

FALLING HARD • BOOK SEVEN



Fatting
for my
Crush

usa today bestselling author

DAKOTA DAVIES

FALLING FOR MY CRUSH

A SINGLE DAD SMALL-TOWN ROMANCE

FALLING HARD

BOOK 7

DAKOTA DAVIES

SAVAGE CREEK PRESS

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NOAH

The rusty Suburban flashes past my hiding spot going 71 in a 55 MPH zone, so I hit the gas and flash the lights.

I recognize the vehicle but can't determine which Morgan is behind the wheel. If it's my friend Wyatt, I'm going to enjoy handing him the \$303 ticket.

If it's his little sister Vonnie, I will enjoy it in a different way.

I clench my teeth to stop this train of thought.

The Suburban quickly slows and turns into a pullout. I park behind the vehicle and step out, the sandy ground gritty under my boots.

Though the threat is low, I approach the driver's side of the car with my usual caution. It's a habit leftover from my time in the military. Never let your guard down.

Shit. It's Vonnie.

She wrinkles her nose in a wince that makes her sea-blue eyes even brighter. "I'm so sorry, Deputy Tucker."

I force down a swallow. "Any special reason why you were driving sixteen miles over the limit today?"

She opens her mouth, but it's like she thinks better about replying. "No."

I wait for her to elaborate, but she just sits there with her freckled cheeks turning pink.

"License and registration, please," I say.

Dutifully, she digs in her purse and plucks out her license, then lunges for the glove box and rummages through the contents—folded papers, receipts, wrappers, gum containers, baseball cards.

“It’s in the owner’s manual,” I say, wishing this didn’t sound so unprofessional. Welcome to life in a small town.

“Oh,” Vonnie says, and snatches the worn booklet from the mess, then slides out the registration card. “Thank you.”

“Be right back,” I say, and take the two forms of ID back to my rig. A car whizzes by, sending a gust of tar and sage into my face.

I run the plates, which come back clean. I enter her driver’s license, expecting the same, but the results load with a surprise.

I frown and read the results again, then sit back and stare at the Suburban.

I have the urge to call Wyatt, ask if he knows about this. But that would be a breach of Vonnie’s privacy. She’s not a kid anymore, and though Wyatt has been her guardian since their dad died, she gets to decide what to share.

I’m tempted to ask Vonnie why there’s a record of mediation in her files, and if this Owen Broderick is still in the picture. However, it’s not relevant to her driving infraction, so technically, I can’t.

Mostly, I just want to know if she’s okay.

Before I can get out of the car, my personal cell buzzes. I have it set to block anyone but my babysitter, Lisa, while I’m on shift, so I already know who it is.

“Everything okay?” I ask, keeping my voice neutral.

“I’m so sorry to call,” Lisa says. “And I’m sorry to do this, but I am going to need some time off. My mom fell and broke her hip today.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say while my gut fills with dread. “Is she going to be all right?”

“Yes, I just got off the phone with the doctor. She’s going into surgery tomorrow. I’d like to be there.”

I shut my eyes for a long moment, cursing the universe for what this means. I’m out another nanny.

“Of course. Take all the time you need to be with your mom,” I say.

“Oh, thank you,” Lisa says with a giant sigh of relief. “I feel just terrible about this.”

“Can you stay until I’m off shift?” I ask as my mind flips through my emergency babysitting rolodex. My mom loves Kenzie, but she moved back to Montana a couple of years ago with my sister Cora. My impatient father can’t handle Kenzie for more than a few hours. I have a brother, but he’s on an aircraft carrier somewhere in the South China Sea.

“Definitely,” Lisa replies.

I end the call and allow myself one groan of frustration before stepping out with my booklet and Vonnie's ID and registration. I'll have to start calling the minute I cut Vonnie loose.

The sand crunches beneath my boots as I approach.

I offer her items.

"I was beginning to think you were going to arrest me," she says with a nervous laugh.

I can't resist the urge to tease her a little. "Something you want to confess?"

She smiles, which wipes the tension off her face. "Not unless being a broke nursing student counts."

I scoff. "If you're a nurse, why are you broke? You probably make more money than I do."

She drops her hands from the steering wheel to her lap. I shouldn't let my gaze follow, but it takes me a split second to steer my attention elsewhere. In that split second, I notice a constellation of freckles on the inside of her right thigh.

"I'm not actually a nurse yet, Sir," Vonnie says. "I'm taking my boards in August."

"Well, sorry to add to your troubles," I say, and hand her the booklet.

With a sigh, Vonnie adds her signature.

I tear off her copy and hand it to her. "Take it easy on that accelerator, okay?"

Her gaze flicks to the rearview mirror then back at me, but it's so fast I'm not even sure she realizes she did it.

Almost like a nervous habit.

"I will," Vonnie says, reaching for the ignition.

I walk back to my vehicle as the Suburban's engine rumbles to life and the tires roll over the sand to the highway. Vonnie accelerates as I slide into my rig.

I fight the urge to dig deeper into what I read in her files. But I don't have permission. However, I do have the right to read up on Owen Broderick. I have a right to know if he's a threat to one of the citizens I've sworn to protect.

Especially if it's Vonnie.

Meanwhile, I have an emergency childcare situation to solve.

I USE my lunch break to run through my list of babysitters but the answers are the same. The teenagers I hire for the occasional Friday night now all have steady jobs, or turn me down for one reason or another. Jessica from last summer is hiking the Pacific Crest Trail and won't be back until August. Tanya who babysat for me over the holidays last year is doing an internship at a law office.

I call some of the moms with kids in Kenzie's class, asking for referrals. One mom offers to have Kenzie over to play with her daughter tomorrow afternoon, and I nearly collapse in relief. And another mom gives me several names, one of which can babysit on Friday.

But that's only two days. What about next week?

Kenzie won't like the sudden change, or Lisa being gone, but I don't have a choice. I can't take any more time off work if I want to have enough for the upcoming family reunion.

I make the mistake of calling my former hookup Lacey on the off chance she might help. Even if she hates me now, I know she still cares about Kenzie.

"Where's Gia?" Lacey asks.

Gia left when Kenzie was two, and I've been on my own since. "Texas, last I heard."

"Did you at least try her? After all, she's Kenzie's mother."

"She's made her feelings clear about that." Like granting me full custody.

"I'm not going to rescue you this time, Noah," Lacey says.

Okay, maybe I deserve to suffer a little. Lacey and I had fun, but she wanted something I couldn't give her. Even though I had been upfront about exactly what I was offering, she still got hurt. I feel badly about that but investing in a relationship beyond sex is so far off my radar that it might as well not exist.

"Fine," I say. Even though it's not fine.

"Good luck," she says, her tone edged with regret.

With my lunch hour nearly over, I call my friend Wyatt Morgan. While I wait for him to pick up, I think back to what I learned from Vonnie's files. Does he know?

"How's my favorite pitcher?" Wyatt asks.

Wyatt and I play in a summer baseball league. A bunch of single dads, mostly, even though Wyatt is no longer single. He and Brooke are disgustingly cute together, with a growing family of their own.

“Screwed,” I say.

“Hang on, let me get to my office,” Wyatt says. The buzz from the newsroom at the Mountain Gazette quiets as a door shuts.

“So, screwed as in another of Penny Creek’s bachelorettes put a rock through your window, or screwed like someone rustled your horses last night?”

“You think I’d call you for help hunting down a horse thief? And thank you for reminding me of the rock. I’d almost forgotten.”

“You’re welcome.”

“My nanny needs time off for an emergency,” I blurt.

“Shit,” Wyatt says, his voice sobering. After raising his three youngest siblings when their dad died and their mom self-destructed, he knows exactly the kind of crisis sudden gaps in childcare can cause.

Wyatt rattles off several ideas, but I’ve already tried them all.

“Maybe I could run an ad in the Gazette,” I say, only half-joking.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Wyatt says.

My heart lifts. Wyatt is the best fixer I know.

“Vonnie,” Wyatt says. “She’s home while she studies for her nursing boards. She’s going to help out with the twins but won’t let me pay her. Plus I heard she now owes Rogue County three hundred bucks.”

“She’s got a lead foot,” I reply. And the prettiest eyes, and a constellation of pale freckles on the inside her thigh, and likes to call me Sir.

I close my eyes and take a slow breath to yank my thoughts out of the gutter.

“Probably picked that up in the city,” Wyatt says. “Good thing she’s got you to keep her in line.”

He’s joking, but I happen to like this idea, only not the way he’s suggesting.

Freaking hell.

“Sounds like she’s got her hands full,” I say to refocus.

“You only need a pinch hitter, right? A week or so?”

“Probably.”

“I’ll call Vonnie right now. I’m sure she’ll be interested.”

“Thanks, man,” I say, fighting the urge to bite my fist.

“Sure thing, I’ll have her call you one way or the other.”

I nearly choke on the breath I’m forcing into my lungs as *all the ways* I would enjoy being with Vonnie begin to unspool in my mind.

Then I shake my head to refocus. Vonnie Morgan is in the no-fly zone for several key reasons. That her big brother is my friend and an important ally tops the list, and then I have a strict policy about not screwing my nanny. Not only is Penny Creek a small town, I'm a gentleman.

Most of the time.

But it's only a week. I can keep my dick in my pants for that long.

VONNIE

“I can’t be his nanny,” I babble to Wyatt while my mind spins out of control. I glare at the \$303 ticket lying on my desk.

“Why not?” Wyatt replies, sounding surprised. “Don’t tell me it’s that ancient grudge Bill Tucker’s carried for our family.”

“No,” I say, though if Dad were alive, he’d never let me work for a Tucker. “I’m busy with studying, remember?”

“That doesn’t take up your whole day though. And it might actually help with studying because you’d have his house to yourself when Kenzie’s at school.”

He does have a point. Here at the Morgan Mothership, I’m lucky if I get an hour of quiet. Not that I mind helping with the twins and hanging out with Brooke and Wyatt or whoever happens to be stopping by.

“I would miss you guys too much,” I say. “I’m only here for a few months.”

“Not if Pete and I get our way,” Wyatt replies.

I groan. Several years ago, my two eldest brothers finally solved their feud, but it’s only made them a stronger team. One that likes to try to control my life.

And while there’s a definite draw to put down roots in this valley, my goal has always been to work as a nurse in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, or NICU. Rogue Valley Medical is too small for that level of care. Sick babies get life-flighted to either Children’s Hospital or Swedish Medical Center, both in Seattle. I’ve applied to both, but Seattle Children’s is considered the Holy Land for pediatric care. That’s where I want to be.

There's just one big problem with this plan. Owen Broderick is also applying to Children's, and because his dad is a high-level surgeon there, he's a shoe-in.

"Just call Noah and find out what he needs," Wyatt says, bringing me back to the room.

I inhale a breath to cool my suddenly hot cheeks. Noah Tucker is the hottest slice of broody alpha pie this side of the Rockies. But that's not the only reason why I'm drawn to him.

Noah was there for me when I needed him. I've never forgotten it.

"Fine," I say, if nothing else than to end this conversation so I can get back to studying. I jot down Deputy Noah Tucker's number.

"And as your job market broker, I demand a cut of your salary," Wyatt teases. "Diapers are expensive."

"Then you better get back to work," I reply.

He laughs and we hang up. I sit at my desk in my childhood room and stare at the phone number scrawled in the corner of my study guide.

I've worked as a nanny off and on since I was sixteen. It's work I'm familiar with, and it pays well. If Wyatt was telling the truth and I'd have a quiet space to study during the day, that would be a nice perk. I'm also broke—though I'm less worried about that since my NICU salary will more than satisfy my needs, plus help me pay off my student loans well within the ten-year plan I set up.

But I can't start my life in Seattle broke.

If it was anyone else, I'd snatch at the chance. But I'm sort of afraid of Noah. He's the kind of guy I've sworn to stay away from because he's emotionally unavailable, and as my therapist would remind me, those relationships end with me heartbroken and alone.

I hate that she's right, but maybe a little bit grateful too because I'm determined not to end up like that again.

When I fall in love, I want it to be for real.

Turning back to my study guide, I grill myself on endocrine dysfunction, making notes with several colors, then flip through my diagnostic flow chart.

I'm just getting into a groove when downstairs, the front door closes followed by a baby's wail. It's Rowan—his cry is always the more shrieky of the two—followed by Brooke's soothing voice. Rowan calms, but with them all back from picking up big sister Riley at preschool, the house is no longer quiet. I put in headphones and queue up my study playlist, but I'm not ten

minutes into a speed session with my diabetes notecards when my door creaks open and a mischievous face peeks in.

It's Riley.

All thoughts of studying vanish, and I crook my finger.

She races over and flings her little arms around me.

I hold her in a tight squeeze, then tug her onto my lap. "How was school today?"

"I did the hundred square again," Riley says.

"I though you already mastered the hundred square?" I ask. "Maybe it's time to move on."

"Mareena says true mastery only comes from teaching others," Riley says. "So I'm preparing."

"Good for you," I say, doing my best to keep a straight face. Mareena is the head teacher at Riley's preschool and takes the learning portion of her charges' day very seriously. Which works for Riley, who attacks school like a lioness dismembering a baby wildebeest. I would worry about this more, but Riley is also just as passionate about making daisy chains and climbing trees.

"What are you studying?" she asks, leaning her little elbows on my desk to gaze at the mess of papers, study guides, and my laptop, the screen now black.

"Hormones," I say, and lean down so my cheek is against hers. Her skin is warm and a little sticky. Later, I'll convince her to take a bath.

"What's a hormone?"

I shut my laptop lid and gather up my flash cards. "They're like messages in your body."

She lines up my highlighters. "Sometimes Daddy writes kissy messages to Mommy."

I remember the winter my big brother fell head over heels for Brooke. Damn, was it fun to have him in the hot seat for once.

"It's a little like that, only it's your brain doing the writing."

"My brain writes kissy notes?" Riley asks, scrunching up her little face.

I lift her off my lap and take her hand. We always share a snack when she gets home from school. It's a highlight of my day and a welcome break from the books.

"Maybe when you're older," I say as we leave my room.

"Does your brain write kissy notes?" she asks, gazing up at me with her

bright blue eyes.

Noah's hearty laugh echoes through my mind. "Yep."

Twenty minutes later, Riley and I are enjoying our cheese, apple, and gingersnaps snack when Wyatt breezes in. He and Brooke have a 50/50 childcare/career agreement, so he's here for the afternoon show.

Wyatt kisses Riley on the head, then slides into the chair next to her and swipes a cookie.

"Daddy!" Riley protests.

He makes a show of eating it whole, which makes her laugh.

Riley invites him into a thumb war, and he accepts. As their thumbs dart and swoop around each other, he eyes me. "Did you call Noah?"

My gut wriggles. "Not yet."

"Don't wait too long. He might find someone else."

"I don't know if I want the job," I say, nibbling a slice of apple.

Riley nails Wyatt's thumb. "I beat you!" she crows.

He taps her on the nose, then gets up and heads for the kitchen. On his way, he puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "You know I'll support whatever you choose."

"I know," I say, and shoot him an automatic smile. He's talking about this nanny job but it extends to the other big choices I'm making about my future too. I wish I could tell Wyatt about Owen and his threats, but my big brother would go for blood. And then my dream of being on my own will vanish because he won't think I'm capable.

And that will crush me. I'm handling the situation with Owen. I made sure he doesn't know where I live or where I am right now. And if I get hired at Children's Hospital with him, we'll be so busy keeping very sick babies alive that he won't have time for his antics.

Or at least that's my hope.

Back in my room, I try to study, but my concentration is shot. Plus I can hear Riley and Wyatt laughing together while they build something with blocks in the rec room down the hall. He's such a good dad. I like to think my twin sister Leah and I trained him, a claim he wouldn't deny.

With a giant huff, I pick up my phone and dial Noah's number.

"Deputy Tucker," he answers.

Crap. I didn't know this was his work phone. "Hi, Deputy, it's Yvonne." I'm not sure why I went with my full name. Nerves, maybe? Another layer of protection?

“Hey Vonnie,” Noah says. “Thanks for calling.”

“I didn’t mean to call you at work.” My heart thumps against my rib cage.

“It’s okay. I’m just doing paperwork.”

I’m tempted to tease him about filing all the speeding tickets he gave out today but hold my tongue. “Wyatt said you’re looking for some help with childcare?”

“Yes,” he says, sounding hopeful. “I’d be grateful.”

It gives me a strange rush knowing I have this tiny bit of power over a big, strong, grumpy cop.

“My nanny has a family emergency and might be gone for a few weeks,” Noah continues.

Just a few weeks doesn’t sound too bad. “Tell me the hours?”

Noah launches into a detailed breakdown of Kenzie’s schedule—school, pony club, gymnastics, plus his twelve-hour shifts and when they overlap and when they don’t.

“Sorry, that’s probably way more than you needed to know.”

“It’s okay,” I reassure him. “I’ve experienced plenty of crazy family schedules before. What about nights and weekends?”

“My schedule rotates, so I don’t necessarily have weekends off, but we have a guest room.”

Oh. So I’d be staying overnight.

“Just so you know, I get paid even if I’m sleeping.”

“I’ll pay you anything you ask for,” Noah says. “Seriously. Name your price.”

“Two hundred a day, plus a car.”

“Done.”

I blink. Okay, this is happening. I realize I’m doodling little hearts in the margins of my study guide. With a frustrated grimace, I set down my colored pencil.

“Can you come over tonight?” Noah asks. “I can make the three of us dinner. We can work out the schedule and you can meet Kenzie.”

We settle on a time and end the call. I immediately want to talk to Leah. She cuts through bullshit like nobody’s business.

But it’s just dinner, and a week or so of being Noah’s substitute nanny. From the sound of his schedule, except for the daily pass-down as it relates to Kenzie, I won’t see him.

So I tell myself I don’t need Leah’s guidance. I got this.

I SPEND a ridiculous hour going through my closet for what to wear to Noah's and finally settle on jeans and a soft, cotton V-neck sweater in my favorite shade of blue.

Noah lives closer to town, in a neighborhood with modest houses and a playground with tall swings and a tennis court. I immediately know I will be spending time at that park with Kenzie.

Noah's silver and blue Rogue Valley Sheriff's SUV is parked in the driveway next to a black Dodge Ram pickup truck that looks freshly washed.

The tidy brown house is surrounded by a lush, green lawn trimmed short and a wood fence that I would bet Noah built himself to keep Kenzie safe.

I let myself in through the gate and follow the pavers to the covered porch. To the left, a shoe shelf contains neat rows of shoes, sandals, and boots, easily matched with the owners based on size and colors. Noah's boots and shoes are big and brown and worn, and Kenzie's are pink or flowered or lined with faux fur.

Noah opens the door, dressed in jeans and a faded green t-shirt that molds to his lean, muscular frame. He's also barefoot and his hair is wet, his dark eyelashes lush around his sharp brown eyes.

Flutters tickle my insides, but I swallow them down.

A small person with dark hair and the same brown eyes races up behind Noah but hides behind his pant leg, her little fingers gripping the fabric.

Noah laughs, almost like he's embarrassed. "Come in," he says to me, and tries to shuffle back with Kenzie attached to his leg.

The minute I'm inside, Kenzie darts off, her wispy, long hair streaming behind her like a cape.

"She'll warm up, and then she'll talk your ear off," Noah says as I step in and he closes the door behind me. I use that nanosecond to survey the small living room to the right—couch, overstuffed chair, coffee table, fireplace with a giant stack of wood. Above is a small loft, reached by a rough-hewn ladder affixed to the wall.

Noah leads me past the living room to the kitchen in the back of the house. A big sliding glass door opens to a covered porch and an expansive backyard. The kitchen space has an island with two stools that face the wall of appliances on the right, and a square, wooden table with matching chairs on the left.

“Um, is something on fire?” I ask because the barbecue grill on the end of the porch outside is smoking.

Noah curses and dashes through the glass doors, bare feet and all.

I watch as he yanks open the lid and stabs at whatever’s cooking.

A soft humming pulls my attention to a small table on the right where Kenzie is busy coloring. Slowly, I walk over.

She’s coloring very carefully in a book, one of the nice ones with thick white pages and fine detail. Not usually what I’d see a first-grader interested in.

“What are you working on?” I ask, squatting down so I’m not towering over her.

She turns the book slightly and fills in a section of the jungle background with pale green. “The mama tiger,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone that makes me smile.

Noah comes back inside holding a platter of burgers and grilled chicken, looking relieved. “Thanks for the save,” he jokes, and carries the platter to the table.

“Time to wash up, Kenz,” Noah says to his daughter, but she finishes the last few strokes of her pencil to complete the section she’s been diligently working on before complying. I get the sense she’s lost in the task and not intentionally ignoring her dad.

I’ve worked with dozens of kids and had enough child development courses during my nursing studies to recognize coping behavior when I see it.

I’m just not sure what it means.

“Can you show me where to wash my hands?” I ask her.

For the first time, she looks at me. “Are you going to spend the night?”

I blink.

“Kenzie,” Noah says in a warning tone. “Manners?”

“It’s okay,” I say to them both, then turn to Kenzie. “Nope, I’m not going to spend the night. Not unless you want me to.”

Kenzie’s thin little eyebrows scrunch together in a scowl—one that surely melts her daddy’s heart daily—as she tries to work out what this means.

“I don’t want you to,” she says, but there’s no malice behind it.

I smile. This is exactly why kids are so awesome. “Okay, I won’t.”

Kenzie glances up at her dad, then at me, the trouble in her big brown eyes fading. “Okay.”

She leads me past the loft to a bathroom down the hall. Beyond are two

doors, likely the bedrooms. At the end of the hallway is a giant window overlooking an aspen grove.

Just as I turn to enter the bathroom, a flash of something from the trees grabs my attention. I pause, my heartbeat ticking into my throat, but there's only the bright green leaves, shimmering in the last of the sunshine.

At least that's what I'm going to believe.

NOAH

I wake to the feel of Kenzie's warm breath on my nose.

"I don't like her," she says when I crack one eye open.

"Don't like who?" I ask.

She scowls at my face. "You need to shave."

"Noted," I say. "Can we get back to the reason you're awake at five a.m.?"

"The new lady. I don't like her."

"Vonnie?" I ask, followed by a yawn. "You seemed to like her okay last night."

Kenzie's lips twitch. "When is Lisa coming back?"

After a quick prayer that I'm not going to fuck this conversation up, I roll out of bed and slip into my jeans.

"This calls for pancakes," I say. And coffee.

"How come you don't have any hair?" Kenzie asks, watching me slide on my t-shirt and a hoodie.

"Because I don't," I say, then lift Kenzie in my arms. Though she's petite for her age, I should stop carrying her like she's a baby. But she's still my baby, and always will be.

Kenzie turns to watch where we're going, allowing me to catch her face in profile. The round cheeks and tangled hair, her deep brown eyes and long dark lashes.

Unable to stop myself, I kiss the side of her head. She smells like her baby shampoo and clover. "You want to go riding today?"

Her eyes light up. "Can we take Dixie?"

“Sure,” I reply. We step into the kitchen, and Kenzie squirms from my grip. I set her down and she hurries to set the breakfast bar with placemats, plates, and silverware while I get the griddle heating and grab ingredients.

Kenzie pushes one of the stools around the island and climbs up so she can help stir the batter, her favorite part. We get pancakes sizzling on the grill, then I pour her a glass of milk and myself a cup of coffee.

I notice the jungle tiger picture Kenzie was working on last night is missing from her book, but I don’t bring it up. I saw the edge of it poking out of Vonnie’s purse last night when she left. And because I’m pretty sure Vonnie isn’t a thief, that means that Kenzie gave it to her.

So Kenzie saying she doesn’t like Vonnie is total bullshit.

I flip a pancake onto Kenzie’s plate, and while she’s busy slathering it with butter and syrup, I pour two more on the griddle.

“Lisa will be back in a few weeks, but it might be longer,” I say to pick up the conversation we need to have.

“If I got hurt, would Mommy come back?” she asks, swirling her fork in the puddle of syrup on her plate and licking it.

This question catches me in the diaphragm like a sucker punch. Kenzie’s only six, but already knows too much about how people hurt each other.

“I know you miss her, *crevette*, but we’ve talked about this,” I say because if I start lying about Gia this early in the morning, it’s going to be a long day.

Kenzie forks up a big bite of pancake. “I don’t want the new lady to go in my room.”

“Not even to play with you?”

“We can play outside.”

“I’m sure Vonnie will want you to feel comfortable.”

“I don’t like her,” Kenzie says, finishing off her pancake.

I scoop the two deep golden brown pancakes onto a serving plate and turn off the griddle.

“Why can’t I be with Granddad? He let me shoot his gun.”

I choke on my coffee. “Was this before or after you ate saddle polish?” I ask after I recover.

“You were on a date,” Kenzie says, deftly avoiding the reason my dad is no longer approved to watch my only child for more than two hours. “We shot at cans he put on his fence. I didn’t hit any.”

“Don’t you think you’re a little young to be shooting Granddad’s gun?” I

refuse to take her bait to discuss my social life. Not that there's anything to tell. Technically, I don't date.

Kenzie swipes syrup with her finger and licks it. Should I let her mainline sugar like this? It's one of the many questions keeping me up at night.

"Why did you marry Mommy when she doesn't like horses?"

Gia and I never married, but explaining this is too complicated. Though I can't imagine it getting any easier as Kenzie gets older. "That's a really great question."

"Does the new lady like horses?"

"I don't know," I say, finishing off my coffee. "You want me to invite her today?"

"Are you going to marry her? You can't marry Lisa because she's too old."

I ignore the first question because I have a right to establish my own boundaries. "People can get married anytime, Kenz. There's no age limit."

"Then why don't you marry her?"

I stand and grab our plates. "Get dressed, cowpoke. We ride in ten."

On the way north, we listen to music—mine, not that cheesy kid's crap some of my dad friends play. Kenzie begs to listen to *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, a French children's story about an adventurous child who is always getting into trouble. Mom gave it to her during her last visit. Though Kenzie doesn't yet know French, she knows enough to piece the meaning together.

Hearing French reminds me of my childhood when Mamie and Papa would visit and our house would be filled with curious, foreign sounds. Mom would chatter right along with them—driving Dad nuts because he couldn't keep up.

Gia adored my French Canadian roots, and begged me for a nickname like *mon coeur* which means "my heart," or *amour*. I tried, but it always felt forced.

"*Mon bijou!*" Gia announced one morning, reading from some list on her phone. She gazed at me with those big brown eyes. "It means my jewel."

I pretended to be late for work.

Funny that the instant Kenzie was born, little nicknames would tumble effortlessly from my lips: *mon petite etoile*—little star, *crevette*—baby shrimp, *chouchou*—sweet bun.

We cross the swollen Rogue several times, then pass by the handful of mega mansions tucked into the aspens or surrounded by fortress-like fences.

My family's property is on the east side of the valley, on land my paternal great-great-grandfather bought with stagecoach money. Back then, the region was experiencing one of the biggest mining booms of the west, and he was smart enough to capitalize on it.

"Is Granddad going to ride too?" Kenzie asks as I turn up Obsidian Gulch, passing beneath the wooden arch with TUCKER RANCH burned into the beam. Some of our land has been sold off over the years, but what's left is a slice of prairie and mountainside, with creeks and woods, places my siblings and cousins spent a lot of time exploring when we were growing up.

Now, Dad lives here, alone. He says he likes the quiet. Though he's a cantankerous bastard most of the time, that doesn't mean I don't worry about him.

"It's just us today, pardner," I say.

We pass a few of the other properties, mostly horse people with barns and corrals and various pieces of farm equipment abandoned in the weeds. The road curves up a broad rise and dead ends at an 80-year-old farmhouse, barn, and fenced pasture.

Kenzie tugs open the door latch and slides out of her booster seat the second my wheels come to a stop. Outside, the cloud of dust kicked up by my approach skitters past my boots.

"Stay out of Raven's stall," I bark.

"I know," Kenzie replies, not turning around, her braid swinging between her narrow shoulders.

Inside the barn, I get a hit of fresh alfalfa and polished leather mixed with the scent from the horses. Six stalls line the left side. The right side has two stall—Raven's, and Blue's—and the tack room. Above us, the loft is piled high with hay.

Raven nickers when I step up to his door. When I click my tongue, he ambles over, huffing a warm breath into my shoulder while I rub his forelock with my knuckle.

"I'll be back," I promise him, then walk to the tack room. A few of the other horses nicker or stomp their feet, but I know Dad's already been out here this morning to care for them.

Kenzie is in Dixie's stall, feeding her chunks of carrot, probably pilfered from our fridge. She's talking in soft tones while petting her neck.

From the tack room, I grab the brushes and let myself into Dixie's stall. She's a sturdy Quarterhorse, mild-mannered and sure-footed. I've been

working her and Kenzie together on a lead in the arena, getting them ready to ride solo.

We give Dixie a quick grooming and pick out her hooves, then I add her saddle pad and bridle. When I go back to the tack room for the saddle, Dad enters the barn.

“What the hell are you thinking?” he says.

“Language?” I say to cut him off, and nod toward Dixie’s stall.

Dad rolls his eyes. “She’s heard me cuss.”

“Is that where she learned it?” I reply.

He steps into the tack room as I lift my saddle. “I hear you hired a Morgan to be your new nanny.”

“What’s your point?” I brush past him and head for Dixie’s stall. “And how do you even know? You spying on me?”

He gives a grunt. “Do I need to?”

I stop and turn so I can stare him down. “Your beef with Timothy Morgan has nothing to do with me.”

“They bring trouble.”

I remember that little flag in Vonnie’s file.

“Cranky Old Man is not a good look for you,” I say to hide my grimace. “Maybe it’s time for a health screening. Dementia can set in as early as fifty for some people.”

He points his finger at my chest. “Why don’t you trust me on this?”

“Because you’re being ridiculous,” I say, and carry the saddle into the stall. I set it on Dixie’s back and center it over her withers.

“There’s things I know about that family,” Dad warns.

Kenzie peeks from under Dixie’s neck, her eyes watchful.

“Yeah, yeah, things you can’t tell me,” I say, and reach for the girth hitch, then slide it through and tighten it. Dixie shifts her feet.

“Exactly,” Dad says. He opens his arms and Kenzie rushes over and wraps herself around his legs. “You’ve had enough trouble. Don’t go looking for more.”

I take Dixie’s reins. “Noted. Come on, Kenzie.”

Once we’re outside the barn, I lift Kenzie into the saddle, then slide in behind her. The barn door skids shut behind us, but I don’t turn around. Instead, I lead Dixie to the edge of the pasture and follow the narrow trail through the prairie grass.

Dixie plods in her steady gait. I welcome the comforting tempo into my

muscles as I fight my dad's words.

They bring trouble.

He's not wrong there. Timothy Morgan pulled plenty of pranks in his day. Did things his way, which sometimes went against the law, and sometimes even common sense. His risky adventures and pushing limits in rock climbing and white-water kayaking is the reason there's a memorial bench on the banks of the Upper Rogue with his name on it.

"Can we go to the mine?" Kenzie asks.

"That's a long ways for ole Dixie here." And I try not to encourage Kenzie's obsession with that place. Ever since she heard from some kids at school about Jonas Rundell being found in a mine, she thinks we'll find a dead body in ours.

"Raven wanted to go to the mine," Kenzie says.

"Oh yeah? How do you know?"

"He told me."

I grunt. "I thought I told you to stay out of his stall."

"I did."

I let this go and we ride in silence up a set of gentle switchbacks, the views expanding as we ascend a broad hillside. The glacier-sculpted Sawtooth Mountains line the western horizon, their jagged tips white with fresh snow. The White Clouds on the eastern side of the valley aren't as impressive, but their silver and lead deposits put this valley on the map.

Dixie sneaks a nip of grass, snapping my attention back to our ride. I tighten the reins and give her sides a little squeeze with my heels.

Our trail tops out on a flat rise that overlooks Obsidian Gulch and a perfect view of the Tucker ranch. Though we're north of town, I can make out the narrow Cold Springs valley, where Timothy Morgan built his family's home. It's no accident that he chose the Sawtooth side of the Rogue, and we chose the White Clouds. Timothy Morgan chose adventure, and Dad's people chose land that could be worked. Timothy was a notorious renegade, while Dad swore to uphold the law.

That year Timothy died, trouble came knocking. I was onboard the *Stennis* in the North Arabian Sea so I missed this slice of Rogue River Valley history.

While Dad's right—after my battle with Gia and settling into my role as a single dad, I definitely don't need any more trouble. But hiring Vonnie for a few weeks hardly qualifies. She's not wild like Caleb or reckless like her

twin, Leah. And she's nothing like her crazy father. She's sweet and patient, with a smile that knocks me on my feet.

She also calls me Sir, and there's the problem with those freckles. Where else does she have them? On her lower back? Her hip? In the tender groove between her thigh and her soft, wet pussy?

I huff a hard breath to cool my heating blood.

Trouble indeed.

VONNIE

I'm standing in front of the freezer aisle, staring at my choices of ice cream, when Noah calls me.

"Can you come over tomorrow morning?"

My belly flips. I banish the possibility of this being a booty call.

"She's a little nervous," Noah adds, further squashing my fantasy. "This might help."

"Of course." I reach in and pull out a carton of coffee chip. "How do you feel about popsicles?"

"Uh, what?"

I laugh. "Okay if I bring popsicles for Kenzie?"

"Summer hasn't started yet. We've barely broken sixty degrees."

"It doesn't have to be scorching hot to enjoy a popsicle."

"She's currently satisfying her sweet tooth fix with powdered sugar."

I frown. "You let her eat powdered sugar?"

"No."

I reach in for a box of popsicles and add it to my cart. "Got it. What time do you need me tomorrow?"

"I wake her up at seven and the bus comes at eight."

"I'll be there at seven," I say.

"You can stay and study if you want. I don't start my shift until noon, but I'll leave you alone."

This throws me a little. "That would be great," I say, then cringe. "Not the leaving me alone part though. I mean, it's your house. You can do what you want."

There's a moment of silence where I want to beat my forehead against the freezer door.

"What I want is for you to have quiet so you can study," he says in a firm voice.

Crap. I've managed to piss him off. "Thank you," I manage. He ends the call and I stuff my phone back into my purse.



THOUGH THE GROWLY Bear Bakery isn't exactly on the way to Noah and Kenzie's house, I decide to avoid the Mothership morning hustle and head there for breakfast.

While I'm waiting in line, Annika dashes from the kitchen to refill the display case with peanut butter cookies, her baby bump making an adorable mound under her apron.

Her eyes light up when she sees me, and in a flash, she races over and pulls me into a warm, firm hug. She smells like bread dough and honey.

I squeeze her, but not too tight. "How's junior this morning?"

She steps back and gives me a grin, her cheeks rosy and her sky-blue eyes sparkling. "Busy. But thankfully not making me throw up anymore."

"That's great to hear." I ignore the pang of envy flickering to life in my gut. I'm so happy for Annika and Grady. They are going to make the most amazing parents.

"Stop by the kitchen before you go," Annika says, then disappears into the back.

After placing my eggs and sourdough order, I pour coffee from the carafe and settle at a two-top.

Across from me in a booth are two people who clearly don't belong in Penny Creek, Idaho. They're dressed the part—the woman in a new fleece pullover and hiking pants and the guy in jeans and a camo hoody—but the woman's hair is dark and silky like she stepped out of a Paul Mitchell commercial, and she's wearing white sneakers, which nobody in their right mind would wear here this time of year, where it's often slushy and almost always muddy.

The guy stands out too because he's a big dude but not in an athletic way, and his beard isn't the full mountain man beard, more like one he started growing a week ago. He's talking on a cell phone while jotting down something in a small notebook. The Mountain Gazette, the valley's newspaper run mostly by Brooke and Wyatt, is folded on the edge of their table. The woman taps her manicured nails against her coffee cup like she's impatient.

"Got it," the big guy says, and hangs up. "Let's roll," he says to the woman. But she's already sliding out of her side of the booth. She's medium-tall and slender like a reed.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not getting inside that mine." She flicks invisible lint off her fleece sleeve. There's something about her voice—it's smoky but rich.

"You really want to let down your listeners like that?" the man asks.

"There's no story here, Hank," the woman says. "Nobody cares about a dead youth pastor."

He taps the Mountain Gazette. "They'll care when we expose the cover up."

"You're right, you're right," the woman says with a sigh then hustles out of the bakery.

The man slides from his side of the booth, wiping his scruffy face with a napkin that he tosses down on the table before scrambling to keep up with her.

I try not to stare at their empty table and the mess they left behind.

This isn't the first time outsiders have arrived to dig up the story of Jonas Rundell, the youth pastor who went missing while setting up a geocaching activity for the teen group he ran. Nobody knew what happened to him. There were rumors, yeah, but he was never found. Until a group of kids stumbled on his very dead body in one of our valley's many abandoned mine shafts.

I've talked about Rundell enough in therapy to understand why my skin suddenly feels too tight and my chest is tingling. And also to know that I just have to stay grounded and the feeling will fade. I'm no longer that kid Rundell targeted. I'm strong, capable. What happened to me isn't my fault.

"So cool, isn't it?"

Startled, I blink at the young woman with twin French braids holding my plate of eggs and toast.

"What's cool?" I ask as she slides the plate in front of me.

“That’s Sadie Jenkins,” the young woman says, plucking my order number from the center of the table. “From Truth Serum? The podcast?”

Now I know why the woman’s voice caught my attention. Last year, Truth Serum made big news when they cracked open a cold case murder of a Pacific Lutheran University freshman named Mariah Goodman. I was doing a clinical rotation with Labor & Delivery during the height of the investigation and a bunch of the nurses were into it. We played the final episode live and caught each other up in between patient care.

“Are they doing a show here?” I ask, crossing my fingers under the table. *No, please no.*

“I hope so!” the young woman says, collecting the empty coffee cups from Sadie’s table. She picks up their Mountain Gazette. “Want this?”

“Sure,” I say.

She sets it down. “Need anything else? Ketchup?”

The scent of the warm, savory eggs and sourdough is making my hungry stomach clench. “No, this is perfect, thank you,” I say, and give her a smile.

After wolfing down the first few bites, I remind myself to slow down. I’m not on shift or cramming like mad between classes.

I unfold the Mountain Gazette and scan the stories. Because I live with the editor and the lead writer, I’ve had a preview of today’s edition. But when I get to the third page, I choke on my coffee.

It’s an advertisement for Truth Serum podcast with a picture of Sadie Jenkins and the words: “THE TRUTH IS WAITING.”

Quickly, I grab my water glass and take several cooling gulps. Then I carefully fold up the paper. I shouldn’t let what I read ruin my breakfast, but my stomach is now a knotted mess.

Being careful not to get in anyone’s way, I carry my plate into the back, grab a takeout box from above the sandwich station, and slide my breakfast into it.

“First day jitters?” Annika asks from the other side of the bakery’s prep island.

After carefully fastening the box’s lid, I paste on a smile and turn around. “Something like that.”

Annika sprinkles flour on the marble surface. “Don’t fall for him, Von.”

I’m still processing Truth Serum’s arrival and what it means, if anything. “Fall for whom?”

She lifts an eyebrow.

I scoff. “Why would I do a stupid thing like that?”

“Because he checks all of your boxes, even the ones you’re committed to avoiding.”

Having a sister who knows your secrets can be wonderful. It can also make you want to wring that sister’s neck.

“I’m not falling for anyone.” That’s the truth. And sort of the problem. Though not with Noah. That’s a different kind of problem.

Ugh.

“I made you a lunch,” Annika says, and snatches a brown paper bag from the fridge. “I added some extra cookies for you and Kenzie to share after school.”

My belly warms. “Thanks, Annika.”

She grabs me in a bone-crushing hug. “I just care about you, okay? I want you to live your big, amazing, beautiful life.”

I sigh into her arms because, hell yes, I want that too.

She forces the bag into my hands then shoos me through the backdoor.

NOAH’S SILVER and blue Rogue Valley Sheriff’s Department SUV and his black truck fill the driveway, so I park our ancient Suburban on the street. I decide not to bring my bookbag and groceries inside yet. It might spook Kenzie, who is understandably nervous about someone new coming into her world.

Before I even get to the door, Noah opens it. Okay, he’s hot as hell in his uniform, but just like the other night, he’s ridiculously handsome in faded jeans and a flannel.

Don’t fall for him, Von echoes in my ears as he steps back to welcome me inside. I catch a hint of his manly scent—cedar and ginger.

“Daddy!” Kenzie shrieks from down the hallway.

Noah doesn’t flinch. “Meet me in the kitchen. There’s coffee.”

As he walks down the hall, I have to tear my eyes from appreciating how his broad shoulders fill out his flannel and the way his jeans hang from his hips. With a suppressed groan, I head for the kitchen.

Just like the other night, the house is spotless. Does he clean every day or has he done so for my benefit? I know he was in the military so maybe he’s just used to things being shipshape.

Sunlight pours into the room from the sliding glass doors along the back

wall, giving the room a cozy vibe.

I search the cupboards for a mug, then pour myself coffee from the machine plugged in next to the toaster.

As I'm scanning the fridge for milk, Noah comes in, carrying Kenzie on his hip. She's dressed for school in jeggings and a t-shirt and mismatched socks.

When she sees me, she buries her face in Noah's neck. As if she weighs nothing, he swings her into the stool opposite the island, then pours her a glass of orange juice.

"Vonnie's going to be here after school today," Noah says, sliding two pieces of bread into the toaster.

"I know," Kenzie says.

"Since you're such a pro, I thought you could show her where your bus stop is this morning," Noah says, giving me a secret wink.

Kenzie grabs her juice glass with both hands and gulps a sip. I guess it's as good a sign of acceptance as I'm going to get right now.

I stay on the sidelines for the rest of the breakfast routine. Noah is a patient dad, loving, and efficient. He braids her hair and helps her with her boots, then we're out the door. Noah holds her little hand and carries her backpack on one shoulder.

At the bus stop, we're the first group to arrive. A pair of brothers join us, then another girl about Kenzie's age with her mom.

The bus arrives, and Kenzie hugs her dad goodbye.

"Have fun today, Kenz," Noah says.

"You too," she replies with a giggle. They tap noses, then she hurries onto the school bus.

The bus driver waits for the kids to settle safely into their seats, then closes the door and accelerates down the street.

"Don't be put off by her attitude," Noah says as we turn away from the bus. "I think she actually likes you."

"Transitions are tough on kids."

He eyes me, his brown eyes lit with mischief. "This isn't your first rodeo, huh?"

"Not even close."

"Then I'm extra grateful you're here."

The compliment goes straight to my gut, adding to the steady churning going on since this morning.

We reach the Suburban and I duck in to grab my backpack and the giant lunch Annika packed me.

“You want to study in the kitchen?” Noah asks as we step into the house. “Or there’s a desk in the guest room.”

“The kitchen table looks nice and sturdy,” I say.

A look of discomfort passes through his eyes, but he swallows hard, and it’s gone. “Great. I’m going to head out for a run, then I’ll get ready for work.”

As he walks from the room, I unpack my things. Textbooks and notebooks and color-coded flash cards, my laptop and my study guide. I’m taking an online review class once a week, which has been a lifesaver.

I line everything up and start with pharmacology, flipping to the section in my textbook for reference. Though Noah’s quiet, I hear him tread past the kitchen to the front door and sneak a peek at him as he slips out in running shorts and a black thermal top.

Damn. Even his calves are sexy.

Don’t fall for him, Von.

I take thirty seconds for a mini-mindfulness exercise to release the tension in my body and refocus on my goals. The jitters settle enough that I can return to my studying.

The door pops open, startling me.

“Sorry,” Noah says, leaning back inside the entryway, his forehead already shiny with a thin layer of sweat. “I forgot. Your car is in the garage. It’s my mom’s, but she won’t mind. The keys are hanging on the hook in the mudroom.”

“Thank you,” I say.

He gives me a smile, his normally stern eyes brightening for one fleeting moment, then then he ducks back through the door.

I force a breath in and out, then get up to do side bends while reciting the rules of nursing protocol and delegation, my eyes on the pretty woods at the edge of Noah’s backyard. I manage to get in a solid hour reviewing cranial nerves, then take a break for coffee and a half of one of Annika’s cookies before switching gears to review the mysteries revealed in an EKG.

When I switch to the study guide, I can’t find my set of highlighters. I dig in my bag but it’s empty. Crap. My quick search of the kitchen drawers reveals only a sharpie and some mechanical pencils, and Kenzie’s art station offers only colored pencils and crayons. Maybe the guest room desk has

supplies.

I walk to end of the hall, past Noah and Kenzie's rooms, and step into the guest room. It's surprisingly welcoming, with a pale blue comforter and white pillows on the bed, a tall, pine dresser and matching desk and chair. In the desk drawer, I find a fat yellow highlighter, but when I test it on a piece of scrap paper, it's dead.

I groan.

I cross the hallway to the final door which must be the mudroom. I get just a flash of the space—utility sink, washer and dryer, a shoe cubby with a pair of muddy running shoes—before I realize there's also a shower and that someone is in it.

NOAH

V onnie's mouth drops open, then she yanks the mudroom door shut.
"Sorry!" she shrieks.

Shit. I clench my eyes tight, then quickly rinse and turn off the water. I peek from the shower door to make sure she's really gone, then snatch my towel and quickly dry off. Before my run, I had brought my uniform in here so I could shower and leave without bothering her.

Ha. Who's bothered now? Judging by the semi I'm sporting, my dick is certainly bothered. At least I wasn't jacking off while moaning her name.

Get a grip, Tucker. I force a breath into my tight lungs, then exhale hard. Thinking about Vonnie like that will ruin me.

After I finger-comb my hair and check my uniform in the mirror over the utility sink, I walk into the kitchen. My thick boots are loud and I'm no lightweight, so she has to know I've entered the room, but she doesn't turn around.

Her honey-colored hair is tied up a knot, exposing the slender curves of her neck, the downy hairs there turned golden in the morning light. There's also more freckles. I grit my teeth.

"You okay?" I ask.

She turns just enough to reveal her face in profile. Fuck, she's pretty.

"I should have locked the door," I add.

"It's fine," Vonnie says, but she sighs like it's not fine. "I'm a nurse, remember? I've seen it all."

This sounds like a challenge, and the idea of proving her wrong is making my dick throb. *Have you, sweet girl?*

A sudden tension charges between us, almost like she can read my thoughts. What would she think of me if she could?

I shake this off, and Vonnie's lips press together. She turns back to her books.

"Have a good day," she says.

"You too," I say, wishing I had a reason to stay.

But I've already taught her how to work the alarm system, told her how to reach me, shown her the file folder containing emergency contacts, medical information, and what to do if I'm injured or killed in the line of duty. Not that I think she'll need that file, but knowing she is fully prepared for any contingency is important to me.

I head for the door, my leg muscles tight. The drive to the station takes four minutes. I use the time to squash any thought of making use of that shower with Vonnie.

After muster, I put out a couple more discreet feelers on Owen Broderick, then text Seth Dalton, my best friend from the navy. We both went into law enforcement after our service in our hometowns. The mountain we climbed together to celebrate our police academy graduations inspired Kenzie's name.

Unless Broderick got into trouble in Alaska, Seth won't have intel, but I value his perspective.

My shift starts with a game of "red light green light" with moving vehicles while a team from the DOT fixes a broken traffic light. An hour later, I'm out on patrol when dispatch sends me up north for a report of trespassing.

It's Montgomery Pike's place. What interests me more is the mine shaft tucked into the hillside behind his property, which is likely what this call is about.

I pull up to the ramshackle trailer surrounded by rusted-out and abandoned vehicles, and when Monty steps onto the porch holding his shotgun across his chest, I know I'm in for a good time.

"Mr. Pike, I need you to lower your weapon," I say in a clear voice. I've parked my vehicle so that it acts as a shield, even though ole Monty isn't pointing his weapon at me.

"I have a right to defend myself," he says.

"In order for me to help you, Mr. Pike, we both need to be safe. Put down the shotgun."

Monty seems to think about this for a moment, making me wonder if he's

been into the moonshine. Then he ducks back inside his trailer. When he reappears, he's without his weapon and has slipped on a faded green down coat that looks like it came from Eddie Bauer's original collection.

"Did you fire that weapon today, Mr. Pike?" I ask him, and approach his porch.

"Just rock salt," he mutters, wringing his hands. His whiskered cheeks are red from a lifetime of booze, and sunken. He probably hasn't eaten all day. "They thought they could sneak up Wolf Creek, but I saw 'em."

I slip my notebook from my pocket and flip to a new page. "What time did you notice them?"

"About an hour ago," he says. "Two of 'em. City slickers." He gives me a shrewd glance and jerks his chin in the direction of the ridge behind his place. "I can spot 'em a mile away."

"They may have permission to visit the mine."

Monty shuffles his feet, clearly agitated. "They won't find anything."

I give him a steady glance. Now we're getting to the real issue. He's working an illegal claim up there, and thinks the trespassers are going to steal it. "Such as?"

His eyes flash. "Are you gonna arrest them or not, boy?"

"Sit tight, Mr. Pike," I say, and walk back to my vehicle.

I take a gravel turnoff and park next to a white Ford Edge. I call in the plates to confirm that it's a rental.

The double track following Wolf Creek disappears into the aspens. I'm not about to go hiking. But I do call it in.

"Remind me who owns that mine again?" I ask our office manager, Linnea.

"The Lynden family," Linnea replies. "I heard there were two reporters poking around."

"Great," I mutter just as two people emerge from the woods—a big guy and a slender woman. The ground is muddy and the woman's white shoes and bare ankles are caked with it. At least the big guy thought to wear boots.

They see me and pause, so I step from my vehicle.

The woman nudges the man, who scrambles to dig into the large backpack he's carrying.

I set the heel of my palm on the handle of my gun so they know I'm not fucking around.

The guy carefully slides out a recording device.

I frown, but he eyes the woman, meaning she's the brains behind this duo.

"It's about time," the woman says. "That lunatic shot at us!"

"You were trespassing."

"And that makes it okay to get shot at?"

"Ever heard of the Second Amendment? It's a way of life for some people out here. You're lucky he was using buckshot."

The woman's eyes practically bug out of her head.

"Look, I'm not saying he has a right to shoot. But this is Idaho. You need to be careful."

The woman crosses her arms. "What if I want to file charges?"

"Let's start with establishing your purpose here."

"I'm Sadie Jenkins, and this is my assistant Henry."

When I don't react, she snorts. "From Truth Serum? The True Crime podcast?"

Like I have time for podcasts, let alone one that replays my daily life. "Do you have written permission by the property owners to be here?"

Ms. Jenkins eyes her assistant. They are obviously recording this conversation, which is illegal, but I can use this to my advantage.

"Why didn't you pursue Jonah Rundell's murder?" Ms. Jenkins asks. Her lips twitch, as if she's concentrating.

I grab the citation booklet from my dashboard, and start writing them up for trespassing.

"I need your driver's licenses."

"Rundell obviously took refuge in that mine. Why didn't anyone look for him there when he went missing?"

I extend my hand for their IDs and stare them down calmly.

Cursing, Henry wrestles his wallet from his back pocket and hands over his license. He tilts his head at his boss. With a huff, she pulls something from the inside of her coat and taps it into my palm. It's a business card. "I don't have my ID on me."

"Wait in your vehicle," I order.

"Not until you—" Ms. Jenkins starts.

