frustrated grunt he lifted and spun, setting me firmly on the cold marble countertop of the island, and I wished I’d pushed my pants to the floor the moment before.

“You’re going to get me in trouble.” His voice was low and angry. “You’ve always been the one thing I couldn’t have.”

“Says who?” I asked, wriggling closer, wrapping my legs around his waist and hooking my heels into his thighs.

He didn’t answer, just huffed at me before grabbing one hip to anchor my lower body to his, then shoved his other hand into my hair and brought his face down to mine. His kiss was raw and desperate, like he needed to eat me alive, his tongue setting a relentless pace.

I matched him, pushing against him as I gave it back as good as I got and he released his grip on my head, lowering his hand to cup my breast, his thumb brushing gently back and forth and the moan that drifted from my mouth matched the one I heard deep in his throat.

“You want this, Madelyn?” he asked, his words hot against my neck, and I arched into him when his head dipped and he trailed kisses from my throat to the fabric covering my breasts.

“Only my whole life,” I managed to pant, my hips churning restlessly against him. The man had always incited a riot in my chest—and other places.

He stilled and pulled back, leaving me panting and frantic. There was a strange look on his face. “You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do.”

It was true, but I wasn’t supposed to admit it to him. I could feel him hesitating, doubting, pulling away, and I grabbed his hands, placing one over my hammering heart and wrapping the other around my back, so he was palming my ass. Then I tightened my legs around him. “You’re not going anywhere, Beckman,” I whispered. “It’s taken me more than twenty years to get you here.”

He barked out a short, strangled laugh. “Don’t, Madelyn. I refuse to be your disappointment.”

“Disappointment?” I let him go, leaning back on the island against the palms of my hands, letting his eyes wander over my body. I knew what he saw: strong arms, a defined stomach

and thick, firm thighs. Small breasts, supported by a great wall of muscle. I had the body of a twenty-year-old bodybuilder and hell if I was going to let all that hard work go to waste when I had this man here to appreciate it.

Scooting my butt, I hopped down off the countertop and reached around him to grab two firm handfuls of his ass, lifting up just a little to find his mouth again, and I whispered against his lips, “Tell me you haven’t thought about it,” just before I nipped his lower lip with my teeth. I could feel him trembling with the effort of restraint and I knew I was right, but this had to be his decision.

I pressed one last soft kiss to his mouth and trailed my fingers down his chest. “I’m not like her, Adam, and I don’t know what she did to you, but I can guarantee you one thing...” I stepped back slowly, turning to walk from the room. I could hear his heavy breaths behind me as he stood watching me go. “You won’t regret a thing.”

Adam

She was relentless, but I knew one thing: I would regret *everything*, because she was something I couldn't keep.

I stood there watching her walk away, like an idiot. My brain and my body were on fire after what she'd done to rile me up, but something kept me from following. A nagging voice somewhere deep in my brain whispered that I'd wanted this for too long, and I still didn't deserve it, even after all these years...

Had I done this for the right reasons?

Hell, no.

I saw my chance and took it: Madelyn needed to appear happily married in order for Sacred Heart to approve Daniela's adoption, and her need was my gain.

Madelyn was everything now that she hadn't been at seventeen: confident, strong, accomplished, seasoned by time and experience. She'd always been headstrong, but now she was fully grown, that sass turned into a confidence hard-

earned, and the guilt I felt for taking advantage of the situation was ridiculous. Everything she'd done pointed to the fact she wanted me, but Steve's warning rang in my ears: *She's been hurt bad, Beckman. If you hurt her, I'll fucking murder you and no one will find your body.*

He might have cracked half a grin, but he hadn't been joking, something that was rare coming from my best friend. I knew he meant it too, and though he knew I'd never intentionally hurt his sister, he knew something about her that I didn't. He had more details about what she'd suffered and I guessed that the experience still colored her interactions with life, and men, in general.

Stupid, my brain interjected into the middle of the thought process, *you really fucked this up. You let her think you were being generous and now she thinks you're going to walk away when you're done with her.*

The hell I would. Madelyn had been the unobtainable—my unobtainable—since she was a teenager, and now that I'd gotten the smallest taste of her, I wanted to drink my fill, something I knew I'd never get. I'd managed to worm my way into her life and the problem was that I was already in over my head.

I was also unsure of whether I needed to admit to her my actions hadn't been entirely altruistic, not sure I liked the idea of her knowing she had the upper hand. That hadn't gone all that well for me the last time I was married.

It took me a while to gather my wits and talk down the situation raging in my pants. If I didn't take a minute to get

myself together, I'd stalk right after her and gladly take what she was so freely offering.

Bailey nudged my leg and trotted past me, out of the kitchen and down the long hallway, toward the back of the house and I followed slowly, trying to tell myself I should sleep on the sofa but completely incapable of keeping my feet from going to her.

The low hum of the ceiling fan was the only noise in the darkened room and I cursed myself for being unable to stay away. I could smell the warmth of her skin, every cell and nerve ending in my body on hyper alert, reaching for her even when I wouldn't allow my hands to do the same.

I put myself through a punishingly cold shower and brushed my teeth, then slipped quietly from the bathroom to pull a t-shirt and a pair of gym shorts from the dresser.

From the shape in the bed, I could tell Madelyn was sprawled across the sheets, naked, but she wasn't sleeping. The erratic pattern of her breathing told me I'd walked right into her ambush, and when I slid in next to her she rolled to face me. My whole body tensed, expecting her to attack, but she didn't. Instead, she sighed, a resigned sound. Then she reached for the hand I had tucked under my pillow, her fingers sliding over mine in the darkness and she rolled up to tuck her back into my front, pulling my arm over her.

My heart melted a little when she opened my fingers, to kiss the band encircling my ring finger, then the palm of my hand. She breathed a deep, shuddering breath when she did it, and I

suspected there was an emotion running through her stronger than desire.

I had to explain myself to her; explain why I couldn't lead her on, because that was what would happen. Feelings would get involved, more than they were already, and I couldn't be responsible for breaking her heart.

"Hailey saved me," I said softly, her hair tickling my lips when I spoke. It was something I didn't talk about; even Jess hadn't known that Hailey was my guardian angel.

The truth was that I didn't have many memories of my mom. She'd died when I was only three and it had thrown Dad into an understandable spiral.

"The tribe had a social worker sent out..." I didn't even know how to start the story, since it was one I never told. "When Mom died I was taken almost immediately. Apparently someone had lodged a couple concerns about my welfare, even before Mom passed...but that was the tipping point."

Madelyn drew in a sharp breath.

"We never figured out who it was; Dad figures it was my uncle—Mom's brother—not willing to step up and help, but more than willing to stir the pot—he's always hated my dad."

I had brief flashes of memory from that age, being put in the back of someone's car while Dad broke down in tears on the front lawn, begging as he watched me being driven away. The memory haunted me to this day, just that snapshot of him, heartbroken.

Madelyn's back rose and fell softly against my front and she curled my fingers over her own, bringing them to her lips as she waited for me to finish the story.

"Hailey was new to the area...I was maybe her third case and she was a kid herself. I don't remember much of it—Dad told me later." I closed my eyes for a moment, remembering still pictures of the woman who came to visit me in foster care. I didn't remember much about the house or the family, except that I was always cold and usually hungry.

"I was scared." The words stuck in my throat, the terror I felt all those years earlier coming back to me, the one clear emotion I could still feel all these years later. I felt like a little kid again, just saying it.

Madelyn rolled over carefully, plastering herself to me like she could press comfort into me through her skin—and it kind of worked. I drew in a calming breath and twisted my neck a little to kiss the top of her head.

"I wasn't there long, according to Dad. A certain someone made a strong case that I was better off in a stable family environment..." I swallowed hard, wondering if she was making a correlation yet. "So Hailey rescued me."

Madelyn was silent, completely still.

"She married my dad so he could get me back." The lump in my throat made it impossible to go on as I thought of how Hailey had sacrificed herself for my sake, making the argument that she would be the one to give me a stable home.

That she'd actually fallen in love with my dad had been a miracle, something she joked was God's repayment to her for doing a good deed.

Madelyn's body went rigid in my arms and when she pulled her face away from my chest, my skin was wet. I heard her suck in a few deep breaths, then she rolled and I heard her feet hit the floor. There was a soft squeal, a dresser drawer sliding open, and the slip of fabric as she pulled a t-shirt over her head and pajama pants up her legs.

She stood there for a moment, her back to me in the darkness of the room, and I heard a snuffle and a painful exhale, something that pushed me quickly to my feet and I hurried to put my arms around her.

"No, please don't." Her voice was low. "Thank you for explaining it to me, Adam. Now I understand clearly what it is you're doing with me."

Oh shit, now I'd really done it.



By the time the social worker arrived the next morning, you could cut the tension between us with a knife. Madelyn had spent the rest of the night on the living room sofa and when I woke her with coffee, her eyes were swollen.

That was my fault.

I didn't look any better. I'd hardly slept at all, dropping off into restless dreams when I did fall asleep, disjointed snippets

that left me panicky when my eyes snapped open.

I'd squatted down next to her and brushed her hair off her face, and that she let me see the hurt in her eyes was a bolt to the heart. I'd promised her brother I wouldn't hurt her and here I was, already doing it.

Both of us were too nervous to eat breakfast, opting instead for three, then four cups of coffee and Madelyn was restless and twitchy by the time she opened the door for the dour woman conducting the study.

Dad had stopped by moments earlier to collect Bailey, promising to take him to the park for a good game of fetch, and I'd hidden the bowls and dog food in the garage. It wasn't a deception, exactly, but I knew the huge, muscle-bound dog would be off-putting to someone who didn't know, love and understand big dogs. In my experience those people were few and Lucy was a much safer bet.

"Can I offer you anything, Amanda?" Madelyn was almost breathless, she was so nervous, driving home for me just what Daniela meant to her. "Coffee, water, tea? I might even have some juice." She was across the room in a flash, peering into the refrigerator.

"No, thank you." The woman's nose wrinkled like it pained her to say the words, and right on time Lucy trotted into the room, straight toward the woman, with a squeaky chirp.

That did it.

“What a beautiful little girl!” the woman exclaimed, leaning over to scoop up the tiny cat. “I have four of my own, all black cats, all local rescues. I’d take on more if I could.”

Madelyn’s eyes widened at the pouring out of unsolicited information and the smile stretching across the woman’s face. What the hell had just happened?

“Don’t let her fool you.” Madelyn’s face relaxed into a gentle smile as she pointed in my direction. “She’s an attention-seeker, but her one true love is that big guy. Every morning when we wake up, she’s sleeping on top of him.”

“Animals are excellent judges of character,” the woman said firmly, and I couldn’t believe it but she actually looked friendly. She *smiled* at me. “They can sense your intentions, though I fancy myself something of an aura reader, so I can as well.”

Madelyn worked hard not to roll her eyes, I could see it in the way the smile froze on her face, and when I turned my head the odd little woman was much closer, gazing up at me like she was scrutinizing something. “Yes.” Her head bobbed slowly, like she was in agreement with a conversation she was having with herself. “You have a deep soul.” She touched my arm. “You’re giving, kind and loving...but boundaries are a problem for you.”

Well, shit. I’d just been analyzed—cut to the quick was more like it—by a crazy cat lady.

She turned her head toward Madelyn with a sympathetic smile, shaking her head slowly. “You are undergoing an

evolution, dear girl. You are all fire and passionate energy.” She wiggled her eyebrows at me, like I was supposed to understand what that meant, and she sighed when I clearly didn’t catch on. “You’ve always learned things the hard way. But that will change...” She stopped abruptly, compressing her lips as she looked at Madelyn and though we were both obviously waiting for her to continue, she didn’t, waving a hand in the air instead.

“Enough of that, it will get us nowhere in this case.” She dismissed herself. “I’d like to see your home and sit with each of you after, to ask a few simple questions.”

Madelyn made a shooing gesture in my direction as the woman moved from the room, like I should follow her, and I thought her head might explode with the look she was giving me.

What was I supposed to do, follow her? Flirt with her? Bury her body in the backyard? I held up my hands in a confused gesture and Madelyn flapped her fingers at me. Ah, ok...I was supposed to make small talk with the woman, so I gave her some distance but tried to engage her in amiable conversation as she viewed each room and made notes on a small pad of paper.

“My stepmom was a social worker for almost thirty years. She took an early retirement last year,” I told her as she peeked inside the linen cabinet, taking in the stacks of towels and blankets, baby wipes and the boxes of diapers stacked at the bottom.

“I know,” she responded quickly, and the cabinet clicked shut. “Hailey and I knew one another quite well; she trained me when I first started and we often had a little overlap in the workplace. We still see one another to catch up from time to time.”

Maybe this was a bad thing. I didn’t need to blur any lines here.

“She told me the two of you were recently married.”

Uh-oh, this was potentially dangerous territory, and it meant they’d spoken *very* recently, like this morning.

“Yeah, uh...Madelyn and I have known each other since we were kids. You could say it was inevitable.” I sure as hell wasn’t going to say why.

“You’re a good match,” she said, making notes on her paper as we stood in the middle of Daniela’s nursery. “You’ll ground her; be the stabilizing force in this household. Children need that, to know they’re loved unconditionally.” She drew in a breath through her nose before tipping her head a little to the left, toward the door, in a nod. “That one needs to know it too.”

She drifted out into the hallway and I heard her call to Madelyn. The two of them talked quietly in the kitchen for a moment, before all three of us settled in the living room to go through Amanda’s questions.

Madelyn reached for my hand, something I thought meant she was nervous, and I squeezed her fingers gently when I

folded her hand into mine, something that made her melt into my side. Maybe she hadn't forgiven me, but whatever this was, I'd take it.

“Thank you so much for your time today.” Amanda stood after a volley of questions and answers, and Madelyn's arm went around my waist like she needed help standing when we got to our feet. “I'll present my report and I'm sure you'll hear from Sacred Heart shortly. You would be wise to engage a lawyer to review any documentation before you sign, even if it is a religious charity.” She gave me a significant look. “It's always wise to play it safe.”

If that was a hint, I hoped it meant we'd passed her test.

“Best of luck to you both.” She reached across the space to squeeze Madelyn's arm. “It's not for everyone, but it's rewarding.”

What wasn't for everyone, adoption? Marriage? Cats? Yeah, maybe cats.

To her credit, Lucy had settled right next to Amanda while she grilled us, the little cat happy to soak up all the love and affection she could. I watched her slow-blink up at Amanda and the thought ran through my mind that Lucy was such a different cat from the feral beast I'd pulled out from under Mrs. Ballard's back deck. That cat had wanted me dead and had set to it with tiny claws and vicious teeth, attacking me every chance she got for the first five or six weeks she lived in my home.

The two of us stood in the doorway, hands lifted in a wave as Amanda backed her tiny Prius down the long driveway and Madelyn blew out such a huge breath, it seemed like she'd been holding it all morning.

I knew what she was dying to do and I leaned over to kiss the side of her head, something she leaned into like she needed tenderness, and I kept my arm around her for as long as she let me.

Yeah, that was me: Mr. Poor Boundaries. Amanda saw right the hell through me.

“Get your shoes,” I said into her hair and she looked up at me.

“Go on.” I swatted her backside gently. “Let's go see our sweet girl.”



No one knew Daniela's actual birth date. Madelyn's Italian was impressive, but her only Spanish was still fairly rudimentary, and the fact Daniela's parents arrived in distress meant some important things had been overlooked, like birthdays and home town and last name. The baby's name was truly the only thing Madelyn had been able to rescue, along with the tiny infant, from the situation.

According to Madelyn, doctors in the camp placed Daniela at only a few days old, so Madelyn had taken a stab at a birth date and rushed through paperwork in order to have the girl placed with Sacred Heart as quickly as possible. It reduced the

burden of care in the camp, but it also put Daniela in a safer situation, on transport to upstate New York after only a few days in the camp.

Madelyn admitted to me that afternoon, as she rocked the small girl to sleep, that she'd spent every spare moment of those days with the tiny baby.

"Grams had nothing to do with it," she said, out of nowhere, and I looked up from where I was folding the fresh baby laundry one of the sisters had brought to the room. "The picnic...last summer, when she announced that I'd wasted my life on nothing and no one."

I remembered that all too well and I set aside a stack of tiny onesies before answering.

"Because of what you sacrificed you saved countless lives, Madelyn. What you gave up to save others could never be considered a waste."

"She's going to ask me what took so long." Her mouth pulled up on one side. "That will be the least offensive thing she'll ask." Her lips tipped up into an evil grin. "She'll want to know whether you're any good in bed."

Despite myself, I blushed. I knew the old woman had no filter whatsoever, in addition to being unable to keep her hands to herself, and I'd never admit it to Madelyn—or anyone else who asked—but the fact she was constantly belittling Madelyn upset me far more than the fact her hands were always on my ass.

“Congratulations.” Sister Theresa’s face was all smiles when she delivered a load of fresh bed linens to the room and caught sight of my wedding band. “Marriage is such a gift.” She looked to the ceiling when she said it, and her implication was plain.

“It is.” I agreed, and I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. “So is that.” I inclined my head toward Madelyn in the rocking chair, Daniela snuggled in her arms, and Sister Theresa’s eyes softened.

“The only things of value in this world,” she said softly, and I sent up a prayer like a gunshot: *Please bring Daniela to us; to lose her would break my girl’s heart.*

My girl...yeah, I’d marched right across that boundary too.

I thought of what would happen if Sister Emanuelle didn’t approve the adoption. What if the home study report was negative? It would kill Madelyn if she had to stop visiting Sacred Heart because Daniela had been placed with another family.

“Sister, may I speak with you for a moment?” I asked quietly, and she nodded her head, gesturing we should take our words out into the hallway. We slipped from the room almost silently and I half-turned to take another look at *my girls*, Madelyn’s eyes closed as Daniela rested contentedly against her chest.

Sister Theresa stood, looking at me expectantly as I chewed the inside of my cheek, and I ran a hand over my face as I tried to gather my thoughts.

“I don’t know that it’ll make any difference, but I have to try for them,” I told her quietly. “Would you please tell Sister Emanuelle that I’d like to speak with her?”

The little nun nodded at me and I watched her throat work on a hard swallow as she squeezed my arm. “You’re a good man, Mr. Beckman. I’m sure Sister Emanuelle can see this and will understand what you would do for your family.”

She nodded resolutely then and turned, beckoning I should follow her down the hallway and toward my fate.

Madelyn

The next few days were unbearably quiet. It was the calm before the storm, one way or another, and I started a new project in the yard in order to keep from going completely insane.

Everything was washed and folded. Daniela's room was ready for her and Kennedy had roped one of her brothers, a lawyer, into being "your guy on standby" whenever it came down to signing legal paperwork—*if* we were approved.

Mia had already texted me several times to ask how things were going, and I knew it was because Scott felt it would be too invasive if it was coming from him, but also because Mia genuinely cared. If anyone knew what it was like to raise someone else's children, it was her, and she'd already told me no less than three times that she expected pictures the instant things were settled.

I hadn't exactly told Scott about the shotgun wedding yet, though he should have been the first person I told. I'd taken a new last name and official documentation had to be updated:

tax paperwork, my passports, payroll information, my driver's license...the list went on and on, but I had no head for it at the present, so it languished while I tried to keep myself busy with other tasks. Tasks that would so physically exhaust me that I fell into bed each night and slept a dreamless sleep.

No time to think about the man who still slept next to me.

No time to worry about what would happen if we weren't allowed to adopt Daniela.

She was the entire reason he married you, nagged at the back of my mind on a constant loop, and I knew what would happen if we lost her: I'd lose him too.

I didn't ask Adam to explain why he continued to sleep next to me and to act like we were a couple in all the ways that mattered to the outside world.

Every morning he brought me coffee in bed, which was impressive, because I was an early riser.

Though he had returned to work, he came straight home each day and helped around the house. He mowed the lawn and folded laundry, fed the animals and brought in the mail. Then we sat down to dinner together each night and each night I fought the butterflies in my stomach that whispered, *Maybe he'll give in tonight*. But it never happened. Instead, each night he helped me clean up the kitchen, took Bailey out to the yard before giving him his dinner, then stretched out in the living room for a few moments to watch TV or read a book.

That was something I didn't know how to do: sit still. I tried to observe what he did, so I could incorporate it, but I quickly learned that if I was watching a movie I needed something for my hands to do, and often I was up and looking for something to do only a few minutes later.

The only time I wasn't twitchy and pacing was in the dead of night, when Adam finally rolled to face me and, dead asleep, pulled me against his chest and kept an arm wrapped around me until it was nearly daylight. Unmoving. Deep, steady breaths.

The truth was that I wasn't sleeping all that well, which wasn't unusual, though my reasons were different now. I no longer had to sleep with one eye open, ready to jump up and rush out. Instead I was safe, going to bed each night with long hours stretching out ahead of me, with no interruptions but one. And each night I was only half asleep until he rolled to pull me to him, and then I wasn't asleep at all because my mind was running riot.

After coffee each morning I was in the garage by sunrise, putting myself through punishing repetitions to set fire to my muscles. It was the only thing that helped take some of the edge off, and the fact Adam still slept next to me at night meant the only place I had to myself was the shower and inside my own head, though I hadn't much liked what had been going on in there lately.

It had been three weeks since the home study and we still hadn't heard a word, so I started working on the yard to keep

myself from losing my mind. I was dying a little more each day and I knew Adam was doing his best to keep me occupied during the hours he was home. He could sense my agitation. My distress. And he joined me in my backyard project, wordlessly hauling one wheelbarrow after another of mulch back to the large circle I'd created.

Steve showed up that weekend and helped Adam fill the huge sandbox, then hauled several big boxes from the garage out into the yard where they constructed the play set I'd had delivered.

"Lots of preparations for a tiny girl," Kennedy observed as she watched through the slider in the kitchen, and I saw the worry in her expression that I felt in my heart. Almost four weeks without a single word was a long time. It seemed longer, since I was still visiting Daniela almost daily, and I felt like Sister Theresa was looking at me with pity.

"And how are things on the home front?" Kennedy didn't look at me as she topped up her coffee, and I made a face at her back as I considered how best to answer that loaded question.

"Going," was all I could manage and she turned to face me, one eyebrow already crawling up her forehead.

"It *so* is not," she said, looking me up and down. "That is *not* the look of a satisfied woman. Believe me, I know."

