



**BRYANTS
& WALKER**
PROTECTION

FOR THE
CHANCES
WE TAKE

THE BRYANTS & WALKER PROTECTION SERIES
BOOK 1

ELLE P. GOLDEN

**FOR THE CHANCES
WE TAKE**

Elle P. Golden

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Book: For The Chances We Take (Bryants & Walker Protection #1)

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Cover Design and Formatting: Grupo Lunas

Editing: The Word Slayer

Cover image: Adobe Stock

AUTHOR'S NOTES AND TRIGGER WARNINGS

As a fan of romantic suspense, I've tried my best to portray aspects of investigation as accurately as possible. On the other hand, I let my imagination run wild here and there, so some scenes don't necessarily represent what a real investigation would entail.

Even though I mention some federal agencies, in no way did I try to diminish their hard work or portray the lengths the good workers would go to fight crime.

That being said, I feel the need to warn you, Fellow Reader, that this book contains some sensitive subjects that might trigger you. If you don't want any spoilers, skip this part and dive into the story.

But if you'd rather be privy to the issues beforehand, here are they: strong language, sexually graphic situations (intended only for 18+), vigilante justice, pregnancy, domestic abuse (including against minors), and the death of a parent.

***This book is part of a series of standalones. Even though the couple finds their HEA now, the background**

story won't be solved in this book.*

DEDICATION

To my nieces, A. and L. May your lives be filled with the love and adventure we encounter in books.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

IZZIE

He was the sexy protector. The man who made me feel complete.

And he was about to become my baby's father.

That was, if he decided to take a chance on us.

Benjamin Walker was unexpected, and so were the changes he brought to my life. My focus should be on my new business, not the positive pregnancy test that came with the man stealing my heart.

But we had more than caring for a baby to figure out.

Between slaying dragons from his past, trying to close down the drug cartel that was haunting our small town, and fighting against his feelings for me and our baby, I wasn't sure he was willing to take a chance on us.

BEN

She was the one woman who could save me from me.

The one that turned my life on its axis and forced me to reevaluate what I thought I knew about love.

But having a baby was never part of my plans.

I was my father's son, after all. A product of hate and viciousness.

If you needed me to face a drug cartel, I was your man. If you needed me to despise the man who tried to eliminate me when I was a kid, you could count on me.

I had yet to learn how to be the man Isabella Turner and our baby deserved, the man who knew how to take chances.

Then I got cocky.

Drunk on her love and acceptance, I took one too many chances and miscalculated the risks my past could bring to our doorstep.

I thought I could gamble with life and come out unscathed.

Newsflash: life won.

PROLOGUE

Some people believed rain was a symbol of the blessings God sent us from above. I, on the other hand, would always associate rain with grief. Failure. Deceit.

It amazed—and scared—me how life always managed to surprise us. For better or for worse.

You could live in hell one moment and find out the next love wasn't just a theoretical concept. You could find a wonderful woman to love, then ruin your family with your own hands.

Some might say it was ironic. I called it cruel.

A bad joke made by the biggest bully we faced: life itself.

I was always a little jerk. Life made me that way, and I embraced it. From the moment I learned what pain was, my path as an asshole was set. I managed to fool a few people along the way that I could be better—I even fooled myself. But our true colors always ended up showing, no matter how hard we tried to hide them.

I was Benjamin Walker for my clients—the Government among them. I was Ben for my closest friends and family. I was Benny for my best friend. Son of a Bitch for my father. Baby for my woman. I even managed to be Daddy.

But I was Enemy for myself.

As I felt the rain run down my face, mixed with my tears, I cursed life for the debacle I was in. She had her share of responsibility. She was, after all, my biggest bully.

But even I couldn't hide the fact that the pain I was feeling wasn't all because of her twisted games and vicious sense of humor.

I was the master of my sea and I was about to sink my ship. Bringing my family down with it.

The truth was, I got cocky. I took one too many chances. I thought I could gamble with life and come out unscathed.

Newsflash: life won.

CHAPTER ONE

BEN

The place was opulent and not somewhere I'd normally choose. If the food matched the smell, I was looking forward to it, but this wasn't my scene. I didn't have a choice in the matter, though.

As I heard the clinking of silverware, I focused my attention on the brunette in front of me. I didn't remember the last time I saw her wearing these kinds of clothes. She looked marvelous in the hugging-curves black dress. I matched her to the best of my abilities. I chose one of my best pairs of black slacks to go with my also black buttoned-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to my elbow. Added to that black belt and black shoes, it wasn't very creative, but I knew I looked good.

The situation called for that.

She gazed at everything around us, her big brown eyes away from my hazel ones and unimpressed by the flashy decoration.

"You look beautiful."

And she did. Her black hair was tied in some kind of knot, her bangs falling to one side of her face, down her right eyebrow. Her fair complexion was shadowed by dim lights, which also served to attenuate the scar on her left eyebrow.

And for that I was grateful. I had enough guilt already to last me a lifetime.

She scoffed, her disrepute such a contrast to her attire, but not surprising if you'd met her before. "That's how you intend to get into my pants today?" Her voice was a little louder than the place required, drawing the attention of a couple of patrons near us.

"I was just trying to be nice."

She mumbled something in disgust. When I didn't respond, she did it louder, "I bet Sheryl looked beautiful."

I sighed deeply. "For the last time, I didn't sleep with her."

"You know what?" She glanced briefly at somewhere behind me and leaned closer over what was supposed to be a romantic table. I mirrored her stance, bringing our faces closer as she whispered, "The Train has arrived, and the Passenger is on board."

She shifted her body back, and we looked at the menu, more intently than was necessary. "*How many people? Do you have visuals?*" I heard Zach's voice in my ear, and I knew Mia had heard it, too. I leaned over again, pretending to show her something on the menu, and answered quietly. "I'm seated with my back to them, facing the front door. I have no idea where they came from."

She pointed at the menu, and anyone would think we were in a deep conversation about the options this place overcharged us for. "They came from the back. I see the Train,

the Passenger, and a woman. I'm not sure who she is, but I think I've seen her before."

"*Where are they seated?*" We could hear Danny's fingers working on the computer over his voice.

"At a table in the corner. It's not exactly secluded, but it gives them some privacy," she clarified.

"*Not enough if you're able to see them.*" Zach's counter was valid.

"Oh, big brother, I see it all," she sassed. "And I don't think they want to go unnoticed. He's being way too flashy to be inconspicuous. Who wears a shiny purple three-piece suit?" Another unladylike snort. "I'll get closer, wait a bit."

"*Be careful.*" He never failed to worry about her.

She turned to me. "I'll be right back, Boo." If her sweet voice was any indication, the *Sheryl* debacle was forgotten.

She sauntered away and headed to the toilet, taking the longest route possible and passing by their table. I could see some male patrons (and some female) following her with their eyes, and I smiled, knowing they never could stand a chance.

Not because of me. They just didn't. I highly doubted there was a man—or woman—worthy of her.

Using it as an excuse to look around, I searched for a waiter and motioned to him to place our orders. After a few minutes, she came back. Her features were neutral, but I recognized her eyes were sharp.

She sat down, grabbed my hand, and whispered, “I couldn’t overhear much, but they were talking about horses. If that was code for anything, I’m not sure. But whatever that means, if real horses or not, they’re planning on bringing them close by.”

“Heroine?” I suggested.

“Maybe.” She wasn’t fully convinced. “Danny, there’s a hidden camera behind the bar, I think you’ll get a good visual of them.”

“*I’m on it.*” His fingers tapped even faster.

My roaming eyes brought some results as well. “There are two men outside the restaurant. One is standing in front of the clothing shop, the other one is inside a car parked in front of it. They seem too attentive to what goes on inside here to be just passers-by.”

“*They’re probably his security detail.*” Zach voiced my assumption.

“Part of it, I think. If they came from behind, this place might be surrounded.” Mia was always one step ahead of us.

“*It’s okay, we’re just here to gather intel. We’re not supposed to do anything.*” Zach paused. “*Did you all hear that? We’re not doing anything tonight.*” With no response, Zach sighed in frustration. “*I’m talking to you, Mia.*”

“Why me?” she rebutted indignantly.

“*Because you’re always doing something reckless.*”

“It’s been working out quite fine, if I do say so myself.”

“So far. It’s been working out so far. I’d rather not lose my little sister because she thought she just had to save someone else. It’d kill me.”

“I hate when he’s sweet,” she mumbled, making a face.

Trying to defuse their *argument*—that’s how far they’d fight—I assumed our characters again. “I placed our orders, sweetheart.”

Another loud scoff. “Just like you ordered for Sharon?”

“Who?”

“It’s Sheryl, dear,” came from the *helpful* old lady sitting at the table beside ours, who was more interested in a lovers’ quarrel than her dinner.

“Thank you.” Mia looked at me in disapproval and pointed at her newest friend. “See? She gets it.”

“I didn’t sleep with Sharon.”

“Sheryl.”

“I saw how you looked at Sharon.”

“Sheryl.”

“Why would I want anyone else when I have you? I was never interested in Sharon.”

“Sheryl.”

Mia turned to the old woman. “Okay, lady, that’s enough.” Shaking her face at me, she muttered, “Humpf, some people...”

The matron harrumphed. As Danny chuckled, we heard Zach’s voice again. “*Why are you always playing the fighting*

couple?”

“Because it’s funnier.” Mia gave me a devilish smile.
“And that way, I get a sense of the staff.”

“How come?”

“I want to see how they react to a table having some sort of trouble.” Still facing me, she glanced at our waiter from the corner of her eye. “Right now, the guy serving us is uncomfortable and fidgety. He’s the same guy who’s serving the Train and another table of uninteresting people. The bland patrons don’t get his attention at all; he’s doing the bare minimum. Now I need to see if he’s uncomfortable because of us, or because of our guys.” She winked at me. “Time to change tactics.”

I smirked and waited for her next move.

A little wary, the waiter approached with our orders, having seen our disagreement. As he placed the dishes, she stared at me lovingly. “I can’t believe it’s been three years.” She looked up at the waiter. “Three years ago today, I met my Boo. So, I want tonight to be just perfect. Think about what is the most romantic dessert you have. We’ll order it later.” She raised her index finger before he could answer. “Not yet. I want to surprise my Boo.”

The young man masked his annoyance at us as I looked adoringly at her. He stepped away, closing in on our much more interesting guy’s table. We ate quietly yet still alert. From time to time, I saw Mia glance up behind me to check on the guy.

“Why can’t I remember who this girl is? I know I’ve seen her face before.”

“One of our old cases?” I tried to help.

“I don’t know.” She furrowed her brows. “She’s not comfortable. They keep touching her, especially the Train, and she always tenses when he does that. She doesn’t want to be here.”

“And we’re not doing anything about her,” Zach reminded us.

I wished he was at our table to see how hard she rolled her eyes. Ignoring his warning, she kept discreetly watching them.

Her eyes twitched, and I chuckled. “Lens?”

“I’m sure someone evil and bitter invented them. It sure isn’t a holy creation.” She glanced behind me again. “The waiter is around them. He doesn’t seem so happy either.” She scoffed. “I bet he wants to run back to the loving couple’s table.” She sat a little straighter. “He’s coming back. Go to the bathroom.”

“What?”

“Not you, Zee. Benny, go to the bathroom.” She was the only one who could get away with calling me that. Knowing each other for more than twenty years brought up this kind of issue. Not that I’d complain. We were way past that point.

I motioned to get up. “Wait. Not yet.” She waited until the young man was close enough to throw a napkin at my face.

“You jerk. I can’t believe you’d bring up Sharon on our anniversary.”

“*Sheryl*,” Danny and Zach said in unison.

I got up from the table to be faced with the guy’s disapproving eyes on me. I walked away, heading to the men’s bathroom and also taking the least obvious route—right by the Train’s table.

As I approached, I noticed Mia was right. The woman, who looked barely over eighteen, was visibly skittish. As she tried to pull the hem of her short dress down her legs, the Train had a possessive hand over her leg, his hand clamping so hard, his fingertips were white. She’d be a beautiful woman if she didn’t look so terrified. The young woman didn’t want to be there.

And it wasn’t hard to figure out why when both men were touching her—legs, arms, and neck—as if they had the right to, while she trembled.

I understood Mia’s urge to intervene in these kinds of situations. But Zach was right, it wasn’t the time, because there was a lot at stake. That sucked. I didn’t hear anything of interest as I passed them, which was a good thing, as Mia was about to make the waiter our informant, and I could hear her in the device inside my ear.

“Can you believe this? Talking about another woman during our anniversary.”

“Did you enjoy your food, Madam?” He tried to stay professional.

“What’s your name?”

“Uhm, Robert.”

“Can I call you Bob?” She didn’t wait for a response.
“Bob, are you married?”

“I have...a girlfriend.”

“I hope you treat her well. You look like a respectful man. I can sense you’re good to her.” A compliment goes a long way.

“Well, I think I do. We need to take care of women, and I do that.” Already less wary.

“Good for you. I bet you’re a catch. Look at me, I’m envying your girlfriend already.” Reeling him in.

“I’m very good to her. You should be with someone good for you, too.”

“Is that a proposition?” Her voice became flirtatious.

“We could come to a satisfying agreement.” Jerk.

“I think we could. I deserve to be cherished. I mean, look at that table in the corner, with the young lady in the silver dress. It’s clear to me that the man worships her and gives her everything, what with her expensive dress and jewelry.”

As if conspiring, his voice became lower. *“I don’t think she’s happy to be here. I’m not even sure she’s even his girlfriend.”*

“Really? He keeps touching her and whispering.”

“She’s not happy with the touching, and he’s not whispering love words. He’s just talking to the other guy about business, horses, breeding, and stuff.” Bingo.

“The poor girl.” Her voice betrayed her acting, showing she was worried about the anonymous woman. After a pause, she resumed. *“That’s weird. He doesn’t seem to be the kind of guy who deals with horses. I’m having a hard time imagining him covered in manure.”*

Bob laughed. *“No, he doesn’t. I don’t know who he is, but the other man, the one he’s with, is a big shot. He owns a chain of stud farms on this side of the country.”*

“You don’t say.”

His voice became even quieter, and I could imagine him getting strategically closer to her. *“The word on the streets is that he’s money laundering.”*

She gasped. *“From what?”*

“Maybe we should go to a more private place to discuss this.” Annnd time to go back.

She giggled. *“That’s an exciting invitation.”*

I was making my way to our table again, this time using the closest path so as not to bring attention to myself.

That’s when I spotted *her* at the bar. The noises around me ceased, and I couldn’t even hear Mia dismissing one pushy Bob. The woman’s auburn hair was loose, framing her face. Her nose was long in a way that matched her face. And when her striking green eyes turned to me, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Without noticing what I was doing, I walked toward her with absolutely no idea what I was doing.

“I knew coming to this place tonight would be worth it.”

She swiveled on her stool to face me, and I tried not to look at her cleavage like a perv. Man, was it calling for me. “That’s a bold statement, don’t you think? I can assure you I’m not leaving this place with you.” Her assessment of me told me otherwise, and seeing the lust shining in her eyes made me grateful for my time as a Navy SEAL.

“Getting to see you tonight was more than enough for me.”

“You’re good.” Her smile was seductive. “But you’re too late. I’m here to see someone else.” That’s when I remembered I was also here with someone else. Not in the same capacity, but still.

“I can wait for my turn. I’m most definitely not threatened.” I wasn’t. “I’m working tonight.” I shouldn’t have said that. For all intents and purposes, I was celebrating my anniversary with my *Boo*. “But don’t you worry.” I leaned closer to whisper in her ear. “We’re happening.” Her shiver was answer enough.

Then I headed back to my table. Mia and I soon wrapped things up, having collected what intel we could to discuss later.

Since we came together, I dropped Mia off at her place and waved at a smiling Gabe standing by the front window. As soon as she closed her door on her, Gabe, and Haley, I went home, thinking about the gorgeous woman from the bar.

I couldn’t wait to see her again. Sexy and beautiful—

Son of a bitch, I didn’t ask her name.

CHAPTER TWO

IZZIE

Men were jerks. All of them. I couldn't believe I almost fell for another line.

After so long of feeling lonely, I decided to try the whole dating thing again. What a disaster.

The guy I met was a tool of epic proportions. Rude, unattractive, and misogynistic. I still couldn't believe he asked me to put on a jacket so I wouldn't show much skin.

Yet he wasn't worse than the lying sex-on-a-stick that tried (and almost succeeded) to seduce me. When he approached me at the bar, I prayed he was the man I was supposed to meet. His confident walk toward me was already a turn-on. Added that to his crooked smile, devilish hazel eyes, probably two days' worth of stubble, and a body that wouldn't quit, I was ready to say yes to pretty much anything.

Do as you please, show me the goods, make a baby with me. Oh, the irony.

My surprise—and disgust—when he left the restaurant holding hands with a beautiful brunette was the slap in the face I needed.

“Working,” my ass.

I felt sorry for the woman for being cheated on—I hardly doubt I was the first one he made a proposition to—but

I felt worse for almost being cheated with.

Although, that didn't matter. My focus was on getting ready to start the next chapter of my life and finally make my dreams come true. *By Any Beans* was about to become a reality. Just a couple more days, and I'd open the doors to a project I'd been nurturing for years.

When I found that place in quaint Holy Water, I felt like I was finally where I was supposed to be. The property wasn't big, which was fine by me, because it meant the rent wouldn't break me. Although it wasn't cheap by any means, considering its great location on Main Street.

It was close to many already established businesses, and their workers were inviting and warm. I'd searched for so long for a place where I'd call home and feel welcome—two things I'd never got to feel living with my mother.

As soon as I was of age, I left her place and ran to freedom, but the bad taste in my mouth from her disdain—and the constant doubts she planted in my head—remained.

I believed everyone had a voice inside their heads that told them they weren't good enough. Mine was outside my head, eating in the kitchen, and I was forced by law to call it "Mother."

I didn't even tell her about this place, and I wasn't planning on doing so any time soon. What was the point? She'd just make me feel bad for doing it wrong, guilty for walking away from her—even though she didn't want me around—and wary I'd fail even before I began.

This was my baby, and I needed it to succeed. I spent too much money and my heart on it.

I was a gut-believer. I listened to my feelings and trusted my instincts. I'd been dreaming about my coffee shop for years, but besides my procrastination based on fear, there was always something that stopped me. The timing wasn't right, I was tight on money, I couldn't find the right location. That was why I expanded my search to other towns.

Until I found this little gem.

Holy Water was adorable with its many trees, fresh air, and surrounding lake. The little shops along the main street were all different but followed the same architectural pattern, like it was constantly decorated for a holiday only this town celebrated.

When I came for the first time to check the property, the old lady from the boutique nearby approached me to sing praises about this town and congratulate me on my new business. The one I hadn't started yet.

An old man wearing a straw hat approached me, his hand already stretched to welcome me, telling me how he liked his coffee.

My gut was screaming at me to seal the deal before someone else snagged it. It was home.

And that was why my sole focus should be on starting up my adventure and making it soar. Cheating bastards be damned.

I didn't even know his name, and we exchanged just a couple of words, so there wasn't a good reason why I was so

out of sorts about it and thinking so much about him.

Yet my gut was trying to tell me something I couldn't understand.

I checked everything was in its right place after cleaning it and made a list of a few more things I needed to buy for my opening in two days. I'd have an early start the next morning to prep everything for the big day and bake all I could, just to put them in the oven when needed.

After I locked everything in, I headed to the market nearby. I pulled my jacket closed around me to protect me from the crisp air, fall already announcing its presence. I took in a huge breath, feeling energized.

The market wasn't crowded, which was a good thing. I loved how welcoming those people were, but I was in the zone, and I wanted to focus on my task. I was so engrossed in my shopping, I didn't realize there was a person close by, only noticing when my cart hit someone's leg.

Not *any* someone. The sexy jerk from the other night.

My apologies died on my tongue when I realized whom I was staring at, and his crooked grin made my knees weak. Did he become even more handsome since that night?

"I was wondering when we'd see each other again."

I made a mental check of my appearance, which was stupid; I didn't want to impress someone like him. That was what I told myself when I remembered I wasn't looking exactly hot.

"I'm wondering if your girlfriend would be happy about it."

He placed one hand on my cart, preventing me from going away—if it was on purpose, I didn't know, but I had my suspicions.

“Is this your subtle way of asking me if I'm single? You could've just asked. I'm happy to inform you I'm completely available and just waiting for our chance to make it happen.”

Idiot.

“So you just have the habit of walking around, holding women's hands?” He looked confused at my question. “If you excuse me, I need to get going.”

He stepped in front of me, blocking my way, but not being “in my face” about it.

“What are you talking about?”

I huffed, forgetting all politeness. “You seemed pretty cozy for a business meeting.”

He thought for a moment, and clarity seemed to come to him. His lips split into a full, sexy damn smile again. “There's no need to be jealous, Forest.”

“Forest?”

“You have the most striking green eyes. They remind me of the outdoors and forests. They look like freedom.” There was such awe in his voice, I forgot my words and why I was mad at him.

Oh, right, he was a jerk.

“Excuse me.” As I was maneuvering my cart to go around him, he blocked me again and bent a little to look into

my eyes.

“I didn’t lie to you; I was working.” I gave him my most skeptical glare. “There’s no need for me to lie to you. I can’t go into the specifics, but I was indeed working with a friend.”

The situation was all off. Yet he didn’t seem to be lying to me. If that wasn’t enough, my gut was calm in his presence, and my instinct was to trust him.

I was ready to concede—and maybe offer him my number, you know, to have a new friend—when we heard a loud thud, followed by a squirt. Startled, I turned around, looking for the source of the noise, and saw a can of soda spilled on the floor.

Next to it was the beautiful brunette from the other night. Holding a little boy’s hand. The most adorable and beautiful little boy.

Oh my God, was he a father? To that pretty family?

She wasn’t dressed for the night. Wearing jeans, a pair of sneakers, a shirt with the saying “*Feminism is my favorite F word,*” and a pair of dark blue-rimmed glasses, she looked younger than the bombshell from the other night, but not less beautiful. She was the image of the girl next door.

Fighting my gut, disgust rolled around in my stomach for being a trusting idiot again. Taking his distraction at his girlfriend (wife?) and son to my advantage, I slid my cart around him and rushed out of that aisle, straight to the cashier, hoping I had everything I needed.

I wondered what they were doing there. We'd met a few towns over, and I didn't consider he might live in Holy Water. I thought my new beginning in this place was shaping up to be so wonderful.

I should've known it was too good to be true.

CHAPTER THREE

BEN

I looked around, startled by the noise, and found an embarrassed Gabe looking at the mess he most likely had made. His trembling chin matched his eyes, which were filled with unshed tears, as Mia was squatting down, trying to comfort him.

My shame was instant for having realized I'd forgotten about them in my quest to flirt with Forest. *Damn it.* I hadn't asked for her name again. I was off my game.

I glanced to my side and noticed her gone, which didn't surprise me. She was probably feeling right about her assumptions that I was a cheater. Ignoring the longing I felt for a stranger, I walked toward those two people I knew and cared about and tried to forget about the redhead who had been tormenting my mind for the last few days.