"Right now we're looking at a two hundred dollar fine," I interrupt, my patience thinning. "Failure to comply with a Sheriff's Deputy is a misdemeanor that would require you to appear in court, and carries a much bigger fine."

Ms. Jenkins gives me a defiant glare, but shuts her mouth and strides to the vehicle. Her assistant gets in the driver's seat.

While I call in their information, I can hear them arguing inside their car.

When I have the citation ready, I walk to the driver's side. Henry lowers the window. I have both of them sign, then hand them a copy. "I'll need to escort you off the property."

Henry starts the car.

"Jonas Rundell was a pedophile," Ms. Jenkins says. "I think someone found out and put a stop to it. We're going to find out who."

"Have a nice day," I say, and walk back to my rig.

I follow the rental car down the gravel road, bumping over the washboards and dips, splashing through puddles.

As soon as they turn onto the highway heading south, I follow, but pull into a turnout so I can call Wyatt.

"Has anyone contacted you or the Gazette about Jonas Rundell's case?" I ask.

"Recently?" he asks. I detect an edge to his voice. I'm not surprised, but it prickles the back of my neck. Given the hatred my father has for Wyatt's family, he and I understandably weren't friends growing up. But we've developed a deep friendship since. It's happened slowly, over time, after many baseball games and sharing parenting woes and recognizing our mutual respect for upholding the rules of our jobs. Sometimes those rules put us at odds, but it's only made our friendship stronger.

"I just kicked two journalists off the property where his body was found."

"Who do they work for?"

"Some true crime podcast called Truth Serum."

A car races past me on the freeway. I should be doing speed patrol, but right now, this is more important.

"They cracked a case last year. A Pacific Lutheran University freshman was murdered. Police were convinced it was the boyfriend."

I vaguely remember the case, though not the podcast part. "They brought up Rundell's past."

"Shit. We ran their \$500 ad in today's edition, but there's no mention of Rundell," Wyatt says after a short pause. "They're obviously here to investigate his death."

The dread in his voice adds to my own. When the Gazette broke the news that Rundell had sexually traumatized several of his youth group members, it

ripped our valley wide open. And though Wyatt and I each pursued the case to the best of our abilities, his big reveal made my job harder, and put a dent in our community's faith in law enforcement.

This only worsened when we failed to make headway. Every lead fizzled out. Likely suspects had airtight alibis. Rundell had been murdered—the forensics report made that clear—but he'd been dead for six years by the time his body was found. It's hard for most people to remember what they ate for breakfast, let alone details from six years ago, and harder to obtain evidence like DNA or fingerprints. Eventually, the task force created by the feds was dismantled and the case was mothballed.

Though I never found proof, I believe Rundell was murdered by someone who knew about his crimes. The parent or loved one of a victim.

A year after we shelved the case, Vonnie came to me with her story. She shared how Rundell had lured her in and coerced her into doing what no eleven-year-old child should ever have to.

She told me because she said she hated keeping that secret for so long, and she wanted to be free of his power over her, once and for all. I remember her that day—nineteen years old and already so poised, so brave.

That two-hour conversation still haunts me.

If anyone ever hurt or violated Kenzie like that, the only thing keeping me from ending the fucker in the most painful way possible would be the decades I would spend in jail, which would mean abandoning my daughter. Instead, I would make sure he spent his life behind bars.

Sadie Jenkins and her partner Henry are going to chase their tails trying to solve this case. They're already off to a shaky start. Not only because they've trespassed, but Ms. Jenkins is assuming Rundell took shelter in the mine when the storm hit. That logic is faulty, but I'm not about to correct them.

"You want to meet for a beer later?" Wyatt says.

"I'm working late this week."

"Just one quick beer. Vonnie won't mind a little overtime."

Hearing her name is like a kick to my nuts. "All right. I'll check with her."

"Sourdough's then," Wyatt says.

We end the call and I pull back onto the highway, the pit of my stomach heavy and tight. I give Vonnie a quick call.

"Okay if I go out for a bit after my shift tonight?" I ask. "I'll come home to change first."

“No problem.” Her sharp and professional tone throws me for a moment. Did I imagine the heated charge between us this morning?

We hang up and I force a steadying breath through my nose.

When I get home just after ten, Vonnie’s folding laundry in the living room.

“You don’t have to do laundry,” I say.

She continues folding. “Kenzie got paint on her shirt today, and I didn’t want it to stain. Plus, you needed towels.”

“Have you always been an overachiever?”

“Tragically, yes.” She flashes me a grin. “How was your day?”

“Fine,” I auto-reply out of habit. As a general policy, I don’t talk about work. “After you’re finished, I want you to relax.”

It comes out bossy, but I stand my ground. She flashes me a bold look, as if trying to read me, then says, “Okay.”

This should not feel like a victory, but a dangerous feeling trickles into my veins. It’s not easy for me to turn off my dominant side. Some women like it, some don’t.

From the vibe Vonnie’s giving me, she likes it, or at least she isn’t afraid of it.

The last thing I need right now is to imagine ordering sweet Vonnie to finger her pussy while I watch, or to get on her knees so I can slide deep inside her.

Clearly, I’m losing my mind.

Or maybe I just need to get laid. The last time was months ago. Or longer. Too fucking long for sure.

I hurry to my room and quickly change out of my uniform, forcing my semi into my jeans. I go into the bathroom and splash cold water on my face until the heat in my core fades. Then I look in the mirror and tell myself to get my shit together.

I slip into Kenzie’s room to check on her. The soft glow from her nightlight makes it easy to see at a glance that my daughter is fast asleep, her breaths rising and falling easily. I pull her covers up, then brush back her hair and place a soft kiss on her temple.

“Night, Kenzie,” I say softly, then let myself out of her room.

Vonnie is in the kitchen, searching my cupboards. Her long-sleeved t-shirt rides up as she reaches for something, revealing an inch of bare skin at her waist. It’s only been two days and I already like seeing her in my kitchen,

then remember my little pep talk in the bathroom mirror.

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

She glances over her shoulder. “Have a good date.”

“It’s not a date,” I say, amused that she would think such a thing.

She cringes, wrinkling her nose. “Sorry, I don’t even know why I said that. It’s not my business who you meet or what you do in your free time.”

“You think I have free time?” I say, enjoying watching her squirm a little.

She pulls down a box of ginger tea I forgot I had. “Even for a date?”

“Especially for a date.”

Her eyes tighten. “That’s sad, Noah.”

Of all the things she could say, a compassionate sentiment wasn’t on my list of possibilities.

“It’s reality,” I say with a smile to make light of my lack of social life.

She points a tea bag at me. “Self-care is important.”

“I take care of myself just fine,” I say, then fight the lurch in my stomach with a tight breath.

Is that a smirk on her face?

Fuck. I’ve just admitted to my nanny that I jerk off.

Before I can embarrass myself further, I mumble something about seeing her later, and hurry to my truck.

NOAH

At Sourdough Gil's, I hang my coat inside the entry and walk to the bar, where Wyatt is chatting with the bartender. It's fairly quiet in here tonight, but the summer tourist season will heat up soon enough, bringing wealthy outsiders from California or adventure seekers from Seattle for the spring runoff or mountain climbing.

Wyatt and I bump fists when I slide onto the empty stool next to him. Music from the speakers mixes with the low hum of conversations and the crack of the occasional pool ball from the table in the back.

"I'm buying," Wyatt says, nodding at the row of taps.

I order a pilsner.

"Is Vonnie working out okay for you?" he asks.

"She's doing fine." The memory of her bent over her study materials this morning with the light turning her skin golden flickers to life in my mind.

"I'm glad she's getting some space from us," Wyatt says. "Those nursing boards are tough."

"You worried she won't pass? I've never seen so many color-coded charts and study guides in my life."

The bartender sets down my pint and turns away to mix a pair of cocktails for a waitress.

"I think I'll always worry about them," Wyatt says.

I know what he means, yet it just reminds me that Wyatt is Vonnie's guardian and has been the most stable parent figure in her life since her dad died and her mom fell apart.

"They're all adults now," I say, giving him a look. "Leah's running her

own business and Dylan is a professional athlete. Vonnie's got a good head on her shoulders, and she's smart and organized. I'm sure she'll accomplish whatever goals she sets for herself."

Wyatt gives me a curious look. "You've learned a lot about her in two days, huh?"

I fight the unease tightening the base of my spine. "Most of it's from your bragging."

He gives me a rueful grimace. "Parenting teenagers is not for the faint of heart. I'm not shy about taking credit for pulling her and Leah from the abyss."

"I'm sorry, man. I had no idea it was so rough."

He gives a quick shrug. "You're right, though. Vonnie's smart and she's tough. She'll come out on top."

I blink hard to prevent these words from inspiring a fantasy of Vonnie riding my cock, but it comes in a flash—my hands on her hips guiding her down while she groans, her head thrown back in bliss.

"So, guess who paid me a visit today?" Wyatt says, snapping me back to the conversation.

"A team of true crime podcasters," I say.

Wyatt nods. "They had practically memorized that series me and Brooke published about the victims."

"You guys won an award for that, didn't you?" I ask.

"Yeah, Brooke gets the credit for that. I was just her sounding board."

It's impossible to miss the way his eyes light up when he talks about Brooke. It's not like I envy him...more like I'm in awe. How does he balance being a dad, athlete, having a career, plus have time and energy for a relationship?

"Back when we wrote that story, we knew there were more victims," Wyatt says.

Like Vonnie—which I can't talk about with him. I spin my beer on its coaster. "And now you're afraid this podcast team will expose them."

Wyatt sips his beer. "Yeah. I promised that I'd protect them."

"If you don't tell the podcasters, how will they know?"

"They could find out the same way I did," he says, staring into his beer a moment longer before glancing at me. "You still have the case files, right? They're safe?"

I nod. "Of course."

“Who else knows that the church kept a roster of the youth group?”

“Besides the pastor and secretary, just the investigative team, which is me, Dad, and that task force, which included a state trooper and two federal agents.”

“Okay,” he says, relieved. “I alerted the pastor and secretary, and they promised not to talk about it. They feel bad enough about what Rundell was getting away with right under their noses. The last thing they want is more bad press.”

My heart goes out to Wyatt. He’s trying to protect his baby sister. I would do exactly the same. Yet does he know how strong Vonnie’s become?

“Sounds like you have nothing to worry about then,” I say.

“Yeah. Good.” His chest rises with a quick inhale, and he lets it out in one giant huff. “I can’t figure out their angle. I mean, he was a piece of shit,” Wyatt continues, finishing off his beer. “Why does anyone care who offed him?”

“From what they said to me yesterday, I get the sense they think the case was buried on purpose. That there’s some kind of cover-up.”

He eyes me with a steely gaze—the one that reminds me of his fierce determination as a journalist and the many awards he’s earned for it.

“Easy,” I warn. “The task force worked that case just as hard as any other. But we hit dead end after dead end. Whoever killed him covered their tracks well. Then six years went by.”

“Why didn’t law enforcement pursue his disappearance more diligently back then?”

At that time, I was on the other side of the globe fighting terrorists, so I only know what pieces I heard from friends and Dad, which isn’t much. “Missing persons searches only get so many resources, and it really did appear as if he’d left town in a hurry. We didn’t know then about his history, and I certainly don’t blame his victims for staying quiet. It’s not like they missed him.”

“All right,” Wyatt says with a nod, then pays our tab. “Thanks for working with me on this.”

“Nice try,” I say, downing the last sip of my beer. “I work for Rogue County.”

He slaps me on the back and squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t get prickly. We might play for different sides, but we both want the same thing.”

He heads for the door, leaving me in a wake of turbulence. It’s true that

Vonnie's information is safe. The case files on Rundell are sealed, and because the case is unsolved, they aren't public. Wyatt has nothing to worry about.

I shouldn't feel uneasy about the whole thing. But I do.

WHEN I LET myself in to the house, it's quiet. I'm immediately on edge, and pause, trying to make sense of it. The alarm system was on, and nothing looks disrupted.

In the kitchen, I find Vonnie face-down asleep on her textbook.

My relief rattles through me, and I chuckle.

Vonnie's long hair partly covers her face, and her mouth is relaxed as she breathes slow and even. Even though she's crashed out on a book, she looks extremely peaceful.

With a soft sigh, she blinks lazily, then must notice me standing against the counter watching because she bolts upright.

"Oh! Hey!" she says, doing a quick swipe at her eyes, probably to wake up. "Sorry, I um, must have nodded off there."

"You know you can always rest in the guest bed. No need to torture yourself."

"A little bit of torture is good for character development," she says, standing up and stacking her books and notebooks.

I deserve a medal for resisting this bait. If we were in a bar and a woman said that to me, I would offer my assistance. A little bit of torture happens to be my specialty.

But we're not in a bar and Vonnie is not some random woman looking to play. She's a sweet young woman working hard to accomplish her goals. She doesn't need a horny, hard-up boss with conflicting feelings distracting her.

I'm the one who is distracted. I just need to get laid and I'll be able to quit thinking about her like this.

"Hey, are you free to stay late on Friday?" I ask as she's sliding everything into her bag.

She grimaces. "Sorry, I have plans. Did your work schedule change?"

"No. We have a game, and after, if I can, I like to go out for beers. But I can't do that with Kenzie along. It's no big deal. Maybe one of my backup sitters can help."

"I hope it works out." She gives me a bold smile. "I'll bet you could use

some adult time.”

I huff a sigh and rub the back of my neck. *If you only knew.*

She slides her backpack onto her shoulder. I walk her to the door and open it for her.

“See you tomorrow,” Vonnie says as she slips past, leaving me in a wake of her sweet scent.

I watch her walk to her car and drive off, her gaze fixed on the road ahead of her. Then I shut the door and rest my forehead against it.

If a little bit of torture is good for character development, by the time Vonnie finishes working for me, I’m going to be fucking saint.

ON THURSDAY, I’m catching up on paperwork when my desk line rings.

“Deputy Tucker,” I say, and reach for the soda growing warm on my desk.

“Hey, this is Assistant D.A. Eric Nordland, calling you back about that mediation case.”

I sit back in my chair. “Owen Broderick.”

“Yeah. Has he had contact with Ms. Morgan?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

A short silence passes, in which I’m sure Nordland is trying to determine why I would want information about this guy if there’s no impending threat.

“His name popped up, and I was curious,” I add, trying not to sound too eager. In my experience, district attorneys are cagey about giving up intel.

“Yvonne Morgan reported Broderick for stalking. They’re students together, some of the same classes.”

“Is he violent?” From the basic information available to me as a cop, I only know that Broderick is twenty-four, lives in Seattle, and owns an expensive car.

“No history that we know of, and no prior reports of stalking or harassment.”

“She didn’t want to prosecute?”

“We’ve had luck with mediation in the past for cases like these.”

I nod, but my gut is still uneasy. “Thanks for the call,” I say, because there’s nothing more I can get from him.

“One last thing, and this is off the record, okay? This Broderick kid’s got some serious entitlement issues. He’s smart too. Top grades and all of that.

His dad is some bigwig at Seattle Children's Hospital."

"Is this supposed to impress me?"

Nordland gives a low huff. "Think of it as a friendly heads-up."

"Noted," I reply.

"I also think Ms. Morgan let things go too far."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Now my hackles are up.

"I think she was flattered by his attention. I got the sense that she was reluctant to see it end."

I'm losing the ability to stay objective, so I thank Nordland and end the call. I tap my pencil against my desk, processing what I've learned. But I only have more questions.

At least Vonnie's in Penny Creek where she has her family and friends looking out for her. Plus, she has me, because if this Broderick kid steps inside my county, I won't hesitate to make him feel unwelcome.

During this shift rotation, I have Fridays and Saturdays off, so I don't get to start my morning sharing a cup of coffee with Vonnie after Kenzie leaves on the bus. Instead, I take Raven on a long ride, do barn chores, grocery shop for the weekend, then Kenzie and I go to the baseball game. Fortunately, there's always a group of kids Kenzie's age with enough parents around to supervise. We win the game 4-1, with Wyatt making a double play, Tanner sprinting across the home plate just shy of getting tagged, and me striking out both of their top hitters.

I luck out when one of the moms invites Kenzie over for ice cream sundaes and a movie. Kenzie is excited, so I say yes and hug her goodbye.

"Have fun, Kenz," I say, and we rub noses.

"Are you sad?" she says, gripping both sides of my face and starting intently into my eyes.

"A little," I say.

"I promise I'll miss you," she says.

I give her a wink. "I promise I'll miss you too."

"But not too much," she continues, still so serious.

"Not too much," I agree.

She smiles, which lights up my heart like a supernova. "Okay, Daddy."

I watch her go, selfishly wishing I had someplace more exciting to be tonight than a bar with a bunch of guys.

Because the game was at the multiplex fields up north, closer to Sunbeam, the team heads for the Bitterroot, a small but lively bar popular

with river rafters and mountain bikers as well as RV travelers checking the Rogue Canyon Scenic Byway off their list. Wyatt and a few others say they've got duties at home, leaving the rest of us to celebrate.

Inside, the place smells like French fries and whiskey, with music playing just loud enough over the roar of conversations and laughter that I can make out the tune. Though I have a few hours of freedom, I still need to drive a ways and pick up Kenzie, so I order a coke.

Tanner's girlfriend joins us, and introduces us to her group of girlfriends. Two of them I know. One is a single mom with a kid at Kenzie's school, and the other is a teacher there. The third woman is short and curvy, with thick dark hair swept up in a ponytail. They get drinks and we all migrate to the back of the bar to play games.

"I'm Matilda, or Tilly, if you like," the short brunette says over the music as we settle at one of the tall round tables at the edge of the dance floor. She extends her hand, and I shake it. Her short nails are painted a deep purple that matches her sweater, and her hand is cold.

"Noah," I say, and sip my coke. Just as I look for a place to set it down on the small table, a flash of blonde hair catches my eye.

The dance floor is dark, and small like everything else in here, but in the crowd of people dancing is Vonnie Morgan.

I realize Tilly is talking and blink at her. "Sorry, what was that?"

Tilly leans closer. "Fern tells me you're a cop. So's my daddy. He was a sniper in the army."

"Oh. Nice." I'm trying not to make it obvious that I'm watching someone else, but it's impossible. Is Vonnie here on a date?

Tilly frowns. "Being a sniper is super dangerous."

"So is being a cop."

"Yeah, that's why I'm a florist. Do you wanna dance? Or we could go back to your place."

My scalp prickles. "What?" I say to stall. This is what I wanted, right? Someone interested in a little fun.

But my motivation flatlines. Not because Tilly isn't attractive, or interesting.

She's just not...

On the dance floor, Vonnie gets spun by a tall, athletic guy in cargo jeans and boots. He looks slightly familiar, but I can't place him. She's grinning as they move, both of them confident and smooth together, like they've done

this before.

Fuck.

“Sorry, I have to go pick up my kid in a half hour,” I say to Tilly.

Tilly gives me a tight smile. “I get it, I’ve got two teenagers at home.”

I ask Tilly about her kids and her job as a florist—no wonder I don’t know her, the only flowers I buy are for my mom every Mother’s Day, and since she moved to Montana I do it all online—meanwhile trying not to be obvious that I’m following Vonnie’s every move.

“You sure you don’t wanna dance?” Tilly asks, glancing wistfully at the crowd just as Vonnie—her back pressed to her date’s chest and his hands on her hips—looks up, her eyes locking with mine.

VONNIE

“O hmigawd, Noah’s here,” I say as Sasha spins me back to face him. He takes my hand and whips me around.

“Who?” Sash asks over the music. He winds me into his arms and we sway again, our bodies close.

“The cop I’m nannyng for right now.”

“Handsome,” Sasha says over my shoulder as we grind to the beat. I shouldn’t be surprised at this. Sasha is the biggest flirt I know. He’s also one of my favorite people. I’m so glad he moved to Penny Creek with Leah and T.J. to help them run Yankee Fork Outfitters so I can steal him away for nights like this.

I spin so I’m facing Sasha again. “Want me to introduce you?”

“Think he’d be into a threesome?” Sasha says, his eyes filling with mischief. “That’s hot.”

I laugh. “Keep dreaming.” I grip his hand and pull him to Noah’s table, where a pretty brunette is sitting next to him.

“I’m so proud of you!” I say to Noah. I punch him playfully in the bicep, but his arm is like steel.

His face twitches. “For what?”

I eye his date. She extends her hand. “Matilda, or Tilly,” she says over the music. I introduce Sasha to them both.

Sasha asks Tilly to dance, and she practically jumps out of her chair.

I give Noah an expectant glance. The obvious move would be for him to ask *me* to dance, but I’m having too much fun to wait for his invitation, so I extend my hand and smile.

He gives me a look—he’s amused but wary. “Your date won’t mind?”
I laugh. Is he jealous? My belly tightens.

“Sasha’s not my date.” I glance over my shoulder. Matilda and Sash are a good match, and they’re both smiling. “You didn’t object to Sasha taking your date.”

His gaze narrows and the edges of his mouth twitch. “She’s not my date.”

I put my other hand on my hip and give him my biggest smile. “Then what are you waiting for?”

“One song, and then I turn into a pumpkin,” he says with a playful smirk, then takes my hand leads me to the dance floor.

I drink in this moment of things shifting yet again between us. Six years ago, when I sat in that interview room and poured out my heart to him, he didn’t pity me or judge me. Instead he spoke to me with compassion, and he listened. But here at the Bitterroot, it’s like he’s the vulnerable one, which makes this feel like more than just a dance.

Sasha catches my eye and grins. I ignore him because Noah surprises me by leading me in a country swing. It’s a fun dance, sort of like ballroom but sexier. There’s not a ton of room for it and I get the sense that Noah’s a little rusty, but soon we find our groove and he’s shuffling me and turning me, his hands expertly landing on my hip or bringing mine to behind his neck so I have something to grab when he leans me in a dramatic little dip. This earns us an appreciative whistle from someone in the crowd.

If Noah hears it, he doesn’t let on. His eyes are bright and playful as we continue moving together, a twirl or a pivot, the music thrumming in my bones. When the song ends, we stand there breathing fast, still holding hands. He said one dance, but I can’t seem to let go of him. The next song starts, and I can sense his reluctance to go, so I step close. “One more.”

He grabs my hips and starts moving. “One,” he replies, his lips brushing my ear. Tingles shoot down my spine, but I don’t have time to savor the feeling because Noah leads me off again. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Sasha’s curious glance, but I just smile and give myself to the music and Noah’s lead.

Dancing is my happy place. I danced all through high school. Modern and tap were my favorites, and then I got into swing dancing my senior year as an alternate to doing P.E. which I loathed. That opened the door to country swing and the two-step and others that I picked up along the way.

My brother Caleb’s band plays a bluesy combination of rock and country

and I've danced my ass off many times at his shows. In Seattle, there's a fantastic ballroom swing community and live music scene. Going out dancing with my friends has been a fun way to blow off steam and let all my worries melt right out of me.

It's also grounding in a big way, which I'm so grateful for.

Noah seems to be enjoying himself too, grinning with that satisfied smirk as we spin and shuffle, his hands on my hips or shoulder, his grip confident and firm. It's threatening to turn my legs to jelly. But I force myself to stay in the moment. That's the best part about dancing with a partner—sharing something intuitive and spontaneous. And fun.

That's what I see on Noah's face—joy. It's infectious and thrilling, like we're sharing something that belongs only to us, like a secret. When the song ends, he pulls me close. Our chests rise and fall against each other as we breathe. I rest my cheek against his collarbone and memorize the feel of his solid body and strong arms. His woodsy-ginger scent. His warmth and the way our bodies fit together.

The next song is "Slow Hands" which has a sensual, thumpy rhythm. My skin prickles with an intense craving because I want to be in Noah's arms while it plays.

"Last one?" I say, a hopeful edge in my voice.

Our eyes lock, and I can see the trepidation in his gaze. Though is it because he's worried about being late, or is he afraid of the energy zipping between us?

Noah doesn't answer, instead leads me in what feels like a waltz, of which I have little experience. I try to anticipate his steps but our rhythm is out of sync.

"Let me lead, *chérie*," he says in my ear, his voice low and rich.

Heat coils in the pit of my tummy. I relax and make my body fluid, trusting him to lead me in a dance I know nothing about. He places one hand on my low back and the other clasps mine, and everything falls into place.

Our steps align and our hips pivot as he spins me around the dance floor, looking at me in a way that makes my heart crawl up into my throat—it's protective and caring. Sensual and mischievous.

If I was crushing before, I'm going to be steamrolled into a pancake by the time he leaves.

Too soon the song comes to an end, and Noah twirls me gently into his arms. We stand there embracing, my arms around his neck and our chests

rising and falling together, our hearts thumping.

“Thank you,” he says so quietly I wonder if he meant to out loud.

I take one last second to imprint the feel of him, his warmth and strength, and the way my body feels. “Anytime,” I whisper in his ear.

What I would give for him to lean down and kiss me. To press my lips against his, to let the heat between us catch fire.

Instead, he steps back and flashes me a soft smile, then slips through the crowd.

Sasha does a little jig as he moves my way. “You don’t have to stay on my account,” he says, lifting an eyebrow.

I huff a giant sigh.

Sasha pulls me to him and we sway together comfortably.

“You want to talk about it?” he asks, moving into position to lead me in our favorite two step.

“I’d rather dance,” I say.

“That bad, huh?” Sasha says, his eyes kind.

I manage to tamp down the tingly buzz running beneath my skin and enjoy the last of my night with Sash, but when I climb into the Suburban, the sharp ache in my core feels supercharged.

I drive slowly home, following the sinuous curves of the canyon, to Cold Springs Road. It’s almost midnight, but there’s too much cloud cover for the moon to show her face. Our night sky is one of the many things I love about Penny Creek. On a clear night, the stars are like crushed glass on black velvet.

After I’ve let myself inside and tiptoed up to my room, I brush my teeth and undress, then settle under the covers. When I unlock my phone so I can put it in sleep mode, I see a text I must have missed while driving. It’s from Noah.

Text me when you’re home

I study the message for a moment. He’s not worried about me, is he?

I’m home

Good

I pause, my fingers poised over the keys. Before I chicken out, I type:

I wish we could have danced longer

Any longer and I wouldn't have been able to walk out of there

???

I don't get out much

Unable to stop myself, I burst out laughing. Quickly, I cover my mouth with the covers, then snatch up my phone.

We can fix that

My inability to walk or my lack of a social life?

A bright, hot flush prickles my cheeks. Am I really about to sext my boss?

What's more pressing?

Maybe dancing tonight made me brave, or it was spending time with Sasha, who oozes sensuality from every one of his adorably sexy pores, but my filter has gone out the window.

I roll onto my tummy and tug the covers over my head, and I wait for his reply. The little dots dance, then stop. I wiggle, impatient.

Come on. Say something sexy. Say something that tells me you want me. That I didn't imagine what I felt tonight.

The dots dance again.

Definitely the walking

I bury my face in my pillow and scream. Then I type so fast my fingers are a blur.

I have some ideas, but they involve kissing

Kissing might make it worse

A spear of desire shoots straight up my spine.

Maybe a little torture would be good for you

Only if I could torture you back

What do you have in mind?

I wait, but he doesn't reply.

Crap.

I get it, this is one massive line we're stepping up to. But pushing him over it is too tempting.

Think of this as a getting to know each other exercise. You tell me what you like, and I'll do the same

It depends on what you'd be into. I'm very serious about limits

I suck in a breath. Limits? Holy hell.

Hold on, we're supposed to be talking about what you like

I'm partial to orgasms

"Yesssssssss," I groan.

If you were to give yourself one right now, how would you?

I would fuck my hand

Picturing this sends a quiver down my thighs. Watching a guy stroke his cock is not something that would normally get me hot, but this is Noah.

What do you think about?

Pussy

I clamp my hand over my mouth and fall into my pillows.

Such a dirty mouth, deputy

Your turn

Eek. I'm tempted to open a new message to Sasha for help, but when I left the Bitterroot, he and Tilly were looking rather cozy and I wouldn't be surprised if they're still there, or...somewhere.

I like orgasms too

Alone or with a partner?

The ache between my legs gives a needy pang. I'm so turned on that a quick hump against the sheets would take care of myself in seconds.

Partner is better, but alone is an important part of any self-care routine

How do you get off?

I roll onto my back and groan. Could he be any more sexy right now? I give myself a soft caress, then stop. This is a bad idea.

Maybe you'd rather show me

Heat tightens my core into a needy little knot. I stroke myself, and a shiver rattles down my thighs.

Kind of hard to do if you're not here

He calls.

I force down my panic, and answer.

"Let's hear this orgasm," he says in a low tone.

"What?"

"Imagine I'm watching."

"Oh." I scissor and glide, rocking against my palm for more. With my eyes closed, I picture Noah sitting here next to me, murmuring praise as I take myself to the edge.

"That's it," he says, like knows my dirty thoughts.

I remember the look in his eyes when I coaxed him onto the dance floor, and the way his body pressed against mine. His lips brushing my ear when he said, "Let me lead, *chérie*," while "Slow Hands" thumped in my ears.

"Noah," I gasp.

"Say that again," he says, his tone tense.

“Noah,” I repeat, squeezing my eyes shut as the climax rises. I rock harder into my hand and give a tight gasp.

“Fuck,” he groans.

The tension and hunger snap loose inside me and I come with a whimper, my thighs trembling.

I go limp against the bed as the sweet release floods through me. My body feels tingly and alive and the knot in my core unravels, yet the satisfaction is already fading, replaced by the ache for more.

We breathe together for another long moment.

“Goodnight, sweet girl,” Noah says.

My body should feel happy, but my brain feels like it’s on spin cycle. “Goodnight.”

I roll to my side and hug my pillow.

What did tonight mean? And was it a beginning, or an end?

VONNIE

“So you’re phone sex buddies now?” Leah says from across the yurt.

“I don’t know,” I wail, tugging on my braids until my scalp stings. “I haven’t talked to him since then.”

She stuffs the last of the extra bedding into her backpack, her toned biceps flexing, then she clomps in her ski boots over to the windows to make sure they’re locked.

“His dad’s an asshole,” Leah says.

“You sound like Caleb,” I reply. “And so what? I’m not having phone sex with his dad.”

She shudders. “Don’t make me hurl.”

I help her move the mattresses off the wood frame beds and stack them vertically against the wall.

“What’s next then?”

“Probably nothing. I was high from dancing and Sasha’s magic. It can’t happen again.”

She shoots me one of her looks. “And that’s okay with you?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Just...if you two hook up, make sure you get as good as you give, you feel me?”

I gulp a breath to keep my head from swirling. “I feel you.”

We pack up the rest of the yurt, and Leah secures the door with a giant padlock. Leah and T.J. haven’t wasted any time creating the life they want together—from creating and growing a business to fighting and winning a land preservation battle to starting a family. Part of this is likely due to T.J.’s

heart condition and the very real fear that he's living on borrowed time, and part of it is Leah, who does everything fast.

So it shouldn't make me feel like a clunky, slow caboose. Our paths are different. One isn't better than the other.

"I hear some journalists are doing some show about Rundell," she says, breaking me from my thoughts. "Do you ever wonder who did it?"

"You mean killed him? No."

We shoulder the packs and clomp in the soft snow to our skis. The bright sun reflects off the melting snow, making me squint. A gust from the west brings the scent of minerals and sweet pine. I take a moment to enjoy the pretty view of the basin before clicking into my bindings.

"What if it was..." Leah zips up her coat, grimacing.

"Lee, it wasn't Dad."

"What if it's someone we know?"

I gulp a giant breath. "I'd say the likelihood of that is pretty high."

Leah curses. "I just hope these journalists don't drag any of us into it."

"I'll drink to that," I say.

She flashes me a sly smile, then gives her belly a quick but loving caress. "I'm going to need to take a rain check on that front. For about five more months."

I race over and grab her in a huge hug. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just did," she says, laughing.

"But...I've been home for weeks." I step back and stare into my sister's face, looking for signs of trouble, but her eyes shine and her cheeks are pink from her smile.

"I wanted to tell you first," she says. "I mean, T.J. knows, but not the others."

"Not even Jesse?" I ask, surprised.

"He's only two."

"Yeah but his world is gonna get rocked."

"When I get further along, we'll tell him."

I tug her to me and hold her. "Congratulations, Lee."

In my head, I do the math. Five months from now, I'll be working at Children's, probably on nights. Probably exhausted. Will I be able to get time off so I can be here? I missed Jesse's birth because he came a week early and I couldn't get home in time.

I'm likely going to just miss Annika and Grady's big day too, because the

baby is due in early September, and unless I fail my boards, I'll be gone by then. A sigh trembles up my throat.

"Von?" Leah says, stepping back to scrutinize my face. "What's wrong?"

I swipe my cheeks, angry at myself. "Nothing. I'm just so happy for you."

She puts her hands on her hips, which is hard to do while wearing a giant internal frame backpack stuffed to the gills. "Bullshit."

I give her a little shrug. "I wish I could be here for you."

"You're always here for me," she says with an annoyed huff. "Even when we're apart."

She's right, yet my heartstrings are vibrating. Not that I would put aside my career just to attend my sister's labor...but how many more special moments am I going to miss?

"I love you, Lee," I say.

"Love you back," she says, then flashes me her wicked grin. "Race you to the bottom?"

I laugh and slide my mittens into my pole straps. "You going to give me a head start?"

"My weakened condition is your head start."

"I'm not falling for that bull," I say, and push off with my poles. "You'd be invincible carrying triplets."

"Don't even joke about something like that."

I set off down the slope, the slushy corn snow loud under my skis. The cold air pricks my eyes, but I relish the sting because at least this time I'll have a reason to cry.

I DRIVE to Noah's house and carry my overnight things and my bookbag to the cozy guest room. Now that Noah's working nights, this is my new home. Why is it making me feel so lonely?

Whatever.

After setting up my study materials on the desk and unpacking what little I brought, I meet Kenzie at the bus.

"How was your day?" I ask her as we fall into step toward the house. I keep my hands at my sides instead of reaching for hers. She'll show me when she's ready.

"Do you like horses?" she asks me as I let us into the gate.

"Yes," I reply.

“Daddy has three. Grandad has four.”

We slip off our shoes and I open the front door. “Do you get to ride with your daddy?”

“On lucky days. He won’t let me ride Raven though. Can I have a snack?”

While she eats a half a bagel and apple slices, I slide her lunch box from her backpack. An empty plastic marshmallow bag is crammed underneath it.

I eye it curiously. Noah said Kenzie’s got a wicked sweet tooth, which is what almost every parent I’ve ever worked with has told me. However, a whole bag of marshmallows? That’s worrying.

It’s another sign that Kenzie is struggling.

We spend the afternoon playing, going to the park, then eating dinner. I try to steer our conversation so I can try to find out what’s bothering her, but she’s either oblivious or way too smart. Or I’m reading too much into this.

But my gut tells me something’s not right.



WHEN I WAKE, it’s just after five in the morning. I’m used to getting up early. It’s when I get in my best studying, but it’s also when Owen would try to get into my apartment.

But Owen is not here.

I dress in a flannel and leggings and walk to the kitchen. The coffeemaker is already set up, so I tap the button, then choose a mug from the cupboard. While the machine goes to work, I stretch, trying to wake up. When finally the coffee is ready, I sashay to the counter.

Noah is standing in the doorway.

I yelp in surprise. “Jeez, you scared me,” I say, pressing my hand against my heart to keep it in my chest.

“We need to talk,” he says. He’s still in his dark grey and navy uniform and thick black boots.

“Sure,” I say, my heart fluttering. Is this when he fires me for being sexually inappropriate? Wouldn’t that be the ultimate irony.

He leans his hip against the counter. “Lisa called me last night. Her

mom's recovery is more complicated than she anticipated, and she needs more time."

I pour a cup of coffee and add milk, then stir with a spoon from the drawer, bracing myself for the bad news that's surely coming.

Noah shifts his feet and crosses his arms. "I need you stay on a little longer."

"You do?"

"Why do you look so surprised?"

I bring my cup to my lips, hoping it hides the flush in my cheeks. "I thought maybe...the other night," I finally say.

He scrubs his chin with his big hand, his face conflicted. "Yeah, I've... thought about that too."

"It was really unprofessional of me."

"You weren't on the clock. Why would it be unprofessional?"

"Because you're my um, boss."

"You seem to like taking orders."

I nearly choke on my coffee. From him? Definitely. Heartbreakingly.

He raises an eyebrow.

"I have a habit of falling for the wrong guy."

A shadow passes through his eyes. "Define wrong."

This is such a loaded question, with answers I don't disclose easily. "Emotionally unavailable."

"And you want the opposite. A relationship."

This makes me think of Leah rubbing her belly and smiling so bright. I heave a sigh. "Someday."

"So until then, you dance with strange men in a bar, then call them up in the middle of the night begging to get off."

My thighs tense, drawing my core into a knot. Did I really beg? "I think you called me."

To my surprise, he tilts his head and laughs. Then he steps closer, a sensual, dangerous look on his face. "I think you liked it."

A prickly heat shoots down my spine.

"But right now I need a nanny more than sex," he says.

Even though my heart divebombs for the floor, he's right. It stings, but I understand. "Got it."

He heaves a slow sigh. "So you'll stay on?"

"Of course."

“It’ll involve a trip to Garnet Falls for a family reunion, but I’ll make sure our cabin has a desk so you can study.”

I blink at him. Garnet Falls is a mountain resort town a few hours away. In the winter, the skiing is incredible, and in the summer, it’s an outdoorsperson’s playground. It’s just as pretty as Penny Creek, but it has an opulent vibe, like Aspen or Park City.

However, my thoughts have snagged on the phrase *our cabin*.

I will my libido to hibernate until this job is over.

Yeah, right.

“Daddy?” Kenzie says sleepily from the doorway.

Noah scoops her up in a giant hug. I grab my coffee and scoot from the room so they can have their morning.

I join them on the walk to the bus stop so Kenzie remembers that I’ll be on duty when she gets home. After the bus pulls away from the curb, Noah and I walk back to his house.

“I saw something yesterday that has me a little concerned,” I say, giving him a steady glance. “Kenzie hardly ate any of her lunch and I found an empty bag of marshmallows in her backpack.”

He shoots me a steely look. “Where did she get them?”

“I didn’t ask, but maybe from school? Sometimes teachers use them for crafts.”

With a grimace, he turns up the driveway. “Why would she steal them?”

“Marshmallows are pretty irresistible,” I say.

“They’ll rot her teeth,” he replies with a scowl. “Let alone spike her blood sugar if she’s eating them instead of her lunch.”

“Maybe they comfort her,” I say.

He gives me a dazed look. “Comfort? I thought it was about the sugar.”

As a pediatric nurse, I know some basic psychiatry. “It would be normal for her to be experiencing some anxiety, given her situation. Food that tastes good is comforting.”

He seems to think about this. “Anxiety, huh?” He releases a heavy sigh.

“It’s normal,” I repeat.

“I’ll keep an eye out. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Of course.”

Inside the house, he gives a giant yawn. “I’m gonna get some shuteye.”

“I’ll be super quiet,” I say. “Or do you want me to leave? I can go home, or to the Bear.”

“No,” he says. “You’re welcome to stay.”

We part ways and I resist watching him walk to his bedroom. Instead, I stuff my earbuds in my ears and settle at the sunny kitchen table with my flashcards. I’ve worked plenty of nights, so I know the drill. Blackout curtains and earplugs for a few hours of sleep, eat nourishing food, get exercise, and try not to fall asleep on your feet at three a.m.

I imagine him settling into bed. Is he thinking of me?

I need a nanny more than sex.

It hits me hard that he thinks he has to choose, but I also understand why. He’s prioritizing Kenzie, as he should.

Which is another very good reason why I need to shut down my feelings, because I would never ask him to change that.

TO KICK OFF MY STUDYING, I dive into labor and delivery complications, especially fetal distress, because as a NICU nurse I will assist with high-risk births. I create a flow chart of signs and symptoms with interventions and medication considerations. I quiz myself, then celebrate with some footwork warmups, using the back of the kitchen stool as my barre.

While I work through a tendu series—side, side, front, front, ronde de jambe—my mind wanders.

I need a nanny more than sex.

What Noah *didn’t* say, however, is that he doesn’t want sex. It’s just not first on his list of priorities.

Well, it’s not mine, either.

I tighten my grip on the stool. Damn him for being so handsome and sexy. For that firm edge to his voice. For the mischievous glint in his eye when he teases me.

I’ll just have to keep resisting him.

Even while spending a week together in *our cabin*, in one of the most romantic mountain towns in the west.

I have a willpower of steel. I can do hard things.

Do not think about steel. Or doing anything hard, including Noah’s—.

To distract myself, I queue up a playlist and step outside to the deck so I can dance without worrying about disturbing Noah.

I sink into the music and let everything go.

I tell myself I don’t care if he’s watching.

I don't.

NOAH

I don't sleep for shit, even though I shower and jerk off and employ all my usual rituals. How can I sleep when Vonnie is right outside my door, dressed in tight leggings I dream of peeling from her perfect body? I was right to squash the energy growing between us, but it doesn't mean I'm happy about it.

It's my fault for allowing things to get that far. Being bothered that she was dancing with someone else was my first mistake. Spinning her around the dance floor was the second.

Since Gia, I don't dance. It leads to bad decisions, like one-night stands that produce offspring.

But damn, it felt good to twirl Vonnie and hold her, to see her smile at me like that. To show her off while also knowing she was mine, even if just for a song.

One more.

Like I can resist a woman begging me like that.

The way she moaned my name when she was getting off will live rent-free in my brain until the end of time. Does she do that when she's alone, or was that just because I was on the other end of the line?

When I catch sight of her outside on my deck, lost in a secret dance, I stuff my pillow over my head, trying to block out the idea of joining her. Finally, several hours later, after tossing and turning, I get up.

Part of me wants to stride into the kitchen and show her just how sturdy my kitchen table can be. But the warning bells steer me into my workout clothes then out the garage. Once underway, I feel better.

But I know it's only temporary, and will only get worse once we're in Garnet Falls under the same roof.

I'll just have to keep my distance. Even if it kills me.

BY THE END of my first week on nights, I'm running on fumes. It's impossible to sleep when Vonnie's in the house. Even though she doesn't make any noise.

Because I *want* her to make noise, and the idea of making her come multiple times so I can hear her moan my name again is slowly driving me insane.

But it's not like I can ask her to vacate the house, not after I promised her a quiet place to study.

On Friday night, when I come back to the station after my first round of patrol, the podcast woman and her sidekick are waiting in the station entryway.

They've been emailing and calling me, asking for an interview. I'm reluctant to talk to them but not because I have anything to hide. More like I know their questions are going to piss me off.

Linnea is gone at this hour, but there are two other deputies on duty. Danforth is at his desk, typing away at his computer. Mitchell is out on patrol.

"We could really use your perspective on the Jonas Rundell case," the woman says. Sally? Sammy?

I widen my stance and stare her down. "You should talk to the Sheriff. He was around when Rundell disappeared."

The woman and her assistant make quick eye contact. "He's a difficult man to track down."

I snort. More likely, Sheriff Tucker is blowing them off. Though he's a great cop, he has even less patience for shit like this.

That these two journalists are here at ten o'clock in the evening is an indication of their determination. "Fine, we can meet in the conference room."

They both rise, and I lead them through the bullpen to the small room next to the Sheriff's office. There's a table and four chairs, a clock on the wall, and bright fluorescent lights, which hum to life when I flip the switch.

"Okay if we record this?" the assistant asks, waving a small black device.

“We have permission from the PAO.”

Ms. Jenkins shows me a copy of our Public Affairs Officer’s email on her phone for proof.

“Fine by me,” I say, and take the chair closest to and facing the door. I turn my radio down a notch but not so low that I’ll miss a dispatch.

While her assistant sets up the recorder, Ms. Jenkins pulls out a notebook. She gives a time stamp for the recording, then plunges in.

“You responded to the call about Rundell’s body. Tell us about that.”

“Forensics were setting up when I got there. We didn’t have an ID on the body until days later.”

“At that time, did you suspect it was Jonas Rundell?”

“No.”

“How many other missing persons cases were open at that time?”

“None.”

“Did you see any signs of the trauma that killed him?”

“Yes.”

Ms. Jenkins waits for more, but there’s not much I can share without a court order.

“Once forensics confirmed that Rundell was murdered, what happened next?”

I run them through a scrubbed version of the case timeline, being careful to reveal only what’s public.

“After the Gazette series exposed Rundell, and his victims came forward, how did that affect the course of the investigation?”

I pause. “It gave us a possible motive.”

“How did you work that angle?”

“Just like any other in the case.”

“Yet it’s never been solved.”

If this is supposed to get me to spill details, they’re mistaken. My conversation with Wyatt echoes through my mind. He wants to protect Vonnie, and I understand why. Who knows what these two podcasters would do to her family if they knew.

“According to our records, it took this department two full months to interview these four women and their family members. Why so long?”

“Investigations take time.”

“You seemed to narrow your focus to two possible suspects, yet neither were ever charged. Even though their information is inconsistent and frankly

incomplete.”

They’ve done their homework, I’ll give them that much. “In order to bring charges against an individual, law enforcement needs enough supporting evidence.”

“Jonas Rundell was a class three pedophile. Is it safe to say that some people were glad he was dead?”

“I can’t comment on what people may have felt at that time.”

“You have a daughter. She was born during this investigation.”

My neck tenses.

“Was it difficult for you to balance being a new father with also working such a delicate case?”

The simple answer is yes, but not for reasons that are relevant to this wild goose chase. “No.”

Ms. Jenkins narrows her eyes. “Is it possible you overlooked something? Missed a small but vital piece of evidence or testimony?”

“Sure it’s possible.”

A sly smile spreads across her face, yet this is hardly an admission of guilt or negligence. We’re human. We gave this case our all. A murder is still a crime, no matter if the victim is a scumbag. But we had no forensic evidence. No DNA match, no murder weapon.

“We’d like to listen to those interviews.”

“Not without approval from the Attorney General,” I say, shaking my head for emphasis.

Thank fuck I didn’t record what Vonnie told me that winter afternoon. I didn’t see the need—it wasn’t a confession. Or maybe deep down I was afraid a day like this would come.

Which might be why I kept my subsequent investigation of Kitty and Timothy Morgan off the books. My reasoning at the time felt solid—Rundell’s case had gone cold, and reopening it for such a slim lead felt like a waste of time and resources. Why drag Vonnie’s family through the mud if the leads were dead ends?

To be sure, if I had found something, I would have had no choice but to make it official. But Kitty had an airtight alibi for that night, and though I never managed to nail down Timothy’s, we don’t prosecute the deceased.

“We expect to get it any day,” Ms. Jenkins says briskly.

If Ms. Jenkins and her partner really are that good, there’s a chance they could expose my off-the-books inquiry into the Morgans.

Which could ruin me and my chance of ever working in law enforcement again.

Fucking hell.

“You’re welcome to return when you do,” I say.

The assistant ends the interview, and we all stand.

“Have a good night, Deputy,” Ms. Jenkins says with a curt nod, then strides out of the room, her assistant scurrying behind her.

Once I’m sure they’re gone, I unlock our tiny evidence closet, sign out the two boxes from Rundell’s case and carry them to my desk.

If the team of podcasters aren’t bullshitting me about getting a court order to access these files, there’s only one way they could find out about Vonnie—from the youth group roster.

I scan down the lists for each of his five years in Penny Creek—nearly a hundred names—and my heart sinks. Her name is there. Yvonne Morgan.

WHEN I GET HOME the next morning, the house is quiet and dark except for the light over the stove. I slip off my shoes and check Kenzie’s room. She’s sound asleep, her hair strewn across the pillows and her mouth parted in relaxation. After a twelve hour shift, nothing grounds me like seeing her peaceful.

In the kitchen, Vonnie’s study materials are packed up and everything is neat. The coffeemaker has brewed. Outside, Vonnie sits on my deck wearing one of my winter coats, a mug of coffee cupped in her hands, the steam melting into the dewy morning air.

The hint of a sunrise has turned the tips of the jagged mountains to a soft pink and the sky to a washed-out yellow. In the four seconds I stand there watching, the colors warm to crimson and coral. It’s like watching a painting come to life.

That she’s at the center of it just makes it more perfect.

Her back is to me with her blonde hair draped over her shoulder, preventing me from reading her expression. Is she up early because sleep is impossible for her too?

All week I’ve managed to avoid her. I come home and go to bed and when I get up, she’s gone. In the afternoon, I keep my distance and once I’ve given her the pass-down, I’m quick to leave her and Kenzie to their evening.

It’s torture. Not the good kind.

Sharing a cup of coffee and a sunrise might help.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I slip through the sliding glass door with my coffee. When she turns, the soft lighting makes her look even prettier. My belly tightens.

“Morning,” she says in a warm tone.

“Morning,” I reply, and settle in next to her, making sure to keep my distance.

“I hope it’s okay I borrowed your coat,” she says, her eyes crinkling with worry.

Even in late spring, morning temperatures rarely rise above forty degrees. “I’m glad you did.” I nod at the skyline. “It’s nice out here.”

She gives my cup of steaming coffee a curious glance. “How are you going to get any sleep?”

“I’m not going to sleep,” I say.

She looks aghast. “How will you make it through the day?”

Her genuine concern for my welfare threatens to turn this moment into something it can’t be, so I shrug. “I’m used to it.”

“Kenzie said you’re going riding today.”

“Yeah. That’ll keep us busy.”

She sips from her cup. I try not to notice the way her plush lips embrace the rim. To distract myself, I gaze at the brightening sky framed by the razor-sharp outline of the Sawtooths.

“Big plans today?” I ask.

She scoffs. “Volunteering at the free clinic, then back to the books.”

“What kind of duties does an almost-nurse have?”

“I track medications, take vitals, start IVs. Sometimes I help with deliveries.”

I give her a questioning look.

“Babies,” she says, laughing softly. “The free clinic has a midwife.”

I can’t help but think back to Kenzie’s birth, which was terrifying because she came early. Thankfully, Gia and I happened to be in Idaho Falls that weekend, where they have a decent-sized hospital. If we had been in Penny Creek, I’m not sure the outcome would have been as positive.

“Is it scary?” I ask.

“It can be.” She takes another sip. “Things can go wrong fast.”

The intense hues of color in the sky are fading as the sun peeks over the ridge behind us, washing the land with warm brush strokes. Sitting out here is

peaceful, but being alone with her is making me want things I can't have.

"You probably don't get scared," she says, staring into her coffee.

My pulse throbs against my temples. "Sure I do. But I'm good at evaluating risk."

She nods, but her face has turned solemn. "Of course you are."

The moment feels heavy and charged. I grimace, because I don't want her to feel like she's some kind of threat.

She rolls to her feet, empty coffee cup dangling from her crooked finger. The sun rays climbing into the sky make her face shine, and though she's smiling, her eyes are edged with hurt.

"Have a good day," she says.

I reach for her hand, but she's already turned away. We pause there, each of us breathing, the air between us simmering with that steady, unrelenting heat that even a week of avoiding her hasn't dampened.

But she doesn't turn back, doesn't jump into my arms. The knot in my chest burns.

Reluctantly, I let her hand slide from my grasp.

VONNIE

“It’s not even a week, Von, jeez,” Leah says from the edge of my bed where she’s watching me pack and peeling a tangerine.

“It’s six days. I want to be prepared,” I reply.

She lifts a pair of my undies with one finger and eyes me. “For what, a strip tease?”