I had to set my cup down, because the last thing I needed was an eighth cup of coffee for the day and when she looked at me like that, I had to have a distraction or I'd spill my guts. It

was another of Kennedy's superpowers, and it seemed I hadn't yet discovered all of them—they were legion. All these years and I was still discovering new things about her.

"It's complicated." I sighed, busying myself by opening the silverware drawer and fidgeting with the utensils that were already stacked in nice, even rows.

"Madelyn." Kennedy's voice went flat. "It's actually very simple. You're either blissfully happy and screwing each other's brains out, or you're not, and you're *not*. Why?"

I stole a look out the window to make sure Adam and Steve were still fully engaged in wrestling with the play set. The back of my brother's neck was starting to turn red, meaning a barrage of colorfully spliced curses would drift through the yard soon.

"He's repaying some kind of cosmic debt," I finally hissed and she cocked her head to the side, lowering her eyebrows—finally, because the left one had been trying to stage an escape into her hair.

"Explain."

"Hailey married his dad when he was a little kid, so that he didn't have to be in the system, and now I think he married me to do that for Daniela. Like he needs to pay a weird debt...sort of."

"No." Kennedy's mug thudded to the counter. "Hell, no. That is not why he married you, Madelyn. Why would you even think that?"

Because I haven't been in anything close to an actual relationship since I was twenty-five, and I fucked that up with my issues.

Because he looks at me like he's dying inside but he refuses to touch me.

My pupils suddenly suffered an attack of gravity, because I couldn't lift them from the floor.

“Because he doesn't want me like that, not the way people...want each other.”

Kennedy snorted. “Plenty of married people don't want each other that way anymore. Just ask my brother Ian. He and Sophie have been married thirteen years and have eight boys. *Eight*. She said he's not allowed to touch her again until she's in confirmed menopause and I'm pretty sure she wasn't joking, because I don't think they sleep in the same bed anymore.”

There was a sharp curse from the yard and both of us looked out the window to see Steve and Adam in a heated discussion as Adam braced the frame and Steve affixed the bolts.

“What happened, Madelyn?” Kennedy's expression was soft and sympathetic. “Steve told me you haven't been in a serious relationship in years, and that you have a history of sabotaging them when you feel a guy's gotten too close. Maybe that's what you're doing now, without even realizing it.”

“It's not me this time,” I said, with no idea how I was going to disclose this doozy.

Teagan chattered away in her playpen. She'd been slow to talk—Steve had considered taking her to a specialist—but now she was stringing together clearly pronounced words two and three at a time.

Kennedy joked that Teagan hadn't gone through a practice phase at all. Instead, she'd quietly observed and then started talking when she was capable of dropping right into the middle of a conversation.

“Does Adam know what happened to you?” she asked gently, and I nodded slowly.

“Some of it. He knows the broader details of the story.”

“He's always been protective of you,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. “You remember that time you got your period at school and you bled through your pants?”

I remembered that happening more than once, so I shrugged. At this point I just assumed all the information she had available to her was secondhand, thanks to my brother, and his memory wasn't always the best.

“That little shit kid that always gave you such a hard time figured out why you had your sweatshirt tied around your waist and she was telling all the boys what happened, to try to embarrass you. She was such a little bitch.”

Why didn't I remember this?

“Lila, I think.”

“Leia.” Just saying the name made me roll my eyes. “She probably still hates me for absolutely no reason.”

“Yeah, well...now she has a reason.” Kennedy looked smug. “One of my sisters-in-law is friendly with her. Turns out she married some cyber security guy fifteen years older than her. Two-point-five kids, a McMansion, a trip to the Caymans every year...and she still wants what you’ve got.”

“Pffft. What was her excuse then?”

“Same reason.”

I was about to ask her that reason, but there was yelling outside and I looked up in alarm, because it sounded like Adam yelling, and that was something I’d never heard before. It even shut Kennedy right up, her eyes going wide in alarm, and I almost ripped the slider off the track in my hurry to yank open the door and get out into the yard.

“That’s all I’m going to say about it.” Steve’s voice was quiet, tense and steely. “You know I’m right.”

Adam’s back was to me and I could see the tension in his shoulders. It was rolling off him in waves, an anger I’d never felt from him before, and when I stepped up behind him to smooth a hand over Adam’s back, my brother’s eyes snapped to mine.

“Mad?” Kennedy called from just inside the house, a distressed look on her face when I turned back to acknowledge that she’d called me. “Might want to brace yourself for this one.”

When it rained, it poured.

I turned slowly and lifted one hand to say *What?*

“Looks like word traveled fast,” Kennedy called, and my eyebrows dipped lower on my face as I frowned at her.

“You’ve got some visitors from Florida at your front door.”

Steve’s eyes went wide. “I didn’t say a word, Mad. Not a peep, I swear.”

“Hailey.” Adam and I said the name at the same time, and we drew matching breaths. It was time to pay the piper.

I crossed myself—there was no joke about it—and Adam turned fully, pulling me against him and pressing his face into my hair. It hardly seemed the time, but the way his chest rose and fell rapidly, it probably had to do with something more than my parents showing up.

“We’ve got this.” His voice was low in my ear. “Together, Madelyn. I will always have *your* back, too.”

There weren’t many people who’d had my back, no one outside the USAF, anyway, except maybe my brother and Kennedy, and my eyes filled up without warning. I didn’t try to stop a tear from leaking down my cheek that time, and I slid my hand into his hair and made a loose fist, pulling his face back. His expression was worried as he looked down at me and I lifted a hand—I was borrowing half of his move—and cupped his cheek before leaning up to press a kiss to his mouth. It was one he took willingly, with no resistance, no tension. Instead, his arms tightened around me and I heard Steve chuckle, “Well, ok then. Guess this talk was unnecessary.”

Whatever that meant, I’d ask Adam later.

I could hear voices drifting out from the house, my mother's unnaturally bright, friendly voice that she used specifically for company. She'd used that voice with me for years, every time she saw me, right before she asked if I had a boyfriend or planned on giving her a grandchild. What were my new accomplishments since she'd seen me last? Because medals and recognition didn't rate in her world.

There was no doubt in my mind she'd jumped on a plane the moment she found out there was a husband and an impending potential grandchild, because she couldn't miss her opportunity to crow over the fact I'd finally caught up to society's expectations.

That Daniela was Venezuelan was sure to invite some snide remarks from my mother, who would have similar opinions about my marriage to Adam. Considering Dad's mixed South African heritage, though it was apparently "several generations back," our bloodline was somehow superior and untainted as far as she was concerned.

"Adam!" Her voice was falsely bright, something that didn't surprise me, that she'd greeted him before either of her children.

Adam's arms tightened around me for just a second, a reassuring squeeze, and when I broke the kiss he leaned in to peck my lips once more. It did something funny to my heart, soothed and calmed, and I gave him a grateful smile. Everything he did, big or small, I was starting to suspect was

with me in mind. I didn't have to ask. That was just the kind of man he was: thoughtful, intuitive, caring.

“Look at you, young man.” Mom marched right across the yard in her block-heeled sandals, smearing bright pink lipstick on Adam's cheek when he leaned down to hug her and she planted one on his cheek. “I suppose my daughter didn't want to share you with anyone; it's a miracle you had any witnesses at your wedding.” Her laugh was brittle, full of accusation.

“Maddy.” Dad leaned in to wrap an arm around me, kissing my temple in a gesture reminiscent of the way Adam did it. That was an association I didn't want to make. “How's my best girl?”

That was an uncomfortable flashback to the wedding.

Dad kept his arm around me as Mom dragged Adam toward the house, and he glanced quickly over his shoulder, like he needed to be sure I was nearby.

“You made a good decision, peanut.” Dad's voice was low and conspiratorial, and he squeezed me closer. “He's a wonderful man and he'll treat you right.”

Adam had done nothing but treat me right, and while I appreciated that, I appreciated it less at night when he rolled away from me and went to sleep. He was cuddling me less and less the last few nights, apologizing as he rolled away, and once he'd told me it was for my own good and stubbornly wouldn't elaborate.

Truthfully, I didn't know how much longer he'd be willing to play this game. I could feel him withdrawing a little each day, physically and emotionally, but I was terrified to confront him about it, for fear he would admit it.

This was a mistake.

The tender moments, like we'd just shared, were becoming less and less and we'd been married weeks, not years.

Kennedy helped me pull together lunch and each time Mom tried to pull Adam away to the living room, I asked him sweetly if he could help me with something. He knew what I was doing and Mom probably did too, but he gave me a little grin each time, did what I asked and then gave me a cuddle or a kiss, or both, and maybe it was for show, but it didn't feel like it.

Clearly I was going to have to ask him to help me with things more often.

It was an absolute miracle, but Mom made it an hour and twenty minutes without dropping any bombs. Then, "Your grandmother tells me you're adopting a foreign baby."

Adam and I exchanged a look: So it wasn't Hailey's fault.

"She also paws my husband's ass in front of God and everyone, so I wouldn't trust the old woman further than you can throw her," I responded and Adam snorted.

"What's wrong with having a baby of your own?" Mom looked genuinely perplexed and I was shocked she'd so readily overlooked Adam's Onandaga heritage, something

she'd always brought up to Steve and me when she started out with "He's such a nice boy, it's just..." Like that half of his bloodline was dirty.

"You know how old I am," I snorted. "I'm not tempting fate."

There was a wistful look on Adam's face that I'd have understood if I thought it had anything to do with *our* children, but I couldn't even get the guy to take off his clothes around me so those chances seemed slim.

I held up admirably under my mother's scrutiny that afternoon, or I thought I did. I fielded an endless barrage of questions and when Adam knew I was tired, he took over answering for me, pulling me against his side so I could rest my head on his shoulder.

What everyone else saw when they looked at us, I was pretty sure, was a loving couple in the early days of their marriage. They didn't know that once it was just Adam and me in the house, I would catch him watching me with kicked puppy eyes, and I didn't know why or what to do about that, since he wouldn't talk about it.

While I could have offered to put my parents up in my new home, Mom made it abundantly clear she'd booked them "a delightful suite" at one of the higher end local-ish hotels. However, she had no qualms about inviting herself over to Kennedy and Steve's for dinner, and Kennedy whispered to me, as Steve hustled them out the door, that she'd pull a relief watch, but I owed her.

Adam blew out a huge breath behind me when I shut the door, and I sagged against it in exhaustion. The sun was already low in the sky; it was getting late.

Without a word, he crossed the space and pulled me into a hug, kissing the top of my head, and he rocked us slowly back and forth. It was comforting, and it dawned on me that in his arms I could shut out the noise of the world. It was just the steady whoosh of his heart and the soft sound of his breath, and my heart swelled painfully. I was exactly where I wanted to be, but I couldn't have what I wanted most: all of him.

I tucked my face in, to kiss the place over his heart, and he dropped his head down to mine, covering me with his hair, his cheek resting gently on mine. I moved slightly after long moments, pulling back with my eyes down, lifting my face slightly to give him the hint I wanted to kiss him without rushing him.

Finally he notched an index finger beneath my chin, lifting my face that extra inch, and when my eyes flicked up to his I could see a deep suffering in his expression. It took my breath away, the need I saw there, and I wondered if I'd been reading him wrong the entire time.

It was a long, painful moment and finally I let my eyes drift back down to his soft lips, only an inch away. It made me swallow nervously and his eyes fluttered shut as he lowered himself that miles-long inch to press his lips firmly against mine.

This was daylight, a place where he couldn't hide from me, and when he slipped a hand into my hair to angle my head, his mouth opened against mine. I might have whimpered when he swept possessively into my mouth, nothing tender or delicate about the way he tasted me with deep, hungry strokes of his tongue.

“Fuck it,” he groaned, stooping slightly to grip my thighs and I jumped at the urging of his squeezing fingers, his hands moving quickly to catch me as I wrapped my legs tightly around his waist.

“Last chance, Madelyn.”

“You're my only chance.” I sighed against his lips. “The only one I've ever wanted to take.”

That was loaded with obvious meaning I wasn't sure he'd bother to unpack.

He made a noise in the back of his throat at my confession, something between a growl and a groan, and then we were moving fast. With huge, hurried steps he carried me to the back of the house, into the bedroom where I'd lain awake in frustration for nights on end. We crashed onto the bed, my legs still wound around his hips as he dug into the mattress with his knees to push us up.

“This is it, baby.” My heart thrilled at his growly words. “If we do this, there are no take-backs.”

“Mine, then?” I asked hopefully, a smile on my face as I cupped his between my two hands. It made a brilliant smile

break across his beautiful face and he gave me a half-nod. “Yours. Always.” Then he leaned down again, pushing his arms under my body to wrap me up tight as he kissed and licked his way down my neck with a ferocity I hadn’t expected from him.

“You’re *mine*, Madelyn.” The words rumbled against my skin as he bunched my shirt in his hands, pulling it up my body, his tongue following behind, his teeth softly nipping at intervals.

That was it, I’d died. There was no other explanation. I’d died and gone to heaven, because the man I’d wanted in my bed for years was here, wearing my ring, showing no signs he wished to stop anytime soon. *Finally. Thank God.*

The evening light bathed us in brilliant golden rays as I pulled his shirt over his head, and I pushed gently to roll him over onto his back as my lips sought the tiny scars, the old wounds the only imperfections marring his smooth, golden skin.

“Beautiful,” I murmured, sweeping my lips over the flat disc of his nipple, grazing it lightly with my teeth. It made him buck beneath me and I answered with a swivel of my hips, something that made his fingers tighten their hold on my hips, a breath catching in his throat.

I made my way back up to his mouth and his tongue sensuously danced with my own as he smoothed his hands up my sides, freeing the clasp on my bra and peeling the straps down my arms. He tossed it away and pushed up on the heels

of his hands, dragging us backward so that his back rested against the headboard. Then he broke the kiss to run a thumb slowly over my swollen mouth and his other hand cupped my breast gently, his breath a hard, heavy exhale.

My hips circled needily over his, met by his body pressing up against mine with every revolution.

“Should I be desperately searching for protection?” he asked softly, his lips tickling my neck, and I paused. Thought it over for a second, as much as my boiling brain could process thought.

I wasn't on the pill.

“No.” My voice was firm, my decision made. “I don't want anything between us.”

That must have been the right answer, because he groaned and banded an arm around me, rolling carefully. It changed the angle between our bodies drastically, my body lifting toward his, seeking his hips with every stroke, his tongue mimicking what our bodies sought.

I could hardly believe my good fortune, that after all this time I was getting what I wanted. He hadn't stopped, pulled away or told me we shouldn't, and just for good measure I reached around him to grab his backside with both hands, squeezing firmly, trying to hold his body to my own.

“Are you sure, baby?” He pulled back, panting, his hand shaking when he brought it up to brush the hair off my face.

Baby. What a delightful word, my new favorite.

I'd been sure for as long as I could remember. Could he just hurry up already?

"Zero doubts and even fewer regrets," I answered quickly, and his smile was blinding. He jumped up quickly, using both hands to quickly peel me out of my leggings and I heard them hit the floor as he stood there, staring down at me. It was hard not to feel a little self-conscious and I pushed up on my palms and pulled my legs up to tuck at my side.

"Nuh-uh." His expression was soft. "I want to see all of you, Mrs. Beckman."

My heart exploded, along with my stupid ovaries.

"You're the most incredible thing I've ever seen. My beautiful wife." His hand reached out to cup my chin and I turned my face to kiss his fingers, sure I heard sadness coloring the husky desire in his voice.

His fingers were gentle on my cheek, then they were in my hair to tug at the band that held the long braid. He yanked it out to loosen my hair, then stood back to look at me, his eyes glazed, a look I'd never seen from him before that I thought might be lust.

He seemed frozen in place and I pushed up onto my knees, scooting to the edge of the bed and reaching for his hips. He took the small extra step forward, his eyes on my hands as I popped the button of his pants, and I caught my lip in my teeth as I tugged them down his powerful thighs. *Holy shit, this was really happening.*

Catching one leg under his foot, he peeled them off and hesitated for just a second, long enough for me to appreciate the way the snug boxer briefs struggled to contain him. My eyes flicked up to his, gratified by the hunger I saw in his.

“You’ve never looked at me like this before,” I whispered, and I couldn’t keep the small smile from stealing across my lips.

He bent slowly, pushing the underwear down his legs and my heart stopped beating.

“Only every time I thought you weren’t looking,” he responded, catching my chin with his fingers to tip my face upward. “It’s been killing me.”

That made two of us.

I couldn’t help it, the needy sound I made when my eyes drifted over him, all of that naked perfection, and all mine.

“Does that mean you like what you see, Mrs. Beckman?” he asked, his voice warm and teasing, and I leaned back to scoot up the bed before holding out both hands to him.

“Can I see you closer?”

“Your wish is my command,” he teased, dropping onto all fours on the edge of the bed and crawling up to me. It was like watching a powerful cat stalk its prey, all bunching muscles and sinuous movement, and I felt the thrill deep in my belly, such a powerful sensation that it traveled all the way up my throat.

He crawled right up between the legs I parted for him and placed a hand at the center of my back to ease me down.

“How do you want to do this?” he whispered, looking concerned, and a little chuckle slipped out of my mouth.

“Loudly.”

Another slow smile from him. “That *is* preferable.”

The smile fell off his face then, replaced by a serious, determined look and he leaned down to take my earlobe between his teeth, followed by the softness of his lips and tongue, something that made the entirety of my lower body pulsate.

My hands had a mind of their own, roaming quickly over all that smooth, soft, glorious skin. His muscles bunched and flexed as I did, his abdomen jumping when I slid a hand between us to wrap my fingers around him. He grunted when I did, his body going tense above me, and after a few careful strokes I could feel his body vibrating.

“Now, Adam,” I begged, trying to guide him to me and he shook his head shortly.

“The last thing I’m going to do is hurt you because I was too impatient.”

I groaned. “I don’t need you to be a gentleman.” But then his fingers swept gently between my thighs and my eyes went wide. *Oh. Maybe I do need you to be a gentleman, if that’s what it means.*

He watched my face so intently, it made me self-conscious and I had to shut my eyes to focus on the wonderful things he was doing to my body.

“Eyes on me, Mrs. Beckman,” he purred, leaning down to trace my lower lip with his tongue.

“But you’re looking into my soul.” I panted, forcing my eyes back open, afraid of what he’d see there.

“I know.” His voice was warm and happy. “There are things I need to see.”

I gasped when he slid a finger inside me, and a hard breath gusted from his nose, his fingers never slowing.

The noise I made was incomprehensible, a low groan, and he leaned down to kiss me again, something deep and slow that made me melt, and without warning my body betrayed me as I shattered around him, panting and gasping.

“Yes, baby.” His voice was low and victorious, right in my ear. “Give me more of that.”

My entire body sagged weakly, drained by the power of my response to him. To be fair, it had been an awfully long time since I’d been touched by anyone other than myself, and I forced out a small laugh. “I had no idea that was going to happen. I usually get some warning. Sorry, it seems like you have magical fingers.”

“Sorry? Hell, no.” He pushed up on one elbow, his face hovering over mine as he smiled down at me. “That’s the stuff my fantasies are made of.”

Was it, though? I hoped that was the truth.

“Your turn?” I asked hopefully, smoothing a hand down his back and almost involuntarily his body dropped to mine.

“Mmmhmm, in a minute.” He anchored himself with one arm over my head while he leaned down to kiss me again, starting me off slow again, building slowly as his tongue stroked deeper. He was patient, reading my body’s cues, waiting for me to wind up again and it took mere moments to drive me back to a fever pitch, panting and clawing at him. I wanted him just as wound up as I was, crazed and desperate. But so far he was the only one who’d remained in complete control the entire time.

“We’ll take this easy,” he murmured against my neck, his hard breaths the only thing that told me he was on the verge of losing himself.

“Not easy,” I grunted, rocking my body against him. “We have time for easy later.”

With that I reached between us, lining us up and lifting quickly. It made his breath catch and I winced, letting the twinge pass. It *had* been a long time and it was going to take me a minute to adjust.

“Hurting you?” he whispered, struggling to keep his eyes open as I took a breath and struggled to take him deeper.

“No.” I lied. “Just been a while.”

He nodded once, bringing up one hand to cup my cheek again and it almost made my eyes fill with tears. His

tenderness was my undoing, the way he looked out for me and my comfort; checked to make sure I was ok.

Reaching down, he put a hand beneath my right knee and lifted gently, bringing it around his back. It better opened me to him and he waited for me to lift again, his body trembling with restraint.

I loved that, that he was so...aware. I could think of ways to reward him for such thoughtfulness later.

“Better?” he asked softly, his hips moving in tiny increments, and I answered by leaning up the short space to kiss him, reaching down to take his backside in both hands, pulling hard.

“Mad,” he choked as I took him suddenly, swallowing the rest of my name, and I greedily drank in the expression on his face, his eyes closed, his jaw slack. I wanted to freeze the moment, remember forever what it was like to take his body into my own that first time and put that look on his face: absolute wonder.

We lost our ability to speak then, soft grunts and moans taking the place of words. Our eyes should have been closed as we lost ourselves to the sensations, but he kept his open, heavy-lidded, gazing down into mine in a way that was more intimate than the joining of our bodies. He could see everything when he looked at me like that, down into the places where I held secrets like *I'm in love with you* and *If you leave it'll break me*.

I didn't have words sufficient to describe what happened when I felt his body start to wind up tight and he gritted his teeth, waiting for me. He swiveled his hips carefully, angling himself, and I burst with a wordless cry. He followed immediately, shaking and gasping, his eyes finally drifting shut and he quickly lowered his face into my neck, pressing soft kisses there as he struggled to regain his breath.

Wordlessly he scooped both arms beneath me, holding himself up on his elbows so as not to crush me, but blanketing me in a full-body hug as he murmured something into my neck. It was something said so low, I felt the whisper of the words on my skin, just before his lips pressed another gentle kiss there.

"Hold on," he instructed, and I hooked the other leg around him as he tucked his body close to mine, rolling quickly and I winced as my full weight came to rest on top of him.

"No, don't go," he whispered when I tried to push myself up on my elbows. "You're fine." He smiled up at me, a joy in his expression that squeezed at my heart. "My own little weighted blanket."

There was something dangerous squeezing in my chest and it was threatening to leak out of my eyes. I'd neglected to tell him a couple really important things, things that could change the entire landscape of whatever this was, if he felt the same way.

I was entirely too chicken to do it, to take the chance that he was just being kind to me just because that was who he was,

and this was just sex for him. The scratching of an itch that had been spreading out of control for some time.