"Hey buddy, are you okay?"

Gabe turned his teary eyes to me and nodded. Mia was stroking his cheek and talked to him in a soothing voice. "Don't worry about it, okay? Everything is fine, it was just some soda, and we can clean it up in no time." Right on cue, the owner's son, a helpful teenager who hadn't mastered yet how to fight pimples, appeared, holding a rug and some cleaning products. "Thank you, Stevie."

He dodged her raised hand that was stretched in a silent offer to clean it, his cheeks a dark shade of pink. “It’s my pleasure to clean it, Mia. Anything you need.” Sucker.

“Then thank you again. That’s sweet of you.”

If he kept getting redder, I feared he might explode. To be young and have a crush on an older woman.

We turned around with the items we intended to purchase and grabbed a few more things. Gabe’s sadness was already forgotten as he asked for more candy than he could handle and Mia agreed to everything.

We stayed silent, both lost in our own thoughts until she broke it quietly. “I need to know who was that woman, it’s driving me crazy.”

My gut froze, and my heart sped up, and I had no idea why. I tried to keep my voice steady. “Just a woman I met.”

“Wait, you know her? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t exactly know her. We’ve met before, and I wanted to ask her out.”

“Good Lord, Benny. She’s barely legal.” What was she talking about? Forest even looked older than Mia. Which wasn’t a hard feat. Mia normally looked younger than she was. “And again, why haven’t you told me? I’ve been wracking my brain trying to remember where I know her from.”

“It’s recent. We’ve met at the Picadilly and talked a little.”

“When? I kept an eye on their table the whole night. And how did you get away with it? Zach was on our case so

we wouldn't intervene."

I didn't have the heart to tell her Zach was on *her* case so *she* wouldn't intervene. Besides, this conversation was weird. Did she see the guy Forest was on a date with? Why did she keep an eye on her table? She was alone when we met. But I'd probably intervene if I saw the moron. I didn't know the guy, but I knew he was a moron.

"We just talked at the bar." Mia stopped and gazed at me, still holding Gabe's hand, who was oblivious to our conversation, too entranced by the variety of ice cream. Maybe we shouldn't have stopped in that aisle.

"I don't think we're talking about the same thing." I looked at her in confusion, and she answered my silent question. "I was talking about the girl we saw at *their* table. I can't stop thinking about her. For the life of me, I can't explain why I think I know her, and from where." Her frustration was clear, although she tried to mask her emotions. We resumed our leisure walk, still grabbing things we didn't need.

"We need to look back at our previous cases, maybe it'll lighten—"

"Wait. What were *you* talking about?" I tried to control my squirm, avoiding her big, brown, inquisitive eyes. Understanding dawned on her face. "She's the beautiful girl you were talking with just now."

I nodded but didn't elaborate. At least until she raised a single eyebrow at me. I didn't know why that always made me spill my beans.

"I met her a few days ago."

She nodded. “That makes more sense. So? Who was the beautiful woman?” She looked at me intently, but her voice wasn’t sharp; just curious.

“Just some woman I’ve met.”

“We covered that already. You seemed interested a few minutes ago.” I lamely shrugged. “You know playing coy will do the opposite of keeping me away. Spill it, Walker.”

I grinned at her true words. “We met the other night at this posh place. Well, the night you and I went to Picadilly to gather intel.”

Her brows furrowed in thought. “Really? I don’t remember seeing her there. And you were with me the entire time.”

“Well...” I rubbed my neck, shifting my weight between my legs. “Remember when I went to the bathroom so you could talk to the waiter? I was returning to our table when I found her at the bar. We talked a little.”

She gasped dramatically. “I didn’t know my Boo was that fast. You’re good.” Her voice carried a note of wonder. “So when are you meeting her again? What’s her name?”

“That’s the thing...I don’t know.” It was my turn to be frustrated.

“Just call her and set a date.” If it were that easy.

“I don’t have her phone number. I don’t even know her name.”

“What do you mean? That’s the second time you talked, how come you don’t have that information yet?”

Fundamental information, I might add.”

I huffed, annoyed at myself. “I forgot to ask her. Both times.”

We stayed quiet for a few seconds. Until she snorted. “I stand corrected. You’re dumber than I am.”

“I got distracted.” That lame excuse was all I got.

“By what? What on Earth could have distracted you enough to not even ask the most basic of questions?”

It was hard to answer that. What could I say? I was distracted by her eyes? By her beauty? By how my body reacted at the sight of her?

I glanced at Mia, only to be met with her watchful eyes. “This woman got to you, huh?”

“That’s insane. We’ve talked two times, and I don’t even know her name.”

“Because you were too entranced to remember asking.” I had no response to that.

Except... “You thought I was interested in that scared girl from the guy’s table? Jesus, Mia, she’s barely legal.”

“That’s what I said,” she exclaimed. “That’s when I realized we were talking about different things.” She looked at our full cart. “I think we’ve got everything we need.”

“I don’t think we need everything we’ve got.”

She raised one shoulder. “You never know.” She picked Gabe up, kissed his pudgy cheek, and lightly tapped his butt twice. “Time to go home.”

“We take *evewithing*?” His eyes rounded in worry.

“Everything, kiddo. But your mommy will decide when you can have it. Deal?” He nodded happily, and I pitied Haley for having the mission of controlling her son’s ingestion of sugar. “So let’s go, or she’ll send a search party for us.”

We headed to the cashier, and I thought our previous conversation was over. But it’s never over with Mia. “It’s interesting that you met at Picadilly, in Saving Grace, a few days ago, and ran into her by chance just now.” She glanced at me. “No one would travel a few towns over just to go to the market here.” Where was she going with it? “Keep your eyes open. It’s quite probable your nameless girl lives here.”

I couldn’t answer, and she wasn’t expecting me to.

Was she right? Was my Forest living here?

And why did that thought make me so happy?

CHAPTER FOUR

BEN

As the days went by, our frustration grew. Despite the information we gathered, we weren't any closer to figuring out what those men intended.

We stayed most of our time in the company, trying to crack questions and come up with answers, but we seemed to have reached a dead end. If we weren't on the field dealing with clients, we were all over this case.

Despite our aggravation, I was grateful.

Zach and I joined the navy and soon enough joined the SEAL program. That's when we met Daniel "Danny" Delgado. Mia opted for another route. She went to college, and after her bachelor's degree in criminal justice, her master's degree in law, and her doctorate in criminal psychology, she was accepted at the Drug Enforcement Administration, the DEA.

Danny, Zach, and I went to every deployment together for years. When Danny's girlfriend (turned wife) announced her pregnancy, he left and went back to civilian life. Lucky for him, we already had an in at the DEA, so he started working under Mia.

A few years later, Zach, Mia, and I stepped out of where we were and opened our own company. *Bryants &*

Walker Protection was our baby. And it was thriving.

Danny wasn't comfortable leaving a steady job to enroll on the adventurous path of starting our own business—and when I said he wasn't, I meant his nagging wife, Andrea. I could understand their caution in doing so, what with having a baby and all. But I was past the point of not liking the woman.

When we finally convinced Danny to come work with us, we were already becoming well-known in the field. With Mia's connection and expertise and Zach's and my background, we were assigned more cases than we could accept. Having Danny with us was a relief, especially because we all knew and trusted him.

But there were still moments when we had to work with other groups, so we wouldn't say no to a good assignment. We needed to expand ASAP, as Mia always brought up. We needed people we could unquestionably trust.

We needed more man (and woman) power to deal with our daily activities (private securities, private investigations, consultation) and embrace what the government required. Not only was the money good, the job was meaningful.

Our investigation of the Train (Santiago Cruz) and the Package (Brian Keyes) came to us from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the FBI. Drug trafficking was getting bigger in our area, law enforcement wasn't able to contain it, and they didn't even know where it was coming from.

The frustrating part was that most of our investigation was done in the dark. After the night at Picadilly, we talked to our FBI liaison, but either he also didn't know anything or he wouldn't tell us. I couldn't decide which was worse.

Zach, the most centered of us all, was trying to resonate with the bureau. I was focusing on common routes for trafficking heroin (what we thought the “horse transportation” meant), and Danny and Mia spent the last few days holed up in her office, looking at our old cases and their cases from the DEA to try and figure out the two men’s connection and who was the girl with them.

We were on edge and frustrated. The only highlight of our day was when Haley brought Gabe to the company or Danny brought his daughter, Sofia, to lighten us up. That was, when Andrea let him do it.

I was going crazy looking at meaningless photos and articles that didn’t help. I stood up from my chair and strode to Mia’s office. She had her elbows on her desk, her hands thrust in her hair as she read whatever it was on the many files she scattered along with snacks. Danny was working on a chair facing her.

Still holding her head, she lamented. “I wanna die.” She looked up at both of us, took off her glasses, and rubbed her hands over her eyes, exhaustion clear if the dark circles around her eyes were any indication.

“Have you eaten? We should take a break, *cariño*.” Danny’s voice transpired the worry I was carrying.

“I snacked with you, but I think I need to eat something.” Her eyes were tired, and she seemed dizzy, even though she tried to mask it.

“I’ll get us something. Do you know if that new coffee shop is any good?”

Danny turned around on his chair to face me. “I went there the other day. The pastries are awesome. I think she’s doing well, because every time I went there, there was a good amount of patrons.”

“She?”

“The owner. I think she’s the one who bakes. Really good stuff.”

“So I’m trying her. What do you guys want? Can I bring you coffee?”

“No caffeine for me.”

I shot a surprised glance at Mia. “We’ve been working nonstop. Wouldn’t coffee be helpful?”

“Caffeine is bad for her.” I don’t know if it was because they worked together before we started the company or just his natural fatherly instincts, but he always seemed more attentive than me. Thank God I didn’t have a baby. There were so many ways I could ruin a kid.

Just like I was ruined.

“Danny’s right. My head is a little funny right now, if I ingest anything remotely energetic, it won’t be nice.” She shrugged one shoulder, trying to play it cool, but she didn’t fool me.

“Are you having a crisis?” Danny’s voice was quieter than before. “We could dim the lights in the room. Or better yet, you could stop and rest.”

She gave him a small smile. “Not a full-on crisis yet, just a little annoying dizziness. If I eat something, I’ll feel a lot

better.” She gazed at me. “Just bring me a hot chocolate and whatever pastry that looks yummy.”

My worry about her remained. She’d have labyrinthitis episodes from time to time, especially under stressful situations. She knew what she needed to do, but there were times when she powered through it for a case we were working on, and the results were horrifying.

Not for the job, she always came through. But for her health.

I took their orders and told myself to be quick. We were based right outside of town, but Holy Water was so small, we felt like everything was close.

I parked a few stores down from the café because there was no parking spot closer. Danny was right, the place seemed to be a hit.

By Any Beans was a pleasant place. It was a colorful space, yet the colors were well chosen, not tiring. Its big windows on the front brought in natural clarity, and the space smelled delicious.

I approached the display of goodies, and my mouth watered. Unable to pick, I planned on buying a little bit of everything, hoping I could remember the beverage preferences.

A young, curvy woman smiled at me from behind the counter. Her honey hair was pulled back in a ponytail, exposing her beautiful face. The pink tips of her hair matched her bright smile. There was something cheerful about her that was contagious.

“Hello. What can I get you?” Her voice was as colorful as her nails.

“Hi,” I looked at her name tag, “April. Are you the owner?” I didn’t fully think she was; she seemed too young for that.

“No, Isabella is the owner. Isabella Turner. I just work here.”

“This place seems great.” I was still admiring it and happy to have a place like that in our little town. I had a feeling I’d spend a lot of time at the welcoming bistro.

“It truly is. The pastries are to die for.” She said, almost conspiratorially.

I placed my order, ticking off everyone so I wouldn’t forget them (Mia, Danny, Zach, Haley, Gabe, and myself). April was preparing the beverages, so I took my already prepared coffee and started to peruse the place. I walked toward the door, checking the funny paintings on the wall, and as I was turning back to the counter, the door slammed open, hitting me on the arm and making me spill my coffee.

I was ready to say calming words to the apologetic lady when I recognized her voice. She stopped talking when she realized who the man parading with coffee spilled on his coat was. A huge grin stretched my lips.

“If you wanted my attention, you could’ve just tapped me. How are you, Forest?”

She seemed at a loss for words until she recovered, shaking her head lightly. “What are you doing here?” Maybe she wasn’t completely recovered.

“I heard great things about this place and wanted to check it out. I’m most certainly happy that I did. What about you?”

“I own this place.” She sounded almost defensive. I felt victorious for a multitude of reasons.

“And now you have a new regular.” Despite her best efforts to contain it, the shadow of a smile was noticeable. She seemed to finally realize I was smelling like coffee—because I was soaked in it—and apologized profusely again.

I was too distracted to have finally found her for good. I couldn’t hear a single word she said when she grabbed my arm, pulling me to the counter so she could clean the mess she made. I wasn’t about to stop her if it meant she’d keep touching me. I felt a surge of energy course through my body. She must’ve felt the same, based on her dilated pupils and soft gasp.

She tapped me with some napkins that didn’t do anything to clean, but I was most certainly not complaining. By her pleased expression, she wasn’t either.

When April brought me my order, Forest rounded her eyes. “I’m feeding a lot of people,” I said as an answer to her unasked question. Her eyes turned wary, and she slowly pulled her cleaning hand back. Time to clear some things. “My co-workers. And friends. Nothing more.”

“No goodies for your son, I see.”

I laughed out loud. It was crazy to think I had a kid. “Gabe isn’t my son, just like Mia isn’t my girlfriend.” At her

curious gaze, I explained. “Mia’s the one you saw with me both times. She’s my co-worker. Well, and best friend.”

“It must be hard to be a single mother.” Still sensing her doubt, I continued.

“I’m sure it is, but she’s not his mom. Haley is, and the three of them live together.”

“Oh, I had no idea she—”

I chuckled again. “They’re not a couple.”

“I’m so confused.”

“Then maybe we should meet another time, and I could explain everything.” I leaned closer to her, and her smell tightened my pants. “You know, I don’t do anything rushed. I like to take my time and give my full attention. I need to be sure everything is thoroughly covered, no...*subject* untouched.”

At my whispered words, her green eyes almost turned black with desire, and she shivered. “I’ll arrange some napkins for you.” Her hoarse voice made me feel big—in more ways than one.

She turned away and headed behind the counter, with her back to me. She grabbed a few things, deposited them in the small box with my order, and handed it to me. “I put another cup of coffee for you, since I ruined the first one.” Her pink cheeks were driving me crazy.

“I look forward to seeing you around again...Isabella.” At her surprised smile, I turned on my heels and left the cafeteria. The whole drive back to the company was made with a grin I couldn’t contain. What a nice turn of events.

I entered the lobby of Bryants & Walker and passed Haley at the reception. I lifted the box in my hands to show her. “I brought treasures, Hay.”

“Thank you, Ben.” No matter how many years have passed, she always sounded shy and sweet.

I placed everything on the table at our kitchen-turned-breaking-room-turned-escape-area when we needed to change the scenery. When I opened the box, the amazing smell hit me full force again, and I couldn’t wait to dig in.

Not just on the pastries.

I stretched my hand to pick up my cup, then I noticed a small piece of paper under it, seemingly a scribbled note. When I unfolded it, my heart started beating faster. Right under *Forest* was what could only be her phone number.

I stared at the note, grinning like a fool. For the first time, I didn’t know what to say to a woman. I just felt this pressing urge to run after her.

I heard the guys coming and slipped the note into my pocket, hiding my smile behind my cup of coffee.

Who would’ve thought a case of goodies also held opportunities?

CHAPTER FIVE

IZZIE

I was most certainly losing my mind. When did I start handing my phone number to strangers? And when did I become obsessed with my phone to check if said strangers had sent me something?

To be fair, it'd been only a couple of hours. Yet I was frustrated he hadn't tried to contact me. Hadn't he seen my note? Mortification embraced me when I considered maybe someone else had found it. I didn't know why, but thinking about that Mia girl—his so-called co-worker and *best friend*—made me feel uneasy.

The right word was “jealous.” Which was stupid, since I didn't know either of them.

I was lost in my thoughts as I prepared my baking for the next day when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I tried to suppress the teenage girl inside of me and completed my task before picking it up—praying it was him, not some telemarketing person.

Unknown: are you as sweet as everything you bake?

My heartbeat was so fast, I could hear it thumping in my ear.

Me: who is it?

Unknown: you wound me, Forest.

Me: I still don't know who you are, I guess you'll continue to be "Unknown" on my contact list.

Unknown: I introduce myself as Benjamin Walker. My friends call me Ben. You can refer to me as the man who'll change your life.

Me: Cocky much?

Sexy Bee: I think you should at least try this theory.

Me: I don't know if that's smart. Let alone wise.

Sexy Bee: is it weird of me to be proud of you for being careful? I need you to throw caution to the wind for me, but I feel better knowing you're playing it safe.

Me: so you won't try to corrupt me?

Sexy Bee: oh no, is that what you understood from what I said? Don't let me fool you, I'll definitely corrupt you.

Me: is that a threat?

Sexy Bee: it's a promise. Now tell me about you. What you're doing?

That threw me a little. I thought he'd initiate some sexting—which would be creepy at this early stage—but he changed the route to ask me mundane things.

We texted for hours. Even the prospect of staying late to prepare the baking for the next morning didn't faze me, nor did it erase the smile on my face.

The conversation flowed easily. Even though he still explored his seductive streak, he wasn't obnoxious about it. We flirted. We made jokes. We talked about nothing important,

yet that felt big. Like something fundamental was shifting. For me. For my life.

I should be scared about it. But a bigger part of me wanted to jump head first into whatever this was.

What was the harm?

We'd been talking for a few days, still with no date in sight. I fought against my frustration, especially because, instead of ghosting me, he was considerate enough to tell me he needed to be away for a few days, dealing with his job. Which I'd yet to find out what it was.

I was at Beans, trying new recipes as April managed the customers. She was a local godsend. She'd handle the selling as I focused on my baking, and she was amazing at it. Her vivid personality made us fall in love with her. Even the grumpiest of patrons couldn't resist her welcoming smile.

I was lost in my process when she poked her head into the kitchen. "There's a customer here wanting to talk to you. He says he has a private request."

"I'll be right outside."

I left the dough resting and washed my hands. I tried to fix my hair and check for any flour spots on my clothes until I looked presentable. As presentable as I could after standing for almost ten hours.

I joined April behind the counter, looking for the man who was looking for me. I was met with *his* hazel eyes and

crooked smile.

“What are you doing here?” Despite my words, my voice carried a wonder I couldn’t hide. “I thought you were away at work.”

“I was. I just got back and decided to come here. Forgive me for my rumpled clothes,” he said sheepishly, opening his arms at his side to show me.

They were indeed creased, and looking at him more intently, I noticed he looked exhausted. “Is everything okay?”

He nodded, his cocky smile still showing, but his eyes softened at my question. “I’m just a little tired. Thank you for asking.”

“Speaking of asking. I was told someone had a private request for me. Any idea what that means?”

Benjamin leaned on the counter, his eyes glinting despite his serious face. “That would be me. I have a very serious request that I couldn’t make over a text. It’s too important a plea to be made so informally.”

I leaned over as well, putting our faces closer together. “That sounds serious.”

“You have no idea. You see, I’m planning on going out tomorrow night for dinner. But I can’t do that alone. You know how small-townners are ruthless. I’m in desperate need of someone to go with me to save face. Then I remembered you owe me one.”

I rested my face on my right hand. “How do you figure that?”

“Well, you did leave me hanging for days without telling me your name. I didn’t even learn it from you. Then the whole coffee on my shirt debacle.”

I clicked my tongue. “I remember giving you another cup after that.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t enough. I’m sorry, it’s not up to me.” He raised one shoulder, keeping his forearms placed on the counter, almost touching mine. “The thing is, you owe me, and I need a date for my dinner tomorrow night; otherwise, I’d be the laughingstock of Holy Water.”

“We can’t let that happen.” I sighed in mock distress. “I guess I could lend you a hand and go out with you tomorrow. Just to save face.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” he said solemnly. “So now you just need to give me your address, so I can pick you up.” His devilish, flirting gaze was back.

“You already have it.” He looked at me in confusion, and I pointed my index finger up. “I live upstairs. It was cheaper and easier this way.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll pick you up at seven—” Before he could finish, someone opened the door to the shop, swinging the wind chimes and making me remember we weren’t alone. But what froze me was who was coming in.

Mia was startled when she looked at us—and how close we were. Feeling misplaced guilt, I stepped back, breaking my connection with Benjamin. He looked at her and shifted his weight on his legs, mirroring her awkwardness.

“I decided I wanted something different,” she explained, almost apologetically.

“Damn it. Sorry. I forgot—” She waved her hand, dismissing his...worry?

“Don’t worry.” So I was right. “I’m feeling fine, I just changed my mind about my order.” She pointed at April. “I’ll just ask her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Take your time. I’ll get everything.”

The three of us stood awkwardly until she waved timidly at me and stepped away to the other end of the counter, giving me and Benjamin some privacy. That seemed mindful of her, but the discomfort was already settled.

He leaned again over the counter, not as close as before, but he was still making an effort. From the corner of my eye, I saw Mia turning her back to us, so I leaned as well, but my wariness was hard to ignore.

She was fastly served—thank God for April—then headed out. As she passed us, she gave me a bashful smile that left me out of sorts. It was hard to read her. Did she have feelings for Benjamin? I observed her intently, trying to notice signs I hadn’t before.

At a closer inspection, she appeared to be exhausted. Her clothes were disheveled, there were dark circles under her eyes, and she looked almost despondent. Since this was the first time we were seeing each other from a little distance, I was just at that moment noticing there was a significant scar close to her left eye, marring her eyebrow.

I watched her walk away, and from the glass panels, I saw her get in the driver's side of a car parked in front of Beans but not drive away.

“So what do you say, Forest? Are we set for tomorrow?” I was pulled away from my inspection. He stretched his hand to carefully clean some flour I had on my cheek, and his hand lingered, his thumb lightly stroking my face.

I softened my stance at his sweetness. I appreciated his effort in making us come back to our flirting stage, so I made my part. “Anything to help your image in this unforgiving town.”

“Then it's a date.”

His triumphant smile helped ease some of my concerns. But as I saw him get in the passenger seat of the car with Mia, I hoped I wasn't getting myself into a situation I couldn't handle.

CHAPTER SIX

BEN

We drove in silence for a while, heading to Bryants & Walker. We were whacked, not to mention frustrated, after being away for the last few days following a lead that turned out to be a dead end.

We couldn't all go away for it, so Danny was dealing with our private cases from the towns nearby, and Zach was managing the local assignments and contacting our liaison from the FBI for some new information while keeping an eye on Haley and Gabe so she'd feel safe.

Only Mia and I were available to go away, and it was frustrating to come home with no answers. Maybe that's why she was oddly quiet the whole time. We were running on midnight oil, so I came up with a perfect solution: go to Isabella's coffee shop to grab something to eat.