I snatch the underwear back. “I’m not answering that.”

“Bring that new bikini, the one that barely covers your ass. Then wear it to dinner.”

I roll my eyes. “And here I was thinking you’d be helpful.”

“I am being helpful. You want him to handcuff you to the bed and tongue you until you scream, right?”

“Jeez, Lee, boundaries?”

She rolls to her feet and pops a section of tangerine into her mouth. “Last piece of advice, even though you don’t want it.” She points a section of tangerine at me. “Have fun. Garnet Falls is really cool. Tons of stuff to do.”

I raise an eyebrow because I know there’s more.

She saunters to the door but looks back. “And bring condoms.”

I huck a pillow at her but she ducks out of sight, laughing.

NOAH PULLS into our driveway early the next morning for the four-hour drive to Garnet Falls.

Despite what Leah suggested, I’m not going to lust after Noah. Not when he made it clear what he wants. Plus I’m responsible for Kenzie and she’s my

priority.

Wyatt is doing a set of crunches on the living room floor while Rowan and Mateo play, babbling in their toddler language. Brooke left before sunrise to get in one of her grueling workouts.

“Get that bosshole of yours to give you some time off up there,” Wyatt says, then goes into some oblique sets, grimacing even though the work is just a warmup for him. “Do some open water swims or go for a trail run.”

“Love you too,” I say, and slip through the door. The icy morning air stings my cheeks as I hop down the steps to the sandy driveway.

Noah steps out of his truck in jeans, sneakers, and a green canvass coat. “Morning.”

“Morning,” I reply, though my voice sounds tight.

Noah reaches for my bag so he can put it in the back. It shouldn’t make me swoon, but I’m already in a weakened state from seeing him smile at me. It’s a nice change after two weeks of orbiting around each other, our conversations centered around scheduling and grocery lists.

“I brought a few things for Kenzie, if that’s okay,” I say.

“Very sweet of you,” he says with another million-dollar smile.

Kenzie is munching on animal crackers in her booster seat in the back row when I climb into the front.

“You want my tiger?” she says and offers it to me.

“How’d you know tigers are my favorite?” I say, and pop it into my mouth.

She smiles, and my chest tightens. Though I’ve been with her almost every day for three weeks, I sense Kenzie’s still just tolerating me while she waits for Lisa to return. I don’t take it personally, and I don’t read too much into her tiger gift. Kenzie’s excited about this trip and it’s probably making her feel generous.

I’ll take it, though.

Noah turns his truck around. Our driveway is a narrow lane of pale sand we pay to grade every spring to smooth over the bone-jarring washboards and potholes. We’re really strict about not driving on the grassy edges because over time it’ll just make our road harder to maintain. Which is why I notice the set of tire impressions on the grass. As we pass them, I try not to let it worry me. It was probably a delivery driver, or maybe when Brooke left this morning, she had to steer around another car, or maybe there was a moose in the road. It’s that time of year.

It's not evidence that Owen Broderick is in Penny Creek.

"You okay?" Noah asks, his eyebrows knitting together.

"Totally," I reply, and force my fear from my mind.

The route to Garnet Falls is one of those legendary scenic drives people come from all over the U.S. to experience, and because we're on the cusp of summer, Noah's truck isn't the only car on the two-lane road. But he seems completely relaxed behind the wheel.

Kenzie stays busy with the sticker book I bought her, then we play several games of road trip bingo before she falls asleep, her head slumped to the side.

"Want me to drive for a while?" I ask Noah.

He shoots me a surprised glance. "With that lead foot of yours?"

"I wouldn't speed with you and Kenzie in the car."

"So you're only reckless when you're alone," he confirms.

This is delicious bait and I should absolutely not use it to stir the pot, but the temptation to unsettle him is too strong. "Or with the right partner."

There's a little muscle in his jaw that starts twitching.

"When was the last time you did something reckless?" I ask, crossing my arms.

He chuckles softly. "About two weeks ago."

My stomach flutters. "Yet you survived."

His eyes take on a fierce gleam. "The jury's still out on that, actually."

Kenzie wakes, and the rest of the drive passes in a blur of keeping her happy with games and music and snacks. When we pull up to the Sandy Lake Lodge, I'm thrown into a melee of Noah's kin. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents—who go by their French nicknames Mamie, and Papa, both with the weathered complexion of mountain people. They welcome me with warm hugs and call me Yvonne with their musical accents and I instantly love them both. I meet his mom, Liliane, his younger sister, Cora, and his burly younger brother Deveraux.

"Call me Dev," he quickly interjects, giving Noah the stink eye while nearly crushing my hand during our brief handshake.

Kenzie acts shy until she sees Liliane, and jumps into her arms. She and Cora sweep her away promising ice cream and pool time, leaving Noah and I to check into our cabin. The main lodge is two stories and beautiful inside—massive wood beams polished to a high gloss, tall windows that overlook Sandy Lake and the mountains rising steeply to the northeast, their tops still

snowy.

The cabins are nestled among the tall pine and spruce trees, the branches shifting in the afternoon breeze, and early-season wildflowers like lupine and valerian. It must be nice for Noah and Kenzie to get away someplace so pretty and serene, and to have such a welcoming family. His aunt and uncle traveled all the way from Quebec, and his brother Dev has just come from the navy base in Bremerton after six months of duty in Asia.

Noah drives us to “Wildflower” and we carry our things inside. There’s a comfy living room and kitchen in the middle, with big windows facing the lake. Our porch has two lounge chairs and just below, edging the shoreline, is a fire pit with log rounds for seats.

“Take the master suite,” Noah says, nodding to the south side of the cabin while he walks in the opposite direction to a hallway, where there are two rooms.

“You should have it,” I protest. “This is your vacation.”

He looks back over his shoulder. “I’ll be closer to Kenzie this way.”

My room has a king-sized bed, gorgeous wood furniture, and a connecting bathroom with a walk-in shower and a big jacuzzi tub.

“Noah, are you sure?” I call out, and lean from the bedroom door. “This is too nice for me.”

He walks over from the kitchen, a serious look on his face. “Why do you think that?”

I was sort of kidding. “Oh, just that it’s so, um, big.”

He winks. “Enjoy it.”

My tummy flutters. I gaze into his deep brown eyes. “Okay,” I manage.

Several of Noah’s family members burst through the door, and Noah breaks away. I close my door so I don’t bother them, and open my suitcase on the bed. Laughter and conversation and the sound of soda or beer cans cracking open rings through the cabin. His uncle has a thick French accent like their grandparents, but his Montana cousins have a western twang.

I take a few minutes to unpack, tucking my things into the chest of drawers one stack at a time: t-shirts, shorts, sundress, cover up, swimsuits, my sandals and flip flops. I blink at my empty suitcase, realizing there’s something missing. I check my pile of folded clothes one last time but my underwear aren’t hiding between my shirts or shorts. I check the suitcase’s side pockets, but they are empty.

This is Leah’s fault. She distracted me.

I huff a breath. At least I can wear my river shorts or swimsuit most of the time. I'll survive five days without underwear, or I can handwash the pair I'm wearing in the sink and let them dry overnight.

I decide to not let it worry me right now. Instead, I slip on my suit, whip my hair into a messy bun, and hurry past Noah's family. They're all talking in a big group in the kitchen, with Kenzie in her grandpa's arms.

As I close the back door, I catch a furtive glance from Noah, but then it's gone, and I'm outside with the mineral scent of the lake and the sweet pines filling my senses. After my swim, I return to the cabin so I can sneak in a bit of studying, but Noah jogs up behind me. He's wet and wearing a pair of black swim trunks and flip flops. I try not to stare, but he has the most remarkable chest and shoulders.

And abs. Dear Lord.

He's also got a tattoo on his right bicep. A set of wings. And another one on his left shoulder blade—a date in block letters which I quickly realize is Kenzie's birthday.

“Kenzie needs her spare goggles,” Noah says.

Did he catch me checking him out? Crap. “Is she having fun?”

“She's having a blast,” Noah says, and continues past me down the hall, his flip flops squeaking.

I will him to turn around, or better yet, to hurry back here to kiss me.

Balling my hands into fists to bring me back to reality, I hurry out the door and down the path.

That night, I'm on duty, so after a rowdy outdoor barbecue at a group picnic area, I fold an exhausted Kenzie into bed. She closes her eyes and I sing the silly song I made up for her about a bear in underwear at a fair but she's zonked by the time I get halfway through it. I kiss her goodnight, then grab the novel I haven't had time to read and settle on one of the lounge chairs on the deck.

But the night is so pretty, with stars emerging one by one from the dusky sky and the mountain air cooling my cheeks, that I end up just sitting.

A tall figure approaches, his footsteps soft on the sandy path. I start, then recognize Noah's silhouette.

“I thought you were going whiskey tasting?” I ask.

Noah turns up the walkway to our cabin, his hands tucked into his jean pockets. “Dev took off on a ride,” he says, and climbs the steps.

I saw Dev's sleek motorcycle parked in front of his cabin earlier. “Are

you bummed?”

He settles on the edge of the neighboring lounge chair. “Nah. He needs the fresh air. He’s had a rough year.”

“You all seem very close. You must have missed them even more when Kenzie was born.”

“In a way, sure, but maybe it was a blessing too. Mom’s got a heart of gold, but she would have urged me to try harder with Gia.”

“It must have been difficult to go through all of that alone.”

He settles back in the chair and gazes up at the indigo sky now dotted with bright stars. “It was harder trying to coparent with someone unreliable.”

“Kenzie’s lucky to have you.”

He huffs a slow sigh. “I’m the lucky one.”

“Do you think you’ll have more?” I ask.

He laughs softly. “Not without a partner.” A wave caresses the sandy shore. “And I don’t know...my job can be dangerous. That’s tough for me. Plus, the schedule alone is a major hardship. You’ve seen that firsthand.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” I say.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he turns to me. “What about you? You’re amazing with Kenzie. You could probably have nine kids and make it look easy.”

I gawk at him. “Nine? I’d have to start today if I want that many.”

“Tick Tock, Morgan,” he teases.

I throw my book at him, but he dodges, laughing. “You’re such a natural, I figured you’d want a big family.”

“I definitely want to be a mom, but I want a career too.” *One day at a time.* “I guess I sort of want to prove to everyone that I can do it.”

He frowns. “Do what?”

This is one of those moments where I could drag him into the deep end, or keep us in the shallows.

I decide to test the waters.

“I’m the youngest, you know? My siblings are very supportive, but sometimes it’s a little stifling. For example, Peter and Wyatt really want me to stay on at Rogue Valley Hospital.”

“Why is that stifling? They want you close.”

“There’s no NICU in the valley. And they know that.”

Understanding fills his gaze. “Have you talked to them about it?”

“I had...a situation last year.” The tension I can normally release with a

full, slow breath keeps building, which means sharing time needs to come to an end soon. “I didn’t tell them because I knew they’d freak.”

“They’d want to know if you were in danger, Vonnie. It’s called caring.”

“That’s the problem. Their idea of caring is to tell me what to do.”

His eyes flicker with mischief in the near-dark. “And yet you seemed to like taking orders from me.”

I reach for something else to throw at him, but the only thing within reach is one of my flip flops. I lunge for it, but he tries to beat me there. With a shriek, I snatch it, but he sort of tackles me, or maybe he’s off balance, because we end up on the deck.

Though I can hold my own in a wrestling match with my NHL-star brother Dylan and my firefighter brother Caleb, Noah’s experience taking down bad guys must give him an edge because in a flash, he’s flattened me with his body, his arm pinning mine so he can grab the flip flop I’m holding above my head.

I’m panting, though I shouldn’t be out of breath.

I meant what I told him—I like being in charge of my life, my choices, but being restrained by Noah while his eyes are lit with that quiet hunger is turning me to jelly.

“If I let you go, will you promise not to bean me with your shoe?” he asks.

His lips are so close and he smells so good. My pulse races and there’s a tight ache coiling inside my belly.

“I have a right to defend myself,” I say, writhing a little beneath him, but he’s not budging. “And my honor.”

He gives me a languid, sultry smile. “Just because you like me being in charge doesn’t tarnish your honor. You can have both.”

“Noah,” I say with a needy groan because he’s now so hard against my pelvis that I might scream in agony.

He rolls us over so that the throbbing hollow between my thighs presses against his erection. My craving for more sends a flash of heat down my thighs and makes my breasts tingle.

Noah cradles my face with both hands and brings me close. I shut my eyes and meet his lips with mine.

The kiss is tender and slow and sends thrill tingles down my spine. I kiss him back, my body warming quickly. Our lips lock in a gentle, delicious embrace. Then he flicks his tongue against my upper lip, and I let him inside.

The kiss deepens, our tongues dancing hungrily, our breaths coming faster. Desire and craving explode inside me, and I kiss him back, savoring the way our bodies fit together and the delicious heat rising through me.

He makes a low growl from the back of his throat. It's carnal and sensual and triggers a wonderful curiosity that feels welcoming, playful.

I press my body into his, wanting more of him, but he grabs my hips to stop me. "Fuck, Vonnie," he says, and rests the back of his head on the porch.

I lay my head on his collarbone, our breaths fast. My heart thumps hard against my chest, beating in time with his. The cool night air settles over us as we rest there—like it's holding us hostage.

Noah strokes my lower back with a gentle caress. "This goes against every rule I have, sweet girl."

I sigh heavily, my chest pressing firmly into his ribs. While my whole body is screaming for him to touch me, kiss me, it has to be right for both of us. The last thing I want is for something to happen between us—like hot porch sex under the stars—then have him regret it.

"We can't just break the rules a little?"

He laughs. "What I want to do to you right now goes way beyond that."

"Then let's make new rules," I say, and prop my chin on my fist so I can see him better. He's still tantalizingly hard beneath me, but I resist the urge to start grinding against him.

He sighs and stares up at the stars. Then he slowly rolls us to our sides, then stands and reaches for my hand.

After pulling me into a soft hug, he breaks away and we walk inside the cabin.

"Goodnight, Vonnie," he says, and walks down the hallway to his room.

NOAH

“Are you tapping that?” my brother asks in a low tone as he watches Vonnie set up her towel across the pool from us.

“Don’t be an asshole. She’s my nanny,” I reply, pretending to catnap in the chair next to him. Kenzie is with Cora and a bunch of cousins, eating a hot dog in the shade.

“So?”

“So no, I’m not.”

He makes a sound like a flat tire. “Can I?”

I shoot him an icy glare. “Don’t you fucking touch her.”

He puts up his palms and gives me a smirk. “You are so busted!”

I close my eyes, but not before stealing another quick glance at Vonnie, who is on her stomach reading a thick textbook, her blonde hair piled on top of her head in a messy knot.

Today she’s wearing the same turquoise bikini I saw her in that first day, but she’s slid her straps down her shoulders, probably to avoid tan lines.

Surely not to drive me crazy, yet I’m imagining all the ways I would kiss her there. From soft and tender to nibbles to the edge of my teeth as I come inside her.

“Nothing’s happened,” I say to shove back the memory of our kiss last night. The way she was writhing against me was making it impossible to think. And how cute was her little attempt to get me to break my rule?

Too damn cute.

“Because she’s not into you? Or you’re too chicken shit?”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” I say. “She’s been through some stuff.”

His face tightens in concern. “So have you.” Then he grins. “Nothing like a little sexual healing to make it all better, though.”

“Fuck you,” I say with a groan and banish the idea of kissing Vonnie again. Or wrestling with her. Or pinning her to the wall so I can stroke her soft pussy. “I’m a gentleman, remember?”

“Unlike me,” he says, and rises, humming the chorus to “sexual healing” while doing an obnoxious Flashdance impersonation as he shuffles off.

I glare at him but he’s too busy rounding the pool to notice. My jaw tightens as he sits in the chair next to Vonnie and starts talking.

Minutes later she’s applying sunblock to Dev’s broad back, her laughter ringing in the air. He’s wearing a smug expression that I will wipe off his face later with a left hook.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Kenzie calls, hurrying over to grab my hand. “Come catch butterflies with us!”

I let her pull me off the lounge chair, then scoop her into my arms. She smells of chlorine and grass stains, her pigtail a tangled, crusty disaster.

“Only if we let them go,” I say.

She grabs both sides of my face and stares at me intently. “Of course, Daddy.”

MY GRANDPARENTS TAKE everyone out for pizza that night. For some reason, I worry that Dev’s going to invite Vonnie to climb onto the back of his bike, but she rides shotgun in the truck and plays “I-Spy” with Kenzie as we drive the short distance to town.

Since that kiss last night, the need to be near her while also not being close enough is making my skin itch to the point of insanity. Like now when she’s smiling and her cheeks are pink from the sun, and her eyes are bright. She’s wearing a pretty sundress and flip flops. The same ones I tackled her to grab.

Vonnie’s *then let’s make new rules* rings in my head.

Inside the restaurant, the hostess leads us to two long tables on the covered patio, both with red-and-white checkered tablecloths and glasses of ice water sweating in the warm air. It’s early enough that the restaurant isn’t packed, and the two horseshoe courts are empty.

Kenzie dashes off to sit with one of my cousins, who waggles a coloring book and crayons at her.

Before we even sit down, Dev eyes me. “Wanna play horseshoe?”

Cora overhears, and eyes Vonnie. “How about doubles?”

She gives Cora a high five. After we order our pizzas and drinks, the four of us walk to the sand pit at the far end of the patio area.

“Are you getting much studying done?” Dev asks Vonnie.

“Not enough,” Vonnie says with a laugh. “The problem is mostly me. FOMO is real.”

“Waterfall hike tomorrow,” Cora says. “Are you joining us?”

She grimaces. “I really should study.”

“The waterfall is two hundred feet high and Mamie says we can swim behind it,” Cora says as Dev doles out the horseshoes, one for each of us.

“Hard to resist that,” Vonnie says, looking torn.

“Then don’t,” I say, lifting an eyebrow.

Her eyes take on a steely glint. “So I should break my rules, while you won’t even bend yours?”

Cora gives us both a curious glance. “Did I miss something here?”

I grit my teeth.

Dev steps up to throw his shoe humming “sexual healing.” I block him out and throw my horseshoe next. It lands close enough for a point. It puts us in the lead but does nothing to improve my mood.

When Vonnie brushes past me to throw her horseshoe, the hem of her sundress skims my knee. I catch her fresh, wild rose scent. I watch her size up the target, then wind up and throw.

Dev leans closer to me. “You want me to cause a distraction so you two can make use of the bathroom?”

I give him a flat look. “Stay out of this.”

He wraps his arm over my shoulders and gives me a hearty squeeze. “I’m on your side, okay?”

By the time we sit down to dinner, my stomach is in knots. Eating doesn’t help, so I sip my beer and listen to my cousin and her husband talk about their life in Quebec.

After dinner, our party spills onto the street. The vibe is busier now, the narrow lane lined with parked cars and the restaurants and bars packed with patrons, the noise of conversation ringing in the air.

The group splits, some heading back to the resort, and others meandering down the boardwalk.

Dev gives me a sideways glance. “You wanna paint the town red

tonight?”

Next to me, Vonnie is carrying a sleepy Kenzie. After devouring half a pizza, she climbed into Vonnie’s lap and looked ready to fall asleep on the table.

“Why don’t you go?” Vonnie says to me. “I can take Kenzie back.”

This shouldn’t be such revolutionary idea. Vonnie drives Kenzie around in my mom’s car and has put her to bed when I’m on shift.

A strange emotion rattles through my chest. “You sure?”

“I’m sure,” she says with a smile.

“Keep that lead foot under control, okay?” I tease, then wish I could take it back because I sound like an asshole. And it’s a total cover, because what I’m feeling scares me.

I trust her.

She holds out her palm for the keys and gives me a wink. “Go have fun.”

I resist the urge to lean down and kiss her the way I might do if we were a couple and she was gifting me a night to spend with my family. A quick thank you and a promise that I would make it up to her—breakfast in bed maybe, or a toe-curling orgasm. Or three.

Longing for this blasts me like an avalanche.

I won’t deny that I’ve dreamed of having a partner. Someone to share the load with. Someone who can stop by the store for a gallon of milk on their way home or go to parent-teacher conferences or return Kenzie’s library books before the due date. Someone to hold at night and kiss good morning. Someone to dance with, pleasure and cherish, and protect with all my heart.

It’s stupid to yearn for this from Vonnie when she’s looking up at me while cradling a sleepy Kenzie on her hip.

But I am.

It’s also wrong to want her company tonight, but it’s there too.

“Thank you,” I manage, and drop the keys into her hand.

She gives me one last look, her ocean-blue eyes so serene, then turns away.

I trot off and catch up with Dev and Cora. In the group are several cousins, plus my aunt Lottie and Uncle Gill.

“Your girl take Kenzie home?” Dev asks as we cross the street to a bar with a flashing neon cowboy sign above the door.

“She’s not my girl,” I reply, tension creeping into my voice.

“I didn’t use up my one week of leave to spend it with a grump. Either

cheer the fuck up or I'll make you go home so Vonnie can take your place.”

“Ouch,” I say, and rub my chest like he punched me.

“She’s cuter than you. And she’s funny. And a hellofa lot more fun.”

“I can be fun,” I protest as we follow Cora and my cousin Angie into the bar. It’s cool and comfortably dim inside, with that low hum of conversation and laughter to make it feel welcoming.

Dev gives me a careful glance. He’s always been the jokester, the funny one, while I’m more serious, my sense of humor dry as tinder. But as a logistics coordinator in a war zone, he’s no stranger to tragedy. Yet he’s always upbeat, looking for the good in life, enjoying it.

“It starts by not overthinking,” he says.

“So I should just be irresponsible?”

“I promise it won’t kill you.”

I get what he’s saying. We’re not in a war zone. Vonnie pretty much said the same thing. That night on the phone with her, I let my guard down just a little.

And yet you survived.

The beginning of a headache starts to pound at the base of my skull.

Dev and I each order a beer and join my family’s rowdy conversation and banter. Because we only have a reunion like this every few years, I haven’t seen some of my family members since Kenzie was practically a baby. Back then I was still trying to work things out with Gia. I could only come to the reunion for three of the five days. Kenzie didn’t like strangers so I couldn’t leave her with my mom or Cora, meaning I had no adult time. By the time I got home I was exhausted, only to find out from a neighbor that Gia had used the house while I was gone, and she hadn’t been alone.

Cora slips in next to me as our group files to the foosball table and dart boards in the back. Someone orders more food—buffalo wings and nachos and smoked trout, and a bottle of red wine—from a passing waitress.

“Too bad Vonnie’s leaving Penny Creek,” she says, leaning closer so she doesn’t have to shout over the music. “She’s awesome.”

“She can still be awesome in Seattle.”

Cora gives me a kind look, which softens the hackles that have been on red alert since the evening started.

“What if she stayed?” she asks.

“She doesn’t want to,” I reply.

Cora nods slowly, her gaze drifting, which is maddeningly effective at

making me reflect on my words, which sound selfish and bitter.

Damn it. I don't want to be either of those things. It's petty and immature.

"Does that make you feel rejected?"

"The fuck?" I say.

Dev appears, his eyebrows arched. As the middle brother, he's always been the peacekeeper and can sense danger between my sister and me from a mile away.

"Vonnie's not Gia," Cora says, her mouth a hard line.

I look her squarely in the eyes. "Okay, Mom, thanks for the pep talk."

Dev steers me away, which is a good thing. I love my sister, but there's a reason I don't talk about my private life with her—being psychoanalyzed is at the top of the list.

Dev and I play a game of darts, but I'm distracted by my heckling cousins and thoughts of Vonnie being awesome. Awesome at speaking her mind. Awesome at kissing. Awesome at phone sex. Awesome at smiling that brilliant, half-sly smile at me when my guard is down so that it stabs me right in the heart.

The song "Slow Hands" comes on the speakers. I fight the rising ache in my chest.

Shutting my eyes, the memory of Vonnie twirling in my arms comes rushing back. Her smile, her hand in mine, the trust she shared with me and the magnetic pull between us.

Maybe my siblings are right.

I took a risk that night, and it felt good. It reminded me how nice it feels to embrace the simple joy of living one moment at a time.

Last night's kiss felt the same way.

But how can I dare want more?

Several of my younger cousins have rushed onto the dance floor, dragging Cora and my aunt and uncle with them. Dev asks a woman to dance, leaving me standing here like a moron. I could follow his lead with a pretty stranger, or join Cora and my cousins jumping around, but I can't seem to make my feet close the distance.

because there's no breaking

our plans

for those...slow hands

Instead, I sip my beer and watch from the sidelines. Because there's only one person I want in the care of my slow hands tonight, and she's not here.



ON THE WAY out the door the next morning, Lisa messages me that her mom is doing better and she plans to return next week.

I should be grateful for this. Things can go back to normal.

But it just makes me feel like I'm running out of time, which is nonsense. Vonnie's not leaving Penny Creek until August.

Fuck.

On the hike, Kenzie runs up the path together with Angie's two daughters, chattering about magic stones and mermaids they hope to find in the pool. I talk with Mom about her work with the D.A.'s office in Montana. Dev joins in as we cross a wide bridge, then follow the river up a steep, rocky section. I hear the waterfall before I see it, a thunderous roar in my ears.

Soon we're crossing the final meadow, dotted with tiny white flowers but still soggy due to the late spring, then descend to the sapphire-blue lake, tucked into the forest like a hidden pocket. The pretty falls pour off the granite cliffs, filling the air with mist and tiny rainbows where the sun shines through it.

"You going in?" Dev asks, peeling off his t-shirt and toeing off his sneakers. Most of my family members are in various states of disrobing. I'm hurrying to keep up when out of the corner of my eye, Vonnie wades into the shallows.

This morning, she stayed in her room to study, then rode to the trailhead with Cora and Mamie. On the hike, she was ahead of me. So I've barely seen her or talked to her. I should tell her about Lisa coming back so she can plan ahead, but I can't bring myself to do it.

When we get back to Penny Creek, I will. That'll still give us a week.

A week for what, though?

Nothing's happened. Nothing I can't turn off, anyway.

Dev catches me fixating on Vonnie and snickers, then he saunters past me to rush into the water, splashing everyone.

The afternoon passes lazily for everyone else. We swim. We share a picnic. More hikers arrive at the lake, one young couple brings their giant Chocolate Labrador who plunges into the water to swim in circles, his tail

wagging like a propeller. I manage to stay away from Vonnie, though I hear her voice, and sense her nearby. It's maddening.

Dev and my uncle head off to climb something. Kenzie and I play Shark Walk, Throw Me Higher Daddy, and a game she invented called Turtle where I throw rocks and she dives for them. Then I dry her off and we stretch out on a granite slab in the warm sunshine.

When I wake, it takes my sluggish brain an extra second or two to come online.

"Don't worry, Kenzie went back with your mom and the others," Vonnie says while rolling a fat blade of grass between her fingers.

I wipe my sunburned face with my palm and slowly rise to a sitting position. The surrounding cliffs and forest swirl in my vision but quickly sharpen. The lake is much quieter now, with only a handful of other visitors.

"Who put you up to babysitting me while I slept?" I ask, squinting at her.

She laughs. "Dev wanted to tickle your ear with this, but I talked him down."

Framed by the giant trees and the speckled granite, with the waterfall thundering in the background, Vonnie could be a mountain princess right now. Her hair is long and windblown and her freckles look darker on her sun-kissed cheeks. Her eyes sparkle like the ocean, the tiny gold flecks glinting in the softening light.

"Thank you for saving me from such torture."

"You want to repay me?"

My stomach does a cartwheel. "Fuck yes."

She stands and reaches for my hand. I'm tempted to yank her onto me instead, but manage to stuff that idea down and roll to my feet.

"I should warn you, though, it's, um, kind of dangerous," she says, and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear.

The craving to caress her face and kiss her makes my fingertips twitch and my breath stutter in my chest. "If you're trying to discourage me, it's not working."

She grins. "Good. Let's go."

VONNIE

I lead Noah to the granite ledge above the lake. It's a good fifteen feet to the water below. I know I could have jumped earlier, but it would have felt weird doing it in front of his entire family, like I was showing off. Instead I stewed on it, hoping for my chance.

Here it is.

Noah gives me his signature steely look, but there's something different about his eyes right now. They're curious and playful. I take a second to entertain that I'm the cause. Across from us, the waterfall cascades over the top of the cliff, plunging down, down, down into the lake.

"You sure it's deep enough?" Noah asks, leaning over the edge to peer at the indigo blue water below.

"Stop being a pussy and jump." I toe up to the edge and leap.

I land with a hard splash that stings the soles of my feet. The brisk water swallows me and all sound dulls to a low rumble. When I break through the surface, Noah is next to me, flicking the water from his face with a sharp toss of his head.

"Pussy, huh?" he says, and pinches me in the side.

"Someone's gotta put you in your place," I say while kicking away from him.

"Is that so?" He lunges for me again, but with a yelp, I swim away and take off.

He's right on my tail.

Though my competitive swimming days are long over, I trained six days a week for most of my teenage years thanks to Wyatt, and I'm still fast. Noah

likely swam as part of his military training, but I bet I could take him.

Though I like the idea of him catching me.

When I near the waterfall, my lungs are tight from exertion. Noah's gaining, but I'm not going to give up. The cascading water fills the air with so much mist that I can't see, and it's so loud that I no longer hear Noah swimming behind me, though I know he's there.

With a giant breath, I dive. Beneath the thundering waterfall, the water becomes a churned pearly blue. I kick down to get under the force of the water pouring in. Aerated, fizzing current churns all around me, stinging my skin. Though this is the kind of risky shit my family does for fun, I'm not usually the one in the lead. That I am right now gives me a rush.

The pressure eases and I rise to a pool framed by a curtain of falling water.

Noah gives my toe a tug, and I scream. I twist away from him but he lunges and we go down thrashing in the shallows. He's powerful, but I'm quick. My shrieks and his grunts echo inside the cave as we wrestle and splash. Finally, he tackles me, pinning my body to the sand. It's almost exactly the same tangle we ended up in last night.

We breathe, our eyes locked in the dim shelter of the cave.

"That sassy mouth of yours is trouble," he says in a low tone.

"It's your fault," I say, breathless.

He raises an eyebrow. "Maybe I can help."

"I'm afraid I'm beyond help," I say, squirming a little because his erection is now fully hard against where I'm aching. "Hopeless, in fact."

His lips trace my jawline, making me shiver. "If that's a challenge, I accept," he says in my ear.

"Noah," I say in a low groan.

The energy simmering between us all day expands so fast the air feels charged. Maybe it's the waterfall—all those negative ions exploding all around us—or maybe it's the cool mist melting on my hot skin.

I stop questioning it or worrying about it and just let the moment build, breathing life into the flames flickering to life inside me.

There's an edge to Noah's gaze, like yearning. Need. He wants this even though it's risky. Dangerous for so many reasons.

I caress the side of his face and watch him carefully, as if my touch can convey my understanding. The connection between us tightens, like we're magnets being pulled closer and closer together.

He kisses me, his lips warm and plush, but hungry. I flick my tongue past his upper lip, and he nips me back before his tongue swirls with mine in a delicious, sensual duet, making my blood pound. Our kisses go from flirty and playful to deep and dreamy. I'm breathing fast and the energy is so powerful that my whole body is tuned into the way one kiss melts into the next, and the next.

"I need to hear you come again," he says in my ear.

My pulse thumps hard in my throat.

He kisses the tender place behind my ear, and I roll my hips into him.

Trailing kisses down my neck, to my collarbone, Noah pauses to tease my nipples over the fabric of my bikini top. Ever since last night when he kissed me, I've been wanting his touch, his kisses, his body close to mine. I ignore the warning bells screaming in the back of my mind and focus on his firm, sensual touch and his silky tongue as he makes little nips and kisses down to the edge of my bikini bottoms.

Behind him, the curtain of water shines like liquid pearls. It's colder behind the waterfall, which is the only reason I'm not on fire.

Noah kisses along the edge of the fabric. I reach for his shoulder, but he gently moves my hand to my side. "Keep your hands where I put them," he says in a firm voice.

"What if I want to touch you," I say in frustration.

"Then you don't get to come," he says in a steady voice—almost matter-of-fact—like we're discussing options for dinner. Meanwhile I'm a quivering mess.

I groan.

"Afraid of a challenge, Morgan?" he teases, slowly peeling my bikini bottoms down.

"Bring it on, Tucker," I reply, though I'm quickly losing the ability to form coherent sentences.

He kisses up my bare thigh.

"Careful what you ask for," he says, and gives me a feathery tease with the tip of his tongue.

I jolt, then sink my fingers into the coarse, wet sand, the rough texture grounding me.

Noah urges my thighs apart and kisses closer, then brushes my throbbing pussy with light, maddeningly tender caresses.

Every thump of my pulse feels amplified the longer he makes me wait for

his mouth, and it's pushing me closer and closer to insanity.

"I'm this close to doing it myself," I say in a rush.

"And rob me of torturing you?" he says with a low chuckle. "No chance."

I dig my fingers deeper into the sand.

He gives me a slow caress with his wickedly soft tongue. I suck in a gasp, my thighs quivering. My nipples tingle and ache. My neck prickles.

"That better?" Noah asks.

Everything insides me tightens. "Yes."

He lowers down again, his lips and tongue gliding against where I'm aching and buzzing. It's intense and so good. The sound of the waterfall pounds in my ears and the sand grinds against my back while Noah's expert mouth drives me to the brink in minutes. He's sensual and hungry, swirling and gliding like he can read my deepest needs.

It's delicious to be his sole focus like this.

He squeezes my clit with his lips, the sharp pleasure edged with such a wicked surprise making me desperate to come. He circles me there and nips at me again. Having to keep my hands at my sides while he devours me like this is the most delicious form of torture, heightening the ache pulsing through my body.

Noah circles me harder. I rock against him, surrendering completely to our rhythm. The cold water lapping at my toes and the mist melting on my skin make it even more intense, like the mountain is part of us, of this.

With Noah's mouth wrapped around me and his low groan vibrating through my body, I come, the release like sweet freedom. I go tumbling through a flash dream of joy, my body loose and fluid.

Noah continues with a firm, tender caress.

I give a whimper. It's deliciously intense. I'm hot and languid and still breathing fast.

"One more," Noah says, flicking his tongue.

I try to protest, but he grips my thighs to keep me open for him. The bright burst of my climax has faded but a low, deep heat is already building in my core. Maybe it's his commanding tone, as if I don't have a choice in this. Or maybe I just don't want this to end.

"I'm not moving until we get you there again," he says, then strokes me with his tongue, focusing on the sensitive, achy place that needs him.

"Oh," I manage, and renew my grip on the sand, the grains sharp under my nails.

Noah slides a finger inside me, slowly, while circling with his tongue. That smoldering heat inside me ignites.

Noah adds another finger, making me feel so full and needy. I suck in a tight breath, rolling my hips in time with his seductive thrusts. Then he strokes some magical place inside me, triggering a primal, desperate yearning for more—deeper and harder even as it consumes me whole. I rock with him, completely losing control.

Pleasure rips through me like wildfire. I try to slow everything down so I can savor the heat, but it's all happening so fast. The sensations build to the tipping point and I come hard, my sharp cries echoing inside our cave. My breaths rattle in my throat as the release shudders through me.

Noah rests his cheek on my belly and sighs. My body is limp and heavy and my fingertips are raw from scratching into the gritty sand.

After one final aftershock, Noah kisses up, slowly, with gentle caresses. Then he rolls me to his chest and wraps his arms around me in a soft embrace. He releases a low, contented groan.

There are questions hanging in the air between us, but they float away before I can form the words. Instead, I snuggle into him, soaking in the warmth and strength from his body.

Time seems to have slowed down, almost like in this hidden place, we're in a separate world. It's going to feel different outside of it. I try not to dwell on that thought, but it's there.

I lay my cheek on his chest and he strokes my back, his touch sensual and lazy at the same time, like he can't help himself. It's wonderfully intimate, making my insides flicker with renewed heat.

"That was incredible," he says.

"Agreed," I say with a smile, and kiss his collarbone. His erection presses firmly against my hip.

He gives my bottom a pinch and I jerk away, which rolls my hip bone over his cock. He shudders.

Unable to hold back, I kiss down his chest. A thrill tingles over my skin because ever since that night on the phone, I've wanted to feel him, taste him. And after what he just did to me, I am desperate to even the score.

"Vonnie," Noah says, "We're in so much trouble."

"I know," I say, and untie his trunks. When I slide the fabric down, his hard cock springs free. Oh my, he's gorgeous. And ready. Very.

Thinking about how good he would feel inside me is going to make me

crazy.

But crazy never felt this good.

I grasp him and gently stroke while I kiss the firm plane of his belly.

Noah hisses in pleasure, and props himself up on his elbows, his eyes focused on me.

The waterfall's mist on my back makes the breath of cool air swirling inside the cave feel even colder, and I release a little shiver.

I take him into my mouth and suck his soft, full tip. His heady, salty arousal tingles on my tongue. He feels so smooth and hard, his hot skin sending a buzzing warmth down my spine. I glide lower, wrapping my lips firmly around him.

Noah combs back my hair and drapes it over one shoulder. "All the way, sweet girl."

Determined to comply, I move lower, taking him as deep as I can.

"Fuck, yes," he praises.

Closing my eyes, I move up and down, savoring his quickening breaths and the way he's trusting me. It gives me a silent thrill knowing he's willing to step into the unknown. Even though we both understand the risks.

Noah's stomach muscles tighten. He combs through my hair again to steady me while he thrusts. It's carnal and so intensely sexy.

"You want me to come in this sweet mouth? Or on my stomach?"

I release him to swirl around his tip. "My mouth."

With a groan, he thrusts inside me, like he's driven by raw hunger. I give into it, taking more.

His grip on my hair tightens. "Yes. Fuck. Just like that."

Reckless energy pulses through me as I devote my sole focus on giving him what he needs. It's freeing and powerful all at once.

He comes with a low groan, filling my mouth. I move with him until he's spent and breathing hard. Gently, he urges me up and we collapse onto the sand again. His heart thumps hard against my breast.

"That was..." He huffs a slow breath. "Fucking amazing. I...haven't had someone do that for me in a long time."

"Why not?" I say, and prop my chin on my fist so I can see his face.

His eyes darken for an instant. "It's intimate."

"That's why I liked it," I say, and give him a smile.

The vulnerable look he gives me turns his brown eyes into deep, dark pools. "Me too. Probably too much."

My belly flutters. He's so tough on the outside. But inside, he's kind and sweet and maybe a little scared—like me.

“Because I want more,” he adds, caressing the side of my face.

“Then take it,” I say, and kiss him softly.

NOAH

Because of how late we stayed at the lake, we rush down the trail and jump in my truck. I feel like a teenager out past my curfew, but it's only heightening my buzz.

Mom messaged me that she and Cora took Kenzie to their cabin and are getting ready for dinner there. It makes me eager to get back, but I also wish Vonnie and I had more time alone. I would kiss her, explore every perfect inch of her. Taste her, pleasure her until she begged me to stop.

In the truck, I pull her close so I can hold her hand on my thigh while I drive the short distance back to the resort.

"Dinner's going to be kind of fancy tonight," I say.

"Oh," Vonnie replies, sounding surprised. "Am I going?"

"Of course," I reply. "You gotta eat, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I planned on making a sandwich or something."

I turn down the gravel road toward Sandy Lake.

"I want you there," I say. It comes out more demanding than I intended, but it's the truth.

"Then I'll be there." Her expression turns pensive. "I'm going to need a shower though."

"Need any help?" I ask as we pull up to the cabin.

She bursts out laughing, then bites her lip and flashes me a playful, sultry gaze. "Do we have time?"

I put the truck in park and drag her out with me, then clasp her hand and tug her into the house. "We'll make time."

She's still giggling and protesting when I lead her to her bathroom. The

shower is spacious, with handsome tiling on the floor and walls and an inset shelf for soaps and shampoo. I set her down and turn on the water.

I yank off my t-shirt, not taking my eyes off her.

“Off,” I say, pointing to her clothes. She gives me a challenging look, but complies, whipping off her bikini top and tugging down her shorts.

I wish I had more time to admire how incredibly gorgeous she is, but we’re going to be late enough. And I’m already so turned on that slowing down isn’t an option.

So I grab her around the waist and shuffle her into the shower. Our bodies press close, the scent of the lake on her skin filling my senses. The hot water hits my back and I gently spin her so she gets warm.

“Noah,” Vonnie groans, tugging at my neck to pull me close for a kiss.

Her lips are soft and hungry, eager. I kiss her back, my tongue flicking against her lip. I remember what her lips felt like wrapped around me, stretching so perfectly. The memory of her delivering the sweetest pleasure echoes through me, renewing my craving for more.

I cup her breasts and kiss down to suck each one. She trembles, then rolls her hips, wanting me closer. I spin her around and pull her back to my chest. The hot water hits me in the shoulder and pours between our bodies, making our skin feel silky and slick.

I cradle her soft breasts and brush my thumbs over her hardened nipples, savoring the way she’s panting. Then I stroke down her belly, delving her nearly bare patch of curls to where she’s wet and plush.

She jolts in my arms, bucking like a colt.

I lift her arms to circle my neck, then I stroke back down, enjoying the way her body is stretched out for me.

She arches to my touch, her breaths coming faster. That she trusts me like this fills me with a powerful need to not just care for her, but protect her.

“Fuck you feel good,” I praise in her ear while giving her pussy a slow, gentle stroke.

She leans back, her mouth opening in pleasure.

I massage with my fingers. She’s so plush and soft. She starts trembling, pressing her shoulders into my chest, desperate for contact. It’s exhilarating and sexy as fuck that I can make her feel so good.

“Noah,” she says, leaning her head back and sucking in a gasp.

“I’m right here, darlin’,” I say, scissoring her clit with my fingers.

“Yes, oh...”

I can feel her muscles drawing in tight and her breaths quicken to sharp gasps. I tug on her nipple and stroke her, listening to her body. Her willingness to indulge in what neither of us can control or fully understand is such a gift. I pledge to keep it safe.

With her body tense against me and her thighs quivering, Vonnie comes, her whimpers rising to soft cries that echo inside the walls.

“I’m going to come on your back,” I say, sliding my fingers from her wet pussy and tilting her forward so her hands rest against the wall. Though I’d love to slide inside her just like this—her back arched and her pussy plush and ready for me—there are some things we need to talk about first, things better shared when I’m not thinking like a caveman.

Vonnie looks back to watch me stroke myself, her eyes lit with a sultry gleam.

Fuck.

I stroke faster, harder, my breaths coming in firm grunts. My climax bursts in a flash of heat and sweet surrender. I grip her hip and shut my eyes, savoring the brief moment of freedom and lightness, letting it consume me.

When the colors of the room come back into focus, I gently spin Vonnie around and wrap my arms around her waist. She circles my neck and rises up to kiss me, her lips soft and her tongue flicking gently. “I’m going to be thinking about that all night.”

My mind goes blank as all the blood in my body rushes to my cock. With a groan, I give her shoulder a full, wet kiss, sucking on her tender skin.

“Careful,” she warns. “If I show up with love bites all over my neck, that’s going to make for some interesting dinner conversation.”

I switch off the water and grab us both towels. While I would relish the opportunity to watch her get dressed, maybe help—or distract her until she’s so flustered I’d have to make her come again—we’re already late.

“So...this stays...um...between us, right?” she says, scrunching her nose in an adorable wince.

While I kiss her, thrilled that we’ve managed to make a casual arrangement so easily, panic buttons are blaring to life in my brain. Because I already know I’ll want more.

“Just so you know, I am on birth control and have a clean bill of health and haven’t been with anyone else since I left Seattle last month.”

“Who was it?”

She gives me a curious look. “Why do you want to know?”

I force myself to let it go. “A boyfriend, or...”

“A fling?” she says with a sly smile. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you. Your eyebrows are doing that thing.”

“What thing?”

“That thing when you get stressed.”

I grunt. “I don’t get stressed. Tell me who you hooked up with.”

“No.”

I’m about to throw her on her bed and torture the answer out of her, when I notice a pair of panties hanging over the towel rack.

“There’s a washing machine here, you know,” I say, giving her a curious look.

Her already pink cheeks redden. “I know.”

“You forgot underwear?” I suppress a laugh.

Her look turns defiant. “Why is that funny?”

I pull her against me. “It’s incredibly cute.”

“I’m kicking you out now,” she says, and gives my chest a little shove.

I’m tempted to kiss her, but being late to dinner will bring added scrutiny, and this is all too new for me to think about how to handle that. So I hurry to my room and throw on a pair of chinos then slide on a chambray dress shirt, my chest still damp. I add a belt and quickly towel dry my hair, then finger comb it into place.

When I step into the kitchen, Vonnie hurries out of her room wearing a pink knee-length dress that flares at the hem, and sandals. Her hair is tied up in a tidy twist and she’s added a pair of beaded earrings that catch the light.

I stand there, stunned by how good she looks. Her sun-kissed cheeks dotted with freckles, her lean legs tanned by the sun, her perfect lips so soft and delicately pink.

How is it that just moments ago I had her completely at my mercy, and now she’s the one who could bring me to my knees?

We walk down the path, and it takes everything I have not to reach for her hand. It’s frustrating, but I don’t have the mindset to work through why.

When we arrive, my family members are mingling on the patio, so it’s easy to slip into the mix without any fanfare. To my relief, the only person who seems to catch on that Vonnie and I join the group simultaneously late is Dev, who gives me a shrewd glance.

Kenzie attacks me with a giant hug, and I pull her into my arms. “Hey Tiger,” I say. “How was your afternoon?”

“You have whiskers, Daddy,” she says, scowling at my face.

“I promise I’ll shave tomorrow,” I say as my uncle announces that our table is ready, and I carry her inside.

“Can I have French fries?” she asks, her body twisted away so she can watch where we’re going.

“As long as there’s a burger or chicken fingers with it, yes,” I say.

“Chicken fingers. And ranch.”

“Since when do you like ranch?” I say, eyeing Vonnie because surely she’s behind this.

“Ranch is the secret to life,” Vonnie says, giving me a quick smile, her eyes sparkling.

A sweet rush floods through me. I can’t help but smile back.

We arrive at the table, set beautifully with white linens, shiny cutlery, and handwritten place cards. Kenzie and I are on the side closer to the fireplace near Mom, with Dev across.

Kenzie squirms out of my arms so she can climb into her seat, where someone extremely thoughtful has placed a sticker book and a box of animal crackers.

“Why don’t you sit on the end, Yvonne? And we’ll get a place setting for you,” Mamie says from behind me. Her French accent sometimes makes her voice sound stiff, but her tone is warm, as is the look she’s wearing.

Vonnie’s eyes turn troubled, as if she somehow feels unwelcome. But the exact opposite is true. I can feel the warmth my family is showing her, and it hits me that they want her here just as much as I do.

“Yeah, no sweat,” Dev says quickly, as if he’s sensed this too.

My chest tightens with a mixture of longing and joy, but there’s something tugging at my heart too. Maybe because it’s all so intense. Or maybe I’m fucking terrified.

In the split-second Dev turns to grab Vonnie a chair, I force a smile at her. “Everyone’s happy you’re here.”

She seems to relax. “Thank you,” she says, then settles into her chair.

THAT NIGHT we light a big bonfire down at the lake. We roast marshmallows for s’mores and the kids rehearse and perform short skits for the adults. A group of pre-teen cousins lip sync “Saturday Night Fever” donned in too-big vintage clothes from the thrift store in town, and way too much lipstick. I

laugh so hard my stomach cramps. Mamie teaches Kenzie a song in French that I remember her singing to me when I was little. It's the kind of night I wish we had more of, but there are only a few left.

Kenzie falls asleep in my lap, and Vonnie volunteers to take her back to the cabin.

"You sure?" I say, unable to separate the new Vonnie I know—the one who likes to take orders and deep throat my cock—with the thoughtful young woman lifting my daughter into her arms.

I watch her go, my conflicting, intense thoughts swirling in her wake.

I can't help but admire her strength. She's been through some difficult experiences. Not just Rundell, but losing her dad and witnessing her mom's mental health collapse. These would be enough to send anyone to the depths of hell and keep them there. And yet Vonnie's confident, and full of light and hope. How can someone who's been hurt by people sworn to protect her still be so full of joy?

I can't help but wish for some of that in my life. Is that what I want from her? To feel hopeful, alive? Or do I want to be the one to protect her once and for all, to be the one person she can count on to stand by her?

My stomach does a painful flip, making my diaphragm quiver.

Because I can't shake the desire to have both. With a sigh, I dismiss this stupid, selfish fantasy.

It's after midnight when the party starts to break up and people drift off to their cabins, until Dev and I are the only two left. He throws several logs on the bonfire, which ignite with a series of loud snaps and a shower of sparks.

Then he settles back in the Adirondack chair and crosses his ankles. With a sigh, he leans back and stares up at the sky, which is jam-packed with bright stars.

I offer him a beer from the cooler, and he accepts. Of all the things I miss about having my family spread all over the country, kicking back with my brother is the biggest.

"Trail ride tomorrow," he says as we tap our bottles. "I haven't been on a horse since I left Penny Creek."

"It'll come back to you," I say. "Just don't pull a groin muscle."

He grunts. "Are you riding pickup at the rodeo again?"

"Planning on it."

"Just stay away from narcissistic folk singers," he says.

"As if I need you to remind me," I say with a huff.

“Kenzie seems like she’s doing really good,” Dev says, then sips his beer. “You gotta take credit for that.”

“Thank you,” I say, and mean it. Of all the things I’ve fucked up in my life, that Kenzie isn’t one of them fills me with an intense pride.

A log shifts on the fire, sending out a spray of sparks.

“New ink, huh?” I ask, nodding at the fresh tattoo on his right forearm.

“Lost another friend,” he says, rubbing over the design.

“Shit,” I say with a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“She was a medic.”

My gut takes a dive. Dev had hinted that he’d met someone.

“She wasn’t even supposed to be on that patrol, but...fuck...it doesn’t matter now.”

“Sorry, Dev,” I say, my words insufficient.

I stare up at the stars. We both know there’s nothing else to say in this moment, so I just draw in a slow breath and hold it for an instant—an instant where I carry my brother’s pain alongside him—then let it go.

“Did you get orders?” I ask.

“*Nimitz* strike group. Korea probably.”

“How soon?”

“Another two months of shore duty, then we’ll deploy.”

“Shit, only two months? You just got back.”

He shrugs.

“Maybe it’s time you took me up on my offer,” I say, and sip my beer.

He scoffs. “And work with Dad? No fucking way.”

“He’ll retire eventually.”

“Rogue Valley isn’t big enough for both of us.” He glances at me, his features sharp in the firelight. “I seriously don’t know how you do it.”

When things went south with Gia, Dad stood by me and my decisions. He helped me navigate the challenges of legal separation and custody. Though the difference between that kind of support and my mom’s—who told me to move to Montana—is subtle, it meant the world to me.

“His heart’s in the right place,” I say.

“Dad’s heart shriveled up when Mom left,” Dev says.

My mom is very private, so I only know what I’ve pieced together. It’s easy to see their jobs causing friction between them. Though Mom worked for the D.A. prosecuting the criminals Dad put away, they clashed on many occasions. Dad’s an old-fashioned lawman who doesn’t work as hard

gathering evidence as Mom and her colleagues would like.

But in their core, they both believe in justice. Probably too much, at the cost of their relationship. I also suspect the contempt Dad has for the Morgans is linked to why my parents split, yet I can't figure out how.

