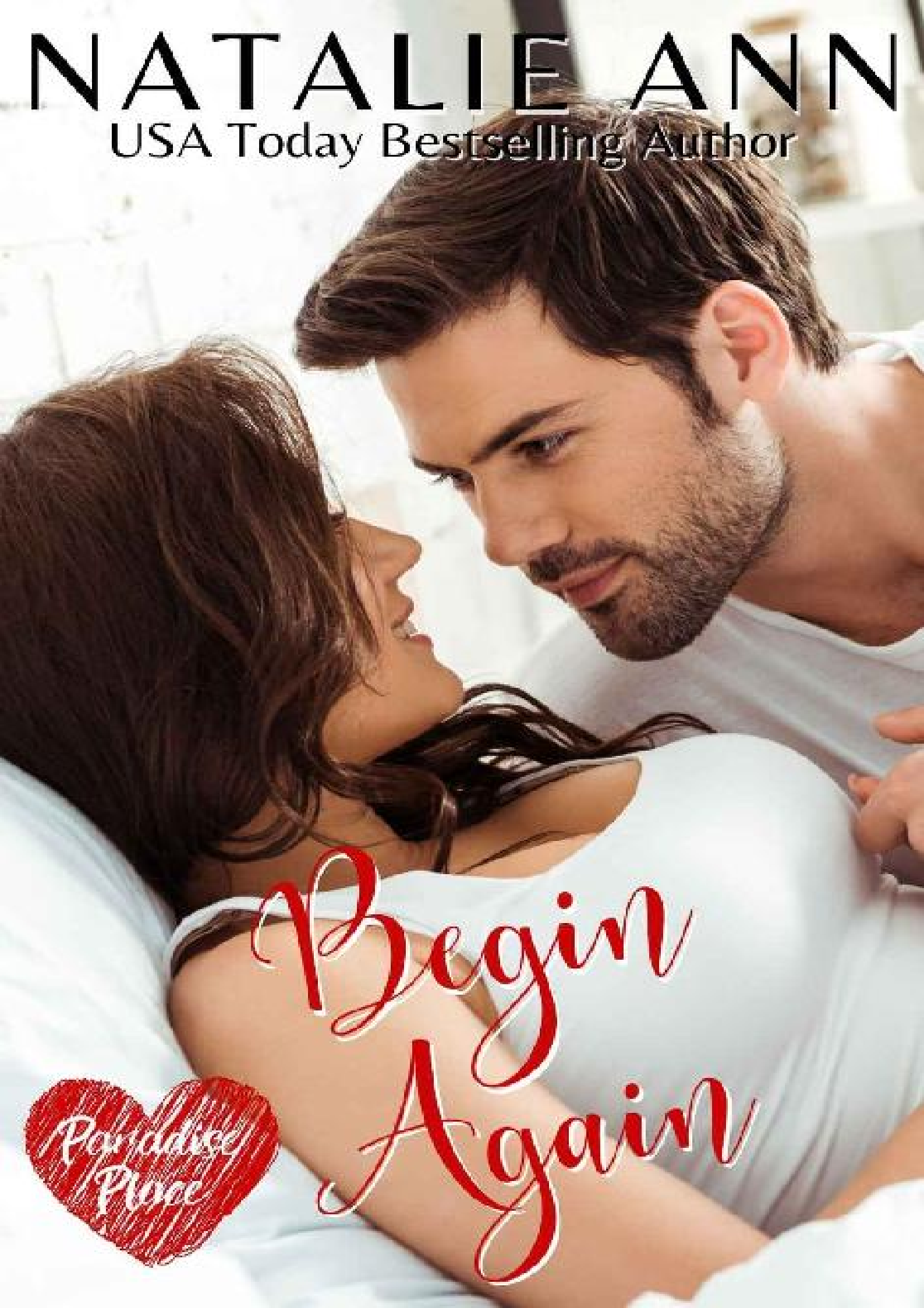


NATALIE ANN

USA Today Bestselling Author



Begin Again




BEGIN AGAIN

NATALIE ANN

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BLURB

They say you never forget your first and that is true for Christian Butler. He is the laid back one of the family. He never plans things out more than a few weeks or months in advance. He can pivot and change when need be. Life is just simpler that way and it works for him. But there are things he'll never get out of his mind that will always make him wonder if he could have done something differently.

Liz Carter never forgot her first. They were young and in love, but her life was a mess and she didn't want to drag him down. She moved out of the area to get away and start over. What she found was even more drama than at home and eventually returned to begin again. The last thing she ever expected was running back into Christian and bonding over a house he always wanted but she ended up getting.

PROLOGUE

“I need you to go with me tomorrow night to my boss’s house for a dinner party,” Tanner Carter said to his wife, Liz.

“I can’t,” she said. “I’ve got to work. You know that.”

She worked third shift as a nurse and had for years. That was how she’d met Tanner. When he’d come into the ER one night hurt, having been in an accident.

“Yeah, but call in,” he said, waving his hand, dismissing every word she ever said like always. “It’s not like they can’t just call someone else in to do your job. I don’t have that luxury.”

Liz held back the snort. She’d never considered her job a luxury and hated when he talked to her that way.

That everything in her life was trivial and could be discarded or replaced so easily.

“I can’t,” she said again. “You had me call in two months ago for something else that wasn’t an emergency. I said I was sick and someone saw me out that night. I’m lucky I didn’t get written up or fired.”

Tanner turned his back on her like he always did. He was rude more times than not. She had no idea where the sweet loving man she’d married four years ago went. The one that sought her out with roses and candy all the time when she got off her shift.

“You can find another job easily,” Tanner said. “You need to be with me tomorrow. Figure it out.”

“No,” she said.

Tanner turned and scowled at her, grabbed her arm and yanked her close to him. Her face was inches from his. “I’m not going to tell you again. You’re going to get your fat ass to that party tomorrow night and you’re going to put on the hottest dress you’ve got even if you’ve got to squeeze into it. You’re going to have a smile on your face like you want to be there too.”

She was sick of this. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take.

The comment about her weight just set off a flood of emotions in her.

She wasn’t fat. She’d never been fat. But she’d been so thin lately that people at work were commenting on it even though she tried to hide it in her baggy scrubs.

Liz didn’t like to be questioned about anything so she’d been trying to eat more so they’d see she wasn’t starving herself. Like she did around Tanner to avoid his comments and nasty remarks toward her.

“I’m not calling in,” she said. “Make up an excuse for me.”

“I smell something sweet on your breath,” he said. “Have you been eating chocolate again?” She yanked her arm away only for him to grab it and bring her back. “Answer me,” he growled.

“No,” she lied.

He let go of her arm and took a step away. She thought this was over and she could finish getting dinner on the table. She’d go to work in a few hours.

She didn’t even get to take one step before he backhanded her across the face.

He’d never hit her before. Ever.

He'd grab her. He'd push and shove her. He'd insult and use verbal abuse. But this...this was new.

Her hand went to her face. It was burning and stinging like nothing ever had before.

She stared him down in shock.

He almost seemed to realize what he'd done at that point too. "See what you made me do," he shouted.

"Me? You hit me!"

He turned and grabbed his keys and then stormed out the door.

She was thankful for that.

She ran up to her room and looked in the mirror at her face. It was going to bruise. She knew it. She'd put ice on it, but there was no way she could hide this from anyone at work.

She was sitting on the couch an hour later with her second ice pack on her face trying to figure out what she was going to do.

She had money in an account that Tanner didn't know about. One she'd had before they met and she'd never told him. For the past few years she'd kept putting little bits of money in there without his knowledge.

It'd be enough for her to move out. She could stop her check from going into his account. She didn't want anything of his anyway.

The front door opened. She'd hoped she could be gone before Tanner returned. Normally when they fought that was what he did. He'd leave and come back when she was working and they wouldn't have to face each other again for a day or so.

He'd be nice and sweet to her. Apologize and things would be good for a month or longer. Then they'd start up all over again.

"Liz, are you okay?"

She didn't expect to see her mother-in-law standing there. She moved the ice pack down but knew there would be a mark on her face from Tanner's hand.

"Yeah. Just tripped."

"No," Donna Carter said. "You didn't. Let's go right now."

"Where?" she asked. Her mother-in-law had never liked her that much. At least she didn't think so.

"You're leaving."

"I've got time before I go to work," she argued.

"No," Donna said. "You're leaving Tanner. Enough is enough. He's out getting drunk with his brother right now. He won't come home for hours. That's enough time for you to pack everything you care about and get it in your car. I'll give you money."

This was all too much. "Where am I going to go?"

"I'm not sitting around anymore and watching this." Donna pulled her phone out of her purse. "Do you still have that account that Tanner knows nothing about?"

Her jaw dropped. She didn't know how Donna knew that. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," Donna said. "Yes or no on the account?" Donna's lips were firm.

"Yes," Liz said quietly.

"I'm transferring one hundred thousand dollars into it right now."

"What?"

Her mother-in-law was still pushing buttons, then stopped. "Look right now. It's there."

She pulled her phone out and logged in and was stunned to see the money sitting there. "How did you do that? How did you know?"

Donna waved her hand. "It doesn't matter. Up. Now. Let's get you packed and out of here and don't come back. Don't

say a word of this night to anyone.”

Liz ran to her room to find boxes and bags. There were some in another closet, but right now she'd just grab everything off the hangers if she could and toss them in her backseat.

Donna was on her heels and snatching clothes out of the closet. Shoes too. Things were going into garbage bags in a haphazard mess.

“Why are you protecting him?”

Donna stopped and looked at her. “I'm not. I'm protecting you.”

“By buying me to not say a word about what Tanner does? And how did you even know?”

“We can talk and pack. He's always been a troubled child that thought he could get away with murder thanks to his father spoiling the boys. I don't want to have to worry about that. Murder. I'd never be able to live with myself. I didn't expect to see the mark on your face and it's enough for me to do this now. I've seen the signs slowly over the years. You could say preparing me for this day but hoping and praying it wouldn't come.”

Guess she wasn't doing too good of a job of hiding anything.

“Why do you care?” she asked. “You don't even like me.”

Donna grabbed her arm—not hard like Tanner had done—but when she flinched, Donna dropped it and sighed.

“I'm sorry. I should have stepped in sooner, but you're good at hiding things. Just not good enough. I do like you, Liz. I'd had hopes that Tanner would settle down when he met you...but it didn't happen.”

She wasn't going to ask if this had happened before with another woman. It didn't matter at this point.

All that mattered was that she had money and the means to get the hell out and she was doing it.

“What are you going to tell Tanner?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Donna said. “I’m going to act shocked. He won’t come after you. Trust me. He’ll blame it all on you and say good riddance.”

Liz didn’t care. “I don’t know where to go,” she said.

“Go home,” Donna said. “It’s time you do. Your father will understand.”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice,” she said.

She kicked it into overdrive packing her car to the brim with everything that was hers. She wouldn’t take one thing that wasn’t.

Everything was in Tanner’s name anyway.

Once she was in her car, she called work, talked to the one person she trusted and said she had to leave town and wasn’t coming back.

Her supervisor told her to be safe and when she got to her destination to reach out so they could make sure she got all the money coming to her.

It was as if everyone knew and she felt like such an idiot.

No more. She was going home whether she liked it or not.

MAKE IT MY OWN

O *ne Year Later*

“I THINK you’re in over your head,” Trevor Sherman said to her.

Her father was trying to be nice. Liz knew it, but she had to do this for herself whether she was in over her head or not.

She was no longer taking orders from anyone.

It’d taken her a long time to move on from her divorce.

Donna was right—Tanner not only didn’t come after her, he didn’t contest anything.

Why would he? He kept it all. It was more like she didn’t contest anything.

“It’s the first home I’ve ever owned myself,” she said. “I can’t wait to make it my own.”

“It’s huge,” her father said. “And old. It needs a ton of work you can’t possibly do. You know I’ll help you, but I feel like this is a money trap for you.”

“It was a great deal,” she said of the Tudor house that was fifty years old.

Yeah, she was stupid to do this, but after living at home with her father since she came back to Colonie and putting her money away. Not to mention the money from Donna no one

knew about. She was able to have a nice deposit on this house and money for some rehab.

“The only thing that is great about it,” her father said shaking his head, “is the fact that the roof, windows and furnace are less than five years old.”

That had been a big plus. The rest of the house was so dated but livable.

Liz saw potential and, goddammit, she was filling her life with that after what she’d been through.

“I know,” she said.

“Are you going to let Abby live with you and help with the mortgage payment?”

Her younger sister of seven years didn’t want to stay in her apartment anymore and offered to move in and help with the bills.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I haven’t lived alone in a long time. I just need to get there. Abby understands. Besides, she has a few more months left on her lease. I’ll decide before she has to make a decision.”

Her father was walking around her house that she’d moved into a few days ago. He’d help her, but it’s not like she had a ton to move in. Mostly the five-bedroom, four-bathroom house was empty.

She had some second-hand furniture she’d gotten from garage sales and friends in the living room and eat-in kitchen. She’d bought herself a new bed and mattress that was delivered the day she closed because she was sick of sleeping in the old twin at her parents’ house.

Everything else in the house, she owned whether she bought it new or used. Things like towels and minimal kitchen essentials.

The start of her life a year ago, all her possessions were stuffed in her sedan, which wasn’t much at all. When it came time to buy things, it was what she could afford.

It wasn't beneath her to buy things someone else owned. She was just glad to say she didn't have anything given to her. That her life wasn't easy.

Nope. It wasn't easy years ago growing up here and it wasn't when she was married regardless of Tanner telling her he made it that way for her.

"I'll help you if you tell me what you want to do here first," her father said.

"Dad," she said. "You're busy. You started back to work last week and I know you're going to be working ten- to twelve-hour days. I'm working nights."

She'd gotten hired at Albany Medical Center fast. When she'd moved out of New York years ago, she'd had her nursing license and had just kept renewing even though she'd been working in Georgia for over six years. She wouldn't be renewing that license, as she was never going back there.

"I could come here and work when you're at work," her father said.

"No," she said. "You need to go to bed when I'm going to work. Then I'll be sleeping days."

"But I could get some work done before you go in and you're up then," her father said.

She knew there wasn't going to be a lot of arguing. "We'll see."

"Weekends," her father said.

She started her shift on Sunday nights and ended them Friday mornings.

"I need a game plan first," she said. No more riding by the seat of her pants like she had in her youth or early adulthood. That was how she got into this mess. "Dinner is almost done. Do you have a lot of work lined up already?"

Her father owned his own fencing company. It was him and about four guys that worked for him. They did a lot of business in the Capital Region, but her father worked for every dime he had during the nice weather months because once the

snow fell, he wasn't doing much work at all other than repairs as needed.

"I do," her father said. "I'm ready to dive right back in. It's too bad you couldn't have gotten this house months ago when I was slow. Then you could have gotten stuff done because I was bored out of my mind."

She laughed and flipped the burgers in the pan, then checked the fries in the oven. The old yellow oven that she was shocked still worked. But, hey, they built things to last back then.

"The timing is still off, as I'd be sleeping during the day," she said.

Her father got the plates out of the old dark wood cabinets. They were in good shape and she wondered if she could paint them or not. The cabinets and counters at least looked to have been updated in the past thirty years, but the wall oven was still the same ugly yellow. The rest of the appliances were white and probably ten years old or more. Nothing matched, but it was functional and that was all she was concerned with.

She just hoped everything lasted until she could tackle the kitchen all at once. It was her first project, but knew she'd have to hire someone and it would take time to get price quotes.

Her father pulled the cheese out of the fridge and placed it on their burgers while she got their forks.

Five minutes later they were sitting down to eat.

"Just like having you at home," her father said.

"I'm not that far away," she said. "I'm sure you're thrilled to have the place to yourself again."

"It's lonely," her father said. "And it was nice having someone cook for me."

Liz grinned. They did have a routine. Her father would come in late after long days and since she was leaving for work at ten thirty, she'd had no problem making dinner later

for them. Then she'd eat something lighter on her break at work.

"You can come to dinner anytime you want. I've still got to cook," she said.

"You need your space too," her father said. "I know it."

Trevor Sherman had been the one raising his two daughters for most of her life. Her mother was not in the picture. Or only when she was healthy and stable. Which wasn't often.

Her parents were divorced and Liz hadn't talked to her mother in over ten years. It was just too hard when Lily Sherman didn't want to take care of herself.

"It's going to be interesting," she said.

"I know you can't do this kitchen on your own," her father said. "Not even the bathrooms. So what are you going to do first?"

"The floors are in good shape. I think I just need to put a coat of paint in all the rooms down here and then my bedroom. That is all I'm tackling upstairs. There are too many rooms."

"Your main bathroom isn't too bad," her father said.

"Thirty years or so, just like this kitchen," she said. "It could be worse, but for now it's usable. It's so big, but the tile is dirty and dated. The tub too. No way I can do anything in there other than hire someone. I'll paint it at least, but that is about it."

"Things in life take time, as you know," her father said.

"Yeah," she said, diving into her dinner with more gusto than normal. She'd put about twenty pounds on in the past year and actually felt good about herself.

She'd never forget her father's face when she'd come home and he cried at how thin she was. She supposed she never saw what everyone else did, but Tanner liked fashion-model-thin women and he made sure she knew that. Repeatedly.

Sickly thin was his idea. At twenty pounds heavier she was happy with some tiny curves and a whole heck of a lot of muscle.

She felt strong and that was more important to her than anything else.

She ate what she wanted and she worked out. She was taking a new stance in life and it was going to not just be healthy on the outside but on the inside too.

“If you want help painting, just let me know,” her father said. “I know you. You’ll start before the weekend.”

She laughed. “I’m going to pick up some paint after work tomorrow. Or on my way home from work. I’d just like my bedroom done. It’s too bright.”

The whole downstairs was dark colors that were going to take a lot of primer to cover up, but for some silly reason the primary suite was white. Like burn your retinas white.

For those who lived the life of a vampire, as her sister, Abby, often said about her, she needed her room dark. She’d take care of it tomorrow if she could.

“That will be the easiest room in the house to do,” her father said.

“Exactly,” she said. “But this weekend, you can help me paint if you want.”

Her father smiled at her. A true one and Liz knew she made the right decision by giving in and letting him help her just a little.

HARD TO FORGET

Christian pulled up in front of the Brewsters' house that Butler Construction was going to be doing some work on soon. A rehab inside and he'd be walking through it with his brother Evan.

Evan was the one that managed the projects, walked through for jobs and bids, and Christian was the engineer that had to look for structural issues and draw up the plans.

Though his family had built this house and every other one in Paradise Place, many at this end were built by his grandfather, father and uncle long before he was born.

He didn't have much lined up on his schedule with the new builds that he couldn't walk away and do this with his brother.

Most houses on this street were at least fifty years old. And as he stood in front of the Brewsters' house waiting, he stared across the street at one of his favorite houses, shaking his head in disappointment.

He'd been in love with the larger older Tudor-style home since he was a kid.

It was on one of the main roads of the development, so he'd passed it daily going in and out to school and hanging with friends.

In his mind, he'd hoped to own it when the original owners sold. He'd been biding his time. But then he lost out and it was a burn that no amount of salve was going to heal.

“This place needs some work outside,” he said to his brother of the house they were going to look at today. He’d been waiting outside for Evan to show up. Early April, Friday around lunch, Evan was probably being pulled in all sorts of directions on multiple projects that were getting ready to go with spring and warm weather finally hitting.

Christian liked his job better. He could do what needed to be done and move on to the next. Stop one thing and work on another and not have to plan weeks out. It was how he lived his life. Doing what needed to be done and worrying about tomorrow when tomorrow’s sun rose.

“You should have gone for landscaping rather than engineering,” Evan said, getting out of his truck.

He’d been told that a lot in his life. “It’s a hobby. But there is no reason the outside can’t look as good as the inside,” he said.

He’d done his fair share of building in his life but had wanted to be an engineer. Evan was on site more, Christian in the office.

Had he filled in when they were short staffed and behind? Yeah.

But at thirty-four years old, most of the time he was only swinging a hammer at his flips. Things he did on the side at his own pace and made a nice little profit. He worked when he wanted on them...when the designs came to him and he was ready.

“Yeah, yeah,” Evan said. “Heard that before.”

The two of them made their way to the front door, rang the bell, then waited for the owners to answer.

“Evan, Christian,” Molly Brewster said. “So glad you could take the time out to come over. I know you’re both busy, but I’ve been wanting to make changes to this house since we bought it ten years ago.”

“Never a problem,” he said. The house had been upgraded most likely twenty or thirty years ago by the looks of it. “You said you wanted a new kitchen?”

“Yes,” Molly said. “I just can’t stand the layout. I want it more open than anything else. Jim told me I had to live with it for years and I have, but it’s time to take some walls down.”

He looked at Evan. Christian knew that was the trend. The open concept. It had its purpose and he did it for a lot of his flips. After all, he was doing the work to sell and make a profit.

Personally though, he liked the division in the rooms. More so in these older colonials. What he loved about Paradise Place was they built any style of home a customer wanted. No cookie cutters there. But most did lean toward modern colonials.

“Let us know what you want,” Evan said. “Then Christian and I need to just climb into your attic space to check for load-bearing walls. Once we’ve got that information we can get down to exact plans and someone in the office will get the pricing drawn up from what you pick as your finishes.”

An hour later, Evan had left. Christian was still sitting in his truck checking over a few things before he pulled out.

The garbage trucks were coming down the street, making a ton of noise. He turned to look and saw the driver must have misjudged and hit the mailbox of the house across the street.

The Tudor that he’d lost out on.

Shit.

He got out of his truck and walked over. He wasn’t going to let the driver move past without making it known he’d seen what happened.

It appeared as if that was what the driver intended to do when the truck kept moving to the next house.

Christian went up and stood by the driver’s door. The driver had earbuds in and he could hear the music through them himself, which told him why the guy had no clue what he’d just done.

With the size of the truck there was probably no way he felt it with the jaws moving up and down to get the cans.

“Can I help you?” the driver asked.

“Yeah. You just all but knocked down the mailbox at the last house,” Christian said.

“Seriously?” the driver asked. He looked to be early twenties if that, and probably hadn’t had the job long either, unless he was just careless.

“Seriously,” he said.

The driver put the truck in park, got out and walked back to see the damage he’d done. Just then the front door opened to the house and a woman came marching out as if she’d just rolled out of bed.

She had a big baggie T-shirt on, cotton shorts that showed a lot of leg, flip-flops on her feet and her brown hair falling out of a ponytail.

“What the heck,” she all but shouted.

“Sorry,” the driver said. “I didn’t know I did it. This guy saw me.”

When the wind came up he was sure the woman wished she’d put more clothes on and he was positive she wasn’t wearing a bra. Definitely just got out of bed.

“Thanks,” she said, turning to him. Then she stopped. “Christian?”

“Liz?” he asked. This was who bought the house that he’d been coveting for years? One of his old high school girlfriends.

“Yeah,” she said. “What a way to run back into someone you know. Thanks for the catch. Now I’ve got to figure this out or I won’t get mail.”

“The company will replace it,” the driver said. “I’ll just call it in. I’ll take some pictures if you’re okay and they’ll have it repaired next week. I mean it’s Friday and all, so I doubt over the weekend.”

“I can put it back up so you can get your mail,” Christian said.

It wasn't completely on the ground but at a nice angle that a strong wind would take care of it. The mailbox was dented too, but it'd hold the mail for a few days.

"I can't ask you to do that," she said.

"It's not a problem," he said. "I'll just go get a shovel and sledgehammer at the office. It won't take more than like fifteen minutes to set it."

"I've got them here," she said.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Even better," he said.

The driver was back in his truck, on the phone and reporting what he'd done.

"Let me go get them," she said.

"And maybe put some more clothes on," he said.

She looked down and could see what he'd noticed, her face flushing. He remembered those nipples well. Hard to forget your first.

"Where did she go?" the driver asked, coming back.

"To get a few things for me to set it back in place for a few days."

The driver was taking some pictures now. A few minutes later, Liz Sherman came back outside with a sweatshirt on and the bottom half of scrubs. She still had flip-flops on though.

"Sorry again," the driver said. He handed over a piece of paper. "There is the name of my supervisor. I reported it and took pictures. Someone will be out to replace the post and mailbox like the one you've got early next week."

"Thanks," she said, taking the paper from him. When the driver was gone, she turned to Christian. "Not that I wanted this to happen, but one less thing I've got to replace with my own money."

He laughed. It was pretty much all he could do after he wanted to roll his tongue back in his mouth.

Liz looked good to him. She'd always been thin in school, but she played a lot of sports. She had a youthful body that went with the activity then.

Now, she had the body of a woman that was in great shape and took care of herself.

He'd seen the muscles on her thighs when she walked out, then on her calves when she returned to her house. Her arms looked toned too. Not much more he could tell with her baggy clothing other than she was still pretty big-chested.

All those things a teenage boy dreamed of for his first time.

It'd been Liz's first too. Funny how he hadn't thought of her in years and yet here she was, in front of him, and the owner of the house he'd always wanted.

"I'll take care of this," he said, reaching for the shovel. He was going to just dig around it, try to reset the post as best as he could, then pound it back in and push the dirt against it. It'd hold enough.

"I appreciate it," she said. "I can do it."

"Nah," he said. "It looks as if you just woke up."

She'd always been a nice girl. They'd hung around in the same group of friends. Dated for about six months when they were sixteen and, like any relationship back then, just moved on with other people.

"I did," she said. "I work third shift."

"A nurse or doctor?" he asked her, just taking a guess on the scrubs.

"Nurse," she said. "No way I could be a doctor. Not smart enough nor enough money for the education."

"You have to be smart to be a nurse," he said as he started to dig. He figured she'd go back into the house, but she was standing there talking to him.

"I guess," she said.

She never was one to take compliments. More like she always seemed embarrassed by them. Guess not much changed there.

“Are you supervising me?” he asked, grinning at her.

“Not really,” she said. “Just that I’ll bring the stuff back in when you’re done. No use going to bed again. I’m done until Sunday night, so I should get up and figure out what I’m going to tackle in the house.”

“You stole this house from me,” he said, laughing.

“What?” she asked.

“I’ve been waiting for this house to go up on the market. I had no idea it’d sold until a few weeks ago finding out by chance when Whitney said something. I’ve wanted this house for years.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I remember you pointing it out when we dated. When Ruby Turner called me about a pocket listing I was stunned to pull up here. It’s more house than I need and probably a money pit on top of it. Guess it’s time to make it my own though. Once I figure it all out.”

“I’ve never been inside of it,” he said.

He put the post in place now that he lifted it up, then managed to get it down with the sledgehammer without damaging the mailbox any more.

“Not a ton to see that is pretty,” she said. “But if you want to come in and check it out you can, though I’m sure you’ve got work to do.”

“I do,” he said. “I’d like to take a rain check though. Tonight?” He wasn’t sure why he was saying that, other than he knew if he drove away and didn’t have a date or time set, he’d never get in this house or see her again. There’d be no reason to.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll just be here working or at least planning. Give me a time.”

“How about six?” he said. It’d give him time to go home and shower and change. “I can bring a pizza or something if

you want.”

She looked at him for a second. He knew the person who bought the house was single. He'd been told that. Or a single woman. Didn't mean she wasn't single, but there were no rings on her hands. He'd even heard the name Elizabeth but nothing else stuck.

Probably stupid on his part to come back. He could be showing up and there'd be a boyfriend here.

“How about I order pizza as a thank you for fixing this for me,” she said.

He smiled at her. “Works for me.”

She reached for the sledgehammer and shovel and picked them both up with ease. “See you later, Christian.”

She turned and walked away; he did the same.

He drove to his office. He wanted to talk to his cousin Whitney about this, but she was out on maternity leave still. She'd had her daughter, Quinn, a month ago and wouldn't be back in the office for another month and then it'd be part time in the office, part time at home.

He moved to Zoe Randal's office. She did all the marketing for the business now, taking that off of Whitney's plate now that Whitney had a family of her own.

“Hey, Christian,” Zoe said. “What can I help you with?”

“Can you look up the owners of a house for me?”

“Sure,” Zoe said. “Give me the address. I'm sure Whitney has it updated, you know she tries to.”

“This was just purchased a few weeks ago, so maybe not. Not sure what I was thinking.” He gave Zoe the address anyway.

“Oh, I put this in. Elizabeth Carter. Ruby gave me the information right when Whitney went out. It was a pocket listing.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Whitney had told me after I came back from vacation.”

He'd been so ticked off. He never went on vacation. Ever.

This year though, he'd decided to take a week with a buddy and went to Vegas. They saw a fight, they gambled more than anything, they ate and did whatever they wanted while they were there.

"You wanted that house," Zoe said. "I heard."

He wasn't surprised, as he'd cursed and sworn enough over it. If he hadn't been out of town, he would have heard sooner, he was sure. Ruby found most of his houses for him, but that would teach him to make sure she knew in the future what he wanted.

Now it was gone, out of his grasp like a fist full of water.

It was the house he wanted and knew in his heart he'd never flip.

All his adult life he moved around from house to house, waiting, hoping, for the one he could call home.

Then bam, all his dreams vanished because he decided to help a friend out in his time of need.

He'd just move on like he always did, but man, it was going to sting for a long time.

"I just ran into the person who bought it," he said. He told her what happened. "I knew her. We went to school together. I didn't recognize the name when I heard it."

But he saw why now. She must have been married since her last name was different.

"I'm sure you'll get another one," Zoe said. "You always do. Are you almost done with the one you're in now?"

"Yeah," he said. "Ruby is going to come and price it in a few weeks. Just need a few finishing touches in the basement, then clean it out and find another place to put my stuff. Got to live somewhere."

Zoe shook her head. "I'm not sure how you do it. Dylan said he's not flipping any more houses. He'll help Nathan, but

our house was the first and last project he was doing on his own.”

Dylan Randal was a state trooper. His older brother was an investigator with the state police. Nathan was a flipper too, on the side. The house in Paradise Place though, Nathan had kept that for himself.

No one in his family understood how Christian could move all the time, but he didn't care. It's not like he had anything holding him down. He just took it as it came.

Living in the houses that he flipped made it easier to get the work done. If he had to drive somewhere all the time, he might put it off at the end of the day.

If he'd been thinking about slowing down or changing that soon, he had to tell himself it might be a while before the forever home hit him again.

“I haven't heard of anything else in the development,” Zoe said. “I'll let you know if I do.”

“Thanks,” he said and went to his office. They knew he only bought older homes that needed work. Nothing newer. That tended to limit his options, but it's not like he cared if he was in Paradise Place or not. At least he never did before...but that damn house that got away was going to hurt for a long time.

BUILT TO LAST

Liz opened the door at six when Christian knocked on it.

“Hi,” he said. He walked in and looked around. “This place is exactly as I envisioned it.”

“In need of repair?” she asked, laughing.

At least she looked more put together this time rather than the lunatic that had all but fallen out of bed when she’d heard the loud bang over her noise maker.

“That’s a given,” he said. “I know it’s had the original owners in it since it was built. They had to be in their seventies or eighties by now. I’d been banking on them not having done a lot of work to it.”

“That was them,” she said. “I guess about twenty-five years ago they did some things, so it’s not horrible. Until you see the kitchen. And the baths. Yeah, it’s horrible.”

She’d been living here for less than a week now and she was wondering what the hell she’d been thinking of.

Just because Liz could afford the mortgage—barely—and she had a ton of money in the bank to do upgrades, didn’t mean she should have done this.

But it was as she said. She remembered driving down this street those six months she’d been dating Christian. He always pointed this house out.

When Ruby pulled in front of it, her jaw dropped.

It almost seemed like fate to be brought here.

It was time to restart the clock in her life.

Begin again.

Start over.

Any number of words to her taking ownership of her life and trying to be the person she'd lost in her years of marriage.

“Why did you buy it then?” he asked. “Just moved in, right?”

“This week,” she said.

He pointed to the living room. “You’ve been busy though.”

She looked at the massive living room and you could see into the dining room past it. Not open concept, but large entryways. They were covered in bright white primer. She'd put the third coat on this afternoon for the whole first floor. She'd be ready to finally paint the rooms this weekend.

“Most houses this age have a lot of wallpaper, did this?”

“No,” she said. “Thankfully. But I won't tell you the number of cans of primer I've gone through covering up the burgundy, hunter green and browns.”

He smiled, his hand reaching out for the oak banister. The large sweeping staircase all but dominated the foyer and she loved it. She loved the wood tones in the house too.