I was anxious to see her again. Texting her wasn't enough. I was so excited about the prospect of seeing her that I forgot I hadn't mentioned to Mia what was going on. If I analyzed it more closely, I was reluctant to tell her.

She was the person who knew me best, sometimes even more than Zach did. This whole Isabella thing was new to me; it felt different, which scared me.

I wasn't a relationship kind of guy, I knew nothing about it, and considering my upbringing, I was positive I'd be bad at it. I was the guy women chose to have fun with, but nothing more, and that was okay, because that was all I had to offer.

So my feelings for Forest were as foreign as they were terrifying. Chances were, I'd screw up sooner rather than later. I already had this dreadful sensation that watching her walk away would ruin me.

Maybe that was why I didn't tell Mia about her. If I kept all those feelings my little secret, no one would witness my failure and distraughtness when I screwed things up.

Especially Mia and her family. After everything they did for me, I couldn't bear their disappointment. I admired them too much for that.

But I knew keeping it to myself wouldn't work. Mia knew me too well for that.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you back there. I had no idea that the girl you met before was the owner. If I knew you wanted to talk to her, I'd have stayed in the car."

"No worries. She's just some woman. You know me, I flirt with everyone." I tried to dismiss it, but as I said those words, I felt a heaviness in my gut. My words tasted sour.

Mia's lips thinned, and she glanced at me from the corner of her sharp eyes.

"We'll meet tomorrow night for a date, but that's it. Just a 'welcome to Holy Water, there's not much we can offer' type of thing." I had no idea why I offered that information,

with a side of deceit. I was way too excited for it to be “just a date.”

She took in a deep breath and shook her head lightly in what appeared to be disappointment. After a few moments, she broke our silence again.

“I’m worried about Danny.” I expected a comment on my idiocy, so she surprised me with the change of topic. I should be relieved, but I was disheartened by it. For some odd reason, I needed to talk to her about this whole Isabella situation. I knew I was way in over my head and I needed guidance.

But I turned, wary about what she blurted.

“What do you mean?”

She slowed the car a little, gaining some time for us until we got to the company. “Andrea,” she snarled. It was no secret she didn’t like Danny’s wife. Neither of us did. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but she’s being shifty.”

“How so?”

“She’s been draining him out of money, always demanding more, and I know it’s not to take care of Fee. The poor girl can only count on Danny and his mom.” Sonia Delgado was indeed a marvelous woman, and Danny’s saving grace. “Then last week...” She shook her head, her lips as tight as her knuckles holding the steering wheel. “Right before I picked you up for our trip, I saw her getting into a car with another man and kissing him. I couldn’t get a good look, but I knew it was a man and he wasn’t Danny.”

“God, I hate that witch.”

“That’s not all.” My blood was already boiling, but hearing her affliction sent goosebumps throughout my body. Not the good kind.

“I had this...warning in my gut.” She rubbed her right hand over her forehead, the other one still conducting us. “So I followed them for a while.”

“Of course, the normal choice.” She checked me from the corner of her eyes, unimpressed at my sarcasm.

“He drove them to a dirt road, it seemed to lead to some private property, so I couldn’t go on. Right before they followed that path, he got out of the car to open the gate. What...disturbed me...he was...” She took in a deep breath in distress. “He took off his shirt. On his back, there was a huge tattoo of a scorpion wearing a crown, with a rosary hanging from its tail.”

I stopped breathing for a few seconds, my insides were frozen, and I felt lightheaded. Then I exploded and hit the dashboard. “Son of a bitch!” I bent over, the seat belt restraining my movement, and shoved my hands in my hair. “Fuck! That’s way worse than what I’d imagined. That freaking...I can’t believe she would...how stupid does a person need to be to get involved with a Mexican drug cartel?”

“That’s only one of my questions.” Her fair complexion was paler than usual, and her eyes seemed tormented. “How could she cheat on Danny? How long have she and that guy been together? What are they planning? Is she getting money from Danny to give this guy? How unsafe are Danny and Fee? And what on Earth is someone from *El Rey Alacrán* doing here? This is not even their turf!”

Since her time at the DEA, Mia had dedicated her career to learning about *El Rey Alacrán*, a well-established and still thriving Mexican drug cartel. She investigated everything about them, from their rituals to their ranks, from their operation to the symbolism of their tattoos. Although in that case, seeing that the man had the cartel logo on his back, it didn't leave doubts about his involvement with it.

Way too soon, we arrived at the company, but neither of us got out of the car. "Was he here alone?"

"I don't know, but even if he was, I don't think he'd be for too long."

"How do you figure?"

"If he just wanted to get some, he could go to a motel or drive to a bigger town. Bing, bang, boom, and leave this place. But either he's squatting down at someone else's property, or he bought or rented the place they were heading to. No matter the option, it seems he intends to stay here for a while. If he's planning on staying, he's most likely not planning this on his own. I didn't recognize the guy, so he must be new or on the rise." She turned to me with cautionary eyes. "He was reconning." And that whole line of thought was why we needed her around.

We stayed silent inside the car, neither of us ready to leave and face reality. "Why didn't you tell me this before? We were together for days."

She tapped her legs. "We needed to focus on the assignment, and...I think...I was trying to convince myself my eyes had played me."

“Do you think this has something to do with Pablo?” When Mia was working at the DEA, she, along with other agents led by her, was investigating the increase in drug trafficking on our side of the country. Not around Holy Water, though. They came up with a task force and made some really big arrests.

Right before Mia was fired from the agency and decided to start our venture, she was responsible for arresting Pablo “*El Segador*” Salazar, the right hand to *El Rey Alacrán* leader, Carlos “*La Sangre*” Gomes. The forces were in an uproar over The Bryant Prodigy, yet that wasn’t enough to keep the agency from betraying her.

“I don’t know. He could be here just to expand his business, and this had nothing to do with me. But it bugs me that Andrea is involved somehow. It bugs me that this guy is here at all.” She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger.

“I know a guy from the DEA, he’s new in this area, but he’s good. He used to work with Danny. I’ll talk to him about it.” I made a mental note to call the guy as soon as I could. If anyone could help us with it, Ethan Cross was the man. Him and Mia’s mentor. “Why don’t you call your guy?”

“I’m not sure where Aaron is right now, but I’ll call him.” Her eyes seemed lost, and she began nibbling the inside of her lips. “You know what bothers me?”

“Is there more?”

“Let’s think of this as business research. You need a liaison for that, someone that can give you inside notes, explain the ins and outs, tell you about the area and the

market. Is this person her, or do we need to look for yet another person?”

That didn't sit well with me. I despised the woman, but I didn't think she was involved with drug and human trafficking—the two alleged main sources of income for this cartel. That being the case, we should consider that another person in this once safe and close community was a threat. Who?

Still fidgeting with her glasses instead of wearing them, Mia bent her head down, her shoulders slumped. “We need to tell Danny, right?”

I leaned back, resting my head on the car seat. “We do. This is so messed up.”

“He shouldn't have married her.”

“He was trying to do the right thing for Fee.”

“You don't get married just because your nutcase of a girlfriend claims to be pregnant. He could still be one hell of a father and not be connected to that witch.” She groaned at her own words and leaned his head on the steering wheel. “I shouldn't judge him, I know it's wrong. I just...hate her so much. She's been putting him through hell since they met, and now this.” She lifted her head to the side to look at me. “He needs to get out and take Fee with him. It's not like he loves Andrea anyway.”

“Let's tell him what we know, and then he decides what to do.”

“And if he decides the wrong thing, we convince him to leave Andrea.”

“He decides what to do,” I stated.

“As long as he leaves her.”

“If that’s what he wants to do,” I insisted.

“Ugh, you’re so frustrating.” She rolled her eyes, pushed her door open, and got out, mumbling the whole path to the front door and giving me the stink eye.

Bryants & Walker was set on a huge property. It used to belong to a two-story warehouse of a building and decoration supplies store. The owner ended up shutting down his business and selling the space to us. He didn’t want the rest of his supplies, so he left them in the storage. Instead of reselling them, we decided to keep the stuff for a while and use the space to hide sensitive information amongst the many items still stored.

At the entrance, we could see Haley’s reception space on the right. The pretty flowers on the counter, Gabe’s drawings on the wall behind her seat, her colorful cup that she probably used for tea, it all suited her.

The first door to our left was where we met our clients. We tore down the wall that divided two offices and turned it into a huge conference room, but we decided to keep the two doors that led to the storage facility.

We could also access the storage from the door at the end of the reception area, beside the stairs heading up to our offices.

Each one of the four of us (Mia, Zach, Danny, and me) had our own space. We also installed a kitchen-slash-breakroom and playroom for the kids. Apart from the storage,

the whole place was covered by a dark gray linoleum floor. Even though it looked cool, it was tiring sometimes.

Besides the obvious rooms, we kept our gems well-hidden.

The storage resembled a library, with tall shelves full of books, gadgets, and boxes with our assignments hidden between machinery construction and decoration appliances from the previous business.

One could think the improvised gym was our popular space. But at the end of the storage, right behind an unassuming wall, was our vault. Our most sensitive information was hidden inside. The security system on our homes, our phones, our vehicles, and our families was controlled inside.

Behind its heavy walls, our arsenal was safe. Our weaponry could be the cause of envy for a lot of people. Not that we were a bunch of crazy weapon-heads. Mia herself didn't like them. But in our line of work, and after having made more enemies than friends, we needed ways to protect ourselves in case of an attack.

We weren't expecting one any time soon. Better safe than sorry and all that. It was also why we had weapons safely scattered around the place.

We could also access the vault from a hidden door on the raised platform. Since we had to climb the stairs up and down for that, it wasn't our usual route. It was just an option. One we never intended on using.

If that wasn't enough, our paranoia led us to create a bunker, something like a panic room, right under Haley's desk. If there was someone whose protection we prioritized, it was her.

Mia and I strode inside the company and saw Zach leaning over said reception desk, talking to Haley. He jumped back when they heard us, and she turned a dark shade of pink, as if they were doing something they shouldn't.

"Hey, you guys are back." Zach ambled our way and pulled his sister into a tight hug. The Bryants were nothing if not huggers. I always assumed it was a Brazilian thing. "How did it go?"

Mia leaned against him, her glasses twisting, but she didn't seem to care. Sometimes you just need your big brother's cuddle. "A waste of time."

He sighed in frustration. "I'm sorry to hear that. Not much progress here either." I groaned and headed behind the counter to kiss Haley on her head, right before Mia hugged her and asked about Gabe.

"He missed you guys. He kept asking when Auntie Mia and *Unkow* Bee would be back to play with him and Hugo. Hugo is also fine," she answered before Mia could ask.

Hugo. The furry beast who pranced on all fours, ate my food, and barked at everything. The little shit Mia adopted a few years ago. I was still waiting for the gold he should be retrieving.

Zach inspected our faces closely, always attentive. "What happened?"

“Is Danny around?”

He tensed at his sister’s worried voice. “He was closing a new job out of town, I’m not sure when he’ll be back.”

Right on cue, we heard his car approaching, the tires crunching the gravel. Mia expelled heavily, her right eye twinkling in distress.

“We need to talk.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEN

The conversation was tough. I'd never seen Danny so wild and angry. Rightfully so. What that meant for his marriage, we still didn't know. His main concern was how their possible divorce could affect Sofia, but staying together was causing even more harm.

But as much as I needed to worry about that, my attention was torn, my mind going back to Isabella despite my better judgment. I should be worried about that new development—and I was—but I also couldn't stop myself from feeling excited about our first date.

I shouldn't be gleeful to call it our *first* date.

Yet there I was, thirty minutes earlier at the front of the coffee shop, urging the clock to run faster so I could see her again. I needed to make myself busy, so it seemed like a good time to reach Ethan.

"It's been a while," his gravel voice greeted me.

"Hey, Cross. Missing me already?"

"I could spend a few more years without hearing from you. You only come to me when you're in trouble. You never call to say you wanna hear my voice. I feel so used."

I chuckled. "What can I say? I'm toxic as fuck."

“So...are you in trouble?” His voice turned serious.

“I’m not sure yet. It’s possible.” I took in a deep breath. “One of my partners saw a member from *El Rey Alacrán* around town.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” he hissed, all playfulness gone. “Have they tried anything yet?”

“Not that we know of. I just learned about it yesterday. We’re looking into it, but we’re not sure why he’s here or if he’s working with someone local. I wanted to give you a heads up and ask you if you knew anything about it.”

“That’s the first time I know of Holy Water being involved. Maybe he’s just passing and isn’t targeting your town?” His voice showed me he didn’t believe in it, just like I didn’t.

“I highly doubt it.”

“Have you been working with anything related to that?”

“Not exactly. We have this one assignment to investigate drug trafficking around here, but we think it’s about heroin, and so far we couldn’t connect our guy to the *Alacráns*.”

“And they deal mostly with cocaine, not heroin.” He came to the same conclusion, dismissing the connection.

“We’ll keep our eyes open, and I’ll tell you about any new developments. I’d appreciate the same.”

“Of course. I’ll look right into it and keep you posted.” He puffed over the phone. “Who would’ve thought quaint Holy

Water would be trouble?”

“What can I say? We like to keep people on their toes. There’s plenty of activity here.” Not exactly true, but not a lie either. “Maybe you should get out of your shackles and move here. We could always use a guy like you.”

“Who knows? I might take you up on this. My grandparents are from there, and my grandpa decided to move back; it’d be good to be closer to him.” His exhale was heavy, and he sounded tired. I didn’t expect him to consider my offer. If he ever wanted to change the scenery, I’d be more than happy to vouch for him and bring Ethan to our team. *“You all be careful. These guys are sick.”*

We disconnected, but his warning churned my gut. I knew that already, but hearing someone else say it made me uneasy.

Yet all it took was one look at By Any Beans to improve my mood. The coffee shop was already closed, but knowing Isabella was somewhere in that building calmed something inside me. I couldn’t inspect that very closely if I wanted to stop a panic attack from coming.

I rolled my left wrist to check the time on my watch.
Who cares if I’m twenty minutes early?

I pushed my door open to get out of the car. I came to the front door of the shop, meeting my cheerful face in the reflection. Only then did I realize there was another door that led to the unit upstairs. I buzzed the intercom and waited, shifting my legs and rubbing my hands over my dark jeans.

“*Hello?*” Her metallic voice made my heart beat even faster.

“I’m here to collect an owed date.” Her giggle warmed something in me and placated my anxiety.

“There must be some misunderstanding. I was under the impression I had a good...twenty minutes before paying my debt.”

“You should’ve read the fine print.”

“I guess you’re right. My naive mistake.” She laughed. *Bzz. “I’ve just buzzed you in. Come on up.”*

I went up the narrow staircase to her apartment. Right before I could knock, she opened her door, and I was greeted by her bright smile, making me weak in the knees. I couldn’t understand or ignore the effect this woman had on me.

She was wearing a flowy, green dress that matched her eyes. She was barefoot, so I had to lean my head to look at her. Her wavy, auburn hair was loose, and her scent wafted around us, intoxicating me. I was screwed.

“Hey.” I was breathless. I was also pleased to notice her inspection of me was as thorough as mine of hers. “You look gorgeous.” The pink hue on her cheeks was enticing.

“As do you.” She balanced on her toes and leaned closer to give me a lingering kiss on the cheek, and I held the threshold to stop me from lunging on her and pressing her to the closest surface, the whole dinner forgotten. “I’m almost ready.”

“Take your time,” I managed to reply in a strained voice. “I’m in no hurry, and you’re worth the wait.” That

seemed to mean more than just our evening plans.

She smiled brightly and proceeded to finish her ritual. “Make yourself at home.”

I looked around at her space that spread over the size of her bakery downstairs. The loft was inviting. I leaned on the couch facing a panel with a TV and inspected the space. I assumed her bedroom was behind the door to the left, since her kitchen was to my right, separated only by a countertop. Considering the size of the loft, the kitchen was supposed to be small, but that section didn't seem to match her. I understood she needed somewhere cheap and close to the bakery, but I'd pictured her in a bigger space. Like mine.

I quickly dismissed the dangerous thought.

The place was organized, and it matched her. Or maybe it didn't and I was just happy to be there. I stopped my musings to watch her instead, believing it'd be less dangerous. Although one look at her leaning on the dresser in the living room, our eyes meeting through the mirror, forcing me to control a shiver, was enough to show me I'd never be safe if she was around.

She faced me intently, shifting her head to each side to put on her earrings. “Have you had a chance to rest? You seemed tired yesterday.”

“A little.” I made myself comfortable on her sofa. “Although sometimes I feel like I need a whole month to recharge.”

“I still don't know what you do.” There was no accusation in her voice; just curiosity. I felt eager to answer all

her questions. I still couldn't examine it inwardly, but I wanted us to know each other beyond the surface.

"I co-own a private investigation and security company."

"That sounds interesting." She sounded sincere.

"It can be sometimes. We have our dull moments, but we also have our fill of excitement here and there."

"Well, I'm ready." She stretched her arms at her side and leaned her hips to show me the result. "For the dinner, and you."

"Then let's get going, otherwise we won't get a good table. Where I'm taking you isn't the kind of place you make reservations, but I assure you, you'll like it." I strutted toward her. "But first we need to deal with something."

Her curious gaze held barely-contained lust as I got closer. "You know how people keep wondering about first-date kisses? It's such a pressure that most of the time puts a damper on the whole night." Our bodies were almost touching, and Forest made no move to step back. "I don't want a damp dinner." Her breathing was heavy and pupils dilated when I touched her face, my thumb rubbing her cheeks and hands placed at the base of her neck.

"Maybe we should get this out of the way, so we can enjoy our evening." Her breathy voice made me groan, and I'd have a hard time walking around with a hard-on after that. Our noses were almost touching, and we were breathing each other's air.

“My thoughts exactly.” I closed the final space between us and pressed my lips on hers, lightly at first. Reckoning, I licked and nibbled on her soft lips. She pressed her body against mine, and I could feel her heartbeat, just as wild as mine. Her breasts on my chest, my hands instinctively fisting her hair. When I bit her lower lip harder, her moan sent a flow of energy straight to my cock. All recon was over; I was ready to attack.

Taking advantage of her open mouth, I plunged my tongue, holding her flush against me. Our tongues danced together as we devoured each other. I was famished and borderline out of control. I wanted to explore all of her; I couldn't stop the kiss.

She gripped the side of my buttoned shirt, pulling me even closer, her high heels making it easier for us to explore our greed for each other.

That wasn't just a kiss. It was a claim. I just wasn't sure who was claiming whom, but I had a feeling that was the moment when I became hers.

We broke the kiss, both of us breathing hard, our foreheads pressed together and hands still gripping each other like a life-saver. I felt like I was drowning in Isabella's ocean, but I was too entranced to care. “Now we just have to worry about our next kisses,” I panted.

I pecked her lips and kissed her on the cheek, not ready to take my mouth away from her. She took my offered hand, her face revealing both lust and fondness, and we left for our date.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something told me that night could change my life.



We arrived at All In One on time to get a table at the back. It was the most strategic spot—not too close to the kitchen, in the line of sight of the bar, and away from the jukebox. We could talk without being interrupted, we could hear each other, and our fast serving was guaranteed.

“I know this isn't the fanciest of places; Picadilly seemed way posher than this one. But this is an institution in this town, and I want you to know everything.” Scary enough, I meant that for more than just the menu.

“I'm loving this already. This is more my scene than Picadilly.” Her awe and cheerfulness evidenced the truth in her words. “The atmosphere here is addicting. I loved how unique they are in their decorations. I mean, they have a picture of a gay couple kissing right next to a photo of what I can only assume is a motorcycle club.”

I tried to look at it all as if for the first time, trying to remember my reaction when I knew that place. Its transition from rainbow colors to red and pink, to brown, to gray and black should be tiring or tacky, but it was welcoming. It made sense to the proposal of the place.

“That's because this is a motorcycle bar.” Her eyes snapped at me with surprise and curiosity. “And a gay bar, and an elder bar.”

“What?” she asked, already laughing.

“All In One. We have everything in here. Today is couple’s day. Tomorrow is for LGBTQIA-plus. Normally Mondays are for the elderly. Fridays are for the local MC, based a town over, in Gratitude. Sometimes the local church organizes some events here as well.” Her eyes were big as she looked around, this time with the knowledge of how the place worked. She seemed even more delighted. “Everyone is welcome to come in any day, despite the schedule, but they know the theme will be specific—the drinks, the songs, the games.”

“This is so incredible. It’s fun, it’s inviting, and it leaves no one out.” Roaming her hand over the table, she said, “The rainbow flag tablecloth makes much more sense now.”

“Now look at the other tables.” As she checked around us, her eyes were brimming with glee. The one immediately by our side was decorated with knitted ornaments—*thank you, grandmas of this town*; the one at her back had no tablecloth, and the table was black, with an image of a Harley carved on the top. The people were just as unique.

“You see that table with heart-shaped pink candles?”

“With the two guys sitting at it?”

“That is Paul Johnson.” I waved back at the older man, who had just spotted me. “He’s our minister. The younger guy chatting with him is Mark, his son.” I gazed at her. “His openly gay son.”

“That’s so wonderful.” Her voice displayed her fascination. “It’s hard to consider such a small town like this

one would be so respectful.”

“This place is certainly a little gem, and so are its people.” I placed my forearms on the table, filled to the brim with pride. “All In One is a reflection of that. Hank did one hell of a job here.” I pointed to the owner behind the bar.

“I’d never pegged you to be the religious type.”

“I’m not exactly. The Bryants are; my chosen family. They go to church very often. I could never be called assiduous.” I shrugged one shoulder. “But sometimes I...I need to feel a powerful force. I need to remember that there is some higher energy looking out for me.” I’d never admitted that. “And whenever I decide to go, no matter how long it’s been since I’ve been there, I’m always met with open arms, kind words, and no judgment.”

“What is this town?” She didn’t try to hide her wonder.

“Welcome to Holy Water. This place is home.”

At my words, she beamed at me, nodding lightly, and that felt meaningful. To her and me. After we ordered our drinks and waited for the specials, we resumed our conversation.

“So tell me more about your job. I’m still curious as to what you do and how you started it.” We were facing each other in the booth, and I regretted that decision, needing to be closer to her. But that way I could see her face as we talked; I never tired of looking at her.

“I left the navy a few years ago and joined Mia and her brother, Zach, on this.” At the mention of Mia, I saw what

seemed to be a tick on her jaw. *Was she jealous?* If being happy at that thought made me a jerk, so be it.

“Are you close?”

“We’ve known each other since we were kids. The three of us grew up together.” More than she could imagine. “Zach and Mia Bryant. He and I enlisted together, and the Bryants continued to be a big part of my life.” And I’d be forever grateful to them for taking me in. They were there for me during my worst times. “Eventually, we joined the SEAL program and met Danny.”

“You mentioned her before. Who is she?”

My smile broke free at her jealous inquisition. “He. Daniel Delgado, or Danny. He works with us. He left the navy before Zach and me, then he went to work at the DEA with Mia.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.”

“What part?”

“Everything. It’s just...I didn’t imagine she...” Her stammering was endearing. But it was wrong to let her feel uncomfortable.