Then Dev turns to me, his eyebrow cocked. "Speaking of hearts. You still got yours?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" I fire back.

"You two looked awfully happy when you showed up tonight."

Happy doesn't quite cover it.

"I like her."

"That's the problem," I say. "I like her too."

"I'll bet Dad had a fit when you hired her."

"Yep," I reply, stretching out my legs.

"And you told him to fuck off," Dev says with a grunt.

"Something like that," I say.

"He'd shit a brick if he knew she was more than your nanny," Dev says, giving the fire a poke with a thick, smooth section of driftwood. The logs shift, making the coals glow.

"He can shit as many bricks as he needs to," I say.

Dev releases a full, hearty laugh, his face turned up to the sky.

"Are you going to let it play out?" he asks with a curious glance in my direction.

I exhale hard, stretching my cheeks. The thought of sneaking around with Vonnie makes me ill. It's not that I can't keep a secret. It's that doing so will wreck me.

"Fuck, I don't know. There's Kenzie to think about."

"Kenzie's pretty smitten with her. Just like the rest of us."

"Kenz will be confused, though."

"So you'll help her understand. I get that you're protective, and you should be. But she's tough, and she loves you. You'll figure it out."

"There's something a little...delicate," I say as Dev's words echo through my mind. "I know some things about her, and they're kind of heavy."

His eyes darken. "Is she okay?"

That Dev would immediately go here is an example of why he'd be such a great cop. But it's also a reminder. I need to be cautious. The last thing I need is to leak Vonnie's secrets without her permission.

"She is now."

He gives me a pensive look. "So what's the issue?"

I gaze across the glowing coals to the glassy, black lake and the mountain silhouette rising behind it like sentinels. "I don't want to hurt her."

He chuckles. "Who are we really talking about here?"

"Don't," I warn.

"Why? Because you're chickenshit and you know it?"

With a groan, I stare up at the sky. "Chickenshit isn't the same as cautious."

"Whatever you say."

"Look, we both have reason to be wary, that's all," I reply. "I need to keep her safe."

"Don't go fighting battles you haven't been invited to."

"I need an invitation to protect the people I care about?"

"You do, actually," Dev says, his tone insistent. "Have faith in her abilities to ask for what she needs."

I release a long sigh. Dev is right. I haven't forgotten Vonnie's goal to make her own choices about her life, to go after what she wants.

But that requires trust.

Not just of Vonnie, but that dipshits like Owen Broderick leave her alone.

But I'm not in the business of trusting dipshits.

"Just don't wait for someday, brother," Dev says. "Someday usually means never."

I clench my eyes shut because what if my someday with Vonnie is right now, and it's all we'll ever have?

VONNIE

It's early when I hear Noah and Kenzie getting ready for their horseback ride. I declined their invitation so I could study, and also because being around Noah and his family in such an intimate setting felt like more than I wanted to tackle.

After dressing for comfort in a pair of shorts and a soft cotton halter that ties at the back of my neck, I join Noah and Kenzie in the kitchen as they get ready to leave. Kenzie gives me only a brief hug before dashing to the door to put on her boots. Noah gives me a secret caress across my bare low back, his touch warm and tender.

“Have a good morning,” he says.

“You too,” I manage.

He gives me a wink as he strides for the door.

Watching him walk away in those jeans and broken-in boots has me practically panting. It's not fair that he's leaving me in this state. Judging by the yearning in his eyes when he glances back from the porch, I'm not the only one struggling.

After they leave, I calm my fluttering heart with a series of deep breaths, then refill my coffee, pick up my neurology notebook, and head for the porch. I get halfway through a review of assessing neuro decline when I notice there's a page missing from my notes.

My notebook pages don't tear easily, and I like it that way. Spiral bound or perforated pages will tear loose from excessive use, so not a good choice because I use my notes repeatedly to study and review.

So where did this page go?

Staring out at the sandy beach edging the smooth water, I shuffle through my memories, then suck in a breath.

Owen.

He'd missed class this day, and begged me for a copy. The next day he showed up at my apartment, insisting I let him in, then insisting I loan him my notebook. That was when I knew something was off. I take impeccable notes, then go back and highlight and color code and put keywords in the margins and tabs on the pages for easy reference. In short, my notes kick ass and I don't just "loan" them out.

So I told him to get the missing day of notes from someone else.

Did he decide to take this page?

A chill pricks my spine.

I stand up and inhale a deep breath, trying to come up with any other possible explanation. Could the page have fallen out? I return inside, to my bedroom, and lay out all of my materials: my notebooks, textbooks, folders, my lab notes, flashcards, study guides, even my white board and dry erase pens.

I check every notebook and textbook, then double check my bag, even the hidden pocket against the back.

Nope. It's gone.

I grab my phone and return to the porch. I no longer have Owen's phone number and I've blocked him from all my social media accounts, but I could get his contact info if I wanted to.

Part of me wants to call him and chew him out. He obviously found a way to steal this page from me. That's what creeps me out the most. When did he go through my things? Did he snag it during lab when I was up at the bench collecting our materials? Or did he get into my apartment? There's a window in my kitchen too warped from decades of rain and repeated paint jobs to fully close.

My gut—now tight and fizzing—sends a painful rush of anxiety up my ribs, then to my face, which starts to buzz.

Take a breath, Von.

After filling my lungs, I step down from the porch. I'm barefoot and the sharp sand on my heels grounds me instantly. I walk toward the shore, stopping to bury my nose in a Ponderosa for a hit of sweet vanilla and to connect my senses with the rough bark and sound of the branches quivering in the morning breeze. The fear and anger melt away after several breaths. I

walk to the water's edge and immerse my feet in the chilly water.

From this little episode, it's clear I can't call Owen. And I don't have any proof that Owen took the page, so I can't call Assistant D.A. Fredrick Nordland for help.

But letting this go is harder than I want it to be. I'm angry at Owen for turning our collegial friendship into whatever wacky obsession he couldn't come to grips with. I'm angry that he didn't stop when common sense should have told him to. And yeah, I'm angry that he made me feel trapped and isolated.

Because I've been there before, and I fought like hell to get free of it.

I've been through enough therapy to know that this anger means I'm feeling threatened. That I need to create space. Set a limit and defend it. However, I've already created this with Owen. We went to mediation, he agreed to follow the guidelines presented by the mediation team, and as far as I know, he's stuck to them.

So what I'm experiencing is just a trigger—old fears that my body has been tricked into feeling are real. But it isn't real.

Owen is not here.

The threat is gone.

With one giant, forceful breath, I curl my toes into the sand and gaze at the mountains. Wyatt and Leah both encouraged me to take some time to myself on this trip. Though I have no intention of completing an open-water swimming marathon, maybe I'll grab one of the resort's cruiser bikes, and head to town. There was a gift shop I saw the other night with cozy hoodies and plushies and jars of local preserves. I haven't bought Annika a baby shower gift yet, and Dylan's been begging for huckleberry syrup.

With a sigh, I walk back into the cabin. I ignore my study materials strewn across my bed and slip on my sneakers. Then I grab my wallet and phone and head down the path.

GARNET FALLS REMINDS me a little bit of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. A glitzy ski town with fancy shops, yet deep Western roots, evident by the old hitching posts still in place in front of the grocery store and the row of elk antlers guarding an upscale bar and grill's entrance. The sidewalk's wide, weathered planks squeak beneath me as I window-shop my way down main street, ice cream cone in hand.

I pass souvenir stores selling cheesy t-shirts and hoodies and cowboy hats, a sandwich shop, a swanky women's clothing boutique, the pizza place Mamie and Papa took us to, an outdoor gear and clothing shop, and the small grassy square with a sculpted granite fountain and matching benches. Finally I find the gift shop. After polishing off my cone, I wipe my fingers clean on my napkin and step inside.

Shopping for my family makes me happy, so I indulge in a pair of footie pajamas for Leah's baby, the fabric a buttery soft cotton, plus a panda bear plushie for Annika and Grady, a jar of huckleberry syrup plus a crock of clover honey for Dylan, a pair of locally made ceramic mugs for Wyatt and Brooke, and a baby blanket and mobile for Annika and Grady's baby shower.

By the time the saleswoman is wrapping everything up, I'm practically giddy. Leah would snicker and call it retail therapy, but I'd rather call it gifting therapy.

On my way back to my bike, I decide to slip into the women's boutique. I've survived three days of reusing my one pair of underwear by hand washing them in my bathroom sink and letting them dry overnight, but maybe they have a cheap set of simple underwear, or a sale rack.

Soft rock music plays from the speakers and beautifully dressed saleswomen buzz around helping customers. It's the kind of shop where everything is pretty—a cute dress with a short, flared hem, a stylish cardigan in soft ivory, red cowboy boots, a case of funky jewelry that screams "I'm fun!"

A group of older women are shopping together, chatting and laughing, goading each other to try on clothes. They flip through the racks, lifting a shirt or a pair of jeans for a closer look, then either draping it over their arm or stuffing it back on the rack.

"May I help you?" a saleswoman asks me.

I break from sizing up the store and give her a sheepish smile. "Do you sell um, underwear?"

Her eyes brighten. She's a handsome woman in her fifties, her brown hair highlighted and glossy, with a pretty turquoise necklace hanging from her neck.

"Right this way," she says, and leads me to the left side of the store, where there's a small selection of bras and panties.

Pale blue with lace, white satin, soft pink. While pretty, they aren't exactly the everyday type I was hoping for.

But they look so soft and feminine. Sexy.

“Is this for a special occasion?” the saleswoman asks.

My neck heats. I imagine wearing a set like this for Noah. Something tells me he would like it. From the way my belly warms, I’m pretty sure I’d like it too.

“Um, not really,” I reply, forcing a breath all the way into my diaphragm.

The saleswoman gives me a wry smile. “A surprise, then.”

I press my lips together to keep my face neutral. “Yes, a surprise.”

“Do you need help with sizing?” the woman asks, pausing nearby as I scan the collection, my heart racing.

“No, thank you,” I say.

“I’m Marta if you need any assistance,” she says as a burst of laughter from the group of women across from us fills the store.

I turn back to my choices as the saleswoman moves in their direction. It’s not that I haven’t shopped for nice underwear before. There’s a big brand lingerie boutique in the University District, and most department stores have nice stuff.

But these aren’t department store brands. And the styles are not exactly meant for everyday wear. *Maybe that’s the point*, I decide. My stomach flutters as I carefully sort through the layers of silky garments.

I slip into the dressing room with my selections, the busy hum of the boutique fading as I shut the door. After setting down my bag from the gift shop, I slide off my shorts.

My underwear was still drying this morning, so I went without, which means I have a problem. Trying on underwear without the protection of the ones worn to the store is widely known as a rule one doesn’t break. Swimsuits come with a peel-off protective liner for extra safety, but underwear don’t. I’m torn—can I guess the size and style I’d need? Can I try them on over my shorts?

With a sigh, I put my shorts back on. As I’m debating what to do next, a voice outside the dressing room catches my attention because it doesn’t belong.

It’s a male voice—firm, but with a tension that tells me he’s not exactly in his comfort zone.

I freeze because I know that voice.

“Size? Uh, not sure,” Noah says.

“Is there a color she likes?” the saleswoman asks.

“Blue,” he says.

“How about a style? Bikini, brief, thong?”

There’s a pause. I can’t resist peeking out of my dressing room. When I do, Noah is standing five feet from the lingerie display, scratching his chin like he’s deep in thought while the saleslady stands next to him patiently, her focus locked on him.

“Maybe one of each?” Noah finally says in a low tone.

“Versatility. That’s very thoughtful,” she says with an approving nod, then folds three pairs of silky, pale blue underwear into her palm. “Would you like me to wrap them?”

Just then Noah looks up, the reply on his parted lips.

If I could capture one moment in time, this would be my choice. Noah’s flushed cheeks and awkward expression changes in a flash. His posture straightens, his eyes turn inquisitive, and his jaw clenches. It’s a look of yearning, of possession, and heat.

And he’s directing it at me.

“Yes, thank you,” Noah says to the saleswoman.

She gives him another nod before stepping toward the register.

Noah walks toward me, his lean frame moving with purpose. My pulse taps faster against my ribs and my throat goes dry. The humming in my belly rises to my neck and shoulders, making me tremble. I take a step back, but there’s nowhere to go. A thrill races over my skin.

Noah slips inside the room, filling the space with the scents of leather and sage, a combination that weakens my knees.

He eyes the underwear now clenched in my fist, then raises an eyebrow. “Looks like I’m a little late.”

I shake my head. “I actually didn’t try them on,” I say, my voice tense. A shiver rattles down my thighs, tugging at the ache building between them.

He cocks his head. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not wearing underwear,” I say.

I’ve never seen Noah act surprised—not in that interview room six years ago, not with Kenzie, not with bad news, changes in plans. Maybe it’s because he’s a cop, or maybe because he takes controlling his emotions to the extreme.

But the flash in his eyes and the playful arch to his eyebrow make it clear that I’ve managed to break through that.

Holy hell is it a turn on.

“Show me,” he says.

“What?” I reply, giving him a look.

“You heard me,” he says in that firm voice.

“This is a dressing room,” I hiss, staring him down.

He cocks his head, as if he’s got all day to wait for me to comply.

The ache between my thighs gives a needy pulse. With a breath for courage, I set down my bag and the fistful of satin, and unbutton my shorts. I lock eyes with him as I tug the hem past my hips, then drop them to the floor. The heat building at the base of my spine floods through me and I have to resist the urge to clench my thighs for a hit of contact.

Noah drinks me in, slowly.

His jeans now have a sizable bulge. I remember what his cock felt like in my mouth, and the way he lost control. And later, when he stroked himself while I bent over, wanting him inside me so badly. Another surge of need flashes through me, making my cheeks feel hot and prickly.

He nods at the pairs of underwear. “Let me see you.”

“If I do, I’ll have to buy them.”

His eyes glint. “How about you let me worry about that?”

“What if they don’t fit? That would be wasting money.”

“It’s not a waste to me.”

I lock eyes with him.

“Think of it as payback for my suffering,” he adds.

“What suffering?”

“A three-hour horseback ride with a raging hard on.”

I pinch my lips together to hold in my smirk. “Not sorry.”

Heat pools low in my belly, throbbing into the hollow between my thighs.

We stare each other down as several heated seconds pass. Then he leans against the wall and crosses his arms. Like he’s drawn his line in the sand.

Now I get to decide if I want to cross it.

As if that’s even a question.

I pick up a pair of the underwear and slide it on. The satin is cool and smooth against my hot flesh. The bikini style rides low on my hips, revealing plenty.

Definitely not for everyday.

I glance in the mirror and bite my lip. The pale blue fabric is pretty against my skin and the style is sexy, alluring. But paired with my faded cotton halter and my messy hair knotted at the nape of my neck, it’s like I’m

trying to be two people at once. The sexy temptress and the down-to-earth country girl.

Maybe that's what I like so much about Noah. He doesn't make me choose.

He steps up behind me, the thin cushion of air between us heating, pressing against my spine. I can't control my breaths—or my quickening pulse.

He stares at our reflection in the mirror, his eyes dark.

“You are so beautiful,” he says.

I expected him to say something sexy, or playful. This is intimate. Personal. It twists my longing into something deeper, almost painful. Emotions I don't understand rise up inside me, mixing with my desire.

He kisses the crook of my neck, his lips warm and tender, and cradles my hips.

Goosebumps prick my skin and draw my nipples tight inside my halter. What is this man doing to me?

He caresses over the silky fabric, heating my skin beneath, then locks eyes with me in the mirror. “Watch.”

VONNIE

A shock wave of desire pulses from low in my belly.
His cheek brushes my temple, his jaw tense as he gazes at me.
He traces the edges of the silk, his touch confident, erotic. The place between my thighs gives a tight throb.
“So soft,” he adds, and kisses behind my ear, his lips warm and plush.
Prickly heat races down my arms to the tops of my thighs.
Gently, he dips his fingers into the panties. He releases an appreciative groan. “So wet.”
My thighs tremble. If he keeps up this slow torture, I’m not going to be able to stay on my feet much longer.
He gazes at me in the mirror while kissing the crook of my neck.
“Think you can stay quiet?” he says in a low tone.
The knot in my core twists tighter. I don’t trust myself to speak, so I nod.
Our eyes lock in the reflection as he strokes me inside the panties. God, his touch feels good. The fear that we’ll be discovered only makes this hotter.
He kisses behind my ear, his tongue flicking over my skin while his fingers caress me perfectly. Watching him destroy me with such tenderness, such focus, starts to make the room swirl.
As if he can read my mind, he wraps one arm firmly around my waist and molds his body to mine. The tension in my core coils tighter and my heart pounds in my ears. Noah strokes where I’m needy and tingling, my desperation making it deliciously on the line between not enough pressure and too much.
I’m breathing fast and the room feels hot. I try to silence my whimpers,

which reminds me that outside this room, people are going about their day, oblivious.

The ache between my thighs intensifies, like a knot under strain. My legs start to quiver. I'm going to rattle right off the ground. My nipples feel ultra-sensitive, the fabric of my faded halter heightening the sensation.

The orgasm rises through me, forcing my hips into his hand, my mouth squeezed shut to contain my cries. Noah tugs on my ear with his teeth while scissoring my clit, and I come undone.

I lose all sense of where we are or what rules I'm supposed to follow as everything around me fades. Noah clamps a hand over my mouth as I go tumbling through this blissful space of not knowing or caring about anything but his touch, his breath in my ear, his strong body anchoring me.

When I'm completely drained, I slump against him, the back of my head resting on his shoulder as I try to recover my breath.

Slowly, Noah withdraws his fingers from the panties. He traces a line up my still-heaving belly, leaving a trail of my arousal, then lifts his fingers to his mouth.

His eyes close, as if to savor me fully.

Then he kisses me, his tongue invading my mouth. The taste of me mixed with the scent of sage and the warmth of his lips sends a pulse of sweet heat through me. I turn and wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back, my tongue dancing with his. He's breathing faster, his erection pressing firmly against my warm core. I rub the heel of my hand down him, over his jeans.

He exhales a firm breath.

"This feels urgent," I say, remembering how good he felt in my mouth. Knowing how good he will feel gliding slowly inside me, connecting to my deepest, most intimate place. Every fiber of my being tightens in unison, making me tremble.

"For the record, you asked for this," he says in a hoarse whisper.

"Noted," I say. "Now please, before I explode."

He unbuckles his jeans and slides them down. I rip off his t-shirt, then ditch my panties. He slips a condom from his wallet then rips open the package.

His cock is thick and full and gorgeous. I grip him, gliding my fingers down, over his crown to where he's hot to the touch.

He sucks in a breath and kisses me hard, then breaks away to roll on the condom, his fingers shaking. Then he's kissing me again and lifting me up. I

wrap my legs around him and squeeze. In the mirror, I catch a flash of movement, but then we're out of sight and he's pinning my back to the wall.

He reaches down, where the base of him presses against where I'm throbbing, and with a tilt of his strong hips, guides himself to my opening.

Anticipation floods into me, making my heart pound in my temples and my throat dry.

He gives me a tense look of fire and tenderness as he glides slowly inside me. The pressure is delicious, making me crazy even as his size threatens to rip me open. My insatiable ache pulses from deep inside me, begging for more of him.

"Noah," I gasp as he thrusts again, moving only as fast as I can take.

I tilt my hips to get closer to him, to welcome him all the way inside. He meets me with a firm drive that's so intense I release a tight cry, then clamp my lips shut.

"Fuck," Noah groans in my ear, kissing the crook of my neck as he withdraws only to push into me again in a slow but firm thrust. I wrap my legs tighter around him.

He cups my bottom and starts to pump, pressing me into the cold wall with each movement. I kiss him harder and squeeze him everywhere.

Noah slides a hand under my halter to grip my breast. "You feel incredible," he whispers, thrusting deep and firm. It's so good, the feelings so delicious, that my climax rises like a hot, white sun, blazing into the sky, basking everything with its intense, bright light.

I clamp my mouth on the edge of his ear to silence my cries.

Ripples of pure heat consume me as every little knot of tension snaps free. I grip him tight as the release ripples through me. Noah thrusts harder, faster, our breaths desperate.

He drives into me hard, his eyes dark, almost predatory. Holding me steady against the wall, he pulses inside me.

When his thighs tremble, he releases a shaky sigh, then falls against the crook of my neck and breathes, his fast exhales making my skin tingle.

Then he groans, so softly I barely hear it. "I need that again. Only slower."

I kiss his ear and whisper. "God yes."

Carefully, he withdraws and sets me on my feet. In one quick move, he's slid the condom into a bandana pulled from his jeans, and stuffs it into his back pocket.

Still dazed, my body still pulsing, I focus on the ground under my feet and the wall at my back.

Noah buttons up, then picks up my clothes and helps me slide them on. Then, his gaze so caring, he brushes the side of my face with a tender stroke of his knuckles, and lifts my chin so our eyes lock.

My core releases a tremble. I reach behind his neck and pull him to me for a slow, sensual kiss.

It's the only way I know how to express the longing inside me for more. For his patient, sensual touch, our bodies locked in rhythm.

He kisses me back, his lips tender where I feel bruised and swollen. With one last caress of his tongue, he steps back and scoops up my discarded panties, the white satin looking out of place in his rough, tanned hands. He presses the clump of fabric to his nose and inhales, his eyes closing in bliss.

Then he slips from the dressing room.

I stand there stunned, my heart zooming loose and blissfully free inside my chest. After several full breaths, I slide into my flip flops and gather my things. By the time I exit the dressing room, Noah is gone.

Unable to come down off my high, I walk to the post office and package up Dylan's goodies, adding a little note to let him know I miss him. The task grounds me, but when I click on my pen to address the box, my fingers are shaking. I inhale several deep breaths, but the simple ritual fails to ground me.

And maybe I don't want it to. Maybe I want to stay in this dreamy state of satisfaction. Because whatever Noah and I have started will come to an end—sooner or later. So maybe it's okay to enjoy being up in the clouds, while it lasts.

To surprise Leah and Annika, I decide to mail my gifts. By the time I'm handing over the tidy packages to the clerk, the lights are feeling too bright and the walls too close. I force a smile as I pay for the shipping and collect my receipt, then hurry out the door.

Outside, the late afternoon sun casts long shadows on the ground. I brace against the hitching post edging the boardwalk and huff a giant sigh, forcing my cheeks to expand to the point of pain.

My diaphragm tenses, drawing my core tight. Deep breaths aren't helping. I need to move.

The return route to the bike rack takes me past the center square. I pass one of the benches, my mind still in the clouds, when a person stands from

one of the benches.

My skin chills and my chest spasms in shock.

Owen gives me a bright smile. “Vonnie! Hey!”

I force in a steadying breath. *Stay calm.* “What are you doing here?”

“Checking on you.” He says this like it’s the most natural thing in the world, but it’s bullshit.

“You agreed to stop following me, Owen.”

His mouth twitches in annoyance. “I just needed to make sure you’re safe.”

“I don’t need you to keep me safe.”

“Because you work for a cop?” he says in a harsh tone.

“Stop,” I say in a firm tone while locking eyes with him. *Be clear. Be confident.* “I can request a restraining order. That would make it pretty difficult for us to work in the same hospital.”

Owen’s eyes glint. “Unless I already work there.”

“You...found out already?” I stammer.

“Provisional on me passing the NCLEX, of course.”

Shit. He already got a job at Children’s Hospital. “In the NICU?”

He nods. “You haven’t gotten your letter yet?”

“My mail is being forwarded.” I shut my mouth before I can give anything else away.

“I could put in a good word for you,” he says.

“No,” I snap.

His face changes from intimidating to calm so quickly, it makes my skin crawl. “Come on, Von,” he coos. “We’re a team.”

“Wake up, Owen!” I snap. “We had classes together. We did rotations together. But we *were never* a team. And we *never will be*. Stay away from me.”

He gives me one of his creepy grins, then shrugs. “See you soon.”

I walk past him. “And don’t call me Von.”

Fuming, I stride to the end of the block, then cross the street, wanting to put as much space between me and Owen as possible, as quickly as possible. At the next block, I look back, but don’t see him.

Did he follow me to Garnet Falls? Him bumping into me can’t be a coincidence.

With a deep breath, I force my racing thoughts to slow. It doesn’t matter how he found me. He didn’t threaten me or act aggressive toward me.

But he broke the pact we made. Now I'm sure he somehow got into my notes. Hell, has he been in the cabin? That would be just like him. Drive all the way here to get what his twisted mind thinks is justified—because we're "a team."

Crap. I don't want to impose a restraining order because it sticks my neck out too. And if what Owen said is true about already landing a position in the NICU, they'll just tell me to work somewhere else.

What's even more frustrating about this entire fiasco is Owen could be a very skilled nurse. He's smart and a quick thinker, which is probably what drew me to him initially. But he's lazy, and cocky. By the end of our second date, my internal alarms were blaring, and when he tried to kiss me, I did my best to let him down gently.

He acted fine with it. Aloof, actually, like he didn't care. But his body tensed.

A month later I found out he'd been talking to my friends to get my schedule, switched his lab section so we could be in the same one, and caught him outside my window at four in the morning.

At the bike rack, I take one more look around, but Owen isn't watching. After unlocking the bike and setting off, I use the motion of pedaling to churn out the last of my worries. There's nothing I can do about Owen right now. For the moment, he's holding the cards.

The paved path turns to pale sand, lined with thick blades of grass and swaths of brightly colored wildflowers. The work feels good in my body, and I pump harder, until I'm flying down the trail. Thoughts of Noah and our frenzied meeting in the dressing room return to my mind. I can't help but laugh out loud.

Who were those two respectable citizens going at it like maniacs?

After returning my bike at the lodge, I return to the cabin, relieved to find it empty. I'm sure my wildly fluctuating thoughts are clear on my face, and that's not something I can explain right now.

I hurry to my room, planning a quick swim in the lake to cool off and quiet my thoughts. Noah is likely at the pool with his family and Kenzie.

On my bed is a tan, rectangular box, tied with a white satin ribbon. My heart beats against my collarbone in sharp, painful taps. I take a step closer and blink, but I'm not dreaming.

There's a small card tucked under one of the lengths of ribbon on top of the box. I slide it out and open the little envelope, savoring the tingle of

anticipation coursing through me.

Wear these at your own risk

- N

I press the card to my heart, savoring the hunger in his words and the way they stir me up.

Does he have any idea how touched I feel by something so romantic and heartfelt? I wish he were here so I could tell him.

Or better yet, show him.

My core gives a sharp twist, my need spiraling tighter.

Carefully, I slip the satin bow free and open the box. Inside, tucked in pink tissue, are two pairs of satiny underwear, both a pale, sky blue—a bikini and a seamless thong. Underneath is a matching soft cup bra with a tiny rosebud bow at the center.

After laying out the garments on the bed, I hug myself tight. I imagine Noah peeling the silky bra and panties off of me inch by painfully slow inch until I'm bare and desperate for him.

The fantasy plays out in my mind as I put on my swimsuit and force myself to walk to the dock. I stride down the planks, past the canoe and paddleboat rental, past the handful of slips for motorboats, and jump in.

When Wyatt came back to Penny Creek to raise Leah and me, he made us join the swim team, which he took over coaching. I resented it at first. Practices were before school, forcing me out of bed before dawn. The pool was freezing cold. Wyatt was a hard coach.

But the team part was surprisingly fun. I got faster, more fit. Swimming isn't really a team sport in the usual way. A swimmer spends a lot of time staring down at that black line in the bottom of the pool, moving from end to end, alone in their thoughts. When I was upset, or frustrated, or needed space, I learned to rely on swimming.

Before I even know what I'm doing, I'm heading for the floating swim dock in the middle of the lake. My pace steadies, my breaths become even as I give into the work. Below me, the sandy lake bottom transitions to a dark, endless blue. The water turns colder, and the sounds from the shore fade into the distance. I stay alert for the sound of a motorboat but turn the rest of my

senses inward.

My heart feels fluttery, like I'm on a sugar high or flying down a roller coaster. The sweet ache inside me gives a little tug.

Is this lust, or something more?

I should want the answer, but I don't. I only want more of this high and Noah's promise of *much slower next time*.

Which means trouble is on the horizon. The kind that gets me hurt.

NOAH

Leaving that box on Vonnie's bed nearly tore me apart. I wanted to be there when she opened it. To see that light in her ocean-blue eyes catch fire. To touch her and caress her. To take my time. While I'm not regretting what happened in that dressing room, it's going to be my downfall because it wasn't enough. Not even close.

All afternoon I'm haunted by the memory of her hungry sighs and caresses. The way she was just as eager for me.

It makes trying to enjoy the afternoon at the pool with my family excruciating. My skin feels ready to split open and my mind is like a windmill, the blades spinning into a blur.

Which is fitting—I deserve to suffer. After all, I experienced the most erotic moments of my life, then had to walk away.

As if Vonnie is reading my mind, a message pops up on my phone.

Wear at my own risk, huh?

My stomach jolts. She must have found the package.

Yeah because I won't be able to keep my hands off you

And that's a bad thing?

I laugh. Then stifle it before Dev catches on and gives me shit.

If you want it slow, it might be

You wouldn't go back on a promise, would you?

She's got me there.

No

Then consider this foreplay

I laugh so hard I start choking, but fortunately at that same moment, Mamie shows up with a cooler full of crisp, sweet watermelon.

But eating it only makes me think of Vonnie's sweet pussy. I groan, not realizing that Dev is standing next to me.

"I'll have what he's having," Dev says under his breath, reaching for a slice.

"You wish," I warn, and toss my rind in the trashcan.

He takes a bite and wipes his face with the back of his wrist, his eyes bright with mischief. "Taking my advice, huh?"

I give him a look. "You don't know shit."

"Where did you go in such a rush after we left the stables?"

"Town," I say, my jaw so tight the word comes out like a bark.

He raises an eyebrow. "Alone?"

I look away and rake my hair with my hands, then realize I've just smeared watermelon juice into it. This only intensifies my craving for Vonnie, which makes no sense, yet I have no way of turning it off.

I want her near me, her body pressed close to mine. I want her under me, over me, on all fours welcoming every inch. I want her coming on my face, my fingers, my cock. I want to kiss every inch of her skin. I want to come hard into her mouth while she groans.

Damn it.

Dev takes a giant bite of his watermelon, slurping the juice as he chews. "What are you so afraid of?"

"The fuck?"

"Language!" Cora calls out from the other side of the grass.

I ignore her.

Dev tosses his rind into the trashcan before leveling me with a steely gaze. "Just do me a favor and when you break her heart, tell her at least *I* tried to fight for her."

"Who said anything about hearts?"

“So you’re just in it for the watermelon?” he asks, snagging another slice.

“We both are,” I say. “It’s called being consenting adults.”

“Whatever you say, big brother,” he says.

I play Marco Polo with Kenzie and her band of wild cousins, then I launch each of them so many times that my shoulders are screaming for mercy by the time they’re ready to quit.

We order hot dogs and French fries from the snack bar for the kids, then I bundle Kenzie in her towel and put her in my lap to keep her warm while she eats.

“I don’t want to go home,” Kenzie says after swallowing a bite of her hot dog.

“We’re not leaving yet,” I say, jiggling her on my knees till she giggles. “And remember what we have to look forward to?”

She squirms in my lap. “Rodeo! I’m a princess!”

I kiss the top of her head. For the first time, Kenzie gets to ride in the parade with her pony club, the Sawtooth Gems. They call their young lady riders “princesses” even though they’re not officially rodeo royalty. They dress up and put glitter on their horses and polish the bridles and leather to a high gloss.

I’m excited for her but also dreading the moment when she climbs up on Dixie, looking so grown up. It’s another of the many steps she’s taking toward independence, each of them moving her farther away from me.

“Is Mommy coming?” Kenzie asks.

My heart sinks. “Not sure yet.”

“Will you call her again?”

“If I can have a French fry.” I don’t tell Kenzie that Gia’s number has been disconnected. I have no idea how to get hold of her now. Her email inbox is apparently full too. That could mean that her career is keeping her busy. Or it could mean she’s flat broke and drifting.

It’s a fine mess, but at least it’s not mine anymore.

Kenzie dips a fry in ketchup and turns, aiming for my mouth. I snatch it like a shark, and she squeals with laughter.

While we wait for her cousins to finish their snack, I convince Kenzie to rest with me on a lounge chair. When Kenzie was little, I had many a nap with her on my chest. There was something so sweet about having her close to me. It would start out with us reading together, her tiny body tucked into the crook of my arm, and soon she’d be limp against me, her breaths heavy.

Exhausted, I'd close my eyes for just a minute.

So when I feel Kenzie's body relax and her breaths lengthen, I stroke her back. How many more of moments of having her close to me like this do I have left?

I watch Dev playing a game of hoops in the pool with our cousin Bryn's two boys. As if he can feel my eyes on him, he turns for a split second, his eyes boring into mine. His comment about breaking Vonnie's heart still rubs.

He's wrong. I'm not breaking Vonnie's heart, nor do I plan to. We're just having a good time. Dev can stand the fuck down.

Mom saunters over from talking with Mamie and Papa and Cora in the shade to the neighboring lounge chair where she's left her hat and towel.

She smiles at Kenzie as she settles into her chair and pulls on her hat. "Did we wear someone out?"

I rub Kenzie's back. "Looks that way."

Mom adds a layer of sunblock to her arms. "You're heading out soon, right?"

I glance at my watch. A night with my siblings has been on the books since day one—I won't see Dev for a year or more, and the three of us won't be together like this again anytime soon. However, my dick is strongly urging me to bail so I can make good on a certain promise.

I heave a frustrated sigh. "I've got five more minutes." I check on Kenzie, but her face is completely relaxed.

Mom gestures for me to hand Kenzie over. "I'll get her to your cabin when she wakes up."

"You sure?" I say just as Dev heads for the locker room. I'm his ride, so this is my cue.

"Of course. I gotta soak her up while I can."

Gently, I set Kenzie in my mom's arms, then adjust the shade umbrella so they're comfortable.

My chest tightens, seeing them like this, because I know Kenzie is going to miss her Grand-mère when we part ways. I will too.

"*Merci, Maman,*" I say.

She beams up at me, her eyes glistening. Then she waves me off. "*Vas y.*"
Now go.

I smile back, then hurry after Dev.

TOWN IS PACKED WITH PEOPLE, and parking proves difficult. I finally manage to snag a spot a few blocks from the town square.

It's a beautiful summer evening with golden light basking the peaks and the air refreshing and crisp. Dev and I leave my truck and walk toward the bar Cora picked out.

"There's a free concert in the park tonight," Dev says as we walk from my truck. "Don't worry, it's not Limelight."

I hadn't been thinking about Gia or her band. "Gia wouldn't lower herself to play at a free concert, not even in Garnet Falls."

"You hear from her?"

I shake my head. "I'm going to have to break it to Kenzie that her mom won't be there to watch her in the parade."

"Sorry, brother," Dev says, his jaw tight. "As hard as it's been, at least with her gone, she's not making promises she can't keep. That's worse."

"So I should thank her?"

He scoffs. "Hell no. But you can at least respect her clarity."

The bar Cora picked is one of those hip yet intimate places, with outdoorsy shit on the walls—wooden snowshoes and skis, a buffalo head, wallpaper with tiny fly fishermen and dark wood wainscoting.

Cora wanted her own wheels tonight, so Dev and I stroll to the bar for a drink while we wait.

We order our beers, and the bartender slides two frosty pint glasses into our hands.

Dev sips his. "I know she broke your heart, but it doesn't mean you need to keep everyone at arm's length."

"Wow, Dev. That's deep." I hunch over my beer. "And I don't keep everyone at arm's length. Just her."

"You sure about that?" The edge in his voice and the stern focus of his gaze hit me like a punch to my breastbone.

The din of conversation and music seems to rise to a fever pitch, and I force a deep breath. "Yes."

While my brother certainly sees through bullshit—especially mine—I'm not so jaded that I wouldn't consider having someone in my life.

But it would have to be with someone who planned to stick around.

Cora hurries over and pulls us both into a tight squeeze. "Yes! My two favorite guys. All to myself." She hails the bartender.

"I want all the dirt on Penny Creek. Does Dad have a girlfriend yet? I

heard rumors that Julia is marrying some billionaire? And what's this about reopening a murder investigation?"

She pauses to order her cocktail, then turns to me. "Well?"

"No, no idea, no comment."

She rolls her eyes. "You're no fun."

"I am too fun. I'm here, aren't I?"

"Wait, murder?" Dev asks.

I stare them both down while sifting through what I can share and what needs to stay in the vault. "Remember when that youth pastor went missing? And everyone thought he'd run off with some rich widow?"

Dev narrows his eyes. "The one who turned out to be a fucking scumbag?"

"Yeah," I reply. "His murder was never solved."

"Is there new evidence or something?" Cora asks.

Maybe it's that first beer going down like water, or maybe I'm preoccupied with thoughts of Vonnie, because I forget to mask my emotions, and my siblings are quick to pounce.

"What are you not telling us?" Dev asks, ordering another round.

I grunt. "Plenty."

"Okay, okay, we get it, you took an oath of silence or whatever," Cora says, waving her hand in the air. "Just tell me this. Who do you think killed him?"

"Oath of silence?" I say with a laugh. "I'm a cop, not a monk."

"I'll drink to that," Dev says, and he and I tap glasses, then drink.

"All right, point taken. Just let me know if I can help," Cora says.

I frown. "How?"

"Hello, what do you think I do all day at the governor's office? File my nails?" Cora says with a roll of her eyes. "I have contacts literally everywhere. Media, law enforcement, even FBI."

"But you're in Montana."

"So was this sicko before he came to Penny Creek."

I raise my eyebrow. "How do you know that?"

"It was in the Gazette. I followed their stories. Really well done series, by the way."

"Who's the true crime junkie now?" I reply and poke her in the ribs.

She goes completely red in the face, and Dev and I both laugh.

Cora turns to Dev. "Your turn. I hear you have orders back to Asia?"

We spend the next round getting caught up on Dev's ever-changing lifestyle with the navy. He tells us funny stories about his shipmates, the kids fresh out of boot camp he has to train, the high-level operatives his team supports. It's easy to see his pride in his work, and how strongly he believes in serving his country.

Finally, we're led to our table which is in the center of an outdoor courtyard. Tall, white birch trees strung with fairy lights give it that same hip yet relaxed vibe. The tables are adorned with candles and white linen and a stubby glass vase with tidy pink roses and pine sprigs.

As we sit, I finger one of the roses, imagining what it would look like tucked behind Vonnie's ear.

Cora's phone chirps and after checking the caller ID, she holds up her finger to us and steps to the edge of the dining area to take the call.

Dev and I study the menu while in the park across from us, a band is tuning up and testing microphones. The square surrounding the park is busy with passersby, but a steady stream of people are filing into the park.

It's not that I don't want to hang out with my sister and brother tonight, but I can't help thinking about spending it with Vonnie instead.

I know where we'd start the night. And I'm pretty sure I know where we'd end it.

"What looks good?" Dev asks, scanning the menu.

I try to read the selections, but it's impossible to focus.

Cora drops back into her chair, snapping me back to the patio.

"Sorry about that," she says in a rush. "Mom wanted to ask if she could use my room for the sleepover."

"What sleepover?" Dev and I both say in unison.

"I guess all the girls begged to stay together tonight, and Mom offered to host. Mamie and Papa are there to help."

"Kenzie too?" I ask.

"Pretty sure she was the ringleader," Cora says with a mischievous smile.

I shake my head, impatient. "What about Vonnie?"

"I think Mom gave her the night off? I'm sure she can use it to study."

Heat pools in my gut. Vonnie is at the cabin alone, studying?

Slowly, Dev sets his menu down, almost like he's stuck in the same daze.

Cora's eyes warm as understanding takes hold. "Oh, Noah. You and Vonnie?"

I grimace, and gear up for a fight.

But Cora slides her hand over mine, and when I meet her gaze, she's beaming. "That's just about the sweetest thing I've seen, like ever."

I slide my hand from under hers. "What?"

"That look on your face. Noah! You're lit up like a Christmas tree."

I glance at Dev, who jerks his chin. "It's true."

I close my eyes. Hell, has it been that obvious?

"You want to call her?" Cora asks gently.

Dev leans close and grips my shoulder, his dark eyes fixed on mine while his words rattle around in my head. *Don't wait for someday, brother.*

On the other side of the park, the band kicks off their set with a bluesy ballad. Fans are clustered on blankets in the grass, some brought camp chairs, and others are on their feet, dancing.

Our waiter stops by our table, but I barely hear her because there's someone in the crowd. She's swaying, her body fluid with the folksy beat. Her hair is tied back in a loose bun, revealing its many shades of honey-brown, and the slender curve of her neck. Her faded cutoffs seem to only accent her strong, lean legs as she dances.

Without another thought, I slide one of the delicate roses from our centerpiece and weave through the tables to the edge of the arbor. After vaulting over the low fence, I dodge pedestrians, then put my many years directing traffic as a county cop to use, staring down traffic so I can cross the street to the park.

The band has attracted more people, and the chorus draws more of them to their feet.

I didn't imagine her, did I?

Hurrying, I push through the crowd, avoiding blankets and chairs and clusters of people standing. Just when I think I get a glimpse of Vonnie, she vanishes. I keep weaving and side stepping, my focus locked on the group of people standing closer to the stage.

A new song starts. A duet. The woman's voice is complex and rich, a contrast to her partner's cleaner, earnest tone. I can't hear the words, but I can sense their shared joy in my bones. It only intensifies my longing.

Where is she?

Finally, I see her. Hips swaying, knees bouncing. She's completely lost in the music.

Fuck, she's gorgeous.

I take a step closer, but she still feels so far away, like I'm never going to

reach her. I force the tightness in my chest to relax with several deep breaths.

Just then she turns in a half circle, a bright smile on her lips.

She sees me, and gives a look of such delight, I can't help but laugh.

I step closer and she jumps into my arms. I spin her around and around, and then I take her face in my hands and kiss her.

It's soft and joyful, making us both laugh. I press my lips to her forehead and savor this moment, and then I take her hand so we can dance.

NOAH

Having her close to me again, with the warm evening air holding us tight and the sweet duet from the stage vibrating my bones is almost too much. I spin her, my chest to her back, and we sway, our bodies close. I inhale her wild rose scent all the way into my core.

I give in to the easy joy of dancing with her, leading her in steps our bodies seem to already know and understand. She moves like water and smiles like the sun. I can't help but smile back, my eyes locked on hers as we move. In this moment, there is only room for us, sharing something genuine.

When the final chord of the song rings out, I spin her to me and cup her beautiful face. She looks up at me, her eyes sparkling and earnest. A powerful rush of desire and sweet surrender overtakes me. It's too good. Too powerful to resist. So I don't.

I kiss her again. Her lips meet mine, soft and warm. Welcoming and hungry. Like she's been waiting for this kiss all night. I tug on her bottom lip, and she gently bites mine back. I flick my tongue against hers. She tightens her grip on my waist.

Applause for the music drowns out the furious beating of my heart in my throat as I kiss her again, needing more of her sweet sighs, her playful tongue. Her breaths are coming faster, each inhale bringing her soft breasts close to my chest. Arousal pulses through my bloodstream at the thought of laying her down in the grass and undressing her, taking my time to pleasure every inch of her until she's so desperate and wild with need that there's nothing else in the world to her except my touch.

A new tune kicks off from the stage, and we break away, breathing hard. I

kiss her forehead and she holds me tight.

“Why didn’t you call me?” I ask in her ear.

She kisses the crook of my neck, her lips gentle, but she’s trembling. “You were with your family.”

The memory of Dev’s *don’t wait for someday* nearly brings me to my knees. I get a whole night—one long, uninterrupted night. Does she have any idea what a gift this is?

“They’ll understand,” I manage.

“Noah, are you sure?”

I try to settle my raging blood with a steady breath, but I’m halfway to crazy, and it comes out shaky. “There’s only one person I want to be with tonight.”

Vonnie grips the back of my neck and pulls me to her for another kiss, this one desperate. I cup her ass and urge her closer, bringing her soft curves against my erection. If I don’t get her out of here soon, I’m not going to be able to walk.

“One more dance,” I say, barely able to get out the words.

She sighs against my cheek.

I nibble the edge of her ear as we sway, our bodies in sync. “And then I’m taking you home.”

“Okay.”

I take her hand and twirl her, my gaze locked on hers. The music fills my senses and the colors around me fade to a blur of blues and greens. I pull her close and spin her away, our feet light on the grassy field, like we’re dancing on a cloud. She moves with grace and confidence but her eyes are tense with desire.

The song ends and I twirl her slowly into my arms. Our bodies press close, both of us breathing hard. I kiss her once, gently, then I take her hand and lead her through the crowd. By the time we reach the edge of the park, it takes everything I have not to break into a run.

There’s no need to rush, yet even with this gift of time, it’s not going to be enough.

At my truck, I open her door and help her in, then practically fly around to my seat. Once I’m behind the wheel, I tug her close and place her hand on my thigh so I can caress her slender fingers while I drive. The knot of ache inside me ratchets tighter.

I drive with total focus while caressing her fingers, my blood pounding

like thunder inside my skull.

Entering the resort, I gulp the zesty, fresh air coming off the lake to keep from combusting. When I turn up the narrow lane to our cabin, I catch a glimpse of Vonnie's profile. Her face is tense and she's biting her lip. She catches me looking, and gives me a sly grin, and then we're both laughing.

I park and hurry around to her side, but before she can jump down, I flip her over my shoulder, my hand on the backs of her bare thighs.

"Noah!" she shrieks, laughing, and tries to wriggle free. But there's no way I'm letting her go.

I unlock our door and set her down inside. The last glow of the sunset casts a pale, soft light into the cabin. Vonnie's pretty in any light. But I've never seen her more beautiful than she is right now.

She lifts her face to me as I lower to kiss her. Our lips lock in a sensual embrace, and I give a little tug. She kisses me back, her gentle tongue flicking against my mouth. I swirl deep into her mouth, and she makes a low, needy sound from the back of her throat.

I lift her into my arms. She gives a squeak of surprise but grips my waist with her thighs and clasps her hands behind my neck as I set off down the hall to her room.

I find the doorway by pure instinct and shut the door with my heel, then carry her to the bed and set her on her feet. We kiss again, the sound of our hungry lips and quickening breaths filling the room. I lift the hem of her shirt and she raises her arms. After tossing her shirt aside, I kiss the crook of her neck while stroking over the silky fabric of her bra. It's the one I picked out, with the tiny satin rosebud at the center. I rub her nipples with my thumbs and devour the sweet salt on her skin.

"I'm going to do such dirty things to you, sweet girl," I say, sliding her bra straps down.

She groans. "I'm counting on it."

"Stop me if it's too intense," I add, giving her nipples a gentle pinch over the fabric of her bra.

She tilts her hips toward me. "Okay," she breathes.

I kiss past her collarbone and follow the edge of her bra past her left breast. She's so soft, her nipple taut and warm in my mouth. I swirl with my tongue. She sucks in a gasp, her grip tightening on my waist. I peel the other side of her bra down and lavish the other breast with the same attention.

Breathing fast, Vonnie strokes down the front of my jeans. My dick

throbs, drawing my core tight.

I unclasp her bra and slide it from her shoulders, then yank off my shirt. Our lips crash together as I pull her close, her nipples brushing my bare chest. She wraps her arms around my neck, rising on her tiptoes to get closer to me. Gently, I stroke her breasts, savoring her needy breaths and the way our bodies connect, the heat from her skin radiating into mine.

Could she be any more perfect?

I unbutton her shorts and slide them off, then cup her ass to bring her closer. Her soft, warm center presses into where I'm throbbing and so full I'm going to burst. Our kisses turn fervent as I hold her against me, throbbing so hard the only thing I can think about is sliding deep inside her.

She slides my belt free and unbuttons my jeans, her movements rushed. I let her slide everything off, her fingers so delicate.

"I want you in my mouth," she says, kissing down my chest.

I shift her to the edge of the bed and step between her thighs.

She looks up at me, her eyes tight with yearning. And then she plants a soft kiss on my hipbone and wraps her fingers around me.

I groan as she kisses along the plane of my stomach, then sucks my tip, her wet, silky mouth wrapping tight around me. Her eyes flutter closed as she slowly glides down. I comb my hand into her hair and arch to meet her.

"Baby," I groan as she pumps back, then down again, taking more this time. I watch her closely for signs that this is too much.

But she grips my thigh and swirls with her tongue.

"Your mouth," I grit out. "Fuck."

She glides down, and I comb back her hair again, urging her on while trying to contain my desire. The beast inside me wants to ravage her pretty mouth, but the urge to protect her is stronger.

"Touch yourself," I say as she glides up.

"What?" she says, and gives me a curious look.

I raise an eyebrow. "You heard me, sweet girl."

She presses her lips to the plane of my stomach. I caress her nipple. Her lashes flutter closed and she huffs a needy groan.

"Show me what you want me to do to you," I say.

She hesitates, but I give her nipple a firm caress, then gently squeeze with my finger and thumb. A shudder passes through her. Slowly, she dips her hand into her panties.

"That's it," I praise, then guide my cock to her lips. She opens, and I

watch her mouth stretch around me.

Inside her panties, her fingers move up and down, caressing. I'd like to give the show more of my attention, but her mouth is driving me insane.

I glide slow and deep into her mouth as she fingers her pussy, the motions completely driven by her need. My balls tighten as she groans.

"I'm going to come in this sweet mouth," I say, thrusting as she slurps to keep up. "Pinch me if it's too much."

She flattens her palm to my thigh, as if to signal that she's with me all the way. That she wants this too only makes this more intimate, more perfect, and I can't hold on any longer. I grip her hair as my orgasm rips through me. I slow, savoring every delicious jolt of joy lighting me up, until I'm pulsing hard into her mouth.

With a groan, I slide out of her.

"Lie back," I say, and lower to my knees. I tug her panties down and kiss up her inner thigh, parting her open for me.

My first taste sends my blood racing, and I groan. "You need me right here, don't you, girl?"

"Please," she pants.

I glide two fingers inside her as I take her clit between my lips.

Vonnie jolts beneath me and gives a soft cry.

Fuck, she's wet. Silky and warm and ready for me. I pump her and tempt her with my tongue. She grabs my hair with one hand and the edge of the bed with the other.

"Noah," she cries.

I stroke the tender place inside her while sucking just hard enough that she arches to me, consumed by her need.

She comes in a series of tight cries, rocking with me, her grip stinging my scalp, but I relish the pain. Nothing could stop me from giving her what she needs right now.

When her thighs quiver with aftershocks, I withdraw my fingers and part her thighs wider.

Vonnie is panting, still lost in her release, so she doesn't object until I give her pussy a firm, slow lick.

She gasps. "Noah, I—"

I glide again, with just enough pressure. "I'm not done."

A whimper escapes her lips. She tries to grab my shoulders, but I gently guide her hands to the edge of the bed.

She groans in anguish. “I can’t help it.”

“Then I guess we’ll need to remove the temptation,” I say, and scoop my belt from the floor.

Her eyes widen as I lift her to the middle of the bed and guide her hands to the headboard.

“I can use this or not,” I say, setting the belt next to her.

“I’m not sure I can be trusted to keep my hands to myself,” she says, her eyes bright with desire, and that hint of mischief I’m growing to love.