White trim and molding were modern. It was fine for some people. She liked the character this place had and the original wood.

It was like the house was built to last. She needed something to last in her life.

Maybe that was part of why she bought it too.

“Those colors alone are a nightmare,” he said.

“The whole downstairs was like that. Let me walk you through a house that is way too big for me. My father thinks it's a money trap. That I was impulsive to buy it, but I don't think so.”

She'd told herself she wasn't going to be that way in life again. She'd always been a planner. Yet she came home and bought this house when she should have thought it through more.

"A hundred and fifty grand into this place and it will be worth three hundred more easily," he said.

"That would be great," she said. "But I'm not moving any time soon or looking to be a flipper. My father is going to do this half bath for me this weekend. He said it would be a housewarming gift."

Christian popped his head into the small space she was talking about. "Should be easy enough," he said. "The walls are primed. The floors are in good shape if you keep them. Just change out the vanity, mirror and toilet and it's a new room."

"That's what is happening. He's going to sand the grout down on the tiles and put a gray in to match the tiles rather than white. At least I think it was white before years of grime were added to it."

"It will look good," he said. "Some things are better left simple to keep the integrity."

"I think so too. As you can tell, I don't have a lot of furniture. What I've got isn't the best. I've been living with my father for the past year when I moved back here."

He turned to look at her. He'd always been so handsome and nice.

Way out of her league with his brown hair, dark eyes, great personality and wealth.

Yeah, the Butlers were in their own league and she grew up with a single father and an unstable mother.

They tried to keep the part about her mother out of the grapevine as a kid, but some knew and they made sure they bullied her about it too.

Never Christian though.

He'd always seen her as a classmate he was attracted to.

They'd lost their virginity to each other, dated for six months, then drifted apart. She'd like to think it was mutual back then. Just two kids that hung out in the same group and then went on to date other people.

But that was a lie. They didn't drift. She'd made the decision to break up and he went along with it.

Only she didn't date too many more after Christian. No one that she slept with, at least in high school.

No one that tugged at her like he had and she didn't want a reputation.

She'd been asked if she'd slept with Christian by her friends and she never admitted it. She didn't think he told anyone either. He didn't seem the type to brag because no one had ever made a comment to her about having sex back in high school.

"I'll admit that when I found out this house sold, I'd asked who bought it. I must have heard the name but didn't think anything of it. I would have recognized Elizabeth Sherman."

"I'm divorced," she said. "It was finalized about eight months ago, but I moved back a year ago. I've been living with my father and putting money away. No one wants to live at home at our age. It was time to start looking. I got this house for a steal and I know it."

"I looked it up," he said. "I was just curious what it sold for."

She knew home sales were all public knowledge.

"And it stung even more, didn't it?" she asked, grinning.

"Yeah," he said. "I figured it would have gone for more, even with the work it needs."

"They wanted more. They probably could have gotten it. I wrote them a letter at Ruby's urging. Just telling them about myself. The previous owner is a retired nurse from Albany Med where I work. She was touched and they accepted my offer with no contingencies. It was a fast close once the banks got to work."

“Which most sellers love. Congrats,” he said.

He sounded as if he meant it even though she could see deep down he wished he owned the house.

“Thanks. You won’t be saying that once you see the kitchen.”

They moved through the downstairs rooms, then to the kitchen in the back. “Complete with yellow wall oven,” he said. “Haven’t seen one of those in a long time.”

“It works,” she said. “Thankfully. I don’t want to replace any appliances until I’m ready to gut this. I’ll have to hire someone to do the work. My father can help me with a lot of things, but he’s getting into his busy season, so it’d be on the weekends. I can’t go that long without a kitchen for one thing. And second of all, it’s just too much work for him.”

“You could demo it at least,” he said.

“I might,” she said. “Or with my father. Anything to save some money. I just have to figure out what I want. What would you do?”

Might as well get his opinion.

“I wouldn’t open it up,” he said. “This kitchen is huge and open to the eating area on one side and you can see into the family room back there. No reason to knock any more walls down.”

“Agreed,” she said. “I like the large entryways rather than open concept. Did you notice the pocket doors that would shut the two rooms off? The same with the office?”

“I did,” he said. “A great feature. I was hoping you’d keep them. Do they work?”

“They work with a lot of tugging and pulling.”

“That’s an easy fix,” he said.

“When the time comes,” she said. “Way down on my list. I don’t need an office and won’t be using that room. Both will sit empty for a while, but at least I can paint them. The rooms. Not the wood or the doors. I’m keeping that natural.”

He nodded his head and walked around the kitchen. “I’d put an island in here. It’s so open and big, it seems off balance empty like this. I’d put the stovetop in the island too, not right next to the oven.”

“I thought that too,” she said. “I was hoping it could be done.”

“Anything can with the right amount of money. It’s electric and not gas so easier to do,” he said.

She listened to everything else he’d said. Most of it was keeping the setup the same. “There’s a big pantry here,” she said. “It’s got the laundry room off of it. I don’t like that. I’d like to move that upstairs but down the line too.”

“Show me the rest of the house if you don’t mind,” he said.

“Can we order pizza first?” she asked. “I’m starving.”

“Sure,” he said.

She pulled her phone out, ordered their dinner to be delivered and then brought him upstairs.

“Again,” she said. “More room than I need. Four bedrooms and two full baths up here. The rooms are huge.”

“I thought it was five bedrooms, three and a half baths,” he said.

“The basement. I’m saving that scary part for the end.”

The basement hadn’t been touched in fifty years, she was sure. No way she’d use that bathroom or put a bed down there either. Not that she needed that space.

“Your bedroom is done,” he said.

“Believe it or not, this room was bright white. I need it dark to sleep. No primer needed here and the first room I took care of.”

Her curtains were up too, blocking out as much light as she could.

“It’s a massive amount of space. How big is the closet?”

“Not as big as it should be with the size of the room.”

“You can fix that. Take some space from the room and enlarge the closet,” he said. “That’s what I’d do.”

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll add that to my list of money drains.”

He laughed at her and moved into the bathroom. “Not too bad in here.”

“No,” she said. “I think it might have been the last thing they updated about twenty years ago.”

The walk-in shower was tile. It was white and clean, the grout not so much, but her father said he’d clean it out with a sander when he did the bathroom downstairs this weekend. She’d fresh the grout and it’d be good as new.

The big corner tub with jets was an eyesore and she’d love nothing more than to get rid of it and put a freestanding tub in its place. Not that she had much time for baths, but it was a nice dream.

The double vanity could be replaced, but again, nothing horrible considering the rest of the house.

“It’s more than livable,” he said.

“It’s the only bathroom that is,” she said, laughing. “Trust me. We’ve got lime green in the hall bath. I kid you not. It reminds me of that Nickelodeon slime.”

They moved down the hall and he burst out laughing when he saw what she was talking about. “Functional and clean though.”

“It’s both. Just ugly as sin.” They walked through the other three guest rooms and then down to the basement. “And the final segment of the tour.”

“Damn,” he said.

“The wood paneling is the best part. Check out the room and bathroom in the back.”

He was laughing as he moved through the big family room complete with shag carpeting and a large bar in the corner that

looked to have come out of the seventies...before the house was even built.

“Well, you do have your work cut out for you,” he said. “What does the backyard look like?”

“I’m not even thinking of the outside of the house,” she said. “But let me show you.”

POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITIES

Christian let his mind drift like dandelion fluff blowing through the meadow in a windstorm with the potential and possibilities on this house.

He was even more annoyed he'd lost the house but couldn't be that Liz got it.

She saw the same vision in things as him.

She was going to keep the original wood throughout. The floors had been taken good care of and she had a few throw rugs in the family room and her bedroom.

She wasn't going to rip out walls and paint over the oak.

What he couldn't figure out was how she could afford to do much at all.

He'd seen the used furnishings. Though nurses made good money, they didn't make enough money to buy and rehab houses like this. Not without some seed money.

But what did he know? She was divorced and he had no clue about her life prior.

"Now this is what I'm talking about," he said when they went out the back door and onto the deck.

The yard wasn't big, but it was landscaped well. Not overly fussy and wouldn't take a lot to maintain, but he could already see where he'd have to do it.

Flowers to brighten it up.

A brick paver path to a nice fire pit off to the side.

“Not me,” she said. “It’s pretty and all, but I need low maintenance. My father is going to give me his old mower. He said it was time for a new one. As long as it works, I don’t care. It’s not much lawn to cut and take care of.”

“Nah,” he said, trying not to sound disappointed that she didn’t see what he could do out here. The front had a lot of shrubs too, but again, easy maintenance.

“I can hear it in your voice,” she said, smirking at him.

“What?” he asked, turning to look at her.

He saw the young girl that had a twinkle in her eye years ago in their English class. He’d caught her staring at him a lot.

He noticed because he’d been looking at her too.

“That you have ideas for back here and are bummed I don’t. I get it. It’s the one that got away.”

He looked her over from head to toe and started to wonder if it wasn’t only the house that got away from him.

“There is always another one,” he said.

“I’ve heard that before too,” she said and moved past him into the house. He wouldn’t ask her what she meant by that. It was probably too personal.

“The place is going to look great when you’re done,” he said.

“Ten years or more from now,” she said, grinning.

“It takes time to find what you want and need in life,” he said.

“So I’ve been told,” she said. “Can I get you something to drink? I don’t have any beer. I never really developed a taste for it. No wine either, as I don’t care for more than a glass here or there. But I’ve got water, some diet ginger ale and unsweetened iced tea.”

“The tea is good,” he said.

She opened her fridge, mismatched like the rest of the appliances in the kitchen, pulled out two bottles and handed one to him.

“I’d ask what you’ve been doing with your life, but it seems like you work for your family?”

“What gave it away?” he asked. “The truck with Butler Construction on it earlier?”

He’d left that at the office and then drove over in his own truck this time. He didn’t want a company truck, but during the day when he was out and about, his father and uncle drilled into his head to make sure he used one. It was part of the advertising.

He wasn’t like Evan that drove everywhere nonstop.

His brother’s business truck was what he drove all the time. It always had been. Evan’s wife, Parker, had an SUV and then a sporty little Mercedes. Evan would drive that at times if he had to.

Christian was just content to do his own thing like he always had.

“That,” she said. “Plus I think it was a given you were going to. What do you do? Did you end up going for construction too?”

“No,” he said. “Engineering.”

“You said you wanted to,” she said.

He had, but not many believed him. Told him he was nuts and should just follow in his family’s footsteps.

He didn’t like to be told what to do much in life.

Sure, he knew he’d work for the family business and he was good with his hands like his father, brother, uncle, cousins and grandfather.

But it wasn’t what he wanted to do daily. Or felt like he was forced to do daily.

His father had been supportive of his decision to go for engineering.

“I did,” he said. “But I do construction on the side. It’s in the blood.”

“You know I was married,” she said. “The name change.”

“Yeah,” he said. He was surprised she brought it up. “Not me. Single now.”

“Definitely single now,” she said. “Been that way for over a year. It’s not easy to date living at home with my father. And well...I just needed the me time.”

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I was with a buddy in Vegas when you were writing your letter to put an offer on this house. My buddy Tate’s fiancée had just left him for someone else. Complete blindside and he wasn’t taking it well. He said he needed to get out of town and it was one of those drunken throw-a-dart-at-a-map nights. Next thing I know, I’m booking a plane ticket.”

“Geez,” she said. “That’s loyalty for you. But if I remember correctly, that is your style too. Just do what sounds good for the time being.”

He’d always been that way and everyone knew it.

“Tate’s a good guy. I met him in college. He grew up in Clifton Park.” Which was less than thirty minutes from Colonie. “He works for a big engineering firm out of Albany.”

“I don’t keep in contact with anyone from high school or college,” she said. “Of course, I only went to community college anyway.”

“There isn’t anything wrong with that,” he said.

“No,” she said. “But I did want to move out of the area. I got my nursing license here and started to work. I’d gone on vacation with a coworker to Georgia. It was so pretty and she got talking about moving there. The two of us looked into getting our licenses and the next thing I know, I’m moving.”

Which was funny, considering he remembered her picking on him for never making plans, yet it sounded as if she’d pulled a move like he would have.

“How long ago was that?” he asked.

“About seven years ago. Betsy lasted a year and moved back home. I should have realized she might not make it, but I liked the area and stayed.”

“But you came back?” he asked.

“Sometimes it’s the only choice you’ve got,” she said.

The doorbell went off and she grabbed her purse off the counter. “Let me get it,” he said.

“No,” she said. “I told you it’s my treat. But if you want to get the plates out of the cabinet, you can.”

She pointed to the wall they were in and he opened one, but found it empty, then another the same. He finally found plates and got them down, then pulled over the napkins on the counter and went to sit at her small two-person table in the big breakfast area.

It seemed out of place, but then so did so many of the things in the house.

The few things there were.

Something wasn’t adding up in his mind. Or maybe he was looking more into it because he was curious.

Liz came back with a box and a bag on top. “I got wings too. You can’t have pizza without wings.”

“No,” he said, “you can’t.”

They sat down and started to eat. He normally didn’t care too much about the silence, but now that they’d walked through the house and talked about that, there wasn’t much more unless they got personal.

“How are Evan and Kaelyn doing?” she asked.

Guess they were going to get personal. Maybe. A little. He was fine with that.

“Great,” he said. “Both married and have kids. Got myself two nieces and a nephew.”

“Good uncles have pictures on their phones,” she said, lifting her eyebrow at him.

He wiped his hands after picking up a few wings and pulled his phone out. "This is Scarlet. She'll be three next month. River will be one in August. Those are Kaelyn and Harris's kids."

"Harris Walker," she said. "He lives here. I've heard. I mean my father told me. He's a big Mets fan. Actually he put in Harris's fence several years ago. He was so excited to find out who it was and that your family recommended him."

He remembered that. Evan had come back and told him Harris was looking for a fence and they wanted to be discreet. Butler Construction had contracted for it to go in. He'd suggested Trevor Sherman because he knew the guy was fast, efficient, and if he found out whose house it was, he'd never say a word. At least back then.

"We do recommend your dad often when people ask after the build," he said. They contracted with someone to have it part of the build. Trevor just wasn't big enough and the timing had to be right. Things he was glad he didn't have to deal with.

"He appreciates it. He likes to stay busy."

"This is Evan's daughter, Grace. She'll be a year old next week."

"They are all adorable. And then there is you," she said.

"Yep. Then there is me. The middle kid that just does his own thing."

That had always been him.

Evan being the oldest and the loudest got the most attention.

Kaelyn, the baby and the only girl, she got a different form of attention.

Christian went about life not caring all that much or taking things as seriously.

He was a go-with-the-flow type.

Yet he couldn't get the woman in front of him out of his mind since he crossed paths with her this afternoon.

HAD HER BACK

“Are you ready to get to work?” Liz’s father asked when he came in the front door with her sister, Abby, behind him.

“I am. I didn’t know you were helping too,” she said to Abby.

“I’ve got nothing else going on. Besides, I want to see about claiming my room.”

She rolled her eyes at her sister.

She wasn’t opposed to Abby moving in and helping with some of the bills. It’s not like she’d split the costs or anything with her, but having that added income would help her get more work done faster on the place.

Having a guy in her life wasn’t something she was worried about until Christian came over for dinner last night.

Now she was wondering if Abby would be in the way.

Which was stupid over just one night having pizza.

But they did make plans for dinner again tonight. She wasn’t sure how it even happened.

One minute they were talking about his siblings and he was asking about Abby, and the next he said it was only fair if he showed her his house that he was working on.

She was off and hadn’t done much in her life other than work and gobble up all the overtime she could, so she found herself saying yes before she could think of a reason to say no.

“There are three to choose from,” she said. Might as well go along with it. “But the bathroom is horrible.”

Abby hadn't been here yet, as she was working days and this was Liz's first weekend in the house. Her sister wasn't one for manual labor so the last thing she expected was for her to show up here.

Abby left her side and ran upstairs, her father putting his tool bag down. “I've got the vanity and toilet in the truck. I picked them up this morning. I hope it was okay to pick them out?”

“It's fine,” she said. Beggars weren't going to be choosers and she wouldn't pick something out that someone else was paying for.

Her father had simple taste like her and she could care less about a toilet. The vanity was tiny enough in that room, so it'd be fine.

“Do you need help?” she asked.

“Just another set of hands to guide it will be good,” her father said.

She went outside with him; they brought in the toilet and then the vanity. From the picture on the box, she was already happy. It was simple oak that would come close to matching the trim in the house. The countertop was solid white, the same as a sink. Basic and would allow her to paint the room any color she wanted with the gray flooring.

“Do you want to paint the room first?” her father asked. “I don't think it will take that long once I pull out the old toilet and vanity.”

“I can do that,” she said. “It's going to be so nice to have a room done in the house other than my bedroom. I just bought light gray paint. Then as time goes on I can decorate around it.”

“Good,” her father said. “Abby bought the mirror and light fixture.”

“She didn't need to do that,” she said.

“Happy housewarming gift,” Abby said. “I thought you would appreciate it more than something in the kitchen to cook with.”

“I do,” she said. Liz was touched by how her father and sister had her back. Her sister always did. Her father too, but he didn’t know everything Abby did.

Hours later, her little half bath was almost done. Her father was installing the mirror and lights now that the paint had dried. She’d done it right away, then moved to the large formal living room and dining room where she and Abby were putting their second coat on.

“Does it feel odd being alone in this big house?” Abby asked.

“Not really,” she said.

“All the noises it must make though,” Abby argued.

“There is that. But I’m sleeping during the day and gone at night. Maybe that is why it doesn’t bother me as much.”

“Could be,” Abby said. “But you were home last night alone.”

“And out like a light. I’d only slept about four hours yesterday morning and then went to bed at nine last night.”

“I’m not sure how you can do that,” Abby said.

“It’s not for everyone.” She heard the drill going at the other end of the house where her father was and decided to tell Abby about yesterday.

“I had someone here for dinner last night,” she said quietly.

“Who?” Abby asked, moving closer. They were in different rooms but moved to the entryway to talk.

She told her sister what happened with her mailbox and how Christian came over for dinner last night. “Oh my God. It’s like old times sake. Your first and all.”

“Shhh,” she said.

Abby was seven years younger than her and she wasn't sure why she ever admitted who her first was. But Abby was sixteen and Liz was already working full time and thinking of moving when she told her. Her sister was at that age where she needed a mother and their mother wasn't around.

If there was one thing that would have kept her home, it was Abby, but her sister had urged her to go and find some adventure.

No one thought it'd be the adventure she'd had.

"What was it like?"

"It was pizza and wings and we talked. I kind of stole the house from him."

"How?" Abby asked. She explained it all to her sister.

"Okay. That makes more sense. You were letting him see what he didn't have anymore. It could have a double meaning there." Abby winked at her.

Normally she'd tell her sister to cut it out, but this time she didn't.

Not that she was thinking that way, but maybe she could.

"After we walked through the house, there didn't seem to be much to talk about. It was awkward so I asked about his siblings. Then he asked about you."

"What did you tell him?" Abby asked.

"That you're a pain in the ass."

"Very funny," Abby said.

"I just said where you worked, nothing more."

"He knows you're divorced," Abby asked.

"Yes. He told me that, when he'd found out the house was sold, he'd heard the name and would have remembered if it was mine. He went back to see if it was anyone he knew."

"And saw it was a different last name. When will you go back to Sherman?" Abby asked.

“Soon. I didn’t want to do it until I bought a house. I knew it was going to take some time and I didn’t want it to mess with my credit or anything. I’ve got to change all my cards over and everything. Now that I own the house, I can start that process.”

She’d been scared she couldn’t get the loan even though she’d been pre-approved due to the money she had in the bank.

Pre-approval didn’t mean it’d go through though.

“What’s the next step?” Abby asked. “Did you exchange numbers or are you going to see each other again?”

The drill stopped and she looked around to make sure her father wasn’t close by.

“I’m going to his place for dinner tonight. He said since I showed him my place that I’m rehabbing, he wanted me to see one of his.”

“Sounds like a line to me,” Abby said.

She frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Hey,” Abby said, grabbing her hand. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for and I didn’t mean he was playing you. Just that maybe it was a good excuse to see you again.”

“Could be,” she said. It was hard to get out of her own way at times.

“He’s nothing like Tanner. Don’t think that,” Abby said.

“I know.”

“What did you tell him about Tanner?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I don’t want anyone to know.”

Abby sighed. “Dad is going to be so upset if he ever finds out the truth.”

“There is no reason for him to. He thought I was heartbroken over the marriage ending. Let him believe it.”

She was more heartbroken over being a victim and allowing it to happen in her life.

Before her ex-mother-in-law, Donna, had shown up, Liz was going to go to work as usual and then make a plan for leaving Tanner. She didn't think she could just pick up and go and get away.

It was probably better that Donna did get involved and it made it less painful on that end.

No matter when she left, it was going to be painful though. She knew that.

"I hate keeping it from Dad," Abby argued.

"It does nothing if he knows now, right? Nothing changes."

"No," Abby said.

She knew that because her father felt bad that he wasn't there for her when her marriage was going bad. If her father knew she was in an abusive relationship, who knows what her father would have done?

She didn't need that on her shoulders.

"What are you girls talking about in here?" her father asked. "Just like old times. I'm doing all the work and you're gossiping."

She laughed, Abby nudging her shoulder. "Yep, Dad," Abby said, "Liz is telling me all the chores she is going to make me do if I move in."

Her father snorted. "Nothing and no one could make you do your chores."

Her father left the room. "Guess he told you," Liz said.

"Whatever," Abby said. "Let me know how it goes tomorrow. All the details."

"Maybe," she said. It was pretty sad this was the first date she'd been on in almost six years.

Her last date was Tanner. Six months dating, then a year engagement. Married over four years, separated and divorced a year.

Liz was so out of the loop that she didn't even know if tonight was a date or not.

DARING HIM

Christian opened the door Saturday at five. “Hey,” he said to Liz. “You found it okay.”

“Not that hard,” she said. “Even though it’s not in Colonie.”

His latest flip was in Latham, but he was off Route 9, close to Shaker High School, and easy to find, as she said.

“Come in,” he said. “This place isn’t nearly as big as yours.”

“But it’s beautiful,” she said.

This house was only about fifteen hundred square feet. He’d replaced all the flooring, put a new kitchen in, redid the full bath in the hallway upstairs where the three bedrooms were. Put a half bath downstairs after taking some room from the dining room that he’d opened up into the kitchen. He finished the basement and added a three-piece bath down there too.

“Thanks,” he said. “It’s not my style.”

“Then why do it?” she asked.

“Money,” he said. “This is a business for me. I do what is selling, not what I want to live in.”

“Why not build your own house?” she asked. “Then you wouldn’t have to move all the time.”

“It’s been asked a lot,” he said, smiling. “Let me show you around while I tell you.”

When people asked him, he never really had an explanation. That he needed to feel something for the place he was going to make his home permanently. Building something new, it wasn't like he could walk in and feel it until he was done. Then he'd feel stuck.

The new just never appealed to him for some reason and maybe it was for that very reason. He wanted feelings for a place and you didn't get that during construction.

They moved to the kitchen and open dining room now. The living room could be seen from the kitchen, but it wasn't a completely open concept.

"You had to have taken walls down here. This house is too old to have had this layout. I looked at one similar."

He laughed. "I did. And I find it funny you were looking at smaller houses like this and ended up with one that is close to four thousand square feet."

"You're not the only one that is surprised over it. But my father finished my half bath today and Abby and I painted all the rooms downstairs. Not bad for less than a week living there."

"Do you have pictures?" he asked.

"I do," she said, pulling her phone out. "I can show them to you. But you can come and look at it yourself too." She pulled her phone back when he went to reach for it. "As long as you don't judge it next to all the work you did here."

"Never," he said, his hand reaching for her phone. Their fingers touched, there was a burn and he was sure she felt it with him. He also thought she'd done it on purpose. A test of sorts. He was fine with it if that was the case.

She pulled the photos up and scrolled through them. "It's not a lot of work, but at least it feels more put together. Nothing like here."

"Don't compare," he said, tugging on her brown hair she'd left down.

She'd always had long hair that he could remember. She didn't wear a lot of makeup, but she was still stunning to him.

Natural. He had that preference in a woman.

"Sorry," she said, smirking. "It's hard not to when I'm standing in this brand new house."

"Hardly brand new," he said. "You can see most of it down here. There are three bedrooms and a full bath upstairs."

They climbed the stairs and she looked in. She'd see that the bathroom was simple with a double vanity and shower tub combo but nothing else. Basic colors of gray and white floor, white vanity and countertop, the same with the sink.

"I'd need shades in here," she said.

He grinned. "I know. But in doing flips I've learned it's best to stay neutral. Whoever buys this can easily paint the vanity cabinets a different color, or the walls, curtains and artwork go a long way. I order things through Butler Construction and what is the best price."

"I'm glad to know I'm not the only one shopping bargains. I know it's my forever home, but I don't need fancy things either. Strong, simple, and functional is all I'm asking for."

"Like you," he asked.

"You think I'm simple?" she asked him. She'd just popped her head into the bedrooms—his was last—then came back out. Not much to see, as he didn't have a lot of possessions. It was easier to move when that was the case.

"Hardly," he said. "I've always thought you wanted people to think you were, but you're pretty complex."

"I think the same is said about you too," she said.

She moved past him and went down the stairs and then to the basement. He'd let that drop for now. No one ever thought things about him like Liz did. Almost as if she got him when others didn't.

"This was the biggest change," he said. "It wasn't finished and I did that. Not a lot of work but figured it'd be a good kid

space. I put a bathroom and shower down here. Laundry too. There was just no place for it upstairs.”

“This will be a great first home,” she said.

“That was my thought. There is only so much I can do with the space I’m given, but I made sure there was more than one full bath. That is all it had.”

“Really?” she asked. “Did you do all the work yourself?”

“Yes. I carved out space for that tiny half bath off the kitchen.”

“It seems as if it should have always been there,” she said. “I need to take more notes of the things you are doing for my place.”

“What I do for the flips is nothing that your place should have. Unless you like this. I got the feeling you didn’t. Or it’s not the look you’re going for.”

“It’s not,” she said. “In terms of the colors and finishes, but you’ve got an eye for design. Must come from the engineering background.”

No one had ever said that to him before. That he had an eye for design.

“I do design most of the houses for the new builds,” he said.

She laughed. “Guess you put me in my place.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I just need to finish up some things downstairs and then I’ll get it listed.”

“What do you have to finish up?” she asked.

“Trim work. Small things you won’t notice walking through.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Now you just need to find another house, right? Or will you be on the street? Maybe moving back home with your parents like I had to with my father?”

He closed one eye at her. He wasn't sure if she was joking or not.

Yeah, she had to be.

"I won't fit in the bed at my parents' house in my old room. I'll find another place easily enough. Or so I hope. If not, I can get into one of our apartments that the family owns."

They didn't just have Paradise Place but another development in Guilderland they were working on, not to mention a lot of rental buildings and townhouses.

Mostly they were filled, but he never felt like he'd be out of a place. He'd just stay where he was until he found something else.

"It's nice to have those options," she said quietly.

She moved toward the stairs and back up them. He wondered if he put his foot in his mouth.

He tried not to talk much about his family. He never wanted to come off as bragging. He didn't think anyone did, but more so he didn't want to turn Liz off.

"Sorry," he said.

"For what?" she asked.

"I know I've got a good life."

"So do I," she said. "There are people out there with more than you that think their life sucks."

"You're right," he said.

He forgot that about her. That she tried to always think of the positive at times in life.

He knew girls had been rough on her in school.

That people talked about her mother not being around, but he'd never heard much about the reason. It wasn't his place to ask.

When they were dating, they didn't talk about too many personal things like that. He only knew that her mother left her father and Trevor was raising two girls on his own.

What he knew of Trevor Sherman was the man loved his daughters and worked his ass off to make sure they got what he could give them in life.

So yeah, Liz was right—she had a good life too, regardless of the fact her marriage ended.

Lots of people's marriages ended for a number of reasons and they didn't all have to be bad.

Though something told him there was more to this than she was going to say.

And the second date—because they were dates in his book—wasn't the time to talk about it.

“Don't worry about it,” she said. “I don't have what you've got and never will. I've got a good job I love even though it kicks my butt more often than not. My father and sister are there for me and I know that. I've got a roof over my head that is solid even if the inside is ugly.”

He laughed and pulled her close to him. She didn't seem to hesitate and went into his arms. “I forgot about this side of you. Everyone should have this kind of outlook on life.”

“I forgot about it myself until I moved home,” she said quietly.

There was so much he wanted to ask but didn't. He couldn't.

Not when her brown eyes were staring into his almost daring him to kiss her.

He was going to do it because there wasn't one thing on the face of this earth that he wanted more than to get his mouth on hers again.

He leaned his head down; she lifted up to meet him.

Her hands went into his hair and held his head there, his lips nudging hers open, his tongue swooping in.

The two of them were making out in his living room just like they had eighteen years ago. Back then their first kiss was

behind the benches at a football game on a Friday night though.

He lifted his head after a minute. There was a smile on her lips, a softness to her eyes. Not an innocence that was there years ago. He wasn't sure he'd see that again. But the softness, yes, that was more than enough.

A CHALLENGE

“**D**id you do anything for Easter today?” Amanda asked Liz at work that night. They hadn’t punched in yet for their shift. They both always got there twenty minutes early just in case, but would stand back until it was time, as they were told enough unless they were called in.

“I had dinner with my father and sister,” she said. “It’s not much of a holiday for us. It’s not like we’ve got kids or anything. How about you?”

Liz never cared about most holidays as an adult since it gave her double time to work. Just like today.

It’s not like she was lying. She’d cooked dinner at her father’s house for the three of them. She’d wanted to do it at her house, but she didn’t have seating for three, nor all the pots and pans she’d need to bake the ham that her father wanted.

It was their family tradition to do that and she’d stick with it.

“The kids were excited to get up and see what the Easter Bunny left them. They are getting to the point where I’m not sure if they believe still. Or at least my oldest.”

“How old is Landon?” she asked of Amanda’s oldest.

“He’s ten. I think he’s playing with us, but Bella is six and she believes so even if Landon doesn’t, I’m happy he’s keeping it to himself.”

“I was like that with Abby. I’m seven years older than her. It was nice to keep the secret. Or at least feel as if I knew something she didn’t.”

“I’m sure your parents were thrilled you did that,” Amanda said.

“My father was,” she said. “My parents were divorced by then and we lived with my father.”

“Oh,” Amanda said. She didn’t often say that, but it wasn’t a secret either.

Most times kids ended up with the mother and not the father. Or at least a split custody agreement.

But in her family that didn’t happen.

Her mother had left and they didn’t hear from her for months until they realized she was in a mental institution. Her father had been called and went to see her mother.

Lily Sherman had gone off her meds once again. Her father was fed up with living the life they were.

Liz remembered the meltdowns more than Abby did. It was fine. At eleven, and Abby four, it’s something you can’t forget no matter how much her father hoped that wasn’t the case.

No one wanted to feel as if they were abandoned and she was glad her father worked extra hard to make sure his two daughters didn’t.

“Not a big deal,” she said.

“Do you talk to your mother?” Amanda asked. She didn’t talk too much about her personal life. She never did. But people asked and were curious.

“When she comes around,” she said. “It’s not often.”

Her mother was still in the area, she was sure. In some group home or something. She just couldn’t live on her own. Or she could have if she took her meds, but she didn’t want to.

When you don’t want help when people are trying to give it to you, then you learn most will walk away.

It's what her father had to do to protect himself and her and her sister. Liz understood that now.

"At least you spent the holiday with your sister and father. Did you cook at your new place?"

"No," she said, laughing. She'd rather talk about the massive house she had and get ready for the jokes about the amount of work it needed. She was fine with it. It was a challenge she was more than willing to take on.

"Let me see what you did so far," Amanda said. "I know you had to have done something. You showed me the before pictures."

"Lots of paint," she said. "And my father redid the half bath for me downstairs as a housewarming gift."

Liz proudly showed off the work her father did for her. No, it wasn't anything like the work Christian did for his flip, but she didn't care.

She wasn't a Butler and never would be one.

She saw how Christian felt bad when he made a comment about having plenty of places to live.

She didn't want him to feel that way. He wasn't saying anything that wasn't the truth.

It was one thing she'd liked about him back in school.

He was honest. He was humble too.

He never wanted to hurt anyone.