He held me like that for a long while, his hands smoothing over my hair and up and down my back, breathing like it was no problem despite the fact there was nothing little about me, the full weight of my body pressing down on him.

I loved it, being held like I was delicate and precious.

We didn't leave the bed until the early dawn of the next day, after a wonderful night of kisses and sighs, soft sounds and passionate moments that inextricably bound my heart to him.

If I'd been secretly in love with him before, this just cemented it: I was in deep, deep trouble.

He made coffee while I mixed a green juice, communicating with soft touches and lingering glances. It was an intense connection I'd never had with anyone before, the overwhelming need to be near him every second that turned me into a teenage girl.

The two of us completed a workout in the garage gym, then I did a few sprints while he jogged at a slower pace. He winded much faster than I did, something that made me constantly look back to check on him and he always smiled and waved me on.

We worked together to make breakfast and Lucy kept jumping up on the counter, eager to see what she was missing.

Bailey sat at the edge of the counter, patiently waiting for spills and crumbs, knowing Adam would sneak him something

every time my back was turned. He was a soft touch, that one, and it was something I loved about him: his big heart.

I lured him to the shower after breakfast and kitchen clean-up. The instant I had the dishwasher loaded and humming, I caught his eye and peeled my sports bra over my head. His eyes dilated and he threw down the kitchen sponge, stalking purposefully toward me in a way that made my heart flutter. *We had so much lost time to make up.*

He stripped his shirt over his head as he followed me down the hall and I wiggled out of my running leggings as he stepped out of his gym shorts. Then I snapped on the shower and stepped in, squealing when the cold spray hit my skin. It made him chuckle wickedly and he stepped in behind me, pulling me tight against him and leaning down, turning the squeals to moans when his kiss was immediately deep and hard.

I wasn't sure what it was that had flipped the switch and awakened the sleeping beast, or made him give himself permission, but I needed more and my hands roamed over hot, wet skin as I tried to pull him closer. I had fantasies to live out with this man and I wasn't sure how much time I had to get through all of them, because somewhere in the back of my mind I knew the clock was ticking down. Something this wonderful couldn't possibly last forever.

With a shower blowjob checked off my list, I was feeling pretty pleased with myself—until he hoisted me right up in his arms and pressed me against the tile wall for another round. It

was hot, messy, loud and slippery, and I realized at that moment that I'd never in my life had great sex, not until Adam Beckman.

Shit.

I don't know why we bothered with clothes, but the two of us dressed and drifted out to the living room, where we sat on the sofa with legs pulled up, facing one another as we had more coffee. It was a rare day off work for Adam, and I loved the mornings he didn't have to be up well before dawn to make the drive to the hospital. I liked seeing him in my days, and I hoped now I'd see much more of him in my nights as well.

"I think your cell phone's ringing," he said, patting my knee and I trained my ear for the buzz-buzz of the phone I constantly kept on vibrate. Chances were good it was my mother, calling to let me know she had plans for the day and I could expect her imminent arrival. That was awfully courteous of her, but perhaps it was because when she showed up she preferred us to be wearing clothes.

I jumped up and hurried into the kitchen, where the phone clattered on the countertop. I'd left it there before our shower and hadn't bothered to retrieve it.

Sacred Heart.

My heart caught in my throat and I made a funny noise that had Adam in the room in a flash, just as I held the little box to my ear. "Hello?"

I made wide eyes and panicked scribbling motions in the air as Adam stood helplessly, watching me. For all the ESP he had when it came to me, he wasn't catching on. Concern was evident on his face and I must have looked stricken, because he stepped forward suddenly and pulled me against his chest, his arms going protectively around me as I struggled to keep the phone to my ear.

“Thank you,” I managed finally. “We’ll be there just as soon as we can.”

“What happened?” Adam looked worried. “Is it Grams?”

I took a deep, slow breath and let the adrenaline tingle and fizz through my body. Then I looked up at him with trepidation in my heart but a smile on my face. “Sister Emanuelle has approved our application. She wants us to come in to sign some paperwork and if we can get James to review the documents quickly and complete everything, we can bring Daniela home today.”

His face lit up with a smile that hurt my heart, it was so beautiful.

Now I have everything I want. How long can I keep it?

Adam

Madelyn was a bundle of nerves while she made the call to James, Kennedy's lawyer brother, and he agreed to meet us at one in order to review the documents. He anticipated it to be straightforward and quick, and for Madelyn's case I hoped he was right because now that the fuse was lit she was about to explode.

We had a few hours to go and Madelyn was pacing so restlessly, I suggested we just head over to Sacred Heart and spend some time with the baby while the clock ticked down. She nodded gratefully and hurried to put on something other than shorts and a tank top, and though the last thing either of us needed was more coffee, I too needed something to keep me busy, so I poured another cup while I waited.

I had to keep her from going to pieces, so I tried to distract her with a scenic drive into town. Then we stopped at a donut shop, something neither of us ate, and she poked me in the ribs. "I'm onto you, Beckman, you and your distractions." Her smile was sweet. "Thank you." She looked like there was

something else she wanted to say, but she bit her lip and looked down and since she was already a little skittish when it came to emotional things, I didn't push her even though I'd have given a limb to know what was running through her head.

"Stop trying to distract me," she finally said as I towed her down the street, her hand in mine. "There's no sense in wasting any more time; let's just go get our little girl." Her whole face lit up when she said it and I couldn't help but smile back.

"Your Grams won't believe you've been bitten by the maternal bug."

"That's not what it is." She made a face. "I'm not a kid person—I've never been—but I love that one with my whole heart."

I hope there's a little room left for me, ran unbidden through my head. Because I could handle being second in her life, so long as it meant I had a spot at all. I knew that probably wasn't the way things were supposed to go, but second fiddle was fine by me so long as it kept me in her heart and in her bed.

She practically skipped to the truck and when I slid in behind the wheel, impulsively I reached for her. We weren't *that* couple yet, so in sync that we shared intimacy easily, but she leaned toward me and covered my face with joyful kisses before she pressed her lips to mine. Despite the summer heat, a few minutes of that would have the cab fogged up and we'd

have an audience on the sidewalk, so I tried to keep it semi-PG.

When we arrived at Sacred Heart, James's car was already in the small lot. I knew him only a little, but I knew he was no-nonsense and it was my guess that he was inside, already halfway through the paperwork.

"How wonderful you could make it." Sister Theresa beamed at me as she let us in, and I wondered where she thought we might otherwise be. "This is such a happy day for our darling little Mary."

Daniela, I thought vehemently. When Madelyn told me her story, I too saw the importance of keeping her name and I loved that Madelyn wanted to protect every piece of her past that she could. Which wasn't much yet, though I knew she'd been digging, trying to find a link. Doing her own due diligence. In New York, adoption cases were sealed, so if Daniela's family ever tried to find her, it would be a pointless search.

James sat in Sister Emanuelle's office, at the small table in the corner, reviewing what was a surprisingly short stack of paperwork. He looked up as we entered, and from the small smile he gave Madelyn, I suspected the news was good.

"Simple as it's going to be." James stood and hugged Madelyn, then shook my hand. There were only two seats at the table, so I gestured that Madelyn should sit and I dragged over one of the clumsy armchairs sitting in front of the desk. It earned me a sour look from Sister Emanuelle, something I had

no doubt would have earned me some stripes with a ruler if I was a boy.

“I’ll file the paperwork with the court and contact you when the hearing date is established. I expect this will be an immediate gavel bang and done, since there are no known relatives to contest this and the sisters have agreed that as long as the child is raised within the church, they are glad to see her placed in a stable, loving home.”

He gave me a long look as he said it, like maybe I wasn’t stable or loving.

Madelyn nodded quickly and snatched the pen from the table, signing everywhere James indicated, then she passed the pen to me. I noticed her hand shook when she did it and I grabbed her hand rather than the pen, kissing the back of it as I watched her eyes go all melty.

“This is a pretty simple process,” James said. “Private adoptions are only as complicated as you make them and the good sisters seem interested in placing the baby as quickly as possible.”

Sister Emanuelle’s face softened for the first time and the look she gave Madelyn suggested she was trying to smile. It looked painful as fuck.

“Madelyn has demonstrated her loyalty to Mary with her faithful visits and it’s clear the baby has grown attached to her. I can’t say that for the other couples who have approached us, so truly, with time Ms. VanBuren, you’ve won me over.”

“Beckman,” I corrected without even thinking about it, and I caught Madelyn’s smile out of the corner of my eye. “She’s Mrs. Beckman.”

“Beckman.” The unpleasant grimace stretched wider on Sister Emanuelle’s face. “Yes, our Mary will be a blessing to your household and you will be a blessing to her. I expect we’ll be seeing more of her in the very near future, at Mass of course, and then when she is of age to begin her schooling.”

I had no personal experience with the Sisters as teachers, but I remembered Steve telling me about some of Madelyn’s experiences at their hands. She wasn’t in their care for long, but I had no doubt she’d been terrorized and had given it right back to them.

“We’ll love her,” I promised. “She’ll be safe and warm, fed and protected, and we’ll always do right by her.”

It didn’t escape me that the words leaving my mouth felt a little like the promises I’d made to Madelyn before slipping a simple band on her finger. She deserved so much better, both the promises and the ring.

Madelyn’s eyes were huge and shiny as James grouped the papers together and straightened them by gathering them in his hands and ticking the bottoms against the tabletop. It was a loud noise in the quiet room and when there was a soft knock at the door I’m pretty sure Madelyn’s heart stopped.

Sister Theresa let herself in, a squirmy little bundle tucked into her left arm, wiggling against her shoulder, but the baby wasn’t vocally fussing.

“You’d never believe how much she’s grown in our care,” she chuckled. “She couldn’t have been more than two weeks old when she got here and she was so tiny...” She looked at Madelyn. “You saved her, my child. It’s right that you should be her mother.”

Madelyn sucked in an audible breath and I reached out to put a hand around her waist just as Sister Theresa stepped forward and settled the baby in her arms.

I can’t tell you what happened at that moment, but I could hear the blood pounding in my ears, my heart thumping in my chest. I had the whole world right there, in my arms, and I realized in that next heartbeat just how awful it would be to lose everything I’d just found. I was taking the first real breaths of my life at forty-five years old. *How have I been asleep for so long?*

“We’ve packed a few things for her,” Sister Theresa said as she reached out to smooth her hand over the baby’s head and Daniela looked up at her seriously with huge, dark eyes. “We’ll miss this little one.”

I watched Madelyn’s knuckles whiten when the sister said it, like she was ready and willing to fight anyone who’d try to take the little girl out of her arms.

There were a few more pleasantries and we stumbled out into the sunshine with a box of diapers and a few clothes in my arms, Daniela cuddled up to Madelyn’s chest.

James congratulated us. Shook my hand, which I had to put down the box to do, and gingerly hugged Madelyn, keeping a

safe distance so as not to crush the baby.

I hovered over Madelyn while she settled the baby into the car seat she'd installed in the truck weeks earlier and she turned with huge, bright eyes and such a hopeful smile that it made me smile back at her. I reached for her then, grabbing her by the face and hauling her mouth to mine for a not-so-innocent kiss.

“Not in front of the kid!” someone hollered from across the street, and there was raucous laughter from the small group of guys. I lifted a middle finger in response and there was good-natured laughter.

I walked her around to the passenger side and gave her a hand to help her in, something that earned me a sideways glance. She was one hundred percent capable of handling herself, but Hailey had made sure I was well trained. I was thoughtful and chivalrous, thanks to her repeatedly drilling the importance of both things into my head, saying that no son of hers was going to go out into the world to burden another woman. I supposed that was something I should have thanked her for, in retrospect, but it had been used against me in the past too, so sometimes I wished she'd have just allowed me to grow up with just a touch of asshole.

There were cars in the driveway when we got home, a drive during which I think Madelyn sat gazing into the back seat the entire time. I'd asked her if she wanted me to pull over so she could ride next to the baby, but she shook her head. Honestly, I

think she was still getting used to the idea and she needed just a few moments of physical distance to get her head on straight.

“Uh...looks like the cavalry’s here,” I announced, only a little ashamed that I’d thought to text Steve before we headed to Sacred Heart. The man couldn’t keep a secret to save his soul—that he’d kept the adoption quiet for more than a day was a miracle in itself. He was plainly to thank for the cars in the driveway.

There was a squeal from inside the house as I got out of the truck. I knew I’d locked the house before we left; had I missed a door?

“Let me see the little munchkin!”

Kennedy came flying out of the house, her arms wide as she rushed toward the truck, and Madelyn was already reaching into the seat to unbuckle the baby.

“Gimme, gimme, gimme!” Kennedy’s hands were out. “I need some little squishy!”

Madelyn looked like she wanted to laugh and slap Kennedy at the same time and she handed Daniela over so carefully, it was like she was transferring an egg to someone she feared would drop it.

We were swarmed then. Madelyn’s parents came rushing out of the house with Teagan, and Grams followed carefully with a walker.

“Steve’s out back already,” Kennedy announced almost breathlessly. “Hope you were in the mood for a little

celebration, because when Steve told me today was the day...” Her eyes filled up suddenly and she leaned into Madelyn. “Congratulations, Mama.” Then she leaned over to me and pushed up on her toes, kissing my cheek, just before she punched my shoulder hard. “Good job, Daddy.”

That was a weird word, one I’d certainly never thought I’d be called, and it surprised me to find just how much I liked it.

“Come on.” Kennedy led the way back into the house, everyone trailing back in behind her as Madelyn’s mother fussed about wanting her turn to hold the baby.

I hadn’t spent any time in the vicinity of Mrs. VanBuren since I was in my early twenties, and by the time Steve and I left the Army, the VanBurens had moved to Florida.

Shortly put, she was exhausting. She was drama and energy and a giant, sucking black hole of neediness. She needed all eyes on her, something I’d miraculously forgotten in the last several decades, and the memories came roaring back.

“Kenny’s gonna punch your mother,” I whispered into Madelyn’s ear as we followed the little parade through the house, and I heard an explosion of sound from Steve when Kennedy appeared on the back deck with the baby in her arms. He was definitely his mother’s son, just dialed back to the point he was manageable.

I was about to step through the back door and onto the deck, but Madelyn caught my hand and pulled me back, her eyes big and shiny with joy. When I turned to her she grabbed my face with both hands and absolutely laid one on me, and I mean

wow. I'd gotten the idea that Madelyn had a passionate spirit, but the emotion I felt radiating out of her was almost enough to bring me to my knees: joy, hopefulness, love.

Maybe some of that love was for me.

We spent the afternoon with Madelyn's insane family—my family now, I guessed, and Dad showed up with Hailey later that evening.

Daniela handled being passed around like an appetizer tray like a champ. She was quiet, staring up intently at each new face with eyes dark as cesspools. She blinked slowly at each person getting up in her business, occasionally rewarding us with little smiles, and when she squirmed just a little, Madelyn was at the ready with a warmed bottle, like she'd interpreted the wiggle for what it really meant.

“Never thought I'd see the day.”

I had to look down my shoulder to see Grams leaning on her walker beside me. She reached one hand over as she said it, patting my butt, and I rolled my eyes. She caught me doing it and chuckled. “Forgive an old lady her only joy.”

Something about her told me that had always been her joy in life. I could hardly remember her husband, Madelyn's grandfather, but I felt sure the woman had put him through his paces—routinely—and had probably been buried with hand prints on his ass.

“You have a new joy now.” I pointed across the yard to where Mrs. VanBuren was hogging Daniela, cooing and

crooning loudly as Madelyn looked on with a pained expression.

“I know what you did for them,” the old lady said quietly and I took her arm, leaving the walker in order to guide her to one of the chairs. “That’s something I’d have called a very large sacrifice if I didn’t know better.” She put an arm low on my hips to steady herself and I waited for the handful of ass that never came.

Settling her carefully, I pointed toward the table Steve had spread with food and drinks and she shook her head. “Don’t distract me, boy. I have something to say.”

Uh-oh.

“You’re both idiots,” she huffed suddenly, reaching out to give a sharp slap to the back of my head.

“What?” I tried to keep my voice low.

“Ridiculous.” She muttered the words like she’d just confirmed I had an incurable disease. “I have news for you, young man. If you think you’re doing this to help my granddaughter, you’re wrong. You’ve made a choice to be there for her and the baby and now you’re in it. This wasn’t something temporary.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “I knew what I was getting into.”

“Did you really?” Her voice went a little quieter. “I see the way you look at her, Adam. You might have told yourself you did this to solve a problem for her, but you’re dead-gone over my granddaughter.”

News flash, old woman: I have been for decades. Just ask my ex-wife.

“Watch yourself,” she warned quickly. “She’s only loved one thing for a long time now: work. It didn’t give her any sass or backtalk and she was real good at what she did, I know that much even if I didn’t approve of it—not a fitting place for a woman, being in combat.

“It’s going to take her some time to learn how to be tied down in a family way, and she might not be very good at it for a while.”

I nodded slowly. Was this a warning? An insight? A tarot card reading?

“I have no doubt she has feelings for you, Beckman.”

That drew me up a little short. She’d never called me by my last name to my face; I was always “young man,” or “son.”

“Those feelings have been there for decades—she’s kept them buried down deep, and I think you have ‘em too. But I see the way she looks at you too, and I think she’s worried you don’t want her at all now that you’ve gotten what you wanted.”

My face must have gone pale, because I felt the blood drain out when she gave me a pointed look. That was an awful accusation and something the old woman really didn’t need to be thinking about.

“I’m old, but I’m no fool, and I’m certainly not blind—not yet. That girl’s been betrayed and abandoned before,

Beckman. It's what made her who she is, and she's devoted her whole heart to work because it will never let her down."

I sank down to the deck, my butt hitting the boards, my elbows resting over my knees as I tried to absorb the impact of her words.

"Now you have to prove to her you won't leave once you feel she's sufficiently settled with Daniela."

I cut the old woman a sharp look. "I would n—"

"Hush." She set a hand on top of my head. "I didn't say you would, but I think she feels that way—worries about it. She's a handful, that one, and you have your work cut out for you. You've gone a long way in proving to her that you're a good man, but she's going to be looking for signs you're getting twitchy. She might invent hurts where there are none intended, just to protect her heart."

She took her hand back and leaned into the back of the chair.

"Madelyn's an old dog." She chuckled. "This is a whole new set of tricks for her to learn and she might not take to them real quick. Just keep doing what you're doing—and *don't* let her push you away."

Like hell I would.

"You know something I don't?" I asked slowly. "I'd appreciate any helpful information; she's a tough one to win over, but I'll do whatever it takes."

The old woman smiled at me.

“You’ll earn it,” was all she said, patting the top of my head like I was a dog.

Well, at least she wasn’t patting my butt.

Something pulled my attention across the yard, to where Steve was introducing Daniela to the partially-constructed playset and Madelyn was hovering, and I watched for a moment, smiling. *This is my life.* Then Madelyn turned her head, as if she could feel me watching her, and gave me a heartbreaking smile.

Now she has Daniela; she won’t need you much longer.

That was a sobering, terrifying thought. She wouldn’t do that, would she?

That thought deflated the happy bubble I’d been living in for weeks, like a dart to a balloon: instantaneous and devastating, and I spent the rest of the evening trying to keep a happy face on what should have been another of the happiest days of my life, because despite Grams’s encouragement, something felt ominous and foreboding. A heralding of the end.



Settling into a routine over the following weeks was harder than either of us had expected.

I was fortunate to have a pretty regular schedule, thanks to the fact we were finally fully staffed, and I didn’t tell Madelyn, but I was giving consideration to selling my place. It

demonstrated how serious I was about us, or so I thought, and I wanted to be able to contribute more to our expenses without the drain of a mortgage payment on another home.

After a few weeks of settling in, Madelyn took a couple overnight jobs somewhat locally. All she could tell me was that Katsaros had secured a contract in New York City, providing security to a couple diplomats. I left it at that, aware she couldn't tell me more, but also afraid that if she told me more I'd never sleep again.

Daniela settled into the routine faster than we did, and oftentimes during the night I woke when Madelyn crept from our bed to check on the baby. We'd kept her in the bassinet in our room the first few nights, but she was a wild sleeper and clearly didn't have enough room, so we moved her to her own room and her crib. That meant I set up the complicated baby surveillance system immediately and Madelyn could be found glued to the monitor until she could no longer keep her eyes open.

If anything, being a new mom probably made her a bit neurotic for a while. It wasn't Daniela's fault, because it wasn't lack of sleep. It was just that everything Madelyn did had to be done perfectly, and she was her own harshest critic. No matter what it was, she was always convinced she could have done better and I could see her driving herself crazy with it.

Though Daniela typically only woke once a night, Madelyn was on edge, easily startled, dropping off into a light, troubled

sleep the instant her head hit the pillow. Because of that I tried to give her space, careful not to push too hard, holding her close when she let me but waiting for her to initiate intimacy—which she didn't.

I didn't ask whether it was the stress of becoming a caregiver, or her job, or the difficulty of maintaining a balance between the two. Her job gave her a lot more freedom than most, but when she was away from home she had to be all in, and I knew she was having a hard time doing that now that Daniela was constantly on her mind.

Whether or not I was on her mind was a question that nagged at me, and it was Hailey who could tell I was having my own hard time adjusting to getting everything I wanted all at once.

“Give it time, Adam,” she admonished early one Tuesday morning. She'd arrived before six to watch Daniela while I was at work, as Madelyn and I couldn't always coordinate when she had to leave for work—sometimes at a moment's notice—and there were times I couldn't be there to watch my own daughter. It made me feel incredibly guilty.

“Adjusting to parenthood is difficult on the father and the mother, and surprisingly a number of the reasons are the same. You're adjusting to a new sleep schedule, trying to balance your careers, and sex goes out the window.” She barked a short, humorless laugh. “Not that it's something anyone tells you, but whether you've been sent home from the hospital with an infant or you've taken a foster child home, there's an

adjustment period that's incredibly difficult on every couple. However, if you're both in it for the right reasons, you will find your way through it. Just keep open the lines of communication. Be gentle and patient and kind. There will be days you feel like everything's broken and can't be repaired, but give each other some leniency and a lot of hugs."

I sighed. I wasn't sure I wanted relationship advice from my stepmother, probably one of two people best qualified to give it to me, given the similarity of our situations, some decades removed.

"You and Dad didn't...ah..." I poured a mug of coffee, grimacing, not sure I wanted an answer to the question that had just formed in my mind.