“That *is* a problem,” I reply with a grin, sliding the belt around her wrists, using the headboard slats as an anchor. I make sure they’re secure but not too tight. I don’t want to hurt her.

Then I kiss down her body, moving slowly, my cock quickly pulsing to life. I swirl my tongue around her nipples, lavishing each with my attention, then part her thighs and return to my slow, firm strokes, using just my tongue. She arches to me, which shifts the restraints on her wrists.

She pants faster, her core trembling.

“Give me all of you, baby,” I say, caressing her soft, plush pussy with my thumbs before delivering another slow, sensual stroke from my mouth.

She needs it firm but not rushed, so I glide at her pace, my body focused on reading her cues. I grip her thighs and wrap my mouth on her clit. I can sense everything drawing tight, tighter, her core so tense, like a knot. Her gasps turn frantic, her hips trembling. I suck her clit hard, teasing with the edge of my teeth, and she comes unhinged.

Her thighs press against my hold and her back arches off the bed. The raw taste of her as she comes, her body completely at my mercy, imprints in my senses. Tonight isn’t going to be enough for me. Not even close.

But I refuse to think about that when she’s trusting me so beautifully, her cries tearing up the silence. Because what matters is right now—this moment blending perfectly into the next. I won’t think about what is waiting for us after that.

Fuck yes, this is our someday. Nothing is going to keep me from enjoying it.

Vonnie collapses onto the bed, her body limp. I kiss my way up her warm, smooth belly, then slide my belt buckle free and roll her onto my chest while she recovers.

With a gentle brush of her hair to the side, I stroke down her back. She shudders.

After thinking about her nonstop, after tasting her, kissing her, savoring her smile and her strength and desire, I can't wait another minute to be inside her.

As if she's reading my mind, she caresses my chest, and her hips give a subtle roll, adding pressure to where I'm painfully, achingly hard. I'm about to dash to my room for condoms when she slides one from a box in her nightstand drawer.

I caress her face in admiration because hell yes do I appreciate a woman who is prepared.

Straddling me, her face tense with yearning, Vonnie peels the package open then slides the condom down my shaft.

"Come here, baby," I say, and guide her hips to me.

Her eyes tense as I slowly sink inside her.

For as long as I live, I will never forget the way this feels—her plush heat and the tremors rolling through her as our bodies connect—or the tenderness and desire in her eyes.

"Noah," she whispers as everything falls away, leaving nothing between us.

I roll my hips to give her every last inch. "I'm here, sweet girl."

VONNIE

I wake to the sound of wind in the trees outside Noah's window. It's still dark, probably very early morning. Next to me, Noah is on his back, sleeping, his silent breaths deep and relaxed. One arm is bent behind his head, the other resting on his stomach. I take a moment to admire the edge of his jaw and his soft mouth. A mouth that kissed me tenderly, hungrily.

His shoulders are curved and strong, but lean like every other muscle group in his body. I study the tattoo on his right bicep. He doesn't talk about his time in the military. Was it navy, like his brother? I wonder where he was stationed. I get the feeling he left because of Kenzie. How does he feel about that? He seems to enjoy his job now, but does he miss the freedom he once had?

Will I ever know his secrets?

As if Noah feels me watching, his eyes flutter open. Then he pulls me to him, wrapping his arm around me, and sighs.

The warmth from his body spreads through me, the strength and tenderness of his embrace making me feel safe and cherished.

But we should probably part ways. Before the morning, and Kenzie's return.

Before I fall any harder for Noah Tucker.

"I don't want to leave," he says with a soft groan, like he's thinking the same thoughts.

"I don't want you to, either," I say.

With a sigh, he kisses the top of my head. "A little longer, then."

I WAKE with sunlight on my face and an empty bed. Noah left some time ago for brunch at the lodge with his family. With a lazy sigh, I haul myself to the shower.

Too keyed up for studying, I grab my phone and a banana and head out for a walk. The morning air has that fresh crispness and the scents of minerals and pine. It's so pretty here, and peaceful. Why doesn't Penny Creek feel that way? It's just as pretty. Maybe because having my family near makes it less peaceful, though I love having them close. Is it Noah? Here in Garnet Falls, he's less guarded. He laughs more. Smiles more.

I'm queuing up my playlist when Wyatt calls.

"Miss me that much?" I say.

He huffs a sigh, and I imagine him pacing inside his office at the Gazette. "Are you studying? I don't want to interrupt."

"I'm taking a walk before I get started, you know, clear my head," I say, then wince. When I'm keyed up, I overshare.

"You doing okay?"

Crap. I've triggered his big brother alarm. "Awesome, actually. What's up?"

"There's a team of true crime podcasters in town, asking questions about Jonas Rundell," he says, his voice tense.

I refuse to let this conversation burst my happy bubble. "I overheard them talking in the Bear."

"They think the truth about his murder was buried on purpose. They've interviewed me twice and I know they've been pestering the police for information and access to files.."

Of course, Noah would help them. It's his job.

"Will they get it?" I ask.

"That's my worry. There's a chance they could find out about you."

My gut lurches, but I gulp a deep breath of cool, morning air. "Yeah, I've thought about that."

"They won't learn it from me, but your name is in the case files."

"I understand," I say, and pause to close my eyes and ground myself. This exact scenario used to keep me awake at night. It's the reason I kept Rundell's secret for so long. I thought people would look down on me, or worse, pity me. But years of therapy, an amazing first boyfriend when I was nineteen, and the experience of sharing my secret with Noah helped me let go of that fear.

However, if the team of podcasters get Rogue Valley Sheriff's department to reopen the Rundell murder case, things between me and Noah could get even more complicated.

"Just remember that they have no power to make you divulge anything you don't want to, okay? Don't let them intimidate you."

I try to squeeze some of Wyatt's kindness from the phone line. "Right. Thanks for the heads-up."

"Welcome."

"I got you rodeo tickets," he says in a lighter tone. "I think all of us will be there. Even Dylan's going to make it."

A joyful hum vibrates through my chest. I haven't seen Dylan since the Suns played in Seattle last February.

"Are you coming home tomorrow night, or are you staying at Noah's?" Wyatt asks.

The question jolts me back to the conversation.

"Not sure yet," I reply. Technically, Noah doesn't go back on shift until Sunday night. There's no reason for me to stay with him.

It's troubling that I want to.

"Okay, see you soon," Wyatt says. "Love you."

"Love you too," I reply, and end the call.

I FORCE myself to study while Noah and his family share one last hurrah at the pool, but my mind keeps drifting. If Rogue County Sheriff's Department reopens Rundell's murder case, how will I feel?

Leah's fears that our dad was somehow involved rise to the surface.

But Wyatt flat out told us Dad wasn't anywhere near Rundell or that mine that weekend, and I believe him.

However, if these podcasters discover my connection to a murder victim, and that it's been hidden all these years, they'll chase me down with a pitchfork.

Wyatt's reminder about my right to refuse involvement returns to my thoughts. He's right, and yet wouldn't that make me look like a coward?

Noah comes strolling up the path, whistling, then spots me sitting on the porch with my books in my lap, and races up the steps. His tanned, earnest face is so handsome. He looks so relaxed, so carefree.

Will that all go away when we return to Penny Creek tomorrow and he's

back to carrying the world on his shoulders?

“Your presence has been requested at dinner,” he says, dropping sideways onto the lounge chair next to me.

“But it’s the last night with your family,” I protest.

He raises an eyebrow. “Everyone wants you there.”

“Okay, but only if you ignore me,” I say.

He laughs, then takes my hand and lifts it to his lips. “No chance of that.”

My heart flutters. Though I should be using tonight to get caught up on studying, I’m glad for the opportunity to soak up the last bit of warmth from his family.

He steals a quick kiss, then bounds down the steps. “See you at five. Mamie and Papa’s cabin,” he says over his shoulder before disappearing into the shadows.

Just as I expect, the evening passes in a blur of laughter and stories and good food.

When I say goodbye to Noah’s sister, she holds me tight.

“It’s been such a pleasure, Yvonne,” his mom says, her hug brief but warm. “*Bonne chance* with your nursing boards and the job search.”

“Thank you,” I say, my stomach clenching. My nursing boards are three weeks away, and though I’m confident I’ll be ready, it’s always served as the end point of my summer in Penny Creek.

Now, for sure it’ll be the end of me and Noah.

By the time Noah and I leave the party, it’s nearly midnight and I’m so tired that my legs are heavy and my eyelids feel like they’re made of sandpaper.

“I don’t want to go home, Daddy,” an exhausted Kenzie whines as he scoops her up.

Noah says something softly to her in French, rubbing her back. She wraps her arms around his neck and rests her cheek on his shoulder. I’m pretty sure that she’ll be asleep by the time we get to the cabin.

Soft waves brush the lakeshore, and a gentle coolness settles in the air as we walk the path, the sand crunching beneath our feet. Just as I expected, Kenzie’s body has gone limp against Noah, her face completely relaxed.

He reaches for my hand, and we walk in silence to the cabin.

“I don’t want to leave either,” he says in a soft voice. “I need a time machine.”

“But then we wouldn’t get to see the future,” I say, giving him a curious

look.

He smiles, but it's tight.

We climb the steps, then I hurry ahead of him to open the door. He pauses to grip my hand one last time, this time bringing my fingers to his lips for a silent kiss.

"Goodnight, Vonnie," he says, then continues down the hallway.

I stand there, my emotions building inside me like a storm. Then I force my legs to move.

But once I'm in bed, sleep eludes me. I know why, but I'm not ready to confront it.

I text Sasha.

You awake?

Just getting home. You okay?

Hmm, how to answer this.

I'm trying to figure that out

Ah. Eventful week, eh?

You could say that

And now you don't know what's going to happen

Exactly

What do you want?

I almost laugh because he's making it sound so simple.

To have more time

What's stopping you?

Plenty

It's okay to not know all the answers

I sigh and cradle the phone. This is one of the biggest reasons why Sasha is one of my best friends. He's better than Prozac.

Love you

Let's dance soon, yeah?

I laugh.

You know it

WE LOAD our things in Noah's truck after a quick breakfast, then Dev stops by our cabin for one last goodbye, his bike's throaty purr echoing through the woods.

I go back inside the cabin for one last sweep, and to get Kenzie. But she doesn't answer my call.

Standing still in the middle of the room so I can listen, I call out again. No answer. So I search my room, peering under the bed and in the closet. Sometimes, Kenzie likes to play hide and seek. Maybe this is a way for her to prolong our departure.

I move to the living room and kitchen, but there's no place for her to hide. Her room is empty, but when I enter Noah's bedroom, I sense her.

"Kenzie," I say quietly.

I hear a faint crinkling of plastic. It's coming from the other side of the bed. When I round it, Kenzie is sitting on the floor, curled tight into a ball, her back tucked against the corner created by the headboard and wall. Next to her is an almost empty bag of marshmallows, which she seizes, her eyes afraid.

"There you are," I say in a kind voice. I smile but don't approach. "Your uncle is outside. You want to say goodbye?"

"Is he going to die?" Kenzie asks. Her trembling lips are dotted with white bits of marshmallow.

I settle on the floor facing her. Death is a tricky concept for a six-year-old. One thing I can't do is lie to her about it. "Are you scared he will?"

She nods.

"I'm scared too."

"You get scared?"

"Yeah," I say. "Marshmallows help, though."

She gives me a look, like she's not quite sure if I'm being sincere.

“Daddy says they’ll make me sick,” she says, fingering the bag.

“Your daddy cares about you.”

Kenzie doesn’t respond.

“Do you think Uncle Devy will be sad if he has to leave without one of your hugs?”

She gives me a solemn nod.

“Should we go give him one?” I say, and extend my hand.

Kenzie takes it, her skin sticky against my palm. We walk slowly from the room. She’s left the marshmallows behind, but I’m still troubled.

Saying goodbye must be extra tough for Kenzie because of the way her mom isn’t in her life. I understand completely. Eating marshmallows to feel better isn’t a terrible coping mechanism, but her attempts to keep it a secret is a red flag. And there’s the possibility that Kenzie wants to get sick. Maybe for extra attention. Maybe she thinks it will bring the kind of nurturing she craves from her mom.

Ugh. That’s so hard. Because it’s pretty obvious Gia’s not interested.

Outside, Kenzie latches onto Dev like a koala bear.

He closes his eyes and holds her tight. “See you soon, tiger. Take care of your dad.”

She holds him a moment longer, then he sets her down. Noah scoops her up as Dev gives me a secret wink. “Don’t be afraid of a little trouble.”

Noah is busy making Kenzie giggle, so I smile back.

Dev slides on his helmet and leather jacket, then mounts his bike and starts the engine. He gives us a nod before heading down the drive.

Noah’s eyes are glassy when the silence settles. “I guess it’s time for us to go, too.” He eyes me. “Ready?”

Sasha’s words repeat in my mind. *It’s okay to not have all the answers.*

But I’m not scared of the unknown.

I’m scared of what I want.

NOAH

Leaving Garnet Falls means the fairy tale I've been living in for the past week is over. I'm kicking myself for not enjoying it more, for not being able to slow down time. I'm going to miss them all, especially Dev. But I'm going to miss Vonnie and these carefree days the most.

Even though it's a foolish fantasy, I meant what I said about a time machine. I would live this week all over again just to savor the sweet moments, the shared laughter, the slow kisses, the spark in her eyes when she looks at me.

But I can't go back in time.

To prevent myself from reaching for her hand, I grip the wheel.

How did I get myself into this mess?

Vonnie and Kenzie are busy with Road Trip Bingo for the first hour, then we listen to an audiobook about a boy who lives on the moon with his family, something Vonnie turned us onto. I try to focus on the story, at least for a distraction, but I'm too torn up inside.

Because I don't want things to change.

The easy freedom I had in Garnet Falls is gone. Vonnie's tenure as my nanny is ending. Where do we go from here?

This feels a little too familiar, and it pisses me off.

Gia lied and manipulated me. I tried to love her, but she went after her dreams instead of trying to love me back.

I'm being unfair. Vonnie's been clear about her goals from the start.

And I respect that about her. She's shooting for the stars—despite facing huge challenges. I want her to fly.

But rooting for her to achieve her dreams means I'm also rooting for her to walk out of my life.

By the time we enter Rogue Canyon, there's a prickly, hot itch between my shoulder blades. I try the air conditioning, the windows down, counting backwards. I squirm in my seat, but the itch is embedded in my skin.

After Yankee Fork, we pass the Bitterroot. My chest gives a tight ache, and I grimace.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Vonnie watching the entrance through the window with a longing in her gaze.

"You don't have to move out," I blurt.

She gives me a wary look. "Uh, what?"

"I mean we don't have to change, um, our arrangement."

Now she's confused. "I thought Lisa was coming back?"

"Lisa's coming back?" Kenzie pipes up from the back. "Today?"

"Friday," I say, my voice stern, even though I don't mean to scold her.

"Aw," Kenzie whines.

"Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll just go home," Vonnie says.

I nod, then turn up Cold Springs Road.

"Will Lisa see me in the parade?" Kenzie says.

"I'm sure she will," I reply.

Nearing Vonnie's driveway, I have that same overwhelming need to slow everything down—my wheels, my unsettled thoughts, my galloping heart. But her driveway appears and I turn down the narrow, sandy lane. Tall pine and spruce stand like soldiers, and I can't shake the sense of hostility.

Maybe the hostility is all mine, because leaving Vonnie here feels wrong.

After I pull up to the house, Vonnie jumps out before I can even get unbuckled. "Thanks for everything. See you tomorrow."

Our eyes lock for an instant. Then she reaches for her bag and shuts the door behind her.

"Wait," I say, and hurry from the truck.

Vonnie turns as I catch up to her. Though I'm aware that we're on her turf, I'm tempted to pull her close and hold her until her body relaxes, and then kiss her, my lips telling her what my words can't.

"Come riding with us tomorrow," I say.

Her eyes search mine. "Horseback riding?"

I smile. "I could use the help. Kenzie's going to ride Dixie solo."

"Gosh, I haven't been on a horse in years," she says, but I can see the

curiosity on her face.

“We’ll pick you up at ten, okay?”

She exhales a slow breath. “Okay.”

After she’s climbed her porch steps, I walk back to my truck.

“Bye, Vonnie!” Kenzie calls out as Vonnie opens her front door.

Vonnie gives a little wave at Kenzie. Then she slips inside.

I put the truck in gear and drive back down her long driveway, my eyes fixed on the Morgan’s big house in the rearview mirror. Maybe I’m hoping for a glimpse of her from one of her windows.

But the house gets smaller and smaller, and then I’m turning down Cold Springs Road again, taking the house from sight.

Driving through Penny Creek’s busy streets feels surreal. Everything is familiar, yet it’s like I’m seeing it with different eyes. I love this town, the mountains, and the life I’ve built here. I love the bite of fragrant sage in the air, the sound of crickets in the dark, the cloud shadows drifting over the bare, green foothills. I love our August thunderstorms, our snowy, cold winters. I love the shimmery sound of the aspen trees in the wind, the copper scent of the rivers.

So why do I have nerves running beneath my skin like an electric current?

Is it because I miss my family? Or because I now have to go back to compartmentalizing my feelings for Vonnie?

It’s probably both.

At the house, I park the truck. The finality of it sinks further into my bones. After lifting Kenzie down, I grab a few bags before walking through my gate to my front door. The grass is too long and the house looks dark, but I know that’s not the reason for the heaviness in my chest.

Once inside, Kenzie races off to her room. I drop my load in the living room, then return to the truck.

A car starts at the end of the block, then drives slowly to the stop sign. In the short pause before the driver turns, I get a flash of his profile—young Caucasian male, thin brown hair.

Then I notice the Washington plates.

The car disappears from sight, but I stand still, unable to shake the feeling niggling my gut.

Was that Owen Broderick, casing my house?

The idea is ridiculous, but my apprehensive thoughts won’t turn off. With a grimace, I call Linnea.

“Welcome back, Deputy,” she says. “We’ve missed you around here.”

By that, she likely means I’m the only one who can keep the Sheriff from carpet bombing his crankiness all over the station.

“Can you run a plate for me?” I ask.

“Go ahead,” she replies.

I rattle off the numbers. “Washington state.”

Linnea types, then says, “Justin Blanchard, age twenty-five. You want his address? Looks like Seattle somewhere.”

“No. Thanks,” I say

“Sure thing,” Linnea says. “I’m off tomorrow, but I’ll see you Monday.”

“Sounds good,” I reply, staring down my street while the adrenaline drains from my bloodstream.

To reassure myself further, I take a quick inventory of my house, checking doors and windows, the alarm system. I pace the perimeter, looking for footprints in the grass. But there’s nothing here.

My phone pings with a message. It’s from Vonnie.

Call me when you can talk

The fear that Owen is in town rushes back. He could be at her house right now.

After checking on Kenzie, who is playing with her stuffed animals in the loft, I head to the back porch and settle on the edge, my bare feet soothed by the cool grass. Pale green foothills draw my gaze upwards to the blue sky and puffy white clouds.

Vonnies answers on the second ring.

“Hey,” she says, sounding relieved.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“It’s about Kenzie,” she says, then releases a breath. “She was hiding with a bag of marshmallows when I went to find her at the cabin.”

I shut my eyes and sigh. “Again.”

“It makes total sense that goodbyes are hard for her,” Vonnie replies, her voice gentle. “Marshmallows might be like an antidote, or at least her attempt to feel better.”

Guilt for hanging Kenzie out to dry with her feelings is like a lead weight on my already heavy heart. This is not the kind of dad I want to be.

Have I been so focused on other things that I’ve missed the clues that my daughter needs my help?

“That she’s hiding it might mean she’s ashamed,” Vonnie says, her voice tight. “And if there’s one feeling I wish I could wipe off the face of the earth, it’s that one.”

Tension cramps my lower back. “Agreed. Any idea how to do that?”

“You could try making marshmallows okay. Maybe even eat a few yourself. Make it no big deal, and she might not feel the need to hide it.”

“And then she’ll stop hiding her feelings?”

“It’s worth trying.”

“Why are you so good at this?”

She gives a soft laugh. “About four years of therapy.”

My chest tightens with emotions too confusing to understand. She’s navigated one hell of a storm to be where she is now. But I’m also angry that a sick fuck like Rundell caused her so much pain.

“I’m glad you found the support you needed,” I say. “You deserve to be happy, Vonnie.”

She sucks in a breath. It’s so faint I barely hear it. “Thanks, Noah.”

“See you tomorrow,” I say.

We end the call. I grip fistfuls of my hair and allow myself one moment to feel overwhelmed. Then I get up and shuffle back into the house.

Even though what I really want is to crawl under my covers and wallow in my insecurities, I spend the rest of the evening focused on Kenzie. We color together, I tell silly jokes that make her laugh, we eat her favorite dinner of grilled cheese and tater tots. I’m not sure who benefits more from the extra attention, but after I tuck her in to bed and shuffle to my room, I’m back to thinking about Vonnie.

I should enjoy what’s left of our time together, while keeping it under Kenzie’s radar to prevent a diabetic emergency.

I wish Vonnie was here.

The thought pisses me off. I’m completely fine on my own. I prefer it.

Or at least I used to.

I crawl into bed but my mind refuses to settle. It’s like when I come off a busy nightshift and my nervous system is jacked.

It’s easy to know the reason. I just have no solution.

Vonnie and I agreed to keep things casual. But there’s nothing casual about the way I feel right now.

THE MORGANS' driveway is packed with cars—the old white Suburban, Caleb's truck, Leah's Subaru, Wyatt and Brooke's SUV. From the big house, laughter and conversation and the clank of silverware filter through the open windows.

Vonnie bounds down the steps dressed in jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved Henley-style shirt with a pastel flower print.

"Morning!" she says as I meet her at the passenger door and help her up. Her hand is soft and warm in mine. As she jumps into the truck, I get a hit of her fresh scent.

"Morning," I say, then glance at the house. "You guys having a party this morning?"

"Birthday brunch for Riley."

"I don't mean to steal you away from your family."

"And miss a horseback ride with you two cowpokes? No chance."

As I back carefully to turn the truck around, I feel eyes on me and glance at the house. Wyatt is with one of his twin boys, heading for the tire swing on the side of the house. He's watching me as if he can't quite make sense of what he's seeing.

I give him a casual wave and he gives me a stiff nod.

As soon as we hit Cold Springs Road, I reach for Vonnie's hand. She squeezes mine back.

At the barn, I ask Kenzie to show Vonnie how to get the horses ready.

"Put her with Blue," I say, and give Vonnie a wink. "She's got attitude, but I think you two will get along beautifully."

While Kenzie and Vonnie get to work, I give Raven extra attention, hoping he forgives me for my week of absence, before tacking up.

The coolness of the morning is gone by the time we lead our horses from the barn. I tie Raven to a coral post so I can check the girth hitch on Blue and Dixie's saddles.

I walk around Dixie and Kenz to Blue's left side, giving Vonnie and me a fleeting moment of privacy. It's maddening that I can't kiss her. Instead, I tighten Blue's strap.

"Now, your stirrups," I say, sliding the buckle open then moving the pins and sliding the buckle shut.

"Ready?" I ask, giving her space to slide her foot into the stirrup. I place a hand on the small of her back. A shiver passes through her, and she pauses.

Unable to stop myself, I lean in to nuzzle her ear. She leans closer, her

breaths quickening. The air between us heats.

From the fencepost, Raven fidgets, tossing his head and shifting his feet.

Vonnie gives a soft laugh. I cradle her head and place a gentle kiss on her temple. Then I help her mount the saddle.

Quickly I check Dixie's girth hitch, then help Kenzie into her saddle and offer her the reins. "What are we working on, princess?"

"Soft hands, look where I want to go."

"Beautiful," I say and step to Raven, who is restless after having to stand around. I untie him and climb into my saddle.

When I look back to see Vonnie and Kenzie's bright smiles, my chest swells with an almost painful ache. I imprint the moment in my mind, so I can savor it later.

"Let's ride, ladies."

After taking the trail single file to Obsidian Creek, we cross over and ascend to a high meadow. I keep my eye on my crew. Kenzie and Vonnie talk and laugh together, and everything feels...easy. It's stirring me up inside, making me want what I know we can't have.

The creek is low this time of year, but there's a wide run deep enough for our horses to drink. The clean scent of the water and lush grass fill the air with sweet summer fragrance. Wildflowers bloom in clusters along the bank in white, red, and purple. Beyond, the meadow rises to an amphitheater made by a rocky ridge. Though it's out of sight, there's a lake up there that might still have snow. On an early ride last fall, we saw a family of foxes bounding over the talus.

Kenzie dashes off to make a daisy chain, her braid swinging between her shoulder blades.

"What's this test like?" I ask Vonnie as our horses drink. Raven paws at the glittery sand, splashing my shins.

"The NCLEX?" She grimaces. "It's computer-based, and designed to expose your weaknesses."

"How so?"

"There are a minimum of 75 questions and a maximum of 225," she says, scratching Blue's neck. "If the computer thinks at 75 questions you're going to ace it, you get cut off, and you pass. But it'll also cut you off at 75 if it thinks you'll fail."

I lead Dixie and Raven toward a patch of shade in an aspen grove. Vonnie follows with Blue.

“So every question after 75, you’re wondering if it’s going to end, which may or may not be a good thing.” I tie up Raven and Dixie. “Sounds like a mindfuck.”

She laughs. “Yep.”

Vonnie finishes tying up Blue. Across from us, Kenzie is plucking daisies and adding them to a pouch she’s made with the hem of her shirt.

“Is the test state-specific?” I ask, settling on the grass, my back against a fallen Ponderosa, the surface smoothed from years of exposure.

“Not exactly. I can get certified in as many as I want,” she replies, sitting next to me.

“Why not get licensed in all of them?” I ask.

“Eesh,” she says, giving me a sideways glance. “Paperwork, for starters. And it’s expensive. Alaska’s application costs four hundred bucks. Then each state has their own special requirements on top of a nursing degree, so I’m keeping it to Washington, Montana, and Idaho.”

I give her a questioning look, my stomach tight.

“Peter encouraged me to have options.”

“I thought you wanted him to stop meddling?”

She shrugs. “In this case, he’s right. I don’t want to work in Washington State forever. Most Level Four NICU nurses burn out in a few years. If that happens, I could try a level Three or Two, or maybe Labor and Delivery.”

She plucks something blue and delicate from the grass. It’s a piece of a baby bird’s egg. Her eyes brighten, then she pushes to her feet. “I’m going to show Kenzie.”

Across the meadow, I watch Vonnie kneel in the grass so Kenzie can see what’s in her palm. Kenzie’s face lights up.

That Vonnie’s expecting to burn out in Seattle sits heavy inside me. Why would she purposely throw herself into a job that will chew her up and spit her out?

In a way, I understand. When I joined the military, it was because I thought I had something to prove. And I did—but there was a cost.

It’s a lose-lose situation. If she stays in Penny Creek, she’ll feel like she gave up her dream. She leaves, and she puts that beautiful heart and soul of hers at risk.

As much as I’d love to order her to stay, I know I can’t.

I have to let her go.

NOAH

The next morning, Vonnie arrives on my doorstep looking so good that I have to clench my fists to keep from yanking her inside and kissing her senseless.

“Hi,” she says with a smile.

I rub the back of my neck, and laugh. “Hi.”

Her skin is golden brown from the sun, which makes her pretty eyes look extra blue and her freckles like a dusting of cinnamon. She’s wearing a bikini top beneath her tank shirt, the tie at the back of her neck.

Before I can say anything else, Kenzie blindsides me with a major meltdown.

Earlier, she complained of a stomachache. Are marshmallows to blame?

Swiftly, I wrap her in a bear hug. My emotions are hot under my skin. I want to be angry with her for acting out, but I also know she’s only capable of handling so much change at once.

“No...no...no,” Kenzie manages between shaky sobs.

“It’s okay,” I say in an even tone. The social worker who helped Kenzie and me when Gia left told me to be calm in situations like this because ultimately, that’s what Kenzie’s asking for right now. She wants reassurance, and it makes sense. We’ve had an intense week but now we’re back to reality—the one where I have to go to work, and she’s left behind.

Vonnie gives me a sympathetic look as I rub Kenzie’s back.

“Vonnies here, and I’ll be back tonight,” I say to Kenzie, and kiss her on the forehead.

She releases one last shuddering breath, coating my neck with her tears.

Gently, I peel Kenzie's arms from my shoulders and set her down, squatting so we're eye to eye. I give her one last hug. "I have to go, *chouchou*."

"Bye Daddy," she whispers in my ear. "I promise I'll miss you."

"I promise I'll miss you too."

When I release her, Vonnie smiles. "I got us a three-day pass to the country club pool."

Kenzie's eyes widen. "The one with the big japuzzi?"

I resist the urge to correct her, and use the distraction to slip from the room, though not before mouthing "thank you" to Vonnie.

Vonnie smiles but her gaze has an edge to it—like she wants to say something but is holding back.

Leaving them tears at me. Kenzie can be stubborn, but a tantrum is another sign that she's struggling. She'll be in good hands with Vonnie today, but that too is temporary.

The itch between my shoulders gives a little jolt. When I climb into my truck, I attempt to scratch it by rubbing against the back of my seat. But the friction is all wrong, and I can't seem to reach the right spot.

With one last glance at the house, I reverse out of my driveway and head to the station.

I'm barely inside the building when Dad steps out of his office and beckons to me, his face locked in a scowl.

"Good trip?" he asks once I've dropped into the seat across from his desk.

"Great trip," I reply.

"Good," he says, leaning his elbows on the desk and clasping his fingers. "Cora gave me an update. Sounds like everyone's doing well."

"Yeah, we all had a lot of fun." I know he won't ask, so I add, "Especially hanging out with Dev."

He nods, but his eyes tighten. I know he regrets the split between him and Dev, but he's too stubborn to admit it, even to himself. Though he doesn't talk about Mom and Cora, he misses them too.

Dad taps his fingers against his lips. "I notice you've been in the Rundell murder files."

My father isn't one to mince words, but this is abrupt, even for him. "I needed to fact check a detail for those two journalists."

"They've been busy. The Attorney General requested a copy of the case files."

The AG is the state's lead prosecutor, and if he's invested in this case, things are going to get interesting. "He doesn't believe that we intentionally ignored that case, right? We worked it just like any other."

"Did we?" he asks, staring me down.

He can't possibly know about my discreet dig into Timothy Morgan's alibi, yet Dad is no fool. "Yes."

"Why am I just learning now that Yvonne Morgan was one of his victims?"

Shit. How did he connect the dots? And if he did, will the podcast team be fast on his heels?

"Because it led nowhere," I say.

His expression darkens. "How hard did you try?"

I cross my arms. "I've made independent decisions on a case before. Why is this any different?"

"You know why."

To slow down my racing pulse, I heave a full breath. "Yvonne Morgan came to me a year after the case went cold. It wasn't easy for her to share her experience and it certainly wasn't easy for me to hear." Another breath. "The weekend Rundell disappeared, Vonnie, Leah, and Kitty were in Boise watching Dylan play hockey. It checked out."

"Where was Timothy Morgan?" Dad asks, leaning forward in his chair.

"Vonnice couldn't remember."

"And did you follow up?"

"Of course," I reply, an edge to my tone. "But Timothy Morgan didn't do us the favor of establishing his alibi before his death."

"Did Timothy know about what Rundell had done?"

"Vonnice said she and Leah told their mother, but it was never talked about again."

Dad's eyebrows arch. "So we'll assume Timothy knew."

"Vonnice had already left the youth group when Rundell went missing."

"That doesn't mean her daddy didn't take his revenge."

"Maybe, maybe not," I say with a shrug. "Impossible to know."

"The attorney general chewed me a new asshole because this looks sloppy, and I have to agree."

I close my eyes for an instant. Maybe he's right. During that timeframe, my attention was divided. Kenzie had been born early, and though she came through with flying colors, I worried constantly. Meanwhile, Gia had one

foot out the door.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Make it right.”

“I can’t interview a dead guy,” I fire back.

“So interview the rest of them, for fuck’s sake. Where is your head?” He points an accusing finger at me. “Is that the problem here? You’re thinking with your dick?”

“That’s enough,” I snap, and push to my feet. “I’m perfectly capable of keeping my personal life separate from my job.”

“Then I’ll expect a complete report by Friday.”

Fucking hell. Friday means I’ll have to move fast, which could tip off the Truth Serum team that I’m working the case. But refusing will raise suspicion that I’m shielding Vonnie and her family from inquiry. A refusal would *also* defy a direct order from the Sheriff, which I won’t do. Even though Sheriff Tucker is my father, he’s still my boss.

“You know that’s going to draw attention,” I say, resting my hands on my toolbelt. A nightmare plays in my mind of news vans cornering Vonnie and journalists racing at her with their microphones and accusations. This is why I kept my original inquiry on the down low, but that’s impossible to continue.

Damn it.

“So be it,” Dad says, closing his laptop and packing it into his briefcase. It makes me wonder if he stayed late today just to have this conversation.

“You think Timothy Morgan did this,” I say.

“I *think* it’s at least worth a closer look,” he says sternly, grabbing his coat.

I walk from the room, my heart in a vice.

How can I “make it right” and protect Vonnie too?

FIRST, I call Wyatt, then remember our baseball team has practice today. I cruise by the Growly Bear, but Annika’s gone for the day and won’t be back until four a.m.

The only other Morgan who may have answers for me is Caleb. I drive to Rogue River Fire & Rescue’s HQ, where he’s a firefighter. Though he was a loose cannon as a teenager—someone to steer clear of—as an adult he’s a solid guy. We’ve been on enough calls together over the years that we’ve built trust. He also owes me a favor.

At the fire station, I go in through the main door and lean into the admin office. “Morgan here today?” I ask the office manager.

“I’ll page him,” he says with a nod, then gets on the phone. After a short exchange, the office manager hangs up. “He’ll be right down.”

I go across the hall to the truck bay and stroll past a shiny red engine.

Caleb was Timothy Morgan’s most faithful adventure buddy. Though I don’t relish the idea of opening up hard memories for Caleb, he might be the only one who can tell me where Timothy Morgan was the night Rundell disappeared.

From the shiny metal pole extending from the ceiling, a tight screech fills the air and a blur of blue drops into sight.

“Hey, man,” Caleb says after he lands, his eyes sharp.

“Hey,” I say, and shake his hand. “Sorry for hitting you up at work, but I’m working a case.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “That sounds serious.”

“It’s sensitive too.”

He puts his hands on his hips. “How can I help?”

“What do you remember about the night Jonas Rundell disappeared?”

Caleb tilts his head, confused. “*That’s* your case?”

I wait for my question to sink in.

With a hard exhale, Caleb purses his lips. “Hell, Tucker, I was seventeen. I didn’t even know the guy. Nor did I have any interest in his church group.”

“Where were you that night?”

He laughs. “You’re kidding, right? Back then I cared about two things: running rivers and pussy. Forgive me if my memory is foggy.”

“Vonnie told me about Rundell’s abuse. She came to me a couple of years ago.”

Caleb goes completely still, and for a guy who never stops moving, it’s chilling.

“I’m sorry,” I add in a soft voice.

He rakes his hair with both hands. “What do you want from me?”

“Your mom and sisters were in Boise to watch Dylan’s hockey tournament that weekend. Why didn’t your dad go too?”

His eyes turn shrewd. “You think...” He gives a tight cough, as if I’ve punched him in the ribs. “Damn. You think my dad killed that asshole?”

“I don’t think anything. I’m just trying to establish the facts.”

“Is Sheriff Tucker behind this bullshit?” he asks, shuffling his feet. “He’s

had a hard-on for my dad since I can remember. This would be the perfect way to even whatever score he's been waiting to settle, wouldn't it? Pin Rundell's murder on him. He's not alive to defend himself."

"That's not how I operate, Morgan, and you know it," I say tersely. "I'm actually trying to protect your sister. There are two parties interested in solving this case, and both have the potential to make life difficult for her. One is the attorney general. The other is a team of journalists who are convinced there's been a miscarriage of justice. I'm actually more worried about them, and that's saying something, because the attorney general does not fuck around."

"I don't know where Dad was that weekend."

We stare at each other, the already warm summer air thick with tension.

Caleb shrugs. "It's the truth."

"You were close. Did he ever confide in you?"

"About crushing that guy's skull with a rock? Fuck no." Caleb releases a firm breath. "And as for us being close, that only went so far. I pushed him—physically. He liked that. But when I refused to run the Upper Rogue that day, it was running at *eight thousand* CFS. A fucking death trap. He told me I was useless and a coward, and then, like the stubborn bastard he was, he went anyway. I never saw him again."

I clench my eyes shut for an instant, then put my hands on my hips. "I'm sorry."

"Go jerk someone else's chain," he says, spinning from me and walking toward the back of the truck bay. "And stay the fuck away from my sister."

Back in my SUV, I rest the back of my head on the seat. That I've rattled Caleb's cage—for zero gain—sits heavy with me. Most people think being a cop is challenging because it's dangerous. They think high speed chases, taking down bad guys, and being constantly alert for threats.

But digging into people's old wounds and asking them to bare their soul is much, much harder. And while it can sometimes shake the truth loose, I don't relish harassing people I care about.

For two days I work the case like a dog on a bone, doing my best to evade detection from the podcasters, who I catch trying to trail me several times. On Thursday, they're eating in a booth at the Bear. They get quiet when they notice me standing in line to order a sandwich, but I ignore them. Back at my desk, I sign out Rundell's murder book for yet another review while I eat.

During the investigation, our team used the youth group roster as a

starting point for digging up potential suspects. I flip to that section of the book and scan the interview log. At that time, I was still a rookie, so I was given the grunt task of checking alibis. My notes are logged in the margins of the lead investigator's notes. Nothing looks out of place, and yet, there has to be something I'm missing.

Fourteen years ago, Penny Creek didn't have traffic cams or security footage for me to view, hoping to pinpoint Timothy Morgan's location.

I checked in with Timothy's close friends—adventure junkies like him—but none were with him that weekend, at least that they remember.

So where the fuck was he? I even asked our local Forest Service ranger for copies of their trailhead register books for that date. But if Timothy Morgan went on a hike or trail run that day, he didn't sign in.

When momentum stalls in a case, the best thing to do is step away. Get a new perspective. My favorite way to do this is on a ride, with Raven's steady gait and the scents from the land allowing my mind to rest and the puzzle pieces to shift, reform.

I don't have time for a ride today, but I also don't know that it would help this time. Timothy Morgan doesn't have an alibi. So what? If he killed Rundell, we will likely never know.

The only other move I have left is to knock holes in some other suspect's alibi, which means officially reopening the case and redoing the work we've already done.

With my chest feeling tight and my brain swimming with unspent adrenaline, I type up my report for the Sheriff, detailing the results of each potential lead regarding Timothy Morgan. By the time I get to the summary, I'm ready to wash my hands of the whole thing.

If Sheriff Tucker wants to nail a dead man for murder, he can do it on his own time.

Arriving home a little after five o'clock to find Kenzie and Vonnie playing down by the creek behind the house eases the knots in my stomach.

My girls are safe and happy.

Life is good. I don't need to interrogate anyone else today. Or type any more reports, or avoid two pesky journalists.

The last of the tension drains from my body.

"Daddy!" Kenzie calls when she sees me weaving through the aspens. She races toward me, her bare feet sandy and her cheeks pink from the sun.

"How was the pool today?" I ask.

Vonnie wades from the creek to join us on the bank, her freckles practically glowing.

“Vonnie helped me do a back dive,” Kenzie says.

I give an appreciative whistle and lift her into my arms. Her wet legs soak my t-shirt but it feels good. “Sorry I missed that.”

“Now we’re making rapids,” Kenzie says, squirming out of my grip and taking my hand.

“Whoa,” I say with a laugh, and barely manage to stop her from dragging me into the creek. “Let me take off my shoes and roll up my pants.”

“That’s my cue,” Vonnie says with a satisfied sigh. She sits on the bank to dry her feet and slip on her sandals. “I made a fruit salad to go with your dinner. And Annika dropped off cookies too.”

Kenzie’s eyes fill with longing. “Vonnie, don’t go.”

Jumping to her feet, she gives Kenzie a bright smile. “Your daddy’s home. I’ll see you tomorrow, after camp.”

When she turns away, unable to stop myself, I reach for her hand. Vonnie turns, her pretty blue eyes tight with longing. Her breaths rise and fall as the things we’ve left unsaid melt away, leaving me with only one word.

“Stay.”

A soft breeze passes through the aspen leaves, brushing back her hair. Everything in my world is good and pure in this moment. Is it so wrong to want it to last just a little longer?

“Pleeease?” Kenzie begs from the creek.

Vonnie releases a soft sigh. “Only if your daddy helps me study later.”

“Deal,” I say with a wink.

VONNIE

In the morning, Noah gets Kenzie up and takes her to camp on his way to work. I hadn't planned to stay overnight, but after going each other like crazed maniacs until two a.m., there was no way I was safe to drive home. This error in judgement meant I had to hide in his room so Kenzie didn't find out.

Ick. Is this the kind of relationship I'm doomed to have?

I saw this coming, yet did I save myself by walking away?

No.

I should care, but right now, with my body humming and sated and my heart in the clouds, I don't have a care in the world.

When I wake again, it's late morning. Knowing I have the house to myself for most of the day, I roll out of bed. Noah takes neatness to obsessive levels, so I'm not immediately surprised when I don't see my clothes strewn across the floor. I pull on one of his t-shirts and pad into the bathroom, but my clothes aren't here either. Hmm.

I walk to the kitchen to start a fresh pot of coffee. On the counter next to the coffeemaker is an insulated mug. A small yellow post-it note on the lid says,

Happy studying

- N

I peel off the note, my tummy fluttering.

A sound from the doorstep catches my attention a moment before I hear a key in the lock.

Eep. Is Noah back with Kenzie?

No, he would have warned me. Maybe he did. Crap! Where is my phone?

The front door opens, making the alarm erupt, a high-pitched screech that makes me want to dive for cover. A short woman with long, dark hair races inside the house and turns to the panel, furiously punching the keypad. A lanky man in baggy jeans slips in behind her, his hands clamped over his ears.

“I thought you knew the code!” he shouts.

“He must have changed it!” the woman hollers back. She tries poking more of the buttons.

“Let’s get out of here!” the man replies.

“Just hang on!” the woman shouts.

My heart hammers inside my chest. Who are these people? The woman is dressed in tight jeans and cowboy boots. The man reminds me of a scarecrow—skinny and hunched, his clothes hanging off his frame.

Should I call 911?

One thing is for certain, if I don’t shut off the alarm in the next five seconds, a representative from Rogue County Law Enforcement is going to show up, guns blazing. Possibly Noah. Possibly his dad.

And I’m still dressed in only one of Noah’s t-shirts.

Shit.

The woman turns, and my heart drops. I’m looking at a replica of Kenzie—the heart-shaped mouth, the wild, dark hair, her petite frame.

It’s Gia.

“Turn this off!” Gia yells.

I race to the panel and punch in the code, cutting off the screeching alarm mid-peal.

Breathing fast, my mind buzzing, I spin around.

“Who the hell are you?” Gia asks, her gaze flicking down-up.

I wish I was quick on my feet in situations like this. Instead I get tongue tied and nerves seize my throat. If only I had Leah’s assertiveness. Her confidence.

“I work for Noah,” I say.

Gia’s eyes go wide, and I realize my mistake.

“As Kenzie’s nanny,” I add, my heart thumping hard against my

collarbones. A feeling of doom and frustration spin in my stomach—I'm embarrassed, and it feels horrible.

Gia's scarecrow partner is glancing around the living room with a curious gaze. Like he's evaluating the contents. It's weird.

"We need a place to lay low for a few days," Gia says.

I shake my head, completely thrown by this request. "I think we should call Noah."

"I already have," she says, her voice bright with triumph.

"Oh," I say, and try to smile.

Gia gives me one last sizing up, her eyes narrowing. "Thanks for your help with the alarm."

"Right," I say, my confusion lingering. "I'll just, um, get going." Before I experience any more humiliation, I hurry down the hallway to my room. Inside, I fight the frustration and confusion swirling inside my chest.

Noah invited them here and didn't tell me? I go to my phone, but there's nothing from him. This could mean that Gia's lying. Or that Noah forgot or didn't think I'd mind.

Breathe, girl.

Either way, I'm not staying in this house another minute.

Where are my clothes from last night? They aren't in my room. Maybe Noah put them in the washing machine. I'll have to sort that out later. When I can think straight again.

Quickly, I throw on clothes from my drawer. I'm supposed to move out today and get the guest room ready for Lisa. I need to wash the sheets and clean the bathroom. I was going to fill a vase with fresh flowers and put it on her bedside table. I want her to feel welcome after being away for so long.

That will have to wait too.

After packing up my study materials, I race for the door, then remember I don't have a car. Shit.

I calm myself with a firm breath. It's fine. I can walk to the Bear.

As I slip through the front door, I glance at the kitchen, where Gia is staring into the open fridge, the mug of coffee Noah made for me in her hands.

She glances my way, then cradles the mug against her chest. Even though it's petty and stupid that I should care this much, a wound opens inside me, and I start to bleed.

I slip through the door and walk to the gate, my pulse pounding in my

eardrums. My flip flops scuff the gritty sidewalk in my rush to clear the block and put the house behind me. The bright sun makes me squint and heats my skin in minutes.

Once I turn towards town, I dial Noah's number, but he doesn't answer. Even though I know he's at work and likely busy, logic is no match for my rampant emotions.

I shoot Noah a text:

Gia and her friend arrived

Then I pocket my phone and continue to the bakery, my focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

I was eleven years old when Jonas Rundell started giving me extra attention. It made me feel special—a rarity in my family of super athletes and brainiacs. Even though a voice was warning me of danger, I didn't understand it. Until I did.

By then it felt too late to ask for help.

When Rundell's body turned up, all those years of keeping his secret created an immense amount of pressure, and it was dragging me under. Wyatt was there to pull me out. That was the first lesson I learned on the road to moving on. Help is always right there—it's just a matter of reaching for it.

At the Bear, instead of going inside to order, I climb onto the patio and weave through the crowded tables to an empty one in the back. Using my phone, I go through my emails, looking for the message Noah first sent me when he offered me a job. I open the attachment listing Kenzie's emergency info and scan to the bottom.

Dev's number is there. Relief trickles down my spine.

"Dev Tucker," he answers, sounding gruff.

"It's Vonnie," I say, plugging my other ear so I can hear him better over the steady din of bakery activity.

"Hey, girl," he says, his voice warming for a split second before it turns wary. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," I lie. "But...something weird happened, and I can't reach Noah."

"Where's Kenzie?" he asks.

"At camp until two."

"Okay," he says, sounding relieved. "Tell me about this weird thing."

I swallow the embarrassment of being caught by Noah's ex wearing only

one of his t-shirts. “Gia came to the house. She said she’d already cleared it with Noah.”

“How’d she get in?”

“With a key.”

“Was she alone?”

“No. She had a... friend.”

Dev curses. “Are you still at the house?”

“No.” Then I remember the alarm going off, and wince. If Gia had permission from Noah to enter the house, why didn’t he give her the correct code?

“Call Rogue County Sheriff and get them to page Noah.”

Dread fills my stomach. “Should I have stayed?”

“No,” Dev says. “You did the right thing. Let the police handle it from here. I’m going to call our Dad. Keep trying Noah.”

“Okay.”

With shaking fingers, I hang up with Dev and dial 911. A female voice answers. “Rogue County Sheriff Department, is this an emergency?”

For one fleeting second, I debate my answer. “Not exactly.”

“Let me transfer you,” the voice drones.

A different woman picks up the line. “Rogue County Sheriff, this is Linnea.”

“Hi, this is Yvonne Morgan,” I say, rubbing my forehead with my free hand. My skin is hot and damp with sweat from my trek beneath the hot sun. “I need to reach Noah.”

“Deputy Noah Tucker?” Linnea asks, sounding confused.

I wince. “Yes.”

“What’s this regarding?”

“There’s two suspicious, er, guests at his house.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Did they break in?”

“No, they had a key.”

“Did they harm you or the property? Is anyone in need of medical attention?”

“No,” I reply, my frustration bottling up in my chest. “I’m just not convinced they have permission to be there.”

“Are you at the residence?”

“No.”

“Have you contacted Deputy Tucker?”

“He’s not picking up his cell.” Crap. I already made the mistake of calling him Noah, and now his coworker knows I have his personal cell number.

“I’ll send a car,” Linnea says curtly.

“Thank you,” I reply.

Once I hang up, I text Dev the update. He replies with a thumbs up. I sit still, letting the familiar sounds of the bakery ground me. Because I had planned to spend the day studying and prepping for Lisa’s return, I feel a little bit lost. Should I stay here and study? I’m definitely not going back to Noah’s. Annika might have driven to work today, unless Grady drove her. If her car isn’t here, I’m sure I can catch a ride from someone else heading north.

I leave my table and skirt the bus tubs and water filling station at the rear of the patio to the back door. Heat radiates from inside the kitchen, where three fans are running full tilt, their hum dampening the noises from the bakery and Annika’s crew working like mad.

Annika looks up from scooping cookie dough from her big mixer, her face pink from the heat. “Study break, huh? I’ve got pecan chocolate chip about to come out of the oven. Or can I make you a sandwich?”

“Are you drinking enough water?” I blurt, unable to stop myself.

She slides the tub of batter into the fridge and heads my way, her eyes tightening. “What’s wrong?”

“Can I borrow your car?”

“Sure,” she says, still confused. “You’re checking out of Noah’s place after today, right?”

“Right, but there was a...miscommunication. I need to leave sooner.”

She huffs a breath to get her bangs out of her face. “You sure you’re okay?” she asks, then winces and caresses the side of her swollen belly.

“Kicking?” I ask.

She grins through what looks painful. “Yeah, here.”

She slides my palm against her bump. From my training, I’ve felt babies move in utero, and I got to feel the twins kicking when Brooke was pregnant, but Annika is my big sister, and has wanted a family since she basically raised me and Leah. Tears prick my eyes.

Annika’s eyes get glassy too, then we both laugh.

I hug her, then snatch her keys from the hook above the door and hurry to her car.

Out of the corner of my eye, a car moves swiftly up the road. It’s a Rogue

County SUV. Are they headed to Noah's house?

My phone rings. It's Noah.

"Are they still there?" Noah asks, his voice tense.

"I...don't know."

He mutters a curse.

"Did you invite her?" I ask, squinting against the sun.

"No," he says in a firm tone. "Why did you let them in?"

My stomach tightens. "She had a key. She said she'd talked to you."

"She lied."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do."

"Leaving them alone in my house was your best move?"

My frazzled nerves give a jolt, and my stomach churns with emotions I'm quickly losing the ability to control. "If you had told me this might happen, maybe I would have been prepared."

"I didn't think I needed to tell you not to let in strangers."

"I'm sorry," I say again, then hate myself for it. I don't need to apologize for something that felt out of my control.

Stop it. This woman is Kenzie's mother.

"I'm on my way there to sort this out," Noah says.

"I'm supposed to pick up Kenzie soon."

"Shit." He exhales a hard sigh. "This is why I—" he stops himself. "I would appreciate you picking her up. I don't know how long this is going to take."

"Okay," I say softly.

"I'll call you later."

I hang up the phone and brace against Annika's car. Then I get in and drive home.