“She’s an impressive *friend*.” I emphasized the word, hoping she’d believe me. Her beaming was answer enough.

“Then what?”

“Then, a few years ago, Zach and I left the navy, Mia...left the DEA, and we started our company, Bryants & Walker Protection. Later on, Danny joined us.”

“What do you do exactly?”

“We do private investigation, give consultations, install security equipment. We also work on confidential assignments for the government.”

“Now *that* is impressive.” She looked at me with marvel, with a side of lust that was driving me wild. “When you were away a few days ago...were you on one of those confidential assignments things? I’m sorry if I’m not supposed to ask that.”

“Indeed I was.” I breathed out. “But it didn’t go well.”

Her eyes became worried, and seeing her care warmed something inside of me. “What happened? Are you okay? I’m so sorry, I was just thinking about it being cool and sexy; I hadn’t considered it could be dangerous.”

“You think I’m sexy?” With that admission, I couldn’t be blamed for the cocky grin stretching my lips.

She came closer to me. “You know you are.” Her scent was intoxicating. It had a note of caramel, just like her pastries. It was comforting, almost familiar. She smelled of home and care. “I need to know you’re fine.”

I placed my hand on hers, squeezing it, and just by touching her, I could feel myself getting calm yet excited. It felt right as my thumb roamed her hand. When our food arrived and we pulled our hands back, the longing nearly crushed me. I needed to feel her warm skin against mine. “I’m fine. It can be threatening sometimes. But we’re all trained. We’re as safe as we could be.”

Her lingering concern touched me. Despite the Bryants, Danny, and Haley, I couldn’t think of another person

who cared for me. I knew my mom did at some point, but we were so busy surviving. Most of the time, it felt like I was the one caring for her.

“I’m monopolizing the conversation. I need to know more about you. Tell me your secrets, Isabella.” Just by saying her name, I felt intoxicated. Her Forest eyes called to me in a way I’d never been called before. I was trapped under her spell.

The crazy thing was, I didn’t want to get free.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IZZIE

I'd never had so much fun. I'd also never been so sexually charged.

It was so easy to talk to Ben. Unlike other men I dated, he listened, he was interested, and he asked questions about me because he wanted to know me.

Yeah, we were flirting, but it felt more than that. It felt deeper and more meaningful. I wasn't ready for the night to end. If I was being honest with myself, I hoped that—whatever it was—never ended.

As he drove me back home, I felt my excitement grow. I was lightheaded and already shivering, but not from the weather. Our tension was palpable, and even our words were coming out broken inside the car.

When we got to my place, he left the car, walked around the hood, and opened the door for me. I wouldn't have imagined him to be the chivalrous kind. He was respectful, that was for sure, but he transpired to be more like a salvage player than a good boy. I didn't know which version I loved the most. That he was acting under the "Proper Date 101" method, or that he could wrack me if he let out his inner beast.

His hand placed on my lower back warmed me while also giving me goosebumps. We climbed the stairs, and when

we reached the door to my loft, we turned to each other, neither of us ready to call it a night. I expected to be met with his crooked and cocky smile, but it was nowhere to be found. In its place was an intensity that made me shiver.

His hazel eyes were fierce, and his breathing was heavy, matching my own. On their own accord, my eyes trailed his face and landed on his lips. Without realizing it, I stepped closer and licked my lips in anticipation.

“You’re killing me here, Forest. I’m trying to be a gentleman, give you a chaste kiss, and leave.”

“I didn’t ask for a gentleman.”

“Are you looking for trouble?”

I placed my hands on his chest, his thumping heart underneath my palms showing me he was barely containing himself. “If it’s trouble you’re offering, then that’s what I’m looking for. Are you giving it to me?”

His groan inebriated me. He laid his hands on my hips, his nose almost touching mine. “Are you sure you can handle me?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” With the courage I didn’t know I had, I pulled him down by the lapels of his buttoned shirt and crushed our lips together. I might have taken the first step, but he soon took charge of the kiss.

He pulled me by the hips against his body as his tongue entered my mouth. With our tongues licking and teeth clashing, I thrust my hands inside his hair and all but climbed him. I could feel his shaft resting on my belly, and that surged me on.

His hands made the short trip from my hips to my ass, then he pulled me up. I crossed my legs around his waist, shamelessly grinding my core on his cock, craving the friction and some relief from the torment Benjamin was creating inside of me.

He pulled his head enough to say, “The door.” My mind was foggy, and I had no idea how to answer. “Open the door.” He laughed lightly at my sex-induced haze. “Our first time won’t be with me humping you in the hallway.” He gave his signature cocky smirk. “We’ll save that for later.”

Still climbing him, I fished my keys out of my purse, which proved to be a challenge while he kissed and nibbled my neck. With trembling hands, I tried to insert the key in the lock and failed miserably. His warm chuckle as he bit my earlobe let loose a mewl from me. “Let me take this.”

With ease and precision, he held me and opened the door on the first try. It should’ve bothered me that he seemed so unaffected, whereas I was already losing my mind. Then I felt his desire against me as he walked us inside and I saw pure fire in his eyes, proving to me he wasn’t immune to whatever that was.

He kicked the door shut and pressed my back against it. “If we go down this route, there’s no turning back.” His gravel voice shouldn’t be such an aphrodisiac. I resumed rubbing myself on him and felt ecstatic when he let out a groan. There was something so erotic when a man made such a sound for you.

“I don’t wanna go back.” I panted as I encircled my legs tighter.

“Then hold on tight. This will be a wild ride.” Before I could respond or react, he crushed our lips together again, swallowing my whimpers as he sustained my body with his hips and roamed his hands over me.

It wasn't a feather touch. He was claiming me, leaving me no doubt to whom I'd belong from that night on. Benjamin let his hands run wild under my dress, rubbing the back of my legs until he found my lacy underwear. With his mouth still devouring mine, his index finger pushed the edge to the side and found my bundle of nerves, making me buckle against him. I was soaking wet, and his finger slid easily over me. He ran his finger back and forth on my slit, and every time he reached my clit, he'd circle it, putting enough pressure to drive me crazy, but not enough to relieve me.

Mindful to let me breathe again, he broke our kiss and bit my neck just as he inserted one digit inside of me. It was so good. It wasn't enough. Already in tune with my needs, he inserted another one, driving them in and out, making scissors movements and *come-hithering* inside of me.

It took me a while to realize the begging I was hearing was my own, and I wasn't left unattended. A third digit joined the others as his thumb circled my clit. He kissed me again, his tongue mimicking his fingers, as he applied even more pressure with the pad of his thumb. It was an overload of sensations, a crescendo I couldn't stop or control.

I felt the desire growing inside of me, my skin felt hot, and all I could do was meet Ben's hand stroke for stroke. I grasped his hair and felt the vibrations of his groan against my pebbled nipples.

It was all so much, so all-consuming. All I'd never felt before. When I thought I couldn't handle it anymore, I shattered. My head thumped back against the door as I cried out his name, holding on to him as he fondled me until my quivering stopped.

“And that's just the first one.” His triumph was evident.

I half-laughed, half-panted as I looked at his gorgeous, mischievous eyes, barely keeping mine open.

“You talk a big game.”

“I *play* a big game. I'm not done with you, Forest.” He eased me down, still holding me until I could feel my legs again. “This time, we're gonna make it right.” There was nothing wrong with how we did it. “First order of business, bedroom. Then, clothes off.” I could get on board with that.

Balancing myself on my shaky legs, I grabbed his hand and licked his fingers, sucking them clean until his nostrils flared and pupils dilated. “Follow me.” My voice had never been so sultry, and I'd never been so bold.

Still holding his hand, I took us to my bedroom. Standing up in front of him, I pulled my hair to the front, over one shoulder, and looked at him over the other. “Could you help me?”

The tip of his fingers touched my neck, and the zing of the zipper sounded louder, mixed with our labored breaths. My anticipation was consuming me. It wasn't just lust. It was craving. A need to feel him against me, inside me. To let him claim me just as much as I'd claim him.

He stepped closer, and I could feel the heat of his body enveloping my back as he placed a gentle kiss on the nape of my neck. My dress pooled at my feet, followed by my bra. The only thing covering me was my underwear.

Benjamin ran his hand on my back, to my waist, and instead of pulling off my thong as I expected him to, his hands rounded my belly and found their way up to my breast.

Expert fingers pulled and played with my nipples as he kissed my neck and bit my ears, resting his erection between my cheeks. “So soft. So responsive. I can’t wait much longer to make you mine.”

“So don’t keep us waiting.”

He kneeled behind me, this time pulling my underpants down, and placed a light kiss at the end of my spine, followed by a sharp bite on my right butt cheek, making me jump in surprise. When he stood up, he turned me around and ordered, “Get on the bed.” His bossiness shouldn’t be so hot.

I sat on the mattress and pulled myself to the middle of it, watching my private show. Benjamin undid the buttons of his shirt, never missing eye contact, then pulled it off his strong shoulders.

He was strong yet lean. His body was a work of art, but his smoldering eyes and devilish smile were what made me close my legs to seek a poor attempt at friction. He unbuckled his belt with deliberate motions. “Open your legs, Forest. I need to check on my dessert.”

At his command, I rested my feet apart and opened myself to him. In more ways than one. I felt exposed, yet his

hunger was empowering.

“You rest assured, I’ll taste every little bit of you. But if I don’t enter you in the next few minutes, I’ll go crazy.” After he took our shoes off, he pulled his boxers down, letting his powerful cock spring proud, big, and free.

He kneeled on the bed between my legs and let his eyes run lazily all over me until he looked right into my eyes again. “Are you sure you want this? Once we take this step, there’s no going back.” His words hung heavily between us, their meaning more palpable than expected. Like an omen.

“I don’t wanna go back. Whatever this entails, I want it all.” Little did I know what I was promising at the moment. What we both were.

After he covered himself with a condom, he hovered over me. His forearms bracketed my head, his hips finding their comfort between my legs as he motioned his shaft back and forth on my slit, wetting himself. I circled my legs around his hips and arms around his neck, pulling him down for another one of his burning kisses.

Gripping my left hip with his hand, almost to the point of pain—delicious pain—he entered me, inch by glorious inch, making me feel full. It felt ardent. It was exhilarating. It felt right.

“You feel so good. It’s so hot, Forest. You consume me.”

His words encouraged me. Our breaths became heavier as his stroke became more powerful. I matched his pace, wanting to feel him. All we could hear were our moans and the

slap of our bodies molding together, the rest of the world all forgotten.

“More, Benjamin. I need more.” I panted desperately.

He increased the pace of his thrusts, and I could feel the desire burning inside of me again, announcing a new orgasm brewing. Without missing a beat, Benjamin kneeled, standing his torso up, put my right leg on the inside of his elbow, and circled my clit with his left thumb as he entered me over and over again.

I grabbed the sheets, needing something to hold on to. When I felt his thrusting becoming more erratic, seeing that powerful man coming unhinged because of me, brought forth my ecstasy.

“It’s time. Come with me, Isabella.” It felt like more than an announcement in the throes of passion. It felt like a calling. And I came. I came with him. Around him. For him. My back arched and I whimpered as he let out a guttural groan, pulsing inside of me.

He lay beside me on the bed, mindful not to crush me, and I turned my head to him, my eyes still closed as his hands held my waist possessively. “There’s no going back.”

And I was fine with that. All I could see was us moving forward.

CHAPTER NINE

BEN

My body was still tingling. I should be relaxed and sleepy, but I was energized and ready to take on the world. On its own accord, my body shifted closer to Isabella's. I encircled her in my arms and pulled her to me, needing to feel her warmth.

Her eyes were closed, her lips were stretched in a satisfied smile. More than male pride, I felt elation. I felt at home. I let my eyes meander over her—her auburn hair spread over the bed; her breaths forcing her breasts up and down; even the tiny freckles on her nose—there were seven of them—made me joyful.

We stayed like that for a while as I tried hard enough to give her some time until we could start all over. It was all a lot and not enough. I needed more, but I also didn't wanna scare her away. I wanted to devour, yet I wanted to savor.

She cuddled closer, hugging my side as she laid her head on my chest. I played with her hair, letting the tendrils run over my fingers. "I think we should take a shower."

She moaned, getting comfortable with me. "Wanna go first?"

"Oh no, that's not responsible. No. We need to be conscious and save water. You know, for the environment. We

should shower together to save...the whales?"

"The whales?" She snorted, balancing up on her elbow.

"I'm not sure what we're saving right now, but whatever the species, I think we should do our part." I put on my most mindful and better Boy Scout face.

"You're such a conscious person." She sat on the bed and scooted to the end, looking at me over her shoulder. "Let's save the planet."

I trailed behind her to the bathroom, letting my smile free. She turned the shower on, and as we waited for the water to get warm, I pulled her to me so I could feel her again.

With our charged energy placated after our first round, I could enjoy her responsive body with less pressure—my cock was one demanding jerk. I kissed her playfully until she grabbed my cock. I kissed her more intensely as she rubbed her thumb on the precum leaking from it and used it to rub my shaft.

I dragged us both under the shower and put my hand on top of hers as we stroked me up and down. I could go on like this until my release, but there was something else I craved to do.

Gently, I pulled her hand away and pressed her back against the wall. She yelped from the coldness, but I was about to change that. I kissed her again and let my fingers fondle her pussy. "It's time for me to taste you, Forest. Are you game for that?" She nodded eagerly, and down on my knees I went. I placed her feet apart and kissed the inside of each thigh,

nibbling her hips and running my fingers around her core, but not where she wanted me to.

She ran her fingernails on my shoulder and neck, pulling me to her. I chuckled and continued my leisure exploration. "All in good time, Isabella." I fed on her frustration for a while longer, enjoying her quiet curses.

I pulled her left leg over my shoulder. "Hold on tight." And without another warning, I opened her lips with my thumbs and went down on her clit. She thrust her hands in my hair, gripping me hard.

I lapped at her bundle, smelling her hunger. I circled my tongue around her clit, pressuring it until I licked down to her entrance. I inserted my tongue as far as I could, lapping inside of her, then went back up. Closing my lips around her clit, I sucked hard and inserted two fingers into her channel.

"Benjamin." Panting. "Don't stop." Moan. "I'm so close." Whimper. I upped my game. She rubbed herself on my mouth, and as my fingers played inside of her, I gave all my attention to her clit, sucking harder until she cried out, her legs shaking so hard, I had to lean her on my shoulders so she wouldn't fall.

As she recovered, I stood up, lifted her, placing her legs around my waist, and entered her in one swift motion. We both groaned at the connection, and she tightened around my cock, making it hard for me to control myself.

After I was sure I wouldn't embarrass myself by acting like a teenage boy, I began to thrust, already running wild. Hot water cascaded on my back, but Isabella's made me even

hotter. I leaned my head down to capture one of her nipples in my mouth, while I played with the other with my fingers.

She scratched my back, begging for more, and I wasn't one to deny her. My strokes became stronger and more uneven. I felt her getting tighter around me, and I knew she was close. "Touch yourself, Isabella."

She fisted my hair with one hand, and the other trailed down to where we connected. She circled her clit with her fingers, and I was entranced. I felt the familiar tingle growing inside of me. "I'm close. I need you to come. Now." She rubbed faster and spasmed around me, squeezing my dick until I couldn't handle it anymore. I shouted her name as she cried out mine, and we stood there, trembling and panting.

A sense of peace enveloped me.

Until I felt my cum leaking down. "Damn it. I didn't use a condom." I was on the verge of panicking. I couldn't ruin her life like this.

"It's okay. I'm on the pill." She sounded satisfied and relaxed. "Are you..."

"All clear. I promise."

"So am I. So don't worry. Just...enjoy this feeling."

"I'm so sorry. I should've been more responsible about it." I felt troubled for being so reckless. I let my emotions guide me and jumped over a really important step of what we did. I knew better than that.

"Stop worrying. We were both into it, and like I said, I'm on the pill. Nothing can go wrong."

My unease said otherwise.

After our environmentally responsible shower, we went back to bed to get some sleep—and fool around a little bit more. I woke up with the sunlight coming from the window.

I moved my hands around on the bed but didn't find the warm body I was looking for. Checking my watch, I figured she was downstairs in the café, ready to start her day. I should do the same.

Café first. Then start my day.

I cast aside my disappointment for not having woken up with Isabella by my side. After getting dressed up, I trudged down to the coffee shop and saw some of her patrons were already filling the place. One in particular, sitting by the counter, caught my attention.

“What are you doing here, Mia?” I shouldn't have sounded so defensive.

Pushing her glasses up her nose with a knuckle, she greeted me with her taunt—which I deserved. “Why, thank you, Benny. I indeed had a good night of sleep. Good morning to you, too.”

I rubbed my hand over my face and sat down next to her. “I'm sorry. I'm just surprised at seeing you here.” Realizing my whereabouts from the night before might be discovered, I tried to justify what *I* was doing there—I wasn't

ready to share Isabella with the guys, and that left me guilty as fuck. “I came for the coffee. She makes such good coffee here. Or he. Or they. How could I know who makes the coffee?” I laughed awkwardly, and Mia looked at me with a scrunched nose and one eyebrow arched up, like I was being weird—I was. “Then I saw you here and came in to say hi.”

One corner of her mouth lifted. “I thought you came for the coffee?”

“I did, but I also saw you inside.”

“Then why were you surprised when you found me at the counter?” She was so enjoying my discomfort.

“I wasn’t. I mean, I was, but not a lot. I’m just explaining to you what I’m doing here.”

“Because you spent the night,” she said matter-of-factly.

“How do you...? I didn’t...”

“Your car is parked out front.” She remarked, her tone indicating that was obvious and I was an idiot. Both implications were true. I didn’t know how to respond. I wanted to keep my Forest for myself for a while longer. But that was one of my best friends, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to hide what was going on.

Before I could respond, Mia muttered, “I should’ve ordered the scone as well.” She shook her head, our talk already behind us. “Why didn’t I? I hope there’s still time to add it.” She thrummed the tip of her fingers on the balcony, anxiously considering her eating options.

We stood there in silence as April meandered around, taking everyone's orders, including mine and Mia's addition. As we waited, Isabella came out from the kitchen, stopping in her tracks when she saw me sitting by Mia's side. She resumed her motion, bringing in her fresh baked goodies to put them on display.

I waved weakly at her, with not a single clue as to what to do—greet her, kiss her, act as if nothing had happened. I'd never had to worry about this before. Whenever I was with a woman, we both knew the score: no attachment. But that felt different, and I felt like I'd skipped the class where they taught us how not to be a jerk to the woman you're starting to develop feelings for. Or better yet: how not to develop them.

I was saved by Mia, who like a well-behaved person greeted Isabella. "Hi. You must be Isabella. I saw you before, but I've yet to introduce myself." She waved shyly. "I'm Mia." She motioned her index finger between us. "We work together." I was glad she was putting the distance and watering down our relationship for my and Isabella's sake. But it felt poor to be cast as just a co-worker. Yet I couldn't be annoyed at her. I should've been more clear in my actions toward Forest, so this whole uncomfortable thing was avoided. "You have a great thing going on here." Her sincerity was clear and helped ease some of Isabella's wariness.

"Thank you. It's a lot of work, but it's been good so far."

Before it became strained again, April came back with Mia's order to go. "Why two cups of coffee?" Sounding like a

jealous prick wasn't helping my case with Isabella. I'd lost my ability to deal with people.

"I figured Danny could use a friendly shoulder. What better way to do that than by gorging on addicting pastries?" I owed her a lot for trying to ease things up with Isabella. Then it dawned on me. "You're not trying to convince him to leave Andrea, right?" My voice was low, but I knew Isabella was listening.

"No, I'm not." She sounded like a petulant child. "But if he comes to this decision on his own, I won't complain. I might even give him a part of my scone." She looked down at the box in her hands. "Okay, I shouldn't be so hasty. I'll keep my scone, but I'll show him my happiness."

"Mia—"

"I'm not interfering in his life, Benny." Her demeanor changed, and she seemed serious. "I'm just worried about him, for a lot of reasons. I want him to remember he's not alone. Whatever he decides..." She sighed heavily, showing it pained her to say it. "I'll fully support him."

She stood up from her stool. "Thank you, Isabella. I know I'm late for that, but welcome to Holy Water." She grabbed her order and tipped her head to me. "See you at the Company." Then she added quietly, only for me to hear, "Don't be a jerk."

Forest waved at her but seemed unsure how to respond. "She seems nice. Although, is it normal for her to try and break up couples?" I felt defensive of Mia. That wasn't the truth, but I needed to remember Isabella didn't know our

dynamics, because I was an idiot who didn't know how to deal with all those feelings swirling inside of me.

“She’s not trying to. I told you about Danny last night. We’ve found out some really bad things about his wife. Mia is just being protective.”

“I’m sorry.” She seemed embarrassed.

“You should be.” She looked at me in surprise, but I wasn’t talking about her discomfort. “I woke up today to find out I was all alone. That was so not cool. I felt used, and I missed you. You didn’t even give me a chance to give you a proper ‘good morning.’”

She smiled at me, softening. “You’re right. I treated you badly.” She came to stand in front of me, the damn counter keeping me from feeling her. “How can I make things up?”

I summoned my most despondent voice. “I think we should do it all over again. I mean, I can’t even count last night as our date, since you didn’t give me a good morning kiss.”

Ignoring the clients around us, she leaned over the counter and gave me a sweet kiss on the lips. “Like that?”

“It helps, but it doesn’t salvage the night. Our good morning kiss should happen in bed; that’s how you properly close a successful date. Everyone knows that.”

“Oh no, what does that mean to us?”

“There’s no way around it. It means our date is still open and we’ll need to close it as soon as possible.” I nodded sternly.

“Whatever it takes to fix this debacle. Just say when and where.”

Throwing caution to the wind, I placed my hand on her neck and gently pulled her closer to me. I kissed her leisurely, tasting her on my tongue, not ready to go on my way.

“Last night was incredible,” I said, with our lips still touching.

“It was marvelous,” she agreed.

“Although I did miss waking up with you by my side.” I gave her a small peck. Then another one. And a third, just for good measure. “I need to work, but I’ll see you soon. I’ll talk to you even sooner.”

“I hope so. I need a repeat of last night.”

“I’ll give you as many as you want.” I hoped I could fulfill that promise.

CHAPTER TEN

IZZIE

Benjamin made good on his promises. We “closed” our first date. Then went on another. And another. And another. We kept going as the weeks went by.

We went out together. He came to my place so I could cook for him. We ordered take-out to eat at his place when neither of us wanted the trouble of cooking. Every time, we spent the night together. He came to Beans almost every day he was in town, and whenever he was away, we texted. That also happened when he was in town.

After that first morning-after encounter with Mia, I tried to ignore my jealousy, especially because Ben never gave me a reason to doubt him. He said they were friends, and I needed to take his word for it. I trusted him. I just wasn't sure about her.

As the weeks went by and we got to know each other better, I noticed my feelings growing out of my control. I didn't want to assume, but it seemed to me his feelings were brewing as well.

We walked around town holding hands, I met some of his other friends, although we had yet to hang out together. I didn't wanna push Ben on that matter. I knew he had his reasons to be cautious; I didn't know what they were, though.