"Suffer a few intimacy issues because I had to adjust to an instant family and a little boy who desperately needed a mother?" She grinned, aware I was completely uncomfortable with this. "Yeah. You could say we went through a spell..." Her chuckle was almost evil, something I'd never heard from Hailey.

The sound of Daniela's movements as she woke, on the baby monitor I'd carried out into the kitchen, arrested my attention and Hailey smiled gently. "She'll settle, just relax. Give her time, patience, and love—that's the most important, Adam."

I couldn't be sure whether she was talking about the baby or my wife, but I tried to draw in a deep breath, pouring some half and half into the coffee.

The truth was that I'd thought I had a pretty good read on Madelyn until the last few weeks. She'd been cagey, exhausted and stressed lately, and I was pretty sure not all of it had to do with home life. In fact, a lot of it was definitely external.

The problem was that even if she could talk to me about it, she wasn't.

My shift was rough that day. I lost a patient in the air, despite my best attempts, long before we could get her to the hospital, where I could get her the extra help she needed.

I stopped on the way home and picked up a bottle of whiskey. It was something Madelyn didn't keep in the house. I mean, I kept some...in the other house...for medicinal purposes. But I knew better than to hit that medicine too hard, especially since one side of my lineage had serious addiction problems. I didn't need to be that guy: a statistic. But that afternoon, I was having a really hard time. I hadn't lost a patient in a very, very long time and that loss had been particularly difficult, since I saw the dog tags hanging out of her shirt. She couldn't have been more than twenty-three years old and she'd overdosed, out in the middle of nowhere, something her boyfriend had called in.

She was gone when we picked her up from the remote outpost, I knew that from her vital signs. But still, I tried. I administered the NARCAN and tried to resuscitate her, but even I'd known we were long, long minutes too late—and still I blamed myself.

Should have gotten there earlier.

Should have started with the NARCAN, even before I took her pulse.

Should have started resuscitation on the ground, instead of waiting until we were in the helicopter, even if it took less than a minute.

Madelyn was sitting at the island when I got home, her head down, a coffee cup and a whiskey bottle sitting on the marble top, and Hailey shook her head at me in warning.

My girl had as bad a day as me, if not worse, and I slid onto the chair next to her and carefully, gently put my arms around her, pulling her closer. I needed to feel the warmth of her body against mine, to know that she was ok, even before I walked to the playpen to check on the baby. That was something I did out of instinct, and would have done first if I hadn't felt Madelyn needed something.

"Thanks, Ma." I nodded at Hailey. "You've pulled a long day."

Nodding at the brown paper bag I'd set on the island, I mouthed, "Take it," with a wink, and she rolled her eyes at me.

I knew better. She was a Quaker at heart, and the fact Dad still drank meant he only drank with me.

It did occur to me that I hadn't often referred to her as my mother, though she was the only one I really remembered, my mother for almost forty-two years.

"Mom."

She turned halfway to the door as I stood, leaving Madelyn to hold herself upright. She was capable, and there was something I needed to do.

“Thank you.” I leaned in to hug her, because this was about so much more than the fact that she selflessly watched Daniela whenever we needed a third parent. “You’ve made all the difference to me.”

I wasn’t usually so straightforward with her and Hailey convulsed a little in my arms, something that felt like a tiny sob, and I folded her tighter, kissing the top of her head.

I hadn’t given her a lot of recognition over the years. I’d been pretty hard on her, really, teasing and waving her off... though she’d always been there, ready to listen and encourage, and although it had taken me a very, very long time, I finally realized what a strong, stabilizing, encouraging influence she’d been in my life.

“You saved me from a lot of things.” I squeezed tighter. “Thank you for caring so much, because now I know how to be a decent man—you taught me all the things I needed to know.”

Forty-fucking-five years old, almost forty-six, and I’d just figured this shit out.

“Love you, Adam.” She made a choking noise, and I had to chuckle when I realized Hailey was about as good at expressing emotions as I was. “You’ve always been an easy kid to love.”

I doubted that was true, but it was generous of her to say, and I gave an extra little squeeze before letting her go.

Hailey cleared her throat and ran a hand through her slowly-silvering blonde hair as she looked toward Madelyn, who was again face-down on the island countertop.

“The two of you will face many hardships. If you lean on each other, the burden is less. Just ask me how I know.” Her left eyebrow lifted upward and something hitched in my heart, because I knew she was telling me just how much she loved my dad. For all those years, despite the hole left in my heart that I couldn’t even remember forming, I knew that was what I’d always wanted for him.

I kissed the top of Hailey’s head and she lifted up on her toes to kiss my cheek. It was unusual for her; she was even less physically demonstrative than me, cautious and sparing in her tender demonstrations.

She nodded toward Madelyn’s form and said quietly, “She and I have a few things in common. It will take patience and tenderness, but you’re the man for it.”

I had no idea what she meant and clearly she knew something I didn’t, and wasn’t about to share it.

Madelyn still hadn’t moved from her position on the island and Daniela was starting to wiggle around in the playpen Hailey had set up in the dining room. Her little face stretched into a gummy grin when I leaned over the side and picked her up. She was an affectionate baby and rewarded me by leaning immediately into my neck when I cuddled her close,

something that wrapped warm fingers around my heart. I'd fallen in love with this little girl the instant I saw her and already I knew which of us made the rules.

Daniela wasn't a fussy baby, something that had surprised both of us. In fact, when she woke in the middle of the night for a feeding it was the sound of her rustling in her crib that woke us. By the time one of us showed up with a bottle she was always trying to sit up, waiting and smiling. It was a little unsettling sometimes, that she just sat there so patiently and was always pleased to see us. She was never angry or crying or inconsolable, though she always wanted to be picked up and cuddled, and neither one of us could get enough of that.

Cuddling Daniela against my shoulder, the two of us walked down the hallway and into the master bedroom.

Madelyn didn't talk about things until she was good and ready, and she had to be relaxed before she opened up and started spilling words. So the baby and I leaned over the tub and closed the drain, flipped the handles and adjusted the water to the perfect temperature before dumping in some of the bath salts Kennedy had probably left.

Back in the kitchen, I set Daniela in her little bouncy seat and I rinsed out Madelyn's cup. It smelled like paint thinner—she hadn't gotten the good stuff—and it was clear she hadn't been able to handle more than a few sips.

Steve had left a few bottles of wine in the rack on the counter and I grabbed one, pouring a generous portion into a stemless glass before I set it on the counter and gently pulled

my wife up from her seat and into a hug. It was as much for me as it was for her, as holding her was comforting, and she buried her face in my neck and I felt something hot drip down the front of my shirt.

“Come on, baby,” I said gently. “Let’s help you relax a little.”

I looked over my shoulder at Daniela, who sat watching me from her seat and I said to her, “You hold the fort in here, little lady. I’ll be back to start dinner in just a minute.”

The animals clearly thought I was talking to them, because Lucy climbed up into Daniela’s seat with her and folded her small body into the space next to the baby.

Bailey took his protection duties very seriously and he circled the seat four times before deciding which position gave him the best vantage point, lying in front of her so he could keep an eye on all the exits.

I very nearly had to carry Madelyn down the hallway and she stood staring blankly at the bathtub.

“Can I help?” I asked, slipping one hand under her shirt to rest on her smooth stomach and she jumped, a tight expression on her face that she tried rather unconvincingly to turn into a smile. It told me that I was on thin ice, even if I didn’t understand why, and I removed my hand, backing away slowly after I set the glass of wine near the edge of the tub.

“Junior Beckman and I will get dinner going,” I said. “Just come on out whenever you’re ready.”

Madelyn didn't say a word to me the rest of that night, and I didn't push her even though it just about killed me. She'd been on two overnights in the past week and I knew something big was happening in the city, but she wouldn't talk about it and I worried with the way she was acting that if she had to pull many more of them, she might never speak to me again. It was clear she was processing something difficult and I wondered what she could have possibly seen in an urban jungle that she hadn't seen in a million worse ways in combat.

I was dead on my feet, but I gave Daniela her dinner and her bath, then took her to the bedroom where Madelyn had padded off right after dinner and put herself to bed, curled into a little ball, her back facing my side of the bed.

"Here she is, Mama," I said quietly. "All fresh and sweet and ready for little baby dreams."

Madelyn unfurled a little and rolled onto her back, and I slipped the baby beneath the sheet to rest on her chest. Both of us loved skin-to-skin contact with our sweet little girl, and most mornings Madelyn was up first to fetch Daniela from her crib and settle her into our bed with me, right on my chest.

I showered and got ready for bed, then I carried the sleeping baby back to her crib and kissed her sweet smelling head before tucking her in. How it was possible to love such a tiny thing so much was something I hadn't yet come to fully understand, but in a short period of time she'd become the air I breathed, just like her mother.

Madelyn wasn't sleeping when I crawled in behind her, and I scooted close to her back but didn't try to touch her, concerned she hadn't made any moves to touch me that night. It felt like she'd given me a glorious taste of everything and then pulled right back, retreating suddenly into a shell I hadn't known existed.

I sighed quietly, said a prayer in my head and crossed myself, then fell into a troubled sleep.

Madelyn

“Oh, hiiiiii!”

The voice was high-pitched, falsely bright, and my stomach dropped to my toes, because I'd recognize that voice anywhere: Leia Batabor, or whatever her married name was now, the bringer of darkness and misery. I'd done so well to avoid her for decades. Why did the universe have to put her in front of me now, of all days?

“It was Maddy, right?”

My father was the only person on the face of the earth allowed to call me Maddy. Anyone else got *one* warning.

“Leia.” My voice was almost as flat as I felt inside as I turned to face her. “Not quite. It's Madelyn.”

“Oh, right.” Her nose wrinkled up in a way I supposed she thought was cute and I wasn't surprised to find she still had the face of a twelve-year-old girl, except that when her nose wrinkled nothing else moved. Botox, probably, or maybe

something more extreme. My guess was that she had a plastic surgeon on the side. “VanBuren, right?”

“Beckman now, actually.” I felt a victorious grin tugging at the corners of my mouth, because she sure as fuck knew that name. She’d chased Adam and my brother until the day they left for the Army.

“Really?” Her eyebrows didn’t budge. “Good for you, marrying up.”

And there it was, the first shot.

Her eyes drifted over my shoulder and I turned my head to see Jess bearing down on us fast.

Son of a bitch, what had I done to piss off Someone today?

“Leia!” Jess’s voice was a touch more victorious than I’d have liked. “I’m so glad to see you here—I was going to call you on my way in to ask if you wanted to meet for coffee.”

Completely ignoring me, Jess circled me and leaned in to give Leia a hug and a fake air kiss, and I hated her a little more. There was only one reason she’d be friends with someone like Leia, and it was because they had an enemy in common.

“Oh. Hi, Madelyn.” She turned like she’d just realized I was there—like she hadn’t just stepped all the way around me to hug Leia. “What draws you out of the lovenest?” Her tone was unmistakably mocking.

“Fuel.” I smiled tightly, gesturing toward the basket in my hand, wondering if she’d notice the canister of formula. “You

know, hard to fuck like rabbits on an empty tank.”

Leia’s mouth dropped open, and just the briefest expression of displeasure flashed over Jess’s face. *Bingo.*

“Ha.” It wasn’t exactly a laugh when it came from Jess’s mouth. It was more scornful. “I suppose you have a point.”

Wait, what?

“He *can* go for hours.” There was a smug look on her face and even Leia couldn’t help but smile, something that should’ve broken her plastic face.

“It’s remarkable...” I tried to keep myself in the game, but the look I was giving her should have melted the flesh off her bones. The thought of Adam’s hands on her made me want to punch her in the teeth. I couldn’t handle the idea this woman had seen my husband naked, knew the planes and contours of his body, knew the sounds he made and that he liked to kiss each and every one of my fingers afterward, right before he folded me into his arms, right up against his chest and make a contented little humming noise into my hair. *I absolutely loved that.*

That thought, the realization that those things weren’t only mine, was like an ice pick to the heart, and I struggled to keep the hurt off my face.

“He *is* remarkable. Unforgettable, really.” The smug expression on her face was just begging me to ask her just how unforgettable, but I had a feeling she’d tell me anyway.

“Well, I mean...” It was Leia, looking smug. “You’re operating from pretty recent memory, to be fair.”

Bait and set.

She and Jess giggled in unison and my eyes widened, even though I tried to keep them from doing it.

“Mmm.” Jess looked like she had a mouthful of something delicious and my stomach lurched dangerously. “Yeah, he wanted one last taste—well, that’s what he said, but I wouldn’t put it past him to come back for more. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

The world tilted dangerously and I wobbled just a little, enough that Jess knew she’d hit her mark.

“I had *no* idea he was getting married the next day.”

She was the picture of innocence, all wide-eyed and golden and lovely, poison spewing from her pretty mouth, and I swallowed hard against the bile that rose in my throat. *The next day. How was that possible? We were so busy getting everything together...*

The picture flashed before my eyes, Adam walking into the kitchen, freshly showered the night before our impromptu wedding.

The fact he’d turned me down.

“If you’re going to be sick,” Leia started, and my eyes filled up with the warning tears that told me I was about to throw up.

Throwing down the basket, I clamped a hand over my mouth and rushed up the aisle, past the registers and out into the parking lot. I made it as far as the hedge that bordered the parking lot before I leaned into it and gave up all my lunch.



I sat in the truck with the windows down for a long time, the breeze blessedly cool for a summer day.

I'd gotten back from the city earlier that afternoon, after an overnight that turned into two, and Adam assured me that Hailey knew our shifts and would watch the baby that day.

Stopping at the supermarket on the way home was something I hadn't wanted to do, but we were nearly out of coffee, which was unthinkable, so I grabbed a basket and added things as I hurried through the store.

Given the news I'd received in the city just the afternoon before, I couldn't handle anything more. Leia was bad news, but Jess was the exponent on top of a shit day. It wasn't that I believed her, but that I didn't know yet if I *shouldn't*. She was clearly the jealous type and I wouldn't have put it past her to flat out lie just because she wanted to cause trouble.

The truth was that Adam hadn't seemed all that interested in physical closeness the last couple weeks. I'd chalked it up to the fact we were both exhausted and trying to adjust to the demands of being a new couple, living together and being responsible for Daniela, but some irrational part of me, way deep down, worried it was more than that. I'd been waiting for

Adam to reach for me, to show he needed me in some way, and he hadn't.

We'd had very little time together before Daniela's arrival—then poof, instant family. And while that had been the plan, the adjustment was certainly challenging in its own ways. So while I knew it wasn't a rational fear, or I hoped it wasn't, part of me questioned whether he was already tired of me.

It hadn't been Jess's words that had rocked me, or the look on Leia's face, though both had certainly twisted the knife to the heart. It was a flash of memory buried deep long ago, lying half-naked on the floor of a sorority house, while a man sat on the edge of the bed, re-buttoning the shirt he'd torn off only moments earlier. "Such a disappointment, Fifth Row Girl. I thought you'd put up a better fight."

The asshole hadn't even bothered to learn my name, though he was the TA for the class and had full access to the attendance list.

I had never consented to dinner or coffee with him. In fact, I'd never even spoken to him. I'd just been aware of the fact he gave off a vibe I didn't like. I knew who he was and that he came from money and power. His father had been the state's attorney general for a time and then governor for five or six years. It was no secret he was grooming Mario to step into his shoes.

Mario always had a girlfriend, though perhaps that was a generous assessment. He always had a girl on his arm and he switched them out like watches.

I'd gone to the party with a casual friend that night and she'd been the one to hand me a cup of something I later presumed was spiked, because I didn't even see Mario at the party until he was right in front of me, my vision blurry, the word *No* the only word I could speak.

It became plain to me over time and uncomfortable reflection that Mario was a TA because it allowed him to keep tabs on all the incoming freshman girls. Though he was in his senior year, it was obvious he'd perfected his method and when I took my complaint straight to the university president, I discovered I wasn't the first, or even the second girl to accuse him of something so ugly and perverse.

It wasn't that he was unattractive, because in his own way he had the Italian thing going for him: dark hair, dark eyes, a distinguished nose...it was just that everything beyond skin-deep was ugly.

The Benedetti family sent a retinue of lawyers to deal with me and since I was too ashamed to tell anyone, I faced them alone.

The university's counsel agreed with the Benedetti lawyers—*lawyers*, as in five of them—that I would be wise to take a hush money payment and never speak of it again. For good measure, they kicked in a few hundred thousand on top of the seven-figure settlement offered.

I found later that I was the one to be given the most generous settlement, which convinced me I had been a fool to let him get away with it. It was obvious to me in retrospect

that there was something just beyond my grasp that I could have used to nail the son of a bitch, but whatever it was I never found it.

It could easily be said that the experience colored my future relationships, to the point that there were very few of them. It was difficult for me to trust people after that and the one semi-serious relationship I was in at twenty-five imploded when he found out I had a bloated bank account due to a scandalous past.

The money part didn't bother him so much, but the fact I'd never told him was apparently a huge blow to his ego and when I wouldn't tell him *who* was responsible, he lost his shit and things fell apart.

The truth was that Adam was the first really serious relationship I'd had in...well, ever. And honestly, I didn't know how to handle it. I'd spent weeks walking on eggshells, afraid I'd screw something up and he'd leave. That thought was soul-crushing, because my whole life I'd been in love with him from a distance, convinced I could never have him. He'd been the template, the perfect model, and not just on the outside. He was beautiful and kind, patient and attentive. He was giving of himself, his time and resources, and I don't even have to tell you he was giving in bed. The little time we'd had together, I'd learned how much Adam liked to give and all I wanted was *more*.

It seemed likely that in the very near future, all I'd be getting was *less*, thanks to what had transpired in the city just

the day before, and there was the fact I didn't know how to handle it. But if it meant what I thought it did, I was about to lose everything I'd just found.

By now, Aaron, Big Mike and I were a pretty regular team, something Scott said was necessary for building relationships and trust with one another, and when I'd requested to be pulled off future rotations at the border, he'd pulled them as well. He fed me some line about it being better for Big Mike's "head space," and while I didn't ask for details, I trusted he knew what he was talking about. After all, the two of them had seen some shit together, from what Aaron told me.

For his part, I don't think Aaron was upset about spending more time at home with his wife and kids.

Instead, we'd been assigned diplomatic protection duty in the city, and we'd made several reconnaissance trips to become familiar with the area, with routines and patterns, and anything that would present potential complications once the United Nations was back in session and the clients we'd been hired to protect were in our care.

This job was not in collaboration with the FBI, and I breathed a sigh of relief to know that Gerald Hendrickson wouldn't be breathing down my neck. He was the field office director in the city and he was incredibly good at his job, but Katsaros had mentioned more than once that the man was going through some "personal adjustments" and should be left unmolested if at all possible. All I knew was that he was a

bonafide hardass and the people from his team I'd met at the border were not the sort of people you messed with.

Hendrickson's reputation preceded him from his days in the military, and since I was Air Force and he was Army, that was saying something—not something particularly nice, either.

Personally, I thought it meant the guy was going through an ugly divorce and from the hushed conversation I'd overheard between Scott and Big Mike, it seemed pretty sure I'd guessed right. Both of them were worried about some kind of ongoing operation in Italy, hunting down members of an organized crime syndicate who refused to stay on the right side of the law. Occupational hazard, I supposed, though I'd heard the Jersey boss had even operated *within* the federal government for quite a time. It seemed to be a pretty well kept secret, but the Baldassarri family had seen their fair share of trouble and the transfer of power from one boss to the next had caused some major hiccups, the sort that had reverberated all the way to Italy and right down the boot and across the bridge, into Sicily.

I'd been the one to drive on the trip back upstate and I'd been so distracted, when we made our first stop for fuel and coffee, Big Mike offered to take over.

Running into Leia and Jess after the last twenty-four hours I'd had was like purposely submerging myself in hydrochloric acid: it made everything hurt in a way I was fairly sure would never heal.

Jess's snide insinuation that Adam had returned to her and maybe still was, shouldn't have hurt me. I should have seen it for what it was: grasping and pathetic, but there was just enough doubt niggling at the edge of my mind that I gave her the room to creep in.

Was I enough for Daniela? Was I giving her enough time and attention?

Was I enough for him? Now that he'd seen everything there was to see, did he have regrets? Was I about to be packed up and taken back to the courthouse, returned to sender?

I took a deep, shaky breath, aware I'd been stuck in my own thoughts in a supermarket parking lot for so long, it was growing late in the afternoon. Adam had a long shift today and was probably on his way home just now.

Finally starting up Huey, I swiped a hand over my eyes and made the drive home. For the first time in weeks, I wasn't sure I was ready to go home. I knew I needed to come clean to Adam if I really wanted to give this thing a shot, because it was unfair to him. I was terrified of expressing my feelings to him and he needed to know what those were if we had a real shot at it.

It scared me to think he might not feel the same way, that he was playing the game for my sake. Our physical connection was incredible and I'd known lesser relationships could be sustained on that alone for some time, but I wanted more.

For once in my life, I wanted to be loved by someone—desperately. It was something I hadn't felt from my parents,

and Steve and Kennedy filled the void admirably but that still wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted the sort found in the books Kennedy kept trying to get me to read: all that passionate longing and ridiculous heaving, something I always laughed about but secretly hoped was real.

Adam already gave my heart arrhythmias. He made my stomach do jumping jacks and my stupid ovaries quiver. But I had no idea whether the feelings were reciprocated in any way, and I'd pinned my hope on a few vehement reassurances from Kennedy. They were straws to grasp at when I didn't feel like there was much hope at all.

Hailey's expression was kind when she met me at the door to hand me Daniela. She didn't leave right away though, she'd simply known that I needed to hold the baby, and I cuddled and kissed the tiny girl until she squirmed to be put down, so I set her back in the playpen and Hailey gave her a bottle.

It was Hailey who read the stricken expression on my face and moved toward the coffee pot, filling a mug that she slid in front of me as I collapsed on the island. I hadn't expected her to add a generous glug of whiskey, something she must have found in one of the cabinets, but I certainly wasn't going to argue with her.

I felt Adam walk into the house before I heard him. Something about his presence spoke to me, as it always had. I'd always known, as a kid, when Adam was in the house and it was no different now, some kind of weird communing of our souls.

You're going to miss this, my brain chanted as I leaned into the bathtub later that night. I didn't know what to do with a man who ran me a bath and brought wine. One who didn't crawl up my butt with "What's wrong, babe? Are you ready to talk about it? Can I help at all?"

To be fair, there had been a few less serious relationships since Garrett, but they'd never lasted long. They seemed to tire quickly of the fact I didn't need them enough.