But once I'm there, it's full-tilt kid madness. Riley has friends over and they are having a water balloon and water gun fight in the yard. The twins are keeping both Wyatt and Brooke busy—Mateo is in his highchair mowing down chunks of what looks like plum and maybe strips of jam toast. Rowan is humming as he attempts to walk from the edge of the couch to where Wyatt sits on the floor four feet away, arms outstretched.

"Hey, stranger," Wyatt says, shooting me a quick glance. "Nice to have you home."

I force a smile. "Nice to be home."

On my way up to my room, he calls, "Dylan got an earlier flight

tomorrow. We can pick him up after the parade. Then Caleb and Leah want to run Yankee Fork on Sunday.”

I lean over the banister. “All of us?”

He grins up at me. “All of us. You want to invite someone?”

My worn-out heart beats a soft little thump. “No.”

Wyatt turns back to Rowan and extends his arms. “Okay.”

Up in my room, even with the door closed, the house is alive with laughter and chatter. I set my book bag on the floor, then continue into the shower.

Though I scrub every inch of my skin, I can’t rid my sense of humiliation. I’m angry at myself for sleeping in. If I’d gotten up when Noah had, my things would have been packed up and I could have had Lisa’s room ready and I wouldn’t have been in such a compromising position when Gia walked through the door.

Is that why this stings? Because Gia now knows exactly what Noah and I are up to? Or is it that she once had his heart, and seems to think she still has a piece of it?

Or maybe it’s because Noah is making me feel like I did something wrong.

Damn him.

That he trusts his cruel ex over me hurts more than anything else.

NOAH

I don't speed, ever, but I'm tempted. Where did Gia get that key? And who is with her? What am I about to walk into?

Driving the same stretch of highway where I pulled Vonnie over reminds me of her quick glance to her rearview mirror. Like she was used to being followed.

Is that why Gia was able to spook her so easily?

I call Linnea and request a few hours of emergency leave so I can deal with this mess.

Two Rogue County Sheriff rigs are parked outside my house. One of them is Deputy Axel Danforth's. The other is my father's.

Awesome.

I walk up the path and through the gate. After a steadying breath, I open the front door. Inside, Sheriff Tucker—Dad—stands with his arms crossed, staring down a man hunched over the table who could double for Shaggy in the Scooby Doo cartoons. His completed statement and pen rest to the side of him.

In my living room, Gia is seated on my couch across from Danforth. Other than a different hairstyle and darker makeup, she looks the same. A snake with lipstick.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

"You invited us, remember?"

"I don't," I say.

The Shaggy lookalike stands up from the table. "This blows. I'm gonna bounce."

Gia whips her head around to glare at him. His posture sags. It's like watching Gumby fold over.

"Whatever," he says with a groan.

"I met your nanny," Gia says, lifting an eyebrow.

Gia's incredibly easy to read—she wants something, and the more drama she causes to get it, the more fun she'll have. However, I have to weigh her demands while managing Kenzie's emotional capacity, so I force myself to stay cool.

"Thanks for the assist, Deputy," I say to Axel. "I can take it from here."

I send Dad the same message with a short nod. He pushes off the wall and crooks his finger at Shaggy. "You. Outside."

"Why?" Shaggy whines.

"Because I asked." He tilts his head, his gaze unwavering.

Shaggy gives an exaggerated breath. "Total waste of time," he says on his way to the door. As he passes me, he sneers. "He doesn't even have good tequila."

Dad steps in close behind him, authority emanating from his every pore. They disappear through the door, and Axel follows.

I cross my arms and stare at Gia. "What do you want?"

She frowns. "To see my daughter."

"Bullshit." I glance in the direction of the front yard, where I'm sure Danforth and Dad are keeping watch over Shaggy until I decide what to do. "Who's your sidekick?"

"That's Cassius."

"Whose idea was it to break into my house?"

"We didn't break in," she replies, her words clipped. "I have a key, remember? How was I supposed to know you'd changed the alarm code?"

"You gave me back that key when you left," I say. Most likely, she made a copy.

Gia shrugs.

"I've called you three times recently," I say, "but the number is disconnected."

"I have a new phone."

I wonder if she's pawned the one I bought for her to schedule calls with Kenzie like our parenting plan specified. "That would have been nice to know."

"Well, I'm here now. I want to see Kenzie in the parade."

“How did you know she was in the parade?”

“Roxy told me,” she says with a victorious glint in her eye. Roxy is a huge Limelight fan and one of those small-town busybodies who calls our dispatch with “anonymous tips” at least once a week—none of them worth the energy it takes to record them.

“Your nanny is sure cute,” Gia adds with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Especially in your clothes.”

The fuck? I shake this off. I’m not letting Gia derail this conversation with her antics. “You’re not welcome here.”

“Without seeing my baby ride in the parade?”

“You can stay in Penny Creek as long as you want. But it’s not going to be in this house.”

Gia smirks. “So you can keep screwing your nanny? Does Kenzie know?”

Axel pokes his head inside my door. “Are we making an arrest, Tucker? If not, can we please cut this one loose?” Outside, I can hear Cassius hollering about police injustice. Great. The neighbors are really going to love me now. I check my watch.

Vonnie’s picking up Kenzie right now. Shit. I should have told her to stall.

“Release him,” I say to Axel, then point a finger at Gia. “Now out. You can see Kenzie tomorrow in the parade. The best spot will be in front of the drug store, east side.”

Her eyes turn curious. “Where is Kenzie?”

“At camp.”

“Where? We could go there together.”

“You are not allowed near her without my permission.”

“Then give it to me, Noah,” she barks back, her thin lips curling. “I have a right to see her.”

Technically this is not true. Gia signed away all of her parental rights four years ago. Back then, I paid a lawyer a fuckton of money to create a legal separation and a parenting plan because I wanted everything in writing. So there was no misunderstanding, and so I have the law on my side. However, if Kenzie finds out Gia was here and I didn’t let them spend time together, there aren’t enough marshmallows to heal that wound.

A car door shuts outside, and my stomach liquifies.

Kenzie bursts into the house, her eyes wide. “Mommy!”

Gia crouches down and opens her arms. “Baby!”

When Kenzie nearly tackles her, Gia looks up at me with that coy expression I once fell for.

Outside in the driveway, Vonnie is standing with her arms crossed over her chest. Her hair is wet and loose down her back, like she’s freshly showered. On her face is a look I’ve never seen—a mix of hurt and defiance.

Gia sees this exchange and smirks.

I stride to the front door and shut it. Then I pinch the bridge of my nose and breathe.

Maybe it’s time to revisit the legal separation documents and parenting plan I had made four years ago. I don’t like Gia dropping by and I certainly don’t like her manipulating me or threatening me.

Would she really tell Kenzie about me and Vonnie?

Fuck.

Frustration eats at me. Like I told Dev—Vonnice and I are both consenting adults. The reason I’m keeping it secret is to protect Kenzie.

And Gia probably knows that.

My fingers start to tingle—I’m clenching my fists.

After the rodeo, I’ll call that lawyer again. His name is on the file I keep in my office cabinet. Maybe it’s time I create stronger rules about how close Gia can get to us.

“Mommy, Mommy,” Kenzie says, tugging on Gia’s hand. “Come see my princess costume.”

“I’d love to,” Gia says. Her expression is warm, but I’m not fooled. Everything about this screams scam.

“Kenz,” I say, trying to keep my voice level—a difficult task in this moment. “I have an idea. Why don’t you go put it on, then your mom can get a preview?”

“Okay!” Kenzie says, practically bursting with excitement. She’s still holding Gia’s hand, as if she’s afraid to release her. “Please don’t go yet?”

Hearing my daughter express her longing out loud guts me. I prepare myself for the aftermath. Because Gia won’t be staying long. Whatever her game is, it’s a quick one.

“I won’t,” Gia says, showing no indication of the heartbreak this is causing Kenzie.

Kenzie dashes off, her bare heels thumping the floor.

“Why aren’t you playing a gig this weekend?” I ask once we’re alone.

She shrugs. “I wanted to see Kenzie.”

“Fuck, you’re a terrible liar,” I say, gripping my hips. “What. Do. You. Want.”

She sighs, her shoulders dropping. “Ten thousand dollars.”

“What?”

“My drummer needs to go to rehab.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

“We’ve crowdsourced thirty, but the best program costs more.” She bites her lip, but her charms have zero effect on me. “I know you have the money.”

I scoff. “Right. I’ll just take it out of Kenzie’s college fund.”

Kenzie calls from the edge of the hallway. “Cover your eyes!”

When Gia complies, I watch her face for a split second. This isn’t happening. Ten grand?

Kenzie comes clomping out in her getup: black cowboy boots, dark denim with rhinestones up the seams and across the pockets, a raspberry-pink western shirt with pearl snaps, the big belt buckle at her waist and the white cowboy hat.

Gia jumps to her feet and claps furiously. “Wow, Kenzie! Such a pretty princess!”

Kenzie beams.

“Can we go to the park?” Kenzie asks.

“Absolutely!” Gia says at the same time I say, “Not in your costume.”

Kenzie pouts.

“After tomorrow you can,” I add, resisting the urge to flash Gia a look. Her strategy of playing the fun parent so I look bad is one of her favorite games, yet one she’ll tire of soon enough.

But how long will that take?

At least tomorrow we’ll have no time for Gia and her shenanigans. The parade—setup and untacking included—takes most of the day. And though I’ll be busy during the rodeo after that, Lisa is on duty with Kenzie. They’ll have dinner at home before attending the rodeo.

“Should we go get ice cream?” Gia says, hurrying over to stroke Kenzie’s long hair.

Kenzie looks to me for approval. I’m about to turn them down—it’s nearly suppertime—but if I say that out loud, I’m back to being Bad Dad. And Gia might use the opportunity to invite herself to stay for dinner.

I don’t relish the role of protecting my daughter against her own mother,

but it's a job I take very seriously.

Damn it, I want her gone.

"Sure," I say, and give Kenzie a wink. She squeals.

"Go change, though," I add.

Kenzie races off, her boots ka-thunking on the hardwood floor. I turn to Gia. "I'll pay for a hotel room for you and—" I draw a blank.

"Cassius," Gia says, watching me with a careful focus.

"Two nights, but that's all."

"What about my drummer?"

"What about him?"

"Limelight needs him to play."

"Take a little time off from touring."

She huffs a sigh. "Do you really want a breakdown of the music industry's payment structure, or do you want to help me?"

"I'm sorry you're in a bind. But I'm sure you'll figure this out."

I can practically see the flames crackling behind her eyes. "You're a cold-hearted bastard."

The good news is this doesn't even hurt anymore, nor does it surprise me. The bad news is she looks pissed enough to start a war. And her ammo is the kind that ruins lives.

Maybe I should just give her the money—that would make her leave. I could pick up some overtime shifts to make up for the dent it would put in my savings. I could hold off on Dixie's upcoming dental work and the new set of truck tires I need.

It's not that simple, though. Kenzie's heart is set on Gia watching her in the parade, and now that such a promise has been set in motion, I'm going to make damn sure it happens.

Is this what enabling feels like? I'm facilitating Kenzie's addiction to a toxic love. A love that will only hurt and abandon her after it's sucked her dry.

I need to find a way out of this mess. For good.

Outside, Axel and Dad are gone.

Vonnie is gone too, but after slamming the door in her face, I hadn't expected her to stick around.

Gia is quick to stride to the passenger side of my truck and climb in. I help Kenzie up and she buckles into her booster seat.

Cassius stands on the other side of the street, looking furious.

“I’ll call you in a bit,” Gia says to him, then shuts her door.

I drive down the quiet streets, the windows down, and listen to Kenzie talk about our trip to Garnet Falls. She sings one of her French songs for Gia, who cheers in appreciation. She eyes me. “Takes after her momma.”

Like hell she does.

I have to park several blocks away from the center of town because rodeo people are everywhere and the streets are packed. The three of us walk to the ice cream stand, which is near a water play sculpture that spouts from holes in the ground at random times. A handful of kids Kenzie’s age with their shoes off are trying to stomp on the holes before they burst, getting delightfully soaked. Adults sit nearby on benches holding melting ice cream cones or relaxing while their kids play.

“Vonnie tooked me here yesterday,” Kenzie says.

“Who’s Vonnie?” Gia asks.

“When Lisa had to take care of her mommy, Vonnie came,” Kenzie says as we step up to the counter to order our ice cream.

Gia glances at me. “She’s your nanny?”

“She’s my friend,” Kenzie says easily while gazing at the row of colorful ice cream tubs, her little hands splayed on the glass.

Kenzie orders Moose Tracks and I order Coffee, but Gia declines.

“You sure?” the kid behind the counter asks, looking confused.

Gia shakes her head. “Too fattening,” she says, as if this is polite conversation.

“Make mine a double scoop,” I say to the kid.

He goes to work scooping mine first.

“What’s fattening?” Kenzie asks, her eyes wary.

I focus on my daughter’s face. “It’s when people think certain foods are bad for them.”

She frowns. “Is ice cream bad for you?”

Gia opens her mouth, but I pick up Kenzie so we’re eye to eye. “No, *chouchou*, ice cream isn’t bad for you.”

“Mommy doesn’t want any, so I don’t either.”

The kid looks up from adding my second scoop, confused.

“We’re going to hold off on the other order for now,” I say.

Vonnie’s advice flits through my thoughts, but it’s like I can’t find the right words to share them.

“Daddy, Lulu’s here, can I go play?” Kenzie asks, squirming out of my

arms.

I set her down and in a flash, she dashes off, calling her friend's name.

I pay for my ice cream and stroll after Kenzie. Gia falls in next to me.

"Don't ever talk like that around her again," I say.

"What? Ice cream *is* fattening." Gia scowls at me. "If you don't reel in her eating habits now, she'll blow up when she goes through puberty, and there's nothing like extra pounds to make a girl feel awful about herself."

Maybe spending time with Vonnie has made me more sensitive to this backwards thinking. Or maybe it's my worry about the marshmallows Kenzie's using as a crutch. Either way, Kenzie doesn't need any more bullshit about what she can or can't eat.

"Keep that harmful shit to yourself," I say, and lick my ice cream. But Gia's ruined my ability to enjoy it.

"Harmful, huh?" Her eyes flash with that battle-ready heat. "That's rich. What's her name? Vonnie?"

I refuse to give her any more fuel, so I ignore her question.

I'll have to endure two whole days of this, all while insulating Kenzie from Gia's crap. A difficult task made even tougher because I'll be busy with the parade and rodeo.

Something tells me Gia knows this, and is already scheming how to get what she wants.

NOAH

During dinner, Kenzie is so keyed up about her big day tomorrow and the all the excitement of seeing Gia that she's not eating.

"I went to the moon and I brought comic books," I say, and swirl a bite of noodles around my fork.

She catches on, and grins. "I went to the moon and I brought my comic books and Jupiter."

I swallow my bite. "Jupiter the planet?"

"No, silly. Jupiter is my dog."

"What kind of dog is Jupiter?"

"He's soft and brown and he smiles," Kenzie says.

"That's nice you have a friend."

"Can we get a dog?"

I give her a scrutinizing glance. "Who's going to snuggle with me if we have a dog?"

She stares into my eyes, her expression so earnest. Genuine. My heart flutters so fast my breath catches.

"I will, Daddy. Promise."

I smile at her. A dog might be a good idea. I could train it to attack narcissistic folk singers. "I'll think about it."

Her eyes light up. "Your turn."

"Take a bite first," I say. Not that I endorse bribing children to eat, but if she doesn't, she'll wake me up at midnight hungry and we both need a solid night's sleep.

Kenzie forks a bite of pasta, her eyes flicking to mine, expectant.

“I went to the moon and I brought my comic books, Jupiter, and peanut butter cookies.”

“Yumm,” Kenzie says. “I went to the moon and brought my comic books, Jupiter, peanut butter cookies, and Vonnie.”

My breath catches. She’s choosing Vonnie over her mother? I hide my surprise with a sip of water. “That’s nice of you to invite her. Do you think she’s up for a trip to the moon?”

“Duh.”

I feel like shit about today. The text I sent Vonnie earlier hoping to talk has yet to be answered.

I nod at Kenzie’s plate, and she dutifully takes a bite.

“I went to the moon and I brought my comic books, Jupiter, peanut butter cookies, Vonnie, and…” My mind goes blank. What else would I need?

“…Raven,” I add.

Kenzie scrunches up her face. “You can’t ride a horse on the moon, Daddy.”

“Not even Raven?”

Kenzie’s eyes brighten. “He could use his magic powers.”

It’s dishonest of me to encourage fantasies like this, but in this moment, I can’t shut her down. “Exactly.”

After dinner, when I carry her off to bed, she throws her arms around me. “*Je t’aime*, Daddy.” I love you.

I almost laugh at how effortlessly this rolls off her little tongue. My family has taught her well. I miss them. Especially right now, when I feel like I’m up against the world.

After Kenzie’s tucked in, I stroke her forehead and watch her eyes flutter closed, then wait for her breathing to deepen. I kiss her temple and slip from her room, leaving the door ajar.

I take a quick shower to wash off any trace of my ex. After I dress in jeans and a t-shirt, I pad to the kitchen and pour myself two fingers of whiskey with plenty of ice.

With my drink in hand, I slip to my back porch, and dial Vonnie’s number.

“Hey,” she says, her tone guarded.

I sip my whiskey, the ice clinking against the glass. My throat burns but the cinnamon and smoke lingers on my tongue. “Hey.”

“You okay?” she asks.

Staring at the dusky sky, my thoughts cartwheel over and over. “I need to explain about...today. In person.”

There’s a long silence.

“Please,” I add.

She sighs. “I’m kind of mad at you.”

“Which is why I need you here so I can make it up to you.”

“Promise to talk to me, and I will.”

“I promise.” Before hanging up, I let her know where to find me, then sip my whiskey and wait. The cricket chorus fills the night as the stars pop out of the faraway sky one by one.

Fifteen minutes later, I hear a car door shut on the street, and jump down to the grass. She comes around the corner of my house. Her hair is loose and shining like gold in the soft light from inside. Her lips are a glossy pink, with rosy cheeks to match.

When she sees me, she pauses, and our eyes lock.

I step close and pull her gently into my arms.

She returns my embrace, and a sigh escapes her lips.

“I was a dick today,” I say as the tightness in my spine slowly releases.

I can feel her smile against my shoulder. “Want to tell me why?”

I hold her warm body against mine for a moment longer. “I got scared.”

“You? Scared?” She scoffs and leans back, a skeptical expression on her face.

I plant a soft kiss on her forehead, grateful she’s willing to let me work this out. “You want to go inside?”

She stares up at the sky. “No, it’s nice out here.”

I sit on the edge of the porch, my bare feet cooled by the thick grass.

Vonnie sits next to me and places her hands on the edge, like she’s bracing herself.

“I called Dev,” she says. “When I couldn’t get a hold of you.”

“He told you to leave Gia and her sidekick here alone?”

She shakes her head. “He told me to call 911.”

I force a slow breath, giving myself a moment to process. “You did the right thing.”

“Then why were you mad?” she says. I expected anger, but she’s hurt.

Pins and needles prickle my chest. “I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“She tried to make me feel slutty.”

I shut my eyes for a moment. “And then I was an asshole to you. Fuck,

Vonnie, I'm so sorry."

"I get that you're stressed. But it hurts when you shut me out."

"I was actually trying to protect you."

"By shutting the door in my face?" She glares at me.

I release a hard sigh. "She would have dug her claws into you."

"And you don't think I can hold my own? Noah, I'm not some fragile flower."

I put my arm around her. She sighs, and I kiss the side of her head. "Gia brings out my worst. Forgive me."

"Why is she here?" Vonnie asks.

"Money," I reply.

She leans against me. "Not to see Kenzie?"

"I'm never sure with Gia."

"That's awful." She huffs a breath. "I shouldn't have been dancing around in just your t-shirt this morning."

Though this scenario shouldn't be funny, I can't help but smile. "I'm sorry I missed that."

Lightning fast, she punches my thigh.

"Hey!" I protest. Then nuzzle her ear with a brush of my lips. "It's probably a good thing I wasn't there when she walked in."

Her breath catches. "Why?"

"Because she would have seen you bent over my kitchen table."

She laughs. "You think I'd let you do something so dirty to me?"

I nip her earlobe and gently tug it with my lips. "I'd get you so hot you'd be begging me to."

She squirms. "Oh."

I pull her onto my lap and cup her face. When I stare into her pretty blue eyes, the powerful link between us twists a little tighter. I kiss her, our lips meeting in a slow embrace. She swipes her tongue past mine, and the kiss deepens. The crickets and the soft brush of the wind rustling the aspen leaves blend with our soft sighs and hungry lips.

I cup her ass and tug her closer. My cock gives a surge as her center makes contact.

She kisses me back and rolls her hips slowly over my erection. Her breaths quicken as the heat from our bodies blend together, the energy inescapable, addicting.

I caress her smooth tummy, feathering upwards. "See why I needed you

here?”

Her face softens and her eyes gleam with tension and desire. She kisses me with a tender, soft brush of her lips.

I stand, taking her and the blanket draped over the chair with me. With a little shriek, she wraps her legs around my waist.

I lay her on the blanket in the soft grass, then slide off her shorts and panties.

She sucks in a needy gasp.

I kiss up her inner thigh, kissing her adorable constellation of freckles on my way to where I've wanted to be since I left our bed this morning.



WHEN I WAKE Kenzie at 7:00, it takes her only one full second to remember what today is, and she jumps into my arms. “Today I’m a princess!”

Laughing, I hug her tight. “Today and every day,” I murmur before I kiss the top of her head.

After a quick breakfast, she dresses carefully, and I brush and braid her hair.

“You sure Mommy will be there?” she asks me no less than five times.

“She said she would.”

Kenzie nods, which tugs on the strands I’m weaving. I say a silent prayer of thanks for YouTube, which taught me this critical single-dad skill. Do they offer tutorials on getting rid of a toxic parent without permanently damaging the child? Or how to explain to a six-year-old that even though we love people, they still leave us?

As a reminder, I add “call lawyer” to my list of Monday tasks on my calendar. Then I go back and edit it to include “call social worker.”

“Vonnie and Lisa will be there too,” I say to Kenzie, my chest tightening. Though I so badly wanted Vonnie to stay last night, we both agreed to separate. But after watching her drive away at midnight, I wanted to claw my skin off.

When do I get to have a life?

We pack up our things and head to the fairgrounds. Dad was quick to

offer to load the horses this morning and meet us at the stables. Besides Raven and Dixie, he's bringing Odin, his powerful Quarter Horse, and our quick, spirited mare Bluebell.

After parking in the giant rodeo grounds lot, I help Kenzie down. She practically drags me along the row of horse trailers lining the access road. Horses of all colors and physiques are being led to stretch their legs or are warming up in one of the small corrals or getting groomed at the side of their trailer.

Finally, we reach the entrance of the stables. The air smells of alfalfa and that distinct mix of barn and horses. Because Dad's been involved in the rodeo for decades, we get stable priority for our horses. I find him and our herd in the farthest corner, which will be the quietest once the announcing starts. A jolt of excitement flashes through my bloodstream because rodeo pickup riding is a fuckton of fun. And Dad is an intuitive, skilled teammate.

Dad's brushing Odin, while Bluebell watches warily. She doesn't like the break in her routine, but once she's chasing down wild steers in the arena, she'll forget all about it.

"Granddad!" Kenzie says, and dashes into Odin's stall. She wraps her arms around Dad's legs and he bends to squeeze her back.

"Ready for your big day?" Dad asks.

"Yes!" she replies, and hurries to Dixie's stall. She feeds her something from her pocket. Likely carrot sticks from last night's dinner. Now I know why they disappeared so fast.

"Morning," I say to Dad.

"Morning," he replies.

I go to Raven's stall, and nuzzle the side of his soft nose and scratch his forelock with my knuckle. "You ready to rumble, big guy?" I say softly.

Raven jerks his head up and shifts his feet. He knows why we're here. I've owned only three horses in my life, and Raven is by far the smartest. He's also lightning fast. Two important skills for snagging cowboys off the back of an unpredictable, pissed-off bull.

Next to me in Odin's stall, Dad says in a low tone, "You work things out yesterday?"

"For now," I reply.

Dad's quiet for a long moment, Kenzie's soft murmur to Dixie blending with Dad's brush strokes on Odin's coat.

"Is she still here?" he asks.

“Yep,” I say, stroking Raven’s silky neck. “I got her a hotel room.”

“Mighty kind of you,” he says while brushing Odin’s rump in short, firm strokes. “Is that why she’s in town? She’s broke?”

“Yep,” I say, and grab a brush from our tack box and run it over Raven’s shoulders.

From outside the stall, I hear a voice I recognize.

My heart dances into my throat. Vonnie is standing outside Dixie’s stall. She’s wearing a tank top and tight jeans tucked into blue cowboy boots.

A knot of heat and desire tightens in my core.

Vonnie gives me a smoldering glance, as if she’s having similar feelings, then refocuses on Kenzie.

“Princess glitter, wow!” Kenzie says, and takes something from Vonnie’s outstretched hands.

“Want me to help you put it on?” Vonnie says.

Kenzie tugs Vonnie into Dixie’s stall.

Behind me, Dad’s brushing away. But there’s an edge to his silence.

I try not to let his disapproval get to me, but it only sinks in deeper.

Vonnie steps out of Dixie’s stall. “Good luck! I’ll be watching you!” She gives me another quick glance before turning away.

I try not to stare as she walks to the exit.

“You gonna have a clear enough head to ride with me tonight?” Dad asks.

I force images of peeling down Vonnie’s jeans from my mind.

“*Calmos*,” I say—relax—because nothing pisses Dad off more than hearing me speak the language he never bothered to learn.

“I’m not risking my life or Odin’s,” Dad replies.

He’s right. Pick-up riding is dangerous, and requires focus and strength.

I stroke down Raven’s strong, silky shoulders. “We’ll be ready, won’t we, boy?”

Dad turns to pierce me with a stern glare. “I certainly hope so.”

VONNIE

On the way to my car, while dodging a pair of cowboys leading their horses from the arena, I spot Sadie Jenkins and her partner. Sadie's pacing in the shade of one of the giant trees on the sidewalk while the guy smokes a cigarette, his back against the tree trunk.

Before they see me, I duck between two cars. Then I kick myself for being ridiculous. There's no reason to be afraid of them.

"Come on, Hank. Why else would they withhold those records?" Sadie says. "It's obvious both of them are protecting someone,"

"What if they're protecting a kid?" Hank asks.

"Right?" Sadie says, her voice sharp.

"But a kid didn't kill Rundell."

"Of course not," Sadie fires back.

"Well...all the players are in town," Hank says. "Besides Wyatt Morgan and Noah Tucker, we've got the Sheriff, retired detective Rick Torres, each of the four known victims, even the widow everyone thought Rundell had run off with."

Sadie stabs the air between them. "The murderer is here."

"Unless he's dead," Hank replies.

I try to casually cross the gap from the back of the truck I'm hiding behind to the next row of cars, but it's like I can feel their eyes on my back.

"Yvonne Morgan?" Sadie says.

Cursing silently, I turn. "Yes?"

Sadie hurries over. She extends her hand, and gifts me with a huge smile. "Sadie Jenkins. This is my assistant, Hank. We host a podcast called Truth

Serum. It's true crime."

I already know this, so I just nod.

Hank extinguishes his cigarette against the tree and drops it in his shirt breast pocket.

An awkward silence follows, and then Sadie's eyes gleam. "We'd like to speak with you about our project. Youth Pastor Jonah Rundell's murder."

Though her lips continue moving, I get a flash of Rundell's round face.

Ugh. I refocus on Sadie. "Okay, but I was only twelve at the time he died."

Sadie seems to ignore this. "It'll just take a few minutes."

"Sure," I say, coaxing a steadying breath into my lungs.

Sadie's eyes practically glow. "Great."

Two young women dressed in Western clothes, their hair lush and long beneath their cowboy hats, lead several horses past us, then turn onto the gravel lane leading to the arena behind me.

I follow Sadie to a bench on the other side of Hank's tree and we sit facing each other. Several blocks away, faint marching band music starts to play. The parade must be starting soon.

"Noah Tucker and your brother Wyatt have an unusual relationship," Sadie asks.

"How do you mean?"

"It's not often a cop and a journalist are friends."

I almost laugh. "Welcome to life in a small town."

Sadie's lips tighten as she gazes at me. I can almost see the wheels turning in her mind. "Your fathers hated each other though."

I shrug. This is no secret.

"Does Sheriff Tucker approve of this friendship?"

"Doubtful, but it's not like I would know..."

Sadie tilts her head. "What's your relationship with Deputy Noah Tucker?"

My stomach flips. "I worked for him as a nanny."

"So you're close?"

Ooh, boy.

"Sort of." I circle a knot of wood in the bench slats.

"Has he shared that the Rogue County Sheriff Department is investigating your father as a potential suspect?"

My throat closes. I force down a swallow. "No."

“From what we’ve discovered, your father had no alibi the night Jonas Rundell was murdered.”

Okay, I’m done here. I stand and stare Sadie down. Maybe this is what she’s wanted—to stir me up, to get me to reveal something juicy for her project. “Good luck with your story.”

“Thank you,” Sadie finally says, and glances at Hank, who pockets his phone.

I walk away with turmoil churning in my gut. My dad certainly had his flaws, but flying into a murderous rage wasn’t one of them.

Tears prick my eyes, but I wait until I get to my car before I wipe them away. I’m being irrational, giving Sadie and her story too much power over me.

If it’s true about Noah investigating my dad, why is he hiding it from me?

AT THE PARADE, I weave through the crowd to find my family. Caleb and Taylor have been saving a spot in our usual place in front of the bookstore. If my brothers and sisters keep having kids, soon we’re going to need the entire block.

Sasha, Leah, and Tristan—with Jesse riding on his shoulders—are here, plus Wyatt, Brooke, and their three kids. Lori is doing field work at the wolf sanctuary but should be here any minute, Peter and Tess have shifts in the E.R. today, and Annika and Grady are probably making good use of their day off together. She admitted to me how insatiable she’s been in her final trimester, an overshare I wish I could unhear.

“Is that Gia Moreno?” someone next to me says.

“Ohmigawd, it is! Get her autograph!”

Turning, I squint into the bright sunshine. It is Gia. She’s wearing a white cowboy hat, white off the shoulder blouse, a jean skirt, and strappy, high heeled sandals. Her makeup is flawless, as is her sparkling smile.

A small crowd is gathering around her as she signs whatever is being thrust at her—a ball cap, a receipt, the inside flap of a book, a t-shirt.

“Thank you so much,” she coos. “Y’all are so kind.”

I’ve actually never heard Limelight’s music. Is Gia famous?

“I’m here to see my daughter,” Gia says as I try to skirt the small mob. “She’s gonna be a princess ridin’ right down main street.”

A murmur of amazement rises from her followers.

“Excuse me,” Gia says to them. To my surprise, she catches up with me.

“That’s so wonderful you’re studying to be a nurse,” she says.

I give her a questioning look.

“Small towns are just delightful.” She makes a little shrug and scrunches up her face. I think it’s supposed to be cute, but it feels mean.

“Kenzie seems very attached to you. How does she feel about you leaving?”

“We haven’t really talked about it,” I say as nerves fizzle in my gut. I’m tempted to defend my reasoning behind not telling Kenzie about my impending departure—it’s weeks away, a lifetime for a six-year-old. News like that would only cause unnecessary anxiety.

But I get the feeling Gia isn’t interested in a child psychology lesson right now.

“Enjoy the parade,” I say, forcing a smile. “Kenzie is super excited you’re here.”

After I turn away, I force a deep breath, but my skin pulses with an uncomfortable heat. Like I’m frying in the sun.

Sasha takes one look at me when I arrive at our group and folds me into a hug. I squeeze him back.

“You okay?” he asks in my ear.

The impromptu interview with the true crime team is still rattling around in my brain, knocking against Gia’s nasty vibe, but I give Sasha a smile, then make my rounds. When it’s Caleb’s turn, he wraps me so tight I can’t breathe.

“Caleb!” I squeal, and pound on his shoulders.

“Just testing your reflexes,” he says with a wink. I sit down with Taylor who is flipping a Rubik’s Cube while Riley watches in awe from his other side.

“Can I try?” Riley asks, practically frothing at the mouth.

Tay whips two more twists, then hands it to her.

Sasha joins me on the curb and hands me a beer from the cooler no doubt packed by Caleb.

“It’s only noon,” I protest.

“Beer is ninety percent water. And it’s cold.”

“Fine,” I say with a laugh, and crack the lid.

He cracks his open and we cheers.

“Studying going okay?” he asks.

“I might be, er, playing a little too much.”

He taps my can with his. “Maybe a little fun is good. Helps you focus.”

“I thought three months of review would be enough. Now I’m not so sure.”

“You could extend, right? When’s the next one?”

“October.”

“Why not stay a little longer?”

“Because then I might never leave.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I fail to see the problem with that idea.”

I jab him in the ribs. “You can visit me in Seattle. I’ll take you to the Century Ballroom.”

“Of course I’ll visit. But Von...why put yourself through the trouble of leaving when everything you want is here?” He leans closer so his voice can’t be heard over the crowd. “Including a handsome stud who tends to your every need?”

I fight the flames flickering to life inside me with a full breath, but the air is hot and stagnant. “If I stay here, I’ll never know what I’m made of. I want this, Sash. I won’t ever get this chance again.”

He gives me a look of fierce kindness. “Then I want it too. Even though I’ll miss you like crazy.”

The parade starts, and we all stand.

We wave and cheer the team of Tennessee Walkers clip-clopping down the street, then a team of bareback riders, then finally Kenzie’s pony club.

I wave and call her name, but she’s waving furiously at Gia one block up. Finally, Kenzie hears me and turns.

“Hi Vonnie!” she shouts, her little smile like a beacon under her giant cowboy hat. Dixie’s chestnut coat gleams in the sunshine, the glitter flashing with every step.

After Kenzie’s group passes, the high school hockey team comes through on rollerblades to shovel the horse poop into trash bins. Dylan used to hate that job, but it always got him extra points with his harem.

Next, the eight young women of the Rodeo Royal Court, decked head to hoof in fancy attire, pass by waving and smiling.

Behind them in two rows, the rodeo crew stride toward us.

Noah and his dad are the second pair of riders, behind the MC. Noah is dressed in dark blue Wranglers and a white Western shirt.

I can’t help but think about what I learned from Sadie and Hank.

Rogue County Sheriff Department is investigating your father as a potential suspect.

Noah's quick brown eyes find mine, and his composed expression brightens.

Heat pulses through me, making the already hot day feel scorching. I stare at him as my emotions and fears tumble through me like the colorful shapes inside a kaleidoscope. One second the pieces lock together in a perfect fit. The next they're a jumbled mess.

Locked.

Jumbled.

Locked.

Jumbled.

Noah gives me a subtle wink and a playful smile, and then he and Raven are sauntering past us.

I watch him go, my heart galloping in my chest, my head swirling. I don't realize I'm gripping Sasha's arm until panic messages start firing in my brain.

"Sorry," I say with a wince.

"I got a contact high from that look he gave you."

I laugh, but it quickly turns to anguish. My insides are mush and my hands are shaking. The kaleidoscope inside me spins again but there is only chaos.

"What am I going to do, Sash?" I lean on his shoulder.

He puts his arm around me and squeezes. "Take it one day at a time."

VONNIE

After the parade, we pile into cars and migrate to the airport to pick up Dylan. Caleb rides shotgun with me in the Suburban, with Taylor and Lori in the back.

“Deputy Tucker paid me a visit the other day,” Caleb says, rolling down the window.

I side-eye him.

“I’m not telling you what to do, but...I’m here if you need me, okay?”

Flutters tickle up my breastbone. “Why does this sound like a warning?”

He gestures with his palms. “*Tranquillo*. More like a reminder.”

I should probably dig into this more, make sure he’s not gearing up to meddle. Caleb has always been my most protective brother. But we arrive at the airport and file into the building with the rest of my family before I can think up a reply. Our group is so boisterous that people actually gawk as we make our way to the baggage claim area.

When Dylan steps from the tarmac and sees us, his normally stoic face cracks into a bright grin. He drops his bag and we take turns mobbing him with hugs.

When it’s my turn, he grabs me in his strong arms and lifts me off the ground, as if I weigh nothing. “How’s my favorite little sister?”

“Hey!” Leah says and punches him in the arm.

He puts me down to grab Leah in a headlock.

“Easy!” I warn. “She’s got a bun in the oven.”

Dylan’s smile turns mischievous. “Wasting no time, huh?”

She jabs at him but he jumps back. Tristan and Jesse move in and Dylan

quickly swings Jesse onto his shoulders. We migrate to the parking lot, everyone talking at once. To an outsider, we'd probably look like some motley cast of a variety show. Or maybe one of those reality TV crews who team up to search for clues while a clock ticks down.

Without enough time for a proper dinner, we decide to grab food at the rodeo. Once we park, Dylan uses the back of the Suburban as an impromptu locker room to exchange his dress shirt and shiny shoes for a faded Henley and a pair of worn leather cowboy boots. Though I know he's fully acclimated to the high life of a professional athlete, the wardrobe switch seems to ease the lingering tension from his frame.

We mob the taco truck outside the rodeo entrance, then take our foil-wrapped burritos inside just as the MC kicks everything off. My family claims a section of bleachers four rows deep and we settle in. The littles go to the railing to watch the mutton busting competition while the rest of us eat our burritos and sip sodas, our chatter loud enough to draw the occasional dirty looks from our neighbors. It's useless to quiet us, so I don't even try.

While I'm certainly basking in the glow of tonight's reunion, there's only one real reason I'm excited about tonight's events.

And despite the many rodeo cowboy crushes I've had over the years, there's only one cowboy I'm excited to see.

When we stand for the National Anthem, Noah and the seven other wranglers gallop through the gate, each holding a giant American flag.

I swoon on the spot.

With my hand on my heart, I open my mouth to sing along with the crowd, but the words don't come.

Noah flies past, the flag flapping majestically, his focus total, complete. Raven's powerful muscles ripple, the pace of his labored grunts matching his stride.

"Breathe," Leah says in a low tone over the chorus of voices.

Dutifully, I release all the air from my lungs, but as the song reaches its crescendo, my heart is what's bursting in the air.

When Noah disappears through the gate, the giant flag undulating in the powerful stadium lights, my head throbs and the intense yearning I've been denying all day ignites.

My condition only worsens. Noah spends an hour chasing down wild steers and rescuing cowboys from the backs of bucking broncos. I'm so focused on Noah and Raven in the ring, Raven's hooves pounding the dirt

and Noah's concentration so complete, that I almost miss Gia staring at me from two sections down. I look away, but I can't shake the feeling she's been tracking me all night.

Why does she care about me at all? I'm not a threat. She doesn't want Noah or even Kenzie, and even if she did, it wouldn't matter. They aren't mine to fight over.

Is that her game? Mess with my already mixed up heart?

Noah and his dad tag a fresh team of pickup riders for the saddle bronc riding, so I go looking for Kenzie. Gia and her scarecrow friend are sitting next to her, as is Lisa, who smiles warmly at me.

"You want to see the starting chute?" I ask Kenzie. Gia watches me from the corner of her eye, like she's pretending I'm not standing right in front of her.

Kenzie's face lights up. I extend my hand for her to take. But before she moves my way, she turns to Gia. "Promise you won't go yet?"

Gia plasters on a smile. "And miss the bull riding? No chance."

Satisfied, Kenzie climbs down to the walkway and takes my hand.

"You and Dixie looked very regal in the parade," I say. "Was it fun?"

She gazes up at me, her sweet face so earnest. "I waved at you."

At the back of the arena, I lead her up the steps to the walkway connecting both sides of the stands.

"Are you going to ride in the roundup with me and Daddy?" she asks, her small hand warm in mine.

"Is that an invitation?" I ask.

"Please?" Kenzie says, tugging on my arm.

"When is it?" I ask as we reach the narrow walkway connecting the two sides of the arena.

"Before winter, duh."

I tap her nose to cover the ache in my gut. Most likely, this roundup happens in the fall, when livestock are moved to winter grazing grounds at lower elevations.

I'll be gone by then.

Before I can formulate an answer, a buzzer sounds from the announcing booth ten feet away. Kenzie and I cover our ears, then laugh. I point down, and Kenzie leans over the railing.

Below us are several helpers perched around a tight metal chute helping a cowboy lower onto a very agitated horse. From above, we see mostly the tops

of their white cowboy hats and the flash of their seasoned leather gloves. I hear shouts and commands in Spanish and English while the horse kicks and slams his sides against the pen, clearly ready to eject this cowboy into orbit the second he's let loose.

I steady Kenzie on the railing, and we watch the cowboy make one final adjustment to the rope lashing him to the saddle. After one tense moment, he gives a firm nod and the chute opens. In a burst of speed and motion, the steer kicks and bucks his way down the center of the ring. The cowboy, chaps flying, his body jerking and slamming, manages to stay on for his full eight seconds. When the buzzer blares, a pickup rider sprints forward to assist. He rescues the cowboy, and the other pickup rider herds the horse through the exit gate.

We're halfway into watching our third rider when Kenzie jumps down from the railing.

"Mommy!" she shouts while racing toward the steps. Startled, I scan the crowd and the in-gate below us for what's spooked her and see Gia walking with purpose down the muddied gravel road.

I hurry after Kenzie.

"She can't leave," Kenzie whimpers when I finally catch her at the bottom of the stairs.

I glance at Lisa, who is watching us from the bleachers, and give her a reassuring nod.

The arena buzzer blares loud in my ears and the crowd cheers. I scoop Kenzie up and descend to the ground level exit. Rodeo fans crowd the walkway, adding even more noise and confusion.

The right thing to do is to return Kenzie to Lisa and let her take over. But what if Gia is leaving and Kenzie misses her chance to say goodbye?

Kenzie's lower lip trembles. "She promised."

"We'll catch up to her, okay?" I say as I weave through the throngs of people, past the concessions and onto the gravel road behind the arena.

Kenzie squirms from my arms and trots ahead, her twin braids whipping over her shoulders as she dodges horses and horse people, some already celebrating, others grooming or loading gear.

I trot next to her, keeping my eye on Gia. She wouldn't really leave without saying goodbye?

To my relief, Gia turns toward the barn.

"See? She's probably going to visit the horses," I say to Kenzie.

Kenzie looks up at me, her eyes brimming with hope. It breaks my heart because it's so pure yet so doomed. She reaches up for my hand, and I hold it tight.

We stop inside the barn, the scent of alfalfa and animal musk strong in the warm air. A whinny from one of the stalls sets off murmurs from the other horses, almost like a warning.

Kenzie and I pass the first row of stalls, some occupied, some empty. Around the corner, Noah is grooming Raven, his motions swift, but restrained. Like he's trying not to reveal his feelings.

Facing him is Gia, her hands on her hips. I can't hear what they're discussing, but it's obvious that she doesn't like it.

"Mommy," Kenzie coos when she reaches Gia's side.

Noah looks up, his quick eyes assessing our presence. To my surprise, he smiles at me.

I stop, my heart pounding. "Um, Kenzie wanted to see her mom."

Gia glares at me, then Noah, as if blaming me for interrupting.

"Daddy, can we feed Blue?" Kenzie begs, tugging on Gia's hand.

He wags his finger at her, a playful smirk on his face. "One carrot, that's it."

"Yay!" Kenzie drags Gia two stalls down, rattling off horse facts.

I close the distance to Raven's stall and Noah meets me at the gap in the door, a spark of mischief in his eyes. His white shirt is marked with stripes of dirt and patches of dust. His jeans are similarly dusty. But he oozes power and sensuality from every pore. Or maybe that's just the effect he has on me.

"Nice riding out there, cowboy," I say in a low voice, leaning against the doorframe.

He steps closer, so I can smell his heady, intoxicating scent. "You know where to find me if you'd like a turn."

I press my lips together to keep from giggling.

Raven gives me a curious glance, his nostrils flaring.

To my surprise, Noah plants a soft kiss on my mouth. When he leans back, he smiles. "I've been wanting to do that all day."

"Me too."

I glance down the aisleway, but Gia and Kenzie are inside Blue's stall.

This isn't the time to bring up what I learned from the podcast team. "Do you want me to ask Lisa to take Kenzie home? It's been a big day for her."

He gives me a thoughtful glance. "That might be a good idea. I'll text

her.”

From Blue’s stall, it sounds like Kenzie is giving Gia a grooming lesson, her little voice earnest, like she’s eager to please. My heart thumps hard against my ribs.

“Things looked a little tense when we came in,” I say in a low tone.

Noah steps away to continue brushing Raven’s sleek coat, reminding me of their impressive tour around the ring, the giant flag rippling behind them.

“I’m giving her what she wants,” he says. “Or at least what I think is fair.”

I inhale a slow breath. Giving Gia nothing seems fair, but this isn’t my battle. “That sounds intense.”

He brushes down Raven’s rump in long, firm strokes. “She’ll be gone tomorrow, and we can all move on.”

Kenzie and Gia step back into the aisleway, and Kenzie slides her door shut. “Blue is going to be Vonnie’s horse for the roundup.”

Noah’s eyes lock with mine.

“But Vonnie’s leaving,” Gia says.

“No, she’s not,” Kenzie says.

I turn just as Gia looks down at her daughter, a crooked smile on her face. “I’m sure Vonnie will explain.”

Noah steps out of Raven’s stall to glare at Gia, then his attention is drawn to the aisleway and the person moving toward us. It’s Gia’s lanky friend, his long arms swinging at his side.

Gia sees him, then gazes down at Kenzie. “Bye, baby. Be good, okay?”

She lets go of Kenzie’s hand and steps back, giving me and Noah one last glance before turning away.

I watch, dumfounded, my heart quivering in my chest while Gia and her friend stride for the door.

Kenzie stands, her hands limp at her sides, her eyes fixed on her mother walking away.

Quickly, Noah scoops Kenzie into his arms.

Kenzie’s expression is shocked, confused—her look of hope from earlier blown apart. She dives into Noah’s arms. He rubs her back and holds her.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he says in a calm tone, his face set in a grimace.

I put my sense of powerlessness and frustration aside. “You want to go back to the rodeo?” I say to Kenzie. “We can sit with Lisa.”

“No,” Kenzie moans, her body limp against his shoulder, as if she’s

drained all of her reserves.

Noah shakes his head at me, then says to Kenzie, “You can stay with me until I need to ride, okay?”

Though I know Noah doesn’t mean to dismiss me, Kenzie is obviously upset, and needs her daddy.

So I turn on my heel and walk quietly to the door.

Back at the rodeo, I watch the last of the calf roping, but I can’t settle down. I shift my feet on the bleachers, smooth out the blanket, but nothing brings me comfort. My thoughts bounce around in my mind, beating up my heart in the process.

Kenzie must be so upset. How could Gia be so cruel? So selfish? How is Noah doing? He must feel the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders. How can I help them?

The bull riding competition starts, but Noah and his dad aren’t riding.

“Hey, your pocket’s buzzing,” Caleb says from my right side.

“Huh?” I reach back. It’s my phone. Crap. I’ve missed three calls from Noah.

A rush of fear prickles down my back. Something’s wrong.

I jump to my feet and tap the redial button, then press the phone to my ear.

Noah answers, his voice tense.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear—” I start.

His breaths sound ragged, like he’s running. “Please tell me Kenzie’s with you.”

My heart drops. I scan the bleachers, but Kenzie isn’t here. “No. Didn’t Lisa take her home?”

“She was about to, but Kenzie took off.”

“Could Gia have her?”

“Already checked,” Noah says. A horse whinnies. He’s in the barn. I cross my fingers that Kenzie is there. Maybe hiding in Dixie’s stall.

“Oh fuck,” Noah says as a stall door slides open in the background. “Raven’s gone too.”

NOAH

My world narrows to one focus: find my daughter. The sounds of the barn fade, and I hear only my thumping pulse and the air rasping through my throat.

Kenzie took Raven.

I was gone for one minute—*one*.

Blue pricks her ears and turns to gaze at me as I hurry to finish getting her tacked up.

Raven is a powerful horse. Incredibly dangerous for a small child. He'll run until he feels like stopping, and if Kenzie manages to stay on, when it ends, she could be a hundred miles away, in any direction. And if Kenzie falls off, she'll be alone. Possibly hurt.

Hurried footsteps in the aisleway pull me from this downward spiral.

"Noah," Vonnie says, breathless. She wraps me in a quick hug.

I draw on her strength and warmth for one second before breaking away.

"You're going after them," Vonnie says, watching me slide on Blue's bridle and fasten the buckles, my fingers acting on autopilot.

"I have to," I say.

Vonnie puts her hands on her hips. "I'm coming too."

I frown. There's a million reasons to tell her to stay, but I can't form any of them into words. "Not a good idea."

"It's a great idea. We're partners, aren't we?"

I don't have time to pick this apart, not when my heart is frozen in my chest.

"I'll take Dixie," she adds, dashing to the tack room.

Cursing, I follow, hoisting Dixie's saddle while Vonnie grabs the pad and reins. Together, we tack up a surprised Dixie. I soothe her with a gentle stroke of her neck.

"Help us find your girl," I say.

"I told Caleb and Wyatt," Vonnie says as she takes the reins.

"What for?"

"Because they can help. Caleb runs search and rescue missions all the time. And Wyatt can find out if anyone saw her leave and put out the alert."

I run my hand through my hair. It's not that I don't want help, it's just humbling. "All right."

We lead our horses to the exit. The muddy, gravel road behind the barn is crowded with rodeo people and their horses and trailers, but I try to block out the sounds and movement around me so I can channel the universe. *Which way did she go?*

I'm about to tell Vonnie we should split up when her phone chirps. "Wyatt says she was on Chestnut heading east," she reads from her screen.

"Let's go."

Vonnies and I slide into our saddles. I squeeze Blue's sides with my heels and click with my tongue. We take off down the center of the road.

My dad calls. "I'm on my way. Where are you?"

"About to turn east on Tenth. Vonnie's with me."

"That road funnels into Quince Canyon. You ride there recently?"

"Negative," I say.

"The north side trail has a nasty washout."

"Let's get them before they reach it," I say, my fingers tensing around the phone.

"Agreed."

I hang up.

"We'll find her," Vonnie says, her gaze fierce in the glow from the streetlights.

Tenth street takes us past several blocks of houses, then turns to gravel. We urge our horses faster. The lights from town fade as the night wraps us in darkness.

"Why did she take Raven and not Dixie?" Vonnie asks as our horses gallop side by side.

I think back to the game Kenzie and I played last night. "She thinks Raven has magical powers."

“Does she have a destination?”

“She’s never done anything like this.”

“She had some pretty big feelings today.”

“This is my fault. I should have set up tighter restrictions so Gia can’t pull shit like this.”

She gives me a sharp look. “Don’t do that. You’re doing your best, Noah.”

“How is this my best?” I growl, and push Blue for more speed.

The gravel road ends at a BMX pump track. Beyond, trails weave up a broad slope to the outline of a jagged ridge.

Hoof prints are everywhere. I slide the big flashlight from my saddle pouch and scan the ground. The nearby creek keeps the soil damp, but it’s impossible to know if the hoof prints are Raven’s.

“You want to call for her?” Vonnie says.

“Good idea,” I say, and count down from three. “Kenzieeee!” we both shout, then stay still and listen. I count silently to twenty, but hear only my frantic pulse.

We try again but get no answer.