"That's a great gift," Amanda said. "I wish Sean was handy like that."

They always got a laugh out of Amanda's husband. He worked in the labs at the hospital. He had two left feet and was lucky he knew the difference between a screwdriver and a hammer.

"Sean has other great characteristics," she said. "Remember that."

“You’re right,” Amanda said. “He’s a great father. The kids love playing with him. He’s a really good cook too. I’m lucky there.”

“You are,” she said.

In her mind, any time a husband and wife shared duties in their life, that was a win.

Her parents didn’t. It was all on her father because her mother could barely keep things together.

Tanner, he did nothing.

He claimed he paid all the bills and that was his part.

He wasn’t wrong, but she gave him most of her check too.

Stupid on her part. One thing she learned was to never rely on anyone again.

Keep things separate because you needed an out if the time came.

She should have never needed that money from Donna and was still thankful she’d gotten it.

She hadn’t heard from Donna in months. She thought it was nice that Donna would reach out a few times early on to see if she was okay. If she needed anything.

She’d always said she was fine and doing well. She’d never take anything from Donna or Tanner or anyone named Carter again.

“Looks like it’s time for a fun-filled night,” Amanda said. “You ready?”

“It always makes the shifts go by faster,” she said.

They both punched in and made their way to the front desk to get filled in on what was going on.

She got her room assignments and was thrilled that most times she wasn’t dealing with the emergencies coming in the door but rather the ones that were already triaged and put in rooms to be monitored.

At three in the morning, she was punching out for her break. She'd grabbed a piece of the leftover pizza from Friday night when Christian was over to warm up. It was easy and fast.

She hadn't talked to him at all today and didn't expect to. He knew she was going to work and that meant she'd try to get four or five hours of sleep before she had to be here.

He was spending Easter at his parents' house and then would see his siblings and nieces and nephews too. She remembered what it was like when she used to visit his house.

The perfect family was what she'd thought he had. One in dreams and fairytales that kids would love to live.

All her dreams had to be jump-started and she wasn't afraid of the hard work that came with that. The old bandages to keep the parts together and working enough to function.

When seven rolled around the next morning, she was punching out and walking to her car when her phone went off in her purse.

She didn't check it much when she was on shift. There was no reason to. If someone needed her for an emergency they had a number to call to reach her. Carrying her cell phone in her pocket was just an excuse for it to get broken in her eyes though many employees did.

She was shocked to see the text from Christian saying: *"morning and hope you had a good night at work."*

She found that funny. There wasn't such a thing as a good night in the ER in her experience.

She texted him back quickly that it was a normal night and she couldn't wait for her head to hit the pillow. She'd reach out later when she was up.

Liz hoped that didn't sound needy, but he was the one that reached out first.

She drove home and parked in the garage. What a luxury that was to have.

She took a quick shower to get the germs off of her and then crawled in bed and hit her sound machine, her room nice and dark, the exhaustion of the night gone.

Whoever said there was no satisfaction in a good hard day of work never lived in her shoes.

NORMAL DATING COUPLE

Three weeks later, Christian was picking Liz up on Saturday afternoon. He'd wanted to actually take her out on a real date rather than just always hanging out at each other's house.

"You look nice," he said. She had jeans on and a T-shirt that was loose on the top but tucked into the front and sort of hanging out the back. He could see how toned her arms were and found out that she lifted weights for exercise.

Prior to her move into her house, she had a gym membership and worked out before she went home after her shifts.

Since she owned her house, she'd stopped the gym membership and bought a home gym and put it in one of the spare bedrooms. He hadn't been upstairs since that one time and had no clue until she'd told him.

They didn't see much of each other during the week. She'd been going in early to cover some mid shifts and said she liked the overtime.

It's not like he'd ever tell her not to take all those extra shifts and she still had Saturdays off, though she did work Friday night two weeks ago.

He had a lot to do too and finally got this house ready to put on the market. It went live yesterday and he had two showings today.

Too bad he had nowhere to go and was going to end up in one of the apartments that his family owned.

It was not the first time he had to do it and didn't care all that much. He'd put what he had to in storage if need be, but he wasn't going to rush and buy just any old house so he had a place to crash.

That didn't make financial sense in his mind.

Just because he came from and had money didn't mean he it took it for granted.

"Thanks," she said. "This is going to be fun today. What made you think of it?" She moved to get in his truck.

"Doesn't every woman want to see a castle?" he asked.

"I guess as a little girl I did. I long since gave up thinking a prince was going to come save me in one though."

She was laughing when she said it, but he didn't think there was much humor behind her words.

It wasn't the first time she'd made a comment like that.

At some point, he'd like to know more about her.

He'd like to tell people he was seeing her too, but so far they hadn't done much more than have a few dinner dates and not even discuss making this public.

Today was the first date they'd be around people and they were going to Hudson, an hour away. Chances are they wouldn't see anyone they knew.

"I was trying to find something to do," he said. "We don't always have to cook for each other. It's nice to get out of the house. But if you don't want to do this, we can do something else."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I think it's a great idea. I've always wanted to go. At least as a kid. You're right. At some point I think every child wants to be a princess or prince."

"Or a knight," he said. "Lots of boys want to be the knight."

“That’s more like it,” she said. “I guess thinking back if I had to choose, I would have chosen to be a knight too.”

They went to his truck and got in. “So, is this thing we’ve got a secret?”

“What?” she asked, turning to look at him. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been seeing each other for three weeks now. Dating. At least that is the word that I’m using. I’m not seeing anyone else. Not sure if you are, as we haven’t talked about it. I’m doing that now.”

She started to laugh at him. “Christian, you are the first date I’ve had in almost seven years. The last date I had was my ex-husband. No one since him. Not one date since I moved here. I haven’t wanted to even try.”

This was news to him. Which also meant she hadn’t had sex in a while either. That could be another thing holding her back, yet when they kissed she sure the hell acted as if she wanted more.

“I understand if I’m a rebound and you’re skittish. You don’t talk about things much.”

“First off, there is no rebound a year out,” she said. “But yes, I’m skittish. I didn’t have a great marriage. The divorce, that was simple and fast.”

“Not something you want to talk about,” he said.

“No. It serves no purpose right now,” she said. “But Abby knows I’ve been seeing you.”

“Oh,” he said. “You never said anything.”

“I didn’t think I had to. It was never my intention that no one was supposed to know.”

He felt like a fool. “Does your father know?”

“No,” she said. “Not that I’m hiding it from him. It just hasn’t come up. He isn’t one to ask if I’m seeing someone and I’m not one to volunteer it. And I’ve been working a lot and have things to do in the house. It’s not as if we spend a lot of

time together. Is that a problem? I suppose I need to know what you are looking for.”

This wasn't turning out any way that he thought it would.

“I'm not sure what I'm looking for,” he said. “We haven't talked about us once. I would just like to think of us as a normal couple dating. We go out and do things. People know.”

“People do know in my life,” she said, grinning. “It seems in your life they don't know.”

She had him there. “I never told anyone you were my first,” he said. “Did you tell anyone?”

He saw her face get red. “Just Abby,” she said. “Which I wish I didn't.”

“She was like what, ten or something back then?” he asked.

“Close your mouth before a fly pops in it,” she said, laughing. “No, I didn't tell her then. It was years later when she was around sixteen. It's not like our mother was around and she needed someone to talk to. She asked when my first time was and with who. I told her.”

“Oh,” he said.

“You never told anyone we were each other's first?”

“No,” he said. “I'm not that way. I mean it's not like when we broke up we weren't still friends. We talked now and again when we saw each other.”

He wasn't even sure why they split, thinking back, other than it was just what kids did at that age.

“True,” she said. “But I never slept with another person in high school. I didn't want any guy to know I wasn't a virgin and expect it from me.”

“I didn't want any girl to think that of me,” he said, smirking.

She started to laugh and he was glad he could lighten the mood.

“Yeah, I’m sure that is the truth. Either way,” she said. “I’m not hiding this now.”

“Good to know,” he said. “It’s not like I’m going to announce it to my family or anything, but if it comes up that I’m seeing someone, I don’t want to lie.”

“I don’t like liars and bullshitters,” she said.

He turned to look at her while he was driving.

“The same,” he said. “Is that what happened with your ex-husband?”

She looked at him and as much as he wanted to hold her stare, he had to watch the road. “No. Well, yes, to the bullshitter. Let’s say he wasn’t the person I thought he was and end it at that. He didn’t cheat on me if you think it’s that. It wasn’t. I left him though.”

He had to end this conversation. He knew that now.

“We won’t talk about it,” he said. “But know if you ever want to, I’m here.”

“Thanks,” she said. That was it. Nothing else.

He wasn’t sure if she was thanking him for ending it or for the offer.

Probably for ending it.

They arrived at the Olana Historic State Castle within an hour, got out and paid their tickets for their tour.

“The landscaping is just crazy this time of year. Everything is blooming.”

“It’s driving you nuts I haven’t talked about doing anything with the yard, isn’t it?” she asked, bumping her shoulder into his.

“Not really,” he said. “It’s your house, not mine.”

“I know,” she said. “I just don’t have the love for it as you do.”

“The house?” he asked, stunned she’d said that.

“No. I love the house. I mean the outside. Maybe in time I can get out there, but I’m just happy it’s neat and easy to care for. No one sees the back and that is fine. I’d like to sit out on the deck and will get some patio furniture soon. It’s still not always so nice out, but today it is.”

It was seventy in the sun and that was plenty warm for the end of April.

“I grew to love the outside and I’m not sure why. It’s just a hobby.”

“Did you do any landscaping on the house you listed yesterday?”

“A little,” he said.

He’d been going to her house to see her. She didn’t want any help in the house, but he’d been giving her pointers and showing her things she could do on her own. She was still at the painting-everything phase and got all the bedrooms done now too.

He’d told her paint went a long way to improve things and she was seeing that.

“Do you think you’ll get an offer quickly?” she asked.

“In this market,” he said, “I hope so. At least within a week. Maybe today. I’ve got an apartment set to move into in a few days. Or it’s open for me and I’ll start moving things over. I’ve got to reach out to my movers to help.”

He’d long since stopped asking family members since he moved so much. They had lives and other things to do in their free time.

“I can help you,” she said.

“Thanks,” he said. “But I’m good. Hiring movers makes it easier for everyone.”

“You know what else makes things easier for everyone?” she asked.

“What?”

“Being straightforward. I’m glad that you were with me today. I appreciate it.”

“I’ve always been that way,” he said. “Straightforward and telling the truth.”

“Good. Then so will I. I’d like you to stay the night tonight...if you want.”

“Oh, I want,” he said.

She smiled at him. “It’s going to be so much better than our first in your bedroom.”

He started to laugh. “You bet your sweet ass it’s going to be.”

THE FIRST TIME

Somehow they made it through their day and were back at her house.

It wasn't even dinnertime yet and the air had been thick with sparks and sizzling sounds in her ears all day.

"We don't have to do this tonight if you don't want to," he said.

She turned to look at Christian as they pulled into her driveway. "You don't want to?"

Her heart sank. Was she not enough again for another man?

She'd spent the past year working herself up in body and soul.

It might be the most confident she'd felt in her life and here the one man she wanted even more than when she wanted him at sixteen just told her they didn't have to do it.

He turned once he shut his truck off and reached his hand for hers, their fingers threaded together. "I want to. I've wanted to for weeks, but I'm not someone to push."

Liz knew that. They'd dated four months before they'd had sex as kids.

He'd never brought it up once when they were sixteen. It's just they'd get making out and one thing would lead to another.

More than once he'd stopped to ask her if she was sure.

She should have remembered that about him.

“I know,” she said. “Why did you just say that then?”

“Because you’ve been quiet since you said it and I wondered if you’d changed your mind.”

“No,” she said. “I think it’s just the anticipation. You know, like the first time.”

“We’ve both learned a thing or two since then,” he said. “At least I have.”

It was the charming grin on his face as he climbed out of the truck, her following. The day’s growth of beard that she was coming to enjoy seeing. She knew he shaved every few days or just trimmed his beard.

She would have found it irresistible as a teen, but at sixteen he didn’t have nearly the facial hair he did now.

“I’d like to think I did,” she said, as they walked into the house.

“Don’t doubt yourself,” he said.

“What?” she asked, her smile dropping.

“I see it in your eyes. Every once in a while a little bit of insecurity creeps out and you try to catch it and hammer it back into place. Don’t worry about that with me. It only makes you human.”

Guess she hadn’t done as good of a job making changes in her life as she’d hoped.

Or at least putting up the front of self-assurance.

“I suppose,” she said. “Let’s not talk about this though.” Her arms went up and around his neck. “Just kiss me like you’ve been doing. We won’t have any thoughts in our mind after and nothing to stop us.”

He lifted her chin with his thumb and finger, his mouth lowering. “You’re beautiful. Inside and out.” He kissed her softly. Almost like a chaste one that he wanted to come back for more of. “You’re so much more beautiful now than you

were at sixteen. You were a girl then. You're a woman with all the right amount of curves now."

She jumped back. It was like cold water on her head. "You think I'm fat?"

He ran his hands through his hair. "Wow. I can't do or say anything right tonight. I've never thought I was that smooth before but didn't think I was this bad. I just complimented you and you think I told you that you were fat?"

She ran her hands over her face. She was losing it.

Never did she think she'd be reacting to this, but maybe it had to do with Christian being her first.

Not only her first lover ever but the first one after her divorce too.

Did that mean something?

She couldn't think of it right now.

"Sorry," she said. It was all she could think to say.

"Let's just take a break," he said. "It doesn't mean I don't want to see you naked because I do, but I want to make sure you're in the same frame of mind as me. Right now I'm terrified I'm going to mess something up and it's too much pressure. I might not be able to get it up and embarrass the hell out of myself."

She wasn't sure how she could laugh at a time like this, but she did. Leave it to Christian to relax her.

"I doubt there is anything you can or will do to embarrass yourself."

"I'm not so sure," he said. His arm went out and touched her bicep. "These are pretty big. I bet they could knock some sense into me."

She grabbed him by the shirtfront and all but attacked his mouth.

The next thing she knew they were circling the empty front living room in her house, the echoing of their feet on the floor lost to her now.

They were pulling shirts off, jeans tugging down and shoes being kicked away.

She reached down to pull her socks off because there was no way she was going to have sex just wearing them.

He did the same thing, then was reaching for his jeans and pulled a condom out of his wallet.

Damn, he'd gotten bigger. A lot more muscle on him too.

"Holy cow," she said. "Look at your arms. And your abs. Who would have thought that from a guy that sits at a desk?"

He laughed, then lowered her to the floor, his mouth going to work again.

This time he didn't keep it on her lips though, but rather moved down her chest. He found the front clasp of her bra, released it and parted it open, her breasts on display.

She always thought her chest was too big for the rest of her and normally strapped it down with sports bras, but she wanted to feel more like a woman when she was with Christian.

"Just as I remembered," he said. She didn't believe it though. Someone like him had probably been with a lot of women in the past several years.

"Shut up, Christian," she said.

He laughed and his mouth lowered to her nipple, pulling it between his lips, her back arching up to let him take more. She let out a moan in her throat and hoped he didn't move anytime soon.

His tongue was licking her, lapping up every bit of sensitive skin she had.

He was moving back and forth across her body and all but torturing her at this point.

Her hips were rising and she was pretty sure her underwear was soaked with as worked up as she was.

Christian was almost grinding against her through his boxer briefs too.

In her mind, all she thought of was them humping like this as teens before they had sex.

Sure, it felt good, but they didn't know any different.

Once they did, they never did this again.

Why would they?

And she didn't want to do it now either.

"Christian," she said, yanking his head back. "We aren't sixteen."

He looked her in the eye, she saw he got her meaning, and then he scooted down and pulled her panties off.

His mouth went right to the dew dripping everywhere, his tongue just lightly touching her.

"Jesus," she said. She almost came on that touch alone.

"You're easy," he said.

She wasn't going to take exception to those words. She'd done it too much already.

Besides, she wasn't sure she could even think any more than how good this all felt. Not even how hard and cold the hardwood floor was under her back.

His thumbs went to her wet lips, spread her wide and all but attacked every part of her body at once.

She didn't know how it was possible, and he was right: he'd learned a lot in the past several years.

Her hips were lifting up and grinding against his mouth, but he didn't seem to care as she was throbbing and coming all over him.

When it felt like she had nothing else left to give, her body went lax on the floor while she sucked in a few deep breaths.

Christian moved away from her and she heard the wrapper open, but she'd have to find the energy to open her eyes to see him. She was going to go from the memory of what he looked like. She could open her eyes next time.

Before she knew it though, she was rolling and on top of him. “Huh?” she asked.

“You’ve been on your back, now it’s my turn,” he said. “You can get the sore knees.”

“Here I thought you were being a gentleman,” she said, lifting up. She had to open her eyes now and was glad she did.

He was long and strong. Firm.

“I am one,” he said. “But this lets me see you on top of me. All of you.”

“Ahh,” she said, sinking down. It felt so damn good. She actually lost her train of thought on what she was going to say.

It didn’t matter though. Not when she was naked and riding the hot man under her.

Her hands went forward on the wood floor, her mouth to his, tasting herself on his lips. She’d never done that before and forgot she never wanted to. It didn’t seem to matter though because she couldn’t think of much when she was with him.

She started to bob up and down, his hips meeting hers. They were making a mess of the floor, but she didn’t care. Everything would clean up.

His hands went to her ass and held her down as he started to pound up into her. She had no choice but to just hold on and feel what he was doing. That he was working her back up again too.

“Tell me you’re close,” he said. He sounded as if he was in pain and she was going to tell him to just finish and she was fine. She’d already done it once.

But she knew when she looked into his eyes that he’d argue with her.

“Almost,” she said.

He rolled her so that she was on her back now. Damn, that was faster than she thought would happen.

His arms went under her thighs, lifting her up, him getting on his knees, and she felt open and exposed more than ever

before.

Once he started to move his hips like pistons in her, she had no thoughts at all. She was almost trapped on top of it.

“Oh God,” she said as everything coiled up and unraveled at once.

Her eyes closed, which was too bad, as she wanted to watch him come.

Next time, she told herself, as she heard him grunting, then throbbing inside of her.

There was just his weight on her chest after, his heavy breathing in her ear.

He rolled again and had her on his chest.

“That might be the most exercise I’ve had in a while,” he said.

She started to laugh in a totally free way that only Christian could bring out of her.

YOUR FIRST

“**A**re you sure she isn't taking advantage of you?”
Evan asked him a month later.

Christian had been seeing Liz now for almost two months.

Everyone knew. Not that he had to make an announcement, nor would he, but it happened organically. One person found out, then another and another.

The first was his mother when she asked why he was in such a good mood one day in the office. She'd been filling in and helping with Whitney out on maternity leave.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked his older brother.

“Parker tells me what is wrong daily, but in this case I'm just looking out for you.”

“If I knew you were going to be an asshole I would have gone and got some tools at the office rather than coming here.”

He was going to help Trevor and Liz take her kitchen apart this weekend. He'd finally talked her into going ahead with her kitchen. He'd said he'd help. It's not like he had another project going on and Trevor was doing the bulk of the work.

All Christian was doing was guiding and offering a hand when he was around to do it. Which was on the weekends more than anything.

Liz had fought him tooth and nail over this. She didn't want his help. She said she was going to hire someone, but

he'd told her there was no reason if she could live without the kitchen.

"You've been dating her like two months and now you're rehabbing her kitchen for her? That sounds like taking advantage of things."

He wanted to shove his brother but didn't. Evan was the hothead, not him. Yet he felt it now.

It's not even like his family had seen Liz again either. There was no reason for Evan to be an asshole like this.

"No," he argued. "She and I even fought over this. She was going to hire someone. She's gotten some price quotes. They were crazy high."

"Of course they are," Evan said. "A full kitchen rehab is easily fifty thousand."

"She was getting quotes for over seventy," he said.

"Jesus, how big of a kitchen is it, and what does she want, marble?"

"No," he argued. "She's pretty simple. Tile floors, shaker cabinets and granite. Not even quartz. She is a bargain shopper. It will be nice and fit the house but not over the top. They are all taking advantage of her for being a woman."

"Assholes," Evan said. "We wouldn't do that."

"We don't have time for the project and she knows it. Her father can do a lot of it at night or on the weekends. I'm just helping out."

"I doubt that," Evan said.

They started to load tools in his truck. It wasn't that he needed a lot. He had plenty of his own, but they were in storage right now since he'd moved into an apartment. He'd be closing on his place next week, then he'd have all that cash on hand when another flip came on the market that he wanted.

He never jumped and the market sucked right now for flippers.

"What does that mean?" Christian asked.

“Come on,” Evan said. “I know she was your first.”

He had no clue where Evan was going with this or even how he knew. “What are you talking about?”

“Christian. I was seventeen. I knew how many condoms I had in my room. Trust me. Every once in a while there’d be some missing. It sure the hell wasn’t Kaelyn taking them. You were dating Liz at that time.”

There was no arguing and it didn’t seem to matter. “I’m not sure what one has to do with the other. We were young.”

“You didn’t date long. A few months?”

“Six months,” he said.

“What happened?” Evan asked. “Was she the one you lost and want back?”

He wanted to deck his brother for those words that he’d thought of and never realized before.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

“How can you not know?” Evan asked.

“Because we were kids. We were friends before and after. It wasn’t anything more than that.”

“But you never forget your first,” Evan said.

Which was the truth. “You’re reading more into this. She moved out of the area and came back. We’ve got a good thing but aren’t pushing or putting pressure on the other. I barely see her. She works a shit ton.”

“How does that work for you?” Evan asked.

“Since when did you become Dr. Phil?” he asked.

Evan laughed at him. “Whatever. Do you need anything else?”

“No,” he said. “I’ll bring them back before work.”

“So you’re coming for the picnic?” Evan asked. “Bring Liz. Let her meet everyone.”

He'd forgotten that Evan and Parker were having a cookout. It was more for Parker's brothers and her father. Evan had been asking for a week and he said no.

Not that he didn't get along with Jeremy and Marcus Reid, but he'd rather hang out with Liz.

"She has to work," he said.

"Doesn't she go in at night?" Evan asked.

"She's going in at four," he said. "She takes a lot of overtime if she can." Evan lifted his eyebrow. "Don't go there. She's independent. She doesn't even want her father to help, but she understands that she was getting taken for a ride on the kitchen."

"You can still stop over for a drink," Evan said. "Jeremy is bringing a woman."

"I didn't know he was dating someone," he said.

"McKenna Preston. Her father, Dan, was the man who had the heart attack on the golf course that Jeremy brought back to life."

"Shit," he said. "Seriously? They are dating now?"

"Yeah," Evan said. "Funny how life happens that way. You remember Dan, right?"

"Of course," he said. "Everyone knows Dan."

Dan Preston owned a funeral home in the area. He remembered Dan's wife died in an accident along with Dan's young son when he was a kid. It was horrible.

"Yeah. He's doing well now and McKenna and Jeremy are dating. Jeremy bought the house behind the Prestons."

"Small world," he said.

"Like the world where your first bought the house you always wanted out from under you."

"I'm out of here," he said, walking to his truck to the sound of his brother's laughter.

Christian drove the two miles to Liz's house. There was a Sherman Fencing truck in the driveway. He'd be coming face to face with Liz's father.

This time as Liz's boyfriend.

Again.

He was starting to feel like the teen he'd been the last time.

He pulled behind Trevor's truck, the garage door was open, and he went in that way past Liz's used SUV. There was a dumpster that had been delivered that was blocking the other garage door.

"Hey, Christian," Liz said when he walked in. "Dad, you remember Christian."

"Good to see you again," he said to Trevor. It felt awkward shaking hands with the man he'd known for years and had seen around a lot.

"You too," Trevor said. "Let me give you a hand with some things."

The two men went out to his truck and grabbed the tools he'd gotten from Evan's and carried them in.

"Is this going to be fun or hurt?" Liz asked when they came back in with the last of everything.

"Depends on if you need to take some aggression out," he said.

"Not really," she said.

"Even with your job?" he asked. "I'm not sure I could handle that and what you see daily."

"I don't take it home with me," she said. "I do what I need to when I'm there and then move on. It's the only way to not get burned out."

"That's my girl," Trevor said.

Christian could see how close the two of them were.

"It's a good attitude to have," he said. "So if you don't have anything to take your anger out on, then it might hurt you

because you know how much money you're going to spend."

"Not as much as I would have," she said. She was frowning and he knew she was still put out over having her father and him do the work. More her father working than him.

"I don't have a problem doing it," her father argued. "You just have to live without a kitchen for a bit longer."

"It's worth it," she said. "And the cabinets will be delivered Wednesday?"

"Yes," her father said. "That is what they said and I went to double-check for you yesterday."

"Thanks," she said. She moved to Christian and gave him a kiss in front of her father. "Thank you too for drawing it up and making it easy to order the cabinets a few weeks ago."

"Not a problem," he said. "I can't wait to see it done."

He wouldn't tell her that he was probably more excited than her.

She'd taken all his suggestions from the first time he'd been in the house and what he'd want to do. Then when she'd told him what she ordered, the colors were damn close to what he'd have picked out too.

The browns, creams, and tans were going to look so much better than white and gray in here.

This house deserved the warmth and Liz seemed to understand that.

"Me neither," she said. "A few months from now."

"Not that long," her father said. "I promise. We'll get this ripped apart today and then we can start on the floors. I'll get going on them this week after work."

"No, Dad. You're working all day, you don't need to come back here and work too."

"I'm just paying you back for all the food you cooked for me for a year."

Liz smiled at her father, but Christian knew she felt guilty about the work her father was doing for her.

“I’ll be cooking for you for years to make up for this,” she said.

“What about me?” he asked.

She smiled and winked at him. “We could come up with another arrangement,” she said quietly when her father went to get his sledgehammer.

“I can get on board with that. Let’s get this kitchen taken down. Tell us what you want with the appliances.”

“I’m going to put the fridge in the garage. I’ll need it for things anyway, but I want an extra even after the kitchen is done. I sold the stove and dishwasher. Someone is coming to get them today. I just have to text them.”

“That’s my girl,” Trevor said again. “Always a bargain shopper.”

“In this case, it’s enough to feed you guys. I was going to just give them away, but they wanted to give me something. They said fifty bucks and I said sure.”

“That’s nice,” Trevor said. “Sometimes people need to feel their worth. Everyone’s got their pride.”

Christian saw Liz nod and started to realize more of what might be going through her head.

She was like this back in school too. He remembered people said stuff about her mother not being around. Or maybe she didn’t have a car like other kids did when she was sixteen.

She worked a part-time job when a lot of the girls didn’t.

He always worked. It was expected of him and his siblings.

Nothing was given for free.

For the next few hours, cabinets were ripped from the walls, countertops smashed, and Liz was holding her end up. Damn, she was strong. But he knew it as he’d seen her body.

It didn't just physically look strong but more that she had strength behind her.

She'd said one day that she had to be in her job. There were times you had to lift patients and it was never the lightweights that needed it.

He laughed over that but understood where she was coming from.

"Okay," she said, wiping her arm across her brow. "That was one hell of a workout and felt good."

"So..." he said. "Since the dumpster is here, do you want to take out the hall bath too?"

"What?" she asked.

"Yes," Trevor said. "I was going to suggest it too."

"I'm not doing it now," she said.

"You've got the money," her father said. "You were going to pay all that money for the kitchen that you don't have to now."

"I know," she said. "But I need to get the kitchen done before I do anything else. It's not that easy."

"Sure, it is," her father said. "You aren't using it. You've got your bathroom and this half bath. Just shut the door and you won't see it and it won't bother you."

Her shoulders slumped. "Fine," she said. "Only because I think you two are having too much fun. Leave the toilet, please. I don't want that hole or anything just open there."

Christian started to laugh. "We'll leave it. That is an easy thing to take out when the time comes."

"No," Trevor said. "Get rid of it. It's green. I'll put a new one in tomorrow for you. You know I can do it fast."

She threw her hands up. "Only if you let me pay for it."

There was a battle of wills going on. "Fine," her father said.

Christian wasn't saying a word and just went upstairs with Trevor to get the tub and vanity out. The floor needed to go too, the tiles were cracked and in horrible shape.

"That was easier than I thought it'd be," he said. "I didn't think she'd give in."

"She's had a rough time lately," her father said. "Keep that in mind."

He wasn't surprised Trevor was talking to him now that Liz was staying downstairs to clean up the floor and bring the rest of the smaller pieces to the dumpster. He'd like to start on the floors today if Trevor was game. If not, he'd start tomorrow while he was here to give Trevor a hand.

"She won't talk to me about anything," he said.

"Not me either," Trevor said. "She was a mess, that is all I know. Abby knows what was going on but won't say anything."

It wasn't what he wanted to hear. "She seems like she is in a good spot now."

"She is," Trevor said. "I don't want to see her like she was when she came home either. She just showed up. I had no warning. Nothing more than a phone call that she'd be home in a few hours and wasn't going back. Her car was loaded as if she threw everything in there in a hurry."

Shit.

"She said nothing?" he asked.

"No. I can guess, but it doesn't do anything but wind me up and it's best to not do that when I can't change anything. As long as she is good now, that is all I care about."

Christian couldn't argue with that, but he could take his frustration out on the bathroom demo because he needed to after hearing that.

CHANGES NOTHING

“**T**hat dress looks better on you than it does me,” Abby said three weeks later.

“I doubt that,” Liz said, looking at herself in the mirror. She didn’t think she’d find herself going to a wedding with Christian, but he’d asked her a few weeks ago and she’d said sure.

The problem was she had nothing to wear and didn’t want to buy a dress that’d she’d never wear again.

Her sister came to her rescue.

“It’s true,” Abby said. “Your boobs are much bigger than mine and it calls for that in the dress.”

She turned in the mirror again and saw how the light blue wraparound dress did fit across her breasts well. It was cinched at the waist and fell to her knees. Her sister was a few inches taller than her and she supposed this was meant to be above the knees.

“I guess you’re right. I like how it’s sleeveless too.”

“Your body is so smoking,” Abby said. “I’m jealous, but I know you lift weights now. You can see how toned your arms are in that dress. Mine are just thin.”

Abby held her arm up and tried to flex and there wasn’t much there.

She laughed. “It’s a lot of work and I need to be able to lift patients at work without hurting myself. I can’t afford to be

out of work.”

Liz was able to keep things afloat so well because she worked so much overtime. It wasn't like she had much of a life.

At least not before she met Christian.

Now she felt bad that she was working as much as she was.

“I can't believe you don't own one dress,” Abby said.

She sighed. “I've got a few sundresses, but you know as well as I do that I've got no reason to wear a dress.”

“You went out to dinner parties all the time before,” Abby argued. Then her sister almost caught herself with what she'd said.

No one could forget how she'd shown up with her car full of her belongings and nothing else.

There was no way she was taking more than what was hers. Or what she'd bought. Not that she could pick out every article of clothing she'd paid for herself, but none of those cocktail dresses had been her idea and she was damn sure not bringing them along.

“I saw no need for them here,” she said.

“Sorry,” Abby said. “Sometimes I just forget. You're not that person anymore. Not in your body or in your eyes. Your actions. Nothing.”

She moved to her sister. “That might be the nicest thing someone could have said to me.” Abby's arms went around her for a hug.

“Does Christian know anything?”

“Just his name was Tanner and that I left him quickly. I didn't even mean to say that. We don't talk about it. I don't want to.”

“He's okay with that?”

She moved out of her sister's arms. "Why all the questions?"

"I don't know," Abby said. "You just seem so happy and you shouldn't be hiding this from him."

"It changes nothing," she said. "I am happy."

"Dad still asks me all the time what happened. I think he might have said something to Christian that day they were working on your house. Or maybe it was another time. You know they are working when you aren't here."

Liz hated that but gave up telling them to stop.

She'd been picking up more hours and going in early and her father would come here after work for an hour or two. Then she found out Christian was here too.

Three weeks in and her floors were done, the cabinets in too. She'd painted the kitchen herself as it felt as if that was the only thing she could do. She'd put the hardware on one night with Christian. She wanted to have some say in that she'd put sweat equity into it.

The appliances were getting delivered this week. The countertops the following week. All that was left was her backsplash and she knew that was just a one- or two-day project. Plenty of time to get it done.

It had moved faster than she'd thought it would have and she was forever grateful that her father was doing the work. Christian too.

She'd find a way to make it up to them. Or repay them for it.

"Neither of them has said a word to me about it," Liz said.