When Adam brought Daniela to me I cuddled her close, and since he couldn't see me in the gathering dark of the room, I let the hurt leak out that I'd stored up over the last day. It had been hit after hit and even I could only take so much.

When Adam came out of the bathroom after his shower, he very gently took Daniela from me as I pretended to be asleep. I knew I wasn't fooling him, but I wasn't ready to have three very important conversations with him, let alone one.

First, he needed to know that I was all in on this marriage thing, because I got the feeling he hadn't gotten that memo. That was a conversation I needed to have with him before the other two: the full story about Mario, so he knew exactly what had happened and how I'd moved on, and lastly the gut punch that had leveled me on a New York City sidewalk.

I felt him crawl in and scoot up hesitantly behind me. He was careful not to touch me and I contemplated scooting backward to make him the big spoon, but touching him would have broken the dam. I'd have either burst into tears, or rolled

and started mauling him and I wasn't sure he could handle either.

I felt the movement of him crossing himself and I waited until he fell asleep to creep out of bed to blow my nose and creep down the hallway to Daniela's room. I needed to hold her again and know she was safe, because we were still weeks off from the court date that would establish her as unquestionably ours, and now it was possible that those short weeks were just enough time to lose her.

Adam

Our court date to finalize Daniela's adoption wasn't until the beginning of November and I was watching Madelyn's sanity fray right before my eyes.

I was pretty sure that was what was driving her to distraction, but she wouldn't talk to me about whatever it was that was bothering her.

Often I woke in the middle of the night to an empty bed and I knew where I'd find her: In Daniela's room, lying on the tiny daybed we'd put in there for nighttime feedings, her body curled protectively around the baby as they both slept.

It broke my heart to watch her struggling alone, because whatever it was, it was eating her alive. But in true VanBuren fashion, she wasn't about to let anyone help her and it drove me out of my mind.

She was already on a UN rotation with her team and though it was one week on and one week off, I knew the time away from the baby was killing her. The time away from me, I

thought, might be something she found a relief. She looked at me with haunted eyes, something that terrified me because I couldn't imagine what could have happened to put that look on her face, but I was scared it had something to do with me.

As the court date drew closer, she stopped sleeping in our bed altogether, opting instead to co-sleep with the baby in her room every night.

Some nights I crept in and sat with my back against the crib, butt on the floor, arms around my knees as I watched the two of them sleep.

I'd had something so sweet, so pure and beautiful, for just weeks and I didn't know what I'd done, but somehow I'd fucking lost it.



Talk about timing, right?

I had put my little townhouse up for sale by owner, and that week I accepted a cash offer and a one-week closing, something I'd wanted to discuss with Madelyn but my very presence seemed to burden her.

Steve asked me to meet him for coffee on one of my days off and since Madelyn was on rotation in the city that week, I strapped Daniela into her carseat and took her with me.

“Aren't you just a picture though, Beckman?” Steve teased as I walked into the coffee shop with Daniela strapped to my chest in the baby carrier.

I was exhausted and I knew I looked it. All my spare time had been at the townhouse, packing and putting things into storage, cleaning the place and closing. I was so busy, I hadn't had time to worry about what the future would bring beyond the court date. If we could just get through that part, I had hope we could sort everything else out.

“My man, you look like death. What’s going on, this little angel keeping you awake all night?” He reached out to wrap one huge hand around the back of Daniela’s tiny head and she gave him the massive dark eyes on full blast.

“Whew, Beckman. You’re gonna have a real problem with this one. These eyes aren’t going to break hearts, they’re going to *liquefy* them.” Didn’t I know it, though. Much like what her mother was doing to my heart.

“You two starting to get the routine sorted?” Steve asked over his shoulder as he walked to the pickup counter and grabbed the two huge coffees the barista had just set down. “I mean, you know...you sort of decided to do a lot of big things all at once this summer.”

I picked a table near the window and unwound the baby carrier from my body, so that I could hold Daniela easily in my lap. She was nearly capable of sitting up by now and she was curious as hell.

Steve sat watching her with a smile on his face. “Haven’t told anyone else yet, but Kenny’s about five weeks gone.”

It took a long moment for the penny to drop and when it did I shook my head at my best friend. “Congratulations, man.

You two are the best parents. Bet you're so happy." I couldn't help but grin. I'd always known Steve would be a great dad, and I knew it bothered Kennedy that Tegan might be an only child, considering neither of them were exactly young.

"Yeah...forty-six years old with an infant and a two-year-old. The fuck was I thinking, starting so late?" He rubbed at one eye and grinned. "Not that you're doing much better."

He sipped his coffee and watched Daniela on my lap, setting his cup off to the left as he appeared to think about something. Whatever it was, he dismissed the thought because he started snapping the fingers of his left hand and watching Daniela intently.

"You guys find her a pediatrician yet?" he asked, and I thought his voice sounded like he was forcing it to be casual. "She should be coming up on her six-month checkup by now, right? More or less?"

I didn't answer. I was too busy watching him watch my daughter, concern creeping across his face.

"Spit it out," I finally said and he stopped fiddling with the sugar packets he was tapping on the table, outside Daniela's field of vision.

"You ever noticed that she's real quiet?" he asked, as if something had just occurred to him. "I mean, incredible baby. Quiet, patient, sweet...doesn't ever cry. That's weird, right?"

I could feel the pins and needles of adrenaline start to prickle beneath my skin as I watched him drum his fingers on

the table while Daniela stayed completely absorbed with the woven pattern on the cuff of my sweatshirt.

“I’m just saying...” He trailed off, swallowing hard and grimacing. “I don’t know how to say this, man.” He continued drumming his fingers and he didn’t have to say what was running through my head.

For the first time I couldn’t ignore the fact that my daughter wasn’t just a sweet, even-tempered, mild-mannered baby. All signs had pointed, for a very long time, to the possibility she couldn’t hear a thing.



Two days later, there was no doubt in my mind that Daniela was deaf. I’d performed a number of very unscientific tests before I drove to Sacred Heart and demanded to see Sister Emanuelle, since she wasn’t returning my calls..

“I need Daniela’s medical records,” I demanded and the woman’s face screwed up in a grimace, probably out of irritation that we’d reverted back to her original name.

“She hasn’t any,” she answered shortly and I gave her a withering look.

“Doesn’t have any, or you won’t produce them?”

“We have...parted ways with the doctor previously on staff for our children.” She paused to clear her throat and there was an expression of distaste on her face. “There were some differences of opinion.”

“He can’t keep their medical records!” I was getting more and more riled up.

The sister looked distinctly uncomfortable. “The child *has* no medical records, Mr. Beckman. I’m afraid that was something beyond my control.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered if Madelyn had suddenly been approved to adopt the baby, with or without me, when someone discovered the truth about Daniela. It was enough to put off most bright-eyed, idealistic couples looking to adopt but it certainly wouldn’t have been enough to put off Madelyn, and this woman knew it.

“You tricked us—tricked her. You kept that information quiet because you knew it would make Daniela that much harder to adopt.”

The baby squirmed to be let down but I wrapped her in my arms instead, feeling dangerously emotional, and I lifted her, kissing her sweet little face. It was something she didn’t fight or fuss over, deciding instead to put little arms around my neck and lean into my shoulder.

“There were mistakes made,” the sister said slowly. “However, the decision made was for the best of the child. I am certain, Mr. Beckman, that you and your wife will give this child everything it is she needs, and a physical infirmity will not cause you to love her any less.”

She was right. If anyone wanted Daniela, they’d have to rip my arms off to get to her. Somehow Madelyn’s dream had become my own and though I’d had only a tiny window of

time with them, suddenly I couldn't imagine life any differently.

I called Steve from the truck and asked him for a recommendation for a pediatrician, since he had access to a pretty vast network. After all, I knew what to expect: lots of doctor visits. Specialist visits. Everyone would have kind words and recommendations, and on the way home we stopped at the little bookstore in town and I picked up the one book they had on American Sign Language because I was going to get out ahead of this thing, damn it. How far behind were we already?

I spent the next several days and nights worrying about how to tell Madelyn. She was an overachiever, a fixer, and she would see this as something she had to handle on her own.

That night I sat in Daniela's room while she slept, a small lamp illuminating the book in my hands as I tried to contort my fingers into the necessary shapes to form the alphabet. I had to start somewhere, even if it meant spelling out each word the long way, and I practiced until I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

It was getting late and I was on shift early the next morning, so I tucked the book under one of the pillows on the small daybed and kissed the baby, who hardly stirred in her sleep.

Bailey had decided that when Madelyn wasn't home, he needed to sleep on her side of the bed and I knew it was because he'd become quickly attached and missed her,

because he couldn't have cared less if I snuggled him in my sleep.

To be clear, that was exactly what I did.

Lucy let herself into the bathroom with me and she sat on the bathtub surround, delicately washing her little paws while she waited for me to get through the shower. Lately she'd been doing that, spending time with me before bed, but then she'd saunter out the door and down the hallway and I knew from checking on the baby during the night that Lucy would jump up into the crib and sleep at Daniela's feet, keeping watch over her newest human.

It was only moments after I crawled into bed that I felt the disturbance in the house and Bailey exploded off the bed and ran down the hallway, his collar jingling.

There was a soft sound from the kitchen, one that made my heart race even as I felt relief settle into my gut: she was home and safe.

I didn't go to her. Instead, I listened for her quiet footsteps as she walked down the hall and I heard the low, sweet murmur of her voice to Daniela, then the soft sounds of gentle kisses on sweet baby cheeks.

I was going to make this work, for her sake. I would save her all the heartbreak I could; take the reins on this and show her that we could do this thing together. Because if I knew Madelyn, it was that she'd blame herself for this and struggle with the thing she couldn't actually fix.

There was a soft sound as she set her small bag on the chair near the door and the pressure in the room changed as she gently shut the bathroom door.

She was in there a long, long time, the shower running and then not. The sound of her teeth being brushed and the slip of clothing, and then...nothing.

Whatever it was, I couldn't take the distance, the silence, the way she kept herself from me, a moment longer. I opened the bathroom door to find her standing at the sink, her hands braced on the countertop, her head hanging low between her shoulders.

She startled just a little when I came up behind her and wrapped my arms around her middle, pulling her back into my chest. I'd waited long enough and she'd proven she could outstubborn me, so I was done with patience, with waiting for her to come to me.

When I spun her to face me, she quickly dashed at her cheeks with her fists and I held an index finger under her chin to tip her face up to mine. She kept her eyes downcast as I used the same hand to brush the trails on her face.

"Mrs. Beckman. What are we doing to do about this?" I sighed, waiting for her to raise red, swollen eyes to mine and when she finally did, finally let me see what was happening in her heart, I leaned down to kiss her softly.

It took her no time to turn what was supposed to be a gentle, comforting kiss into something hungry and desperate. Which of us was instigating and which was reciprocating, I don't

know that I could tell you, but I hoisted her up onto the bathroom counter so she could wind her legs around me, her fingers moving greedily over my bare upper body.

My girl had been starving herself just as I had, keeping herself from me, perhaps for fear of the emotions she'd be unable to control if she let go. If anything, Madelyn was always in control, and for once I wanted to watch her voluntarily surrender it and lose herself.

Sliding one arm around her back and lifting, I slid the other hand beneath her butt to lift her, carrying her from the bathroom and into the bedroom, flipping the light switch as I went. When she tried to protest, I shushed her. "For fuck's sake, woman. Let me do something for you for once. Stop keeping score. Stop carrying the burden by yourself. Whatever it is, I promise you I can handle it."

She sagged in my arms when I said it and carefully I stretched her out on the bed, peeling down her sleep pants and underwear, then working the tank top over her head.

"So fucking gorgeous," I growled at her. "You know I spent my whole damn life dreaming about this?"

She made a sound, an inhalation of breath, and held out a hand to me. I wasted no time accepting the invitation, parting her legs with one knee so I could crawl up between them, keeping one knee between and the other anchored over her other leg.

Her hands shook when she slipped them beneath the waistband of my pants, taking two firm handfuls of my ass and

pulling my body to hers. I loved it when she stopped fighting herself and just gave in to what she wanted, and I loved it even more when I felt like what she wanted was me. Because I knew it was silly and insecure, but I still questioned whether there was a chance she could feel for me what I felt for her. Madelyn was a wildcat in bed and I couldn't be sure her reactions to me had anything to do with emotion, because maybe she just enjoyed sex.

“I've missed you, baby,” I whispered into the soft skin of her neck, because it was true. She'd been mine for far longer than she knew, I just had to help her see it.

She groaned something and reached for my face, bringing my mouth to hers in what was a desperate kiss. I could taste fear and loss, desire and sadness, and I pulled back slowly, determined not to let her rush me. I wanted to take my time, to love her the way I'd played out in my head so many times, and to convince her with patient, gentle actions that she'd made the right choice with me.

This girl I'd known for my whole life...it had taken us so long to get here, and I was certain that Daniela was our miracle. She was the one who'd brought us together, otherwise I'd have spent the rest of my life stupidly pining after the woman I couldn't have.

We hadn't tried a lot of things yet. Largely the two of us had attacked each other like teenagers in heat the times we'd been together the few weeks we'd had without Daniela, which meant time hadn't been taken the way it should have been.

There were plenty of repeat occurrences, because we hadn't been able to keep our hands off each other, and while neither of us had been complaining, I wanted more.

Tonight I was going to slow things down. It had been a while and I'd missed the warmth of her skin against mine; the way she sighed when I touched her and the way she cuddled into me and linked her fingers through my own, anchoring my arm over her as she fell asleep. She *wanted* to be held, which was why I couldn't understand the distance of the past few weeks, and it had really messed with my head.

She sighed and hummed when I drew patterns on her skin with my tongue, and I knew I was going to have to convince my girl to be patient with me. She was zero to a hundred in no time flat, and teaching her to slow down and enjoy the trip was going to take some doing.

I worked my way from her breasts, back up to her mouth and spent long moments slowing her with deep kisses, the kind you felt deep in your belly.

She wriggled impatiently beneath me, her hips arching up to find my body and I chuckled against her mouth. "Let me slow it down. I want to take my time and enjoy this, like I haven't yet. I've always been so frantic to get my hands on you that I've made a mess of things. I haven't shown you what you're worth to me."

She stilled then and I could feel her looking up at me intently in the dark. She lifted a hand to my face and smoothed

it down my cheek, like she was petting me, and she whispered, “Ok, baby. I’ll play. Show me.”

The endearment thrilled me and I could feel her body vibrating when I kissed her again. I took my time, dragging my fingers in long, smooth, slow strokes across her body, purposely avoiding the areas I knew she really wanted to be touched.

“Please, Adam,” she finally begged with a breathy whisper and finally I lowered my mouth to her breast and drew slow, soft circles with the tip of my tongue. Sucked gently, until a needy moan came from her throat, then lapped my way slowly down her stomach.

Her breath was rapid; I could feel her stomach rising and falling with shallow pants as I kissed my way across one hip bone, then the other, down the outside of her thigh and back up the inside. Her legs widened in a silent plea as I did, and she groaned when I brushed my fingers gently over the apex of her thighs.

I had to steady myself, remind myself to slow down, rather than devouring her the way I wanted. I needed to draw it out, to show her I was everything she wanted, and I had to make sure she wanted more.

Pressing my hips into the bed did nothing to relieve the ache and I reached down to squeeze hard, buying myself a little time so I could give her the attention she needed.

The problem was that the noises she made and the way her body moved did nothing to further my resolve. It was a

powerful thing to be wanted by a woman like Madelyn, someone who gave everything, and I reached up to link one hand with hers as she fisted the sheets. She was going easy on me, I knew, when she wanted to sink her fingers into my hair and guide me. It was hard for her to give up control, but that was her gift to me.

Lucky for me, Madelyn was very vocal, leaving no doubt as to what she liked and I measured the sounds of her sighs and moans, adjusting my timing and pressure accordingly.

“Adam,” she gasped suddenly and I lifted my head. I loved the sound of my name from her mouth, especially in situations like this. “I’m going to need you to slow down, or this is going to be over in a hurry.”

I grinned, though I was sure she couldn’t see it in the darkness of the room, and I trailed lazy kisses across her pelvis and back down her thighs. It would take no time to tip her over that blissful edge and in seconds she was gasping and rocking, and I could feel the gentle pulses on my tongue as she released a long, drawn out moan.

I grinned to myself. *That’s one.*

Apparently Madelyn was done being patient with me, because she was up in a flash and she had my pants off before I knew what had happened.

Her mouth was hot on my skin as she kissed and licked her way down my neck and across my chest, her hands always moving as she held herself over me.

“Hey,” I protested half-heartedly. “I wasn’t finished with you.”

She raised her head and I knew she was grinning at me, something wicked.

“I’m just getting started with you, Beckman.”

I chuckled, reaching out one hand to slip into her hair before cupping the side of her face and she twisted a little to kiss my palm, something sweet that was our own. Those were the small moments when I saw inside her heart, with those tender gestures, something she didn’t give to anyone else and I knew they were only for me.

She was the stuff my fantasies were made of and here she was, in the flesh.

Real.

My wife.

Mine.

I had to bite down on the growl that wanted to rumble out of my throat, a sound of possession for the woman who possessed me, and had for almost as long as I could remember.

It was when she wrapped her lips around me that I lost all coherent thought. It was every fantasy come to life, complete with the soft, sensual hum that drifted from her mouth and through my body. I let myself relax into it; enjoyed the way her hands continued to smooth over my skin and her hair tickled as she moved.

“Baby,” I finally whispered hoarsely. It was her warning and she reached one hand up to find mine, linking her fingers with mine as I had with hers. She squeezed gently, but she didn’t slow, and I tried to keep from bucking wildly when the coils unwound in a burst of silvery light, my heartbeat roaring in my ears. I felt a string of words leave my mouth, something that burst out without my knowledge or recollection and I felt her freeze.

What the fuck had I just said?

I leaned over to snap on the small bedside lamp and she winced at the light. She looked a little wrecked, and I hoped it wasn’t because I’d gotten too rough with her. The woman made me lose my mind and I hoped she didn’t hold it against me. I reached down to cup her chin, running my thumb over her swollen lips.

I didn’t even care. I dragged her up to me, draping her over my lap and holding her close to kiss her lips and press my face into her neck. It would take a while for my breathing to slow and something inside felt dangerously sharp and painful. Emotional and fearful.

With the edge taken off, we slowed. Everything became even more intimate, more meaningful, and she held my gaze when I twisted to lower her to the bed. I wanted her again, in the way that made her only mine, and when our bodies came together I watched a tear leak from one of her eyes. She was feeling the things I was, I was sure of it, and I leaned down to kiss it away.

More tears trailed down her cheeks and I paused, beginning to worry I was hurting her and she was saying nothing, but she shook her head at me and lifted her hips again, so I resumed slowly. I took my time, in no rush, trying to memorize the feel of her body and the soft sounds she made.

That was when I knew I was well and truly fucked: I'd been in love with a fantasy and now I had the real thing. It would take nothing for her to break me, something I'd sworn I'd never let another woman do, and when she wrapped her arms tightly around me and her body began to tremble, I followed her over, wondering why the moment felt like goodbye.

Madelyn

W^{hy?}

I waited until Adam's breath evened out and he slept peacefully beside me before swinging my feet over the edge of the bed and sitting there with my elbows on my thighs, my face in my hands. That wasn't supposed to happen—none of it—and his words had broken my heart, because I was certain they weren't for me.

You're everything, baby. I love you so much.

I was nothing, and his mind would be changed soon. Maybe he could fall in love with me because of Daniela, but without her there would be nothing to hold us together. He'd be back to Jess in no time, the woman who could give him everything if gossip could be believed, and the grapevine was positively electric with it. I had no doubt I could thank Leia for most of that, since it seemed she didn't have much better to do, and I had no doubt Jess was doing her part to perpetuate it as well.

Kennedy had heard whispers from one of her sisters-in-law, which guaranteed gossip had already spread far. Then again, Watertown wasn't exactly a thriving metropolis so it wasn't like news had far to travel. It could be across town after being whispered in just a few of the right ears.

Adam was up early for work and when he stumbled into the kitchen to start the coffee there was the sweetest, sleepest smile on his face. It made him so beautiful and lovable, and all I wanted to do was rush into his arms and let him fold himself around me. If I thought he'd been living in my heart for decades, I hadn't been prepared for the way he'd weave himself into every fiber of my heart and soul in just a few months. Now he was such a part of me, he was my heartbeat and my breath, waking and sleeping and everything in between. To think of losing that—losing him—made sharp knives of anxiety and terror pierce my heart.

I needed to tell him what was coming for us; it was something I was sure we wouldn't survive, because without Daniela I was certain there was no "we." He loved her so much, I didn't want to take away a single one of the precious moments he spent with her.

My favorite part of the day was hearing his low, sweet words to her each morning when I pulled her from her crib and he cuddled her to his chest when I brought her to him.

Then in the afternoons, when he arrived home, his first stop was always at her playpen. If she wasn't there his eyes

scanned the kitchen for her bouncy seat, and he'd rush off to her room to see if she was in her crib.

Adam as a father was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. Something about the huge man cradling the tiny girl in his arms lit my ovaries on fire and I'm telling you, those bitches were pulling overtime in the egg factory. I was a raging, hormonal mess, ready to rip off his clothes the instant he walked in the door and it hadn't taken any convincing to get me naked the night before. I'd meant to resist him and had purposely spent a great deal of time in the shower, but it took him no time to break me down.

The two of them were thick as thieves. Adam intrinsically spoke whatever language it was Daniela understood, and though I felt like we had a bond, her bond with Adam was stronger. I'd have been jealous if it wasn't so absolutely precious, and it filled a hole in my chest I hadn't known was there.

Apparently I'd wanted domesticity and motherhood after all, but I dared not let that slip to Grams. I'd never hear the end of it.

"Adam." My voice trembled as I geared up to tell him what I'd learned in Manhattan.

"It's ok." His face crumpled a little. "I know...I shouldn't have let things get so out of hand."

What was he talking about? I waited, hoping he would continue.

“I’m sorry if I...took things too far last night.”

Why in the hell was he apologizing for that?

“You were feeling...I don’t know. Fragile? And I hope you didn’t feel like I was trying to take advantage of that.” He looked so remorseful. “I woke up around two and you weren’t there...and at first I thought maybe you’d gone to Daniela, or that maybe I’d scared you off.”

There was no way he could think that, was there?