I call Dad. “Take the south side. We’ll go north.”

“A couple of wranglers are on their way too,” he says over the sound of Odin’s steady pace. “Rogue River Fire is standing by with their rescue team.”

I hang up and steer Blue toward the north fork. She takes off like a rocket. Vonnie is close behind me, clicking her tongue to spur Dixie on.

We race up a broad rise. At the top, the trail turns to a well-worn double track, but there are only one set of hoof prints.

“Let’s call again,” I say, fighting off a chill from the quickly cooling night air. Kenzie won’t be able to stay warm for very long in her jeans and thin shirt. Especially if Raven’s running full tilt.

We shout her name but hear nothing. My heart lodges higher in my throat. What if we can’t find her? Or what if we do, but it’s too late?

With a click of my tongue, Blue takes off and Vonnie races up next to me. The moon won’t rise for several more hours, so we’ll have to ride carefully while also keeping an eye out for clues.

The double track straddles a wide ridge that snakes gently upwards. The hoof prints are more spaced out here, indicating Raven was at a full gallop. Did something spook him? Or was he simply relishing his freedom?

Kenzie weighs almost nothing compared to me. Raven would barely

know she was there.

Keep her safe, big guy.

The grunt of the horses and thunder of their hooves crowd my senses.

The trail narrows to single track and skirts below a jumbled peak. I lean forward in my saddle to help Blue plod up a steep section to a narrow pass. Blue easily navigates the clusters of rock, but at the top, the bare clay soil is so dry it's almost slick.

"Whoa," I coax Blue just as she realizes the change in traction, and slows to a stop.

Dixie and Vonnie join us. "Yikes," she says. "Slippery."

The back of my neck prickles. I strain my ears to listen for sounds—a rock tumbling or a hoof clacking, or Kenzie's voice.

"Let's call," I say, and count down.

"Kenzieeeee!" we shout down into the basin, then wait.

But it's hard to hear over our horses' heavy breathing.

Below us, the trail snakes out of sight below the peak. I turn in my saddle. Tiny bobbing lights dot the opposite slopes—likely Dad and the wranglers.

How fast is Raven running? He could easily be thirty miles ahead of us by now.

"Wait," Vonnie says, her posture going completely still.

"You hear something?"

Dixie swishes her tail and stomps, but Vonnie's attention is rapt. "Let's call again."

With my heart hammering against my ribs, I cup my hands around my mouth and yell with all my might.

This time, I hear something too.

"Down that way," Vonnie says, pointing to the left, where the trail fades into the darkness. The thin ribbon of dry dirt angles steeply down. We'll have to be careful.

My pulse throbs in my temples, bringing on a hot, sharp pain. I ease Blue onto the trail. She's agile and with just enough attitude for a tricky descent like this. Dixie is more timid, but she'll follow Blue.

Am I stupid for letting Vonnie come along? If she gets hurt out here, I would never forgive myself. Though could I really have been able to turn down her help?

We're partners, aren't we?

When Kenzie told Gia about Vonnie riding Blue in the roundup, my skin

jumped because I thought maybe it was true.

But one look at Vonnie dashed my hopes, and in that moment, I knew I was going to lose her. Even though her departure has always been there in the back of my mind, it was always a problem for someday.

What Dev said to me rattles around in my thoughts. He's right. There is no someday, there is only right now.

Just ahead, I notice the section of washed-out trail. Below it, the sage and earth are torn up. I dismount and hand Vonnie Blue's reins. With panic tearing at my chest, I race down the slope, my boots sliding and catching on the tough sage, my arms windmilling.

"Kenzie!" I shout.

Behind me, I hear Vonnie talking into her phone.

As I descend, the darkness becomes complete, but I don't stop.

Kenzie is here. My sweet baby girl.

The slope ends abruptly at a creek. I splash into it then pause, straining to hear over the trickling water.

A low nicker grabs my attention. It's Raven.

I click my tongue. If Raven is here without Kenzie...

He nickers again, and this time I see movement in a grove of trees on the other side of the creek.

"Kenzie?" I call out, climbing the opposite bank.

Then I hear her soft sniff. She's on the ground somewhere. I weave through the trees, ducking branches, letting my senses lead me.

"I'm here, *chouchou*, it's okay."

"Daddy," she whispers.

There. To my left, curled up, her back to a giant aspen. Behind her, Raven is a mere shadow.

I race over and drop to my knees. "Did you fall?"

Kenzie's cheeks are wet from crying and she's guarding her arm against her chest. She sucks in a sob. "It doesn't...hurt."

"Let me see," I say, and gently cradle her arm. Thankfully I don't see blood, but she whimpers when I unsnap her shirt cuff and slide it up.

Her narrow wrist is already swollen and there's a bump under her skin. When I touch it, she yelps.

"Okay," I say in a calm voice. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

She shakes her head.

I do a quick assessment just to be sure, but everything seems intact.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she says, sucking in a sob, her tiny body shaking.

“You were so brave,” I say, caressing her hair, my eyes stinging with tears. Though a part of me is furious at her for being reckless, I’m more grateful that she’s safe.

“Is Raven hurt?” she asks, glancing over her shoulder.

Raven shifts his stance in the darkness, his soft breaths barely audible over the trickling creek. That he doesn’t seem distressed is a good sign, but if he’s not hurt or spooked, why wouldn’t he keep running?

“Do you want to help me check him out?” I ask.

She nods.

I lift Kenzie into my arms, being careful to settle her broken wrist against my chest. We walk over to Raven, his coat slick with sweat.

“Hey, boy,” I say, and pet his neck. He jerks his head and gazes down at me.

Kenzie reaches out to pet his neck. We stroke him and I watch his face for a reaction—pain or anxiety or any sign that he’s suffering. He gives a soft sigh.

I shine my phone’s light on his legs, looking for wounds, but don’t see anything obvious. Relief floods me. I’ve had to put a horse down once after an accident, and I have no desire to ever do it again.

“You ready to go home, princess?” I say to Kenzie, planting a soft kiss on the side of her head. From the south side of the canyon ridge, a light appears—Dad. I’ll let him tend to Raven.

Kenzie curls into me. I savor the feeling of safety and relief as the adrenaline ebbs from my bloodstream.

We did it. We found her. She’s safe.

I glance up the slope to where Vonnie is waiting. I could have found Kenzie on my own. But I’m grateful I didn’t have to.

I call her. “She’s okay.”

“Thank god,” she replies, her voice breaking.

“Fractured wrist though,” I say.

“We should splint it for the trip out. I can talk you through how to make one.”

This takes me by surprise. “They teach wilderness medicine in nursing school?”

“No. I was a raft guide in a former life, remember?”

She rattles off the components for an improvised lower arm splint and I

get to work. For the rigidity, I find two sturdy sticks; for the cushioning, I cut a section of Raven's saddle pad, and for compression, I make an ace bandage out of the t-shirt I wore under my work shirt.

Once Kenzie's wrist is secured, she seems to relax a little. Maybe it's the extra support, or maybe because the injury is out of sight.

I call Vonnie back. "Okay, we're coming up."

"Caleb just got here."

I glance up but can't see anything beyond the dim light from my phone's screen. "On horseback?"

"He and Grady, um, ran."

"What?" I say, baffled.

"They're coming down to help you," she says as two lights bob down the slope—Caleb and Grady. "This is the stuff they do for fun."

"Vonnie, I—" I stop myself from saying the rest. I can't possibly mean it. I'm just caught up in the moment.

"Thank you," I say instead.

VONNIE

At the E.R., Peter takes one look at our dirty, grimy faces and puts his hands on his hips.

“Which one of you is actually injured?” he asks.

“My daughter,” Noah says, stepping forward. Kenzie tightens her grip on his neck.

He gives the rest of us a shrewd glance, then beckons Noah through the swinging doors.

“Vonnie,” Kenzie calls out over Noah’s shoulder.

Without a word, Peter nods for me to follow them.

Because this is the work I was born to do, I slip into triage mode, helping to get Kenzie ready for X-rays, talking her through the process, soothing her worried daddy. Pete calls in our orthopedic tech to make Kenzie’s cast. By this time, the anti-inflammatory meds and the applesauce snack have had their desired effect and Kenzie is relaxed, allowing the process to go smoothly. She picks out purple and pink butterflies for her pattern and a pink sling. While I sit with her, Noah steps into the hall to make several phone calls, and when he returns, the tension in his jaw has softened.

“Raven’s fine. Dad got him back to the barn and checked him out.”

I hug him, and though we’ve been together for the last several hours, it’s the first time I’ve held him since last night. We’re dusty and dirty and the lights in this room are way too bright, but the moment feels perfect.

Partners.

Without us talking about it, I walk with Noah to his truck, and we buckle an exhausted Kenzie into her booster seat. Then Noah drives us home.

After Kenzie is tucked into bed, he finds me in the kitchen, my chattering thoughts making me feel restless, and simply extends his hand. I take it, and he leads me into his bathroom. We leave our grimy clothes on the floor and step into the warm water.

After we rinse, Noah holds me. I wrap my arms around him and tuck into his shoulder. I shouldn't cry—Kenzie is safe.

Noah tilts my chin and kisses me. I give in to him with my whole body, letting everything fade away but this kiss and our bodies pressing closely together. He grows hard against my stomach. I roll my hips closer and he gently caresses my breasts. The desire and ache and the fear that I've already fallen too far for this man swirl together to create an unstoppable craving.

Because what if this is the last time?

Noah's kisses are sensual but hungry, his expert, patient hands making me desperate. I kiss him back, my tongue dancing with his while I caress down the plane of his stomach, over his hip bone, and finally, to his smooth, hard cock.

He gives a soft grunt, then takes my face in his hands and kisses me harder. He's firm and perfect in my hand. He groans again, a deep, needy sound from deep inside his chest. After one long, searing kiss, he shuts off the water and reaches for our towels. He dries me with an almost reverent attention, his eyes lit with a fiery, aggressive heat.

Then he carries me to the bed.

His lavish attention continues, with sensual kisses and tender, firm caresses. He gives me the first of several toe-curling orgasms with his fingers, then pulls me on top, stroking my breasts as I rock against him, his gorgeous cock so perfectly full inside me that I never want it to end. We both come, his mouth on mine to silence my cries, and after we catch our breath, he kisses down my stomach, then assaults me with his wicked, hot tongue to coax me to yet another climax.

Limp, my body deliciously sated, Noah pulls me to his chest and drapes the covers over us. I know I should go—Kenzie could wake up needing her daddy in the night—but it's like my brain and muscles have stopped communicating.

"I'm going to get up in a bit," he says. "But I want you to stay."

"You're not tired?" I say, caressing his smooth chest.

He kisses my forehead. "I am, but I know I won't sleep."

"Is it...because of the case?" I ask.

He caresses my shoulder. “What case?”

The questions churning through my brain all afternoon spill from my lips. “Jonas Rundell’s murder. Sadie Jenkins said—” I pause to stroke down his arm, needing to feel connected before I can say the rest. “—you’re investigating my dad.”

He sighs heavily, then rolls us to the side so we’re eye to eye in the darkness. “Investigating murders and all kinds of other crimes is my job.”

“I know,” I say quickly.

He caresses my face, dusting my bottom lip with his thumb. “When you came to me six years ago, remember how I asked you about that night Rundell disappeared?”

“Yeah. But I don’t know where Dad was.”

He watches me for a moment, as if waiting for me to connect the dots. I do, but the picture it makes isn’t pretty.

“There’s a limit to what I can share, Vonnie, but yes, I looked into your dad as a suspect. But I looked into a lot of others also.”

“Did you find anything?”

He strokes gently over my hip, his rough hands moving in slow circles. “Nothing that clears him, but also nothing incriminating.”

“So...that’s it?”

“Not exactly.”

“Noah, my dad is gone. What purpose could accusing him possibly solve?”

His face is calm, like he’s tucked away his feelings. This is both maddening yet somehow reassuring. “None.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know,” he says, and scoops me closer and rolls to his back, taking me with him. “I need you to trust me, okay?”

I shut my eyes, and a tear squeezes out. “I miss my dad. I miss his laugh, the crazy things he used to do for fun.”

“I’m sorry you lost him,” Noah says.

Remembering that terrible year when my mom fell apart and Leah turned into a stranger makes me shudder. I never want to feel that alone again.

If my dad somehow is involved in murdering Jonas Rundell, it’ll crush me, and may very well destroy the tight-knit family I care so much about.

But it’s not like I can ask Noah to stop doing his job. I wish there was something I could do to protect my dad from this, protect my family, my

people. I don't want to wonder if one of them is a murderer.

Rundell was a manipulative predator who traumatized children. I wasn't sorry when he disappeared, but I wish the reason had stayed a mystery. I say a silent prayer that the case leads to a dead end and it gets put back on a shelf.

Noah's tender caresses are so soothing and gentle, his breaths slow and relaxed. I surrender to the sense of safety and the strong pull to rest, and close my eyes.

THE FOLLOWING afternoon I'm volunteering in the E.R. with Peter when I get a phone call from the phone in reception.

Curious, I scoop up the receiver from the desk.

"Hello?"

"Von, there's a letter for you from Seattle Children's Hospital," Wyatt says, his voice tense.

"Is the envelope fat or thin?" I ask, inhaling a steadying breath.

"Thin."

"Shit," I say with a hard sigh. Thin letters usually mean rejections. Fat letters are usually full of contract paperwork and other documents.

"Should I open it?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, and cringe as the sound of paper tearing fills my ears.

"Dear Yvonne, we are pleased—" Wyatt sucks in a breath "—to welcome you to the staff at Seattle Children's Hospital!"

The rest I don't hear because I start screaming.

The triage nurse and half the E.R. staff come running, concerned looks on their faces.

"I got the job!" I shout, and start jumping.

Wyatt is rattling off more of the letter, but I interrupt him.

"Wait, does it say anything about—"

"...and your placement in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit!" Wyatt interrupts.

I scream again. Peter grabs me in a hug and swings me around. The room spins while I imagine walking into the NICU on my first day, ready to start my life.

Though I relish the attention from my favorite E.R. staff, there's only one person I want to share this news with. So once the high fives and hoots die down, I slip away to text him.

Can you stop by the E.R. today?

Everything okay?

Everything is great

After I tap SEND and see those words flash, the euphoria of landing my dream job fades. Because accepting the position at Children's means our impending goodbye is real.

An hour later, Noah texts me from the hospital parking lot.

I hurry outside.

Noah steps from his Rogue County SUV, his face brightening when he sees me.

"Wow. I never knew scrubs could look sexy," he says, his eyes twinkling.

"I know you're at work, but I didn't want to wait to tell you."

His look turns wary. "Wait to tell me what?"

I feel a little bit wicked savoring this moment, when I have him on edge. But I can't hold it in any longer.

"I got the job!" I say, and squeal.

His face breaks into a huge smile. "Vonnie, that's great!"

I jump into his arms and he squeezes me tight.

"I can't believe it!" I say into his shoulder.

"That's a huge accomplishment," he says. "I'm so stoked for you."

"Thank you," I say as the bubble of joy bursts because of course we both know what this means.

We break away, and he must see the tear about to spill from my eye because he wipes it away and gives me a smile so full of love that it just makes me want to cry harder. "We'll celebrate, okay? Can you go out tonight?"

"You mean for a date?" I reply. "Like a real one?"

He laughs. "Yeah. A real one."

With a wink, he slips back into his SUV and cruises to the exit.

That night I'm getting ready, my skin buzzing and my belly wound so tight I'm nauseous.

My phone screen lights up with a call from Noah. I answer and put him on speaker so I can finish my mascara.

"Hey, handsome," I say.

"Hey," he says, sounding tense. "I'm so sorry, but I need to postpone our

date.”

“Oh,” I reply, setting down my makeup. “Are you okay?”

“It’s Kenzie. She’s...having a hard time with me leaving.”

I turn away from the mirror. “Noah, I’m sorry.”

“I think she’s still processing what happened. I feel like if I leave tonight, things will get worse.”

“I understand. Of course you should stay home with her tonight.”

“I’m sorry to do this to you.”

“Don’t be. I love that you’re taking such good care of her. She needs that.”

Instead of moping, I cajole Riley into a game of Koosh ball followed by inspecting various samples of pollen under her microscope.

More than once, I catch myself wanting to share the lazy evening with Noah. Kenzie and Riley are two years apart, but they’d get along well. It’s the same with my family. I can easily see Noah here for Sunday suppers or birthday brunches or just to hang out.

It’s not an unwelcome thought, but it does something to the inner workings of my stomach. At first I think I’m just holding on to some pre-test anxiety. But then I realize what’s really behind it, and the feeling just gets worse.

Heartbreak, here I come.

THE REST of the week passes in a blur of cramming like mad, volunteering in the E.R. or in Tess’s free clinic, and spending time with Noah when logistics allow.

Since the night Kenzie took off and Caleb and Grady showed up to help, then Peter gave me that knowing look in the E.R., it’s taken the edge off my worry that my brothers might not approve of Noah. That night, my brothers saw him as a caring, dedicated dad and not just a strict cop. Almost like he passed some kind of test. Or maybe the experience helped them see me in a different light.

However it happened, the sense of increased freedom is a welcome shift. Sometimes I join Noah and Kenzie for an afternoon at the park and a simple dinner. Other times he and I sneak away, just the two of us.

When we’re alone, it’s like the outside world doesn’t exist. We don’t talk about my job at Children’s, or Rogue County’s murder investigation digging

into my family's past. Instead we talk about our favorite books and music. Or we're in a hurry and don't talk at all, at least not in complete sentences.

Each time he drops me off or I leave his house, the heaviness in the pit of my stomach intensifies. It's like he's the high, and the more I have of him, the more I want. And in between, the craving for more threatens to unravel me.

MY FINAL WEEK before the test, I create a review flow to cover all the body systems one last time. Monday is Endocrine, Tuesday is Neuro, Wednesday is Renal, Thursday is Cardiovascular.

So when I pull out my materials and highlighted text sections for the tricky subject of Delegation & Protocols on Friday morning and my entire notebook is missing, I try not to panic. I saved this subject for the end of my cram week because I wanted it fresh in my mind. It's not science and doesn't come with colorful charts or keywords. Since I've never delegated a single task in my life, it's all theory and concept, which makes it my hardest.

I fight my sense of panic by taking a step back and scanning my entire room, hoping to spot the notebook out of place somewhere. When that fails, I methodically move every notebook, study guide, and textbook from my desk to my bed on the chance it's just tucked out of sight, or I'm blind and it's right here.

I call Noah at work.

"Hey, sunshine," he says in a soft voice.

"I can't find one of my notebooks. You haven't found one lying around, have you?"

"Not that I've seen. Could you have left it in Garnet Falls?"

"Nope. I've seen it since then."

"Okay, meet me at the house in fifteen minutes."

Relief floods me. "Thank you."

After racing down the stairs, I snatch the Suburban keys and slip into my flip flops. "Be right back!" I call out before bounding down the steps.

At Noah's house, his silver deputy SUV is already here. I park on the street and hurry inside.

He pulls me into a quick hug, his uniform starched against my cheek, then gives me a determined glance. "I'll take the kitchen and living room, you check the bedrooms."

“Okay,” I say, grateful for his help, then spin for the guest room.

I check the desk drawers, under the bed, the closet. No notebook. I go into Noah’s room. My already tense stomach gives a jolt. We’ve shared stolen hours together here since the rodeo, and those memories unfurl in front of my eyes, making my thighs clench and the back of my neck prickle. In this room we’ve shared the most erotic moments of my life. As a partner, Noah is attentive and caring, but also bossy and aggressive in a way that’s sexy and passionate. I grip the doorjamb and fight the feeling of desperation. We’re on borrowed time.

Stop it.

I close my eyes and take a breath. Focus.

Forcing my body to move, I search every nook and cranny, even the bedside drawers. In the one next to Noah’s bed are several boxes of condoms, a small package of tissues, a bottle of lube, and several other items I don’t take time to identify because they aren’t a notebook.

I check the bathroom drawers and cupboards but don’t find it. In Kenzie’s room, I do a methodical search, being careful to leave her things as I find them.

I didn’t expect to find my notebook in Kenzie’s room, but not locating it dashes the last of my hopes.

Could I really have lost something so critical?

A rush of fizzing, humming energy prickles up my body. Quickly, I shut my eyes. The sounds from the room blink out as the humming blares in my ears. I breathe, trying to be patient as the feeling passes through me, but the panic swirls faster, making the ground feel like quicksand.

There is only one explanation for why this notebook is missing.

Owen.

See you soon.

“Find it?” Noah calls from the loft, but he might as well be on the moon.

I ground myself in the scent of sage coming in through Kenzie’s window and the solid plane of the wall against my back. Outside, a chickadee chirrup.

Breathe.

“Vonnie?” Noah says, walking slowly toward me, a concerned expression on his face. God he looks good. Big and strong and safe. Stern yet caring. Firm and patient. A good listener. A generous lover. A trusted friend.

A partner.

Noah peers at me, his eyes full of compassion. It hits me so hard that my already quivering heart feels ready to burst.

“It’s okay, sweet girl.”

I lunge for him as the tears burn my nose. The NCLEX is in three days. If I don’t find a replacement for the notes I’ve lost, I’ll fail.

“Is there someone from the class who could copy their notes for you?” he asks. “Or is there a resource online you could use?”

I savor his confidence and composure, his rough uniform fabric against my cheek reassuring. Real.

“I don’t know what to do, Noah,” I say, gripping him so tight.

He kisses the top of my head. “I’m here, okay? Tell me what you need.”

I loosen my grip on him and swipe my cheeks dry. “There’s this guy. From my classes. I think he might have done this. I warned him in Garnet Falls to stay away from me. We...went to mediation...and he agreed to leave me alone.”

“Hold on. Owen was in Garnet Falls?”

A shock wave rips through me. “How do you know his name?”

He wipes his face with his big palm and fixes me with a fierce gaze. “The mediation came up when I ran your license. I looked into it.”

“That was supposed to be private,” I say, my voice rising.

“You’re right.” He sighs. “But I needed to know you were okay.”

I lean back against the wall and stare at the ceiling. “By investigating me?”

“No. I wanted him on my radar.”

“Why? Because you think I can’t take care of myself?”

“Vonnie, stop. I made one phone call, okay? I haven’t told anyone about Owen, not even Wyatt, which, believe me, took a lot of fucking restraint.”

“If I wanted him to know, I would have told him myself.”

He puts up his hand. “I hear you loud and clear. But you have to understand. *I’m a cop*. I see the worst in people every day. It’s not that I don’t believe in you, all right? It’s assholes like Owen Broderick I don’t have faith in.”

I heave another sigh. “I hate feeling like you’ve been watching out for me. Especially without me knowing it.”

“Wanting to protect you isn’t something I can turn off. Please don’t ask me to.”

I pound the wall with my fists. “I don’t want to need anyone’s help. It

makes me feel weak and I've worked so"—my lips tremble with sudden emotion— "hard to be strong."

"Asking for help takes courage and trust, Vonnie. If anything, asking for what you need proves just how strong you are." He takes a step closer, a look of fierce kindness in his eyes, and gently wipes my tears. "Let me be there for you."

This feels like the hardest thing, but once I lean into him and he wraps his arms around me, I stop fighting, and it's the easiest thing in the world.

"Okay," I say.

But it's all a lie, because very soon it's going to end and I'll be back on my own.

VONNIE

I sit at an empty desk in the police station adjacent to Noah's, scanning the necessary forms to file an anti-stalking protective order. Filling them out means divulging a lot of detail, including proof that Owen has broken his mediation agreement.

Next to me, Noah is on the phone, jotting down something on a pad while he gives short answers. When he hangs up, he rolls his chair over.

"Do you know a Justin Blanchard?" he says, tapping his pen against his thigh.

I frown. "No."

"Could he be friends with Owen?"

I rack my brain for the answer. "No idea. Wait, there is a Justin in the class ahead of us. If it's the same one, they might know each other."

Noah's jaw flexes. "The day we got back from Garnet Falls, there was a car parked on my street with Washington plates. Justin is the owner."

"Did you think it was Owen?"

He purses his lips for an instant before replying, "I wanted to make sure it wasn't."

"Owen has a car. I've seen him leaving the parking lot at school. It's black and sporty. Why would he drive to Penny Creek in someone else's car?"

"To avoid detection, possibly." He rolls back to his desk and taps several keys on his computer. I tune him out so I can complete the form I'm working on.

"There it is," Noah mutters a few minutes later. He leaves his desk but is

quick to return, holding an image still warm from the printer.

In it, a white compact car with Washington plates waits at an intersection. Noah points at the driver's face. "Is that Owen?"

Anger boils up so fast I have to clench my teeth to keep from screaming. "Yeah."

"This was the day after we got back, which means he had to have spent the night in town because I saw him the previous day. We have other traffic cams I can access if we need more documentation. Without a doorbell camera or fingerprinting, there's no way to prove he broke in, but this certainly shows he came close to you, which breaks the mediation contract you both agreed to. That alone is enough to file a protective order."

"It's too risky," I say, dropping my pen on the desk. "If HR at Children's finds out about it, I'll never work there, no matter how stellar my grades or my recommendations. Owen got the job first, so he'll get to keep it."

"You can explain that on the form. HR could request that you work different shifts."

I shake my head. "They might make special arrangements for Owen, but not for me."

"Why not? It's not your fault this guy is making your life difficult."

I put my head in my hands. "The cop I talked to hinted that I had led Owen on."

Noah's tone darkens. "Don't let that bullshit into your head, okay? Under normal circumstances, telling someone to leave you alone should be enough. Not for someone like Owen Broderick. You're not to blame for that."

"But why did he pick me?" I say, my voice so quiet I can hear the buzzing of the clock on the wall.

Noah spins my chair so we're eye to eye, his steady gaze drawing me in. "Probably because you're beautiful. And smart. And kind. You're probably the nicest person he's ever met."

I stare out the window, knowing this is a dead-end thought. It's also a road I've traveled before. One that only leads to hell.

No. I won't let stupid Owen Broderick jeopardize all the hard work I've done.

"Vonnie," Noah says. "What happened isn't your fault."

I close my eyes and weave my heart strings with Noah's. Then I cinch them tight and cherish the pulse of strength and kindness this brings into my body. I need to take back what I said about not needing him, because this

right here—this feeling?—is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. It’s growing so big I can barely contain it, barely get in a breath before it’s filling me up like a hot air balloon.

How could I possibly not want this feeling in my life?

“I need to take my boards first, then I’ll decide,” I say.

His look contains no judgment, no scolding or cajoling to do things his way.

“Okay,” he says with a nod.

WHEN NOAH WALKS ME OUT, the afternoon sunshine is casting long shadows on the sidewalks and the air has that clingy, thick heat that indicates a summer storm is brewing.

“Thanks for your help with all of this,” I say as he waits for me to unlock the Suburban.

“Can I do anything else? Look up alternate resources for you? Help you study?”

“How would you help me study?”

“How about I quiz you?” He gives me a sly grin, tucking his thumbs into his thick tool belt. “Or I could pretend to be sick and you could diagnose me.”

I know he’s trying to lighten my mood, not downplay my crisis, so I play along and roll my eyes. “I am not allowed to diagnose patients. That’s called practicing medicine and would be cause for dismissal.”

His eyes sparkle with mischief. “Then maybe we could practice you taking orders.”

I laugh but a rising heat floods the back of my neck at the same time. “Not fair. You’re distracting me.”

He winks and takes a step back. “You can plan on it.”

TO FURTHER MY conviction that Noah is a hero, that night when I come over, he surprises me with a twenty-page copy of lecture notes from the protocols section of our course.

“Where in the hell did you get these?” I ask, leafing through them in awe.

“Your professor, Dr. Alyson Rice.”

“And you just...what...called her up out of the blue and ordered her to send them to you?”

He chuckles. “No. I explained the situation—”

I send him a murderous look.

He puts up his hand. “—delicately. And she offered.”

I jump into his arms. “Thank you!”

He carries me down the hall to his room, and whispers in my ear, “After I quiz you, then I’m going to peel off your clothes so I can distract you.”

“Maybe we have the distraction now,” I whimper, my core twisting into a tight knot. “Study later?”

He lowers me onto the bed and climbs on top of me, kissing down my chest to the bare patch of skin above my shorts. His tongue slides in slow circles and he plants soft kisses along the edge while sliding my t-shirt up. I opted not to wear a bra because I knew I wouldn’t be spending much time in it. When he finds me bare, he groans. His fingers knead and pinch, making me arch off the bed.

“So easily distracted,” he says, caressing me.

“You have no idea.”

Noah lowers his mouth to my nipple. I squirm in anticipation.

“Has my little nurse been thinking dirty thoughts?” he asks.

“I’m afraid it’s a chronic condition,” I say, already panting because he’s tugging my shorts off and kissing his way up my thigh.

He laughs again. “Good thing I have just the right remedy.”

TWO DAYS LATER, my family throws me a surprise pre-dawn breakfast send-off before my drive to the NCLEX testing center. I get spoiled with bacon and blueberry pancakes and the warmth of my favorite people before climbing into the Suburban.

The sun is just peeking over the mountains when I pull onto the highway. Noah asked me to stop by for a final good luck hug and is waiting in his driveway when I arrive. Barefoot and dressed in my favorite jeans and faded t-shirt, his hair bleached by the summer sun, he meets me on the driver’s side and draws me into a firm, tender hug.

I sigh as I soak up his warmth and care, the gentleness in his touch.

“Thanks for helping me not study,” I say softly into his ear, giving it a little nip.

He steps back, his eyes shining in the early light. “Anytime.”

He kisses me and I lift up on my toes, wanting this kiss to last me all day.

“Call me the minute you’re done.” He breaks away with a sigh.

“I will.”

He cups my face and kisses me again, slowly, his lips tender. “I’d tell you good luck, but you don’t need it.”

I dive into his arms again, and hold him for a long time. Even though I’ll be back soon, and have another week before I leave for Seattle, I hate goodbyes. And this feels like a preview of the one that is going to crush me like a freight train.

“See you tonight,” I say.

“Oh,” Noah says, sliding something from his pocket. It’s a square of folded-up paper. A rainbow drawing from Kenzie. It’s beautiful and drawn with care. Kenzie wrote “I Love You, Vonnie” in careful, red letters.

I gaze at it, carefully smoothing out the folds. “Tell her thank you?”

His smile tightens. “She doesn’t know you’re leaving for the day, just so you’re aware. I didn’t think it was worth upsetting her when you’ll be back before she even knows you’re gone.”

“Noah, is she struggling?” The idea that Kenzie is distressed because her mom couldn’t be there for her hits me hard.

He sighs and looks away. “She’s had a few nightmares. During the day she seems fine, but I can tell she’s on edge. I had to cancel her art camp next week because I can’t take any more meltdowns at drop off.”

“That’s so hard, Noah. I’m sorry,” I say. Noah hasn’t mentioned Kenzie’s recent challenges. Maybe he’s been hoping it would get better. Or maybe he’s wanted to focus on me. Either way, I feel terrible. “I hope being with me hasn’t made it worse.”

“No, but...it’s going to be hard when you—” He exhales hard. “—never mind. I think she might need support.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Hell, I might too.”

“We all need that sometimes.”

He laughs softly. “You’re the strongest person I know, Vonnie. So if you did it, I guess I can too.”

After one final kiss, he opens the door for me and I climb in. And then I drive down the street, watching Noah get smaller and smaller in my rearview mirror.

At the testing center, I sip the last of my tea, file through the big doors,

wait in line to use the bathroom, check in, then hand over my personal items. The rules are very strict about what goes with you into the room. I can't even bring my water bottle—they provide plastic ones. Apparently if I have to go to the bathroom, a testing representative will accompany me to make sure I'm not cheating.

People have likely tried all kinds of tricks to cheat, which baffles me. Passing the test that way would feel awful. Plus I would always wonder if I was safe to practice nursing. The thousands of details I've memorized for today have the power to save lives.

Inside the giant room are rows of study carrels, each with a desktop computer, keyboard, and mouse. I walk to the middle front and take a seat.

In times of extreme stress, I've learned how to calm my nervous system with a breathing exercise and a counting game in my head. I do it now, closing my eyes and placing my hands on my belly. My breathing slows, my skin cools, and the heart of me comes alive.

The clock clicks to 9:00 and the monitor in the front of the room calls out, "Begin."

THE FIRST HOUR PASSES QUICKLY. I answer questions about everything I studied. Some of it's crystal clear and I feel confident with my choice, and other times I reread the question five times before deciding.

The multiple choice questions have four answers, with two of them being better but one being the "most" right. Choosing the second-best answer might make the test try the same question again, only slightly reworded. This of course creates doubt in my original answer. Was it wrong? Should I change it this time?

On the 75th question, I cringe when I enter my answer. This could mean the end.

But a 76th question appears. Okay, this is good, because at least I know I haven't potentially failed.

By the time I reach 115 questions, I'm starting to get worried. Though others here are silent, I hear them leave when they finish, and the room steadily empties.

I'm a slow test taker, though. I like to be thorough when I read the question. I have five hours and I'm prepared to use every one of them. Being

methodical doesn't mean I can't pass. Or that I'll be a bad nurse. This is just a hurdle I have to clear, then the real learning can begin.

I signal for a bathroom break and a female proctor leads me to the restroom across the hall. Before I leave, I splash cold water on my face and give my eyes a mini bath by cupping water in my palm and blinking several times.

When I re-enter the testing room, another student glances up from his testing cubby.

For a moment, I think it's Owen. My heart drops and my pulse thunders in my ears.

But it's not Owen. I release a breath and shake out my hands.

When I return to my test, I ignore the sense that Owen is indeed here. If not in the room, then he's in the parking lot, waiting for me.

No.

I take a moment to close my eyes and center my thoughts. Push away all distractions. Then, when my feet feel firmly planted on the ground and my breaths calm, I open my eyes and tap my cursor.

The screen blinks to life, and I narrow my focus.

I got this.

NOAH

Though I know Vonnie can take care of herself, I'm restless and distracted all morning. Taking Kenzie to the park after breakfast gives me something else to focus on. She's learning how to pump on the swings so in between my "helper" pushes to get higher, I make silly faces at her, which makes her squeal with laughter. We do the zipline and the bars, then she skips along the fence line collecting daisies, her forehead damp with perspiration.

Since the night of the rodeo, Kenzie hasn't talked about Gia, and when I offer her opportunities, she shuts down. I'm at a loss when it comes to helping her through this. The social worker I met with when I first drew up the parenting plan has given me the name of a few child development specialists who help kids with loss. I know I need to set this step in motion, but so far I haven't been able to work up the nerve.

Which probably means I have work to do, too.

Kenzie also hasn't asked to ride, or visit the barn, since that night. I want to be respectful, but there is truth to "climbing right back on the horse" after a fall. The longer the wait, the bigger the fear becomes.

Horses can be similarly affected. If a horse spooks and hurts their rider, there can be psychological damage. With patience and care, that wound can heal. I've visited Raven every day to reassure him that what happened isn't his fault, and to thank him for staying with Kenzie until I could come for her. I've exercised him in the coral, watching him carefully, but besides a minor bruise on his right foot and a few scratches, physically he's okay.

So we just need time.

Something that seems to be in short supply these days.
My phone buzzes with a text from Seth Dalton.

Got a minute?

When Kenzie dashes off to the climbing net, I dial Seth's number.

"About time, you bastard," I say.

"Sorry, I was in D.C."

"Oh?" D.C. is the hub of federal law enforcement. This could mean Seth's on a task force. Or he's working a case that led him there.

"I'll tell you more when I can," he says.

I suppress my curiosity for now. "Understood."

"That kid you had me look at, Broderick. He's got a juvenile record."

My spine tenses. Juvenile records are sealed. "How'd you find out?"

"I called in a favor," he says.

I frown. "Any idea what's on it?"

"Nope, but I thought you should at least be aware."

"Huh." I think about this for a moment. Getting access to a juvenile record is extremely difficult—bordering on impossible.

"How's Kenzie?" he asks.

We spend ten minutes getting caught up, then promise to carve out more time for a real conversation soon.

After a quick lunch, Kenzie begs to go to Redfin, and promises to keep her cast dry. We rent a canoe and I slather on sunblock and cram a sunhat on her head before we set out. I of course do most of the paddling, but I don't mind. Watching Kenzie look for ospreys or gaze into the clear, deep water while I stroke the tension from my muscles is a decent way to pass an August afternoon. Especially with summer's end approaching quickly.

I push that thought away and beach the canoe in one of the sandy coves so Kenzie and I can cool off with a quick swim.

Redfin is a deep lake carved by the Sawtooth's once massive glaciers, and the water is frigid. Kenzie's teeth start chattering before she even wades past her knees, but I get her to dunk with me—keeping her cast above water—then I wrap her in a towel and plunk her back into the bow. She sings *Alouette* to herself as I paddle back to the marina.

Big puffy clouds have been building in the sky all day. I double checked the forecast before setting off on our adventure—evening thunderstorms aren't uncommon this time of year—but this one won't break until nightfall.

Vonnie should be home by then. Driving our narrow roads in shit visibility is dangerous.

After we return the canoe, I check my phone for the hundredth time, but there's still no word from Vonnie. It's now almost two o'clock. I grimace. She should be finished with her test by now.

I think about what Seth told me about Broderick. He could have shoplifted or got busted for some prank like streaking. Or his crime could be more serious. What if he hurt someone?

Dev's warning repeats in my mind. *Don't go fighting battles you haven't been invited to.*

Too late for that.

Kenzie and I walk hand in hand down the dock, past the swimming area packed with families playing games and swimming, then to an outdoor kiosk to grab a snack. Sounds of summer fill the air—kids shrieking and splashing, dogs barking, boat motors humming, with conversation and laughter rising above it all while the sun beats down on my shoulders and the soft breeze cools my bare back. It's near perfect. We're just missing one very special ingredient.

Vonnie.

The realization hits me like a slap in the face. I never intended to let her into my life the way I have. I must be stupid, or blind, or maybe I just wanted a taste of that freedom. To enjoy what so many others seem to have. Even though I knew how it would end.

Of all the fuckery I've gotten into in my life, this takes the cake.

My phone chirps as we settle at our table with our chips and humus. It's Vonnie.

I pounce. "How'd it go?"

She groans. "I did all 225 questions, Noah."

"Wow. You must be fried."

"What if I failed?" she says, sounding exhausted.

"Then you'll try again."

"I worked so freaking hard."

I hate that she's doubting herself. "When do you get the results?"

"They usually post in two days."

"Okay. Two days of distractions, coming right up."

To my relief, she laughs softly. "Where are you?"

"Redfin," I gaze at Kenzie who is attacking her snack. "Kenz and I just

did a marathon paddle complete with a swim.”

Vonnie gives a wistful groan. “I wish I was there. I could use a swim right now.”

I hold back from telling her how badly I want her here too. But it’s time to start preparing for what needs to happen between us. Even though it’s going to tear me apart.

“Say hi to Kenzie,” I say to avoid her detecting the lump in my throat, and put Vonnie on speaker.

“Hi Kenzie!” Vonnie says. “Sounds like you’re having a fun day.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m taking my big test today.”

“So you can take care of sick babies?” Kenzie asks, licking a blob of humus off of a chip.

“That’s right.”

“Are you coming over?” Kenzie asks.

“I am,” Vonnie says. “You promised me a game of garbage after dinner.”

“I’m so going to beat you,” Kenzie says.

Vonnie laughs.

I stroke Kenzie’s head and she smiles up at me. “See you soon.”

I’M EATING lunch at my desk while catching up on paperwork when Linnea patches a call through to my desk.

“Aha. I’ve cracked the code,” Cora says with a snicker. “Now when I need to get a hold of you, I’m calling your secretary.”

“I don’t have a secretary.”

“Whatever. Why haven’t you called me back?”

I set my sandwich down and lean back in my chair. “Sorry. It’s not intentional.”

“I haven’t heard from you since the rodeo,” Cora says. “How is everyone? Is Raven recovering okay? How is Kenzie? And most importantly, do you still have the hots for your nanny?”

I lean forward and rub my forehead. “We’re all fine. Kenzie too. And Vonnie’s not my nanny anymore.”

“So you *do* still have the hots for her.”

“No comment.”

“By evading, you’re just confirming.”

“Nice try,” I say with a snort. “I don’t ‘have the hots’.”

“Please tell me you didn’t treat her like some hookup. Do I have to come down there and crack you over the head with a blunt object?”

“Since when did my dating life become your business?”

“You’re dating? Oh, Noah, that’s great!”

Sisters. Vonnie has two. How did she survive? “No. Cora. She’s leaving in a week for Seattle to start her career.”

“So?”

I scoff. “What do you mean, so? No, we’re not dating.”

“I’m confused. You can’t date when she’s in Seattle?”

I give the phone a confused glance. “Look, she’s worked really hard to get this job. It’s what she wants.”

“And she can totally have it. Noah, it’s not like she’s going to the moon.”

“Right,” I say, confused. “Which is why we should go our separate ways.” Saying this aloud is like chewing glass.

She gives an exasperated sigh. “Call me when you want me to pull your head out of your ass.”

“Thanks for the pep talk,” I say to lighten the mood while fighting the sense that I’ve already lost Vonnie.

“I mean it, Noah,” Cora says. “Don’t let her slip away just because you don’t have all the answers.”

When I hang up, feeling drained, Linnea is hurrying toward me, a concerned expression on her face.

I stand. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s some kind of protest going on outside,” she says, glancing over her shoulder. “The Sheriff is on his way back from a meeting. What should we do?”

“Call everyone in. Stat,” I say, and step past her. “I’ll figure out what the hell is going on. When I get out there, lock the door behind me.”

Her eyes widen. “Do you think it’s a riot?”

“Let’s prepare for the possibility.”

“Oh dear,” she says. “Shouldn’t you wait for backup then?”

“How close is the Sheriff?”

“Five minutes, maybe?”

While a shitload of bad can happen in that amount of time, I’ll take my chances.

I walk through the bullpen, Linnea hurrying to keep up, to the lobby.

Outside in the parking lot, several dozen people are milling around. Their expressions range from jovial, as if this is some cocktail mixer, to stoic, as if bracing for a blow. I recognize faces, so they're local. Most are in their forties, but a few are older. To my surprise, Leah Morgan is here. So is Claudia, Taylor Morgan's surrogate grandmother, with her husband Ben.

When I realize the crowd includes all of the parents our task force interviewed regarding the Rundell murder case, my hackles jump to life.

For fuck's sake.

My phone buzzes. It's Wyatt.

"Just a heads up there's an angry mob outside your station." From the hitch in his breaths and the sound of cars whizzing past, I know he's on his way over.

"I'm looking at them. Any idea why they're here?"

"Nope, but I'm about to find out."

I notice a familiar pair of podcasters in the mix. Sadie and Hank are moving quickly from person to person, Sadie's frown deepening with each interaction.

"Stay back until I can make sure it's safe," I say.

"Appreciate the concern, but you can stuff it," he says with a hearty laugh, and hangs up.

After double checking my weapon, I step outside. Linnea locks it behind me.

I put my fingers in my mouth and give a sharp whistle. Eyes turn to me and conversation lowers to a murmur.

I put my hands on my hips. "Someone please explain this little party."

"We want to confess!" someone calls out from the crowd.

Out of the corner of my eye, Wyatt approaches, accompanied by a photographer, who starts snapping pictures. I ignore them.

"Confess to what?" I ask.

There's a long pause, and then a firm, clear voice rings out. "To the murder of Jonas Rundell."

AFTER A SOLID TWELVE hours of interviews, our staff hold a meeting in our small conference room. Fast food wrappers and soda cans fill the wastebasket, a testament to how long we've been here grinding away at this very strange turn of events.

From the front of the room, Dad circles yet another name.

“That at least whittles this down to ten,” he says.

A groan fills the room.

“They’re obviously trying to tell us something,” I say.

Dad purses his lips as he watches me. Since the night Kenzie took off on Raven and Vonnie’s family helped find and rescue her, he’s been different. He doesn’t stare Caleb down when we’re on mutual calls. He doesn’t give me that cranky huff when Vonnie shows up to ride with us.

“That maybe they’re fed up?” Danforth says, tossing his pen down. “I’m with them. Working all these new leads is going to suck this department dry. Why would we spend our resources on this guy? He was a predator.”

“What about the attorney general?” Dad asks with a nervous shuffle of his feet.

“The attorney general can kiss my ass.” Danforth stands up. “I’m going home.”

Dad glances at our two other deputies. “What he said,” Mitchell says, and follows Danforth out.

Rutledge sighs. “Let me know what you two decide,” he says, and slips from the room.

Dad glances at me, clearly conflicted. With a grimace, he turns and wipes the board clean.

“I’ll pay the attorney general a visit tomorrow.”

“And tell him what?”

Dad places the pen and eraser in the tray and turns back to me. “That we’re done here.”

VONNIE

“Put that thing away or I’ll throw it in the river!” Leah yells when she catches me checking my phone for the hundredth time today.

“I can’t help it!” I call back, stuffing the phone in my back pocket. “Results are going to be posted any minute.”

It’s the week of “last everything” while we’re all in town—final hike, final barbecue in the park, final round of frisbee golf. Today is our final float followed by our annual sleepout in the backyard. It’s a little over the top, but I’m not complaining. I need a week of fun with my favorite people before spending the next year away from them.

“Von. You totally passed,” Leah says, an exasperated look on her face.

“You don’t know that,” I protest, suppressing the urge to check my phone again. The NCLEX kicked my ass, and drained me of every ounce of brainpower. Now I feel adrift, but it’s not as enjoyable and freeing as it should be. Maybe because after three months of such intense focus, there’s a hole.

But my sense of unease is likely due to something else. I shove that thought aside and pick up my end of the raft so Leah and I can buddy carry the boat across the road and down the bank to the eddy.

“Forget it for today, okay? Let’s have fun,” Leah says.

“I second that!” Noah calls as he piggybacks Kenzie down the bank after us, with Taylor and Grady carrying another boat behind him.

“Noted,” I say, giving Noah a wink.

He grins back. Ever since he told me Rogue County is closing the Rundell murder case, he’s been more relaxed. He’s sleeping better. When I

let him, that is.

Grady and Wyatt buddy carry another boat down the bank, followed by the rest of our brood. While everyone sorts what boat they'll start in, I sneak one last glance at my phone.

The page loads slowly—out here I have two bars of service. When it blinks to life, there's another link—the results! I tap it, then enter my password.

“Vonnie!” someone scolds just as the list flashes and I see my name.

“I passed!” I yelp, tears burning my eyes.

My family crowds around me, hooting congratulations and offering high fives and hugs. Noah waits his turn, so that when I let him fold me in his arms, the rest of our crew refocuses on clambering into the boats and bickering about who sits where.

“Congratulations, *chérie*,” Noah says, holding me gently.

The emotions spiraling inside me won't settle. I'm thrilled and relieved, but my anxiety about leaving rises another notch.

Even though leaving has been my goal all along.

“Time to get wet!” Caleb calls out.

Leah splashes him with her paddle, then instructs her crew to push off the bank.

I wipe my eyes and grab Noah's hand. “We better jump in before they ditch us,” I say to him, my smile hurting my face.

After the first few rapids, we float a slow section, the sun so hot I have to splash river water on the pontoons so the rubber doesn't scorch me. Noah and Kenzie jump overboard with Caleb and Taylor and pretty soon we're all in the water but Annika, who claims she's now part whale and would never be able to shimmy back onboard.

The water feels icy fresh on my skin. I float on my back and savor the sound of the current and the pretty trees and sky above me.

At lunchtime, we pull out to a beach and haul the coolers to the shade. We share sandwiches and drinks and cookies. Dylan and Taylor have a rock skipping contest, and Annika shows Kenzie how to weave the long grass blades together to make a bracelet.

It's the kind of memory that I'll savor months from now when I'm bone tired and frazzled. And alone.

Noah and I laze in the shade.

“Are you going to file a protection order?” he asks. “Now that you have

signed the contract with Children’s Hospital, you’re safe from retribution.”

I’m still thinking about this, but what if it isn’t necessary? “It’s very unlikely that they’d put the new kids on the same shift together.”

“Vonnie,” he warns. “That’s not a long term solution. Plus, it only applies to work. What about the rest of the time?”

My resistance to submitting this document is likely from the survival instinct to not rock the boat, especially before I’ve even set foot in Seattle. “Maybe I could just wait and see?”

He sighs. “A protection order can keep you safe when I can’t be there.”

“I’m keeping myself safe, remember?” I say, my spine prickling.

“Just because you’re leaving doesn’t mean I’ll stop caring about you,” he says.

When put this way, my defenses crumble. This might be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. And I know he means it.

THAT NIGHT, after a rowdy potluck dinner organized by Caleb and Grady—who threatens to tie Annika to a chair to keep her from helping—we clean up and move outside to the backyard.

In late summer, the night air turns crisp the instant the sun drops below the mountains, so we’re prepared with plenty of blankets. Most of us will stay out talking until after midnight. Some of us will go home, like Peter and Tess, who have crazy work schedules, and Annika and Grady because Annika needs a massive amount of pillows to be comfortable enough to sleep, and she gets up at four in the morning to open the Bear. The rest of us will fall asleep under the stars. There’s a meteor shower that will be visible, but I’m not sure any of us will be able to pry our eyes open to see it.

Kenzie takes my hand and we follow Noah to our corner of the yard. The three of us have never officially spent a night together, but Noah hasn’t made a big deal about it, so I try not to, either.

Everyone lays blankets down and settles in to the sound of zippers coiling and shifting nylon. Someone farts and the littles burst into giggles. Caleb tells a long joke that makes us laugh. We talk about Dad and share a few stories, and I’m overcome with gratitude that I don’t have to worry about an investigation anymore. He’s free.

Finally, when conversation turns to murmurs, Noah turns to me. Kenzie is tucked into the blankets and asleep between us, her little body warm and her

breaths deep and relaxed.

“You doing okay?” he asks, his eyes serene in the starlight.

I huff a slow breath. “A lotta highs and lows today.”

“Tell me the highs,” he says.

“Being here with my family. This incredible day. Passing my boards.” I caress Kenzie’s silky hair, then gaze at him, which sends my heart fluttering into my throat. “Spending time with you both. And...well, you. Being with you.”

He leans in to kiss my forehead, then shifts his position to his side. “And the lows?”

“Summer’s ending. No more freedom.” I try to smile, but my lip quivers. “How about you?”

He narrows his eyes, like he knows I’m holding something back. “Highs? Being welcomed by your family. Sadie Jenkins and her podcast packing up their project and leaving town.”

I laugh. Wyatt and the Gazette had dedicated a front page column to the events that took place outside the station, but I haven’t heard much about it from Noah. “What did they think of that crazy stunt?”

“At first they were practically frothing at the mouth, thinking they’d scored something big. Then when they realized this was a coup, of sorts, they were extremely displeased.”

“I’ll bet. Their big story went up in smoke.” A breeze sifts over the grass, cooling my cheek. “So...lows?”

He gazes at me in the darkness, a pained expression on his face. “Knowing you’re leaving soon.”

My nose stings with the tears I can’t hold back anymore. I’m angry at myself for letting this happen, and I’m wrecked inside. It feels like my heart is fighting for her life.

Why does it have to hurt so fucking bad?

“I wish...I could split myself in two. One of me gets the victory of working at Children’s. The other one stays here.” I wipe the first tear from my eyes, but another one leaks out after it.