Maybe that was why I'd started to feel uneasy whenever I woke up. Whether we were together or apart, my stomach would give me a hard time, and I'd feel queasy. It didn't help he was away, working with Mia. The only silver lining was that he was coming back soon.

But it wasn't enough to keep my qualms away. It was one of those days when just the thought of eating something made me feel nauseated. I thought if I could just talk about this unrest with him, I'd feel better. I was still considering that when I felt my phone vibrating in the back pocket of my jeans.

My cheerfulness died down fast when I saw it wasn't Ben, but rather my mother who was calling me. Unable to put aside her calls any longer, I answered her. "Hi, Mother."

"Look at that, you do remember I exist. I guess dealing with your little shop takes away your care about who gave birth to you."

I held back my tongue, knowing it was just a trap to make me feel like a shitty daughter afterward. I regretted the day I texted her about Beans.

"How are you doing?"

"You would've known if you answered my calls. When did you become so selfish?"

Talking with her was always an exercise of patience and self-control. "Do you need anything?"

She snorted loudly. *"As if you cared. It's not enough that you ruined my body and put a damper on my life, I get to see the ungrateful bitch you've become."*

"You raised me," I muttered. Not quietly enough.

“Why do I still bother with you, Isabella? You never appreciated all the sacrifices I made for you.”

Different place, always the same ringtone.

“Then why did you have me at all?” That question always plagued me. She never hid her displeasure at “dealing with me,” as she so lovely put it.

“Don’t you think I ask myself that every damn day?” she snapped, and I had to take a deep breath to keep my tears at bay. I knew how she felt, but it never hurt any less. *“Anyway, I could use some money. That measly amount you sent me barely kept me afloat.”* She clicked her tongue in disapproval and muttered, *“Unbelievable.”*

I should be the one saying that. I was trying to run a business, wary about the fact that so many new businesses failed in their first years. I was doing fine, but I needed to be cautious and not send money to a woman who only wore the title of “Mother” as an excuse to berate me and bully me into financing her.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Despite her hatred, I still couldn’t say no. If it was for feeling guilty for “ruining her life” or because I still wanted her love and approval, I had no idea. All I knew was that I was sick of her nastiness.

“I knew better than to deal with you,” she hissed. *“Send it quick.”* And then she hung up.

Always a pleasure.

I blinked repeatedly to control my emotions and turned around, pretending to deal with my coffee maker. Cleaning it would make me feel better and accomplished.

“Are you okay?” April’s always cheerful voice was careful. The blue tips of her hair matched my mood. The new color suited her.

“I am. Thank you.”

“If you need to go to the kitchen or do whatever, I can handle things here. Go take a breath outside.” Grateful for her sweetness, I nodded, accepting the reprieve she was offering.

I stepped onto the sidewalk without a defined direction. I walked a couple of stores down, not seeing what was displayed. My stomach was even queasier than before, and I took in some deep breaths to calm it down. I was about to come back to Beans when I felt my skin tingle. Not in a good way.

I looked around, unsure as to why I was suddenly cagey, when I saw a man standing on the other side of the street. His gaze was fixated on me, a creepy look on his face, making me shiver in disgust.

There was something familiar about him, although I was sure I didn’t know him. His smile at me was sleazy, and it broke me out of my musings. I trudged faster to the coffee shop, almost bumping John Cross, a nice—albeit grumpy—old man who became one of my favorite regulars.

“Whoa, young lady. What’s with the rush?” He held me by the shoulders as I looked around for the man, getting distraught rather than relieved to realize he was already gone. Something about him left me upset for no other reason than my gut telling me to be careful.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Cross. I was just distracted.” I gave him my calmest smile, which didn’t seem to convince him. He didn’t call me on it, though, for which I was grateful.

“I could go for one of your pies if you have them.”

“I sure do. Please, come in. I’ll get it for you in no time.”

We walked into my shop again, and he went straight to what I started calling “Mr. Cross’s stool.” My hands felt clammy as I tried to serve him. April, being a lifesaver, sensed my discomfort and seamlessly took my place in serving the old man.

I didn’t know if it was the after-effect of talking to my mother or seeing that creep outside checking me out, but the few contents of my stomach were making a comeback. I hastily left the common space and ran to the bathroom in the back, vomiting inside the toilet way more than I remembered ingesting.

After a while of finally just retching, I brushed my teeth with a spare toothbrush and tried to get rid of the smell in the bathroom, which only made me feel nauseated again.

I traipsed to the cash register as if everything was fine. There weren’t a lot of patrons at the time, and the few who were didn’t seem to notice anything. Except for Mr. Cross and April. She looked worried, whereas he appeared to be suspicious.

“Everything okay, lady?” He pointed his fork at me. “You look green.”

“I’m fine. My stomach is just a little upset. Thank you for caring.” I was indeed thankful for them both. With Benjamin being away, and after the call from hell, I needed that glimpse of fondness.

He puffed and resumed digging in his pie. “My Daisy was just like that.”

“What do you mean?” I headed closer to him and sat down on a stool April and I kept for ourselves behind the counter.

“My wife, Daisy. She was just like that when she was pregnant. She’d turn green, and nothing would stay inside her stomach for long.” April gasped behind me, and I went from green to white. Oblivious to my distress, he went on. “I’m so grateful she gave us our kids. But I always felt useless when she was pregnant. I’m sure your man will feel the same way.”

“I’m not pregnant,” I argued weakly, but it came out more like a question than a statement.

He gave me a look that did nothing to hide his disbelief. He shook his head and grumbled about young people who always thought they knew better.

It was a good thing I was seated, because my knees trembled out of control when I started to consider the probability of his guess.

Was he right? And what did that mean for me and Benjamin?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEN

I was tired, moody, and I was bound to snap at someone just so I could have a partner to spar with and release my frustration. I was more than ready to go back to Holy Water and see Isabella again. I needed my fill of her to calm me down.

Thankfully, Mia and I were going home after days of dealing with private jobs and a useless investigation for the government. We thought we had a new lead on the heroin shipment, but it was another failure.

We stopped at a gas station by the road, and Mia went to the convenience store to buy us some snacks. I was fueling my car when a truck loading two horses stopped nearby to do the same. I lifted my chin in greeting, not in the mood for conversation.

Mia was taking her sweet time. *What the hell is taking her so long? Is she baking the candy?* I was starting to get as restless as the guy's horses. "Are they fine?" *Why am I talking to this person?*

"I think so." The man seemed as surprised as I was at my question.

"*You think so?*"

“I don’t know much about horses. I guess they’re fine. They’re probably just tired; we’ve been driving for a long time.”

“From where?” Why I was still engaging with him, I didn’t know.

“Uhm...Texas.” His hesitation seemed off, but I didn’t dive into it. “We left Texas, and I’m bringing the beasts to Oregon.”

“Really? What for?”

“I’m not sure. I guess breeding or training. You know, for competition.” It seemed weird, but I knew nothing about horses. “I gotta go.” He got into his truck quickly just as Mia was getting out of the store with way more snacks than we probably needed. Not even her “*I wonder if Cappuccino thinks about me too*” shirt lifted my mood.

“Good, you found your way back to the car,” I snapped. “I was worried I’d need to send a search party for you. Next time, just steal the stuff; it’s way faster.”

“The kid behind the register was as green as they come. The poor thing had no idea how to handle the cashier.” She surprisingly ignored my sarcasm and jumped into the car, making me feel like a jerk for snapping at her.

I got in as well, and we went back on the road.

“I bought some Snickers. Want one?” And then I felt worse.

“Sure,” I mumbled. “Thank you.” She fished a snicker out of the bag and ripped the foil, then proceeded to lick all over the candy. “What the hell are you doing?”

She placed the licked chocolate in my hand. “You deserved it.”

I chuckled, thinking I should’ve known she’d pull something like this. I was starving, and honestly, I didn’t care, so I bit half of it. “I’m sorry.” Her only response was a nod as she leaned her head back on the headrest. “Are you feeling better?”

She shifted her head to the side to peer at me behind her sunglasses. “Yeah, thanks. It’s been crazy the last few days, and I didn’t eat as often as I should. Nothing to worry about.” She waved her hand, dismissing me.

Not wanting to push the matter, we drove in silence for a while. We ended up getting closer to the truck shipping the horses, which was headed the same way as us. They still seemed agitated and were vocal about it.

“Is that the truck from the gas station? I saw it from the store.”

“Yep.”

“What’s the deal with the horses? They don’t seem comfortable.”

“They’re most certainly not. The man driving them is a moron who knows nothing about horses.” I scoffed. “And they’ve been driving all the way from Texas and heading our way.”

“What do you mean ‘our way?’” She sounded skeptical as she munched on her candy.

“They’re going to Oregon.”

“What for?”

I shrugged, not really caring about it. “He wasn’t sure. Something about breeding or training for competition.”

She seemed doubtful as she exchanged her sunglasses for regular ones and gazed at the truck again with narrowed eyes.

“Stop that truck,” she blurted.

“What?”

“Ooh, that was cool, just like in the movies.” She looked at me in excitement, ignoring my confusion. “I’m gonna say it again, with more gusto this time.” She pointed a dramatic finger at the truck and declared, “*Stop that truck.*”

“What are you talking about?” She made no sense. It was hard keeping up with her mind.

“No, I’m serious, we need to stop that truck. *Now.*” All the banter was gone from her voice. Even her dizziness and fatigue took a step back, as she was in full work mode.

“I can’t just stop the truck. Why would I?”

“Because that’s what we’ve been looking for.” She stretched her hand, pointing to the back of the vehicle, her body fully turned to me. “This is our breakthrough.” Her voice was urgent, but I still couldn’t understand.

“We’re looking for horses?”

“Yes! But we’ve been looking for the wrong kind.” She shook her head in agitation. “We’ve been going at it from the wrong angle. We were so sure they were talking about heroin,

we failed to check the obvious route. ‘Horse’ wasn’t slang for anything. Cruz was talking about actual horses.”

“Who?”

“*The Train*,” she exclaimed, with urgency.

“That still doesn’t make any sense. Why horses? Why here? What are they carrying? And why are you so sure there’s something wrong?”

She was excited, evidently way ahead of me in the whole conclusion. “Think about it. It’s insane this guy would come all the way down from Texas, *Texas*, to what? Breed? Train? *Here*? They’re getting out of a place with everything they need to look for specialized stuff in the middle of this nowhere.”

“So why the horses?”

“They’re just a front. We do have farms around that could use them. We also have stud farms. *Bryan Keyes’s* stud farms, a money launderer. As in *The Package*. Who would refute that and be suspicious?”

“You, apparently,” I muttered.

“Besides,” she ignored me—again, “shipping horses for that kind of activity isn’t a cheap ordeal, and the animals should be hand-picked. They wouldn’t send someone who knows nothing about the animals and risk losing a lot of money. That guy,” she pointed to the truck again, “isn’t driving for the horses. He’s driving for the real shipment.”

“I don’t know, Mia. This all seems a little far fetched.” I could understand her reasoning, but I wasn’t convinced.

“Come on, Benny. The intel we had indicated the drugs were coming this week. The guy is crossing up the country to do what he’d find back home with more access and quality. No one would suspect anything was going on with that kind of transportation. Hell, it could even explain Santiago and Keyes meeting and why we have a member of a Mexican cartel roaming around.”

The horse guy did seem shifty. But going from that to tell he was dealing with illegal shipments could be a little extreme.

“Please, Benny. Trust me,” Mia pleaded, taking full advantage of her big brown eyes. Even if it wasn’t for them, I did trust her. I’d trusted her with my life. I’d trusted her with my past. I’d trusted her with my survival. She always came through.

“Even if I did want to stop it,” I started cautiously, “we can’t. We can’t legally pull him over. Maybe we should call the cops.”

She thought for a while, contemplating what I said. “This guy crossed several states. It’s a federal case.” Smiling again, she added, “The DEA has jurisdiction over it, and we happen to know a few names from there.” She pulled out her phone from the front pocket of her hoodie. “Can you contact that guy you know? I’ll try Aaron as well.”

She was already dialing before I could say anything. From the panel of my car, I tried calling Ethan, only to be met with his recording voice sounding inside the car and instructing me to leave a message.

Mia was still pressing the phone to her ear, waiting. “Wow. Who’s that hunk speaking? Is that your Ethan guy?” She seemed impressed. “I wasn’t sure if he was a real person or someone you invented.”

“Why would I make him up?”

“I don’t know.” She lifted her shoulder, dialing again. “But if he looks like he sounds, maybe you could prove to me in person that he’s real.” I didn’t have time to respond, for she was already ignoring me and mumbling, “Come on, Aaron. Pick up-pick up-pick up. Thank God, Aaron, hey. It’s Mia... Bryant. I’ll put you on speaker.” She held her phone with its face up between us. “Benny is with me.”

“Walker.”

“Scott.”

Being done with our greeting already, Mia intervened. “You’re both doing fine, great, you’ll arrange a date for a beer. We need to pull up a truck.” Silence. “Aaron?”

“I’m still here. I was just wondering why you’d need to stop a vehicle.”

“And silence was your way of figuring it out? Next time, just ask.” She huffed impatiently. “I think we found our shipment.” She proceeded to tell him her impressions and what we knew—a whole lot of nothing—about the guy driving in front of us. “As you can see, we’re talking about a readily mobile vehicle, and we have probable cause. Just come down here and say the word.” She was extra sparkly in her pitch.

“I might need more than that, Mia.”

“You have my word...”

“Mia—”

“With sugar on top.”

“If you’re wrong about that, we’re facing a shit ton of trouble...why do these things never land on Cross?” He sighed.

“I tried his phone, but no luck,” I explained.

“He’s away, dealing with another investigation. He’s way into it, so we won’t get a hold of him for a while.”

“Wait. You know him, too?” Mia asked.

“We...work together.” Mia shifted in discomfort. *“He’s been a good addition, though.”* He took in a deep breath. *“Look, about this search...it’s way too risky—”*

“But we’re not wrong,” she interrupted anxiously. “We know this is our guy. At least one of them.”

“Actually, *you* know. I’m not sold on it.” If she could fulminate me with her eyes, she would. “Aaron is right. If it’s the wrong call, it could give us a huge headache and jeopardize our whole investigation.”

She fixed her gaze on me, deep in thought, and gulped. “A whole month.”

I widened my eyes. “Are you serious?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Still glancing at her, and gazing back ahead to keep tabs on the truck and the road, I explained, ““A whole month’ means she’s so sure of what she’s saying, if she’s wrong, I’ll have full control of what she wears for a whole month.” I peered back at her.

“That’s ridiculous. You can’t make that kind of decision based on a wager.”

“It’s not just a wager, Aaron. It’s about trust. It means I know what I’m selling and I stand by it.” Mia groaned. “Look, I know it’s a lot to ask, but I’m confident about it. This could be huge.”

“Or it could be nothing,” he reasoned.

“And if it turns out to be nothing, I’ll take full responsibility.”

He puffed through the phone, clearly warring with his decision. *“Fine. I trust you on this. Keep tailing the truck. Where are you?”* Mia recited our location. *“Good. I’m not far from there. I’ll talk to the closest force so they can stop the vehicle until I get there. Your contract with the government is ongoing, so you’re good to be around. Once I arrive, I’ll search, and you can accompany me.”*

She sighed in relief as she hung up her phone and peered at the truck again, on full alert. I tried to keep a safe and unsuspecting distance. There weren’t exits to other roads on that stretch, so I didn’t think the guy was worried we were following him yet. For what it was worth, we just had nowhere else to turn.

A charged quietness enveloped us inside my car. A mixture of excitement and anxiousness for what was to come. We saw far ahead the approaching of a police car, and I heard Mia mumbling words beside me, as she always did before those kinds of situations. As usual, it helped to calm me down.

It was noticeable when the horse guy realized there was a police car nearby. He slowed down, forcing me to break to keep my distance. There was nowhere for him to run. Just a long stretch of tree after tree.

The guy obeyed the signal to stop, parking on the shoulder of the road, and I followed him. We stayed in the car as the policemen checked the guy's documentation, taking their time in doing so, probably to give Scott the time needed for his arrival.

Not long afterward, his unmarked vehicle showed up, and we jumped out to join him. Contrasting her playful demeanor when inside my car, Mia's posture became stern. We weren't friends on a road trip, dying to get home. We were two professional investigators putting our asses on the line for a trail we didn't know if it'd pay off.

When the horse guy—whom we learned was called William Sheen—recognized me, he froze and cursed quietly, making me believe in Mia's theory.

Scott marched toward us, dressed all in black, his marked bulletproof vest making it clear which agency he represented, causing Billy-Boy to turn an unhealthy shade of gray. One of fifty.

Already cutting to the chase, Scott opened the driver's door with gloved hands and jumped into the cabin to start the search. "You better be right about this, Mia."

"I know I am," she declared confidently, only to whisper, "hopefully." She slapped me with a pair of latex gloves and covered her hands with another pair. "Tomorrow, we rest."

“Tomorrow, we rest.”

For the next several minutes, we explored every dirty corner of the wagon. Nothing was left uncovered. We checked the dashboard, change gear, and under the seats. We looked for secret compartments inside the cabin and within the small area where the driver could eat and rest. We ransacked every inch of the vehicle. Scott asked for backup to deal with the horses—Billy was completely useless—so we could get them out to breathe and search for...

We didn't even know what we were looking for. Drugs? A huge load of money? We were set on heroin until Mia brought up our possible mistake.

One thing I knew, though: we'd found a total of zero illegal stuff.

Mia's frustration was growing exponentially, just like my worry. The three of us were inside the back of the truck, from where the horses were taken. There was no other place to look, and this was bound to bring some serious problems for all of us.

“I can't believe this.” She cleaned her forehead with the back of her forearm and leaned her back against the back wall of the wagon, her head hanging low. “I don't wanna go to work dressed as a clown or a fish.”

“Are you really worried about that bet right now?” Scott asked incredulously. “We're in so much shit. We tore this thing apart for nothing.”

“I know, I know.” She seemed despondent. “I just...I was so sure this was it. I can't believe I made a call this bad.”

She shook her head as silence descended upon us. Until she exploded, “*Damn it,*” then punched the back wall with the side of her fist.

Thud.

Scott looked at me in shock. *He heard it, too.*

“Mia,” I started slowly, “do that again.” She peered at us in confusion. “Please.”

Still leaning against the wall, she raised one cautious brow but punched as I asked.

Thud.

Then again.

Thud.

And again.

Thud.

She stood up in wonder. “This wall is hollow.”

“We need to break it.”

“No!” She stopped me. “It might make things harder for forensics.”

“Bring me a toolbox,” Scott shouted. “*Now.*” His order made the other agents and policemen jump into action, but Billy started to freak out. “Don’t let him run away. We’ll need him.”

With renewed motivation, the three of us grabbed a screwdriver and commenced opening the partition, unscrewing it carefully. The bolts were screwed tight, but we weren’t deterred.

When we took off the first leaf of the wall, we saw it: an extraordinary amount of bricks of what we could only assume to be cocaine.

“Ha! Look at that.” Mia cackled in laughter, slapping the wall. “We did it. *We found it.*” Actually, *she* did. “Thank God.”

“I can’t believe this.” Scott was somewhere between wonder and concern. “There are easily over one hundred bricks here. We’re talking about millions of dollars worth of cocaine.”

“I know. *We’re rich!*” Mia couldn’t stop laughing.

“You know we’re not keeping this, right?” Scott tried to hide his grin behind his severe features.

“Maybe *you* won’t. But at two hundred thousand a gram? This is my ticket to retirement.” She even managed to wrench a chuckle out of Scott.

That stopped once she inspected one of the bricks closer. She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. Gazing at us, she raised the brick and pointed to the brand imprinted on it.

A scorpion.

The *Alacrán*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BEN

We ended up not going home that day. Mia and I accompanied Scott in counting and weighing the drugs and sending them to forensics. Following that, Scott tried to interrogate Billy, who kept his mouth shut and legs trembling.

He was in a huge load of shit. *Better him than us.*

We helped Scott in whatever we could as he, in return, talked us up and made sure Bryants & Walker was known to be responsible for that huge arrest.

“No matter where you are, The Bryant Prodigy is still breathing fire.”

Mia gave him a shy smile, her cheeks turning pink for her mentor’s rightful compliment. She wasn’t used to the nickname the agency had christened her with before its betrayal. “It was good working with you again.” Aaron Scott was a stern yet fair man. It told a lot that, after everything she’d been through at the DEA, she still respected him so much.

“Now she has more freedom to light the fire under more bad butts.” I rounded my arm on her shoulder, pulling her into a side hug.

“I have no doubts about that.” He looked at her. “We just miss you at the DEA.” At her raised eyebrow, he

corrected, “Some of us. Don’t get me wrong. Ethan’s been a terrific fit. Sometimes I even wonder how well you two would work together.”

“I don’t think the agency would like that,” she said in a sad voice.

“I know.” He nodded in understanding. She blossomed under Scott’s guidance, and she was making one hell of a name for herself, until that one case that burned her career at the agency. “It can be messed up. Sometimes I wish I had the guts to leave.”

“We’ll have our doors open for when that happens.” It didn’t go unnoticed to us that she said “when,” not “if.”

“You mean like you’re doing to Ethan?” He ignored the comment for now as his eyes narrowed into slits at me. “Don’t think I don’t know you tried to poach him from under my watch.”

“You said so yourself. Imagine him and Mia working together.”

“Unstoppable duo.” He chuckled. “I won’t deny it’s tempting. Once you’ve worked with a legend, everything else falls short.”

“Come on—” It was hilarious seeing her blush. She was quick to encourage anyone, but she never knew how to react to a compliment.

“I mean it. You made a name for yourself. The Bryant Prodigy became a legend. Arresting ‘*El Segador*?’ Everyone talks about it, some don’t even know if it’s real. I know.” His eyes were filled with pride seeing her pupil rise like that. It

could be weird thinking of him as a mentor. He was a few years older than me, and I was a few years older than her. Between them, there weren't even ten years. Although, besides the clear respect between them, there was also this teacher-student dynamic. The guy was a solid agent, and the Bryant siblings had a lot of respect for him. So did I. "And who knows?" he continued. "Maybe I'll take you up on your offer one day." He walked us to our car. "Thank you. For everything. Today was tremendous."

"Make sure people know it was The Bryant Prodigy who did it. The Legend lives." I snorted.

"Shut up." She rolled her eyes and hugged Scott goodbye. "I missed working with you again."

"Say hello to Zach." His tired shadow of a smile fell. "I advise you to watch your back. First *'El Segador,'* and now this?" He shook his head. "This won't bring anything good to your doorstep."

"I will," she promised. But his rigidness didn't ease up on him. Neither did mine.

He turned to me and tipped his chin. "Benjamin."

So we'd upgraded to a first-name basis?

"Aaron."



It was already late to call Isabella, but I'd texted to let her know I couldn't make it back that day. Maybe I was being paranoid, but something wasn't right. We exchanged voice

messages, and I always loved to hear her voice. She sounded tense, though.