"And they won't," Abby said. "They know you don't want to talk about it."

"Nope," she said. "That means with you too. I don't need a therapy session, and if I did, I'd go get it. I got out of my marriage before it got worse. I'm finding who I used to be. I'd like to think I'm a better person than I ever thought I'd be."

“You’re a wonderful person and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise,” Abby said.

“Thank you. Now what should I do with my hair?”

“Can I curl it for you?” Abby asked.

“I don’t have a curling iron,” she said. Who the hell had time to do those things? She washed her hair and tied it up daily for work. It had to stay out of the way. On the weekends, she did the same. It seemed as if she never slowed down or did anything fun.

Another thing she felt bad about, but Christian didn’t seem to mind.

He’d said he couldn’t sit still and was normally working on some flip. She wondered if he was even looking for one now, but he’d said he was and that Ruby Turner, her realtor that worked with the Butlers, was looking too.

She knew the market was tight right now, so she guessed he wasn’t lying when he said nothing was coming to him.

“I brought mine,” Abby said. “Sit on the toilet and I’ll do it for you.”

She could just say no, but Liz wanted to look nice. Better than nice to see Christian’s family again. To meet some of his friends or other family members.

She wanted to feel like she was worthy of him when so many times in her life she never felt like she was worthy of herself let alone those around her.

“Sure,” she said. It seemed like everyone was trying to do things for her and she should stop complaining and just be thankful. “What’s going on with you?”

It was better to change the topic anyway.

“Not much,” Abby said, brushing and grabbing a piece of hair once Liz sat down. “I’m going to renew my lease on my apartment.”

“Do you want to stay there?” she asked her sister. She felt bad about the way this was turning out, but she’d never agreed

when her sister brought up living with her.

“It’s fine. I don’t have a problem with it. I just thought it’d be nice to live with you, but now that the bathroom is gutted, I’d have to use yours and you don’t like to share.”

She laughed. She knew her sister was picking on her. They’d shared everything growing up. Just like they were sharing clothes now.

Maybe as an older sister she hated to do that, but she also knew she didn’t have much of a choice. She helped raise her younger sister because it was the right thing to do. To help her father since their mother was never around.

“What’s the real reason you don’t want to move here? It’s Christian, right?”

“You don’t need your younger sister around when you want to get naked with a guy,” Abby said. “Be honest. It’s not like it was your idea for me to live with you. I know I brought it up and kept hammering hoping you’d say yes. That’s wrong of me.”

No reason to lie. “It’s not the end of the world. He has a place too. And it’s not like I’m around much.”

“You still aren’t saying yes and that is reason enough. But you are around on the weekends. I get it,” Abby said. “If I were in your shoes I wouldn’t want my sister to move in either. It’s fine. Your kitchen looks stunning, by the way.”

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s nicer than I thought it’d be.”

“And half the price.”

She sighed. “I hate that.”

“Don’t,” Abby said as she continued to do her hair. “I know you think you owe Dad, but he doesn’t feel that way. You did a lot for me as a kid. You helped him more than he can ever repay you.”

“You’re my sister.”

“I am,” Abby said. “But I was more of a handful than you were. He works a lot and you were there for me. Driving me

places rather than hanging with your friends. Or taking me with you half the time when you'd rather be with your friends."

She shrugged. "Dad was working late a lot when the weather was nice. If I wasn't at practice or working then I had to get you."

She'd played a lot of sports and her father was always in her corner supporting her in them. He'd never told her she couldn't have a life or do those things, but she knew she had to still be there for Abby. Going to community college close by helped some too.

In the colder months it wasn't as big of a deal as her father didn't work a lot. The warmer months though, that made it harder to have a life, but she'd found a way to balance it.

"You raised me well," Abby said.

"I wasn't around much when you were a teen," she said. "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be," Abby said. "You deserved to move away."

"Yeah, and look at how well that turned out."

"As you said, you might be a better person for it in the end."

Her sister could be wise at times, but it was the tone of voice that led her to believe there was more going on.

"Something is on your mind, Abby. What is it?"

There was about a thirty-second moment of silence. "Have you talked to Mom lately?"

She turned her head to look at her sister. "No. Have you?"

"She reached out to me a few weeks ago."

"She did?" she said. "What did she want?"

"I don't know, really. Just to talk," Abby said. "She has my cell phone number."

"She has mine too but doesn't reach out to me much," she said.

“Because you’re a nurse and you are like Dad and lecture her to get better and take her meds.”

“She should,” Liz said. “But you can’t help someone that doesn’t want to be helped.”

“That’s the point,” Abby said. “And that is why you got away from Tanner. You wanted to be helped. You know it.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I did. I just had to plan it out more. If Donna hadn’t shown up that night, it wouldn’t have been as fast. You could say she covered for me and then gave me the start I needed.”

“You hated taking that money,” Abby said. “Admit it.”

“I did. I still do.”

“You would have gotten money in the divorce,” Abby said. “You know that. You left everything there but your clothing. You took your car and that was it.”

“It was in my name and he had no hold on it. I even insured it separate from him.”

Which made leaving so much easier. But the house Tanner had owned before they met, even if she’d given him more than half of her paycheck for household expenses.

Sure, she would have gotten something in the divorce. At least half their savings and she was positive there was over six figures in there, but it’s not like Tanner ever let her see it.

“I know you would have left him,” Abby said. “I believe you when you say that, but I’m glad it was sooner rather than later.”

“Me too,” she said. “Back to Mom. What did she want? She didn’t say?”

“No. Just wanted to talk and asked how I was doing. She asked about you. She didn’t know you were back in the area.”

“She’d know that if she ever reached out.”

“I know,” Abby said. “I feel bad that I don’t take the first step, but I just can’t. You know.”

“It’s a horrible feeling being abandoned,” she said. “I understand that.”

“Because you were older when it happened and experienced more of what Mom did,” Abby said.

“Yes. I know she didn’t have control of it all, but she could have. Dad was supportive and she didn’t want that. She wanted to drink and do drugs to make herself better.”

Her mother had severe bipolar depression. There were ups and downs in her life. When she was up, she was overly happy and smothering in her love. When she was down, she was horrible to be around. She was depressed, mixing sleeping pills with alcohol. Drinking more than she should. Getting her hands on painkillers.

When her father tried to get help for her mother again and again, her mother would spiral downhill until she just up and left one day and didn’t return.

It was months before her father got a call that her mother was in a mental health unit in a neighboring hospital after overdosing.

Supportive home after supportive home had been in Lily’s life. She was good while she was there until she’d check herself out and relapse.

Liz had never talked about this with anyone in school, but she knew many were aware.

Just another thing she was bullied about and made her doubt herself. Her mother didn’t develop this until later in life and she would often wonder if it was possible for her to have the same thing happen.

Like an idiot, she’d told Tanner. It was the man she’d loved and married. She trusted him and shouldn’t have.

He used that against her in his verbal abuse. Telling her she’d be just like her mother or getting her to believe she was showing those signs when she knew she wasn’t.

She should have left the first few times he’d said those things, but he’d apologize and she’d accept it.

Like a fool.

She'd never be a fool again.

"All done," Abby said.

She stood up and looked in the mirror and almost didn't recognize herself. "Damn. You do good work."

"Let's get makeup on you now," Abby said.

"Sure," she said. "We can do that."

Ten minutes later she was putting on a pair of nude heeled sandals. More like wedges. They were the most comfortable pair of dressy shoes she could find when she'd gone shopping. In her mind it was nice to have at least the one pair and the color would go with a lot.

"You're going to knock Christian's socks off when he sees you."

"That's the plan," she said.

SEARCHING HER OUT

Christian finished with his tie. He didn't mind dressing up that much. The tie was what bothered him the most. Who the hell thought wrapping something around your neck was a good idea?

He found his shoes and put them on too. He was looking forward to seeing Liz all dressed up. Not that he didn't like seeing her the way she was, or in nothing at all, but he had this image in his mind of her at the prom when they were seniors. She'd gone with a bunch of friends; he did too. No dates for them, but he had really wanted to ask her to dance and decided it was best to leave it alone.

They were just friends back then. Exes. Not even ones that talked all that much, but he found his eyes always searching her out. Maybe his brother was right and there was part of him that wondered if she was the one that got away.

Once he was finished getting dressed, he left the apartment he was living in. He needed to figure out his living situation soon. He wasn't used to this, but there hadn't been one house that caught his eye enough to buy.

Ruby found one forty-five minutes away and he told himself no. It might have been a good deal, but now that he had Liz in his life and her time was limited, the last thing he wanted to do was feel as if they both had to spend a ton of time in the car to see each other.

And not working on a flip gave him time to work on Liz's house for her. Maybe he was sneaky about doing it when she'd

told him no multiple times, but Trevor would call and ask for a hand. He wouldn't tell the guy no any more than he'd tell his father or brother no.

Trevor was most likely banking on that too. The last thing he wanted to do was upset Liz's father, so he went along with it.

Yeah, it was sneaky and he didn't care.

He pulled into Liz's driveway and went to the front door. It was unlocked so he walked in.

"Holy shit," he said when she came walking down the curved staircase, her fingers trailing along the banister.

In his eyes, he saw a teenage girl doing that on their prom day.

A woman on her wedding day.

Children racing down and chasing each other.

All the things he'd been hoping to find in a house he could call his home. Why was it here when he had no shot of owning it now?

He saw the makings of memories this house should have held and most likely did.

That was probably why it took so long for the owners to sell.

And he'd lost out on it.

He knew this wouldn't have been his flip.

This would have been his home and that was probably why it hurt so much to lose it.

Everyone said he'd find another. He didn't think he would. Not like this.

He was glad to at least feel like he was helping the potential come out for Liz. For a future she would have here. Did he want to be a part of it?

Too soon to say.

"I'll take that as a good reaction," she said.

“Yeah,” he said. She stopped at the bottom, put her nice toned arms out, then did a little spin for him. This dress fit her better than anything he’d ever seen on another woman before. “It’s like it was made for you.”

“It’s Abby’s dress. She’s jealous because she said it looks better on me than her.”

“I would have never known,” he said. “And I can’t see it on anyone else now that it’s on you.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling sweetly. “Abby was like my mother today. She dressed me and did my hair and my makeup. I feel helpless in a way. I’ve been doing my own hair and makeup for a long time.”

This was a trap. He knew it. He had to figure out how to not put his foot in his mouth.

“And you do a lovely job daily, but I’m going to have to thank your sister too.”

She laughed. “Well played, Christian.”

He wiped his hand across his brow. “Thank God. I was worried there was no right answer for that statement.”

“Let me see you. It’s your turn to do a little spin.”

He snorted. “Not likely.”

“It’s only fair,” she argued. She was laughing at him and he found he couldn’t tell her no.

To mirror her, he put his hands out to his sides and did a turn.

“There,” he said. “I felt your eyes on my ass.”

“Of course they were there,” she said. “Not that I can see much with your jacket covering you, but I know what it looks like. It’s no different than your eyes on my breasts right now.”

He lifted them up to her face and felt the heat creep up his neck. “Sorry. They are just so...there.”

“They are,” she said. “Not even strapped down like I normally do. My sports bra wouldn’t look all that nice peeking

out the V of the neckline.”

“No,” he said. She was bare of jewelry. Just some hoops in her ears, but he only noticed them when she spun and her hair moved out of the way.

He wished he had something to give her to put on. Then he wondered where that thought came from because he never cared one way or another about that sort of thing.

This was her, only spiced up. Yeah, that was how he was looking at it.

Liz was a simple girl and the one that was stealing his heart more than he’d ever thought possible.

“Are we ready to go?” she asked. “I’m trying not to be nervous. My father said he knows Cash but not his future wife.”

“Cash Fielding,” he said. “Fielding Landscaping does all the work with our new builds. I did work with Cash and his father, Roc, as a kid.”

“Did they worry you’d take their business?” she asked, laughing and grabbing her purse off the bench by the door. Just a small one that was different from what she normally carried.

“No,” he said. “Everyone knew it was my hobby, but I wanted to learn. Cash’s father died when Cash was eighteen. He’s been running the business. I was in college at that point going for engineering. Cash and my cousin Ryan are best friends.”

“That explains why my father knows of Cash. For as big as the Capital Region is, it’s still a small community network in the construction field.”

“True,” he said. “Hannah is a hairdresser. Cash and Hannah live in Paradise Place. Hannah’s sister and her husband do too.”

“Cozy,” she said.

“You’ll meet them at the Paradise Place picnic if you go this summer. You should.”

“Only if you go with me,” she said.

“I have to be there and I’d love to have you by my side.”

“Oh,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. He loved this playful side of her. “You don’t live here. How come you get to go? I thought you’d be my guest.”

He yanked her close to his body and kissed her. “There is no way the work is being left to my grandparents and parents and aunt and uncle. All of us kids do a ton of work whether we live here or not.”

“You’re a good son,” she said, patting his cheek.

“Let’s go see the rest of the family,” he said. “Are you nervous?”

“A little,” she said as she locked the door to her house.

“No reason to be,” he said. “You’ve met everyone before.”

“I know,” she said. “But it’s been years.”

“Everyone is still the same as they used to be,” he said.

He just hoped his brother wasn’t an asshole like he’d been weeks ago.

At least when he’d dropped all the tools back off to Evan, his brother had apologized. He knew that was Parker’s doing, but he still appreciated it.

Since then Evan hadn’t said much more to him, but that didn’t mean something might not slip today.

It’d be his parents, he and Liz and Evan and Parker at the table. There’d be no hiding, he was positive.

Kaelyn wasn’t invited. She didn’t know Cash all that well other than a name. His sister could see Liz again another time.

They drove to the church where the ceremony was taking place and found a seat in the back. He wasn’t one to move up front and there was no reason to.

The ceremony was fast and they left to drive to the reception hall.

“That was nice and quick,” she said. “The best way to do it.”

He wanted to ask if hers was like that but knew it'd be insensitive. There was so much he wanted to know about her life during the past several years, but she was closed up like a vault with no oxygen inside.

The more comments that Trevor said around him, the more he started to wonder. It was as if Trevor was fishing too and that made no sense to him.

He'd told himself that if Liz wanted him to know, she'd tell him. He just had to wait her out.

“It was and is,” he said.

It was only a ten-minute drive to the reception hall. They found their name tags and then their tables. His brother and sister-in-law came in and sat next.

“How did you beat us here?” Evan asked.

“I was in the back,” he said.

“That's where I wanted to be,” Evan said, “but Parker pulled me up by Mom and Dad.”

“Oh stop,” Parker said. “I don't pull you anywhere you don't want to go and you know it.”

His brother laughed. “Liz Carter, you remember Evan I'm sure. He's hard to forget. This is his wife, Parker.”

“It's so nice to meet you,” Liz said to Parker and shook her hand. “Good to see you again, Evan. You've barely aged.”

“Oh my God,” Parker said, laughing. “I love you already.”

Christian laughed at Liz's remark. He wasn't sure if she meant it as a joke or not, but her face flushed. “She is pretty great, isn't she?” he said.

He was looking at Evan. “I'm like a fine wine. I just get better with age. Unlike my brother over here.”

“I could say the same about Christian,” she said, winking. “But the truth is, we are both the same age.”

“And you’re even lovelier than you were in high school,” he said. “I know. I was watching.”

Liz blushed again and he wasn’t sure why he’d admitted that.

“It was a long time ago,” she said.

“It was,” Parker said. “Christian tells us you’re an ER nurse. What a hard job you’ve got.”

“It has its moments,” she said. “But it’s rewarding too.”

That was the first he’d heard her say that. “You always say that you just push it from your mind when you leave. That is how you don’t burn out.”

“I do,” she said. “But once in a while you get a win. We had one this week. I found it rewarding.”

She never talked about her work. He never asked either because he honored her comments about separating it when she left the building.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Geez,” Evan said. “What do you two talk about?”

“Not work,” he said. “Do you and Parker talk about work?”

“Nope,” Parker said. “Not unless I’ve got to or need to force your brother to attend a fundraising event.”

His brother all but growled. “Only for love,” Evan said. “Because we know how much I love putting a suit and tie on.”

Parker’s job at St. Peter’s Hospital as director of development meant she had to rub elbows with a lot of money and try to bring it in for funding. No way Christian could do that job or want any part of it.

“Tell me what happened,” he said to Liz.

“A little boy was brought in. He wasn’t far from the hospital and his parents found him in the hot tub unresponsive.”

“Oh my God,” Parker said, her hands to her mouth. “That just makes me think of Grace and our pool and hot tub. We need more security around it.”

“We’ve got plenty,” Evan said, rubbing her hand. “You know that.”

His brother was extremely protective of his family. He could understand that feeling. He was starting to develop it for Liz.

“I didn’t think there was going to be much hope for him, but they’d rushed him in in their arms and he was seen right away. By the end of the night he was awake and showing signs of being okay. He was discharged on Thursday. I don’t normally follow up with patients, but that one I was curious about.”

“That is a great story and rewarding,” Parker said. “Did you treat him?”

“He was one of my patients to monitor until they found a room for him in pediatrics. So not down in the ER for long. But enough to have an impact. The parents were beside themselves. You couldn’t help but feel their pain. Not all parents care that much,” she said, her voice trailing off.

Just another thing he remembered about her. That her mother wasn’t in her life and he wasn’t sure what happened there.

There’d been rumors from kids in school, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember much about them other than Liz’s mother left her father when Liz was young.

The six months they’d dated, Liz had said she hadn’t talked to her mother in years and he just let it go.

Now he wondered what more there was and why it seemed she’d brought this story up today of all days.

INNOCENCE OF YOUTH

The following Tuesday, Christian parked at the pub where he was meeting his friend Tate.

“What’s this I hear you’ve got a girlfriend?” Tate asked when Christian pulled the chair out and sat. His buddy was always early for everything.

He’d felt bad he hadn’t seen his friend much in the past three months. He still texted Tate a few times a week but not much more.

“Yeah,” he said. “How did you find out?”

“Not from you,” Tate said, laughing.

The server came over, and he ordered his beer, then picked up the menu. He was in the mood for a burger more than anything else.

“Sorry. Things have been busy. You know how it is this time of year.”

“No worries,” Tate said. “I wasn’t sure if you were afraid to say something because of my breakup.”

Tate wouldn’t even say his ex’s name. “I wasn’t thinking that,” he said. It’s those things that never crossed his mind either.

“Good,” Tate said. “I wouldn’t want that. Tell me about her?”

“Not a lot to say,” he said. “Her name is Liz Carter. We went to high school together. Dated actually for a few months

when we were young and silly and didn't know what dating meant."

Tate laughed. "The innocence of youth."

"Yeah, something like that." But he was starting to think Liz might not have had all that much innocence in her youth.

He'd spent days trying to remember what he could from back then. He'd even made the mistake of asking his mother on Sunday when Liz was at work.

His mother had only said she'd heard rumors that Lily Sherman had some addiction issues but nothing more.

He knew his mother wouldn't gossip and let it drop. He'd opened up a can of worms there for his mother to start asking about his relationship with Liz and how things were going.

He'd found a way to hang up fast after that.

"So things are good with her?" Tate asked. "Don't hold back on my account."

"They are," he said. "Why?"

"I was going to see if you wanted to hang out Saturday, July first. I've got some tickets to a baseball game."

He wanted to say no, that he spent that time with Liz. But that wasn't right or fair either. Liz was working and he shouldn't give his friends up just because he was dating. If Liz found out, she'd be annoyed.

"Sure," he said. "I don't have any plans."

"Nothing with Liz?" Tate asked.

"We don't plan too far in advance. She works a lot."

"We know you don't plan much anyway. What does she do?" Tate asked. "You didn't even say how you met back up."

He didn't know where this was all going, but it seemed innocent enough in his eyes.

"She's an ER nurse at Albany Med. She works third shift during the week and has weekends off."

“Damn,” Tate said. “And you’re going to spend time with me at a game. I feel honored.”

He laughed. “You should.”

“I’m just kidding. Are you sure?” Tate asked.

“Yes,” he said. “She takes extra shifts all the time. More so when they are short staffed. She’d even made a comment about mandatory overtime coming up because people take time off around the holidays and in the summer.”

“If you’re sure,” Tate said. “I know you sold your last flip and haven’t gotten another one yet. You’ve got to be spinning your wheels with nothing going on.”

He let out a sigh. He didn’t think he was that bad, but maybe he was. He just couldn’t sit still.

“I’ve been keeping busy. Liz bought the house I’ve had my eye on for years.”

Tate started to laugh. “Seriously? That makes more sense.”

“What does?” he asked.

“That you don’t have another flip now. If she bought the house you wanted, that means it needs work. You’re helping her, right?”

He hoped this didn’t turn into Liz taking advantage of him again.

“I am, much to her annoyance.”

“Good,” Tate said.

“What’s so good about it?” he asked.

“That she doesn’t want it. The last thing you want is a woman that needs you around all the time and expects you to do everything for her. No one is happy in the end. Not the woman because you can’t give her what she wants anyway since she has no clue. And not the man who does everything asked of him and it’s still not enough.”

Christian had no idea it had been that bad for Tate. “Dude, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Tate said, picking his beer up. The server brought his out and they ordered their burgers. When the server was gone, Tate said, “It was my mistake. There were plenty that tried to warn me and I didn’t see it.”

“Love can do that,” he said.

“No,” Tate said. “Love doesn’t blind people as much as you hear. I wanted something that she didn’t. It’s no more than that.”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” he said.

He’d never known Tate to get down on himself.

“I’m fine,” Tate said. “I really am. And not sure how we ended up talking about that. Ignore me. There was a bigger reason I asked you to meet tonight for a beer.”

“The game,” he said.

“No,” Tate said. “Not fully. I need a hobby.”

“A hobby?” he asked.

“I thought maybe we could go in on a house together. I’ve got a lead on one. That is if you’ve got time for it.”

He hadn’t expected this, though Tate had said for years he was interested in doing it.

He wasn’t going to say no right away; he’d hear his friend out. He’d never had a partner before. It wasn’t a money issue and he lived in the house so wasn’t sure how this would go.

“Depends,” Christian said. “I’m not looking for a roommate and you know I live in my flips.”

“I know,” Tate said. “I’m not leaving my house. I just figured it’d give me something to do and invest in. Less money you’d have to put upfront too.”

“You know you’ve got to do some of the work too,” he said with a big grin on his face.

“I can do things,” Tate said indignantly. “I did work in my house.”

He'd helped Tate with a bathroom remodel when his buddy bought his house years ago. Tate was good labor but not so good at other things. The joys of demo, those two had a blast, but it wasn't all about smashing things and took more finesse.

"You did. Where's the house?" he asked.

"Altamont," Tate said.

Which was right outside of Guilderland and a coveted area. "Give me the details."

He listened while Tate talked. It wasn't that far, just about fifteen minutes. The price wasn't bad, but he'd have to see it.

"It's a coworker's parents' house," Tate said. "It hasn't had work done in thirty years or more by the sounds of it."

"Is it on the market?" he asked.

"Not yet. I heard him talking about it. His father died a month ago and he's fighting with his sisters about putting money into it to sell it, or just do it as is."

"The problem with estate sales is if one wants more than the other, it could be held up," he cautioned.

"I know," Tate said. "Which is why I've got you."

"Set up a time if you want, after hours. I'll walk through and check it out, but no guarantees."

"That's all I ask," Tate said. "No pressure."

"None felt," he said. He knew Tate wouldn't be offended if he didn't want to do it. He just had to decide if he was willing to commit to something when he was having too much fun working on Liz's house.

GAVE JUST ENOUGH

“**T**he last swipe,” Liz said ten days later. “I want the honor. It’s my kitchen.”

She was all but jumping around in place in her finished kitchen.

The appliances came last week. The countertops were yesterday.

She didn’t get much sleep as she had to be up when they came, but the minute they left she’d gone back to bed after she’d run her hand over the cream granite with swirls of brown in it that matched the color of the cabinets. It was different shades of brown. Something called Colonial Cream. She found it funny since her house was a Tudor yet no one got the joke but her.

“Go on,” Christian said. “It’s all yours.”

She took the blade and smeared the last of the brown grout over the long white subway tiles.

“I can’t believe it’s done!”

“It’s pretty awesome,” he said.

She was looking around the kitchen and big island. This was like a dream to her and to know that it only cost half of what it should have was totally worth the six weeks it took from start to finish.

“I’m going to make you a big dinner in here tonight,” she said.

“You did that last night,” he said.

He’d said he’d had to come see the countertops and while he was here, he decided to start her backsplash. She wanted to tell him no, that he didn’t need to.

She learned it fell on deaf ears.

Her father didn’t listen either and she was tired of listening to herself talk.

She’d told her father to cut it out. That he was working too hard and he’d told her what Abby had said weeks prior.

That he had so much to thank her for for helping raise her little sister.

She didn’t want the thanks. She was lucky they both turned out as well as they had and thanked her father for that.

“But it wasn’t finished last night,” she said. “Now it is. What do you want to eat?”

“You’ve got to go to work,” he argued. “No reason for you to do anything.”

“I need to eat,” she said. “Just like I had to eat last night too.”

“If you insist,” he said. “But whatever you want to make I’ll have. I’m not fussy.”

“I like that you aren’t,” she said.

She opened the fridge and pulled out pork chops. They were already stuffed and she was going to make them last night but decided on burgers instead. These with rice would go down well.

“Was your ex fussy?” he asked.

Liz took a deep breath. She didn’t want to talk about this but had been putting it off. In her mind she knew if she gave just enough it might stop further questions.

That was how she played it with her father and it seemed to be working.

“Yes,” she said. “There were times I couldn’t do much right.”

He nodded his head. “Tate said that to me the other night about his ex. I guess I think of it more from his point of view than a woman’s.”

“What did he tell you?” she asked. She was glad that Christian went to dinner with his friend. She was starting to feel bad that he didn’t do anything unless she was around and she wasn’t around much.

But Christian’s mother had told her that her son couldn’t sit still. This was the longest he’d gone without having at least another flip lined up.

When she heard that, she wondered if they were hinting that he was doing these things in her house for that reason.

Then she started to think they were judging her and that she was taking advantage of his free time.

She tried to assure Judy Butler that wasn’t the case. That Christian didn’t want to take no for an answer.

There was some laughter to that and Judy had said her son never changed and he wouldn’t. For her to get used to it.

But she wasn’t used to it and when Christian had told her that Tate had a house he wanted the two of them to do together, she encouraged it. Just like she was glad he was going to a game with Tate in July because she’d already volunteered to work so she wasn’t forced onto other shifts with mandatory overtime.

“That his ex was never happy. He’d done everything she asked and it was never enough. He said no one is happy in the end. He wasn’t happy because he couldn’t do anything right and she wasn’t because it never ended. She found someone else to give it to her.”

“Sounds like she didn’t know what she wanted other than she didn’t want him,” she said.

“I think he figured that out after his ex left.”

“It’s hard to learn that way,” she said. She turned to wash her hands, then grabbed a paper towel to dry them and get a pan. “You want to know more about my marriage, don’t you?”

“You don’t want to tell me and I shouldn’t ask,” he said.

“There are things no one knows. It’s like that with any relationship,” she said. “It was a lot like what Tate went through...but worse.”

“Did he make you feel bad about yourself?” he asked, frowning.

“Doesn’t every relationship that fails result in people feeling bad about themselves?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve been in relationships that haven’t worked, but I never felt like shit afterward and I hope the woman didn’t either. Things work or they don’t.”

“It’s not that simple,” she said. “Let’s just say he wanted me to be something I wasn’t. Something I couldn’t be.”

“You’re not going to say much more?” he asked. “I just want to understand.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I don’t ever want you to feel that way with me. But I won’t know if you don’t tell me if I’m doing something wrong.”

“There is the difference, Christian. You want to know to prevent it, but this isn’t something to prevent. It’s either in you to be this way or not.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” he said.

She knew she had to dial it back. “Fine. He liked thin women,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re far from fat.”

“To him, right now, he’d be appalled.”

“Fuck that,” he said. She wished she didn’t use this as an example. Not when he looked like he was ready to drive to

Georgia and throw a punch. “You’d have to starve yourself to be thinner.”

“Thanks, but no. I mean, it wasn’t worth the fighting. I changed my diet and I exercised. There is a difference between being thin and looking frail. I was looking frail and it was hard to hide it in scrubs at work.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea. You were thin in school, but you were so active. Now, you’re perfect.”

“Because I’m healthy and doing it for me. I’m going to eat what I want when I want. I’m not going to feel bad about it. I had to get strong mentally and physically for a number of reasons.”

“But the scars are still there,” he said. “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

He’d have no idea how those words meant more than he thought. “You wanted to know. It’s why I reacted when you said something about curves. It was just a reaction.”

“I could give two shits if you put twenty pounds on or fifty pounds. Beauty has to do with more than what people see. It’s about what is inside too.”

“Thank you for that,” she said. “I always felt that way, but it’s another thing I was wrong about.”

Tanner was good looking. He was sweet and kind and complimentary.

It was all part of breaking her down gently. He was playing the long game to the point she didn’t see it.

That slap opened her eyes enough to say it was the final straw.

She’d already had it in her mind to plan on leaving before then.

“I said before I thought you were skittish. I guess I can understand it more.”

“I am, but not as much as I thought I’d be. You’re wearing me down in a good way. But when I tell you I can do things on

my own, I want you to understand it's not just a pride thing. Or being independent. It's that I need to prove to myself and everyone else that I can stand on my own two feet. It's important for me to know I don't need someone else."

"That's sad," he said. "It hurts me to hear you say that."

She didn't want to hurt him, but she needed him to understand that she had to be selfish too. "I'm sorry. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"I understand that. I'd never do anything to hurt you. I don't want to pressure you either, but everyone can use a hand in life too."

"And I'm accepting of it," she said. "I know my father has said a few things to you, but he doesn't even know what I told you."

"There is more?" he asked.

"Yes. It doesn't need to be said. My father doesn't need to know."

"Does Abby know?" he asked.

"She does," she said. She decided to start cooking dinner rather than just standing there talking. She didn't want to get upset, but she felt the lump growing in her throat and didn't want to cry.

The last thing she wanted to do was bring this into the relationship she had now.

"I'm glad you had someone to talk to then," he said, moving toward her. He pulled her in for a hug.

She didn't expect that. She should have. Christian was nothing like Tanner and she was fighting so hard to remind herself of that.

That as much as she was trying not to lose her heart to anyone, she wasn't winning and had to remember that maybe it was time to just practice what she preached.

Be that strong person that could do anything.

Even falling in love with someone again and learning to depend on them just a touch.

LAST ONE STANDING

“It’s like Groundhog’s Day,” Christian said when Liz walked down her arching staircase three weeks later.

“Only this time it’s a black dress. And it’s mine,” she said.

“Sorry that just a few months of dating we are going to our second wedding.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “I haven’t been to that many.”

“Have you been in one before?” he asked.

“Aside from my own?” She was laughing when she said it. Then stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

Her black dress was sleeveless and high on her neck. Like a halter top. The rest of the dress fit her well, hugging her body but not clinging to it either.

It stopped above her knees this time, black open toed wedges on her feet. Her toenails were painted a soft peach and he found it very feminine like the rest of her.

Her long brown hair was down and straight. He knew Abby had done it in waves last time, but it appeared Liz got ready by herself today.

“Yes,” he said.

“Then no,” she said. “I’ve gone to a few of my ex’s coworkers and friends. None of my friends. I didn’t live here or couldn’t come home for them. How about you?”

“I was the best man at Evan’s wedding. The rest of my family has had small weddings, but there have been a lot of them. Then the extended families like this.”

“And this is Cash’s sister that is getting married, right? From the last wedding we went to?”

“Yes,” he said.

“That’s a lot for their family to go through,” she said.

“Sometimes it’s better to get them all over with at once,” he said.

Not him though. He was the last one standing in his family between his siblings and his first cousins.

He didn’t mind it earlier on, but now he was starting to wonder if his time was coming.

It didn’t feel as if he could say anything about it to her either. Not when he knew she didn’t have a good marriage.

For a guy that seemed to blow with the wind so much, he found that he was putting roots down and maybe it wasn’t what Liz wanted.

“Only if you aren’t the one paying for them,” she said. “And I like this suit on you. Is it new?”

“It is,” he said. “I’ve worn my black and dark gray one enough. I thought this was a bit more fashionable.”

“Very,” she said. It was dark blue, not navy, but he wasn’t sure what color he’d call it either. He kept it simple with a cream-colored shirt, blue-and-cream-colored tie and tan shoes.