“Adam,” I started again. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

He looked stricken.

“You’re not going to like it and I should have told you a long time ago.”

His hands went to the top of his head, fingers threading through his hair, like he needed to hold himself together.

“Just don’t tell me that I’m only here for Daniela.” His voice was deep and scratchy, like I’d wounded him so deeply that it affected his voice box, and there was an expression on his face that I’d never seen before.

“I wouldn’t ever do that to you.” My own voice was low and vehement, because how could he think so little of me? “Why would you think that?”

“Let’s just say I’ve been used before.” The hurt was gone and in its place was something hard and angry; something that wasn’t my fault.

I'd married a childhood friend, someone I'd known and loved my whole life, and in seconds he'd become a complete stranger.

"I wouldn't." It was all I could get out. Didn't he know that I understood?

"So what was that?" His face was tight. "What happened between us last night—the last few months, when you *were* willing to touch me—was that all for show? Keep me around for a minute, until the adoption goes through?"

My jaw dropped. *What the fuck?*

"Yeah." He moved quickly to the other counter and filled a cup of coffee, not bothering with the half and half I'd put out. "I should have known better, right?"

I stood there, shocked. Why was he so angry?

"I knew it was too good to be true." His words were so soft, I could scarcely hear them, laced with a deep hurt I couldn't understand.

He took a few careful sips of his coffee while he bored holes into me with those beautiful dark eyes, then spun on his heel and disappeared down the hallway.

I collapsed onto an island stool, trying to catch my breath, because the new and painful hole in my chest was like a knife wound—and I knew what those felt like.

He's done.

It's over.

He'll leave you.

He didn't come back into the kitchen. Instead, he showered and dressed and, in the darkness of the early morning, walked down the hallway and let himself out the front door without another word.

I put my face down on the counter and let my heart crack.



Adam didn't come home that night, or the next, or the next.

I was wild, panicked, and I called him no less than twelve times that first night and each time he sent me to voicemail. It was immediate, again and again, and since I had no idea what I was going to say to him, I hung up every time.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, Kennedy showed up with Teagan and walked into the house without knocking. That, I supposed, was the sign of a close friend.

Teagan was endlessly fascinated with Daniela, and the two of them sat on the living room rug and Daniela watched with rapt attention while Teagan stacked the collection of toys we kept in a bin in the living room.

I didn't even try to offer her tea, soda, water, coffee...she knew the instant she saw me that I was wrecked, and she sat on the opposite end of the sofa with her hand on my knee, the large glass of seltzer water in her hand that I'd pressed on her.

Me? I couldn't stomach the stuff. I'd been throwing up since Adam left and I knew she'd shown up because someone

had sent up the Bat Signal, or her Spidey sense had alerted her to the fact I was right on the edge of Not Keeping it Together.

“What the hell happened?” she asked softly, and I was perilously close to tears as I told her about the passionate night we’d spent together, followed by Adam becoming completely unhinged.

“I was afraid of this,” she said softly, setting her glass on the nearby coffee table and eyeing Teagan, to make sure she didn’t snatch it. “Steve said he went radio silent a couple days ago. He wasn’t responding to texts or phone calls, and I guess they had something to discuss about Daniela.” She shrugged, casting a smile at my daughter.

“Come with me tomorrow,” she invited.

Sunday.

“Why, so I can light a candle for the man I lost?” I asked bitterly, and something in her expression expanded—opened—illuminated.

“You haven’t heard the story about Jess, have you?”

Kennedy looked almost smug.

Of course I hadn’t heard the rumor about the queen bee herself, and I wasn’t entirely certain I wanted details.

“Adam didn’t tell you.”

It wasn’t a question.

“Of course he didn’t; apparently we hardly even know each other yet.”

Kennedy coughed so hard, I thought she'd hurt herself, and she cradled one hand protectively around her belly.

“You're cute. You two have been joined at the hip since you were kids and neither one of you is willing to admit it. And now...now, when you've both finally gotten what you wanted, you're willing to screw that up because of...what? A rumor spread by someone who's a perpetual liar and cheat? You know she only came back because she knew you were home, Mad—she knew she'd lost him for good.”

She looked genuinely confused, almost half as much as I felt.

“You're both so stupid.” She smacked her forehead with one hand. “He *really* didn't tell you?” Her eyes widened. “Wait... Steve didn't either?”

She looked like she was going to kill someone and my money was on my brother.

“How the hell did that man keep a secret for so damn long?” She chuckled to herself before clapping a hand over her mouth, her eyes darting toward her daughter. “Sorry, baby. Mommy didn't mean to say a bad word.”

I sat quietly, waiting for her to finish her thought. Kennedy was the master of half-thoughts. She'd start a sentence and trail off before she got to the good stuff, finishing the rest of the words in her head. It drove me batshit crazy.

“When he and Jess got married, it was for better benefits—at least that was the story going in. Steve thinks she kind of

bamboozled him into it and just slowly, insidiously worked her magic on him with her...uh...” She made a face, looking again at Teagan. “Not her brain.”

The thought of Jess and Adam still made me ill.

“So why did they divorce?” I asked quietly, and Kennedy shrugged dismissively.

“Jess couldn’t keep her pants on and Adam wasn’t real big on sharing. Once she talked him into being all-in, he had opinions it should stay that way.”

I felt my face fall. Part of me had hoped their marriage was entirely a business transaction.

“She...uh...got pregnant and Adam found out the kid wasn’t his.” She winced a little. “That was a little ugly. He was so excited...and then he wasn’t. Steve can tell you more about it than I can, but I can tell you they sat up talking a couple nights...the guy was pretty wrecked.”

Well, there was a song as old as time, and something told me it hadn’t taken Jess long to realize what she’d lost.

“So she’s been trying to win him back ever since?” I asked, hoping the answer was no, and Kennedy looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“I think they had an arrangement for a while...no strings. Pretty sure she was hoping he’d catch feelings again.”

I swallowed hard and reached over to smooth Daniela’s hair, turning my head slowly to look at my sister-in-law. “I sort of...ran into her at Wickham’s a while ago.”

Kennedy nodded that I should continue.

“Her *and* Leia. It was like the universe had something against me.”

She winced. “Those two are like apostles of the apocalypse.”

Yeah, that had been a personal apocalypse all right, and the reason I’d pulled away from Adam.

“Jess was not-so-subtly hinting that they were still meeting up.”

Kennedy burst into an absolute fit of laughter, but I had no idea what it was she found so hilarious. She kept going and going, folding right over her knees and slapping the living room floor. “Oh, that’s the funniest thing I’ve heard in a long time.” She straightened, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. “You are absolutely blind when it comes to that man, aren’t you?”

I sat silently, waiting for her to continue.

“He worships the ground you walk on, Mad. Every time Steve invited him over it was always ‘Madelyn gonna be there?’” She dropped her voice an octave. “The instant he knew you were home it was like he’d invent excuses to be there. Steve thought it was hilarious.”

Somehow I doubted my brother found it hilarious, but it seemed he’d come around to the idea and I was pretty sure I had Kennedy to thank for that.

“Yeah, well...” I shifted uncomfortably and Daniela looked over at me suddenly, like she was checking on me. “He hasn’t been home in four days, Kenny. We had this weird half-argument because he thinks I was using him to finalize the adoption.”

Kennedy nodded. “I can see how he’d be a little bit of a mess...he’s been in love with you for so long, it scared him to get everything he wanted all at once.”

A little snort of a laugh burst from my lips. “In love with me?” His words from several nights before came rushing back to me, words I hadn’t dared hope were for me. “I’ve spent the majority of my life being a pain in his ass.”

“You are that,” Kennedy agreed readily and I shot her a quick middle finger, tucked in close to my side so the babies wouldn’t see it. “But go figure, he’s dead-gone over you anyway.”

I snorted again and shook my head. If she was going to keep telling me lies I was going to need something stronger to drink than seltzer water.

“So...” I stretched my feet out to put one on either side of Daniela’s tiny hips. “Has he been staying with you?”

Kennedy looked confused. “You mean he really hasn’t been home at all?”

“Won’t answer his phone. His truck’s not at his place.”

Her face did a weird collapsing thing in the middle of her forehead. “Of course his truck’s not at his place—it’s not his

place, Mad.” She was looking at me like I was a complete idiot. “He sold it. He told Steve he was all in and he wanted to be able to contribute more, so eliminating a mortgage was the way to do it. I thought you...” Her mouth dropped open like she couldn’t believe what was going on.

A cold rush of adrenaline coursed through my body. Why hadn’t he told me?

“Bet Hailey could answer a few questions,” she said, recovering quickly enough to squeeze my knee gently, and I shook my head to clear it. Was it really possible I’d managed to lose what I wanted most just because the two of us were shit at communicating? Because of a stupid assumption and misunderstanding? There had to be a way to fix this.

Kennedy reached over again to squeeze me with one hand, rubbing her little belly with the other. “This one’s definitely a boy.” She winced. “Sick as a damn dog all day long—T was so much easier.”

I sighed heavily. The court date to confirm Daniela’s adoption was in three days and without Adam by my side, I worried the sisters would change their mind. It was possible that inside of a week I could lose everything I’d ever wanted, and *almost* had.

It was getting late and Kennedy pushed off the sofa with a groan, stretching backward before snagging the diaper bag.

“She’s really beautiful,” she said softly, carefully scooping Daniela from the floor and pressing a kiss to her soft little cheek. “Daddy’s going to have to keep a shotgun and more big

doggies in the house.” She smiled at me, but my heart sank. I wasn’t so sure Daddy would be sticking around.

Bailey smiled up at her from where he lay on the rug, watching over his two tiny charges.

Lucy wasn’t so bold. She’d learned early on that Teagan suffered her great-grandmother’s grabby-hands affliction and whenever T came to visit, Lucy retreated to the upper shelf of my closet.

Kennedy swung the diaper bag over one shoulder and Teagan over the other, and she leaned in, all out of arms for a hug. “You need to *talk* to him, Madelyn. Neither one of you are talkers, you’re just doers. You can’t *do* your way out of this one.” She wiggled her eyebrows at me and I snorted.

Bailey walked them both out to Kennedy’s car and gave T a good snuffle before Kennedy shut the door. Then he sauntered back to me and sat while I stood waving as the two of them backed down the driveway.

I scooped Daniela off the floor and carried her into the kitchen for a bottle. Not having Adam in our days hurt, and I wondered if it hurt him as much to be without us. Something told me it did, at least as far as missing the baby went. I wasn’t so sure that missing extended to me at all.



The next three days were torture, and I hardly slept. I hadn’t decided what it was I needed to say to Adam—there were so

many things—that I avoided it altogether and further punished myself. Well, all of us.

Daniela was decidedly more fidgety and I knew it was because she was waiting for Adam, hoping that his face would be the one to show up the next time someone walked through the door.

I knew what was waiting for me that day, and it wasn't just a judge and a couple lawyers. I didn't know how I was going to talk my way out of this one, and as I dressed the baby in a pretty little white lace dress, I prayed she didn't have an epic blowout for at least a couple hours. She'd been outdoing herself in that department lately.

There were loud voices coming from the room as I walked down the hallway with Daniela on my hip, my heels clicking sharply against the floor. I hated them, but if ever I needed to look put together, today was the day.

Adam's expression was tight and guarded when we walked through the door. His was the first face I sought and the first one I found. I was hoping for a small smile, some kind of tender look to give me hope, but there was nothing there.

The judge wasn't yet in the room and James was saying something to Adam, almost right up in his ear, as three men in suits conferred with one another—loudly—from the other table.

“Ah, Madelyn.” James smiled at me, but it was tight and a little stressed. “It's possible we're going to run into a bit of a complication today.”

I caught Adam's eye, incredibly grateful he'd shown up, and I sucked in a deep breath. *I'd known this was coming.*

I'd hoped and prayed Daniela's adoption was finalized before they found us.

One of the men's eyes latched onto Daniela and he sprang from his seat, shaking a finger in our direction as he released another volley of words in Spanish. My Italian was fluent, thanks to years spent based there, and there was some structure and a little vocabulary overlap. It was enough to understand that the man in the charcoal suit was accusing me of trafficking Venezuela's orphans, and I felt my jaw drop.

Adam came up beside me and lifted Daniela from my hip, kissing the top of her head and cuddling her close as she nestled happily into his chest. She'd been looking for him the past week and the contentment was evident on her face.

Another man hurried into the room behind us and James stuck out a hand to greet him.

"This is Mr. Fiori." He introduced us with a low voice. "He's counsel for Sacred Heart. It seems a suit was filed against them just this morning, also alleging participation in trafficking."

My heart slammed desperately against the walls of my chest and my breaths felt dangerously shallow, the edges of my vision starting to blur, and Adam's other arm went quickly around my hips. I could feel from the tension in his body that he was uncomfortable touching me, but I leaned into him gratefully and tried to draw a deep breath.

I'd known this was coming for a minute and I'd been trying to figure out how to warn Adam with words that I never found. Ironically, one of my charges in the city was the Food and Agriculture representative to the UN from Venezuela, and he'd mentioned the International Organization for Migration was kicking up a fuss about the involvement of so-called charities operating within border camps to steal helpless migrant children. I'd kept my mouth shut, feeling that finalizing Daniela's adoption in advance of any claims might work toward protecting her.

I had no doubt there were operations disguised as charities, scooping up children for trafficking but I knew I hadn't been involved with one.

"We're just waiting for the FBI's team to show up—maybe DOJ—guess we'll see who they send," James whispered behind one hand. "They've been drawn into this as well and were apparently notified of this before we were."

Almost as if on cue, I could hear the march of dress shoes in the hallway and when Adam turned his head I felt him tense a little more. He hissed something under his breath that sounded like "Hendrickson," and I looked over my shoulder to see an attractive older man leading three other men into the room. He was tall and broad, his dark blond hair beginning to fade into something lighter.

"What's he doing here?" I asked quietly, and James leaned in.

“He had a number of operatives on site. I’m guessing he’s here to provide some answers preemptively. What they’re claiming is pretty far-reaching.”

Adam nodded at the man, who returned the greeting and as the judge walked into the room, everyone stood, though not everyone was smart enough to zip it. One of the men at the opposite table immediately burst into angry chatter and the judge cut him a vicious look.

“Be seated.” His voice rang through the room, deep and authoritative, and finally everyone shut up.

“We’re here to finalize the adoption process for this little lady.” His face softened briefly as he waved a hand toward us, where Daniela rested comfortably in Adam’s arms.

“Mr. and Mrs. Beckman, please approach with the child.”

Another angry outburst from the man and I couldn’t help but give him a cutting look as my brain processed just enough of his outburst to realize he was accusing me, personally, of kidnapping.

The judge asked each of us a few questions about ourselves while he reviewed the paperwork in the folder in front of him.

“I see no reason to delay this process,” he said finally, and I felt the blood whoosh through my body. “Everything here is in order and there is evidence of due diligence. There are no family members putting forth protest and the necessary procedures have been followed.” He shot a look at the table as

a fourth man joined them, someone I suspected was a translator.

“The paperwork filed to halt today’s procedure was sloppy.” He shot a look toward the most vociferous man, and we all waited for the interpreter to communicate the judge’s insult.

“You cannot demonstrate to me that the demand to cease and desist is reasonable. There are no family members stepping forward to claim this child, and my understanding is that of the orphaned children who are returned, they will be placed in state care. How can you prove to me that is better for this child than placing her immediately with parents who have demonstrated their love and care?”

His eyes trailed back over to us and he smiled at Daniela, who stared seriously up at him.

“We are not here today to discuss the procedures in place in the migrant camps. I apologize, Mr. Hendrickson, that you were summoned here today, as this has been a spectacular waste of your time. The argument lodged does not belong in this court.”

There was an explosion of sound from the table and finally the translator stood and addressed the room. He pointed to one of the men as he spoke. “This gentleman alleges he is the baby’s uncle, on her mother’s side. The parents were young and there were objections to their relationship.”

I felt pins and needles prickle at my skin. A blood relative’s claim would outweigh mine anyday.

The judge leaned back in his chair thoughtfully, one eyebrow raised.

“Your honor.” Adam’s voice was clear and strong. “If I may?”

The judge nodded, and he appeared grateful for the distraction.

“It’s not my place to say that Daniela’s family is incapable of providing for her, but I cannot imagine they are ready to provide for her and the needs she will have throughout life.”

I cut him a quick look. What was he talking about, like she was sick?

“There were a number of issues not immediately identified, or perhaps overlooked, when the baby was sent to Sacred Heart. It was clearly of highest priority to place her where she’d be safe and was in a situation to have her needs met.”

Slowly, Adam turned to directly and addressed the man who claimed to be Daniela’s uncle.

“Are you willing to do the work to raise her? To learn another language to communicate with her? It will take training and dedication, and she’ll need to be taught how to sign and, if she’s to be truly successful, how to read lips.”

The man’s face collapsed as the translator relayed the information, and he sputtered something angrily.

“He says you are lying,” the translator said and the judge sighed heavily.

“None of this matters!” he barked. “This is the wrong jurisdiction, and the paperwork filed is irrelevant to the situation. It is clear this child was given the best care available and every effort was made to locate additional family members.” He raised the folder in the air and shook it. “To my understanding,” he looked directly at the man, “your country’s migration representative was involved for the duration of the process—and is still involved. If there were concerns about the procedure, those concerns should have been immediately raised within the higher courts.”

“Your honor.” Adam waited until the judge stopped speaking, and the judge nodded at him in recognition.

“Madelyn.” Adam’s eyes finally met mine, and I knew he was searching for some sign of surprise or dismay. “Will you please demonstrate for the gentlemen?”

Daniela was exactly where she wanted to be, tucked comfortably against Adam’s shoulder, and it didn’t concern her at all when I moved out of her field of vision, walking around Adam to stand outside her line of sight. I snapped my fingers loudly, several times, then called to her but she remained nestled into Adam.

“Closer,” he called without turning to face me and I stood directly behind him, holding my arm out to the side to snap my fingers several times in rapid succession.

“She has a doctor appointment next week,” he said quietly. “Through some misfortune, it seems her medical records were

lost and it was not disclosed to potential adoptive parents that the baby is deaf.” He turned then, looking at me curiously.

“Neither of you were aware of this until recently?” the judge asked, and I could hear the quiet murmur of the translator in the background, my vision suddenly tunneling.

“I suspected, your honor,” I said quietly, aware that Adam was staring at me. “It wasn’t enough to change my mind. I loved her then and I love her now and I will always love and care for her—whatever it takes.”

Adam released a big breath, something that was either relief or a sound of astonishment, and I couldn’t turn my head to meet his eyes. He knew now that I hadn’t mentioned my suspicions to him because I feared it would drive him away. It was complicated enough that I wanted to adopt Daniela, and that was a major adjustment without adding in the responsibilities of learning sign language and taking her to the necessary specialists.

“Is this gentleman truly interested in resuming immediate care for this child?” The judge addressed the translator, who said something to the men at the table in a low tone of voice and there was another explosion of sound as the man shook a finger at me. I was a liar and a cheat, a pawn in the game the government was playing.

“I’m approving this adoption,” the judge said sternly. “This child will not suffer as a political pawn and it’s clear to me this is the situation at hand.” He banged the gavel loudly. “I will

have the necessary paperwork completed; if the two of you would stay a moment to sign a few things.”

James’s shoulders relaxed at the sound of the gavel and he waited for the men to be escorted from the room before he stood and whispered something to Adam, then to me: “It’s a ploy. They want to use this for publicity. Hendrickson says their migration representative has some competition and he’s kicking up a fuss to draw negative attention to the incumbent.”

“How do you know this?” Adam asked him, and Hendrickson leaned over the partition with a hand extended in Adam’s direction.

“I know everything, Beckman.” His smile was cool, but it made him astonishingly gorgeous. “UN’s in session; this would be the time to stir up trouble if you want attention.”

I agreed with his assessment, and I nodded slowly. “That’s the only reason.” My heart rate was finally returning to normal. “I made sure there was no family looking to claim her.”

Both Adam and James turned to look at me curiously, and slowly Hendrickson’s eyes followed as well.

“I have a rainy day fund,” I said quietly. “I hired a private investigator when I returned from the border.”

James’s face split into a wide grin. “Kenny’s right, Madelyn. You really are something.”

Adam didn’t look like he shared the assessment. He looked angry, but I was fairly sure he wouldn’t start a fight in front of

anyone else.

We signed the necessary paperwork and Adam cuddled Daniela close to his chest, kissing the top of her head again and again. “You missed her,” I said softly, disappointed some of those kisses weren’t for me.

“It was necessary,” he said firmly. “I needed the space.”

“Because of me,” I whispered, feeling hot tears start to rush my eyeballs and it was the last thing I wanted him to see. I had to turn my head to hide my face from him and he didn’t answer, but I heard him swallow hard. That was confirmation enough.

Kennedy, Teagan and Hailey were waiting for us in the hallway when we finally emerged, and Kennedy’s smile was electric. “Happy gotcha day, sweetheart!” she exclaimed, leaning forward through the mass of pink balloons in her hand to kiss Daniela’s head.

I could feel Hailey watching me, her smile gentle when I finally lifted my tear-filled eyes to hers, and she leaned across the short distance to kiss my cheek. She took my hand to pull me aside, and James joined Kennedy and Adam as they conducted a quiet conversation.

“He’s staying with you?” I asked softly and she nodded, the smile falling off her face.

“He says you don’t need him anymore.”

What the hell? I twisted to look over my shoulder at him, surprised to find his eyes on me though he was talking to

Kennedy.

“Hailey, I’ve been in love with him my whole life.”

“I know, but have you told him that?” she asked softly, and I had to shake my head.

“I don’t know how to do it. I don’t exactly have the best track record with...emotions.”

“Your vows mean something to him, Madelyn,” she said softly. “When he said forever, he meant it. He was making that promise to you, and it extends to the baby as well.”

“I should have told him.”

“There are a number of things I think both of you need to tell each other.” Her expression was sympathetic. “You’re both stubborn butts.” That was as close as she’d ever get to cursing. “You’re both used to doing things on your own and learning how to lean on one another is a very, very difficult lesson. He’s got you, though, and you’ve got him. You just need to trust him.”

Trust was a hard lesson for me, and had been my whole life.

Steve and Mr. Beckman met us at the restaurant Kennedy had chosen for a celebratory lunch, and since my parents were still in town visiting all their old friends, Kennedy had invited them as well.