I woke Mia at the crack of dawn, too anxious to stay away from Isabella, and we went home. Since it was working hours for her, I ended up going home and sleeping alone—I hated it. After sleeping in my bed, hugging my Forest, it felt lacking being there without her warmth.

I slept a few hours during the day to make up for when I was traveling, then rushed to shower and buy take-out for us to eat at her place.

The coffee place was already closed by the time I got there, so I rang the intercom and climbed two steps at a time, rushing to see her. She opened the door, and my heart skipped at her sight.

She was in shorts, bare feet, and wearing an old shirt with several Marge Simpsons on it. Her hair was up in a messy bun, and her freckles seemed even more pronounced. She never looked so stunning.

“I had no idea you were coming now. I would’ve dressed up.”

I entered her place and crashed my lips onto hers, drinking her in to calm my heart. *I feel at home.*

“You look incredible.” I meant it. “I missed you.” I meant that, too.

“I missed you, too.” She seemed honest, yet hesitant. A warning lit in my gut, but I ignored it.

“I wanted to surprise you and apologize for the delay.” I raised the bags in my hand. “So I brought food. I ran by All

In One before tonight's event to grab that burger you liked.”

She looked thankful. To the point of tears. Then she kissed me feverously, running her hands through my hair and pulling me close. Almost desperate. I should've just loved her welcome—and I did—but I was starting to get worried at her reaction. Before I could ask her, she stepped back, not looking into my eyes, and called me to the kitchen.

“You said something about an event?”

“Yeah. Every few months, they throw a gay trivia.” At her confused expression, I explained. “I told you how they have nights for everyone and each group, right?” She nodded. “A few years ago, Mark Johson, our minister's son, decided to start some trivia games. He's a bit of a geek. People loved it. It's fun.” I opened her fridge to get us some drinks. “I'll take you next time.” I fully intended to. Just like I intended to ignore for now what it meant for me that I was making plans for our future. “I wanted you to myself tonight. It's been a long time since I could hug you and stay quiet.”

I did just that. I pulled her into me and hugged her tight. I could feel her heartbeat on my chest, and I felt content. Yes, I was dying to feel her clothes-less body. After those days away, I was craving her like crazy. But at that moment, all I wanted was for us to embrace each other and just...be.

We stood in the middle of her kitchen for a few silent minutes, and I felt recharged. I kissed the top of her head and pulled her to the table.

“How was your trip? Anything good?” she asked right before biting into her burger.

I was still on a high from what happened the day before. “It was pretty uneventful until yesterday. Then we hit it big.” I told her what I could, leaving aside the cartel info, not wanting to freak her out.

“That’s huge.” She sounded impressed. I felt ten feet tall under her admiration.

“It kind of is. We’ve been investigating this for months. Although we still need to catch the guy behind the shipment and the suppliers. But it was good to have a victory after so many frustrations. That’s why we couldn’t come back yesterday. We spent hours working with Aaron on the legalities of the arrest.”

“Aaron?”

“Aaron Scott. He’s from the DEA. He was Mia and Danny’s mentor, and we work closely together now.” I finished my dinner while she was still eating hers. “What happened to you while I was away?” I cleaned my burger-induced-greasy fingers so I could tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, marveling at its softness.

“It wasn’t near as exciting as yours.” It was supposed to be a glip, but I noticed she tensed and went back to not looking at me.

“Izzie? Babe, is everything okay?” I couldn’t keep my worry out of my voice. Something was going on with her, and I needed to know what it was, so I could—fix it? Hold her hand? I had no idea what my role was.

That was my first real serious relationship. I wasn’t even ready to call it that. So many things were foreign to me.

My first instinct should've been to run away a long time ago. I was not relationship material. But for whatever reason, I couldn't stay away.

When her eyes started to brim with tears, my panic rose, although I made an effort to keep it at bay. I wanted to solve whatever it was, but a churning feeling in my gut alerted me that I could be the cause of her distress. It wouldn't surprise me. It wasn't like I had something good to offer besides havoc and a whole lot of trouble.

It still awed me that the Bryants still put up with me after so long and after everything they already did. No matter how many lives I lived, I could never repay them.

She shifted her body to face me fully. I grabbed her trembling hands, holding them between mine, and with a shaky voice she began. "I started to feel queasy a few days ago." *Is she sick? Does she need help with medical expenses?* Maybe there was a way I could add her to my insurance. I cursed myself for not thinking about it before. "I thought I was just anxious...until I talked to Mr. Cross. He...enlightened me to what it could be."

She closed her eyes as a few tears rolled down her pretty face. I inched closer to her, running my thumb over her cheek, not caring I might be getting burger scent all over it. "Hey, babe. It's okay." I pulled her chair closer, its feet scratching the floor, and brought her torso into my chest so I could hug her and trail my hands on her back. "Whatever it is, we can deal with it. You're not alone."

She inched back, and I held her hands. "Do you mean it?"

“Of course I do. What is it?”

She opened her mouth a couple of times, not a word coming out. She shook her head, preparing herself for her announcement, then looked straight into my eyes for the first time that night and said the words that truly wrecked me. “I’m pregnant.”

I wanted to say I didn’t drop her hands like they were on fire. But I couldn’t.

Like the coward I was, I even inched my body further away. And she noticed it. “Is this some kind of joke?” She cringed and shook her head, her tears raining down. “How could this happen? We were careful.”

“Not that first night, though.” Her voice wobbled.

The shower. “You said you were on the pill and I didn’t need to worry.” It shouldn’t have sounded like an accusation.

“I know, I wasn’t worried either. I don’t know what happened. Maybe I took it later than I should have that day. Maybe it just didn’t work; contraceptive methods aren’t integrally efficient. Either way, it happened.”

“I can’t believe this,” I muttered.

“I know it’s a lot to take in. Believe me. You can be as involved as you want...Although,” she took in a deep breath, “we have something great going on. I know it’s scary, but it can be a good thing—”

“We were having fun,” I snapped. I knew I was being a jerk; I just couldn’t control myself. *I guess there’s no fighting against my poor genes.*

“It was more than that, and you know it.” Her voice carried a bit of desperation that should have been enough to stop my assholiness. But I was way too far in my head to stop the train wreck I was becoming.

“I can’t be a father. I’m not...I can’t. We were having fun...this wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“I’m as shocked as you are. I didn’t plan this. But it happened.”

“Didn’t you?”

Her face scrunched in pain, and she whispered, “What?”

“Are you sure you didn’t plan this? You were the one to assure me we were safe.”

“Yes, after you, too, forgot the condom. How is that solely my responsibility?”

“Because you’re the one carrying it.” Man, I was an ass.

“Do you honestly believe I could do that to you?” Her broken voice nearly destroyed me. But I had more than myself to protect at the moment. I could ruin them.

“You wouldn’t be the first one to try and tame me. Forcing things to be more than they are won’t work out for you.” Then I landed the final blow. “We were having fun, so if you mixed things up and pictured more than it was real, you’re the one to deal with it.”

Her pain should have stopped me. Her cry should have made me run back to her and beg for forgiveness and

understanding. For patience. But mainly I was purposefully ruining myself in the process. I knew better than to get attached. I knew better than to believe I could make it work with someone as wonderful as Isabella.

At the end of the day, I was Benjamin Walker. My father's son.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEN

The music was loud, but I could only blame the scotch for my headache. After driving around and cursing myself for being so rude and fate for being so cruel as to give me a glimpse of happiness, only to ruin everything, I ended up at All In One to lick my wounds.

If I were being honest, I was the one ruining everything. Fate was only the messenger of my demise. I didn't believe a child could ruin my life; that was never the issue. But I was a firm believer I could ruin any kid that came my way, not before I ruined their mother's as well.

As much as I tried to convince myself I was doing this to protect Isabella and her child—our child—I needed to acknowledge I was hiding away before sure failure descended upon me.

“Hank,” I yelled, louder than needed, to get the owner's attention. I pointed down at my glass, silently asking for more.

“Are you sure? I could get you some water or something to eat.”

“I don't need food. Gimme another,” *hiccup*, “one.”

“Ben—”

“Another. One.”

He exhaled heavily but complied. I slipped my phone from my pocket. If I was getting miserably wasted, I could use a companion. I rolled through my latest messages, barely able to read the blurry thing.

I tried calling Zach, only to be sent to voicemail. *What day is it?* It was probably his weekly ice cream date with Gabe. That kid was proof a kid didn't ruin a person's life. Haley's son was adorable, and he was our little mascot. If he ever needed a father, it should be someone like Zach. If anyone had what it took to father any child, it was him—patient, responsible, with a loving family to step in whenever needed.

In other words, the opposite of me.

Another great example was Danny.

Danny. I should get him to come.

I looked for his contact through the slits of my eyes and texted him.

Me: *come drrrink witj me at AIO.*

I slurred even in texting. What great father material.

Danny: *can't. I'm with Fee. Andrea is AWOL.*

Even married to the wife from hell, he was loyal—to a damn fault—and he loved and protected his little Sofia. He didn't blame Andrea for being pregnant, nor did he storm off when he learned the news. Because he was a decent man.

Me: *Booo.*

Danny: *??*

Me: *You shuld just dummp her cheeating ass. Lovis s mistake.*

Pause.

Danny: *R u all right?*

Me: *Im freee*

If I wanted to be completely free, I should have a designated driver. On that thought, I looked for my chain of texts with Mia and typed.

Can u get to AIO? I might neef a drivrr home.

I dropped my phone on the counter with a loud thud and downed some more of my drink, not even feeling the burn anymore.

“Poor thing. You look so sad.” I turned to the voice by my side. “Are you here for the trivia? I’d say I could use a partner, but you don’t look like you’ll be much help.” I’ve seen this guy before, I think. Dressed in a bright yellow shirt, with a flowery wristband, red tight pants, and complete with a colorful purple scarf, he presented himself as way too joyful for my miserable self. “I’m Jimmy,” he volunteered, helping me place him.

Right. The teller from the local bank. He was a nice and good-looking guy, always chirpy, if not a little bit on the superstitious side. “I could. Help you.” *Hiccup*. “I mean. With the *trivia*.” I’d say yes to any activity if it helped me quiet my head.

“Oh, honey. You’re in no frame of mind to help anyone. Look at you, you can barely stand straight. What happened?”

I stared at him for a long time until I could focus on one of the three Jimmies staring back at me. “I should c-call her.”

“I knew there would be a ‘her.’” He clicked his tongue. “Rule number one: never contact an ex while drunk,” he admonished me.

“Do you *think* she’s an ex *already*?” Why did that thought hurt so much? “And I’m not drunk. I’m...relaxed.” I leaned back to show him my laid-back state, almost falling back from the stool.

“Whoa.” Jimmy grabbed me by one arm, helping me balance myself. “Of course you’re not drunk.” He took his phone to text someone. *Great, I’m boring him already.* He soon placed his phone back into his pocket. “But I still think it’s a bad idea to contact her like that. You need to clear your mind first; otherwise, you’ll make it worse. I’m taking it you were the one to screw things up?”

My silence was enough of an answer, and he just nodded in understanding. If he judged me in any way, he didn’t show. “Whenever I’m in a jam, I take three deep breaths to calm myself, take three sips of water, and tell myself three times, ‘I am my best ally.’”

I gazed at him with my best suspicious expression, making him chuckle. “Does it work?” *Hiccup.*

“For me, it does. The deep breaths are to calm me down and slow my heart rate. The sips of water—or any other drink...non-alcoholic drink,” he stressed, “are meant to keep me occupied and not make any rash decisions. The declarations are to remember I can be my own friend or my enemy. I choose to be my best ally and make the decision that helps and not defeats me.”

“Why *thhree* times?”

“I think it’s a good number.” He shrugged simply. “Any less would be pointless, any more could be tiring. Why don’t you give it a try?” He placed the palm of his hand on the brim of my glass and stated, “With water.”

“But I don’t wanna drink water,” I whined.

“That’s the only drink you’ll get from now on.” Mia’s hard voice sounded behind me. She kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Jimmy.”

“Hey, girl, hey. He’s all yours, baby. Which is a shame.” He pouted, and I gave him my best smile. Maybe it wasn’t my best, if the horror on Mia’s face was anything to go by.

I still beamed at his flirting and felt somewhat good that one person found me attractive when I was feeling anything but. “I could be yours.”

Mia peered at me with what looked like condolence on her features. “Oh, Benny. In your state, you could never handle him.”

Jimmy snorted behind her. “Good luck with the hunk.” He cheered and sauntered away, leaving me envious at seeing

him so happy.

She waved at Jimmy and took his place on the stool next to me. She watched me from her glasses and scrunched her nose. “Why do you reek of alcohol? You stink so much, it’s a miracle they didn’t throw you out. On that note,” she looked around, seemingly in search of someone, “why didn’t they?”

“I’m a p-paying customer, and I’ll drink *az* much *az* I want.”

“How much did you drink?”

“Yes.” *Hiccup.*

She sighed.

“I’m not as *think* as you *drunk* I am.” I tried to prove my sobriety by righting my stance, almost falling from the chair again.

“Good Lord.” She righted me by pulling my arms and narrowed her eyes behind the bar. “Seriously, Hank?”

“He said he could handle the stuff,” the owner defended himself against the tiny firecracker. *Has she always been this small?*

She motioned her head to me. “Does it look like he can handle it?” She shook her head. “Sorry. It’s not you I’m mad at. Actually, I’m a bit mad at you. Don’t let people get to this state here, it’s dangerous.” She wrinkled her nose at me. “And please, bring him some water and your greasiest burger and fries. If you have anything sweet, it’ll help as well. We need to soak up this booze.”

I twirled to the counter like a scolded child, and she helped me balance myself on the stool. We stayed in silence while we waited for my food to arrive, the music around us not loud enough to stifle the awkwardness I felt as she vibrated with frustration.

When my food arrived, I forced myself to eat it, my stomach swirling in revulsion. I wanted to blame the food for it, but I had a feeling it was more because of the scotch.

“Can you please explain to me why I got texts from Hank, Jimmy, and Danny, asking me to check on you because you were drunk out of your mind? And what was that text you sent me? I didn’t know you could sound drunk on a text.”

“They should mind their *businesss*.”

“No, we should keep a look on you, because apparently you need babysitting.” She sighed and took off her glasses to rub her hand over her face.

“You should do it three times.”

“What?”

“Jimmy said so, you should do things *thrice* because *thhree* is a good number.”

“Okaaay.” *Why isn’t she believing in it? It’s real.* “I’m guessing there’s a story there. First I need to know what’s going on.” Getting closer, she asked quietly in worry, “What happened?” At my silence, she urged, “Benny?”

“Isabella is pregnant.”

She concealed a gasp as best as she could and let out a quiet “Fuck.” Better than anyone else, she knew why I

couldn't be a father. However, deep down I expected her to tell me I was wrong. When she stayed quiet by my side, I felt like shit.

"I take it you didn't react very cheerfully," she started carefully.

"I came here." She nodded, pursing her lips, still not talking about the merit of the situation. The food eased my imbalance, but my mind was still foggy. Lucky for me, I was filled with great ideas. "I'm gonna call her."

Mia's eyes snapped at mine. "You'll do no such thing." I picked up my phone from the counter. "Rule number one: never text while drunk," she stressed.

"That *rulle* you believe in? Don't worry, I'll call her three times, as Jimmy taught me."

"Please, Benny, give me the phone." I looked for Isabella's contact and turned my back from her, still needing to lean on the counter. "Give me the phone, Benjamin," she demanded more forcefully as she hopped off the stool.

"I need to talk to her."

"Not while you're drunk. Give it to me. *Now*."

Damn it, slow fingers. I wasn't fast enough. When I was almost pressing the call button, I felt a weight on my back, and it took me a while to realize Mia was climbing me from behind. "Stop calling her. You're gonna screw this up."

"I already did, so what's the harm?" She climbed higher, her knees punching my ribs and one arm around my throat as the other arm was stretched to grab my phone.

A few of the patrons turned to us and gave us a wide berth, but none of them was helping me. *Jerks.*

“Give it to me.”

“It’s my phone.”

“You don’t get phone privileges while drunk.”

“I’m driving there.”

I stood up and paced toward the door, with Mia still riding my back. She forgot my phone and tried to hold on to a column nearby while still attached to me, keeping me from going out. “Why are you so freaking strong?”

I was wondering the same thing about her. She rounded her legs tighter around my ribs, and I lost my balance. I finally pulled us away from the column, the momentum almost throwing us down on the floor. Then she struck me at the side of my neck, not strong enough to cause damage, but with enough power to stop my struggling against her.

“If you wanna salvage whatever you’re having with her, you need to sober up first.”

“I need to call her three times.” I whimpered, earning a mumbled, “For God’s sake” from her.

When she realized I was going nowhere, she tentatively climbed down off me, and with her eyes still on me, she called Hank. “I’m taking him home. Put it all on his tab, please. Make sure you have a nice tip.” She glanced at him. “And thank you. For calling me.”

Mia grabbed me by the hand to pull me out of there, and I stumbled after her petulantly. We crossed the parking lot

to her car, and she opened the door for me. “Get in the car, please.”

“Three times.”

She rolled her eyes but placated me. “Get, get, get in the car, car, car. I’m gonna kill Jimmy. After I kill you.”

I fell inside her vehicle more than got in. She closed the door on me and rounded the hood before jumping into the driver’s door. “Seat belt.” I struggled to deal with it. *Maybe there was a secret to it.* She leaned over, pulling the belt and clicking it safe on me, then drove us to my place.

The whole drive was made in silence. Far away inside my head, I knew I should be ashamed of my behavior. I should be ashamed for a lot of reasons. From my outburst at Isabella’s to the shitshow at Hank’s. But I was too buzzed to analyze it deeply, too overwhelmed by profound sadness.

I knew I wasn’t cut out to be a father, so why did the thought of walking away from them slice me so deeply?

We arrived at my place and entered, both of us under a heavy silence. I watched Mia, as best as I could under my blurry vision, and felt intense gratitude for having her in my life. Even if I scared Isabella away, I knew Mia was a constant.

She snatched a bottle of water from my fridge and handed it to me. “Wanna talk about it?”

I knew I could count on her to help me clean up this mess, or maybe just make me feel better about it all. I just wanted to stop feeling that lacerating pain wrecking inside of me.

“Make me forget.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IZZIE

I cried myself to sleep that night. I sobbed, hugging my stomach, and curled up in bed until I had no more tears left.

I knew having a kid caused a huge change in life, and neither of us was expecting to have a baby, especially so early in our relationship—what I thought was a relationship. Ben's behavior was beyond anything I expected from him. Shock and fear were understandable. But the scene he made was so far from the Benjamin I got to know those past few months.

I was having a hard time fitting what happened into the man I knew. I didn't wanna make excuses for him, yet I had the feeling there was more to his reaction than not wanting to be a father.

With puffed eyes, I fell asleep, only waking up when my need to throw up became stronger than my exhaustion. After cleaning myself and giving up on sleeping again, I just went back to bed to contemplate what to do.

As I climbed in, I saw my phone hidden between the folds of my blanket and noticed quite a few missed calls and voice messages. The first call was from my mother. That could wait.

I dropped to my back in bed and couldn't ignore the irony. I was the result of an unplanned pregnancy, and I carried

the weight of being the mistake my mother gave birth to, always being reminded that she'd be a lot better if she'd just aborted.

I truly considered that option. I thought it was healthy and reasonable to ponder that route of action responsibly. I knew it was as hard a decision to make as deciding to raise the kid.

Although maybe because I always felt like something was missing in my life, or even because I needed to love a child as I've never been loved, break the cycle, I wanted to have that baby. I just wasn't sure that was a good reason to have a kid.

But how could wanting a baby to love and cherish not be a good reason?

I ignored her call, not even entertaining the idea of calling her back. I had more urgent matters to attend to, and coming up with more money to give her was not one of them.

I checked the next calls, and I was sure the baby somersaulted inside of me. I didn't care it was supposed to be just a little thing yet, I knew what I felt. Okay, maybe it was butterflies. Seeing Benjamin's name on so many missed calls ignited new tears.

Too afraid to listen to them just yet, I got out of bed again, in search of something to eat. Nothing seemed to please me; however, I was already responsible for another life, so I needed to be mindful of that.

After taking the time needed to prepare something to eat, clean things up, take a shower, clean up my room, fold my

laundry, and reorganize my fridge, I opened his voicemail messages.

Between several missed calls, his messages were confusing. Just a little bit endearing. And he was certainly drunk.

Heeey, Forest. For-Est. I like your name...wait...that's not your name. It's Isabella...right, Isabella Forest.

I opened another one.

It hurts so much. I can't be a father...unintelligible mumble...you don't want me to be one. I'd ruin everything. Why it hurts so much?

The next.

Jimmy taught me to call you three times. Is it working? I don't know what to do, I'm sad and...shh! Hide. They're coming for my phone.

Another one.

I wronged you. I'm an ass, and I'll keep hurting you. That's how I was raised to be. I wanna forget, Izzie. I'm sorry.

And the last one.

I miss you.

A new wave of tears was cascading down my cheeks. I wasn't even sure I could exclusively blame my crying fest on the hormones.

I cleaned my face as best I could, hoping some cold water would help ease the swelling from all my crying. I had a new business to run, and if I intended to keep this baby, my shop couldn't go down.

As I set everything up to open it, I called April and instructed her on how to deal with the pastries—time of baking, which batch should go first—and ran upstairs to change.

I had no idea what Ben's messages meant, but I needed to figure out what was going on and find a path for us to move along. My unborn child was soon becoming my priority, but I'd be lying if I said finding a way back to us wasn't on my radar.

As I was leaving my apartment, my skin prickled. It was the same unease I'd been feeling for the last few days. I scanned the street, surveying for the source of my anxiety, and I saw that man again, the same one I spotted a few days ago, checking me out.

It was still early in the day, there weren't a lot of people milling around. Even though he wasn't openly inspecting me, I knew he regarded my presence. I tried to ignore my wariness, climbed into my car, and turned it on to head to Benjamin's place, but not before I saw the man turn to me and grace me with his creepy grin.

I drove the whole way with my stomach in knots. I couldn't shake the familiarity of the man's features, although I couldn't quite place it. In addition to that, I was feeling the return of my morning sickness, and I was as excited as I was dreading seeing Benjamin.

Sooner than I was ready, I parked in front of his house, noticing there was already another car. I stayed inside for a while, talking me up into walking to his doorstep.

I extracted myself from the car and spent the whole path to his door encouraging me to talk to him and declare my decision: I was having our baby, and I still liked him—possibly more than liked, but I couldn't go there just yet. Neither of us was ready to acknowledge that.

I raised my shaky hand and knocked on his door. When he didn't answer, I knocked again and waited for what felt like a year, but it was probably just a couple of minutes.

As the door opened, I felt my heart galloping inside my chest. Benjamin stood in front of me, looking confused and a whole lot sexy. Even his grimace, indicating he was dealing with a deep hangover, couldn't erase how handsome he was.

Wearing only basketball shorts, his ink on display, his necklace with a third of a circle shining from the sunlight, the waistband low enough to show the trail of hair and sexy V that

led to my Wonderland (his Wonderland), he looked edible. *That* I knew I couldn't blame on the hormones yet.