She was adjusting his tie even though he knew there was nothing wrong with it.

“We look hot, don’t you think?”

She laughed and kissed him on the lips. “I think you look hot. I just look like a girl in a black dress that is dying to get out of it.”

Shit. He wished he could have blown this off, but he couldn’t.

Marcus and Addison were like family.

Addison's family had done business with Butler Construction for years. Marcus was Evan's brother-in-law. So yeah, family of sorts to him too.

"I'll get you out of it the minute we are in the door," he said.

"Do you think we will end up on the floor in here again?" she asked. "Or can we at least try to make it up to my bed?"

"Not the floor," he said. "But I'm not promising we will make it to your room either. That's a long way off."

"Deal," she said. She picked up her purse, locked the door and they left.

"You're sniffing," he said thirty minutes later.

"That was beautiful," she said. He had to admit it was a nice touch that his brother pulled his niece down in a wagon. Then Evan held Grace in his arms up at the altar during the ceremony.

"They are going to dance together for the first dance too," he whispered to her. They were still in the church, and the ceremony was almost done.

"Awww," she said.

They were quiet after that, getting through the exchanging of the vows and then driving to the reception.

Somehow they made it through the whole wedding though he couldn't tell you much of what happened.

They ate food that was good, and he talked to more people than he could count and had no clue what any of those conversations were.

All that he'd thought of was that he wanted to get Liz home and out of this dress that she'd said she needed to remove.

"I didn't think we were ever going to be able to escape," he said.

“Me neither,” she said.

They got out of his truck. He’d had two beers the whole time he was there; Liz had three glasses of wine. More than he’d seen her drink before.

“Are you a little tipsy?” he asked when she was struggling to unlock the door. He took the keys from her hand.

“Just a tad bit,” she said, holding up her thumb and finger in front of her face. “But I know what I’m doing. What I want to do.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Not make it to the bedroom,” she said. “But the kitchen. It’s such a sexy kitchen. So nice and clean and maybe we need to dirty it up some.”

He laughed at what she said. “Are you sure?” He wasn’t sure he’d ever heard of a kitchen being sexy before, but he wasn’t complaining either.

“Oh yeah,” she said. She grabbed his tie and started to tug him with her that way, then stopped. “Sorry. That felt right in my mind, wrong while doing it. You’re not a dog that needs to be led on a leash. Give me your hand.”

He wasn’t sure what that comment was about. It’s not like she was tugging him, but more like guiding him in his mind.

“Where are we doing this?” he asked.

“The island,” she said. “Where I watched you put it together one night. A night that I told you you didn’t need to do any work here in the house, but you didn’t listen to me. I watched you working. Your T-shirt was fitted to you, your biceps were flexing. It was turning me on. Did you know that?”

“No,” he said. “You should have said something. I would have taken care of you.”

She laughed a little, her hand running down the front of his shirt and slowly undoing the buttons. “I don’t need a man to take care of me. I’ve been doing it myself for a long time.”

He didn't know if that mean sexually or not. He didn't want to ask either.

"You do a good job of it too," he said.

"I do," she said. "But tonight. I'm going to let you take care of me."

"Gladly," he said. His shirt was unbuttoned. He'd left his jacket in his truck where he'd tossed it when they'd left the reception.

His hands grabbed her dress at the waist and yanked it up until it was around her hips. She had black lace panties on and he shoved them down, her kicking them out of the way after they were tangled up in her shoes.

"Do you have a condom on you? If you have to run upstairs for one that's going to kill the mood."

"I do have one," he said.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, found the condom and opened it up at the same time she was undoing his pants.

His cock was freed quickly, he covered himself and then spun her around. He could pick her up and put her on the island, but this was better in his eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Fucking you this way," he said.

He saw the little shiver going through her body. He wasn't one to talk like that. More so to someone when he wasn't sure how they'd feel about it.

She didn't seem to care though when she spread her thighs a bit, wiggled her ass and made sure her dress was still up around her hips.

Her hands were on the island to steady herself and she turned to look over her shoulder at him.

"Well," she said. "What are you waiting for?"

He grabbed her hips and pushed his way into her wet heat. They both let out a groan at the same time and he held himself there just savoring the feelings.

But she started to move her hips forward and back, forcing a movement out of him.

She wasn't going to wait and let him build her up and he realized it didn't matter.

It's not like they couldn't do it again later on even if he wanted to take it slow with her at times.

She never let him though.

It's like she didn't know how to be gentle or didn't want him to be.

He started to thrust in and out of her. "Like this?" he asked.

"Just like that," she said. "Exactly like it."

She was panting out with each movement he made inside of her. He was sure he was doing the same.

It was way too hot outside even with the air conditioning on to be doing this fully dressed.

He must have been moving too fast or harshly because her feet slipped some on the tiles with her shoes on.

"Kick them off," he said.

He stopped moving as she removed them, dropping her down a few inches, but he didn't care.

He saw her hand move off the island and down in front of her. He suspected she was going to touch herself and he was thrilled.

He wanted her to be able to do that to get herself there. He never wanted her to feel self-conscious or worried that she'd offend him.

"Oh God," she said.

"Keep touching yourself," he said to her.

“What?” she asked, her hand dropping away. It seemed to him now she did it without thought.

He grabbed her hand off the island, brought it to his mouth and licked the fingers that she’d had covered with her dew. “I said keep touching yourself. Do what you need to get yourself there. Please,” he said. “I’m not that far behind and not sure I can hold on much longer.”

She didn’t hesitate after he’d said that, her hand moving fast, her nails grazing his balls a few times, whether she meant to do that or not.

“Now,” she said. “Really fast now. Just go hard.”

He felt her muscles starting to squeeze and convulse around him, his hips almost like a jackhammer going to town and trying to break through any defense she had against him.

Something broke, he wasn’t sure what. But he shut his eyes and everything was just white and bright.

There were noises in the background and he realized it was his moaning.

“Are you alright?” he asked a minute later and stepped back. He was pushing her against the island now and hoped he didn’t leave bruises on her.

“Yes,” she said. “Just exhausted.”

She turned and was smiling. A soft one that melted his heart just a bit.

He picked her up and carried her to bed and she let him.

If that was the only gentleness he could give her, he’d take it.

SMILE ON MY FACE

The next morning, Liz rolled over and took inventory of her body.

Her head throbbed like a slow drum in a cheesy scary movie.

Good lord, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had three glasses of wine.

Never.

Tanner always monitored her alcohol intake.

She thought it was because of the calories, but then she started to suspect that it had more to do with her slipping and saying something he didn't want anyone to know.

She stretched and started to sniff the air.

Coffee? Something sweet?

She opened her eyes and saw Christian coming around the corner and into the room. "What do you have?"

"Breakfast in bed," he said.

"Are you kidding?" she asked. No one had ever done that for her before. She wasn't sure she ever wanted anyone to.

She wasn't the breakfast-in-bed type of person.

But she found this kind of sweet.

"Nope," he said. "I don't kid about coffee and bacon and eggs."

“I thought I smelled something sweet,” she said, looking at the plate he had. Her coffee was in the other hand. It’s not like she had any trays in her house to carry the food up in. That would be fancy and she was anything but.

“I tried to make cinnamon buns. You had one of those cans in the fridge.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Tried? They aren’t that hard.”

She’d been looking forward to that treat. Nothing she indulged in often and it brought back some childhood nostalgia when she saw them at the store the other day.

Her father used to make them on Sunday mornings for her and Abby. The three of them would eat the whole thing that morning and she’d have this sugar high for hours.

Good times in her eyes.

She finally felt as if she was getting there in her life again when she wanted to remember things like that.

To experience them again.

“No,” he said. “They aren’t. But I was paying more attention to the bacon and didn’t set a timer and they got a bit browned. They are downstairs. Not horrible, but I didn’t want to bring anything up here that wasn’t just right.”

“That’s sweet,” she said. “Hand over the coffee. Not sure if I’ve got a headache from a slight hangover or the action on the island last night and having my head down some.”

He smiled. “Here you go.”

She took the black mug out of his hand and took a healthy sip of the creamy mixture that he’d made just right for her.

She was sick of black coffee that she’d drunk for years too. Again, those calories. She’d given it up because she didn’t care for the taste of it.

Being able to just make her coffee the way she wanted and slowly drink it was such a nice treat.

Crazy when she thought back to the things she let happen to herself.

“This is perfect,” she said. “I wouldn’t have noticed if the buns were burned or not.” She reached for a piece of bacon on the plate and popped it in her mouth. “Yummy.”

“Here,” he said. “Eat.”

“Can I take a shower first? I’m not one for eating in bed. It seems frivolous for someone who hardly ever eats breakfast and sleeps during the day.”

“Sure,” he said. “But it might be cold when you get downstairs.”

“I’ve eaten a lot of cold food in my life. But it will be fine. You can put it in the warming oven that you talked me into.”

“That’s true,” he said, moving back with the plate. She stood up and her tank top pushed up some and showed her belly. “Jesus. Did I do that last night?”

She looked down and saw the bruise around her hipbone. It had slammed against the island at one point. She remembered that now, but it was not like it hurt that much.

“Maybe,” she said. “Not a big deal. I could have done it at work too.”

“No,” he said. “I would have noticed that on you Friday night if you did.”

She tugged her shirt down. “Not the first bruise I’ve had. Don’t worry about it. I barely remember when it happened.”

“Barely?” he asked. He had an appalled look on his face. “That means you do remember it though.”

She took a sip of her coffee, shocked she wasn’t upset over this and he was. She supposed it told her she’d healed more than she realized.

“Christian, it’s a bruise. It was an accident and in the heat of the moment. A moment that I’m going to remember with a smile on my face. It’s fine.”

She walked into the bathroom with her coffee and shut the door on him.

It was fine to her, but it didn’t seem it to him.

She showered and dressed, then went down to the kitchen. He was sitting at the island with his coffee and then got up and grabbed the two plates of food in the warming oven. Guess he'd only brought hers up the stairs for her earlier.

"Let me see it again?" he asked.

She slapped his hand away. "Stop," she said. "It's not a big deal. My hipbones stick out. At one point it must have pushed against the island. I bruise easily. Get over it."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes." She didn't want to talk about this. In her mind it was no big deal and the more they talked about it the more it was going to upset or annoy her.

Maybe bring up things she was trying to get past.

He moved over the pan of the cinnamon buns. They didn't look that burned to her. Just a little toasty and she helped herself to one first.

"Are they okay?" he asked.

"Nice and yummy," she said. "Have one."

He picked one up and started to eat it. "What do you have planned today?"

"Not much," she said. "I've got to go to work later. You know that."

"Yep," he said. "I'll leave in the afternoon and let you get some sleep before your shift starts."

"Thanks," she said. "Did you and Tate decide on what you're going to do with that house?"

He'd told her about it and that he was leaning toward walking away from it. She tried not to question him on too many things. That was his life, his time and his money.

He didn't owe her anything. They'd only been dating a few months.

If she was starting to feel something deeper for him, she shoved it back.

She wasn't so sure she was ready for it.

"I've got to talk to him later today again. I told him I'd think about it, but the truth is, I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why?" she asked.

"First off, Tate can't do the work that I can. He'd be helping, but I'd still be doing it."

"Is that a problem? He'd be putting half the money up though."

"Not a problem," he said. "But I like making my own decisions. I don't normally talk them over with someone else when it's my project. That would take more planning than I do. I work on what I want when I'm ready."

"I can see that point," she said. She'd always known that about him before. She'd seen signs of it now too. She didn't think that was a bad trait for people to have either. Not if it worked for them.

"The other problem is, there are three siblings to the estate and they can't agree on a price. One is holding out for a lot more and wants to put work into the house to get it. Another one doesn't want to and just wants to sell it because they don't live around here. The third will sell it as is, but he thinks they can get more even though they wouldn't have to pay a realtor."

"Ahh," she said. "Yeah, I'd want to knock that down too. They'd still get the same in the end."

"That is what I said, but I'm not in the mood to fight it out and deal with people who can't agree. Estate sales like that can be a headache. By now I would have had this settled and closed. They are dragging their feet and I can move on and do other things."

"You aren't doing anything else though," she said.

Liz finished off her bun and then picked up the fork to start on her eggs.

Her headache was gone and she found she was starving this morning. She didn't get to eat a big breakfast like this often.

“I thought since I wasn’t I could start your bathroom upstairs.”

The fork full of eggs stopped its journey to her mouth. “You know,” she said, “I think you are more obsessed with this house than I am.”

“What?” he asked. “No.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve told you a few times that I didn’t need help and yet I find you and my father here doing it anyway.”

“Your father asked me to help,” he said. “Do you want him doing it on his own?”

He was playing low saying that. “No. That’s not the point though. Even when he isn’t here, you’re here with me and then you suggest we do it together.”

“You said you’ve wanted to learn how to do things,” he argued.

“I have. And I appreciate it. But it’s like you still find a way to get things done when I tell you no.”

“What’s this about?” he asked. “I’m used to doing things.”

“I get that,” she said. “But when I’m off of work we don’t always have to do things in the house. I don’t have you here to be my workman. I already worry people think that as it is. I’ve heard the jokes about this being the house that got away from you too.”

She’d brushed it off when she heard it weeks ago and then again last night. But it was starting to bother her that he was obsessed with this place.

That it was more about the house than it was her.

“Don’t let what other people say get to you,” he said.

“So people are saying something?” she asked. Her hands were on her hips. This was the last thing she wanted in her life right now. Another family that thought she was trying to move up in the world. Or that couldn’t accept her for who she was.

“No,” he said.

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “Someone said something to you. Admit it.”

“Listen,” he said. “My family knows I can’t sit still. It’s not a secret that I wanted this house. It’s a joke. Nothing more than that. No one thinks you are using me or taking advantage of me.”

It was the words he chose. “But someone did think that early on at least?” she asked.

“Not like you think,” he said.

She didn’t want to hear this. “I’m not taking advantage of you,” she snapped.

“I know. And no one thinks it now. They didn’t then either. It’s more joking or something. Nothing to worry about. My family loves you.”

“It was Evan, wasn’t it?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Put it from your head,” he said. “Evan likes you. Parker loves you. I never said anything because Evan can be an asshole at times. He’s moody and has always been that way. He’ll admit when he’s wrong. He did the next day. I don’t want you mad at my brother over something he said or thought before he even saw you again based on the fact you bought this house over me.”

What Christian was saying made sense, but in her angry state she didn’t want to hear it. Or maybe even believe it.

“Whatever,” she said. “But it’s still the same as I said. I don’t need you doing things for me. I don’t need you working on my house because you feel sorry for me.”

“Feel sorry for you?” he asked. “Where is this all coming from?”

“The poor divorcee that came home with nothing,” she said. “My life is full of hand-me-downs and second-hand possessions. It’s always been that way. I know people looked at me in school like that and I see it now too.”

“You’re getting all worked up in your head about something that I’m not even thinking,” he said.

He got up with his plate and brought it to the garbage and dumped the remains in the trash.

“Where are you going?”

“Home,” he said. “I don’t know what’s going on, but me staying here is only going to make this conversation worse.”

“What’s going on is that we are having a fight,” she said. “I want you to know I don’t need you or anyone else controlling my life and making decisions for me. I’m perfectly capable of doing it on my own.”

“Heard,” he said, grabbing his keys and slamming out the door.

Well, that wasn’t how she thought the day would go.

RATTING ME OUT

““**W**hat bug crawled up your ass?” Evan asked him days later.

“What are you talking about?” Christian asked, turning his head to see his brother standing in the doorway of his office on Wednesday afternoon.

“I asked what your problem has been,” Evan said. “Everyone has noticed it. Normally I’m the one that people are bitching about, not you.”

“Nothing is wrong,” he said and went back to his computer.

“Yes,” Evan said, walking in. “There is something. It’s ninety fucking degrees out and I’ve been standing around in the heat and sweating my balls off. I’ve got the right to be moody. You, on the other hand, have always been the brother that blows with the wind and nothing bothers you. You’re sitting in this cushy air-conditioned office and yet still have a frown on your face and are barely talking to anyone. I believe you were overheard swearing at the coffee machine this morning too.”

He all but growled, which only proved his brother’s point. “Who is watching me and ratting me out?”

Evan shut the door and came in to sit down. “Not that it matters, but I can tell you because you won’t say anything. It’s Mom. She was here earlier and heard it. She thought it was me and was going to come down on my head and then she saw it was you.”

“I didn’t know she was even here.”

Evan was grinning at him. “She stopped in looking for Dad. She’d just missed him, she’d said. She heard the swearing.”

“And wanted to slap your hand?” Christian asked.

“There is the grin I’m used to seeing. So yeah, what is going on? I guess Mom mentioned something to Whitney to see if anything happened. And don’t get pissy at Whitney either.”

“Never,” he said. “She’ll come down on my head like Mom.”

“That’s right. But Whitney said everyone is just giving you wide berth.”

Christian let out a sigh. He wasn’t used to this. Nor was he used to feeling like he had been.

He supposed it was reflected now to everyone.

“It’s been a long few days.”

“Something going on with Liz?” Evan asked.

He debated for a few seconds and finally said, “We had a fight on Sunday.”

“You don’t normally fight about much in your life,” Evan said. “That’s me.”

“It feels like shit too,” he said. He hadn’t talked to Liz either, which was worse in his eyes.

She’d gone to work on Sunday like she normally did. He knew she slept during the days, but she could have texted him on Monday. Or last night. She was sleeping now, but he’d been tempted to reach out. He’d hold off. He had to let her come to him. She was the one that split up with him back in high school and he never found out why.

Sure, they hadn’t been dating long and he just moved on like she had, but he had to admit it had come as a shock. He’d written it off as teens that just went their own way and refused to let anyone know that it bothered him more than he let on.

Maybe that was why he was so pissy right now. This was bothering him more than he wanted to admit and he hoped it wasn't history repeating itself.

Or maybe it was more of a reality check on the things she'd said.

Not that he was more interested or obsessed with the house. He didn't think he was.

"What was the fight about?" Evan asked. "Maybe I can help."

"I don't know. I didn't even think it was a fight. I brought up helping her with the hall bath upstairs. She got offended and said that she didn't need help. She didn't want it with the kitchen, but I'd managed to slip in there and do it because her father asked for my help."

"What's the problem there?" Evan asked. "I don't see it."

"Really? This from the guy who thought she was taking advantage of me. Which by the way, she figured out you felt that way."

"What the fuck, Christian? Now she's going to be pissed at me. I hadn't even seen her yet. I shouldn't have that hanging over my head."

"I told her that," he said. "I didn't mean to even say it. She guessed it. That is what started this. That she didn't want people to think she was only with me for what I can give her."

"It's not the case."

"I told her that too," he said. "I told her I was going to leave because this conversation was getting out of hand. It was best to cool it off. She had to work."

Evan snorted. "I bet that went over like a fart in church."

"She told me we were fighting and that she was sick of people making decisions for her and telling her what to do. Or what was best. I don't know. The words were flying and I felt like it was a dodgeball game and I was outnumbered and trying to find cover. I left. We haven't talked since."

“Your first mistake was leaving,” Evan said. “Never leave. Now you’ve got to figure out how to go back and talk. If you want to.”

“I do,” he said.

“Then you should have stayed and worked it out. Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t think it was that big of a deal and then it was in her eyes. She’s had it rough with her ex-husband. I didn’t want to add to anything she might have gone through before.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Not a lot. She doesn’t talk about it. I think he knocked her down a lot.”

“Physically?” Evan asked.

“I hope not. I don’t think so. But I don’t know. I know verbally for sure. She’s made comments about not being good enough for him. Or never doing the right things. I know she left him. I think it’s like she just literally had enough and left. Didn’t fight for anything and came home.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I can’t put my finger on it. Little things her father has said. There is more going on and she admitted that much but never told me what it is. Her father doesn’t know either because Trevor has brought it up to me to see if I know.”

“Yikes,” Evan said.

“I did ask if Abby knew. I mean I can’t imagine not being able to tell someone what happened.”

“Does she?”

“She said her sister knew.”

“That’s something at least,” Evan said. “I’d tell you.”

“Like hell,” he said.

“Dude, you know I would if it was serious. It might take me a while to do it, but I would. Just like you would do the

same thing. At least I'd hope so. Kaelyn knows she could come to us too."

"You're right," he said.

"I need to mark my calendar," Evan said. "You never say I'm right."

"You think every word that comes out of your mouth is right and it has been like that your whole life."

Evan smirked. "True. And you never let much bother you and you are extremely bothered now. Do you love Liz?"

"You're getting personal," he said.

"That's what brothers do."

As Evan said, maybe he needed to tell someone. "I think I do. She thinks I'm obsessed with the house more than her."

Evan laughed. "Well, you have wanted that house for longer than I can remember. You talked about it as a kid every time you went by it or saw work being done to it. It's got to be killing you that the outside isn't all fluffy and colorful."

He frowned. "It has so much potential."

Evan laughed much harder to the point he was coughing. "Do you care more about the house you lost than the woman who owns it?"

"No," he said. "Let's be honest, Evan. If I cared all that much I'd go build one just like it. It's not that I don't have the money or means to do it. I even know the layout of it and could make it completely the way I want."

"You make a good point. One you should bring up to her when you talk again. If you talk again."

"We will," he said. "We have to. She isn't the type to just walk away like that."

"Actually, it sounds like she is. But in this case, you're the one that left."

DELICATE SITUATION

“Liz, there is a possible broken wrist in four.”

She turned when she was told where to go next. She grabbed her laptop and moved the curtain aside, saw the woman sitting on the bed holding her hand, her head down.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Liz. You think you might have broken your wrist? Can you tell me what happened?” She looked down at that chart on her computer. “Carolyn, right?”

“Yes,” Carolyn said, looking up. There was a bruise on the woman’s right cheek, some swelling under her eye with it. “I tripped and fell down the last few steps. I hit the wall and then landed on my wrist to catch myself.”

She let out a sigh. She’d seen and heard this way too much in her life. She’d experienced some of it herself.

Liz also knew that it was a delicate situation. Not everyone would admit what was going on, nor would they leave their husband.

She’d been one of those women, but the moment she was hit, she was out the door.

With help.

She had to remind herself of that too. She would have gone back home after work that night. After she lied about the mark on her face. The one she used a lot of foundation on to cover up so her father didn’t question her.

He didn't seem to notice, but Abby had. There was no hiding the truth then.

"Hmm," she said.

She was scrolling through Carolyn's chart. There weren't any other visits to the ER in years. The last had been stomach pains and she was diagnosed with kidney stones seven years ago.

Either this was new or it was escalating. She didn't believe what Carolyn was saying. Not with the way the mark was on her face. The X-rays would show the break, if there was one, then they could tell if it made sense with the story.

"I thought I just sprained it," Carolyn said. "You know, you land wrong and all. I put ice on it, but it's not getting better. It's actually worse."

"When did this happen?" she asked while typing her notes.

"Yesterday morning."

She looked at her watch. It was eleven at night. If it happened in the morning yesterday, why was Carolyn coming in over thirty-six hours later? Why in the middle of the night when she could have come hours earlier?

"Did you drive yourself here?" she asked, noting it was the right hand.

"Yes," Carolyn said. "My husband is at work."

Which explained some of it in her mind. "Was he home when you fell?"

"Yes," Carolyn said. "But I didn't think it was that big of a deal. He was going to bed and I didn't want to worry him. He needed to sleep. I put ice on it and thought it was getting better. Last night I slept with ice on it too."

"If you needed ice on it that much, then you should have come in then," Liz said. "But I'm glad you're here now. Why did you wait this late though?"

Carolyn was looking around and not making eye contact. "Jason was sleeping during the day. Then I had to get dinner

ready. I decided to come after he left.”

“Carolyn,” she said. “Did you fall down the stairs?”

“I did,” Carolyn said. “I tripped.”

Thankfully there were a series of questions that were asked now and she went through them all. The last was, “Do you feel safe at home?”

There was just enough hesitation for Liz to know she could push more. “Yeah,” Carolyn said, then put her head down again.

“Listen, Carolyn,” she said. “This is a safe zone. If someone did this to you.”

“I fell down the stairs.”

“If someone caused you to fall down the stairs. Maybe you were trying to get away and in your haste you tripped. We can get you help. You don’t have to stay and take it.”

“It’s not like that,” Carolyn said.

“Okay,” Liz said. There was no reason to push more now. Carolyn would be here for a bit and she’d come back and work on her. She had other patients to deal with. “Let me just examine you and finish up with these questions and a doctor will be in to see you. I want to say soon, but it’s the ER and that isn’t always the case. You’ll need X-rays for sure. I might be able to get you in for them quickly. When I’m done, just lie back and relax some if you can.”

She left Carolyn ten minutes later and returned to her other patients.

Three hours later, the doctor on shift came over to her. “I just read the X-rays on Carolyn Smith. She’s got a broken wrist. I think you’re right about the abuse, but the break is consistent with a fall. There isn’t anything we can do unless she asks for help.”

“I know,” she said.

“I’m going to go in and let her know. If you can get the splint she’ll need and then refer her to an orthopedist to get a

cast put on it, that would be great. You can discharge her after.”

“Will do,” she said and went about getting the splint and making her way in after the doctor’s notes were updated.

She went back into the room with Carolyn and decided to give it one more chance. “I can leave soon?” Carolyn asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Let me just put the splint on you and go over your discharge papers. You’re not working right now, correct?”

Carolyn had said she was a teacher. “No,” Carolyn said. “I guess it’s a good thing. Hopefully by the time school starts up again I’ll have this off.”

“It will be close,” she said. “Listen. I’ve been in your shoes. Where you think it’s normal for things like this to happen. But it’s not. Or one day it’s kind of normal and the next, you’re in the ER. You can tell people things to brush it off, but what you don’t realize is that most people know.”

Carolyn looked at her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She’d never told anyone other than Abby what happened with Tanner. Never admitted it. Even with Donna she didn’t have to admit anything when her mother-in-law saw it with her own eyes.

“I was married for four years,” she said quietly. “He was such a nice sweet guy. I’d moved to another state. I didn’t have any family around. Just some friends through work, but no one close. My ex made me feel like he was my world and I could go to him for anything.”

She had Carolyn’s attention. “My family doesn’t live around here.”

“It’s easier when those that know you the best aren’t around to notice changes that you’re hoping no one sees. In my job, though, people saw it. I wasn’t as smart as I thought I was.”

“What happened?” Carolyn asked.

“I put up with it for years. It was slow and gradual. I went from feeling five feet four inches tall to just four inches tall. I worked so hard to make him love me and be the person he wanted and in the process lost who I was.”

“It’s not easy,” Carolyn said. Still not admitting anything but listening at least.

If she could get through to Carolyn, maybe she’d realize and notice signs of abuse in her students and help too.

“No,” she admitted. “It wasn’t. But one night he’d snapped more than normal. I went to walk away from him like I always did and he hit me. Right in the face. On the cheek. A backhand that was more of an insult if that makes sense.”

Carolyn’s eyes filled with tears while she nodded her head. “It is.”

“He left after he’d done that. After he tried to blame me for making him do it. Just like he always did when we fought. I had to go to work and I knew he wouldn’t return until I was gone. I was lucky. His mother knew what was going on and I didn’t realize it. She showed up and helped me leave. She helped me pack and told me to go and not come back. She made it so I didn’t have to wait to find the right time to leave. Because that slap was the final straw for me, but not enough to leave at that moment.”

“That’s it?” Carolyn said. “You left?”

“That night with her help. I threw everything I could of my stuff in my car and left town and returned home. Drove through the night and all. I showed up on my father’s doorstep and he welcomed me in as if I’d never left. I should have remembered that. That the fear of letting him down wasn’t worth putting up with what I had.”

“You didn’t have a problem after? From your ex?” Carolyn asked.

“No. But I understand not all situations are like that. Which is why we can help. There are services there for that. As a teacher I’m sure you know of them.”

“Yes,” Carolyn said.

“Then remember that. If you won’t let someone help you, if you aren’t ready, just know that you aren’t alone. And that there is a life after you leave.”

She finished up with Carolyn and then left for her next patient.

By the time her shift ended, she knew what she had to do.

She had to reach out to Christian and tell him what happened to her. She’d never be able to move on if she didn’t do that.

He had a right to know why she was reacting the way she was.

Whether they continued with their relationship had nothing to do with the fact that she owed it to herself to not hide that she came out on the other side.

DARKEST PART OF HER LIFE

“**T**hanks for coming over,” Liz said to Christian the next day at dinnertime.

She’d texted him when she clocked out this morning, told him she’d like to talk and asked if he could come to dinner.

He replied quickly and it told her that maybe she shouldn’t have waited as long as she had to reach out.

“I’m sorry,” Christian said.

“For what?” she asked. She hadn’t expected him to apologize right away.

“For leaving on Sunday. That was wrong of me. I should have stayed and talked it out with you.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked. “The Christian I knew wouldn’t have lost it and left. You were always the guy that just went with what was going on around you. Nothing ever seemed to work you up before.”

“Maybe it means more now. I’m not the same person I was at sixteen,” he said. “I’d say you aren’t either.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not. And I need to tell you why I’m not. I’m not sure where we go from here, but I realized at work last night that I can’t go on like I’ve been for the past year.”

“What’s going on?” he asked.

She pulled out the chicken she’d been marinating since she got off shift. There were potatoes in foil that were seasoned

and she'd throw them on the grill in a minute with the chicken. Corn on the cob was going to go in a pan.

It was a homey dinner and she needed something to do with her hands while she talked about the darkest part of her life.

"Let me get dinner going," she said. "We can sit outside if you want."

"Sure," he said. He went and got a beer. He didn't normally drink during the week, but she got the feeling he knew he'd need it.

Once the chicken and the potatoes were on, she sat down in one of the chairs of her small patio set. "I had a patient come in last night. She had a broken wrist and a bruise on her face. She said she fell down a few steps. Her X-ray confirmed the way of the break, her landing on her hands to catch herself. Her cheek could have too with her explanation, but I wasn't buying it."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because her mannerisms were like looking in a mirror," she said quickly. "This was a woman in front of me that was beaten down mentally and emotionally. Now I saw the signs of it physically. There was nothing in her medical records that indicated any signs of abuse though. Not until last night."

She was watching his face and knew the moment he understood what she was saying. "You were abused by your ex-husband?" he asked. His fists were clenched and he looked ready to stand up, find his keys and drive to Georgia to find Tanner just as he had the night she'd commented on Tanner thinking she was fat.

"Verbally and emotionally I was for years," she said. "I never saw it coming until it was right in my face."

"Do you want to tell me what that means?" he asked. "If you don't, I understand."

"I came this far so I'm going to continue if you let me."

"I want to know," he said. "I think I need to know."

“You do,” she said. “Abby knows. Not everything but most of it. My father doesn’t.”

“Your father suspects something,” he said.

“I know. He’s never asked me, but I know he’s hinted to Abby. Has he said anything to you?”

“Hints and questions that I don’t have answers to. Why doesn’t he know?”

Liz started to sniffle. “I didn’t want him to do anything about it. I didn’t want him to feel like he failed. There is so much in his life he felt like he failed at and I didn’t want to add to it.”

She wasn’t going to talk about her mother. That wasn’t what this was about. Not even her father and mother’s relationship.

“I want to say he wouldn’t feel that way, but I’m not sure.”

“He would have,” she said. “When I met Tanner, he was great. We got along. I met him in the ER. He came in hurt and then he came back. He brought me flowers. He asked me out. I said sure. I was living alone. I had some friends, but I didn’t get out much. You could say he won me over quickly. We got engaged in less than a year and married a year or so later. Everything was fine.”

“It didn’t start until you were married?” he asked. “Until he felt like he had you and you had nowhere to go?”

“That about sums it up. Looking back, I’m sure that might have been the plan. I didn’t think there was a plan, but it seems maybe there was.”

“What changed?” he asked.

“It started with my weight. I hadn’t weighed much more than when I was in high school. Maybe a bit more.”

“You were thin in high school,” he said. “You look perfectly healthy to me now. I think you were almost too thin in school, but you were a girl and now you’re a woman.”

It might have been the right thing he could have said. “Yeah. Well, he liked women thin. I hadn’t thought I put weight on, but he’d make comments. Then he’d buy me clothes and they were snug and he’d say I should lose a little to wear them.”

“He was buying you the wrong sizes?” he asked.