Mom had taken quickly to Daniela, something I hadn’t expected to happen, and she stole the baby from Adam immediately while Dad engaged him in a quiet conversation it seemed I wasn’t allowed to join.

One by one our little entourage finished eating, congratulated us, and left us sitting at the table by ourselves, a few gifts piled up on the edge. Daniela was sound asleep on the bench, worn out from being passed from one person to the next.

There was a fearfully empty feeling in my chest as I looked up at Adam, my fingers rubbing a slow circular pattern on the baby's back.

"Will you be coming home tonight?" I could hear the hopefulness in my own voice.

"Do you want me there?" He looked wary.

"You're my husband; of course I want you there." I laughed weakly.

"Am I there to babysit, or am I there for you?" he asked, and my jaw dropped.

"You're there to be her father, like you promised."

"Yes, I recall a number of promises."

I looked down in shame. "You're angry with me because I didn't tell you what I suspected."

"I'm not angry, Madelyn, I'm hurt. You don't know my history with Jess, but she made promises to me too—worked hard to make me think we could have something together—then betrayed me in some of the worst ways."

He had to know that wasn't me; that I'd never do that to him.

“How do I know you won’t do that, now that you have what you want?” he asked softly, his eyes searching mine.

My heart felt like it might burst.

“Because without you, I don’t have what I want,” I said slowly. Emotional confessions were, for me, like pulling teeth without a numbing agent. “I have been in love with you since I was ten years old, Beckman.” I knew my eyes were shiny. “Every date you went on, I was so jealous. All those girls who got to sit next to you and hold your hand...” I let the words trail off, aware of how completely childish I sounded.

“And?” he asked quietly.

“And when you offered to marry me so we could adopt Daniela, I thought maybe it gave me a chance.”

“A chance at what?” He had me absolutely pinned with his gaze.

“A chance at getting you to fall in love with me, because I knew you would fall in love with Daniela.”

He laughed, a short, sharp sound. “So you were willing to use our daughter to get to me.”

“Yes. I mean no. I mean that wasn’t my plan from the beginning, but it was something that I thought might handily work out to my benefit more than once. I could have everything I wanted, all at the same time.” I shrugged slowly. “I jumped at my chance.”

“Me too,” he admitted slowly, and I looked up at him in surprise. “I jumped at my chance to get something I’d never

thought could be mine.”

He reached across the small space between us in slow motion, and his eyes softened as his fingers slipped into my hair, his palm resting against my face.

“My best friend’s little sister.” He grinned at me. “Who would have thought that was the beginning of the end? I didn’t figure it out as fast as you did, but you grew on me. And once you got in here...” He tapped the side of his head with the fingers of his other hand. “There was no getting you out, you stubborn woman.”

He paused for a moment. Then, “It’s what pushed Jess away. She said I’d always carried a torch for you and that she wasn’t willing to be second best, so she went out and found someone else who’d put her first—at least for a time.” He shrugged. “It was supposed to be a marriage of convenience, but it hurt when I found out. I suppose it wounded my pride.” He lifted his shoulders again.

“Are you still sleeping with her?” I asked quietly, the words like acid on my tongue.

“Hell, no.” He laughed, a genuinely humored sound. “When I found out the baby wasn’t mine, things were immediately over.”

“Kennedy said the two of you had...an understanding...for a while.”

“Divorce wasn’t finalized yet,” he said simply. “She’s beautiful and I was weak...lonely.”

That felt icky.

“You can’t think I want her back.” He scoffed disbelievingly.

“She’s been trying pretty hard to make me think otherwise.” I shrugged. “Obviously I don’t have the best track record and I’m pretty new to this wife thing...obviously not very good at it.”

With a quick glance at Daniela, he stood, pulling me up with him.

“I’ll say this as many times as you need to hear it, Beckman.” His voice was all deep and raspy and it was hotter than hell. “Whether or not you got into this for the right reasons, I made you a promise because I was in love with you—*am* in love with you. You’re the most frustrating, beautiful, argumentative woman I’ve ever known.” He paused to chuckle. “Sexy as hell too, which doesn’t hurt my feelings.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. *Adam Beckman thinks I’m sexy.*

“Then come home with us.” I took a step closer. “Stay with us. It’s not home without you in it, anyway.”

“You being romantic, Mrs. Beckman?” His voice was rough, his eyes a little shiny.

“I’m asking my husband to come home with me. To stay.” My voice dropped and I knew it sounded at least half as suggestive as I wanted it to. “I don’t want to do any of this without you, Adam. Everything in that house adores you:

Bailey, Lucy, the baby...I'm a completely foregone conclusion." I trailed off as Daniela twitched in her sleep. "No more secrets or half-truths, I promise."

"Does that include telling me the rest of what happened in college?" he asked seriously, and I wondered why that still bothered him so much.

"You have a personal vendetta or something?" I teased, but he didn't smile back.

"I have always tried to protect you, Madelyn, whether or not you knew I was doing it. It was my job because you were Steve's sister, but it was my choice because I wanted you for my own. The fact that someone hurt you was what took you away from me for decades. I lost you when you joined the Air Force, and I knew I'd missed my chance. I kicked myself for years. *Years*. And then you came home..." He looked hopeful, his eyes alight. "And you needed something. Finally, in some way, you needed me."

I had always needed him, it was just that I'd never thought I could have him, and it was with incredible gratitude that I tipped my face upward and accepted the soft, sweet press of his lips against mine.

In the end, did it matter how we'd gotten here? Sure, it was later than either of us would have liked, but he was mine and I was his. What a close call that had been.

I looked over at the baby sleeping soundly on the booth bench seat, and I smiled up at him. "She's worth all of it."

“So are you, Madelyn.” He notched a finger under my chin and kissed me again, even more slowly, waiting for me to open to him, and when I did there was a whoop from somewhere in the restaurant.

“For better or worse,” he whispered against my lips, holding up his hand and I folded my pinkie around his.

“Promise.”

Epilogue - Adam

Six months later...

“You could have just called for the helicopter,” Madelyn whined. “If we don’t get there soon, you’ll need to pull over and help me with this and that will be an interesting show for all these passers-by.”

There was an accident on the highway, effectively shutting down all the traffic, and when Madelyn went into labor we opted for a backroads route, which was something apparently everyone else was also doing.

That my wife was pregnant had been a shock to me at first. Aaron had been the one to call it, when Madelyn went on the next rotation with her team the week following our experience in court. She could no longer excuse the throwing up or the hair-trigger emotions as being a result of the prolonged adoption process, and Atholton had taken one smug look at her

before Big Mike handed over a twenty dollar bill, to hear her tell it.

Since we didn't know Daniela's actual birthday, we'd decided to celebrate it a week before she'd shown up at the camp, which made her less than a year older than her new sibling.

Madelyn had been so shocked by the realization, I think she took it harder than I did. Which is to say that while I wanted to shout it from the mountaintops, she walked around in a daze for a couple more weeks, trying to wrap her head around the fact there were more diapers and late night feedings in our future.

Katsaros took her off ground teams immediately. I hadn't had to say a thing to the man, and Madelyn was furious. Instead, he put her on intel and told her she'd stay there until the baby was at least three years old.

I'd moved into a supervisory position at the hospital, and though I was a little sad to give up my position on the life flight, I didn't have to talk myself down each and every shift, when I fought with my fear of heights. Also, our previous coordinator hadn't been operating with the proper background and having a background in trauma care made me much more effective than she'd been.

We'd opted not to find out the sex of the baby, perfectly happy so long as he or she was born healthy and Lukas, named after my dad, was born at ten pounds, three ounces and an enormous twenty-three inches long. The doctor joked he'd

never seen such a huge baby, but it made sense when he saw the parents.

Labor had been tough on Madelyn. The baby was already practically a toddler and he hadn't been eager to make his appearance in the world. I'd made the very inappropriate joke that, like everything she did, Madelyn was working for this one. It made her give me a look that told me I'd best remove myself from her reach while she was pushing.

Daniela was making remarkable progress with sign language. Madelyn and I had been beating ourselves up to learn and teach her, and we found a small local-ish group of parents with deaf kids, people who were able to point us in the direction of useful programs and tools.

Aaron and Harlowe had just had their fourth kid, which was astonishing to me. The two were procreating like rabbits, and though it had taken me years to see and accept, they were perfect for one another.

For her part, the woman I'd thought myself in love with for several years, had become a completely different person. She was warm, open and caring, so unlike the sad, stern, closed-off woman I'd known years earlier.

"I see it," she'd remarked casually when Madelyn and I showed up at their house, intent on finding Bailey a playmate from the dog rescue she was still running. "She's the original and I was the stand-in." She punched my arm playfully and Madelyn looked at me with a question in her eyes.

“She *is* the original.” I scooped my wife’s hair back and leaned in to kiss her temple, something she accepted with a small hum of contentment. “It just took me decades to convince her she’d been mine the whole time.”

That particular afternoon I’d taken Daniela with me to the park, feeling that Madelyn needed her rest. Lukas had been a particularly demanding baby, completely unwilling to leave his mama’s side—something I could well understand—and we were often up with him during the night, as he still insisted on eating at least four times between sundown and sunrise.

“She’s so precious!” The voice was shrill and disingenuous, one I recognized from experience.

Why Jess was still hanging around in Watertown was completely beyond my comprehension, especially considering she still owned a home in Oswego, as far as I knew, and I tried to keep the grimace off my face as I turned to face my ex.

“The two of you clearly make the most beautiful babies.” Her smile was stretched tight and thin, and I grinned back at her.

“Thanks, we do.”

That made her lip curl a little indignantly, something I found hilarious now that I knew how she’d tried to bait Madelyn all those months ago, and what a role it played in Madelyn distancing herself from me. Something that had slowly tugged at the delicate threads holding together our marriage, one based upon hope and desire and a complete lack of trust and communication.

“Oh have mercy,” Jess sputtered. “There’s another one?”

She’d just caught sight of Lukas, sleeping in his carrier next to the bench, where I sat watching Daniela in the sandbox.

Rumor had it that after Jess’s miscarriage, she hadn’t been able to get pregnant again and I thought she looked at Lukas a little enviously, despite her bitter tone.

“You could say we’ve been busy.” I grinned at Jess, unwilling to offer her any sort of explanation or engage her in conversation that wasn’t completely necessary.

Sadly for Jess, nothing about her was necessary to me any longer. I’d wasted so much time, between her and Harlowe, trying to distract myself when only one girl would do. I’d known it the entire time and had tried to convince myself that I could find a suitable substitute for the woman my heart had spoken for years earlier.

“Well…hello, handsome.” Jess stood suddenly, her voice all honey and silk, and I turned to see a tall, older man striding confidently toward us.

“Hendrickson.” I stood and held out my hand. “Good of you to meet me—I know this was quite a drive for you, but I didn’t feel comfortable putting this in the mail.”

Gerald Hendrickson nodded briefly at Jess, a formality that was as much a recognition as it was a dismissal.

“Ma’am.” His voice wasn’t particularly warm. “If you wouldn’t mind excusing us, there are things we need to discuss.”

Jess looked all kinds of put out, and she scoffed audibly as she hoisted her handbag back onto her shoulder and walked away.

“Ex?” Gerald asked easily, and I looked at him in surprise.

“Uh, yeah. How’d you know that?”

“When someone tells me he has potentially incriminating evidence against the governor, you’d best believe I make sure that person isn’t a complete nut job before I bother with looking into their claims. Got a whole workup on you, Beckman.”

I reached into Lukas’s seat and retrieved the folder I’d tucked into the side, covered by his blanket.

“My wife’s brother has been pursuing this information for years,” I said quietly as I handed him the folder. “Long story, but someone with organized connections owed me a favor and was able to ‘un-disappear’ this.”

“Interesting timing,” Hendrickson mused as he sat next to me and leaned forward across his knees. The man was intimidating, his physical presence only slightly less frightening than the energy surrounding him. He was wound tight like a spring, coiled with tension and purpose.

“It’s no secret the governor’s being investigated for corruption.” I snorted at the very idea and Hendrickson gave me a wary glance, eyeing the cell phone on the bench next to me. I picked it up and shoved it into the bottom of the diaper bag.

“This is a completely new charge,” he said quietly, “and if there’s no corroborating evidence I can’t promise you we can make it stick.”

“This will blow the whole thing wide open,” I promised. “There was hush money—a lot of it—and someone was stupid enough to generate a receipt for the wire transfer. Incredibly, my wife found it buried with the paperwork she filed away years ago, upon the conclusion of the transaction.” I tapped the folder to indicate he would find it within.

Hendrickson’s face split open in a delighted grin. “Fucking morons—I love it. Makes my job easier.”

I nodded, pretty sure his job would be anything but easy, but if it dethroned the dirty family that had run the state for nearly three generations, I would happily do my part.

Madelyn had no idea Steve and I had joined forces to take down the man who so carelessly almost ruined her life. Whether or not that had been his intent, I didn’t care, because he’d taken something from her that hadn’t been his to take.

I let Daniela play in the sandbox until Lukas woke up, and while I fed him his bottle she sat next to me and gazed down at her favorite new toy in the world.

For Lucy’s part, she couldn’t decide who needed her attention most, and she and Bailey seemed to divvy up guardian responsibilities pretty well. I could always find Lucy in one crib or the other, while Bailey and Luna, our sweet new white Pit Bull puppy, slept at the doorway of the room so that anyone trying to pass through had to pass over them.

Madelyn was still completely passed out when I got home with the kids and I fed each of them, put them through bathtime and tucked them into their beds.

I had never been so at peace before in my life. I was needed here, needed by our children and plainly loved by my wife. It had taken a long time for me to accept that when she said she loved me, she meant it.

Every day I came home to happy faces, greeted at the door by Bailey and Luna, Lucy blinking at me from wherever it was she'd stretched out for a nap.

Madelyn started back to work from home, though Hailey still came most days to help her with the kids, and I was amazed by how close the two had become. Hailey had stepped right into Madelyn's life where her mother had stepped out, something I'd finally recognized was her gift.

Madelyn's parents did make a point of making the trip north every couple months to visit us and Grams, older than dirt, was still going strong. Every time she saw us she crowed about how she'd known Madelyn would make an excellent mother, just before she helped herself to a handful of my ass.

Old habits die hard.

It had taken Madelyn a while to get used to the fact I'd committed so quickly and sold my place even before consulting her, but with time she began to understand that I'd been committed from the start and she blossomed with the love and care from the people in her life.

My dream girl was finally my reality, the woman I came home to every night and woke wrapped around each morning. With her I was at peace, grateful for every moment. I didn't deserve the beautiful things I'd been given, but not a day passed without my gratitude.

Nothing ever came of the trouble we'd experienced in court. The three men who had shown up never materialized into anything of substance, and aside from choosing the wrong case from which to make an example, there was no further news, possibly because it would cast certain officials in a negative light.

As I curled up behind my wife in our bed later that night, she sighed contentedly and took my hand in hers, spreading my fingers so she could kiss each individual fingertip. Something that had been mine, that had now become hers.

"Goodnight, Mr. Beckman," she murmured sleepily and I grinned into her hair.

"Until the morning, Mrs. Beckman," I responded against her ear.

She knew what that meant, and she giggled just a little, because it meant we'd get little more than a nap before we were after one another, tender moments stolen during the quiet of the night before either of the kids woke.

"Love you, baby," I murmured, something that elicited a hum from her and she stirred slowly, turning to face me, in order to press her lips to mine.

“Always.”

Epilogue - Madelyn

Two years later...

Go tell Daddy that we're waiting for him.

Daniela nodded at me, as capable of reading what I signed to her as she was capable of reading my lips.

The happy birthday, she signed to me with a lift of her little eyebrows, and I nodded at her with a huge smile on my face.

Adam's forty-eighth birthday was something he'd thought he could sneak past us, but with Hailey's help I'd been planning the small family affair for a while.

Life had been a little crazier of late. Shit had really hit the fan, uncovering decade upon decade of Mario's indiscretions, and many of the women from his past had been called upon to give testimony as a case was built against him.

For many of us the statute of limitations was past, but Steve had never given up and the discovery of a collection of unprocessed rape kits in a hospital storage facility had cracked

the case wide open. It shed the light on an astonishingly far-reaching level of corruption, stretching from hospital administrators to police departments, to politicians, and certain members of organized crime—which surprised very few, it seemed.

Adam had been instrumental in bringing Mario to justice, something I'd discovered only after Steve told me just how hard my husband had pushed to have the proper individuals investigated.

My years in the Air Force had provided me with therapy both on the job and off, as my version of therapy was to get things out with physical exertion. As Mario's trial wound on, my sweet husband became even more loving and tender with me and our children, there for each of us, ready to deal with the fallout of my emotions. It dredged up things I'd squashed down and suppressed years earlier, but I consented to do a few interviews since there were so many other women coming forward.

Most mornings Adam and I worked out together in our gym in the garage, the baby monitor on the floor between us and sometimes the workout was genuine, while other times I simply straddled him on the bench and held him tight.

To be honest, we were usually doing more than just hugging, but neither of us found that point to be upsetting.

The way fate had finally brought us together was something that made me chuckle every time I thought about it. We were both so stubborn, it had taken an act of God to force us

together and another to open our eyes. I thanked God every morning and night—and at every Mass—for the fact He’d seen fit to bring me together with the man I’d loved my whole life.

Daniela came flying back into the dining room that afternoon, her face lit up with joy, and I waited for Adam to follow, because where his children were concerned he was never far behind.

His eyes met mine as he moved toward me from the door that led from the kitchen to the yard.

“What is this, babe?” he asked gently, a smile on his face that suggested he knew exactly what was happening.

I set Lukas down gently, putting him in the bouncy chair that had, miraculously, survived Daniela.

“It’s your family wishing you a happy birthday,” I said, gesturing toward the candles blazing on the cake. “You know...the people who love you desperately.”

I couldn’t tell him just how true that was, because the last few years with him had been nothing short of magical. It was a completely different life, now that I was spending it with him.

According to the few new friends I had in Watertown, of which Leia was weirdly a part of that group, we were the definition of couple goals.

Not long before, I wouldn’t have been able to admit to him how much he meant to me...and now that we shared children, I was even more in love with him than I’d been before.

“I already have everything I want,” he said gruffly, his voice teasing as he eyed the small stack of wrapped gifts resting on the table.

“Do you?” I teased, winking when he caught my eye, and I licked my lower lip before pulling it between my teeth.

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But it’s possible I need to reassess.”

“No reassessments necessary,” I teased, because he would get the rest of his birthday present later, once the kids were in bed.

“Maddy.” His face was so serious, I couldn’t even be mad at him for calling me by his silly new nickname, and he leaned down to kiss me gently. “You were my every birthday wish, baby—you are still.” He leaned down again, waiting for me to meet his lips as he grinned at me.

I believed him, because he’d proven himself to me. Despite what had been a weirdly rocky start, it had taken almost no time to settle into what was an easy, gentle daily routine with the man who’d stopped at nothing to show me every day what I meant to him.

Daniela tugged at his pant leg frantically, gesturing toward the candles leaking wax all over the cake, and he chuckled when he turned to look.

“You distract me, woman.” He grinned and blew out the candles quickly, then leaned over to kiss me again before

scooping our daughter up into a hug, his love for our children something beautiful to behold.

“Where’s my boy?” he asked absently, finally realizing the back slider was wide open and there were people in our yard.

“Attending your party.” I gestured toward the yard with a smile on my face. “Daniela wanted to do the cake now; we can do it again later.”

“Freaking fire hazard,” he muttered as he eyed the forty-eight single candles taking up a large portion of real estate on the cake. “Hilarious, by the way...just you wait for your turn.” He grinned deviously, then took Daniela’s hand and walked with her out to the yard filled with the people we loved.

“Better go get your forty-eight squeezes from Grams, birthday boy,” I called after him and without looking back he held up a hand, middle finger extended, the very moment I tapped the button on my phone to take a picture.

“Come on Beckman, you just ruined our future Christmas card!” I hollered, and Steve grinned at me from his chair.

“Dare you to send it out anyway. Mom would love that one.”

“We’d hear the scream all the way from Florida,” I responded, because it was true. There would be no avoiding the “I raised you to be better than that, Madelyn Christine.”

Teagan patiently watched over her little brother playing on the set we’d added onto a little each spring, and Lukas trailed

behind Daniela like a little duckling as she wandered around the yard in her own little world.

“Got your hands full,” Grams remarked as I sank down beside her on the huge patio sofa. Her eyes weren’t on the kids though, and I snapped my fingers in front of her face.

“I *see* you staring at my husband’s ass,” I said rather loudly, as her hearing was starting to go, and Steve snorted.

“No idea how lucky you are,” she fussed at me and I rolled my eyes as Steve tried, unsuccessfully, to control his laughter.

“I know exactly how lucky I am,” I said firmly. “I don’t deserve these wonderful things, but here we are. I know to be grateful.”

Grams nodded, still plainly staring at my husband. “Yep. Grateful for it too.” She absently patted my leg as she said it and Adam turned, giving me a sweet smile from where he stood, keeping watch over the kids.

Bailey trotted out of the house in search of his favorite girl, sidling up to Daniela, announcing his presence to her by pressing his nose into her hand. He had taken it upon himself to act as her shadow and only when he succumbed to a nap was she allowed out of his sight.

A small triangle of pita bread slapped against my cheek and fell to my lap and I looked up to see Steve winding up to chuck another piece down the front of Kennedy’s shirt.

“Victory!” he exclaimed when it slid down her cleavage and disappeared into her shirt. “Now if you’ll all excuse me,” he

announced as he marched over to his wife, “I need to go on a fact-finding mission.”

“Here’s a fact.” Kennedy reached under her shirt and yanked out the bread, throwing it back at Steve. “You’ll be missing a testicle if you even think about manhandling my boobs in front of the family.”

He stuck out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout just as Rhys wrapped himself around his mother’s leg. Kennedy scooped him up into her lap and he leaned immediately into her chest as she cuddled him.

“Not even fair,” Steve huffed good naturedly, and Grams nodded like she was in complete agreement.

There was a delighted little grin on Adam’s face a few hours later, as he watched Steve back a minivan full of children down the driveway. He waved, then looked down his shoulder at me. “Is it a coincidence that the cousin sleepover is occurring on my birthday?”

“Maybe.” I turned and walked back into the house, pulling my shirt over my head to drop on the floor the second I was through the door. “It’ll definitely be easier to give you your birthday gifts without worrying one of the kids is going to walk into the room.”

Daniela was a master of stealth mode, and she’d walked in on us more than once.