“Isabella?” He sounded as confused as he looked, if not a little relieved.

I peered up at his face and noticed his eyes were squinted against the sunlight, probably rejecting the brightness after a night of drinking, if his messages were any indication of his yestern activities.

Wanting to save him from that discomfort, I stepped into his living room without waiting for his invitation. “I heard your messages,” I said as an explanation for my being there.

He was still a little slow in understanding and responding. He shook his head, still holding the door handle as a way to keep his balance. “Isabella, I—”

“Someone was knocking. You got that, or do I still need to babysit—” At listening to her voice, my inside coiled. Mia showed up in the living room and stopped when she noticed me. “Shit, I'm...I'm sorry.”

She looked at Benjamin with unsure eyes, as he seemed panicked. Then I realized why. Mia was wearing male shorts and a big shirt that could only belong to a man, *my man*, having clearly just spent the night here, while I was crying my eyes out.

My gaze jumped from her to him and back to her, urging one of them to explain what seemed to be clear to me. She seemed ready to intervene in a big fight, her shoulders rigid and stance cautious. Mia studied him, and I did the same.

In my scrutiny, it was easy to see the change in his demeanor, from apologetic to stern, from scared to stony.

“Why are you here Isabella?”

Having never heard that tone before, I was unsure how to respond. Unconsciously, I even looked at Mia for guidance, only to be met with her disbelief as she gazed at him.

“You-you called me.”

My voice was so little, I could even hear Mia swearing and muttering, “Damn it, I forgot the phone.”

“Was it so hard for you to understand what I said yesterday? Do you want me to draw it for you?”

Who is this mean man standing in front of me? As if prompted by his rudeness, tears pooled on my eyelids.

“You said—” I resumed weakly.

“I was perfectly clear. Yes, it was fun. But settling down? A happy family? Being a father? That’s not in the cards for me.” Was I imagining a note of pain behind his cruel words, or was that my pathetic heart making excuses again?

Thankfully, I regained my voice, anger moved by pain urging me on. “You called me. Several times. You said you were in pain and you missed me.” Each accusation was accompanied by the pointing of my finger. “I’m not making things up because I need a father for my baby. I’m here because we’re adults capable of dealing with this. Adults who created a life together and developed feelings for each other.”

His snort wounded me more than I let it show. “Feelings?”

“Don’t you dare deny what we have, and what you told me last night.”

“I was drunk,” he scoffed. “I said and did a lot of things I didn’t mean last night.”

At his remark, I turned to Mia, who had her hands planted on her hips and nostrils flaring in anger. She was breathing hard and staring at him with disappointment, her lips pursed. Noticing where my eyes had wandered, he threw another punch.

“Why do you think she’s here?”

I felt the first of many tears fall as she narrowed her eyes at him, then peered at me and shook her head slightly, with sorrow in her features.

“You wouldn’t do this,” I defended weakly, unable to absorb what he was implying.

“Wouldn’t I? How can you be so sure?” His voice shook at the end. “You don’t know me,” he whispered, then hung his head low. “I could hurt you even more.”

Powerless to the agony and betrayal, I suppressed a sob and stormed out of that house, ignoring Mia’s calls for me to come back.

I came here to make things right with the man I was falling for, and I left with a dilacerated heart caused by his betrayal.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BEN

I walked into the atrium of Bryants & Walker in a rush. I didn't wanna deal with the storm I knew was coming. I passed by Haley with barely a nod, and when the shy, sweet woman looked at me, confused, I felt even more like a dick.

I was on a roll, and I needed to get to my office before Mia reached me. Which was stupid. I wasn't safer in there than I was anywhere else. If anything, I was more vulnerable and cornered, because when Mia caught up to me, I wouldn't be able to escape her rightful fury.

If I was brave enough to acknowledge it, I'd realize I wanted to be defied. I needed to be challenged. Deep inside, I knew I was doing something wrong, but for the life of me, I couldn't get to the root of my many mistakes. Or maybe I was too much of a coward to do so.

In a twisted way, I wanted someone to show me the way.

As I was walking hurriedly along the hallway, I heard her approach. Her purposeful steps were loud for someone so small. Which meant she was mad at me. If I concentrated hard enough, I could even feel the disappointment and anger coming out of her. The worst part was, I couldn't blame her. I was disappointed and angry at myself as well.

Somehow, I was gifted enough to have disappointed two women who were important to me.

As I was passing the threshold into my office, I heard Mia say conversationally to a following Haley, as if everything was okay, “Haley, hun, can you please hold Benjamin’s and my calls, please? I need to yell at him for a bit.”

Benjamin. She called me Benjamin. Not Benny, like only she could get away with. Not even Ben, like when she wanted to scold me for mundane things like letting my house be a mess. She called me Benjamin like we didn’t share the bond we did. I’d pushed her over the edge, and all hell would break loose.

I was anticipating the shitshow that was coming whilst struggling to find a way out of it when I heard Zach opening his office door and getting out with Danny and a new prospect we could end up hiring (whose name I didn’t care to learn). That was, if the guy didn’t run away after what was about to take place.

I knew Zach didn’t want a potential new employee watching us in such a vulnerable and messy state, but he also didn’t want me and Mia to take things so far that we couldn’t go back. That was Zach. Sensible, caring, level-headed, and always ready to clean up our messes.

Well, my messes.

As she came closer, from his office across the hall, Zach stated warily, sensing things were about to go south, “Hey guys, you remember Gary? He’s interviewing to be a part of our *functional and normal company*,” he emphasized before snapping, “why are you wearing Ben’s clothes?”

“Hi, Gary. Such a pleasure to meet you!” Mia said sweetly to the guy, ignoring her brother’s question. “We can’t wait to let you know if you’re gonna be a part of this family. Either way, I hope you feel at home. Just a heads up, this is how we deal with things.”

She dismissed the group and fumed into my office. Hypnotized by the event, Haley, Zach, Danny, and the Gary person followed her just inside the door.

And so it began.

“What the hell was that?” She barely contained her anger, raising her arms at her side in a “what-the-fuck” stance.

“I’ll follow you outside,” Danny urged the guy out.

“Why are you wearing his clothes?” Zach’s stern voice never worked on Mia, it was a wonder he still used it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I knew playing dumb with her wasn’t gonna work, but I needed some time to deal with the force she was.

She scoffed, “You better not think you can stupid your way out of the mess you created.”

“Look, I don’t know what you want from me,” I snapped, unable to keep up with my aloof facade. “I was drunk, you spent the night at my place, and Isabella showed up unannounced. There’s not much I can do about it.” Then I added slyly, like the jerk I was, “Unless you want another night, maybe we can actually have fun next time.” I knew it was the wrong thing to say just as I was saying it. I was deliberately antagonizing Mia and trying to get a rise out of her. Maybe out of Zach as well.

Why? Who knew?

“*What?*” Zach asked, ready to jump on me, at the same time Mia mumbled, more to herself than to the rest of us, “I wanna punch you so hard right now.”

“What did you say you did?” Zach asked, trying to keep his calm but instinctively stepping inside my office a little more, yet respecting that Mia could more than take care of herself. All the while, Haley and Danny, who had come back for the show, watched everything without moving so much as a blink.

“What do you want me to say, huh? That I bedded your little sister?” I couldn’t control myself.

“I’ve known you for more than twenty years, but this is the first time I truly feel like hitting you,” Mia contemplated, almost in wonder, while placing an outstretched hand on Zach’s chest to keep him from coming at me.

“Look, this is none of anyone’s business.”

“You made it my business when you let Isabella, then my *brother*, believe anything at all happened between us,” Mia countered, her fists tight while she tried to keep her calm for my sake. As if I deserved it.

“*Then why are you wearing his clothes?*”

“Oh my God, Zachary. *Chill*,” Mia snapped, then returned her frustration at me. “Why don’t you enlighten them?” Her sarcasm wasn’t lost on me.

Silence.

Mia was too angry to talk. I was too ashamed to respond. Anyone else was too busy trying to understand the shit I was pulling.

“What happened?” Haley asked quietly.

“It’s complicated—”

“Don’t even think about coming with this bullshit. You’ve made your bed, quite literally,” Mia snorted, “so man up and lie in it.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Are you sure? Because I can think of a couple interesting things to fill them in.” At my cowardly wordless stance, she went on, being done with my pussyness. “Let’s see, you found a girl you like.” She raised one finger in counting. “And don’t try to deny it, we all know you like her. You impregnated her.” She lifted another finger, utterly ignoring the commotion behind her. “I can only assume you reacted poorly at the news, so I’ll just go ahead and count that one as another mistake.” New finger. “Then you get drunk like a skunk,” Fourth finger. “And you stank like one, too. You created a scene at Hank’s.” Fifth finger. “I drove your drunk ass home, only so you could *throw up* on me,” she sneered. *Good, I unlocked the second hand of mistakes.* “It was disgusting.

“If that wasn’t enough, when Isabella showed up, instead of begging for forgiveness for whatever you’d done, you led her to believe we slept together. *Then,*” she continued before I could interrupt, “you drove here in *my* car, leaving me to get a lift from Mrs. Robinson. The lady is great, but do you have any idea how scary it is to ride with her? Someone

should take her license.” She hissed. “And here I am, in your clothes, because mine were still too damp for me to wear. By the way,” she snapped her fingers and lost all her venom, “you need a new drier. Yours has only one destination: garbage.”

She sighed in contemplation. “I guess that summarizes it.”

As our spectators tried to wrap their minds around what they’d learned, I exhaled in defeat, still trying to weasel my way out of it. “It’s not as easy as it appears to be—”

“It seems pretty easy to me,” Mia interrupted. “All you have to do is admit you have feelings for the girl who’s about to bring your child into the world and do something about it.”

“I don’t have feelings for her,” I rebutted, way too quickly.

Baring her sarcasm, Mia turned to Haley and asked saccharinely, “Hay, could you bring Benjamin’s Denial File? We have a ton of information to add.”

Danny snickered behind his hand, and Haley’s lips twinkled, but Zach was still studying me and waiting for the truth to come out.

“She’s just a woman having my child. That doesn’t change anything,” I argued weakly.

“Why are you so intent on ruining this?” Mia asked urgently, and she seemed truly bewildered about the whole situation. Which was bad for me, because I couldn’t understand it myself, and it’d be great if someone enlightened me.

“I’m not trying to ruin it. Isabella said she wouldn’t ask me for anything, I could be as involved as I wanted.” There. That was a good answer.

“That’s such *bullshit!*” Mia raised her voice. “So what? She’ll be a full-time mom while you get to play the daddy card only when the mood strikes? *‘I wanna act irresponsibly, live my life as if nothing has changed; I’ll drink and sleep around, and my kid? He can fend for himself, he has a woman tending to his every need anyway. I’ll show up to remind him I’m his father when it’s convenient for me,’*” she mocked, badly imitating my voice. “I always thought of you as being wild and free, and I like that about you, but I’ve never imagined you could be such a selfish jerk,” she uttered, full of sadness and disappointment.

“Look, after everything, she probably doesn’t want me around, and she’s more than qualified. She can handle the single mom thing.”

“That’s beside the point, and you know it! Yes, she could be a single mother, like many other women can and are, but she doesn’t have to. It’s extremely selfish and sexist that you let her deal with everything on her own.”

“I’m not being sexist, but it’s so hard for me—”

“And you don’t think it is for her?” she interrupted me, her voice dripping with indignation. “This pregnancy was just as much of a shock to you as it was to her, but the difference is that she won’t bail on *your* kid.” She pointed a finger at me. “Despite her fears and insecurities, she’s stepping up and being the badass woman she is, while you’re hiding here, feeling entitled to not be a father because you were born with a

penis and there's already a woman dealing with your shit. If you think this kid might change your life, you have no idea the impact he'll have on *hers*," she exclaimed, barely stopping to breathe.

As she regained her composure, Danny chimed in. "Why are you boycotting this? You can deny all you want, but you care about this baby, and you have feelings for Isabella. We all saw the change in you since you met her."

"Come on, guys, maybe we should leave. He can deal with this," Zach stated soothingly, draping his hand on Mia's shoulder, always trying to placate things.

"No, Zee. Enough is enough! We agreed not to interfere as long as he knew what he was doing, but he doesn't. He's screwing this up," Mia stressed.

"Wait a second. You '*agreed*?' Are you talking about me behind my back?" I questioned, acting betrayed.

"No," Mia replied in annoyance, not one bit affected by my indignation. "We *cared* about you behind your back. And to your front. That's why we're all here." She raised her arms, indicating her and the guys.

Haley nodded, confirming Mia's words. After everything she went through (most of all I still didn't know) and how Mia stepped up for her and Gabe, Hay always took Mia's side. She had reason to side with her that time, though.

Danny turned disturbingly quiet, and shame filled me. Doing the complete opposite of me, when he learned Andrea, the Devil, was pregnant, he stepped out of the navy and married the evil witch. Sofia was his whole world, and the

only reason he was still putting up with his wife. He was the father I could never be.

Feeling exhaustion take over, my resolve to play aloof crumbled. I felt lost, but I knew no matter my mistakes, or how much of a coward I was, that little group of people, my chosen family, would help me out of it.

That's why I admitted, "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to not screw this up. It feels different this time." I took a deep, shaky breath. "I'm scared."

"Of course you are," Danny said. "Now you care. She matters to you, and not only because of the baby."

"I can't screw this up. If I'm anywhere near Isabella or the baby, I will. I'm...I'm a danger to them, I can't let them pay for my flaws," I admitted with shame, running my hand over my face.

Surprisingly enough, that left Mia speechless. If I wasn't so torn about my shameful existence, I'd have goaded over that small victory.

Danny was the first one to recover. "You can't believe that's true, man. I fought by your side. You saved more lives than I could count, mine included, and you're still doing so. I can't imagine that's something a dangerous person could do."

I appreciated his statement. After years of fighting for this country alongside each other, we were way more than co-workers. We didn't grow up together, as Mia, Zach, and I did. But you don't face death that many times without getting close to the men having your back. And Danny had mine.

Zach was silent, watching me carefully, as if he understood where I was coming from. Because he did. Since we were kids, we were witnesses of what I was made of. He wanted to say something, but knowing him, he'd think about it first, ponder his every word, then he'd lay his truth on my lap serenely. When we were alone.

Mia wasn't so patient, though, and went right for the root of it all.

"You aren't Michael." Her voice was softer than I ever remember. Her quiet words impacted me, even though I wasn't ready to face that route.

"That's not what this is about," I argued weakly.

"You are *not* your father," she stressed. If it were any other person, I might have been annoyed. But I knew her. Even though she was blunt and wouldn't let go sometimes (maybe especially because of it), she'd do anything to help someone she loved. By some miracle I most definitely didn't deserve, she loved me.

We were never *in love* by any means, but her love and protection saved me in a way few people would ever be lucky enough to experience. She saved my life, figuratively. And literally.

I didn't have time to come up with a response. "You could never be like him, and it pains me that you don't see that."

"I could never live with myself if there was the smallest chance that I'd be like him in any way. I know what it's like to have that kind of man as a father, and I saw how he

was as a husband as well.” My voice shook, betraying the nonchalant demeanor I was portraying. “I’d rather lose them than subject Isabella and my baby to that kind of nightmare.”

I was breathing hard, drained by my confession. Ashamed of my past. Somehow lighter for having admitted what the core of my issue was. But that confession only made me sadder.

Danny looked contrite, Zach was despondent and struggling not to say something that could make things worse, and sweet, sweet Haley was sniffing. She was all too familiar with domestic violence; I could only hope talking about my past didn’t trigger her.

Mia, on the other hand, was looking at me with calculating eyes. She was absorbing my confession, but more than that, she was about to land a blow. I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was coming.

She was Mia, after all. Since we were kids, whenever she knew I was hurting, she’d barge in with no finesse, but undeniable efficiency.

The silence in my office was sepulchral. For a few seconds, which felt like hours, all we could hear was the clock on the wall, ticking like a gong second after second. The more time that passed, the more uneasy I felt.

Mia was looking at me intently, and even though she had her back to Zach, being as in tune as he was with her, he sensed she’d say something that could change everything.

The whole atmosphere changed, the tension was thick, and even Haley and Danny became aware of what was

coming, despite none of us knowing what it was.

“You’re right,” she said slowly.

While she was staring at me with slightly narrowed eyes, Zach said warily, in a quiet, warning voice, “Mia, whatever you’re thinking, let’s just take a step—”

“Hit me,” she interrupted him forcefully, stepping closer to me and staring right into my eyes.

“*What?*” I all but yelled.

“Jesus!” I heard Danny say as Haley sucked in a breath and Zach muttered in agitation, “For God’s sake, Mia.”

“Hit me,” she repeated, making my uneasiness grow. What the hell was she doing?

“What the hell are you doing?” Zach mirrored my thoughts, getting closer to her and trying to get some sense into his sister. But she just stepped away from him.

“He’s right,” she answered her brother, her eyes still focused on me. “Who knows if he might end up like his shit of a father? For the sake of his girl and his baby, hell, for the sake of us, we need to know if he’s dangerous.” Stepping closer, she commanded once again, “Hit me.”

“This is a bad idea, Mia,” Zach stated anxiously. Did he think I’d hurt her?

I snapped. “Get out, Mia.”

“No.” She strode my way, taking her time. “Come on, hit me. You wanna know the truth, so let’s settle this once and for all. Are you or are you not like your father? *Hit me.*”

As she came closer, I stepped back again and again. “This is not funny, Mia, just stop and let this go.” I tried using my hardest voice, but she could sense I was breaking.

“Should we do something?” Danny asked as Zach stressed, “Damn it, Mia, let this go.”

“She knows what she’s doing,” Haley said trustfully.

“I’m telling you, this is a mistake. I don’t know what you’re trying to prove here, but stop right now, Mia.” I was cornered and continued stepping back, feeling my already fragile control about to snap. My hands shook, my heart rate was peaking, and I could feel beads of anxious sweat forming on my forehead.

“You know what I’m trying to prove. If you’re like your father, then we deserve to know. Isabella might not be safe with you. Don’t even get me started on your baby. Hell, if you’re anything like Michael, you shouldn’t even be close to Gabe and Sofia.” And that was a punch to the stomach, because I loved the kids.

She circled my table, approaching me like a predator. “If that’s the case, maybe Isabella should be with someone else. A man who could make her happy and take care of your baby. That’s a win-win. You’d be free of the responsibility and far away from your girl and your baby, don’t you think? She’d be better off.” She whispered, but all I heard was a scream, “Hit me.”

My back was literally against the wall, and Mia’s words were more than annoying me. Isabella was *my* girl, carrying *my* baby, and as irrational as it was, I couldn’t stop

the jealousy that sparked within me at this imaginary man claiming what was mine.

Mia wasn't done. "I'm now thinking about all the times we were alone together. Maybe I should've been more careful, I should be afraid of you. My whole family is in danger if you turn out to be like Michael."

I was having trouble breathing.

"We should do something."

"Mia, stop this right now!"

"She knows what she's doing!"

"Hit me." She was so close, I had to suck in my breath and stand even taller to avoid our bodies from touching. "Hit me and get this over with."

"Stop this, Mia," I warned.

"Hit me," she demanded louder.

"Damn it, Mia."

"Hit me!"

"STOP! I'LL NEVER HURT YOU!" I yelled, my breath labored, feeling drained and more than hurt that she thought I'd do this.

"I know," she said quietly. I looked at her, puzzled, without the first clue what was going on. "I know you'll never hurt me," she repeated softly, placing her hands on my thumping chest. "Because *you are not your father*. Your father would've hit me. Your father *did*," she stressed.

My eyes went straight to the scar on her left eyebrow, reminding me of the day the devil tried to ruin my annoying little savior. I felt again all the pain, fear, and freedom I lived that fateful day so many years ago.

“For so long, he tried to ruin your life. Leave Michael in the past where he belongs, and don’t let him rule your future,” she pleaded, with so much love and desperation in her eyes, I wanted to cry.

“What should I do?” I begged.

Taking my face in her small hands, she tipped it down until our eyes locked. “*Take a chance*. You’re being granted a gift here. You’ve found a good woman who cares so much about you. You both can build something marvelous together.” She smiled. “There’s no denying how deeply you feel for each other, so let yourself enjoy all that, take a chance on this beautiful journey. Don’t let Michael win. He’s already taken enough.” She made her point, punching me in the chest with her index finger. “Now it’s your turn to rule your life.”

We were both fighting tears, and when I looked around to compose myself, I realized we were alone in the room.

In true Mia fashion, she bulldozed right into my insecurities and helped me see the truth. I’ve been so scared my whole life of becoming my father, I came close to losing one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.

Isabella wasn’t just my baby momma. She was already an integral part of me. I wasn’t suddenly *cured* and ready to be a bigger man, but I was seeing things more clearly. Falling for her was as inevitable as it was craving to hold my baby in my arms. I just hoped I wasn’t too late for that.

“How do I fix things? I hurt her so much.”

“Start by telling the truth,” Mia answered simply. She stepped back, retreating to the hallway.

“Do you think I have a chance? Do you think she’ll forgive me and take me back?” It should’ve annoyed me how weak I sounded, but being vulnerable showed I had a lot to lose, and that gave me a burst of strength.

“If she’s as strong and self-respecting as I deemed her to be, I think you have a good crawling ahead of you. You have no idea how happy that makes me.” Good. Mia’s sharpness was returning. “But I do believe you haven’t missed your shot. Your feelings for each other just don’t seem to be clear for you two.” She sighed. “You two are tiring. Don’t be afraid to be vulnerable. Tell her the truth. Your truth. Don’t hold back your feelings. It’s time to take a chance and live the life you deserve.”

As I absorbed her words, Mia turned on her heels, pulling the waistband of my shorts up to keep them from falling, and headed to my door. Right before she reached the corridor, I called her name.

“How did you know I wouldn’t hit you? Weren’t you afraid?”

Smiling softly, she leaned her shoulder against the door frame. “I know you, Benny. There was no way you would’ve hit me. I can count on a lot of people to hurt me in some way. You’re *not* one of those people.”

“I could have hurt you, you know? I could have done some serious damage,” I joked.

She snorted, rolling her eyes. “Oh, honey, you couldn’t handle me.” Slapping the door frame twice, she gave me a proud smile and left.

My mind went to last night. To the whole shitshow at All In One. To my messy state after Mia and I got home. To how distraught I’d been.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Make me forget.”

“What?”

“Make me forget, Mia. I need to forget this pain. I need to forget the screw-up that I am.”

“You’re not a—”

“I am, Mia. I am.” I thumped my fist on my chest. “Help me erase all that.”

“And what the hell do you suggest? That I hit you on the head?”

“Yes! Punch me hard.”

“For God’s sake, that was rhetorical. I’m not gonna punch you. I’m not that schooled on relationship matters, but I don’t think having a concussion is the answer. Besides, you don’t wanna forget.”

“But I do. I need to,” I pleaded.