“No. Just styles that ran smaller. I lived most of my life in scrubs. Then he started to comment on my food choices. It seemed easier to just go along with it than fight. I was over fighting. I didn’t want to do it.”

She’d seen enough of it growing up with her parents. She’d always told herself she wouldn’t have a relationship like that, yet she had one.

One that was actually worse.

“You’re not afraid to say what you want now,” he said. “I’m glad to know that.”

“Good,” she said. “Because I’m never going back to being that person again. You need to know that.”

“What made you leave?” he asked.

“I don’t need to bore you with all the details. The weight was one thing. There were so many more controlling things. Belittling things. I’d get tired of fighting and either give in or walk away. When I’d walk away he’d grab my arm or give me a little shove. We were never done with conversations until *he* was done with them.”

“You didn’t do anything about it?” he asked. His face was red now.

“He’d always apologize. He’d turn it around that I made him do it. Then he’d leave after our fight, come back upset after he’d been drinking. Like he had to console himself for what he did. Things would get better and he’d make it up to me. We’d stop fighting and then it’d start over.”

“No one noticed this?” he asked. “No one you worked with?”

“There wasn’t much to notice,” she said. “It’s not like we stand around in the ER talking about our lives much. We are too busy. If I had bruises on my arms or legs from being grabbed or bumping into something if I was pulled or shoved, no one thought anything of it. It’s part of my job or I’d say I ran into something. I was covered up well in the scrubs anyway.”

“He was smart about that,” he said.

“I guess. As I said, I thought no one noticed,” she said quietly.

“But someone was watching?” he asked.

She turned to check on the food cooking on the grill, gathered her thoughts and turned back to Christian.

“Yes. The night I left we’d gotten in a fight. Tanner wanted me to call in sick the next day and go to a dinner party at his boss’s with him. He never understood that I couldn’t just do that. I loved my job, but he felt like it was second class.”

“I’d hardly say that,” he said.

“I never felt that way. He controlled a lot. He owned his house when we met. When we married, I gave him a big chunk of my check to pay for bills but had some in an account for me. He knew about that. He didn’t know that I had another account and started putting more in it. Maybe I always knew I’d need an escape plan deep down. Every time I got a raise or worked overtime, that money went into this other account. He just got a set amount which was like seventy percent of my check.”

“I want to ask why but won’t. It’s in the past.”

“It is,” she said. “I wanted to pay for my share. It’s as simple as that. I had no reason not to give him that when we were married. It’s not like I spent a lot of money or wanted anything. I paid for my car payment myself and insurance. I kept my cell phone. Those things were always separate and it worked out. I had some spending money at the end of the month. At least in his eyes. He knew I had bills, but he

covered the rest of everything with joint credit cards that I used for expenses in the household.”

“But he didn’t know about this other account, you said?”

“No. I don’t know what made me do it. In my mind, I think I knew there might be a time I’d have to leave. It slowly built up but wasn’t like a ton of money. Under ten thousand. More than enough to leave, but not live off of for long.”

“Enough to get away,” he said. “That is all that should have been important.”

“Yes. And that one night, we argued. He hit me. Backhanded me across the face. I was stunned. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew that was it.”

“You didn’t tell him that, did you?”

“God, no,” she said. “He left the house like he always did after yelling at me for causing him to do that.”

“Asshole,” he said.

“That and more,” she said, snorting. “I was icing my face and making a plan in mind. How I was going to pull it off. And then in walks my mother-in-law, Donna.”

“Out of the blue?” he asked. “At night?”

“Yeah. It was like eight at night. I still had two hours before I left for work, but she came storming in and told me to go pack now. She’d help me.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“No,” she said. Liz told him everything that happened and why Donna did it. Then she said, “She gave me a hundred thousand dollars right then. Just transferred it into that account that I thought no one knew about.”

“How did she know?” he asked. His jaw was open, which she could understand because it still stunned her. “Did you know they had that kind of money?”

“I never asked how she knew about that account, but she told me to sign into it and there was the money, as if I rubbed a genie and it appeared. Donna had money left to her from her

father. The family was upper middle class. I didn't realize she had money like that to just hand over, but she felt like she needed to. I wanted to say no."

"Why didn't you?" he asked.

"It didn't seem like I had a choice. She told me she'd make sure Tanner didn't come after me. To just run and not come back. Take what was mine. I left everything else. She said to consider it a settlement from the divorce and that she wished she'd done something sooner."

"Why the hell hadn't she?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, sighing. "I'm not sure why she did that night. Other than she knew Tanner was out getting drunk and had her suspicions. I've touched base with her a few times after I left, but it's been over eight months or so. She just wanted to make sure I was settled. I was pretty cordial with her. I never said much. Though I could trust her more than anyone else in Tanner's family, I still didn't trust anyone enough to say much."

"As you shouldn't," he said angrily. "They shouldn't have let what was happening happen."

"It's on me for allowing it," she said.

He stood up and moved to her, pulled her into his arms and held her. "No," he said. "It's not on you. You needed help and there was no one there to give it to you. I don't ever, *ever* want you to feel like that with me. Or anyone. There is always someone out there to help another person."

"I know that," she said, sniffing. "Which is what I did tonight with a patient. And then I realized that if I can tell a stranger some things, then I can tell you. The reason I sometimes jump down your throat is because of what I went through. I say I'm fine. But then I wonder, am I really?"

"It's been a year," he said. "I don't know that you'll ever forget it completely. Or not have a trigger to it."

"No," she said. "I mean I hope that isn't the case, but I don't know for sure. So I'm sorry that I've had that reaction with you."

“I wish I knew more. Or before,” he said.

“It wouldn’t have changed anything,” she said. “I probably would have still reacted the same with you not taking no for an answer with the help on the house.”

“Probably,” he said, kissing her forehead. “But I wouldn’t have walked out on Sunday and let all these days go without talking to you. I knew you had a bad marriage and had to work things out on your own. I didn’t want to push you. Based on what you were saying to me, you’d been pushed enough.”

This was the part of Christian that hadn’t changed.

He let things go in the moment and would work them out when it was time rather than forcing it.

Part of her should be happy he had that trait and the other not because maybe she needed the push.

“I have been. But you deserve to know why I said what I did. It doesn’t change the fact that I don’t need you to do things for me.”

Maybe she could finally get him to see that she could be fine on her own. She knew it deep down now and if it was not what Christian wanted out of a relationship, it’d be best to know that now.

FINDING A WAY

“**D**id it ever occur to you that I’m not always doing things for you but for me too?” Christian asked.

He was trying not to lose his shit over what Liz had just said to him.

He’d known there was more going on in her marriage but wasn’t sure he’d expected to hear what he had.

“What are you doing for yourself?” she asked.

She’d moved out of his arms and went to check on dinner.

“I’ve never been someone to just sit around. I have to always be doing something.”

“I know,” she said. “I remember that about you in high school. And I wonder if it’s hard with my job. I’m not around much.”

“It’s not hard,” he said. “You’re sleeping when I’m at work. I’m sleeping when you’re at work. But we see each other when you’re awake during the week a few times. That is about the same as any other normal relationship.”

“I think that,” she said. “But I didn’t know if you did.”

“I do,” he said.

“You are normally spending time flipping a house though when you’re not working. And you aren’t doing that. I wonder if you won’t take on another project because then you’ll be

spending time doing that when you could be with me and you worry I'll be upset over it."

He had thought that. He wanted to lie but knew that it seemed she'd been lied to enough in her marriage. The fact her husband ended up not being who she thought he was.

"There is part of that there."

Her hands went to her hips and he thought she was winding up to unleash a storm on him. He reached for her fingers and threaded theirs together. "You're trying to distract me," she said.

"Defuse you," he said. "I said part of it. If I could find a house closer to you and it was the right price, I'd buy it and work on it. I hate living in the apartment. It's the truth. But the one house that was a good deal was over forty minutes away. I'm not going to spend that much time in the car and take it away from time with you."

Her head went back and forth. "I appreciate that. I would have told you it was fine."

"I know you would have. And maybe it would have been, but it's not what I want. See, I'm being selfish here. I do want to work on a house. I do want another project. But I don't want something that is inconvenient to my job and my relationship with you."

"I'll buy that," she said. "Let me go get the corn going. I forgot about it. It won't take long."

He watched her walk away and went to the grill to check on the dinner, then went into the house and started to pull the plates down. No reason that she had to do everything.

"Can we eat outside?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Getting the plates," she said.

"You don't need to thank me for doing my part."

He hated that maybe she felt like she had with her ex.

She nodded. When they were back outside, she said, “I appreciate you thinking of our relationship when trying to figure out where to live and a flip, but you have your own life too.”

“Maybe I want us to have one together,” he said. “I can’t do that if I’m too far away. Or worry that I can’t make the time to see you. Trust me, if a house became available this week close by and it was a good deal, I’d jump on it.”

“I believe you,” she said. “And I shouldn’t have said what I had about this house. I think it just was a trigger about me always saying no and you somehow finding a way to do it. I worried you thought I couldn’t afford it.”

“Well, I did think that,” he said. “But I wouldn’t have offered money or anything. Everyone has their pride. You’ve been working right alongside me during the kitchen rehab or your father has. Not once have I come over here alone to do any work.”

Even though he’d been so tempted to do that but told himself that might be the line that shouldn’t be crossed.

“I know,” she said. “I shouldn’t have overreacted. And as for money, I live a simple life. I’m frugal. We never had a ton growing up, but we weren’t poor.”

“I understand that,” he said. Her father was a single father. His job was seasonal so the money was never guaranteed and had to be stretched for lighter times of the year. “I also understand more how you were able to buy this house and do what you have been to it.”

“I hated taking the money from Donna.”

“Don’t,” he said. “She wouldn’t have given it to you if she didn’t feel she needed to. She could have just as easily come over to help you pack and move.”

“She could have. I’m not sure I would have left though that night. That is the hard part about this. I ask myself all the time, did I do it because of the money?”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” he said. “The money only made it easier for you to do it right then. Donna had to have

known that. Maybe she was scared of what her son would do. She could have been equally scared for him as she was for you.”

“That I believe,” she said. “My father has no idea I was given the money. He doesn’t know how bad my marriage was either. I told him just enough.”

“How much was just enough?” he asked. “I don’t want to lie but don’t want to slip either if it comes up.”

“He knows that I was beaten down verbally and emotionally. That I never felt as if I was enough for Tanner. He thinks I just had enough and left. He doesn’t know anything about the physical part.”

“Which was going on longer than that night,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, sighing. “But I’m not lying to you, Christian. The slap was the last straw. On the drive home, I ate a whole bag of chocolate and laughed and cried through the drive. It felt so good to stuff myself as I cursed and swore. Something so stupid and silly as that made me realize what a fool I’d been. A freaking bag of chocolate that I could eat without guilt.”

“No,” he said. “Don’t do that to yourself. Don’t think you shouldn’t have put up with it or should have left sooner. Know that you left when you needed to. Maybe you would have left and gone back to him earlier on.”

“You could be right. But he made me hate him. When I was driving away that night, there was no love left between us. I was a possession to him at that point. He was a shackle on my ankle.”

“I’ll never be that way to you,” Christian said. “But I want you to tell me if you feel that. If you feel any weight on you from me. Or that I’m putting on you. Any pressure at all.”

“Thank you for that too,” she said. “But it goes both ways. I need to know if you feel it also.”

“Never,” he said. He didn’t know why she’d say that.

“Christian. This relationship is new.”

“No,” he said. “It’s not. It’s a continuation of our other one.”

She laughed at him. “We were sixteen.”

“And now we are thirty-four. We are stronger and more independent, but we are still the same two people who were drawn to each other before. This isn’t just a second chance at your life for you, but one for us. That is how I’m looking at it.”

“Then that is how I will too,” she said. “Dinner is done. I took the night off and I was hoping you’d stay.”

“Why did you take it off?” he asked.

“Because I hoped that we could work this out. I didn’t know how I’d feel after. There were a lot of things going through my mind and I thought it might be wise to have a clear head at work and there was a chance that might not be the case.”

He put her face in his hands. “Yes, I’ll stay the night. I just need to get some clothes. Did you think we wouldn’t work it out and you’d be upset?”

He was staring into her eyes. He wanted to see if he could find any signs of her feelings toward him and what they had.

That he wasn’t feeling this alone.

That maybe she was falling in love with him as he was with her and she’d be upset if they walked away from each other.

“I hoped we would work it out,” she said. “And yes, I’d be upset if we didn’t, but it’s not the first time in my life I’ve been upset about things.”

It wasn’t the answer he wanted, but it was more than he had before.

“Then let’s eat dinner and I’ll get some clothes for tomorrow. I’m sure you’re not going to be too tired for a while if you slept today.”

“I only slept until noon,” she said. “As I said, I knew I had the day off. I wanted to be rested up so we could have some makeup sex.”

He laughed. “I like the way you think.”

TIGHT-KNIT FAMILY

““**Y**our first Paradise Place picnic,” Christian said to her two weeks later.

“It is,” she said. “Are you sure just making cookies is fine?”

She’d seen pictures of this picnic on the development’s website. It looked like a good time, but if she wasn’t dating Christian, she was positive she wouldn’t have attended.

Liz wasn’t someone to get to know her neighbors and hang out with them. She barely said hi to the few she had now.

The house across the street was going to get a new kitchen and some other work done on it. Christian had told her that was what he was doing there when he’d witnessed her mailbox being hit. Guess they were just getting around to starting in a week or so. She was glad the work would be inside and not be too noisy and keep her up during the day when she had to sleep.

“Yes,” he said. “There are so many people there. There are multiple repeats of salads and desserts. My family takes care of the grilling. They normally do hamburgers and hot dogs. It’s easy enough to fit a lot on the grills they bring in.”

Christian had stayed at her house last night and gotten up early to go help set up. Guess the whole family did it. She’d offered to help and he’d told her she didn’t need to.

She wanted to argue but then realized she’d just be in the way when he said none of the wives were there. They were

home with the kids, but she didn't have any kids.

It wasn't worth arguing about, so she decided to bake her cookies this morning rather than last night. She'd made a double batch of lemon bars. She felt that was a nice summer dessert and she wouldn't have to worry about them melting in the heat.

"I think it's great that they've done this for years," she said.

"It is. Be ready to have a lot of people come talk to you."

"Because I'm with you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "You'll get a lot of questions too."

"I figured some of my neighbors will come talk. I've waved to them but haven't spoken to anyone. I'm only around on the weekends and outside mowing the lawn or something if they are."

He pulled on her ponytail playfully. "I remember you used to be so much more outgoing."

"Not really," she said. "I think I forced it more than anything else. In school it's just so hard to get along with people."

"But you did," he said.

"By chance," she said. "Playing sports helped, but you know as well as I do that girls are harsh and things were said. I wasn't always good enough for some groups."

She didn't dress like they did. Her family didn't have the money.

When some started to say she was trying to move up by dating Christian, it was just too much attention on her and she'd had enough.

Over the years she might have regretted breaking up with Christian, but he never fought to get her back either. In her eyes it hadn't meant much to him. Nothing more than a first love or sexual experience.

She didn't let it bother her *too* much and just moved on with her life.

Funny how here she was though.

"You're good enough for me," he said, kissing her on the lips. "You ready to go meet your neighbors?"

She sighed. "Yes. There is alcohol there, right?"

He laughed at her. "You don't drink much, but there is beer. I'm sure Shannon or Zoe has wine. Some bring it. I'll stick with beer. Many bring their own drinks, but there will be a lot of water and juice boxes that the family supplies too."

Which was just another great thing about Christian's family.

"Don't want anyone to get heat stroke," she said. "I don't want to be put to work."

"Do you know how many doctors, police, firemen, nurses and EMTs live in Paradise Place?"

"No," she said. "Do you?"

"No," he said, grinning. "But I can give you the list of those I know personally. I bet it's close to twenty."

"No," she said.

"Now you're going to force me to do it. You—"

"I'm not family," she argued.

He closed one eye at her. "You are to me."

She smiled and this warm heat filled her belly fast. "The same," she said.

"Let's start with law enforcement. The chief of police of Colonie lives here. I don't know him as well as my parents do. But Ruby Turner, who sold you this house, her husband, Josh, Josh's best friend, Nathan, and Nathan's brother, Dylan—who is married to Zoe that is Ryan's sister-in-law—are all employed by the State Police. Trey is a fireman. You're a nurse. Harris's sister, Sarah, is a nurse; Kaelyn is a physical therapist, so still medical. Then Evan's brothers-in-law are

both doctors. Addison a pharmacist. And Sarah's sister-in-law and her fiancé are both vets. That counts, right?"

"Wow," Liz said. "So that is family or sort of connected to your family." She started to recap it on her hand. "That's twelve."

"Those are the ones I know closely. Do you want me to list all the other ones I know and have talked to?"

She smirked at him. "No," she said. "I'll take your word for it. If someone goes down with heat stroke, I can sit back and continue to drink."

"That a girl," he said. "Just relax today."

She grabbed her lemon bars that she'd put on a big disposable tray and they got in his truck and drove to the park in Paradise Place. They passed several that were walking and pulling coolers or pushing strollers, carrying chairs or walking dogs.

Having never grown up in what she'd call a tight-knit extended family, it felt odd to her to see so much of it surrounding her today.

She reminded herself that no one knew what else went on in someone's life. That many put on a front for the world to see. She'd been guilty of that herself for years. No more though. She wasn't hiding or pretending anymore.

That meant that she really should tell Christian how she felt about him.

More so that she *wanted* to tell him. She was tired of holding so much in.

They got out of his truck after he drove it on the grass and parked over by where his family seemed to be. She was going to ask why, but then he went to the back and she saw there were bags of ice there and Evan came over with Ryan to unload them.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked Christian's mom.

“We can take a walk to the dessert table,” Judy said. “The men tend to have most of it covered by now. The women, we were here just setting it up and putting the signs up now.”

Liz wasn't sure what Judy was talking about until they got closer to the tent with all the tables under it. There were tables marked salads with mayo and those without. She could see why, as there were tins with ice in them and then kiddie pools under the table holding even more ice for people to put their salads in. Guess they were serious about no one getting sick.

There was a table with desserts and then a spot to put any desserts with nuts.

“This is great,” she said. “So considerate of your family.”

“We've been doing it for years. I remember the first time I came to one. There weren't nearly as many people as there will be today. But few had allergies or food restrictions like now. We just worried that nothing spoiled in the heat more than anything else.”

“It is a completely different world than it was when we were little.”

“In some ways, yes,” Judy said. “In other ways, no. Christian seems very happy.”

“I don't know that I've ever known him not to be,” she said. “But then I have to tell myself we were kids back then. Weren't we all happy to the point that our issues were more trivial looking back?”

Judy put her hand on Liz's arm. “Not everyone's was trivial.”

She wondered what Judy might know about her mother but then pushed it off. She'd think that Christian would be aware if Judy knew and it hadn't come up once.

Not even ever asking why she went into nursing.

Abby knew that it was so she could help people. That she got it from her father and wished she could have done more for her mother.

She learned at a young age her mother didn't want to be helped.

It was sad in her eyes that she lived a life like that herself.

Then she reminded herself that wasn't the case. It wasn't that she didn't want help when she was married to Tanner, it was that she thought she had it under control...until it was out of control.

"You're right," she said. "They weren't. But I'd like to think most are in a good place now."

Judy smiled and nodded her head. Liz put her dessert down and then followed Judy back to where the rest of Christian's family was.

As the day went on, she met more people than she could have imagined. She tried to remember those that were her neighbors or on her street at least. The rest were faces that she'd pass driving through and wave at.

She was lucky enough that she'd gone to two weddings with Christian and was able to meet his family or at least some of his extended family ahead of this.

"Liz," Ruby Turner said. "I'm so glad that you could come to the picnic. Though I'm sure Christian wasn't going to let you miss it."

She wasn't surprised Ruby knew about her relationship with Christian when Ruby had such a close working connection to the Butlers.

"I'm glad he talked me into it," she said. "And who is this little guy?"

"This is my son, Caleb. He's about eighteen months old and instead of walking, he wants to run everywhere. My husband, Josh, is the one keeping guard for the moment on the little jailbreaker."

She laughed. "Seems fitting since Christian was giving me a rundown of people here. You work for the state police?"

"An investigator," Josh said, shaking her hand. "With this one right here."

She turned her head and saw another man a few feet away. “Hi,” she said. “You’ve got to be Nathan. I met Dylan and Zoe already and you look like your brother.”

“Nice to meet you,” Nathan said. “Christian’s girlfriend. Sorry, didn’t catch your name other than he had a girlfriend.”

“Liz,” she said, shaking the man’s hand and hearing the laughter next to him.

“Ignore my husband. I’m Brina, Nathan’s wife. This is our daughter, Mya. She’s fifteen months old and trying to learn to walk. I was hoping that being around Caleb would help, but he isn’t staying still long enough.”

“Don’t wish too fast,” she said. “Then you’ll have Nathan chasing her like Josh.”

Brina laughed. “I like you. And I know we didn’t get to meet before, but you were at my sister’s wedding.”

“What?” she asked.

“Hannah. She married Cash Fielding.”

“I feel like such a fool,” she said. “I knew you looked familiar. I mean you were in the wedding party, but your hair was up.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Brina said. “Our cousin is Blair and her family is here too.” Brina moved her head around. “Over there.” Brina started to wave her hand and she saw another couple with a little girl and toddler making their way over.

It went like that for a few hours. More names and faces than she’d ever remember.

“How are you holding up?” Christian asked, moving over to her. The burgers and dogs were being grilled. She’d just gotten done helping make sure the salads were out and ready to be served by whoever wanted to help themselves.

“Better than I thought.”

“Liz. Liz Sherman. Is that you?”

She turned her head. She hadn't been called Liz Sherman in a while. She was going to start the paperwork to fix that soon. She saw Martha Overton a few feet away and moving quickly to get into her personal space. Just like Martha did in high school.

"Yes, it's me. How are you doing, Martha?"

"I thought that was you. I heard Christian had a girlfriend, then someone said her name was Liz. Imagine that, you two are back together again. I thought you moved out of the area."

"I did," she said. "I'm back now."

"And you're here visiting the picnic with your boyfriend," Martha said. "My husband and I bought a house here a few years ago. I always wanted to live here growing up and now it's a dream come true. It's such a hard place to get into. But you get a taste of it being with Christian."

Now she knew why she wanted to avoid this party. People like Martha. Those that made her feel she wasn't enough in school and didn't deserve to be with Christian.

Before she could say anything, Christian jumped in, "Actually, it's more like I'm the one here with her. She lives in Paradise Place, not me."

"What?" Martha asked. "You live here?"

"I do," she said. "I bought a house a few months ago. All by myself too. It's good to see you again, Martha. I believe Parker is waving me over."

Liz turned and started to walk, Christian by her. "That was funny. Good for you. I'm surprised you said that though."

"It was petty. I know. I shouldn't have."

He stopped and made her face him. "No, you totally should have. It was great." He leaned down and kissed her and Liz realized that maybe she had come much further than she ever thought she'd be.

The old her—before Tanner—would have walked away. The new her stood her ground and wouldn't let someone make her feel as if she wasn't enough.

Maybe it was time to let Christian know where she stood too.

SAY THIS NOW

““**Y**ou’re not still bothered by what Martha said, are you?”

“What?” Liz asked Christian when she unlocked the door to her house later that night. It was seven and still daylight, but it’d been a long day of setting up and cleaning after the picnic ended.

There were still plenty of people hanging out and would be for hours more, but Christian and his family picked up everything they’d set up earlier and hauled out all the trash in their trucks too. He knew that there would be maintenance checking things over on the grounds tomorrow to make sure everything was back to the way it should be.

“Martha,” he said. “You’re quiet. I asked if you were upset about what she said. You didn’t seem it at first but then got quiet as the day went on.”

She turned and put her arms around his neck. “No. I’m not upset at what she said. I expect things like that from her. From people like her. I’m quiet for another reason.”

“What reason is that?” he asked. He hadn’t been by her side the whole day. She wasn’t one that needed it and he didn’t want to hover. He’d felt like they were in a good place in their relationship, but maybe he was wrong.

“I got thinking that it’s time you knew something else and I was wondering if tonight was the right night to tell you.”

“What’s that?” he asked. “You can tell me anything. At any time. Don’t ever feel like you can’t.”

“I don’t feel that. Which is why I know it’s right to say this now.”

He started to grin. He was hoping it was what he’d been waiting to say too.

“Are you going to tell me or make me wait?” he asked.

“I used to be afraid to say things,” she said. “But I told myself I can’t be afraid anymore. I mean what’s the worst that can happen? You don’t say it back? You don’t feel the same way?”

“I’m pretty sure I feel the same way and will most likely say it back,” he said, giving her a little squeeze and kiss on the forehead.

“That I’ve gone and fallen in love with you. I didn’t know if I had it in me to fall in love with anyone again.”

“I know that feeling,” he said. “Not that I didn’t think I had it in me but that I’ve fallen in love with you too. I knew it a while ago. I think before our fight. That is what hurt so much.”

She frowned at him. “Then why did you stay away?”

“What do you mean? I told you why. That you’d been through so much. A lot of what I didn’t know. I didn’t want to put pressure on you and thought you needed your own time to work it out.”

“Would you have made the step if I hadn’t?” she asked. She moved out of his arms and he wasn’t sure what was going on now.

“Yes. I would have that weekend. You were working and I didn’t want to bother you. Or distract you. I would have reached out by Friday afternoon, no later than Saturday. Do you not believe me?”

“You didn’t reach out to me when we were younger. When I broke up with you, you just walked away like it wasn’t a big deal.”

“I don’t remember it that way,” he said.

“It’s the truth. What do you remember? I told you that I thought we should take a break. You got quiet and said if it was what I wanted and that was it. We never talked again except passing in the halls or seeing each other at parties. It just told me that was the right decision.”

He ran a hand over his face. “Liz. You blindsided me. I thought things were good with us. But we were kids. You were playing sports. You were helping your father with his business and the house. You had a part-time job and you were caring for Abby. In between that you had school and were dating me. I just thought you were being pulled in a bunch of directions.”

She was looking at him. Trying to read him. He wasn’t lying though.

“Were you upset over it?”

“I was. But I was sixteen and didn’t want to let anyone know that I was. We hadn’t said we loved each other though I cared a great deal for you. I knew a bit about your home life. Not a lot. You never said much.”

She let out a sigh. “No. There wasn’t much to say. You knew my father was raising us and everything you just said was the truth back then.”

“Was there more to the reason we broke up? I know everyone always said I changed directions with the wind. I did. I still do at times. I was hurt and don’t know what happened other than what I saw. I just assumed you wanted the break. I figured if you wanted to get back together, you’d let me know. You never did.”

She ran her hands through her hair, pulled her ponytail out and then fixed it. “It was all those things, but then it was more. Looking back, it was stupid, but again we were kids.”

He waited a second and then said, “Don’t tell me someone was giving you a hard time about dating me. Or not being good enough.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Nothing more than I always dealt with in life. You were this nice kid and you didn’t need to be

dragged down by dating me.”

“What the hell nonsense is that? There was no dragging down.”

How had they gone from saying they loved each other to this?

“I know that now,” she said. “And don’t get upset. It’s as you said—we were sixteen. And when a few weeks went by and you didn’t even talk to me again, I just told myself it was for the best. That I did us both a favor.”

“No,” he said. “You didn’t. I can’t profess to say we would have never broken up. No one knows that. I just know that you broke up with me and I let you go. That is how I see it.”

“You let me go?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Back then I moved on like I did so much in my life, but I always regretted not asking you why. Or finding out more. But time went by and...here we are. I want the truth now.”

“It’s what I told you. Nothing more. I promise.”

“I want to be annoyed, but I can’t. We were kids. We both did stupid shit in our lives as kids, but now we are in a different spot. One I don’t want to get out of.”

“Me neither,” she said. “So I’m going to tell you to take me to bed. I’m hot and tired and sweaty so I guess I should say I need a shower first.”

“We can take a shower together,” he said. It seemed she didn’t want to talk about this anymore. He should push more, but he was content with the answers he’d gotten.

“We haven’t done that yet,” she said.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her up the stairs. They were both shedding their clothes on the way and by the time they got to her room, they were stepping out of their undergarments and he was turning the shower on.

This room needed some work too, but it wasn’t horrible. The shower was nice and big and would hold them both. The

tub with all the jets had seen better days, but he'd told himself he wasn't going to bring it up.

Together they'd been working on her hall bathroom upstairs in the past two weeks. She'd brought it up and he was thrilled.

"I need a condom," he said, turning when she went to grab his hand and pull him into the shower.

"Nope," she said. "Not unless you want to. I'm on birth control."

"That works for me," he said, joining her.

He adjusted the water so that it was cooler than normal and felt wonderful on his overheated skin.

They could make their own heat and steam anyway.

Her arms went around his neck, he walked a few steps to the back of the shower and had the water hitting him on the back now, her up against the cool tiles.

He pushed her wet ponytail away from her face and had it behind her. His hair was plastered to him too.

It didn't seem to matter when they were like this and naked though.

"How do you want to do this?" she asked.

"Hop up and put your legs around my waist. I've got you. I promise."

"I trust you," she said.

In his eyes that was more important than her words of love.

His mouth sought hers savagely, his dick probing around until it found her opening, then slid in.

She let out a moan; he did the same.

He was bucking up into her, her hips pushing against his.

He had one hand on the shower wall to steady himself, the other on her hip. He was trying to be aware of his strength and not leave a mark on her.

He didn't care she laughed it off the last time. He felt like shit for days and knew he would even more now.

Their tongues were dueling with each other, their hips moving back and forth and his feet started to slip.

This wasn't as steady as he thought it was going to be.

"We need to slow down," he said.

"No," she said. "I need you to get me there right now. I can't wait any longer."

It was like she knew all the buttons to push and when.

His hand went down her back, over her ass and between her legs. He was only lightly touching around as he couldn't get to the front of her.

It didn't seem to matter where his hand went because she started to chant out his name, her legs tightening even more on him as he felt her start to come and pulse around his dick.

He put both his hands on the wall to brace himself, pushed her firmly against it and started thrusting up into her again and again until he had nothing else left to give and emptied everything out of his tank.

Her legs slid down his slowly, he steadied her the best he could and gave her another kiss on the top of her head. "Are you okay?"

"That was wonderful," she said, sighing. "Now help me get this rubber band out of my hair so I can wash up."

She turned her back to him and the best he could do was pull it out and then winced when some of her hair went with it. She was only laughing.

"Sorry," he said. "I tried not to do that."

"It's less than I would have pulled out."

She stepped in front of him. Grabbing the shampoo, she started to lather her hair, rinsed it, and then put the conditioner in it and moved back for him to clean up.

Then she got under the spray and rinsed her body off with her hair. He'd gotten out by then and was drying off.

"Here," he said, handing her a towel.

"Thanks," she said. "That was fun. Two shower heads would be more fun." He opened his mouth and she held her hand up. "It was a thought not a request. Don't even say it."

His shoulders dropped. "Yes, it would be fun and easier," was all he said.

When they were back in her room and finding clothes, he decided maybe he should tell her about his conversation with Ruby. Here they'd said they loved each other and she was pushing him to find another house. He wanted her to know he wasn't holding off because of her.

"That wasn't so hard to say, was it?" she said, moving to him to poke him in the belly once she had her shirt over her head. She was reaching for underwear and shorts now.

"Can we go downstairs and talk?" he asked. "I'd like to sit outside if you don't think we'll get heated up again."

"I'm cooled off and the AC is on if we need it. Everything okay?"

"Yes," he said. "Just wanted to let you know I might have a lead on a house."

"That's great," she said, following him down the sweeping staircase. He'd never grow old of coming down this or seeing Liz do it either.

If he thought of his kids coming down it, he was holding that close to his chest for now.

"Yeah," he said. "Ruby pulled me aside. Someone went to talk to her. They want to list their house. They said it needs some work and weren't sure if they should do that before or let it go. She gave them the pros and cons of both and then she sought me out. I talked to the couple and am going to look at the house tomorrow."

"So that means it's in Paradise Place?" she asked, grinning at him.

“Yes. Around the block. Older obviously since it’s around the block. This is one of the oldest sections of the development.”

“That’s great,” she said. “I hope it works out.”

“You do?” he asked.

“Yep. Then you’ll be within walking distance and we’d probably see more of each other and not less like you’re worried about. You’re going to live there right...if you buy it?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll live in it. Do you want to go with me to look at it tomorrow?”