“But then I’d only get half of you,” he says.

“Right?” I laugh. “So that’s out.”

The meaning of what he just said hits me, and I swallow hard. “Is that what you want, Noah? All of me?”

Noah’s eyes turn serious. “Yeah, I do.”

My tummy swirls, tightening my diaphragm. “But I’m not staying.”

“I know,” he says, and caresses my face. “I think I’m in love with you, Vonnie.”

I gasp, and I can barely contain the sob rising in my chest. The tears fall from my lids but I angrily swat them away.

“You’re not,” I say, my words harsh. “You can’t be.”

Noah gives me a lost, hurt look. “Baby, you’re breaking my heart.”

I roll from under the blankets. “Then I guess we’re even, because you just broke mine.”

Inside my house, I can’t stop crying. This is stupid. I should stay outside with the others, enjoy this beautiful night, enjoy Noah’s company and snuggling with Kenzie and waking up to a glorious sunrise.

But I can’t.

I think I’m in love with you.

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

I’m leaving in two days, and now he says he *thinks* he loves me.

Is he trying to drive me insane?

Nobody gets to control my life anymore.

And if I love Noah back, that means I’ve let that goal slip through my fingers, because how can I leave?

So I won’t love him back.

I can’t.

NOAH

“**W**here the fuck is she?” I ask the minute I’m inside Wyatt’s office. Please let her not have left for Seattle already.

Please.

He settles on the edge of his desk, hands braced next to him. “What did you say to her last night?”

“None of your damn business.”

“The hell it is,” he says, a fierce glare in his eyes. “That girl is *tough*. But I have never seen her that upset. So unless you start talking, you can show yourself out.”

I’m at a dead end. I’ve called her, texted her, tried to track her down. If Wyatt is the gatekeeper, then I’ll fight to the death.

“I told her that I love her.”

Wyatt releases a slow breath. “Did you mean it?”

I feel like my chest is cracked open and everything inside is raw and hot and hurting. “Of course I fucking meant it.”

“Fuck.”

I grimace.

“Why did you tell her?” he asks.

I’m so tense that bile creeps up my throat. “Because I don’t want...to lose her.”

“You are losing her, asshole! She’s wanted this job since she was fifteen years old and now it’s fucking hers.”

“I’m not trying to be difficult.”

He tilts his head as if to say, aha! “Yet you went and changed the rules,

and you expect her to think that's okay?"

"It's not like I planned this."

"She's crushed on you for years, Noah. Think about it."

I sink into his chair and put my head in my hands. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Everything. Job, kids, wife, family."

Some of the venom drains from his gaze, and he huffs a sigh. "When I took over raising the twins and Dylan, I didn't do much for myself. It was family and work."

"So what changed?"

"I met Brooke."

"Come on, you're not going to tell me that your life just magically transformed."

"No. Far from it. It was a disaster at first. We were coworkers and she refused to let me near her even though our chemistry was making us both claw the walls. And we were both competing for the same job in L.A., plus I had the twins to think about."

I huff a giant sigh. "What would you have done if she took the job in L.A.?"

A pained expression crosses his face. "Let her go."

"Even though you loved her."

"*Because* I loved her."

My bared heart gives a tight, hot pang, and I cringe. Vonnie knows I would never ask her to give up her dream. Or anything else.

"Why won't she talk to me?"

"She's angry."

"Why?"

Wyatt crosses his arms and stares me down. "Because love wasn't part of the plan, and you had to go and fuck it up."

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes until black dots start to dance. "It would be so much easier if I didn't care about her, but fuck, Wyatt. She's fucking perfect, okay? I love the way she smiles. I love how kind she is, even to people who don't deserve it. And she's so fucking smart, and patient, and funny, and genuine. I love kissing her and holding her. I love making her laugh. I love being someone she can count on. I love that she's so true to herself, yet so giving to others. And don't get me started about how great she is with Kenzie. And how sweet it is to watch them together. I don't fucking

want to let her go.”

Wyatt gives me a tense look and shakes his head like he’s not sure about what he’s about to say. But he walks over and extends his hand.

I take it, and he hauls me to my feet. “She’s at Annika’s place in North Fork. But I feel a warning is in order, because if you think I’m cagey, the eldest female of our clan is much worse. Hell hath no fury than a woman about to give birth to Grady Dole’s love child.”

I leave Wyatt’s office and climb into my vehicle. Which reminds me once again that I’ve let this all go too far. I’m on duty, which means I’m using tax dollars to chase down the woman I’m crazy about like some lovesick sap.

Is this what love does to people? Turns their world upside down?

Fuck.

I pull onto the road, but Wyatt’s warning makes me pause. I can’t shake the image of stepping up to Annika’s door and having her shove a pie in my face. Or Grady meeting me with his fists.

I need five minutes to think.

So I crank the wheel to the left and stop in front of the Bear. My tense stomach revolts at the idea of food, but my frantic mind screams for coffee, even if only for the way the ritual can calm me. One strong cup of French Roast, and then I’ll head north.

It’s midmorning so the bakery isn’t slammed. Hearty scents of bacon and sourdough combine with the whir of the espresso machine and murmur of conversation to soften the knot in my chest enough that I can take a deep breath.

At the register, I order my coffee, then slide a few bills from my wallet.

Annika’s not here, but I jolt when someone behind the cashier hurries past the doorway. Then I curse, because who is seriously afraid of a five-foot-six pastry chef—pregnant or not?

Damn it.

I carry my coffee to the narrow counter that runs the length of the entryway. Through the giant windows, the view across the gravel parking lot rises to the green foothills to the west.

With nerves running through my fingers, I dial Dev’s number.

“Why do I get the feeling this call isn’t to wish me fair winds and following seas?” he asks.

“Because I already did that, in Garnet Falls, remember?”

Like the perceptive jackass he is, he waits.

“I fucked up, Dev.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

“Funny.” I set my coffee down and watch the steam make a small fog cloud on the window.

“Sorry, cheap shot. What exactly did you fuck up?”

“I told her I love her.”

He exhales a low sigh. “And she was pissed, am I right?”

“Tell me how to fix it.”

“Back up a little first. When you said ‘I love you’, what was your plan?”

I stare into my coffee, which might as well be a black hole, sucking me in. “It just sort of slipped out.”

“Explain.”

I relay the conversation that ended with Vonnie running away from me, crying.

“Jeezus, you really did fuck up.”

I clench my teeth. “I think we’ve already covered this part.”

“Does she love you back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you willing to wait for her while she figures out what she wants?”

“Yes.” Saying this aloud makes me feel desperate. Of course I’ll wait. What the hell else can I do?

“Then show her.”

“How?”

“Vonnie needs to spread her wings. Let her. Meanwhile you have shit to do. Your daughter needs you right now, and probably the help of a skilled family therapist. She has to learn to cope with people moving in and out of her life. Without some progress there, inviting someone else into your family is risky. And if that mission wasn’t enough, you need to figure out how to get Gia out of your lives forever.”

I brace against the counter. Dev’s right. I’m not ready to give Vonnie the attention she deserves. It’s like what she said about splitting herself in two—leaving only half.

Vonnie doesn’t deserve half.

“Take a year to grow,” Dev adds.

“I don’t want to be without her for that long.” Despite the cool breeze flowing from the door, I’m suddenly sweating.

“Then get on a fucking plane once a month. Facetime, sext each other,

make plans. It's not perfect, but I meant what I said, brother. Someday is right fucking now."

"What if she doesn't want to try?"

"Have you ever given up on anything in your life?"

"No."

"Then don't start now."

I sigh. He's right, and yet. How do I prove to her that I won't quit?

VONNIE

Annika hands me another tissue. “I’m so sorry,” she says, and rubs my back.

“Go ahead and say it,” I reply, and swipe at my cheeks.

“Say what?”

“I told you so.”

“Oh, honey,” Annika says, and pulls me close. “This isn’t your fault. Sometimes our hearts have a mind of their own.”

“But I don’t want to love him. It’s just makes all of this harder.”

She kisses the side of my head. “Do you though?”

I let my hands drop to my lap and relax into her embrace. Another tear tumbles down my cheek. “Yes.”

Annika sucks in a breath and presses her palm to her belly.

“You okay?” I ask.

She exhales slowly. “Yeah. It’s just—” Her whole body tenses—I can feel it—and she makes a sound I’ve heard from every woman I’ve helped through labor.

“I think I should walk,” Annika says, pushing to her feet.

“Sure,” I say, scrambling to keep up.

We slip on our sandals and step into the sunshine. I keep a concerned eye on my sister. Even though she looks ready to pop, the baby’s not due for another two weeks. I hope I’m not stressing her out and triggering her body into early labor.

“Better?” I ask once we’re on the path leading to the creek.

While rubbing the underside of her belly, she nods, but I can tell she’s

distracted. “Do you really want to leave without hearing him out?”

“What else could he say? He’s not going to move to Seattle.”

“Would you want him to?”

I scoff. “He’d hate it there. Let alone how hard it would be for Kenzie. And I’m going to be working like a fiend. I want to be able to focus.”

“So you’re going to break things off?” she asks, her eyes filling with empathy.

My insides twist tighter, making me feel nauseous. Maybe Annika’s hormones are rubbing off on me. “What else can I do?”

When Annika doesn’t answer, I turn around.

She’s teetering on her feet, her face contorted in pain. “Vonn,” she groans.

I race to her side, alarm bells ringing in my head. “On a scale of one to ten, how bad?”

“Oh God.” She pants several breaths, her eyes scrunching shut. She grabs my shoulders hard.

The muscles around her belly tighten. “Six, maybe...seven,” she huffs.

“Have you been feeling contractions?”

“I think so.”

The alarm bells in my head get louder. “Like this?”

“No,” she grunts out. “Not this bad. But—” She winces and sucks a breath through her teeth. “I had a couple of them in the night.”

“Did you call your doctor?”

“Yeah, they said it’s normal.” She breathes, her lips pursed and her face going white. “They said...not to come in too soon.”

Of course my sister would put not troubling the hospital staff above her own needs. I kiss the side of her head. “I think it’s time to get you to the hospital.”

“Okay,” she says.

We wait for the contraction to ease, and then I turn her around and steer her to the driveway. I open the passenger side door of the Suburban. She reaches for the handle above and levers herself onto the seat, her face tight with pain.

“Another one?” I ask.

She braces her palms on her thighs, her breaths tight and shaky. She closes her eyes and her mouth opens in agony.

Shit. It’s only been two minutes since the last one. If things progress any

faster, we're in trouble. Rogue Valley Hospital is thirty minutes away, if I drive fast.

"Where's your bag?" I ask.

"In my car."

"Keep breathing, I'll be right back."

Annika's cheeks puff in and out as she tries to ride the wave of pain. "Oh God, hurry," she whimpers.

I race to her car and pop the trunk. Then I dash to the house for her phone and purse. On my way to the Suburban, I call Grady.

"Hey! My favorite nurse," he says in a cheerful tone. I can hear water running and silverware clattering in the background. He must be in the station's kitchen.

"Annika's in labor," I say.

A dish shatters. "What? Oh fuck. Is she okay? How far apart are her contractions? Where are you?"

"At your house." I jump behind the wheel and put the phone on speaker. "Talk to your wife. I need you to coach her so I can drive."

Annika groans in pain.

"It's okay, baby," Grady says, his voice so full of love my heart just about bursts. "Don't be scared. Everything's going to be okay. Vonnie's going to drive you to the hospital. I'll meet you there. We'll do this together."

"Grady," Annika whimpers.

I cruise to North Fork road and beeline for the highway, being careful of the washboards and potholes, but speed is of the essence.

"I love you, sweetheart," Grady says.

"I love you—" Annika's face goes completely white. "Pull over!"

I yank the wheel and Annika just manages to open the door before she hurls.

Another sign that she's flying through the stages of labor.

"What's happening?" Grady asks.

Annika wipes her mouth and returns to her braced position against her thighs as another contraction seizes her.

"I don't think we're going to make it to the hospital."

"Fuck," Grady utters, his normally calm voice edged in panic. "Annika, baby, I'm coming, okay? Hang in there."

"Get Peter!" I say to Grady.

"I'll get everyone," Grady says.

“Oh God,” Annika says, holding onto the handle like her life depends on it.

I peel onto the highway, gun the engine, and focus on driving while Grady coaches Annika with breathing and distracting her from the pain. The landscape outside passes in a blur of tan and pale green, the scents of hot road tar and sage tingling my senses.

The sun is so bright I don't see the silver SUV coming my way until we've passed each other.

Immediately, he does a U-turn and races after me, lights flashing.

Of all the moments to draw attention from law enforcement, this might be the most disastrous.

Adrenaline fizzes in my veins. I'm tempted to keep driving. Surely they will understand that my priority is getting Annika to the competent staff at Rogue Valley Medical and not abiding traffic laws.

“Vonnie, pull over!” Annika grits out. Her face is beaded with perspiration and her hands are pressed tight to her belly.

“I think we can make it! Think of it like a police escort!”

Annika gives me a keening groan, as if she didn't hear me. “I need to push.”

Shit. Ahead, I spot a turnoff. The gravel road crosses the creek and snakes into the forest.

“I'm ten minutes away,” Grady says.

The SUV is right on my tail now. I turn off the highway and roll down the rocky, bumpy road.

Annika cries out and I only have time to register that her wet lap means her water has broken before stopping the car in a shady turnout.

I jump out just as Noah strides from his vehicle, his face tight.

“Annika's in labor,” I say to cut him off.

He stops in his tracks, his eyes turning wide. “You're kidding.”

Annika gives a primal groan from the front seat.

I race to her side, followed by Noah. We help Annika from the seat. She snatches the phone.

“Seven minutes out,” Grady barks. “Hang on, baby.”

Annika gasps and hisses, her body so tight with the pain and the work her muscles are doing that she's quivering.

“You got this, Annika,” Noah says in a firm but soothing voice. “It's going to be okay.”

“Let’s get her in the back,” I say. “There’s blankets and a first aid kit.”

“I don’t want to...do this here,” Annika says, her head bowed as we carefully make our way to the back. “Not without...Grady...” She groans again. “Oh God. I need to push.”

I whip open the back doors and dig in the side cabinet for our first aid kit. Noah helps me arrange the sleeping bags and towels that have lived in the back of the rig since my dad bought it twenty years ago.

We get Annika settled, but it’s clear she needs to be propped up.

“Get in behind her,” I tell Noah.

His face goes white.

“Unless you want to deliver this baby?” I add, pulling on a pair of latex gloves from the first aid kit.

He scrambles in and gently eases into position behind Annika, using the plane of his thighs to support her.

She grips his knees and curls forward.

“Five minutes,” Grady barks from the speaker.

Births are messy, but most of all, they are scary. Even though women have been having babies without medical intervention for thousands of years, a lot of things can go wrong. And the rapid progression of Annika’s labor is worrying.

What if I make a mistake? What if there’s some critical skill or bit of knowledge I fail to put to use?

With the shears, I cut away Annika’s underwear—there’s no time for grace or modesty. This baby is coming.

“Here comes another—” Annika grimaces. She grabs Noah’s knees and shuts her eyes.

“Okay, push,” I say, and place my hands gently on her. Hopefully all I’ll have to do is catch. But if the baby is stuck or if the cord is tangled, I will need to intervene.

Annika curls forward, every muscle in her body tensing. With her heels braced off the edge of the bumper, she bears down. The baby’s head crowns.

“That’s it, Annika!” I cry, my heart leaping.

Annika strains so hard her face goes white and her hands on Noah’s knees turn to claws.

Grady calls out from the phone but I can’t hear the words over Annika’s agonized screams and our yelling.

When Annika’s spent, she collapses.

“If men had to do this, we’d be extinct,” Noah says.

“Guys”—Annika pants—“are such wimps.”

From the corner of my eye, I catch a flash of red swirling lights. Grady.

“I’m almost there,” he says from the phone. “I can see the Suburban.”

Annika’s face tightens again and she curls into the work. She screams as she pushes with all of her might.

“You can do this, baby,” Grady coos from the phone.

“Come on, Annika!” I shout as the baby’s head slips through. “Push, push, push!”

“You can do it!” Noah cries.

Annika pants, her chest heaving, then everything tenses again. Her body trembles with the strain as she bears down.

Noah’s eyes lock with mine, and a look of longing and hope flits across his face.

Behind me, the ambulance’s wheels chew up the gravel.

Annika curls tighter, groaning in agony. The baby’s tiny shoulders appear.

“Yes! Annika, you got this!” I shout.

Annika collapses against Noah’s frame. Her face and hair are damp. “I can’t,” she whimpers.

“Sweet sister of mine,” I say in a stern voice. “You can and you will. Nobody else can do it for you.”

Grady races up.

I try to step back so Grady can take over, but he leaps up to the rig and takes Annika’s hand.

“Grady, I’ve never—” I start, but he winks.

“You’re doing fine.”

Annika starts crying. “You’re here.”

“Of course I am.” He kisses her forehead. “Did you think I would miss this?”

Caleb hurries up carrying the med kit and quickly goes to work donning gloves and unpacking supplies, as if this crazy experience is no big deal. “You’re doing great, Nika. Let’s do this.”

Another contraction seizes her. She tries to fight it, but Grady squeezes her hand. “Last push, babe. I know you can do it.”

Annika gives in, curling forward, every muscle locked on this purpose. The baby slips into my waiting hands.

Caleb helps me with suctioning his mouth and nose and cradling him in a sterile blanket from the rig. A lusty cry rings out.

“It’s a boy,” I say, savoring this perfect moment of Annika’s baby in my arms. *Welcome to the best family on earth, little one.*

“Is he okay?” Annika asks, shuddering from fatigue.

“He’s beautiful,” I say, my voice cracking.

Annika starts crying. I gently set the baby in Grady’s huge hands. His blue eyes are glassy with tears.

“Oh—” He sucks in a sob, then forces it down. “He’s perfect.”

He places the baby in Annika’s waiting arms. Annika smiles through her tears, her tired face so full of joy and her eyes bright with the kind of love that moves mountains.

Grady looks at Annika and his son in awe.

“Congratulations,” Noah says, giving Grady a huge smile.

With a laugh, Grady grabs Noah in a hug. “Thanks for everything.”

Noah slaps him on the back. “I’m glad you got here for the finale.”

“So, this has been fun,” Caleb interrupts, wiping the tears from his eyes. “But it’s time to get you and junior to the hospital.”

“He’s right,” Grady says, his face turning serious.

We all help transfer Momma Annika and Baby Boy Dole to the medic rig, Grady in the back with his family. Caleb jumps behind the wheel and the rig speeds south.

In the silence that follows, I peel off my gloves and collapse against the bumper.

Noah settles in next to me.

The adrenaline and focus I relied on to get me through the last half hour drains into the ground, and I lean into Noah.

He puts his arm around me and we sit there, breathing.

“You were amazing,” he says.

I laugh softly. “Annika did all the work.”

“You were so calm though. Confident.”

“I’m glad it looked that way. Inside, I wasn’t so sure.”

“You’re obviously good at this,” he says. “You’re going to make an amazing nurse.”

“Sorry I was speeding,” I say.

He laughs. “I wasn’t chasing you down to give you a ticket.”

I give him a questioning look.

“Wyatt told me where to find you.”

A quiet moment passes. This is starting to feel like goodbye, and I can't do that right now. I push off the bumper. “I should go.”

Noah stands and pulls me into a soft hug.

I should resist, but everything I've been holding in breaks loose, and with a shuddering breath, tears blur my eyes.

“Talk to me, sweet girl. Let me make it better.”

I inhale the scent of him—that heady mix of clove and forest. “You can't.”

“Will you let me try?”

“Promise it won't hurt any more than it does right now, and I'll think about it.”

He gives a slow sigh and caresses the top of my head. “Let me drive you to the hospital so you can be with your family. I'll meet you there in a little while. We can talk. Okay?”

What Annika said about hearing him out sifts through my swirling thoughts. But I'm leaving tomorrow. What can he possibly say that will change the outcome?

I release a sigh into his chest. “Okay.”

NOAH

My hopes of getting off shift early crash and burn when a semi jackknifes on the highway an hour before a herd of sheep escape from their pasture, terrorizing a neighborhood and eating everything in sight like a pack of locusts.

When I finally get that mess sorted, I return to the station to write reports for each incident, including the one detailing the home birth I assisted with in a grove of aspen trees halfway up Jasper Canyon.

Dad calls me into his office a half hour before my shift ends.

Though I try to stand still, my feet have a mind of their own. Shifting, rocking toe to heel.

“I’ve decided to retire.”

My heart skips into my throat. “Why?”

His lips tighten, and he releases a thoughtful huff. “It’s time. I’ve got thirty years as of January.”

“The attorney general behind this? Because of the Rundell case?”

“No, this is my decision.”

I study him for a long moment, trying to detect bullshit. It would be like him to take a fall for his department. But maybe he’s telling the truth.

He lifts an eyebrow. “Maybe you’d consider taking over?”

“Me?” I say, blinking in surprise.

Amusement shines in his eyes. “Yes, you. You’re a talented investigator. You’re a quick thinker and cool under pressure. You listen to people and they seem to listen to you. I think you’d make a great sheriff.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I blurt. “I need to think about it.”

“Do that. Now, don’t you have unfinished business to tend to?”

I eye him suspiciously.

“Just one word of advice,” he says, his face tight with emotion. “Don’t make my mistake and let the job take all of you.”

My chest feels tight, like it’s going to burst out of my uniform. “Yes, Sir.”

“Now get out of here before I assign you overtime.”

After a quick stop at my locker to change into civvies, I fly out the door.

INSIDE THE HOSPITAL, the desperation building inside me explodes. I run to the elevator, and stab the button for the second floor. The doors take an eternity to close, even though I attack the button which is supposed to make it go faster. When the doors open again, I race through a glass-walled atrium to the registration desk.

I brace against the counter, panting. “Where’s Vonnie?” I bark. Then realize I’ve asked for the wrong Morgan. “I mean Annika.”

The two nurses working behind the desk eye each other, then the one closest to me says, “Who are you?”

“Noah Tucker.”

The other nurse says, “You’re not family.”

This throws me for a moment, because my life already feels entwined with the Morgans, starting when I was a kid and my dad’s open disdain for them. But when I returned from the military, Dad’s influence mattered a lot less. Over time, Wyatt and I learned to trust each other. Then Caleb and I found common ground with our jobs. Then, I fell in love with their baby sister.

“Noah?” Wyatt hurries toward me, his eyes bright. “He helped deliver Annika’s baby,” he says to the nurses. “I think that makes him family.”

He grabs me in a tight hug, slapping my back. From an open door at the other end of the hallway, laughter and conversation and light draws me like a beacon.

“Wyatt,” I say before we get there.

He must see the serious look on my face, because he stops walking.

“I’m not letting her go,” I say.

His eyes flash. “Don’t even—”

I put up my hand. “I’m not asking her to stay.”

With a grimace, he crosses his arms. "I don't understand."

I glance at the ceiling, maybe hoping for a lightning bolt from the Gods that can bestow an extra dose of strength to survive what I'm about to do.

Survive the giant risk I'm about to take.

"I wish I could tell you more," I say. "I wish I had a plan. But I don't."

"That's not good enough," Wyatt says, his angry eyes glistening. "After everything she's been through. Fuck, what we've all been through. She got into that mess with Rundell because nobody was there to protect her. Do you know what that feels like?" He wipes his eyes and stares me down. "I swore to myself that I'd never let her get hurt again."

My bounding heart squeezes into my throat. "And you've kept that promise. She's learned how to be strong, thanks to you."

"I'll always want to protect her."

I put my hand on his shoulder and lock my gaze with his. "I know. But she's ready to take care of herself."

"Does that mean I have to let go?" he says, his lips quivering with emotion. I can see the fear and love all mixed together inside him, a tug of war that won't quit. I recognize it because the same agony is tearing me apart.

My throat is so tight I can only squeeze out one word. "Yeah."

Wyatt sniffs hard and swipes at his eyes. "Promise me you'll take care of her."

"I promise."

He sniffs again, and nods. "Fuck, what a day."

I smile but it hurts my cheeks, as if they're cracked and dry like the desert ground. "But we're getting ahead of ourselves," I add as my stomach hollows. "She has to want that too."

"Someone's crying again," someone hollers from inside the room.

"It's Noah!" Wyatt replies, and forces a smile.

"Noah's here?" someone else calls out.

Grady rushes from the room, followed by Brooke, Tess, Peter, Caleb. More of them pour out of the room to mob me with hugs and rowdy cries of "thank you!" and "so glad you were there!"

After a few more backslaps and hugs, the crowd finally disperses, revealing Vonnie standing in the doorway.

A tiny cry rings out from inside the room. Grady gives me one more backslap then dashes back inside. The mob of Morgans lingers, filling the hallway with their rowdy laughter and joking.

I walk to Vonnie, her tense look pulling me in.

“Hi,” I say, and shove my hands in my pockets.

“Hi,” she replies.

“How’s Annika?”

Vonnie smiles. “She’s good. Jasper is a healthy eight pounds, two ounces.”

“Jasper, huh?”

“It’s fitting, don’t you think?”

I laugh. “He’s never going to live that story down.”

She smiles. “Nope.”

Our eyes lock, and time seems to slow. The sounds swirling around us fade. I’m aware of the breaths in my throat, the beat of my heart against my ribcage, and the tremor in my fingers as I reach for her hands.

She slides them into mine, and I gaze down, overcome with the sensation of her touch on my skin, the warmth of her.

“I tried so hard not to fall for you, Vonnie,” I say, gazing into her ocean-blue eyes. “Even though I’ve always cared for you, I knew it was wrong of me to want more. So I pushed you away. Or I tried to. But it didn’t work. And now, you’ve become a part of me. And I don’t want to live without it. Without you.”

Her eyes turn troubled, but I lean down and kiss her forehead.

“You remember that thing about splitting yourself in half? I feel that way too. It’s not fair for either of us to try to be two people. I want you to be everything that you want, even if that means I have to let you go.”

Vonnie gasps, and she covers her mouth. “Noah, don’t,” she says before a sob rips through her.

“That’s not the end, *chérie*,” I say in a firm voice to fight the emotions threatening to break free.

A tear tumbles loose and streaks down her face.

“You need time, and space, to challenge yourself. It’s important to you. Which means it’s important to me. And I need the same grace, but to help Kenzie heal, and to prevent Gia from hurting her again.”

“But we can’t do all that and stay together, Noah,” she says, her voice cracking.

“I know,” I reply, cupping her face. “But I can promise you I’ll be here waiting.”

“What? What does that mean?” she says, gripping my hands.

“I’m yours, Yvonne Morgan,” I say. “And that won’t change because we’re apart.”

She sucks in a breath. “You’re putting your life on hold...for me?”

“It’s *been* on hold.” I shake my head. “Not anymore.”

“Are you sure?”

I grimace and my heart races. “Hell yes, I’m sure.”

“What if we can’t do this?”

I raise my eyebrow. “Is it worth trying?”

“Yes!” she says, and jumps into my arms, laughing, her joy lighting me up from the inside.

I swing her around, my tenderness for her engulfing me in a powerful, bright heat.

“Will you visit?” she says into my neck.

“Of course.” If I parse out my vacation time with my 48-off and my three-day, I can easily visit once a month. Or have time off for her visits home.

“What’s going on out there?” Annika shouts.

I set Vonnie down, realizing that the entire Morgan clan is peering at me from inside Annika’s room.

“Noah is confessing his undying love for Von!” Leah says, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Behind her, Tristan hooks his arm around her and smiles.

“They’re gonna stay together,” Caleb calls to his sister, then kisses Lori on the side of her head.

“And Vonnie’s crying,” Tess says, and hands her a tissue.

Though I’d rather be in the high country surrounded by mountains and wildflowers for this moment, being here with her kin is equally fitting. I reach into my pocket for the tiny bundle I’ve wanted to give her since hanging up with Dev.

Are you willing to wait?

Then show her.

Vonnie’s face goes blank as I place the satin pouch in her palm.

“Noah, what’s—”

Someone gasps.

Vonnie looks up, confused, then her eyes go wide.

“Open it,” I say, my jittery breaths accelerating so fast I feel lightheaded.

Vonnie slides Mamie’s engagement ring into her palm. She gave to me

long ago, when her arthritic knuckles became too swollen. “Maybe you’ll find good use for it someday,” she’d said.

And now that someday is here.

Vonnie’s mouth drops open. “Noah, it’s—”

I lower to one knee.

Vonnie makes a tiny squeak. She touches her hand to her heart, her eyes glistening.

“This is my promise to you,” I say, and take the ring from her palm. After watching Vonnie slide on gloves before helping Annika, I realized in an instant that a ring would be impossible to wear while she’s working. But I have a bracelet in mind to accompany it, one with a secure clasp to keep the ring safe.

I poise the ring at the end of Vonnie’s finger. “To be yours. When you’re ready.”

“Noah, I love you,” she whispers, her eyes locking with mine. “If you think we can do this, I believe it too.”

“Then promise to be mine,” I say, my throat so tight I have to force down a swallow. I look up at her beautiful face and memorize the way her eyes sparkle and her cheeks flush. I drink in her expression—love, tenderness, determination, trust—and swear silently to myself to make her happy for as long as I live.

“I promise,” she says.

I wrap her in my arms. All around us, cheers ring out, but it’s just me and Vonnie and the words tumbling effortlessly from my lips.

Je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime.

VONNIE

“It’s okay to freak out a little,” Noah’s calm voice comes through my earbuds as I walk the two blocks from the bus stop. “It’s your first day.”

I shake out my jittery hands. “What if I’m freaking out a lot?”

He chuckles. “Would a shot of whiskey help? It sure as shit helped me before I galloped around the rodeo arena carrying a giant American flag.”

Picturing big, tough Noah Tucker nervous is adorable. “Are you trying to get me fired on my first day? Wait, don’t answer that.”

“Not trying to get you fired. But I did make you smile, right?”

“How’d you know I was smiling?”

“I can hear it in your voice,” he says.

My heart warms. “I can hear it in yours too.”

“Have a great first day. Or night. I can’t wait to hear about it.”

“Love you,” I say, my ring flashing in the evening light as I check my watch.

Right on time.

“Love you too,” Noah replies.

We end the call and I file into Seattle Children’s with several other healthcare workers coming on shift. With a deep breath, I wait for the elevator. I shouldn’t be worried about running into Owen—according to the weekly scheduling document sent out by the admin of our unit, he’s starting on days—no surprise given his royalty status—and by the grace of God, he’s in the neuro NICU.

But I can’t shake the sense that I’m being watched as I wait in line for

coffee at the kiosk in the atrium, or walk to the bank of elevators.

Once I'm in the break room, I store my lunch and jacket, clip on my badge, then slide my ring from my finger and clip it to my bracelet. Once it's tucked under my long sleeve layering shirt, I grab my coffee and stride for the entrance to the NICU. Nerves flutter in my belly as I tap my badge against the sensor and the doors to my future swing open.

A tingle races down my spine as I take it all in: the row of computers recording every possible vital sign from each of our neonatal patients, whiteboards with messages from nurses to parents or the caregivers taking over at shift change, the crash cart in the hallway, the other nurses and specialists buzzing around.

I introduce myself to the charge nurse, a strict and experienced woman named Debbie.

"Rounds start in an hour," she says while monitoring the row of computers, each flashing numbers and graphs from a patient. "After your pass-down from Joe, start on feeds."

Joe, a tall, bald nurse with a mustache, gives me a warm smile. "Don't be scared of Debbie. Come on, I'll help you get started."

THE FIRST MONTH passes in a blur of learning how things really work in a busy, highly specialized and competent neonatal care unit.

The first lesson I learn in the NICU is that very sick babies don't stay on a schedule. They need consoling, or they won't eat, or they forget to breathe.

But the second lesson I learn—the one I'm here for—is that babies are incredibly resilient. They come in fighting.

While the three-hour feeding/care cycle creates a rhythm, every shift is different. We're on call during difficult labors, babies arrive via helicopter from as far away as Montana, preemies are born so fragile that just handling them is risky, or we'll get a full-term baby recovering from a lifesaving procedure. There's also the intense job of helping parents learn how to care for their sick infant, celebrating each tiny milestone of recovery or reassuring them when they're overwhelmed.

It's the most exhausted I've ever felt, and the most exhilarated. Each shift, the minutes fly by. I don't have time to be tired, or hungry, or nervous. Or aware of the world outside, with people moving about their regular night, sleeping or watching TV or partying with their friends. I barely have time to

talk to Noah, and sometimes I'm only coherent enough for "I love you" and "good night."

I relive the moment he slid that ring on my finger. *I can promise you I'll be here waiting.* A rush of jittery hope and joy floods through me.

And while I'm here, Noah and Kenzie are working hard too. They're seeing a counselor who is helping them process and problem solve. When they're ready, I'll be invited so we can have a supportive space to connect. Sometimes the idea of us becoming a family feels so daunting, and other times I'm so excited I can't sleep.

Like yesterday, when Noah told me he's coming to visit. Two whole days together! We talked and made plans for nearly an hour, and then I tossed and turned for at least that long, my body aching for him, my heart ready to burst.

My summer of volunteering in a rural E.R. pays off and I quickly gain recognition for starting IVs and PICC lines. However, I still suck at delegating, and because I'm new, everything takes me longer so I'm constantly in a rush. I also haven't mastered the art of not letting the daily emotional roller coaster we experience crush me, and I cry at least once a day—sometimes from some small success, other times from a relapse, or bad news.

The final shift of my first rotation, I'm bone-tired but on a high like I've never experienced. The babies in my care are gaining weight, learning to feed, even pooping—the ultimate victory around here. And I've helped new parents learn how to care for their sick or injured infant. I've held distressed babies, stroked their tiny heads, fed them, changed them, weighed them, hoped for them.

So when my shift ends and I head to the nurse's station to debrief my day shift nurse replacement, I don't register that Owen is waiting until I'm five feet away.

"It's about time we hooked up," Owen says with that cocky grin.

The charge nurse gives us both a shrewd glance, but gets called away. Another pair of nurses are talking outside the room of our 31-weeker who will be heading to surgery within the next hour. A respiratory therapist and an OT are just inside another room, talking with the parents.

I tap my card to a computer. "So the full term patient in room eight needs to work on tolerating the volume of his feeds without vomiting. I've been on standby for an at-risk birth down in L and D, so be ready to boogie when they tap you. The detoxing 35-weeker is ready for skin to skin cuddling today."

“I love it when you talk dirty to me,” he says in a low tone.

I grit my teeth, then release a breath. “Owen, stop.”

An alarm pulses from room three just as the patient’s monitor flashes low oxygen levels on the screen. His nurse dashes to his room, and in five seconds the alarm quits and the patient’s O2 saturation normalizes.

“I’m just kidding around. Why haven’t you texted me back?”

“I blocked your number, remember?” I reply, focusing on the soles of my feet pressing through my thick running shoes to the floor. The starchy, sterile air cooling my nostrils. The colorful cartoon mural on the wall.

Owen looks away. “I stopped by last night.”

I take another calming breath. That he knows where I live now is not a good sign. “You agreed to give me space.”

“I have.” His voice is getting tense. Colder. “I let you have your fun in Idaho. But you’re back where you belong. With me.”

A team of doctors walk into the NICU, dressed in their blue scrubs and white coats. It’s time for rounds. And for me to go.

“No,” I say, a little too loudly. I take a step back, but Owen grabs my wrist, his tight grip making the bracelet pinch me, and I wince.

Owen frowns, and jerks me toward him, twisting my wrist to reveal the diamond ring linked to the clasp that’s cutting into my skin. “What the fuck is this?”

“You joining us today, Broderick?” someone calls from the other side of the nursing station.

Owen gives me an angry glare. “Take that off.”

I stare him down.

“Owen,” one of the other nurses hisses.

Finally, Owen turns away and joins the huddle of doctors and nurses starting rounds on the far end of the unit.

The ride down the elevator seems to take an eternity. I’m shaking and my breaths are ragged.

I’m angry and frustrated. I thought we were past this. I thought I’d been clear.

He knows where I live, where I work, and now, he knows I’m involved with someone else.

At least I feel safe going home and sleeping. Owen is on shift for the next twelve hours. But what about tomorrow? Or when our schedules align?

Noah calls just as I step from the hospital’s giant front entrance.

“Hey sunshine,” he says in that tender voice that I want to pull through the phone line and wrap around me like a blanket.

“Hi,” I reply, and sigh. Two more days and I can hold him again.

“How was your night?” he asks.

I give him a brief rundown of my busy shift, including updates on some of the babies who have been in the NICU long enough that he’s grown attached too. “I saw Owen today.”

He makes a low, tight huff—subtle but filled with empathy, kindness.

“I think I need to file that protective order.”

“Did something happen?” His voice turns razor-sharp.

“No,” I say because there’s no need to worry him. Owen’s *I let you have your fun in Idaho* bounces through my mind, making my stomach clench. Was he in Penny Creek, watching me? What about the person I saw at the NCLEX—was it him after all?

“But he’s back to saying stuff that doesn’t make sense.”

“I’ll file the order for you right now,” Noah says.

“No,” I say, because I want to handle this myself. And because after today, I need to amend it. “But when you’re here, will you go with me to file it?”

“Of course.”

I heave a sigh of relief.

“Why don’t I call up Seattle PD and get a patrol unit to come to your place? Make sure it’s secure.”

“Noah, I can lock my own windows and doors.”

“I know you can.”

“He’s on shift for the next twelve hours. I’m fine.”

Noah sighs. “Okay. Sleep well.”

“I love you. I can’t wait to hold you.”

“Me too, *chérie*.”

My house is a tiny duplex with raspberry bushes lining the cute yard and a giant oak tree in the front. The wood floors creak and the leaded glass windows rattle when the UPS truck rumbles down the narrow street. But I have a big, cozy bed and blackout shades and a box fan for white noise and to keep the room cool in the afternoons. I double check that the windows are locked, then take a shower and fall into bed.

That evening, after I’ve slept for five hours, gone for a run through beautiful Magnusen Park, cooked up some stir fry, and read a research paper

on noninvasive blood tests for fetal development, I prepare for my shift. And seeing Owen.

To my surprise, he's in the break room when I come out of the locker area.

"Vonnie, seriously, enough with the games," he says.

I'm early, which means Owen is needed on the floor, caring for his patients. Is he shirking his duties to corner me?

"What games?" I say.

He laughs, but it's cold. "That you're with someone else. It's that fucking cop, isn't it? Do you love him?"

"Who I choose to spend my time with is not your business. Back off or I'm filing a protective order."

"For what?" he says, looking genuinely surprised.

This is one of Owen's favorite tricks. First he fucks with my head, then he claims he was joking, or that I'm too sensitive, or that nobody would take my word over his.

I whip out my phone, my head buzzing. "I'm calling Assistant D.A. Eric Nordland right now."

Owen's dark eyes gleam. "The one who thinks you're a hussy? He'd probably love to get you alone. Would you like that, Vonnie? Or maybe you'd get off from him taking pictures of you. Telling you how special you are."

"Stop!" I shout, but the room is spinning and my ears are whomping with white noise.

Owen keeps talking, but I stop being able to listen. I grope the walls, looking for a way out of this hell, but I can't find the door. Owen gets louder. I cover my ears and curl against the wall.

I'm back on that bed in that girl's house. The one with the pool.

"*God made you so beautiful, Yvonne,*" Rundell says in that flat voice I used to mistake for kindness. "*Take off your—*"

No.

Owen towers over me, his expression flashing between remorse and reverence.

I'm so done with this. With him and his wild ideas. His power over me.

I will not let him hurt me, push me, or prevent me from accomplishing my dreams. I won't let him frighten me, worry me, or hijack my confidence again.

He reaches for me, his hand extending slowly, like he's lost in some alternate universe where I'm reaching back. His fingertips brush my neck, and I snap.

There's an easy self-defense move Leah taught me once when we were fooling around. The only reason I practiced it with her is because she bet I couldn't take Sasha down. When I did, Leah laughed so hard she nearly peed her pants, which made it all worth it.

I bring my fist down on the crook of Owen's elbow while springing back from him. He grunts in surprise. But I'm not done. Using my momentum, it's an easy swipe of my leg to flip him onto his back.

He lands with a thud, breathing fast, his arms frozen in a half bent position, like a dead bug.

A man in a set of green scrubs with a round belly and meaty hands storms into the room.

"Dad?" Owen says, his eyes widening in alarm.

Still breathing hard, adrenaline buzzing in my veins, I give both men a wary glance.

Owen's dad glares at his son. "What are you doing here?"

"Working," Owen says, scrambling to his feet.

Confusion mixes with my pulsing emotions. What the hell is going on?

His dad's fists clench in anger. "Not anymore."

"Dad, I'm taking my boards again October tenth. I'll pass this time. I know I will."

My gut drops. What the hell?

"You haven't passed? But...?" This makes no sense. How is Owen employed without being board certified?

"He sent in a phony copy of his results," his dad says tersely, as if reading my whirling thoughts.

I gape at Owen.

"I'm sorry, son, but you've crossed a line." Owen's dad focuses on me, remorse filling his eyes. "Looks like more than one."

He ushers Owen from the room, but turns back at the door. "Are you okay?"

I release a shaky breath, and nod. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"I'm sorry. I think Owen has a...problem. I thought we had it handled, but—" With a grimace, he disappears through the door.

NEWS OF OWEN'S conduct spreads like wildfire. Nurses are notorious gossips, and though our unit runs hot minute to minute, somehow there's enough time to discuss such a scandal.

"You went to school with him, right?" Joe asks, cocking his eyebrow as we work to flush a gastro tube on a 33-weeker.

"Yeah, but we're not friends," I reply, stroking my patient's back with the pad of my thumb. He's so small—two pounds, three ounces. He could fit into the palm of my hand.

Joe shakes his head and tosses the flushing syringe into the trash. "I can't believe he thought nobody would find out he failed his boards. I don't care who his daddy is."

When I finally leave the hospital, Noah is leaning against one of the concrete pillars. I see him first, and break into a run.

"You're here!" I say as he swings me around, his firm hold like a balm to my weary body.

He breaks away to kiss me, his lips tender, but rushed. "I couldn't wait another day," he says, and cups my face to kiss me again.

"Take me home," I say with a sigh.

NOAH

Kenzie sits in the backseat, Jupiter's lagging tongue dripping on her lap as she strokes him.

"Is that her plane?" Kenzie asks as the lights of an approaching aircraft blink into view.

"Maybe," I say, squinting at the dusky sky.

"Do you think she'll like Jupiter?" Kenzie says.

"How can she resist him?" I ask.

Jupiter licks Kenzie's face, and she squeals with giggles.

I pull into the parking lot, then help Kenzie while keeping Jupiter from bounding into the street. I clip on his leash and he clambers down, tail wagging. The volunteer at the animal shelter said he's probably a mix of Irish Setter, Boxer, and Golden Retriever. Which means he's got a sleek, coppery coat, can jump a six-foot fence, and likes to cuddle. Oh, and for some reason, loves to chew my shoes.

Our family counselor, Robbie, said that Kenzie will feel more comfortable with a higher sense of control. So we waited for her to ask about Vonnie coming for a visit. It took five months. She spent two days with us, doing our favorite things, only this time, Vonnie stayed the night, in my room. After Vonnie left, I watched Kenzie carefully for signs of distress, but other than being extra clingy at bedtime, she was okay.

Kenzie started asking about Vonnie more often. They Facetimed after Kenzie got home from school. Vonnie sent her a homemade Valentine's day card with a cuddly plushie. Kenzie asked to send Vonnie one of her most prized drawings. During Vonnie's next visit, Kenzie's front tooth was loose

but she wouldn't let me touch it. When she let Vonnie wiggle it out, it was like another piece of our lives settled into place.

Not long after that, I signed the final papers that will prevent Gia from disrupting our lives ever again. The legal fees were steep, but our safety is worth the investment.

Kenzie and I are free.

And here we are, a year later. I'm so proud of my daughter. She's had to grieve the loss of her mother while making room for someone new. It's been beautiful and heart-wrenching to witness. At times, progress has felt painfully slow.

But we made it. A year of growing.

Inside the terminal, with Jupiter's leash in one hand and Kenzie's in the other, we wait for the passengers to file in from the tarmac.

"Can Vonnie put me to bed tonight?" Kenzie asks, peering up at me.

"Sure, pumpkin," I say.

"And tomorrow, we're going riding, right?"

"Yep."

"I don't want her to leave, Daddy," she says.

My heart expands inside my chest. I kneel down to gaze into my daughter's eyes. "She doesn't have to, remember?"

After a year and a half working in Seattle Children's NICU, Vonnie wanted to come home. The experience filled her sails, but it broke her heart too. So she's going to put her passion to work at Rogue Valley Medical in their expanded labor and delivery unit, plus add in volunteer hours at the free clinic helping educate new mothers as well as triage risky deliveries or babies needing advanced care.

Kenzie's lip trembles. "So she'll stay with us? Forever?"

"Forever, *chouchou*."

The door to the tarmac opens and Vonnie steps through. Her honey blonde hair is loose about her shoulders and her eyes are beacons of bright blue. When she sees me, her smile lights up the room. She hurries our way, dodging travelers and luggage.

No more somedays.

With Kenzie's hand in mine, I rush to greet her.

Finally, our future can begin.



“IT’S GOING to be okay, Daddy,” Kenzie says, grabbing my cheeks.

“You sure she’ll say yes?” I ask, fighting the urge to hurl. I press my forehead against hers and close my eyes.

“I promise,” she says.

I hug her gently, then place her back on her feet.

Dev steps from the tent with my two best friends from the navy, Seth Dalton and Elliot Bell, the three of them in full Western dress—dark jeans, western shirts, vests, and boots. Vonnie said no churches, and I said no tuxedos. I said small, she argued that our families alone would total over fifty people. So we culled the list to a very tight group, which is mostly family plus our closest friends.

My mom slips from the other tent, her silk gown fluttering around her slender frame, and hurries over.

“Grand-mère!” Kenzie yelps, and dashes over.

Mom squats down and smiles at her. “You ready?”

Kenzie glances up at me. I caress her silky curls, and smile. “See you soon, princess,” I say.

“Good luck,” she whispers, then giggles.

I give her one last hug and she wraps her little arms around me. Gratitude soars inside me like a high, and I give thanks to the universe for bringing Kenzie into my life. Being her dad has already taught me so much.

My mom wipes a tear from the edge of her eye and blinks the rest away.

“Thanks for being here, Mom,” I say, and kiss her cheek.

“I’m just so proud of you both,” she says, and laughs. “You’ve taken such good care of each other. Now you get to make that circle of love bigger.”

“Love you, *Maman*,” I say, fighting the surge of emotions rising through me.

I then let Dev, Seth, and Elliot guide me down the aisle between the rows of tidy white chairs to the edge of the aspens, then line up behind me. The guests quickly file in. I try to smile but I’m all jitters inside. Though Vonnie and I couldn’t wait for this day to come, that it’s actually here is hard to believe. All day I’ve gone from terrified to euphoric, from eager to wishing

we had more time.

Not because I don't think Vonnie and I aren't ready. Or because our love hasn't already grown strong roots, but I still live with the stupid fear that it'll all go by too fast, and I'll forget to enjoy it. Because every moment I spend with Vonnie is one I want to remember.

The music plays and the final guests settle into their seats. If I wasn't a nervous wreck right now, I'd make eye contact with my cousins and Cora, with my parents who are sitting together—their idea—and my grandparents. But I'm fixated on the end of the aisle, my heart beating into my throat and the caress of a breeze prickling my skin.

Vonnies bridesmaids stride from the cabin where they've been holed up for the last several hours. They file down the row, all smiles, then line up on the other side of the altar.

My mom sends Kenzie down the aisle to scatter the petals from her basket, then T.J. sends Jesse, dressed like the grooms in matching boots, vest, and jeans, carrying the ring pillow.

Kenzie gets to the altar and gives me a secret little smile, then lets my mom guide her to the chair next to her. Jesse stands in front of Dev just like we rehearsed, only he's fidgety. I give him a wink, and he grins.

The wedding music starts and every nerve ending goes white hot with anticipation. Finally, I get to meet my bride.

Vonnies comes around the tent, her arm slung over Wyatts.

My heart bursts.

Soft sighs fill the air as everyone sees her.

Her blue eyes sparkle and her smile could light up the darkest night. Her blonde hair is pulled partly back and woven with tiny white flowers. Her simple white dress accented with sheer lace and a deep neckline makes her look like a fairy queen.

My queen.

My enchanting, beautiful queen.

Vonnies reaches the grassy aisleway and turns toward me. Our eyes lock, and everything else falls away.

All my hopes are coming true. I'm head over heels for the woman of my dreams.

The best part? She loves me back.

Its a feeling I never thought Id have.

I am hers. And she is mine. Now and forever.

“You are one lucky bastard,” Dev says in low tone.

I force myself to breathe while my girl takes one step, then another, her strides steady as our hearts draw closer and closer together.

At end of the aisle, Wyatt pulls Vonnie into a soft, sweet embrace.

“This is my happy ending too,” he whispers, and presses his cheek to hers. Her eyes flutter closed and she holds him close. They embrace for another long moment before he steps back, his eyes glassy.

After he grabs me in a bone-crushing hug, he takes his seat in the front row next to Peter and the rest of her kin.

A spring breeze turns the aspen leaves into a sea of shimmering green, bringing the sweet scent of the land. Vonnie hands her bouquet of sunflowers to Leah, who gives her a brilliant smile, before turning to me. I offer Vonnie my hands, and she takes them.

I love you, I say to her with my whole heart. *For now and for always*.

For now and for always, her heart replies.

Her smile brightens and a tear slips down her cheek. I kiss it away with a gentle caress of my lips. A shudder passes through her, and then she makes the softest of sighs. It’s joy and faith and love and surrender—a symphony to my hungry, humble heart.

A promise. To keep. To protect.

To cherish.



Get a peek at Vonnie and Noah’s future with instant access to this [exclusive bonus scene](#) you won’t find anywhere else.

To binge the Falling Hard small town love stories, visit the [series page](#). All books are free to read in KU. Enjoy!

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Thank you for welcoming Vonnie and Noah into your heart! I hope you love these two as much as I loved writing their story. I've held their HEA in my bones for so long, it's a joy to share it with you.

Don't forget to snag the bonus scene! Plus you'll get access to all the other exclusive bonuses from the Falling Hard series that aren't available anywhere else.

Want more friends to lovers? Single Dad romances? Fake relationships? Second chances? Make sure you've picked up the other books in the Falling Hard series. Or if you like romantic suspense, check out my Wild Hearts series (Seth Dalton's book, the series finale, is coming soon!), or my Entwined Hearts trilogy featuring Colby & Anya, which combines some of your favorite tropes: small town, friends to lovers, second chance, bad boy, and adventure.

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Don't forget to grab Vonnie & Noah's bonus scene!
Enjoy!

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ABOUT DAKOTA

USA Today Bestselling author Dakota Davies writes hot romance stories featuring hardworking, broken heroes and the feisty women who break down their barriers. She is the author of the addictive Falling Hard family saga and the emotionally driven Entwined Hearts trilogy.

By day, she's a swim team mom, book addict, and nature lover, but inside the mind of the person packing her kid's lunches and going for a run with the dog is an alter ego with a wicked mind. When not writing, Dakota takes adventures in the mountains, speed reads anything by Lauren Blakely, and bakes gluten-free bread.

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