“Birthday gifts, plural?” He looked interested, hurrying into the house behind me and shutting the door as I tugged off my

leggings.

“Yup.” I grinned at him, popping the clasp on my bra because I loved watching his eyes glaze over whenever I got naked. “You get your first present right here, in the kitchen.”

He licked his lips as I pushed down my underwear, and finally it seemed to dawn on him that he was still fully clothed.

“Is this a show or a tell kind of present?” He asked, quickly stripping his own shirt over his head and I moved toward him, slipping several fingers of each hand into the waistband of his pants to pull him to me.

“Telling you would ruin the fun,” I teased as I leaned up and caught his earlobe between my teeth, and a deep sound rumbled from his throat.

Instead I proceeded to show him, dropping his pants before pushing him into a kitchen chair and kneeling between his knees.

“What are you doing?” he asked dazedly and I grinned up at him as I skated both hands up his thighs.

“You know exactly what I’m doing. I’m making this a birthday to remember, so start thinking of some wishes you’d like me to grant.”

“Come here, Mrs. Beckman.” He leaned down and gathered me into his arms, lifting to settle me on his lap. “Every day you make my wish come true, just by being here with me.” He cupped my face gently with one hand and brought my mouth down to his.

“You’ve given me things I didn’t even know I wanted,” he said almost against my lips, and I tipped my forehead to his. “A home,” he whispered. “A family. This is what it is to be truly wealthy, baby. We’ve found something a lot of people spend their whole lives looking for.”

“Turned out it was right in front of me the whole time.” My voice caught a little as I smoothed a hand over his hair. “I’m so glad you saved me from myself.”

“I told you I’d always protect you.” There was such a sweet, loving expression on his face, one that made my heart expand with joy. I’d never been able to get enough of him, something I knew would always be the case, and when he rose from the chair and carried me down the hallway, I didn’t fuss at him. I let him have what he wanted, because apparently all he’d ever wanted was me.

The End.

*If you’re curious about Big Mike’s story, you’re in luck. Keep turning to read sample chapters from **Unrecognizable**, out in February of 2023.*

Unrecognizable - Michael

“I can’t do this anymore.”

My wife choked on a sob.

“I clearly can’t be what he needs, so I need to set him free and let him find whatever or whoever it is that can help.”

Our therapist shifted uncomfortably before gesturing she should continue.

“My sweet husband is intensely loyal, so the only way I can free him is to request a divorce.”

There was a ringing in my ears, similar to what I’d heard when the IED went off, and I couldn’t help the vivid images that flashed through my mind: the truck lying on its side, a gaping hole torn through it.

Smoke and flames and the sounds of men injured and dying.

“This seems like a change of heart since our last session, Claire,” the therapist said gently, and I looked across the

eighteen inches separating my wife and me. It may as well have been an ocean, for all the distance between us.

“This has been a long time coming,” Claire responded in her sweet, clear voice, swallowing down her emotions. “We’ve been doing this for years, twice a week. Where has it gotten us? My husband still wants nothing to do with me.”

That wasn't exactly true.

The therapist looked surprised. Claire was a people pleaser and didn't contradict anyone, not ever, or put her foot down like this.

“Are you saying you've given up?”

I was ready for this guy to shut the hell up.

Claire drew in a deep, shaky breath and I realized how close to tears she really was.

The last three years had broken my wife.

“I'm saying that I have no more hope. I'll never stop loving Michael,” she looked over at me, but she didn't make a move to touch me, “but I can't live like this anymore.”

Her deeply painful admission cracked inside my chest and spilled something hot; liquid hurt that flooded through me and started to fill up in my eyes. I'd never known a life without Claire, not since I was seventeen. We'd been together for over three decades and had two beautiful kids. Claire was my forever.

Was my forever, because now she was throwing in the towel.

“I recommend we continue talking this through.” Wallace’s voice grated on my nerves. “We’ll explore this in depth as we continue, over the course of several more sessions, and make sure it’s the right decision for both of you.”

Claire drew herself up straight next to me and fixed Wallace with an icy glare. “I don’t think you understand how hard it’s been for me to arrive at this conclusion. We have talked ourselves in circles for the last three years and there has been no resolution. He *still* can’t tell me what happened over there. Do you know what that feels like, Wallace?”

The man swallowed hard, because she had him by the balls.

“Imagine how you felt if your wife flinched every time you touched her. No hugs. No kisses or silly, sweet moments. What if you had separate bedrooms, because she had nightmares and was afraid she’d hurt you in her sleep?”

Wallace remained quiet, letting Claire’s hurt leak out.

“It’s been almost six years.” Her voice shook.

I knew exactly what had been almost six years, because I remembered our last time together with the utmost, painful clarity. It was one of my sweetest memories ever made, right before the worst period of my life.

It was the night before I shipped out on my last tour. It was my last tour ever, a two-year stint in Afghanistan with a team of guys I trusted with my life. Upon my return I was finally

going to hang up the towel: retire from the military altogether and do something else with my life, something with just as much meaning, just *different* meaning. Something that let me spend time with my wife; the rest of my nights in her bed.

At the time our oldest, Kingsley, had recently graduated college and moved to Savannah to start a new job, while Eli would start his final year in just a few months.

Both kids had come home for the weekend and we'd spent every waking moment together, sitting on the porch and talking about plans and dreams and what the future looked like.

Claire kept our glasses full of cold lemonade and shuttled delicious food out to us, because when my girl was sad or scared or anxious, she cooked, and when I was about to deploy she was all of those things.

At night she climbed me like a tree and wrapped her body around my own, like she could fuse us together with enough effort, and then I couldn't leave her again.

I'd left Claire several times before. I'd been deployed overseas exactly four times during the course of my military career, and she wasn't joking when she said it was a miracle I was so close to our kids. I'd missed out on a lot of their lives, so when I was home I was all-in.

That particular night, it was just us. Kingsley had flown back to Savannah that afternoon and Eli drove back upstate, where he was living off-campus and working for the summer.

Claire had been the one to lock up the house that night and when she trailed into the bedroom and leaned against the doorway, I'd taken a moment to look up at her and appreciate just how beautiful my wife was. Her blonde hair was a little shorter than it had been in high school, but it was still thick and shiny, her body was defined and tight from the hours of work she put in each day on our small farm.

“Hit the shower, McEvoy.” Her voice had been deep and promising, and I'd scooted off the bed with remarkable speed to follow my wife's orders.

Every precious moment of that night had been burned into my memory, committed carefully, grooved into my brain to come back to, those sweet moments of loving my wife, during the nights I lay alone in a narrow Army cot.

Neither of us had known my two-year tour would stretch to a three-year absence.

Neither of us could have known that the Army would tell her I was presumed dead.

Neither of us had known I would be returned to her in pieces, broken in mind, body and spirit.

Neither of us could have known we would become strangers during the three years following.

We drove home in silence, Claire staring out the window at the beautiful spring landscape bathed in the golden rays of the setting sun. She'd said her piece and there was nothing more,

so I drove with my eyes on the road while I tried to wrap my head around what she wanted to happen.

“You don’t want me anymore, baby?” I finally asked softly, aware that my voice was thick with the tears I’d never let run down my face.

A heavy sigh.

“Michael...” She turned slowly to look at me and I pulled the truck over onto the shoulder of the road, knowing this was going to get heavy in a hurry. “I’ve been your person for three decades, my love.” She reached across the space to put her hand on my arm and I had to steel myself, bracing for her touch. She watched me do it.

“See? That. I can’t even touch you without you pulling away from me. Do you know what it’s like to be unable to touch you?” Her beautiful blue eyes filled with tears. “I can’t go to you at night when you scream in your sleep, because I’m afraid pulling you into my arms will do you more harm than good. It’s the worst kind of torture: I have a husband, but I can’t have *my* husband.”

She swallowed hard and looked out the window again. “At first, when you suggested we see a therapist, I thought the problem was with me. But then I thought, maybe you wanted to share yourself with me again and this was what it would take, so I agreed—and at first I had hope. At *first*. But my hope is dead, baby. I can’t look at you every day and know that all I’m ever going to be to you is a roommate.”

I turned off the truck.

Put my head back on the headrest and stared out the windshield, wondering what my wife would do if I let her see the things I had never let her see.

You should let her go.

What if I let her see the pain that leaked out of me at night, when I wanted nothing more than to crawl into her bed and wrap my arms around her, but couldn't because of the incredible, crushing guilt? It rendered me useless.

We sat there in silence until the sun sank below the horizon and dusk stole over the fields. Then I ran an arm across one dangerously leaky eye and started the truck again.

There was a car in the driveway when we pulled in, and my heart fell. Of all the times for our daughter and her husband to surprise us, this was the worst. I wasn't sure I could pull off the happy face my little girl expected, and I was damned sure Claire couldn't. Those two were thick as thieves, twins born a generation apart, capable of reading each other without so much as a look, just a feeling that fizzed through the aether.

"Oh hell," Claire groaned, and I knew she was thinking the very same thing. "This is not a conversation I'm ready to have with the kids."

Count me on the same page. It was a conversation I didn't want to have *ever*, especially with my wife.

"Just..." She flipped the visor down and quickly cleaned up her mascara in the mirror. "We'll talk about this later—not in front of them."

I let her go inside first and I meant to follow behind, but I couldn't.

Instead, I trailed slowly through the yard with Flash, our Collie-something-mutt hot on my heels. Claire had gotten him while I'd been away and he'd chosen me as his person the first time he laid eyes on me, the same way she had thirty-something years earlier.

Flash followed me behind the barn, to where I'd been chopping wood each evening. But tonight I just didn't have it in me. There was no fight and no energy, so I just sat on the huge stump I used as my chopping block and let what I'd never let my wife see run down my face and drop into the dirt.

Unrecognizable - Claire

“Something’s wrong.”

Kingsley knew it the instant I walked into the house, and though there was no way I was ready to talk about what transpired just that late afternoon, my daughter could feel that my heart was broken.

“Rough session today.” I pasted the fakest smile ever on my face and prayed Kingsley would buy it, or just let me off the hook. If she wanted details I would break down, and once that dam was breached the tears would flow for days.

“Must have been a rough one.” Kingsley gave me one of her brilliant white smiles. She knew more than she should about the regular visits to the therapist, but the real reason had never been disclosed. She’d simply been told it was PTSD—I couldn’t remember whether that was Mike’s idea or mine—and it was true, but it didn’t scratch the surface: the nightmares, the flinching when I touched him, the utter fear I saw in his eyes the two times I walked into his room wearing something sexy.

I'd been trying to seduce my husband for years, desperate to find the man who'd left me six years earlier and never returned.

He'd moved into a different bedroom just weeks after he got home, trying to tell me he wasn't used to sleeping next to someone anymore and he feared he'd hurt me if he had a nightmare and started thrashing.

Things like that were things you didn't tell your kids, no matter how close you were to them.

Re-entry into normal life and routines was hard for some soldiers, I knew that. We'd been an Army family for a quarter century, since I got pregnant with Eli just before graduating from college and Mike lost all hope of ever being signed or picked for the NFL draft.

Truth was, the optics hadn't been good, but I didn't tell him that. I knew when scouts found out he was already a family man, with a wife and a daughter, he wouldn't be considered the malleable player they were looking for. He couldn't be as easily shaped into what a team wanted, as he already had responsibilities and expectations for his future that were molded around very real, established relationships.

My husband was still built like the football player he'd been decades ago: tall and broad, with wide shoulders and a trim waist. He was wide and muscular, his legs powerful, his shoulders and chest a thing of beauty. His arms were still bigger than my thighs.

All those years had gone by, and I still thought he was the most incredibly attractive man I'd ever seen. I wanted him desperately, in every way a woman should want her husband, but I couldn't have *any* of him.

"Where *is* Daddy?" Kingsley asked, and I had a guess but I couldn't answer around the lump in my throat. Instead, I shrugged helplessly.

"Probably playing with Flash. You know that dog is an absolute fool for your father and vice versa."

Kingsley looked disappointed. Despite our almost psychic bond with one another, she'd always been Daddy's girl. I knew when she came to visit us, she was really coming to visit her father, and the visits had been more frequent since Michael's return. Losing him—thinking for almost a full year that he was dead—had destroyed all of us, and all of us were frantic for him, as if we could make up for the lost time by drinking in every moment.

The kids didn't know it, but they got so much more of him than I did, and I worked every day not to be jealous of my own children for their easy relationship with the stranger in my house.

"Claire." Till's voice was bright and friendly. My name was just about the only word I'd ever heard him say that didn't carry with it a thick German accent. My son-in-law, the ambassador's son. The boy—now man—who came from money and influence and culture. He'd fallen at my beautiful

daughter's feet the same way Michael had fallen at mine, all those years ago.

Till was fifteen, almost sixteen years older than my sweet Kingsley, closer to my age than he was to hers. She'd thought it hysterical when I pointed out he was closing in on his sixteenth birthday when she was born, which made him only three years younger than me.

"Till." I tried to paste on a bright smile. "I'm afraid I didn't expect the two of you, or I'd have been better prepared. Let me just get something on quickly. It won't be a fancy dinner, I'm afraid, but I can have something together in a snap."

Till smiled easily. "We should have warned you. I told Kingsley, but she wanted to surprise her papa." He grinned, and I remained astonished that he didn't envy Kingsley's close, easy bond with her father.

"I'll put the chickens in for the night, Mama," Kingsley called as she slipped her feet into her shoes and I blew her a grateful kiss. I would still have to go out later, to make sure the horses were settled for the night, that none of the steers I'd introduced to pasture a few days before had stupidly broken through the electric fence, and the goats were bedded down for the night. My work was almost never done.

"Something *is* wrong."

Till and I were not close, not like me and Kingsley, and to hear his deep, worried voice told me that the emotions on my face couldn't be hidden.

“Claire, this is not like you.”

He had never called me anything but Muti in the past, in deference and respect, despite our infinitesimal age gap.

“It’s over,” I said quietly, feeling a barely-repressed sob shudder through me. “I’m not ready to tell the kids...I told Michael today that I want a divorce.”

My son-in-law’s handsome face went pale. “You cannot do this, Claire. It will kill him...it will also kill your children.”

“Right now it’s killing *me*,” I whispered, bracing myself on the counter against the tidal pull of painful emotion. I didn’t know how long we had until Kingsley dragged Michael back into the house. “He’s been home for three years, and in that time it’s been...nothing. He’s a ghost.” I lifted my hands in a helpless shrug. “I think he cares for me because he feels it’s his duty. Maybe he loves me, but I don’t think he’s *in* love with me. And that’s...” I could feel tears creeping up, heralding a bout of utter hysteria. “I’ve been living with a stranger since he came home.”

Till looked distinctly uncomfortable. “I don’t think this will make it better, Claire. I don’t think this will fix anything for either of you. It will not push him to get better, if that is your hope.”

He was right, I knew that, but I couldn’t look at Michael every day for the rest of my life and allow him to continue to suffer. I couldn’t continue to look at him the way I’d been looking at him the past three years, with longing and hope and

love and hurt, only to see a wounded man, a stranger, looking back at me. A man who chose not to let me in.

Till knew more than a little something of hurt. He'd been married once before, long before he met my daughter, and from what I knew he'd had his heart broken almost irreparably. Kingsley had, according to him, been the one to patch the cracks and give him hope again, filling him up with peace and happiness. (I'm not going to say that wasn't a little weird, finding out our daughter was dating a man only a few years younger than her parents.)

"I will overstep here..." He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "When Leni left me, it was my fault. I pushed her away for a very long time, because I could not accept what it was I needed to change. And when she left, I blamed her... but it was me."

I'd had enough therapy for one day.

"I understand that you are hurt. But perhaps the reason Michael is withdrawn is because of what he fears will be your response when he tells you what it is that has caused this. It is too big for him." He slapped a hand over his heart. "He saw something, Claire. He witnessed or experienced something that destroyed him. And now his fear is that you will not understand him—or forgive him for something that was not his fault. This is the only explanation for a man like him."

The terrifying thing was that I was fairly sure he was onto something, but before I could even formulate a thought there was a sound from outside. Someone was sobbing.

“Mama!” It was Kingsley. “Please, Mama, come quick. Something’s wrong with Daddy. He’s on the ground by the woodpile and I don’t think he’s breathing.”

Afterword & Acknowledgements

I do a great deal of research for each book I write, since I sometimes use locations or careers in my storyline with which I have little to no personal experience. (A big imagination still needs to be backed up by solid facts!)

Watertown, NY has featured prominently in one other book, *The Battle Back Home*, which tells the story of Aaron and Harlowe. While writing that book I researched the town, but went back to conduct even more for this book, since I've lived in and extensively traveled New York state but had no personal "boots on the ground" knowledge of Watertown.

Interestingly, Thompson Park is on a "haunted registry." Local lore says there's a moving vortex within the park that transports individuals through time, should they step into it. However, it seems this is potentially explained away by the possible presence of intense EMF bands, which can cause nausea and hallucination. So you decide...vortex or EMF?

Madelyn's career with the USAF and as a pararescue operative took a great deal of reading, and I can only hope I

got the few facts presented correct. I have great respect for our armed services and wish to show no disrespect by getting my facts wrong. It doesn't mean I'll get it all right, but I do try really hard.

William Sine's book, *Guardian Angel: Life and Death Adventures with Pararescue, the World's Most Powerful Commando Rescue Force*, was instrumental in helping me to understand the rigors of training, the expectations, the combat operations, daily life and the dark sense of humor most pjs display. It's a fascinating insight into a little-known division with training I would say far exceeds that expected of even the Marines, and the dropout rate is astonishingly high due to the rigors both psychological and physical.

Pararescuemen (forgive me, ladies, but this book is a work of fiction because to my knowledge, there are not yet officially any female pararescue operatives—and believe me, I've researched) are known as guardian angels and pjs (parajumpers). They have astonishingly extensive training in medical and life-saving procedures. Sometimes this involves giving a blood transfusion in the field and stabilizing a soldier, while other times it's deploying tactical recovery equipment to rescue men from a collapsed structure.

The fact most pjs jump with 150 pounds of gear strapped to them, yet have trained to complete a high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) jump with gear the weight of an additional adult strapped to their body, absolutely astonishes me. They train extensively to learn how to balance that weight so it doesn't throw them into a somersault while diving, which has

obviously proven fatal. However, it's not an option to leave that gear behind, as they're carrying equipment for any and every given situation they might face.

Obviously, this job has a limited window of physical viability and around the age of forty, it seems most pjs are removed from leading teams to managing them from behind a desk. While many go on to do this with great success, it seems almost a punishment to men who are clearly adrenaline junkies.

Last but not least, I've done extensive research on the First Nation tribes, which include the Oneida (Brandon, from the book *Unwelcome*) and Onondaga (Adam). This has led to a great deal of reading about the Iroquois people, their history and customs, which has been a fascinating cultural deep dive.

Since I grew up in an area of Wisconsin that houses an Oneida reservation, I had some working knowledge of the Oneida culture. However, I was surprised to find that not only are they linked to the Onandaga, but the tribe in the Green Bay area were relocated from upstate New York, where another Oneida reservation remains.

With each book I write there's something new to learn—often more than one “something new,” and I love the process despite the fact I overcomplicate things for myself. However, with a background in journalism and a deep and abiding love for history, this has been a fun way to indulge my thirst for knowledge.

Thanks to my family for indulging my weirdness. My husband has accepted that any given point he might walk past me to find me researching some obscure fact about WWII, case law, or kink acronyms. He doesn't even bat an eye anymore.

Thanks to my wonderful beta readers, Heidi Stowe Anderson, Becca Cherpak, Randi Fleischer and Nicole Marie Johnson, for saving me from myself time and time again. Each of you has saved me from some major blunders, driving home the point how important it is to have as many sets of critical-yet-sympathetic eyes on a manuscript as is humanly possible before it goes live!

Randi, I know you saw the line about Madelyn's mother being the travel agent for guilt trips and that was 100% from you. That one's going to get some frequent play!

The next book explores some familiar territory (New York City) and some not as familiar (Nebraska), and the landscape of a marriage failing after thirty years. I'm already knee-deep in geographical and psychological research...wish me luck.

Last but not least, I can't believe you've made it this far. Thank you so much for reading. This has been a crazy, exhausting journey during which I joke I've never worked so hard for so little, yet it's true. But the truth is that even if I were to win the lottery tomorrow and never had to work another day in my life, this is not my nine-to-five. (Let's be honest, it's my seven a.m.-to-ten p.m.) I'll write until I run out

of stories, which at this rate means I'll be writing for the rest of my life.

I hope these stories bring you some light, laughter, sympathy, hope and perspective. In this way I too can be a light in my little corner of the world.

About the Author

Erin's making good use of her degree in Journalism by making things up all day long.

Born in the Midwest, she's a fan of big trucks, strong-minded men, grocery delivery services and happy endings.

Years after obtaining a degree she didn't use, she's returned to writing the kinds of stories she's been penning since she was ten years old: sweet stories of love lost, won, broken or regained. Her characters have seen some things and they tend to be a little older, a little broken, and just redeemable enough to get their shit together, usually after a few seriously stupid missteps. (Because life is hard, but the mistakes can put us on the path we're meant to travel, right?)

Erin's family relocates with some frequency, thanks to her husband's career. For now she lives with her very own Alpha male and two children in the Metro D.C. area.

Most days you'll find Erin trying to write in a cloud of Mastiff fur, a cat in her lap and the space heater set to

“nuclear.” (True story, it’s a setting.)

You can find her at www.erinfitzgeraldwrites.com, as well as on Facebook and Instagram at [erinfitzgeraldwrites](https://www.facebook.com/erinfitzgeraldwrites). You can also contact her at erinfitzgeraldwrites@gmail.com.

Other Works & Coming Soon

The Atholton Series

Forsaking All Others - (Seraphina & Mateo) Book One

The Battle Back Home - (Aaron & Harlowe) Book Two

All The Days After - (Noah & Eve) Book Three

The Things I Can't Say - (Asher & Olivia) Book Four

When I Had Nothing - (Thomas & Natalie) Book Five

Men of the First Brigade

Unexpected (Jack & Daphne) Book One

Unforgiven (Scott & Mia) Book Two

Unwelcome (Brandon & Giulia) Book Three

Unstoppable (Alex & Lauren) Book Four

Unrequited (Lincoln & Ava) Book Five

Undeniable (Adam & Madelyn) Book Six

Unrecognizable (Michael & Claire) February 2023

Unconditional (Gerald & Emerson) April 2023