“Why?” she asked. “It’s your flip.”

“So?” he said. “It’s going to be my house for the time being. I don’t know. I just thought you could keep me company. Maybe I can use you as sweat labor.”

She ran and jumped in his arms. “Yes,” she said.

Guess he was learning the right way to approach things after all.

SAFE THING

Six weeks later, at the end of September, Liz was called to the nurse's station.

"Yes," she said.

"There is someone here to see you," another nurse said. "The waiting room just called back."

"What?" she asked. She looked at her watch. It was midnight. No one would come to see her or ask for her in the waiting room unless it was a former patient. Very few remembered the name of the nurse that worked with them when they were there.

"I don't know what to tell you. They said the guy has been up there for thirty minutes just waiting and when they finally got to him, he said he wasn't hurt or sick but wanted to talk to you."

"I don't have time for this," she said. "Did they get his name?"

"Not that I know of."

Liz picked the phone up and called the check-in desk, but it went unanswered. Not surprised. They were as busy as she was.

She ran to her locker quickly to grab her phone out of her purse. She never had it on her and anyone that would be looking for her would know that.

She pulled it out and didn't see any missed calls or texts, then went back to work. She'd get upfront when she could, but she wasn't on break and if it was that important the person would have given his name.

It was almost an hour later when she finally could walk away. She'd wanted to go earlier, but when she was coming back from checking her phone, an ambulance came in and she had to deal with that first.

When she walked out through the doors leading to the desk checking people in, she said, "I'm Liz Carter. There was someone asking for me?"

She didn't know who this woman was working the desk. She didn't think they knew most of the nurses either. It was a revolving door half the time of employees out front and in the ER.

"Not me," the woman at the first desk said. "Check with one of the others."

She moved to the two others and then was told the guy was sitting in the waiting room.

"He's not sick or hurt and he's in the waiting room?"

"Not that waiting room," the woman said. "There is another one outside the ER entrance."

She wasn't aware of that and had to be pointed in that direction. This was taking longer than she'd hoped and she needed to get back to her patients.

But if it was a patient, she'd still be doing her job.

She was two steps from the door when it opened and she came face to face with Tanner.

She took a few steps back. "What are you doing here?"

"I wouldn't have had to come here and sit around for hours surrounded by sick people if you answered your damn phone."

Liz moved back again. "I'm not talking to you. I need to get back to work. You're blocked on my phone and that is why I haven't gotten any messages."

She didn't know why he was here and didn't want to deal with this. In her eyes, there was nothing they had to say to each other.

It'd been well over a year on top of it.

"We need to talk," he said, moving toward her.

"No," she said. "I'll call security. Leave now." She turned and moved quickly behind the desks and left him standing there seething.

She went back to her shift and tried to put it from her mind.

In the back of her head, she didn't think he'd hurt her, but she didn't want to be stupid either.

He said he'd been trying to call her. She didn't think she was that hard to find. He found her. Why not call her place of employment and leave a message?

The fact he came here really bothered her.

She clocked out and pulled her phone out. It was seven in the morning and she could just call security to walk her to her car and explain what was going on.

She would walk out with coworkers too, but she didn't want to put anyone in danger.

She thought of the one person she could call and not feel bad about it.

The person that she trusted even more than her father.

She called Christian.

"Hi," he said. "You're calling early. What's going on? Having car trouble?"

"No," she said. "I know you're probably getting ready for work and all."

"I'm set. Just having coffee. What's going on? You don't sound good. Are you sick?"

"Tanner showed up here at work last night."

"What?!"

“Yeah. I went back to work and I was safe. But now that it’s time to leave...”

“I’m on the way. Don’t leave the ER until I get there. I mean it.”

“I won’t,” she said.

She ran her hands through her hair. It’d take twenty minutes, easily, for him to get here and park and come in. It’s not like there was parking right by the door. Unless he actually parked right by the door where people did to unload.

She let out a giggle knowing he’d do just that.

Liz was right twenty minutes later when he said he was waiting for her inside the entrance.

She went back through the doors she had last night, looked around and didn’t see Tanner, but did see Christian and went right to him.

“I don’t see him. Just walk me to my car.”

“Nope,” he said. “I’ll drive you to it, then I’m going to make sure you’re in it and follow you home.”

She nodded, got in his truck right out front and told him where to go for her car.

They were home within thirty minutes and she was trying to calm her heart down.

She was safe. She knew she was.

“I don’t know what is going on,” she said. “I mean I got called to the desk that there was someone who wanted to talk to me.” She told him how that went down and when she found Tanner.

“He didn’t say what he wanted?”

“I didn’t give him a chance,” she said. “I started to back up. He was pissed I kept him waiting. Then said if I answered my phone he wouldn’t have had to come here. But I blocked him. I had no idea he was trying to reach me. Once we signed the divorce papers, in my mind that was it.”

“But it’s not,” he said.

“Obviously. I looked around and didn’t see him when I left. He’s not the type to stay there all night waiting for me. He must know I don’t live at my father’s. He knew the address of my dad’s. I mean he could have found it somewhere or looked it up if he didn’t remember. He’d been there before. My father would have said something if Tanner went there.”

“He probably thinks your father knows about what happened in your marriage and didn’t want to face him.”

“I don’t know that Tanner ever thinks he’s done anything wrong,” she said, shaking her head. “I wish there was a way I could find him. I mean on my terms. I don’t like knowing that he’s just sitting around here waiting for me.”

“I’m not leaving you alone. There is a public record of you buying your house,” Christian said. “He could easily know where you live.”

“I thought of that. *If* he was going to search. He might not think I could buy a place myself. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“But he found where you worked,” he said.

“Could just be a good guess. I worked there before I moved.”

“Let me make a few calls and see if we can find out a way to see where he is,” he said. “Remember, we know a lot of people in law enforcement.”

“Isn’t that illegal without probable cause or something?”

“No clue, but we’ll find out. Why don’t you go take a shower and change? I know you want to. Then get some sleep. I’m not leaving you alone. I’ll stay here.”

“I don’t want to stay here if he can find out where I live. Can we go back to your place? He won’t know about that.”

Christian had closed on his house two weeks ago. He was now living around the corner and it had been nice to be within walking distance.

They'd finished up her hall bath together so it wasn't half done and he could focus on his flip.

She thought life was going just great until now.

She was walking out of the bathroom when Christian came in. "I just talked to Dylan. That was the easiest since Zoe works for us."

"What did Dylan say?"

"He said he'll see what he can find out and get back to me. He was going to talk to Nathan too. I didn't ask what he was going to do. Just explained that your ex was in town, and what happened. And that you were trying to find out where he was staying so that you could be on top of it."

"You had to tell him more," she said. "I know it."

He waited a second. "I told him there was some domestic violence."

She took a deep breath. "I don't want anyone to know that."

"You can trust them," he said. "You can. Ryan's wife, Shannon, had a stalker that followed her here from Seattle. The guy broke into her house in the middle of the night and Ryan caught him and beat the shit out of him and tied him up, then called Josh and Nathan. Or one of them. They both showed up. Not many know the situation because they wouldn't say anything."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because I want you to know you can trust them." His phone rang in his hand. "It's Dylan. Hello?"

She heard talking back and forth and then he hung up. "They found the hotel he's staying at. Dylan is getting off duty now, but he said he'll meet us there. Just to be around, nothing more."

"I don't know that is a good idea," she said.

"It's the safe thing to do," he said. "He won't let it be known he's there with us, but he'll be there if things get out of

hand.”

“What do you mean us?” she asked with her hands on her hips.

“You and I are going to that hotel now. We’ll have him called to the lobby and find out what is going on. Dylan can be there and I’ll make sure that Tanner knows you’re not alone. I’m not letting you go in alone.”

“I don’t want to go in alone,” she said.

“Good. Then let’s go.”

They drove the ten minutes to the hotel Tanner was at, went to the front desk and asked if he could be called. The person working hesitated until Dylan walked over in uniform. Dylan never said a word, but the person just assumed they were together and made the call.

“Tell Tanner that Liz is down here to talk to him. I’m his wife,” she said. She hated to say that. “Do you want to see ID?”

“Could I please?” the woman at the counter said. “Just that you are who you say you are. I mean if you’ve got the same last name and all.”

She pulled her ID out and waited. Dylan moved away off to the side to not be seen.

It was twenty minutes later and Tanner came down. She was positive he’d done it because she’d made him wait.

He was pretty vocal about that too. “Be lucky I didn’t make you wait an hour like I had to.”

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Guess you’re smarter than I thought you were to find me,” Tanner said. She didn’t know what she ever saw in him. He hadn’t changed one bit in her eyes. Not in looks and not how he looked at her the last time he saw her.

Like there was this hatred inside of him that was clawing to take it out on her.

“What do you want?” she repeated.

“Who’s that?” Tanner asked, nodding at Christian next to her.

“Her boyfriend.” Christian moved in front of her. He was taller than Tanner by several inches. Had more muscle on him too.

There was no comparison between the two and though Christian had always been mild mannered she was seeing a side of him now that she didn’t know he had.

She wasn’t turned off by it either.

“It didn’t take you long to move on,” Tanner said.

She was losing her patience and wasn’t going to get baited. That was what he wanted.

She could see Dylan out of the corner of her eye, but Tanner hadn’t even glanced that way. She actually felt as safe as she could possibly be.

“I’m going to walk out that door in a minute if you don’t tell me what possessed you to fly all this way. If I’m not returning your calls and you found out where I worked, you could have left a message there for me. You could have done all sorts of things rather than showing up here.”

“I need your signature. I didn’t trust you to do it electronically. I’m here and can get it and go back and get the hell away from you. You can go on with your miserable crazy life without me. Best day of my life was when I came home and saw you gone.”

She wasn’t going to let those words bother her. He’d never change and she knew that.

“Signature for what?” she said. “Our divorce is final. It all went to you. I didn’t contest one damn thing. I left with my own clothes and car. Nothing else.”

“The boat is in both of our names. I want to sell it.”

“Then sell it,” she said. “You got it all in the divorce.”

This didn’t make sense to her. They’d just bought the boat a few months prior to her leaving. She hadn’t even thought

much of it, let alone that her name was on it.

“I didn’t have it listed in the divorce and the bank is giving me a hard time. I’ve got the papers with me. I just need your damn signature and then I’m out of here.” Tanner walked away to go back to his room.

“Don’t sign anything without looking it over,” Christian said. “Do you have a lawyer?”

“Just my divorce one,” she said. “Not one I can call right now for this.”

“Let me call Brina,” Dylan said, having overheard and moved closer. “Her office is around the corner. I’m sure if she’s not in court she’ll come over.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” she said. These people barely knew her.

“You’re not asking,” Dylan said. “I am. My sister-in-law loves me. She’d never say no.” Dylan pulled his phone out, she heard him talking and then he hung up. “She’s on her way. Fifteen minutes tops.”

Tanner returned by then with an envelope in his hands. “Here. Just sign everything.”

“No,” she said. “I need to read it.”

“It’s simple enough,” Tanner said. “It’s two pieces of paper. Even you can figure it out.”

They moved to sit down in the chairs off to the side. She was going to ignore his words. Dylan had walked outside and Tanner didn’t seem to think anything of it. There was no threat in her mind, but she wouldn’t tell Christian to leave either.

She was taking her time and she knew Tanner was getting pissed. This didn’t make sense to her for a simple boat loan.

Brina walked in. “Liz. Let me check it out.”

“Who’s this?” Tanner said.

“Her attorney,” Brina said. “I’m going to read this over before she signs anything. Have a seat, Mr. Carter. It won’t take long.”

Tanner's face got red. "You called your attorney for this?"

Liz didn't bother to say a word and handed the papers over to Brina.

"It says here that you owe him half the loan on this," Brina said after a minute. "Is that true?"

"No," she said. "I didn't know my name was on the loan. I mean I didn't remember it. I left with nothing but my clothes. He got the house and everything that I gave him, which was a lot of money over the years. If I owe half the loan, then I should get half the profits from the sale."

"You should," Brina said. "What are you selling this for?"

"That's not your concern," Tanner said.

"I believe it is. Here is my card. Liz won't be signing anything today. I need to read over the conditions of her divorce settlement. If you want her to sign over her name for you to sell this, that would be signing the title only. You know that and I know that. That's not what this is about. Do not call Liz or make any attempt to contact her. Everything will go through me or my office."

"You can't do that," Tanner said. "I've done nothing wrong."

Dylan had walked back in and Tanner finally noticed him.

"You know what you did. A lot of people know. I'm not afraid of you. If what you want is for me to sign the title to the boat, then give it to me. But I don't need to do anything else. Once you sell the boat you can pay it off."

She wasn't sure how it didn't come up that she had a loan in her name when she got her mortgage, but no one said a word to her about it. Which just told her it couldn't be that much.

"I'll be drawing up the paperwork to submit to your bank that Liz has no liability toward the boat once she signs this. I'll be sending along the copies of your divorce papers as well," Brina said. "As soon as I'm back to my office."

"Wait here," Tanner said, storming out.

“What’s he doing?” she asked Brina. “And you can do all of that?”

“Yes. He’s trying to pull one over on you.”

She should have figured. She wouldn’t put anything past him now.

Tanner returned. “Here’s the title. Just sign it.”

Brina took it and looked it over, then handed it to her. “Go ahead.”

She shook her head. That should have been with the other papers. She signed the title and then left the hotel with Christian. “Thank you for that,” she said to Brina. “Can you just send a bill to my house?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Brina said.

“I know you need to bill me to make it all legal,” she said.

Brina grinned and winked at her. “I’ll take care of it. Let me know if you have any other issues. Don’t be afraid to reach out to us.”

“I won’t,” she said. “Thank you too, Dylan.”

“No problem,” Dylan said.

They all left and she went with Christian to his house. She was still skittish about going home and was going to have to figure that out, but for now, she just needed some sleep.

PROUD OF HER

“How is Liz doing?” Zoe asked him the next morning when he got to work. Christian should have figured that she’d know what her husband had to do yesterday morning, but he didn’t think Dylan would say much more than where he was or for who.

“Not bad,” he said. “I’ll feel better when I get confirmation he’s gone.”

Everything had been signed and completed yesterday. Brina had gotten in touch with the bank on Liz’s behalf and sent over copies of the divorce papers. At this point Liz was officially free of her ex-husband. Now Tanner just needed to get his ass on the plane today and not come back.

“Just so you know,” Zoe said. “Dylan didn’t tell me anything. He’d only texted to say he’d be late. Normally he lets me know if he’s on time or not daily so I don’t worry before I leave for work. He’d already texted he’d be on time and then that something came up after.”

“It’s fine,” he said.

“I understand,” Zoe said. “But just letting you know. He’d only said he was there for you and Liz and something about her ex causing problems. He said that because I was kind of nagging him. I do that at times. I get worried about him in his job.”

Dylan had gotten shot on duty early into Zoe’s and his relationship. Christian couldn’t imagine living with that fear daily when he had enough of it yesterday to last him a lifetime.

“I don’t think I could handle that,” he said. “Yesterday was bad enough.”

“What was bad?” Evan asked him. He turned and saw his father next to Evan. He’d walked into work and was going past Zoe’s office when she called out to him. He should have been more aware, but his father and brother weren’t normally in the office this early.

He figured he better fill them in on what was going on. He trusted them and could say things without going into great detail.

“Come to my office,” he said.

His father and Evan came in and shut the door behind him. “Is everything okay?” his father asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Or it should be. We had some problems with Liz’s ex yesterday.”

“Her ex?” Evan asked. “Doesn’t he live in Georgia?”

His family was aware of the basic information and he’d tell them some more but not go overboard. Then he’d tell Liz that his family knew. He wouldn’t keep that from her.

“He does,” Christian said. “But he showed up at her job two nights ago.”

“She works the night shift,” his father said. “So he went to the ER in the middle of the night?”

“Yes. He said he’d been trying to reach her, but she’d blocked him from her phone. When she saw him, she went back to work to get away from him and knew she was safe. When she went to leave yesterday morning, she texted me.”

“Smart,” Evan said.

“Yeah. I’m glad she did it. She didn’t think he was still there, but she was nervous.”

“You should have called me,” Evan said. “I would have gone with you.”

“I know,” he said. “But I just ran out the door.”

No reason to say his heart had been racing for a man that didn't get too excited about much. He just took things as they came and figured it out. Yesterday, he might have been more like his brother than himself.

"Any of us would have done that," his father said. "What happened? What did he want?"

"At that point we didn't know. I got her home safely and she told me what she knew. I called Dylan to see if there was a way to find out where Tanner was staying. He or someone, found the hotel easily enough and we went there. Dylan was off duty by then but met us there to be safe. I don't want to go into details about Liz's marriage. That is her business, but I know. Let's say the guy is a total asshole."

"Anyone can see or put together that he probably treated her like shit," Evan said. "Maybe been controlling."

"Yeah," he said. It was best to leave it at that. "Going to him caught him off guard, but he came down to the lobby of the hotel. He wanted her to sign over the title to a boat they owned."

"Why wasn't that taken care of in the divorce?" Evan asked.

"No clue. From what I can gather she left and that was it. They didn't talk again except through lawyers. She packed her car up when he was out of the house and only took her clothes and personal possessions. She didn't contest the divorce and let him have everything. He'd had the house before he met her. She'd forgotten about the boat or maybe just figured it was in his name. No idea. He wanted to sell it and found out he couldn't without her signature."

"He had to fly all this way for that?" his father asked. "That makes no sense."

"He says he tried to call," he reminded them. "But she has an email address he could have reached out to. I think it's more he tried to pull one over on her. I told her not to sign anything without a lawyer looking it over. Dylan called Brina who came right over. The dick was trying to get her to pay half

the loan that was taken out in their names. Once he was caught he went back and got the real documents and she signed them, then Brina checked with the bank and sent over the divorce papers. It's over now. Just waiting for his plane to take off."

"Jesus," Evan said. "Does he know where she lives?"

"He could find out. He found where she worked. There were so many ways he could have reached out to her rather than fly back here, but I think he thought he could intimidate her. He couldn't. He didn't. I was proud of her."

"As you should be," his father said.

"She stayed at my place yesterday and slept. Then she went to work. Rather than go home alone until we knew Tanner's flight left, she went back to my place to sleep again today."

"Smart," Evan said.

"Anyway," he said. "I'd appreciate it if you could keep this to yourselves. She doesn't want anyone to know. She's tried to put a lot of it behind her."

"Not a problem," his father said. "When is the flight leaving?"

"At nine. Not sure if there is a way to find out if he is on it, but I'm hoping he is. Dylan said he'd follow up to make sure Tanner checked out of the hotel this morning. My guess is it should be soon as he'll have to be at the airport within the next thirty minutes."

"I know some people that work at the airport security," his father said. "Do you want me to reach out and see if they can verify he's there?"

"I hate to ask you to do any favors," he said.

"You're not asking. I'm offering," his father said. "Tanner Carter, right?"

"Yeah, thanks." He gave his father the flight time and airline. Tanner had told them he couldn't wait to get out of there and they'd asked when that would be.

Maybe after the shit he tried to pull he felt it would be wise to volunteer that information rather than being a dick and withholding it.

His father and brother left after that and he got to work.

Two hours later his phone rang and it was Dylan telling him that yes, Tanner had checked out of his hotel. Not long after, his father texted that Tanner had gotten on his flight.

He let out a breath and texted Liz. He didn't want to wake her, but it might help her to know it was fine.

When his phone rang, he answered it. "Hey, sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's fine," Liz said. "I couldn't really sleep. I was lying here more than anything. I think I'll go home now. Your bedroom is too light for me to sleep in."

He smiled. "Okay. Want me to come over and go there with you?"

"No," she said. "I'll be all right."

He was going to argue but then told himself it was better to let her go. She'd call him if she needed him. She'd done it already.

"I told my father and brother what happened," he said.

There was a pause. "Why?"

"Zoe asked how you were doing this morning. Don't worry, she doesn't know anything other than Dylan was on his way home and then he ended up with us. Dylan didn't tell her anything other than your ex was in town, but I think she put some together. But then my father and brother walked in and heard some of it and wanted to know what was going on. I didn't give details on your marriage or anything. I hope you know I wouldn't do that."

She sighed. "I know. It's hard to hide it forever. More so when he shows up like that."

"Which brings up another point," he said. "I know it's your choice and I wouldn't push you. But you should tell your

father not only what happened today but also what has led up to it. It's too hard to keep facts straight and who knows what. I think your father might surprise you."

"You're right. I know you are. I thought of that last night too. Telling him now will let him see that I'm on the other end of it. That I'm fine."

He wasn't so sure she was completely fine but then wondered if anyone would ever be.

"Good," he said. "I'm glad you are thinking that."

"I'll see if they can have dinner tonight at my place. So I probably won't see you until tomorrow after you get out of work."

"That's fine," he said. "Call me later though."

"I will. I love you, Christian."

He smiled again. Much brighter this time. "Love you too, Liz."

He hung up the phone. "Awwww," his sister, Kaelyn, said, standing in his doorway. "That's so sweet. Look at our family all finding love."

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Don't you have a job to be at?"

"I took a few days off. I told Whitney I'd take Ben today to have a playdate with Scarlet." Whitney had a stepson that was the same age as Scarlet. They both had babies a few months apart too.

"That will be fun for you," he said. "Added to having River in the house."

"Harris is home. He'll deal with River. Or help. You know, that is what it's like when you've got the person you love in your life. They help you out."

His sister was smirking at him. "You're right," he said.

"I really like Liz," Kaelyn said. "I'm glad you two found each other again."

“Me too,” he said.

His sister laughed and left his office. He heard her a few down talking to Whitney who must have just come in with Ben. His cousin flexed her hours to meet the needs of her family, just like he'd called in yesterday and no one said a word about it.

He hadn't told them what was going on, just that he wasn't coming in.

He'd never take for granted the support his family gave him and he hoped that Liz understood that they were giving it to her too.

BIG FAMILY AFFAIRS

“S ince when have you been one to have us over for dinner together during the week?” Abby asked Liz later that night.

It was six and she'd gotten about seven hours of sleep, dragging herself up at five. She'd be good now. She was surprised that she'd been able to fall asleep once she got back to her house but found that when she was tired enough she just shut her eyes and dozed off.

“I wanted to talk to you both,” she told her sister.

“Oh,” Abby said, grinning. “Are you pregnant?”

“No,” she said, waving her hand. “Good lord, not even close.”

“Then what?” Abby asked, helping herself to an olive in the salad bowl on the counter.

“Wait until Dad shows up,” she said. “I want to only say it once.”

Abby looked at her and frowned. “Come on. You tell me everything.”

“I do and I'm going to again,” she said. “Stop being a pesky little sister.”

That made Abby laugh. “Fine. What can I do to help with dinner?”

“You can set the plates at the island.”

“You need a bigger table,” Abby said.

She still only had two seats at her little table which was too small for the breakfast nook.

“Why?” she asked. “I’ve got four seats at the island.”

“This kitchen is pretty sweet. Christian did a great job.”

“With my help,” her father said, walking in the door.

“That’s right,” Liz said. “You both did a great job. The hall bath looks awesome too.”

“It’s done?” Abby said with her hands on her hips. “You didn’t tell me that.”

Her sister took off running out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Her father followed and she figured she might as well go too.

Her sister was walking around and touching everything.

Her father said, “This is beautiful. The double vanity is a nice touch.”

“It’s a small one for a double but the right decision. I’m done with projects for now. There is still a ton to do in the house, but it’s more than livable. I need to put some money into furniture. I know that.”

She still had a healthy savings account. By having her father, Christian and her doing the work, the kitchen and bathroom together cost less than one of the quotes she’d gotten to have her kitchen done.

That didn’t mean she was going to spend the rest of her money to keep working and living in a construction zone.

No way. She needed life to be a little calm right now.

More so after the past twenty-four hours.

“I can help you shop for furniture,” Abby said.

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “I’m going to keep my eye out for sales. I don’t have a problem with the front rooms staying empty. It’d be nice to just get new furniture in the

family room back here. Rooms that I use more. Then I'll figure out the other rooms as I go."

"What about a dining room table?" Abby asked. "Don't you want to host Thanksgiving?"

"I'm working that night," she said. "I'll be sleeping during the day. Maybe next year, but not this year."

She'd been thinking of the holidays and what to do and then told herself that she wasn't used to big family affairs anyway so it wasn't a big deal.

She was positive Christian was and he'd be doing something with his family.

"It was worth a try, Dad. Guess it's just you cooking again."

Liz smiled at her father. He'd never had a problem cooking for the family before.

"Speaking of food. What's for dinner tonight and what is the occasion?"

"I'm going to use the grill on the stovetop and try some fish on it. Nice and easy and fast. I'll start it now. Salmon. I've got a baked rice dish in the oven that will be done soon too."

"Sounds good," Abby said. "I love fish and don't eat it much. It stinks too much to cook in the house."

"It does and I haven't made it once here, but I've got that fancy grill top and industrial vent that Christian talked me into."

Seemed like Christian was talking her into a lot lately.

The three of them went down the stairs and returned to the kitchen and she started dinner.

"What did you want to talk to us about?" Abby asked. "I'm going to start on the salad if you don't mind. I'm starving."

"Go ahead," she said. "But get the bowls out for it."

“I figured you wanted to talk about something,” her father said. “Is everything okay with Christian?”

“Yes,” she said. “Things are great. I wanted to tell you that Tanner showed up at my job two nights ago.”

“What?” Abby said, turning her head sharply. “Did he hurt you?”

“Hurt?” her father asked.

Abby put her hand to her mouth. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “Dad, I need to tell you what happened in my marriage to Tanner and why I left.”

She spent the next twenty minutes while she cooked dinner telling them most of what she’d told Christian.

It was hard to relive it again, but she needed them to know.

She’d even told them about the money Donna gave her that night.

“I wish I’d known,” her father said. “Why wouldn’t you tell me this?”

“I didn’t tell anyone for a long time,” she said.

“I figured it out,” Abby said. “Right?”

“Abby is right. Living that far away it was easy to hide, but Abby came to visit that second year of my marriage. She saw things I wished she hadn’t. Tanner was even on good behavior, but looking back I guess his remarks were still pretty harsh.”

“It wasn’t just remarks and how he treated you and tried to laugh it off, but it was your reaction to them,” Abby said. “If you laughed them off or joked back I might have thought it was just your relationship. But you didn’t. You didn’t say much and that wasn’t like you.”

“No,” her father said. “You always were vocal and stood your ground.”

“Not always,” she said.

“When it mattered,” her father said.

She put the fish on a serving platter, got the rice out and the spinach that was in a bag in the microwave.

“Make a plate and let’s eat. Yes, I stood up when it mattered. Back then I was just trying to keep the peace, but it wasn’t working and my marriage continued to fall apart. I’d made plans to leave as I told you, but Donna gave me a chance to go faster.”

“I would have come and got you and taken care of Tanner,” her father said. “You have to know that and I’m hurt you’d think otherwise.”

This wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “I tried to have a good marriage, Dad. It takes two people to make it work.”

Her father sighed and sat down with his plate full. “And one person to mess it up if they don’t want to try. I know you saw that and maybe I should have talked to you more about your mother and my marriage, but you were just a kid.”

“Don’t blame yourself. I put up with things when I shouldn’t have and I’m not blaming myself anymore so you shouldn’t.”

“You said he showed up yesterday,” her father said. “What happened?”

She explained it all to them both. From Tanner getting pissed that he had to wait in the ER lobby to her calling Christian and then them showing up at the hotel.

“He’s gone. He tried to pull one over on me and thanks to Christian and his connections it didn’t happen. I wouldn’t have signed anything anyway without looking it over.”

“But you wanted him gone,” her father said.

“I did. If I wasn’t dating Christian then I’m not sure what I would have done. But I love him and trust him. I knew he’d be there for me.”

“But not me?” her father asked.

She'd hurt the man that raised her. Her first love in her life. Her father.

"I trust you. But I didn't want to disappoint you and that was part of why I never said anything. I was embarrassed over the life I had. The marriage I felt trapped in. I didn't want you to think you failed."

Her father was eating with his head down. He wasn't saying a word.

There was silence after that statement and finally he lifted his head. "I failed your mother, and I didn't want you girls to feel it."

"No," Abby said. "Don't you dare say that. You didn't fail Mom and you know it. That's on her."

"Abby is right, Dad. You've done a great job raising us. You're a wonderful father and you were a super husband. You should have tried again with someone else and you didn't. Why?"

"This isn't about me."

"Why can't it be?" Abby asked. "Liz just told you all her dirty little secrets. I have no life so no worries there. But why haven't you dated anyone else in all this time?"

"I've dated," her father said. "But it's hard to split my time with a woman and my job. You girls had to come first and that was a must. You weren't first with your mother and I was going to be damned if you thought your only other parent wouldn't be there for you."

Liz looked at her sister. She figured he'd say that. "But we've been adults for a long time."

"And I've dated, but nothing has stuck. I'm too old for the dating scene. I like my life the way it is. I don't need someone to try to change me or make me someone I'm not. I don't want to always compromise either."

She laughed. "You sound like Abby now."

"Hey," Abby said. "That's not true."

“It kind of is,” her father said. “Listen, girls. Life hasn’t been easy for any of us. I tried to make it better for you.”

Her father was sitting between her and Abby and she leaned and put her head on his shoulder. He was big and rough around the edges. Trevor Sherman didn’t always watch his language and wasn’t polite. Tanner had made comments in the past about that and when she should have stood up for her father more, she’d tried to avoid conflict and changed the subject.

That was wrong of her. She was proud of who her family was and where she came from.

Being picked on and bullied as a kid played with her head. Then the same thing happened with her ex-husband.

Christian was one of the only people in her life back then and now that accepted her for who she was.

She’d never forget that or take him or his family or the family in this room for granted again.

“You did a great job with us,” Abby said. “Right, Liz?”

“The best,” she said. “And don’t ever think otherwise. I’m telling you everything now because I’m sick of secrets. I’m sick of hiding what I went through. If you knew when I came home a year ago, I think you would have babied me. Now you can see I’m fine. I really am.”

“You are much stronger than you were when you came back. Healthier looking on the inside and out.”

“Thank you,” she said. “What I do now in my life is for me and those I love. I’m not letting anyone else make me feel less than I am ever again.”

She’d turned her head to look at Abby and noticed the tears in her sister’s eyes. She wasn’t sure what was going on and hoped to find out.

That came two hours later when her father left and Abby hung back.

“Mom reached out again about two weeks ago.”

She sighed. “Why are you just telling me now? What did she say?”

“Not much,” Abby said. “She just said she loved me and was sorry. Then she hasn’t texted again. I think it was one of those prepaid phones. Every time I get a text it’s a different number.”

Liz knew there were shelters and homes that had those prepaid phones for clients. It most likely was the case.

“Do you know where she is?” she asked.

“No. I’m worried and am not sure why.”

“You know the moods Mom always had. There isn’t much we can do other than try to find her. And do you want that mess in your life again?”

“No,” Abby said. “I haven’t told Dad.”

“Don’t,” she said.

“It makes me feel bad not doing it. Especially after everything that happened tonight.”

“This is different,” she argued. “You heard him. He felt like he failed her and us. He doesn’t need that in his life again. They are divorced. He needs to move on. We need to move on. We’ve tried to help her and she doesn’t want it. She comes back into our lives and disrupts us and stresses us out. I’ve had enough stress this past year to last me a lifetime.”

“You’re right,” Abby said. “I just feel guilty.”

“Don’t. But tell me. Please. I want to know if you get another text or call from her.”

“I will,” Abby said. “I promise.”

Her sister left after that. Liz still had time before she had to leave for work and decided to text Christian and tell him the night went well and she’d talk to him tomorrow.

He’d take the hint not to call or bug her and she appreciated that.

But mentally she was exhausted and needed to push it behind her so she could do her job tonight and not be distracted.

BE CONTENT

Two months later, Christian walked into Evan's house for Thanksgiving. With everyone being in relationships the holidays were all split.

Kaelyn and Harris were going to Sarah and Caden's house where Sarah was cooking for Caden's family that were in town along with Sarah's parents.

Parker was cooking for her brothers and their families and since that left his parents and him on their own, they were invited to Parker's too.

He would have loved to spend it with Liz, but she had to work. She was sleeping right now, as it was only noon. Parker planned on eating around three, and Liz would get up at five most times. There was no way he wanted her to cut her sleep short if she didn't want to.

He got the feeling she would prefer not to have the big holiday event on top of it. She'd said her father and sister were going out to eat.

"Hey," he said, moving to the back of the house where most were gathering.

"Is Liz going to try to stop over?" his mother asked.

"No. She won't get up until five. I'll bring her some food if you guys don't mind."

"Of course," Parker said. "There will be plenty."

“She’d appreciate it.” He helped himself to a beer and some snacks, then started to watch football with Jeremy and Marcus. Addison was at work but would be getting out soon. McKenna, he was told, was on her way with her father.

He knew Dan Preston. Everyone did. The guy was one of the most social people in Paradise Place.

It’d be a good day, he was positive. It’s just it wouldn’t be the holiday he wanted since he wasn’t with the woman he loved.

“How is the house coming?” his father asked.

“Not bad,” he said. “The kitchen is almost done.”

“Primary suite was first, right?” Evan asked.

“Always. I’ve been doing the kitchen in stages. The floors were good throughout, just had to refinish them and that took time. Once I started them in the kitchen I went through the whole downstairs. Still got another one and a half baths to do, the laundry room and the finished basement. The rest is just cosmetic. Actually, most of the house was that. I didn’t remove walls or anything.”

“So a fast flip?” Evan asked.

“Faster than most. I’d say within two months or so I might be able to start thinking about putting it on the market, but it will sell faster in the spring than the middle of the winter.”

“No reason to rush when your girlfriend is within walking distance,” Evan said.

“No,” he said. “And then I’ve got to find something else too.”

Which was always the hard part. He had his eyes open at all times or had Ruby looking, but there wasn’t much.

There was part of him that wanted to stop moving around so much too. Maybe he should consider finding a place and just staying put.

But in his mind, he saw things being serious with Liz, and if they continued, she wasn’t going to move. It’s not like he

could invite himself into staying at her place either.

No reason to think of those things now or try to plan anything. They'd work themselves out like they always did in life.

He'd lived most of his life that way. Not a lot of plans other than the immediate future. Which meant a few weeks or months. Nothing much further out than that.

Christian didn't like the feeling that he was planning for more because it was out of his control and more in Liz's.

For someone that flew by the seat of his pants, he found he couldn't right now. It didn't even bother him more than the fact he really wanted to stop flying and plant his feet solid on the ground in one spot.

He'd been afraid to say that to her though.

They loved each other and that was about all he knew. He'd have to take it for now and be content even though he was struggling to feel that way right now.

"One of these days you're going to get sick of moving so much," his mother said, almost as if she'd read his mind.

He only grinned at her and drank his beer and focused on the game on the TV.

Hours later he arrived at Liz's house.

"Hi," she said. "Ooohhh, dinner. It smells good. Thanks for bringing it."

"You're welcome. Everyone missed you today. Parker said she would have held off and eaten later for you."

"That's nice, but I wouldn't do that to everyone," she said. "Maybe next year I'll put in for it off in advance. It's hard because there are so many that have more seniority. I mean, I get it. I could have celebrated and maybe should have, then come back and napped again. I felt bad about it."

He moved closer and pulled her into his arms. "Don't feel bad. We've been dating a little over six months. You've got a job and I know that. I don't have a problem with it."

“Thanks,” she said. “I haven’t always been made to feel that way about my job.”

“You love your job, right?”

“I do,” she said.

“Do you enjoy third shift? I mean I know a lot of people who’d rather work nights than days.” He didn’t want her to think he was pushing for her to get off her shift. He wouldn’t do that.

“Trust me,” she said, “if I had my choice I’d work days. But getting on days in the hospital is a long wait most times unless I go work in one of the offices. And now not a lot of RN’s are in the offices. They put nurse’s aides and assistants there to cut down on costs.”

“They do?” he asked.

“It’s a waste of an RN’s service and education to have them just taking vitals from patients now. I’m not saying there aren’t RN’s in each doctor’s office, but fewer and fewer. They are doing more administrative work or social work with the patients. Direct care is on the aides.”

“You never talk about your work much. I guess I just thought you loved the fast pace of the ER.”

“I do. I’m not sure if I would like doing paperwork or social work. No, that isn’t true. I would, but you need a bachelor’s for that and I don’t have it and don’t want to go back to school.” She started to eat the leftover dinner that he’d brought.

“I wouldn’t go back to school either now, but I think if people want to, they should always follow their dreams.”

“I agree. It’s not my dream though. For me, getting on first shift at some point is the dream I’ve got. But you make more on third and it’s something that I need.”

He didn’t know if she needed it as much as it was a way for her to be in control of her life.

They didn’t talk about finances. He didn’t think it was his place to do it. He’d been shocked she’d told him about the

hundred thousand from her ex-mother-in-law.

Though she'd bought new furniture recently for her family room, most of the house was still empty and she'd stopped any construction.

Some of that was to give her a little peace, as he knew living in construction wasn't for everyone. The other was he was busy with his flip and she wouldn't ask him for help unless she needed it.

He wasn't pushing either.

"You need to do what works for you," he said.

"Thanks for that," she said.

"For what?"

"For not judging me or making me feel bad about the hours I work. I know I could change jobs and get on first shift. There is such a demand for nurses. I could go into an OR at an outpatient facility. The pay would be less because of the shift differential. But it'd be Monday through Friday and there would be overtime because you stay until the last surgery is done most times. It could be ten- to twelve-hour days but no nights and no weekends."

It seemed she'd thought a lot about it. He wanted to encourage her but not push.

"Sounds like a good option when you're ready. The best of both worlds. Treating patients directly and getting the overtime you like, but also having nights and weekends off."

"Someday," she said, winking at him.

"Hope to be around when that someday happens."

"I hope you are too. And just so you know, I put in for Christmas Eve off."

"You did?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Yes. I thought it over. I was going to work it since I figured I could still spend Christmas Day with you at some point. Going to work on Christmas night isn't a big deal to me. But then I realized I'd have to sleep and my father likes

Christmas Eve. Which of course I could still do and then go to work.”

“But you can’t enjoy it if you’ve got to go to work,” he said.

“No. So I’m starting my shift that week on Monday night, Christmas night. I can enjoy Christmas Eve day or night and not worry. We can wake up together on Christmas Day if you want. Do what works for us and then I’ll sleep a few hours before I go into work like I normally do at the start of my shift.”

“That sounds like a great plan to me,” he said. “Just like we are spending some of today together.”

“We are,” she said. “Thanksgiving is just about food for me. Not really family.”

They never talked much about her family or memories she had.

“I think a lot of people feel that way,” he said. “Smaller families more so.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I don’t remember any big Thanksgiving dinners growing up. But I do remember Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. I’m at a good point in my life and want to have some of those memories with you now.”

“Thank you for that,” he said, moving closer and giving her a kiss. She had to stop chewing for that.

“Why are you thanking me?”

“Because it was what I needed to hear without even knowing it.”

SOME NOSTALGIA

The doorbell going off while she was sleeping was an annoyance that Liz hated.

She wasn't sure what was worse. The doorbell camera that she allowed Christian to install months ago going off when packages were delivered or someone actually ringing the bell now.

The two of them had half-heartedly argued over the cameras, but when he said it'd make him feel better that she could see movement around the house when she was working at night or sleeping during the day, she conceded.

It wasn't a big ask, and the truth was, now that she owned a home and she was gone at night, it did make sense to her.

She grabbed her phone when the bell went off again. It was eleven in the morning. She'd only been sleeping three hours. One more and she'd get up for the day anyway. Since it was Friday she only slept till noon and would go to bed with Christian tonight.

She liked they spent Friday and Saturday nights together. And with her being off on Sunday for Christmas Eve that would be three nights in a row.

She rubbed her eyes as she looked at the woman on her front porch. Then she zoomed in.

Shit. Was that her mother? She hadn't seen her mother in ten years, but it looked like her, even though the woman was unkempt and frail looking.

She hit the button to talk. “Hang on. I’m coming.”

She whipped the covers back and got dressed. She couldn’t imagine what this could be about.

Abby had told her that their mother hadn’t reached out again. It’d been over a month. Her mother never reached out to Liz at all.

She had sweats and a cotton shirt on, slippers on her feet and was running down the stairs and opened the door.

“Liz?”

“Yes. Mom?” she asked.

“You remember me,” her mother said.

“Hard to forget,” she said. She was looking the woman over. She was in clothing too big for her. Jeans that had seen better days. A fleece jacket instead of a winter coat. The black fleece was worn and two sizes too big. She was guessing it was a hand-me-down or donation to a home her mother might be in or have been in.

“Can I come in?” her mother asked.

“Sure,” she said. There was part of her that didn’t want this drama, but the other part of her that wouldn’t let someone leave that needed help. “How did you find me?”

“I talk about my girls to people.”

“What people?” she asked, frowning.

“Those I live with,” her mother said. “Can I get a drink?”

Her mother was taking her jacket off. Liz reached for it and put it over the railing. “Yes. Is coffee okay?”

“That’s fine,” her mother said. “It’s cold out.”

“It is.” She hadn’t seen a car out front. “How did you get here?”

“I got a ride,” her mother said. The answers were short and not making a lot of sense and she wondered if her mother was high.

“What if I wasn’t home?” she asked. She put a cup under the one-cup coffee maker. Just like her mother to do something like that. Be dropped off on a cold day with no way to get anywhere else if she wasn’t home.

Her mother shrugged. “I would have called someone to come get me.”

“Who?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” her mother said.

She put the mug in front of her mother and watched her take a sip of the black liquid, then cringe. “Do you have cream and sugar?”

She turned and got them both. “Do you want something to eat?”

Her mother looked as if a strong wind could knock her over. Not healthy at all.

“Don’t go out of your way,” her mother said.

“I haven’t eaten yet. I got out of work and went to bed. I can make some eggs and toast. Or since it’s close to lunch a sandwich. Tell me what you want.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” her mother asked. “Normally you start lecturing me and you’re not.”

She looked at her mother closer, noticed her eyes were clear and figured the short answers were more nerves and uncertainty than anything. At least she hoped.

“I’m sure I’ll get to that,” she said. “Or maybe not. For now, you’re here and I’m hoping you’ll tell me why. You’ve been reaching out to Abby and she isn’t sure of the reason. She said you haven’t gotten back to her lately.”

“I don’t know what to say,” her mother said. “And something warm to eat would be good.”

She got a pan out and the eggs, then put four pieces of bread in the toaster. Her mother looked as if she hadn’t had a good meal in ages.

Liz wondered if that was what people had thought when they looked at her during her marriage.

No, she couldn't go there.

"Tell me why you're here while I cook," she said. "We haven't had any real communication in over ten years."

"I wanted to see you," her mother said.

"Why?"

"A mother can't want to see her daughter before the holidays?"

"So you're going through some nostalgia?"

"Maybe," her mother said.

"Where are you living right now?" she asked. "In a home or shelter? A supportive housing facility? Or are you on the streets?"

"I'm taking my meds," her mother said quickly.

"Now," she said. "Have you been?"

She didn't want to be harsh, but it was what her mother had said before. She'd had enough drama in her life and it was hard to keep letting someone in that was only going to hurt you again and again.

She didn't want her sister to go through this any more than her father.

"No," her mother said. "I've been on the streets and living with friends. I had nowhere to go. I got help and am in a home now. I'm trying to get back on my feet."

"I'm glad," she said. "That's all anyone has ever wanted for you. You just never wanted it for yourself."

"No," her mother said, looking up. There were tears in her mother's eyes. She looked much older than her fifty-four years. Her mother had her young. Her parents were both twenty when they married and she was born months later.

She'd done the math to know she was conceived before the wedding. Those early years though she didn't remember much

other than her mother's moods being up and down and a lot of fighting.

When her mother was smothering her with hugs and kisses one minute and then turning her away as if she were the devil's child left on the doorstep the next.

When Abby was born, her mother had been better. She'd been on her meds and was stable. Then one day, she just wasn't. Leaving and not returning for days. Going on benders of drinking and drugs to dull the pain of her mental illness rather than taking the meds that would help her.

It was a vicious cycle her mother couldn't outrun even though there were people who wanted to help her.

It might have been one of those long looks she'd had in the mirror after she'd left Tanner.

That there were people out there who wanted to help and she couldn't or shouldn't push them away. She didn't and she was where she was because of that.

If she could get her mother to see that, it might help.

"Do you want it now?" she asked. "Is that why you tried to contact Abby? Or did you call her because if you contacted me I'd talk about this like I am now and you weren't ready?"

"I don't know what I wanted back then. I think I just wanted to know that one of my daughters would talk back to me if I reached out."

She let out a breath. "I'm talking to you now."

"Because I showed up at your door," her mother said.

Liz poured the eggs into the hot pan and stirred them around. She grabbed some shredded cheese to add too. It always tasted better that way.

When the toast popped up she buttered it and got two plates down.

She put the food in front of her mother with a fork.

"Eat up," she said.

“If I didn’t show up and tried to text instead would you have replied back?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I could have chosen to ignore you ringing my bell and I didn’t so that should say something.”

Her mother nodded her head and started to eat like a starving woman. “These are good. Just like I used to make with the cheese.”

“I remember,” she said.

Her mother looked up and nodded again and continued to eat.

“I want to get better,” her mother said when her plate was cleaned up and she was reaching for a slice of toast.

“I think you believe that. But you also know there is no cure. To get better is medication. It’s maintenance. You can’t just take it when you want. You can’t substitute drugs and alcohol in its place.”

“I know that,” her mother said. “It’s hard.”

“Life is hard,” Liz said. “Where are you staying now? How were you able to get out?”

“I’m in Saratoga County,” her mother said.

“And a friend brought you here?” she asked. That was probably forty-five minutes away depending on the home her mother was in. “How are you getting back?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ve got some money. I can call an Uber.”

By money it meant her mother was getting her personal needs allowance from the state. That was less than two hundred dollars a month. It was the end of the month and she’d bet her mother didn’t have enough left to get her home.

“I can take you back,” she said. If her mother told her no, that would mean that this was all a lie. If her mother said yes, she’d feel as if she could talk to the counselors and get an idea of what was really going on.

“Can I think about it?” her mother asked.

She frowned. “You can, but if you are in a home, you’re going to most likely have to return today. Don’t most places only give a day pass?”

She knew how this worked. Or the gist of it.

“I’ve got until six to get back home. Lots of time.”

Her phone went off with an alert at the door at the same time she heard it open and Christian yelling, “Liz?”

“In the kitchen,” she said. She wasn’t sure why he was here. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw someone on the porch ringing the bell.”

She wanted to growl at him. She’d had no idea he had access to this on his phone. He’d never said a word.

She hadn’t asked either. She wouldn’t have said no if he asked, but the fact he did it without her knowledge felt intrusive even if he was the one who set it up.

There was no way she was going to argue with him right now over it. They’d have to deal with it later.

“Christian Butler, this is my mother, Lily Sherman.”

“Oh,” he said.

“Yeah. Oh. Can I see you in the other room?” She turned to her mother. “I’ll be right back. If you want more to eat, help yourself.”

“I didn’t know,” he said when they were in the front office. An empty room like so many others.

“No,” she said. “You wouldn’t know. Just like I was stunned when the doorbell rang and woke me up.”

“I thought it was a homeless person,” he said quietly. “I was worried.”

She snorted. That was a good description of the way her mother looked. Her hair was more white with black mixed in; it was messy and all over the place and might not have been washed in a few days.

There was a stench of cigarette smoke around her mother too. She didn't know if it was from her mother smoking or those she was keeping in contact with. It didn't matter either.

"No reason to be worried."

"What's going on?" he asked. "You said you haven't talked to her in years and she just shows up?"

"I'm trying to figure out what is going on. I'm not in any danger. I'll let you know when I know more."

"Meaning you want me to leave?" he asked.

"If you could. She's talking to me now and she might not if you are here. I'll explain more later, I promise."

"After you yell at me for coming over?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Maybe," she said. "Now go." She gave him a little shove toward the door.

He left and she went back to the kitchen. Her mother was in front of the coffee maker and getting a second cup.

"Is that your boyfriend?"

"Yes," she said.

"He's handsome."

"I think so," she said. "You're not here to ask about my life, are you?"

"Why can't I?" her mother asked. "I've missed so much."

"You have. And if you want to know what you missed then you need to prove that you are going to get help and continue with it. No more popping in and out of our lives on a whim. It's not fair to us and it's not doing you any good."

"I just want to make peace with my life," her mother asked.

Liz wasn't sure she liked the sound of that.

"Peace, why?" she asked.

"It's the start of getting better, don't you think?"

“If it’s something you want to do, then you’ll let me take you back to the home and talk to your counselors and get the full story.”

Her mother waited for a few minutes. “Fine. I’d like to see Abby too. Can you arrange that?”

She didn’t want to bring her sister in on this, but she wouldn’t hide it either.

“I’ll call her now and see if she can go with me to bring you back.”

Hours later she returned home and Christian was in her kitchen cooking dinner. “I can tell it’s not going to be a fun conversation,” he said.

“No,” she said. “And trying to butter me up by having dinner on the table isn’t going to help it any.”

A PANIC MOMENT

Christian knew he'd made a major misstep by showing up, but he'd been concerned and wanted to get that through to Liz.

Maybe he was sucking up by having dinner ready for her, but he was more confused than ever about what was going on.

"Did you get your mother back to where she needed to go okay?" he asked.

He took the steak off the grill on the stovetop and started to slice it for them in strips. He pulled out two sweet potatoes from the microwave and put one on each of their plates and then grabbed the cooked carrots that he'd heated up and was keeping warm.

"Yes," she said. She moved to the island and sat down to fill her plate. "I know you've got a lot of questions and I'll answer them all, but we need to talk about why I didn't know you had access to my cameras. Do you not trust me?"

"It's not that," he said quickly. That never even occurred to him and he realized what a big miscalculation he'd taken there. "Never. After Tanner showed up I was concerned for your safety. You know that. We talked it over in depth."

More like talked it over to death. If he didn't think she'd freak out he would have installed them without her agreement, but she had agreed.

"Why didn't you tell me you had access to it on your phone?" she asked.

“It slipped my mind,” he said. “Honestly. I installed it and tested it on my phone because you were in the shower. Then I put it on your phone. I don’t ever look at it. I’ve got one for my house too. I always have them.”

“You must have a lot,” she said.

“I have them when I’m living there and working on the houses. It’s a simple security system that most have. When I sell the house it’s disabled. Half the time when it goes off on my phone, I don’t look. Or don’t look right away.”

“You could have called or texted rather than driven over here,” she said.

“I could have. I might have had a panic moment.”

He started to eat his dinner, his eyes on hers and then back to his food.

“Do you think I would have let a homeless person in my house?” she asked. “Or even opened the door? I saw who it was. I could have ignored it and didn’t. I even talked to her through it to hang on because I was sleeping and she woke me.”

“I thought of all of that after the fact. In the moment I was just in a rush to get to you. You have to understand, Liz. There are parts of your life you don’t talk about. Or it took a long time to talk about.”

“Trust again,” she said.

“No,” he said. “I’m messing this up. Normally it’s Evan that can’t talk his way out of a paper bag and now it’s me. I trust you one hundred percent. And I know you trust me too.”

“Why do you know that?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“Because you called me when Tanner showed up,” he said.

“That’s right. When I was worried or concerned, I called you over my father. So you should have thought of that before you rushed over here to see if I was getting mugged in my own home rather than serving a hundred-pound woman some damn eggs and toast and a cup of coffee on a cold day.”

She managed to put him in his place faster than his mother had ever been able to do.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I overreacted.”

“You did.”

The two of them continued to eat. He wasn’t sure what more they could talk about in terms of the camera. He’d said he was sorry.

He didn’t want to bring up her mother. She’d said she’d get to it and he had to let her.

His plate was almost cleared, hers too, when she finally said, “I’m trying to wrap my head around what to say in regards to my mother.”

“I figured as much,” he said.

He finished his meal and picked his plate up and started to clean the kitchen.

She finished and rinsed her plate and put it in the dishwasher.

“My mother was homeless before a month or so ago,” she said.

He turned and looked at her. “Why?”

“Because she’d either been kicked out of the supportive housing she was in for violating rules or she left on her own for not wanting to follow the rules and take her meds. It’s a cycle she’s had most of her life.”

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked.

“She has severe bipolar with depression. I don’t think she always had it. I don’t know. I don’t think anyone does.”

“Tell me what you do know,” he said. “I want to understand.”

“What have you heard?” she asked. “I know kids talked when we were in school. I’m sure your parents have heard things.”

“If my mother knows anything she hasn’t said a word. I haven’t asked. They don’t judge, you know that. If I think back, I remember kids saying your mother was crazy. And I’m sorry, I know that is insensitive and I don’t mean it. Just what I heard.”

“I heard it too,” she said. “Not just from kids at school but from Tanner. There is a difference between my mother’s mental illness and others.”

There was part of him that was fighting the hurt that her ex knew about her mother and she didn’t tell him.

“When did things start?”

“I don’t even know,” she said. “I remember my mother always having mood swings. She’d be high and then low. Good days were so good she was smothering me with kisses and hugs and I wanted to get away. She was dancing in the rain, the sunshine made her giggle. A bad day and she couldn’t get out of bed. She’d cry for no reason. She wouldn’t eat. She didn’t want to live. Extremes.”

“Did she ever try to commit suicide?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “A few times. And she always ended up in an institution. She’d get on her meds. She’d get better. She’d come home and life was good. Or about as normal as it could be. But the suicidal thoughts and actions didn’t start until after Abby was born.”

“And you were older and remember it more,” he said. He couldn’t even imagine that as a child. He was struggling to understand it as an adult.

“Yes. It was hard for my father. He feels as if he failed my mother because he couldn’t keep her healthy and on her meds. He hated that it seemed she cared more about herself and her next fix than her family.”

“Fix?” he asked.

“She self-medicated on drugs and alcohol. There are a lot of people with mental health and addiction problems. It’s common. Trust me, I’ve read enough on it.”

She would have wanted to help her mother. “Did you go into nursing because of your mother?”

“I’m not sure if I did it for her or me. I guess I’m like my father and wanted to help people. It seemed the thing to do. I could go to college for two years and then get a good job making great money. It’s hard work, but I didn’t care.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“I tried to help my mother and she didn’t want it. She said it came off as lecturing. Maybe it did. I was working at that point. I saw what could happen to her if she didn’t get help.”

“You were young and trying to do what you could to get her to see,” he said.

“I was. It didn’t work. It pushed her away. My parents were separated for about ten years before my father finally divorced her. I think deep down he thought she’d be able to pull it together, but she didn’t. Or she couldn’t. It doesn’t matter. He didn’t need that in his life anymore.”

“The hope things would change only to have it squashed again had to be difficult.”

“It was,” she said. “I know that, though he wouldn’t admit it. I told you he feels he failed my mother and his marriage. Then us because he couldn’t help her. When I told him about Tanner, the whole truth, he was upset again. I told him I didn’t want him to feel like he failed again. I was embarrassed I was in that mess. That I had a shitty marriage on top of it.”

Christian moved to pull her into his arms. He could see she was upset, but she very rarely let any tears fall.

“There was no reason to feel embarrassed.”

“I know that now. But I explained that is why I didn’t tell him. And that now he could see I was fine and how strong I was.”

“You are,” he said. “I’m so proud of you.”

She snorted and moved out of his arms. “You didn’t even know me during that time.”

“I didn’t need to know you then to know how far you’ve come. I see how far you’ve come in the months we’ve been together.”

If he knew her when she was going through everything with Tanner he might have beat the shit out of her ex.

“I have,” she said. “I want to say I did that on my own, but I know that isn’t the case. I did it with help from my father. He gave me a place that was safe and secure when I got home. Then I did it with you. You’ve done the same. You love me for me and you give me a chance to come to decisions and conclusions on my own.”

“So I’m forgiven about the camera?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, sighing. “I knew it had nothing to do with a trust issue, but I had to hear you say it.”

“What’s going on with your mother now? Why after all these years did she show up? I’m still trying to figure that out.”

“So am I,” she said. “What I know is that she says she wants to get better. That she is trying and she knows it’s hard. She was on the streets until a month ago. She’s in a new facility in Saratoga County. She likes the counselors she is working with. She likes the place she’s at. Maybe they can get through to her when others couldn’t.”

“That’s positive,” he said.

“It is. I’m hopeful but not holding out hope. Not like Abby is. I know my mother might slip again. This isn’t a fix or a cure, it’s a lifestyle of change and living with your limitations and understanding coping mechanisms when you are feeling like you need help. Getting it is the first step.”

“Seems she did that,” he said.

“One of many times in her life she has,” she said. “Abby and I drove her back. We talked to her counselors. I want them to talk to me or Abby if there are concerns or issues. My mother authorized them to do that.”

“Which had to be huge,” he said.

“I believe it is. I’m not sure if it’s the holidays that caused it or not. She made some comments about the way I made her eggs with cheese. I knew she did it that way. I always liked them, but they didn’t hold any fond memory that my mother did it for me. It’s just how I ate them.”

“I understand that,” he said. “But did she?”

“I don’t know. What I saw was hope in her eyes over something that simple. I know this is going to sound mean and horrible, but I can’t let her into my life right now. Not like she wants.”

“She has to earn your trust again,” he said. “I think that is reasonable.”

“Abby is so ready to say she is fixed and accept her with open arms.”

“It sounds as if your sister doesn’t have the memories that you do,” he said.

“No. She was too young to remember any of the bad. All she remembers is she had no mother and she’s always missed and wanted that in life. I tried to be there for her, but I was her sister, not her mother.”

He just thought of something. “Back in school. When kids were saying those things about your mother, you worried I’d find out, didn’t you?”

“I’m not so sure I worried as much as if you’d feel the same way. Or think I wasn’t good enough for you. You knew that part of it. My mother’s story was just an added bonus.”

It was the way she said it that had him letting out a not-so-funny laugh.

“Why did you tell Tanner and then not me?” he asked. Might as well go right for it to get it all out in the open.

“I trusted him,” she said.

“And not me?” he asked. There was the hurt again.

“Let me finish,” she said. She was sniffing some now and he handed her a paper towel. She had no tissues anywhere that

he could see. She blew her nose and blotted her eyes. “I told him early on. When we were engaged. He always asked where my mother was. He couldn’t understand how I had no relationship with her. Later on he used that information against me.”

Shit. He should have figured that. “He told you you’d be just like your mother?” he asked.

“Yes. We talked about having kids. I wasn’t ready for them. Maybe deep down I started to worry about the way he was treating me. The way he thought of my weight and how it’d be when I was pregnant.”

“Our guts know the truth even before we can admit it,” he said.

“Yes. He’d tell me I couldn’t be a good mother because I never had one in my life. And when I’d get upset with him or we’d fight he’d tell me I was just like her. That my moods changed. That maybe I needed to have some tests or evaluations.”

What a dick her ex was. “You didn’t believe that, did you?”

“No. That was one thing I never let get into my head. I knew the truth there. It was just one more battle sword in his arsenal to use at war with me though.”

“I will never do that to you,” he said. “Ever. We all have things in our families and pasts, but that doesn’t mean it will happen to us.”

“It won’t,” she said. “And I’m a stronger person from everything I went through. If I felt like you would have believed that or used any of it against me, we wouldn’t be where we are today.”

He couldn’t wrap his head around this. “Then why haven’t you told me?” he asked.

“Because I want something that I’ve never seen or had in my life. I want to experience a real relationship. A real family. Bringing my mother into my life again would be a reminder of what I didn’t have. It’s on me, not you. You have to believe it.”

“But you did bring her back in,” he said. “So now what?”

“Now I know I can handle it. That’s the only reason I brought her back in. I can handle it because of you.”

“I know I’m forgiven now,” he said, reaching for her and pulling her back against his chest. “Right? You wouldn’t have said that or admitted it if you were still mad at me.”

She grinned at him. “No. I wouldn’t have. I’m not sure we have to forgive each other. I think I just need to know that you’ve got my back. I need to not be afraid to talk to you either.”

“Never feel that way. If I have to remind you daily, then I will.”

“You might have to,” she said. “But I’m catching on.”

“I’m glad I found you again, Liz.”

“I’m glad I bought this house, Christian. That’s how we found each other.”

She was right. He might not have seen her again the day the garbage truck hit her mailbox, but he would have found her. He believed that wholeheartedly.

EPILOGUE

V *alentine's Day*

LESS THAN TWO MONTHS LATER, Liz was cooking dinner for Christian. She had to go to work in a few hours, but since it was Valentine's Day and their first together, she wanted to make it special.

He was just about finished with his flip and going to put it on the market in a month. He hadn't found another place to buy yet and she knew he was looking.

They'd been together for about ten months and she was going to suggest he move in with her when he sold his house. He could still do his flips when he had time or wanted to, but this would take the stress off of him finding the perfect place and worrying he lived too far away.

And...she wanted him here every day.

"Hi," he said, coming in the door. "You're making Italian. I smell sauce."

"I am," she said. "Spaghetti and meatballs. I know you love it."

"I do," he said.

"What's in the bag?" she asked.

"Dessert. Rich ooey gooey brownies with frosting and caramel on them."

“Are you trying to get me fat?” she asked.

“You’ll just burn it off,” he said. “I’m the one that should be worried about getting fat with the way you cook for me. Have I said how much I love it?”

“You haven’t,” she said. And this was just playing right into her hand about having him move in. If she could figure out the right way or time to say it.

“Well, I do love it,” he said. “Not as much as you. But a close second.”

She laughed at him. “I’ll take it.”

The water was boiling and she dumped the pasta in. “How is your mother doing?” he asked. “Abby went to see her today, right? I’m sure she called you.”

“She did,” she said. “My mother is doing well. Not quite two months. She has a long road ahead of her, but she’s following the rules and taking her meds. Abby took the day off and brought my mother out to lunch. She took her shopping for some clothes too.”

“That’s nice of Abby,” he said.

Her sister might be setting herself up for heartbreak, but there was only so much Liz could do. As she’d said before, she was hopeful but not holding out hope. She wasn’t opening herself up to this right now.

“If it helps them both, then that is a positive thing,” she said. She wouldn’t be negative about it either. “Why are you pacing around?”

“What?” he asked.

“You’re pacing around the kitchen. Why?”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t realize it. I guess I was thinking that maybe this was a second chance for your mother. You even said your father has visited once. Do you think they will get back together or there is a chance of it?”

She laughed. “No chance. My father wants her well because she is the mother of his children. But no second

chance at their relationship.”

“They aren’t as lucky as us,” he said, smiling.

“No,” she said. “But it’s not the same thing either. Love has to be strong enough on both sides. My father had it for years, my mother not even close. She needs to get better and just focus on her. My father has moved on. Not with someone else, but with the acceptance that he can’t have what he thought he did.”

“I’m sorry for them,” he said. “That they can’t find what I did. What I know I’ve got with you.” He stopped pacing and was looking at her and then just dropped to one knee. “I know this might seem early, but we aren’t getting any younger. I don’t want to wait. I don’t want to even think of losing you again either. Will you marry me, Liz?”

She was just staring at him. She never expected this to happen and rather than fear creeping up her back, excitement was dancing in her belly.

“Yes!” she said, moving closer to him. “There is no timetable on love. It’s only what we feel for each other.”

He took the diamond ring that was in his hand. She hadn’t even looked at it and now realized it wasn’t a single diamond. Not like she had before and sold. This was a thick band with three diamonds of the same size in it. She was guessing they were a carat apiece and now she was afraid to wear it.

He slid it on her finger though. A perfect fit. Just like them.

“I know you’re nervous about this ring. Get it out of your head. It’s a symbol of our love. I needed them to be the same size. It’s our past that brought us to our present and we will create our future. Each one equally represents the other regardless of the time we spent there.”

She looked down at the ring, then she kissed him hard on the lips. “I don’t think I have ever heard anything as beautiful and as well said as that.”

“Somehow I pulled that out of a hat and it worked,” he said, laughing.

“It did work. Unless you planned it and have been stressing over it?” she asked.

“You know me,” he said. “I don’t plan for anything because I can’t control it. The only plan I had was to do this tonight and that’s because the ring was finished two days ago. Well, I planned on you saying yes too.”

“That’s good. Because I’ve been doing some planning of my own,” she said, looking down at the ring. “I was just thinking that when you sell your house that you should move in here. I was trying to figure out the best time to tell you. Now you just made it easy. I can tell you now. Might as well move into the house you always wanted.”

“I got the girl and the house in the end. Notice I said the girl first.”

“You did,” she said. “Good job!”

THE END!

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