“No,” she retorted placatingly, as if talking to a child. “What you want is to take a shower. Actually, I want that. You stink. Let’s settle on we both wanting that. We want you to take

a shower.” She grabbed me by the hand, guiding me to my bedroom. “Then you’ll wanna get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow, you’ll want coffee. Lots of coffee. Black, strong, hangover-killing coffee, with a side of drenching-alcohol food. I’ll even cook you breakfast.”

I nodded helplessly and followed her inside my bedroom and to my bathroom, where she turned on the shower. “Remember your first step? Shower.” She pointed to the bathroom stall, already filling with steam. “I’ll be just outside if you need me. After all that, you’ll talk to Isabella.”

“I can’t talk to her,” I whined.

“But you want to, remember? You wanna make things right. But you can’t make it right in your state. So make yourself clean and pretty for her. Deal?”

I nodded again, a little too hard, and my stomach revolted.

“If you want, you can tell me what you plan to tell her. We can work on that so you have all the best words. What do you say?” She sounded cheerful, and I wanted to agree to it all and make her happy, right before my stomach revolted again. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

But instead of words coming out of my mouth, it was all the booze and food I ingested that did.

Right on her.

Despite my shame, I felt lighter than I ever remembered feeling. More than the previous night’s ingestion,

I expurged something dark that lurked inside of me. I had a new sense of understanding.

I knew I was bound to screw things up again. Years of feeling like shit didn't go away with a throw-up and an argument. But I had a new purpose, and for the time being, that was enough.

Be a braver man, earn Isabella's trust, prove I could be a damn good father for my baby, and win my girl back.

It was time to take a chance.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IZZIE

A couple of days went by when I felt mostly numb. If not for my morning sickness, I would've probably not felt a thing. I was either broken inside or deliberately ignoring the wreck my heart had become. Most likely the latter.

I knew I needed to react and do something. For instance, look for a gyno, start taking prenatal vitamins. As much as I wanted this baby, I couldn't find the energy to move along and take charge of what was important. When I wasn't feeling numb, I was feeling guilty for not being a better mother.

My most dreaded fear was that I'd become my own mother along the way—a selfish woman who lived with the sole purpose of making her child feel unloved and inadequate. *What if I never love my baby the way he deserves? What if I resent him and make him feel like a nuisance instead of a blessing?*

I mused these and other happy feelings over and over in my head. Besides telling Ben, I haven't told anyone about my pregnancy. Talking about it would make the whole situation way more real than I was ready to face. Seeing as how the last time I told someone about it, things went epically wrong, I wasn't all too enthused to do it again.

Not that I had that many people to tell. I was avoiding my mother like the plague. I needed to tell April. I was definitely telling Mr. Cross; after all, he was the one to call it right.

It was sad how lonely I was. More than ever, I missed having someone in my corner. A true friendship, a person I could count on. Growing up, that was something that always left me upset, if not bitter. I never had girlfriends. Women to ride or die with. I felt like I was too old for that, right when I needed the most.

So, I immersed myself in my shop. I looked for new recipes. If I wasn't manning the counter and dealing with customers, I was tucked in the kitchen, creating new things.

I was allowing myself to take some time to be me again, to wrap my head around my situation. I still had a good few months ahead of me to make the necessary changes and get used to the—scary—idea of being a mother.

I could only imagine how frightening it must be for the women who were forced to go along with a pregnancy they didn't want. Because no matter how much I wanted it, becoming a mother was terrifying.

And becoming a single mother was petrifying. Despite my resentment, I had to give props to my mother for keeping me alive—albeit despising me in the process.

I was about to close Beans, seeing out my last customer. I was busy dealing with the cashier when I heard the door open. I was tired, but I wasn't about to send away a paying customer.

Before I could build my professional smile, I heard his cautious voice.

“Isabella?”

I hated that my numbness ran away just by hearing him say my name. He was the one who left me in that state in the first place. It was fitting that he was the one to get me out, but I didn’t wanna give him any more of my emotions. So I schooled my features and tried to hide the fact that my heart was galloping inside my chest.

“Benjamin, what a surprise.” I was proud of myself for my steady voice. “What brings you by? Are you here to tell me about your latest conquests? Or to make sure I understand my *no* place in your life?”

His contrition at my mockery shouldn’t have touched me. As much as I was relieved to feel anything other than numbness and guilt, I was also mad that he still had that pull over me. I also hated that his disheveled appearance, three-day beard, and the circles around his wary eyes tugged at my heart, giving me hope.

“Isabella, I’m—”

“I’m sorry, we’re closing.”

He startled a little, pain clouding his face, right before it was replaced by determination. He closed the door behind him and turned the key to lock us inside. He flipped the door plaque from “*It’s time for coffee*” to “*More pastries tomorrow*” and strode my way.

“That’s good, that way we won’t get interrupted.”

My traitor heart skipped a beat at his approach. I wasn't ready to stand up for myself against my feelings for him. Noticing my guarded expression, he slowed his pace, not fully stopping, only giving me time to get used to his presence.

He stood in front of me, on the other side of the counter. "You look so beautiful." He took in a deep breath. "How are you feeling?"

"Still pregnant." He only nodded. "What are you doing here?"

He took a step closer, and I felt grateful for the counter separating us. There was nothing I wanted more than to feel his arms around me. That was precisely why I needed the obstacle.

"I need to talk to you. Explain." He ran his fingers through his hair in anxiety. "Most of all, I want to apologize."

I wanted to say he was too late to throw apologies at me and I didn't need his excuses. Yet there was a part of me that yearned to understand what happened. A tender corner in my heart needed to know if he walked away from what we had because I wasn't enough for him. I knew I should comprehend his actions as a result of his own issues, not me. But for my peace of mind, I needed to know.

"You have two minutes."

To my surprise, he complied instead of arguing for more time. He nodded with resolve, widening his stance, then sucked in a steady breath and began.

"I'm sorry for the hateful things I said. I'm sorry my first instinct to our news was to be a spiteful coward instead of

supportive. I'm sorry for running out on you and not holding you in my arms, assuring you everything would be okay. I'm sorry I got drunk instead of staying with you, thinking about names and cribs."

I placed my hands on the counter for balance and took a shaky breath. But he wasn't done. He closed our distance and cupped my face, intertwining his fingers in my hair and running his thumb on my cheek.

"I'm sorry I was so scared I'd end up hurting you in the future that I hurt you now and made everything worse. I'm sorry I let my past dictate my actions. I'm sorry I made you feel unwanted when you're everything I crave." He jerked his wrist to check his watch. "And before my two minutes are over, I'm most sorry for lying to you. Even if it was by implication or omission. You deserve my truth and my respect, and I gave you pain and deceit."

That was the moment I should have sent him away. But all I could do was whisper, "Why did you?"

His face contorted in shame, and he hung his head down before facing me. "I was taught to believe I'm not a good person. From a very young age, I learned nothing but violence and hatred. I was scared to subject you and our baby to that kind of toxic environment. I still am. I wanna make things right. I wanna clear everything up and be nothing but honest with you. This is my truth: I screwed up, I made a series of mistakes, and I'm afraid I'm gonna screw things up again, and I'm sure I will. But I can assure you right now, whatever mistakes I make won't be because I don't want you

or our kid. They'll most likely happen, because I have no idea what to do, but never for not wanting you."

There was so much vulnerability in his voice. But how could I believe him so quickly? "You hurt me so much."

"I know."

"You made so little of what we had, and then you... you betrayed me. You cheated on me with *her*." I felt as broken as my voice.

He closed his eyes in mortification, then snapped them open in sorrow. "I'm so sorry for everything I've put you through, and for lying to you about it. But I *never* slept with Mia. Since you and I started seeing each other, there's no one else for me."

I scoffed. "She was there. I saw your state, and you said—"

"No, I didn't. You jumped to that conclusion, and I... let you believe that was the truth. It isn't." He exhaled heavily. "I have so many wrongs to fix. That's just one of them. I know this isn't what you wanna hear, but I promised to be honest. I understand you see Mia as a threat, but she's not. She's one of the most important people in my life, just like you are, but for different reasons. She was there because, as so many times before, I needed her help. She's the kind of person who will drop everything to lend a hand.

"I'm aware I made her look like someone you should keep your distance from, but I'd hate for you to lose a friendship like that for some stupid shit I pulled."

Was he seriously defending her to me? “Are you in love with her?”

“Never have been, never will be.” His answer was sure and decisive.

“I found her at your place wearing your clothes,” I cried out.

“Nothing happened.”

“So, I’m gonna take a shot and say she wanted to.”

“She most definitely didn’t.” At my unladylike snort, he pulled his phone from his pocket. “My words might be worthless to you right now. That’s solely my fault. This might help.” He hefted himself onto a stool and opened his trail of massages with her. He slid his thumb on the screen, scrolling their conversation until he found what he wanted. “Read this, and on. Please.”

Warily, I took his phone from his hand and started reading. I wondered if he could listen to my beating heart, because it sounded to me like a fast-hitting gong.

***Ben:** Can u get to AIO? I might neef a drivrr home.*

***Mia:** are you there for the trivia?? I hadn’t pegged u for a trivia guy. You live and learn.*

***Mia:** wait why u writing drunk? Is everything ok?*

***Mia:** Hank, Danny, and Jimmy just texted. Don’t leave, I’m coming.*

A few hours later, a new stream of messages.

Ben: *no need to pick me up. I'm already home.*

Mia: *are u freaking kidding me with this? Who do u think brought your sorry ass home?*

And then started the voice messages.

Mia: *I can not believe you threw up on me. How much did you freaking drink? Disgusting. Disgusting!*

Mia: *I'm gonna pick your favorite shirt to wear. Then I'm going home and dressing Hugo in it.*

Mia: *Your washing machine is a joke, by the way.*

Mia: *I'm so pissed at you right now. Not to mention puked. I can't believe the stunt you pulled today.*

Mia: *I'm bringing Hugo when you're not home, and I'm letting him hump aaalll your pillows. Then I'll have him lick your silverware. And shed on your bed and couch.*

Mia: *I hope you hit your littlest toe on the table.*

Mia: *I'm sorry, the last one was uncalled for.*

Mia: *Look, I know you must be scared. You're about to become a father, and that's huge. But you're not alone. You guys have the whole family to help you with this. Besides, it's about time we have another kid around.*

A few hours later, if I wasn't mistaken, right after I left his place that fateful morning:

***Mia:** you're such a jerk.*

***Mia:** I hope you know what you're doing because it seems to me you're actively ruining something good.*

***Mia:** YOU TOOK MY CAR???*

Later that day:

***Ben:** Thank you. For everything.*

***Ben:** and I'm sorry.*

***Mia:** this is what family is for. Nothing to be sorry. About me, anyway. You have some good groveling to do about Isabella. Have u started yet?*

***Ben:** no. I don't know how. And I wanna give her some time.*

***Mia:** just don't give too much time. Don't let him rule your life anymore.*

Him?

***Mia:** just go for her. For them. Man, you're becoming a father *surprised cradling face emoji* *heart emoji**

***Ben:** That's scary af.*

Mia: I think it's supposed to be.

Mia: BTW, Gabe let it slip to mom and dad.

Ben: how did he know?

Mia: we all talk *shrugging lady emoji*

Ben: to a 3yo?

Mia: we hide nothing. He must've heard us... or Zee and Haley *evil smiling emoji*

Ben: lol the worst kept secret.

Ben: how did they take it?

Mia: Mom teared up and dad laughed. I think they're getting tired of waiting around for more kids. Zach kind of claimed Gabe, so he's off the hook for now, but mom was starting to nag me. This pregnancy couldn't have come at a better time.

Ben: you're welcome ☹️

Mia: they wanna meet her.

Ben: I need to fix everything first.

Mia: Hurry. They don't know she's from the coffee shop yet, but once they do, I won't be able to keep them away for long. And by "them" I mean "mom".

Ben: I will. Promise.

Ben: on a side note, have u talked to Aaron? We need to strategize about dealing with that guy lurking around town.

I skimmed their work talk until their latest messages. Not only wasn't I interested in it at the moment, I also didn't wanna learn things I wasn't supposed to. I knew they dealt with confidential stuff, and as crazy as it sounded, I didn't want to go over his trust.

I reached the latest texts.

Mia: have u started the groveling?

Ben: I'll start today.

*Mia: good luck *fingers crossed emoji**

Ben: Thx. I'm gonna need it.

I wasn't sure how to feel. Reading them talk brought a new light to the kind of relationship they had. Since the first time I saw her, months ago at that posh place, I placed her in a threatening box. Since then, I'd been feeding my insecurity and blaming her for pretty much everything that wasn't working yet between me and Benjamin. It was hard to dismantle what I conjured in my head in just one sitting. I handed his phone back, not looking him in the eyes yet.

“You have no reason to trust me.” He broke our silence. “Again, that's solely my fault. Although I'll do whatever it takes to prove to you I'm here to stay. I just...I ask you to be patient with me. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I wanna be here. I wanna be a part of our baby's life. If you see it in your heart to forgive me, I wanna be a part of yours, too. If you think you can forget the stupid shit I did, I want nothing

more than for us to get back together. But I'll prove my worth first. To you and to me."

"I'm gonna schedule my first appointment with a gyno," I blurted. I could never imagine a man would beam so brightly at the mention of a lady-parts-doctor.

"Tell me when, and I'll pick you up. We'll go together." I smiled shyly, having a hard time controlling my relief for not doing it alone. "I don't wanna overstay my welcome." He sighed almost in pain, and I was close to asking him to stay the night. Maybe forever. "Please, let me know when you have your appointment. All of them. And whatever you need, just call me. Or text me. You can come to my place, or the company as well." He seemed reluctant to go, and I was warring with myself to let him. With a resolute nod, he leaned over the counter and placed a sweet kiss on the corner of my lips. Before he leaned away, he whispered, with our mouths almost touching, "I'm here to stay."

He strode to the door to leave. Right before he walked out, he turned to me. "Lock the door behind me, Forest. This place holds my precious gems."

Despite my better efforts, I might have swooned a little.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IZZIE

I was still reeling from the latest events. After being heartbroken by what I saw—or what I thought I'd seen—in Benjamin's apartment, I believed everything was over between us even before it'd started.

Then his apologies came, and even though he sounded so despondent and sincere, even though I wanted so hard to believe there was a chance for us, I was scared.

I didn't have just me to worry about. I had a baby to protect from everything, even if it was heartbreak from his father. Not that I believed Benjamin would ever intentionally hurt our baby.

Quite the opposite. For the next couple of weeks, he showered us with attention. Every day, more than once, he texted to check on me. Every time he was in town, he'd stop by Beans to see how I was doing besides the messages. He sent me apps for pregnancy, links to articles about what we should know about babies. When I complained about my morning sickness, he brought me crackers and some lollipops he learned from Haley that might help.

It was hard to keep up my defenses when he was so keen on destroying them.

Rounding my arms around my belly, I felt a battle blooming within me. My mind was telling me to be cautious, but Benjamin had a pull on my heart, and the stupid thing was urging me to take this leap of faith and go for it.

I craved his presence, I longed for his strong arms, and I couldn't remember one single time when I felt so whole than when I was with him.

But we had a lot of ground to cover and a lot of issues to overcome. Was it worth it?

I looked around my bakery. My dream come true. I'd poured so much of my energy into it, my little piece of heaven. That place was built on my hard work, sleepless nights, an abundance of tears, stubbornness, and faith.

There was that word again.

I had so much to lose, yet I took a leap of *faith* in my business, I took a chance, and I could look around with pride and joy. I had many opportunities to give up. I faced many moments when I thought that place would be impossible, but I had more reasons to make it real.

I had so much belief in a business. It felt only fair that I invested just as much belief in a man who not only was my baby's father, he was also making me feel wanted and protected. When he wasn't trying to push me away.

I knew there was a story he wasn't ready to share. I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything about him, because despite his mistakes, what I already knew about him made my heart swell with want and need.

As the sun descended, a mixture of purple and orange rays seeped into my shop through the glass windows. That myriad of colors was as hypnotizing as the man consuming my thoughts and heart. Both the colors and my man were captivating, bringing me wonder, and—for reasons I couldn't pinpoint—fulfillment.

I was so entranced by the sun setting, I didn't realize the figure that approached me.

“Hey,” she said timidly.

“Mia? What are you doing here?” I didn't mean to snap, but I was caught off guard and might have sounded a little less than polite.

She gave me a bashful smile. “I was working on a case a couple of towns over when I thought, ‘If I come back, pass right by the Company, turn left, take the main street, and follow all the way up to the beginning, I'll be right in her neighborhood’...so here I am.” She shrugged. “I hope I'm not intruding or anything.”

“Uhm, no...it's okay. I'm sorry, I just didn't expect you.”

“I figured that. Can we talk?” She peered around for a quiet place.

I couldn't keep the wariness from my voice. “Sure...do you want something to eat, some coffee?”

She smiled more brightly. “I'd never say no to that.” She gave me her order of hot chocolate and croissant.

“There's a vacant table in the corner.” I pointed in the direction of it. “I'll be right there.”

“Thank you.” Maybe because of my talk with Benjamin, or because she was more open that day, or even because I was trying not to be so suspicious, I thought she looked happy at the prospect of talking to me.

Or she could be just happy she was about to eat.

As I prepared her order, I watched her walking through the place, intently enough to notice that, even though she seemed calm, her shoulders were tense. When she reached the vacant booth right in the corner, she turned and slid onto the seat against the wall, giving her a clear view of the whole bakery, door, and streets through the tall windows.

She perused the whole space as if calm and slightly curious, and I would’ve missed her cautious and calculating eyes if I wasn’t paying such hard attention. At that moment, I felt sorry for her. It couldn’t be easy to be alert all the time. It must be draining always having to be waiting for the worst, looking for evil, and fighting danger when the rest of us lived our lives as carefree as we could.

That’s when I realized she looked tired and wondered if her job was the reason, or something else. Like me and Benjamin.

I continued to watch her for a while more. With dark, tight jeans, a pair of sneakers, and a T-shirt that said “*Don’t misalign my fucking chakra,*” paired with her glasses, brown hair in a ponytail, and big brown eyes, she was the definition of the girl next door. But her sharp gaze showed she had more edge than she let on.

As I approached the table, she peeked up at me and once again gave me a small smile. I wanted to be suspicious,

but for the first time I noticed she might not be a threat.

I put her food and beverage on the table with my own cup of hot chocolate—damn, I missed caffeine—and thought of something to say to break my awkwardness.

“You said you were working. How did it go?” Lame, I knew, but I wasn’t sure how to proceed. It wasn’t like we were friends and knew a lot about each other.

She briefly looked down, and her eyes turned worried before she schooled her features. “It could’ve been better. It also could’ve been worse, so I’m counting this as a win.” She tried to infuse cheeriness into her tone.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Nah, it’s okay.” She dismissed me lightly, waving her right hand while her left arm was braced on the table. “It’s not a funny or cute story, it wouldn’t bring joy to the table. Thank you for asking, though.”

Sipping her beverage, she sighed. “I needed this. I’m starving.” She pointed to her food. “Do you mind if I eat while we talk?”

“Not at all.” She proceeded to shred her croissant instead of biting it. “But what are we talking about? I’m not sure what to expect.”

Her munching slowed as she processed my question. Carefully, she answered, “Us. Benny.” Shrugging one shoulder. “I think our talk is long overdue.”

“Benjamin talked to me about what happened the other day,” I blurted. She looked intently at me, not showing her emotions. “I’m thinking about giving him another chance.” I

didn't know why I admitted that. Maybe I needed to say it out loud to test the words. It could also be that I wasn't completely sure she wasn't a threat and wanted to stake my claim.

But when she smiled proudly and her shoulders lost a little of their rigidity, I felt good about my decision. Oddly enough, I felt like I had a new ally. Or an old one and I was just too jealous before to recognize it.

"I'm so sorry for—" she started saying at the same time I asked, "Do you like him?"

"What?"

"Do you like him? Do you...not like me?" I hated how high schooly I sounded.

"Why are you asking me that?" She sounded confused.

"Because I've always felt some kind of reservation from you. That day when I went to Benjamin's place and saw you, it felt like you didn't want me there."

"I *didn't* want you there," she said bluntly.

"Oh..." That was embarrassing.

"No, sorry, it's not like that." She looked frustrated as she took off her glasses and rubbed her thumb and index fingers over her closed eyes. "I'm sorry, I might not be exactly gifted at choosing words."

"Why didn't you want me there?" Unless she was about to admit her undying love for him, I couldn't see any other reason.

Sighing, she looked down, her food forgotten for a while. Her fingers were fidgeting as she seemed to ponder her

words. When she lifted her head and stared into my eyes, she seemed cautious yet purposeful.

“I’ll try to dissect this as best as I can without breaking Benny’s trust.” She started. “You asked me if I like him, if I don’t like you, and why I didn’t want you at Benny’s place the other day.” She took in a deep breath. “You’re different.

“I’ve known Benny for most of my life, since we were way too young for all the things we’ve lived. I never, and I mean *never*, saw him react the way he did since he met you.” She became pensive again. “He was always wild and fun to hang out with; that attracted women. They all wanted this side of him, the adventurous side. That was okay, because that’s all he was willing to give them anyway.

“But then you came along. And something shifted within him. I felt the pull you had on him. He was different with you, because you’re different for him.”

“So you were jealous.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I was worried. Because I knew you had the power to break him, just like you had the power to appreciate the wonderful man he is. The deeper one that goes beyond his savage demeanor. I didn’t know which one you’d be: the one to break him, or the one to love him. I was wary.”

That wasn’t what I was expecting. She wasn’t finished.

“As the days went by, I noticed how happy you made him. He was softer somehow. He wasn’t carrying the weight of the world anymore. I saw how good you were for him. That’s when I felt a different kind of fear.” She took another sip from

her cup, but I doubted she tasted anything. She was lost in thought, and I didn't want to disrupt her line of thinking. If I wanted to understand more about Benjamin, she was my better source.

“Benny's upbringing wasn't the easiest one,” she resumed carefully. “It's not my story to tell, but I'll say trusting and loving someone isn't easy for him. I knew when he realized how strong his feelings were, he'd try to sabotage what you guys had. He's one hell of a partner when you need someone to fight for you. But he's a work in progress about acknowledging he deserves to be loved.”

I had so many questions, I didn't even know where to start. Before I could come up with one, Mia continued.

“When I saw you two together, I wasn't wary because I didn't want you to be with him. I was cautious because I...I was...” Sighing in shame, her shoulders dropped, and her face scrunched in a grimace. “I was afraid he'd do something stupid. I feel terrible about it, because it seems like I was waiting for him to screw up.”

We stayed silent for a while, my then cold chocolate long forgotten. Mia looked nervous about the conversation, and I started to see her in a new light. We still had a lot to talk about, but that reprieve was necessary for both of us.

I noticed she started bouncing one of her legs and picking at her food again, shredding her croissant more to have something to do than eat it.

“The night before that...day, Benny started freaking out. I'm not sure what happened with you two, but he wasn't in his right mind. He told me about the pregnancy, so I put two

and two together. It wasn't hard to realize he'd said something stupid to you. He ended up having a little too much to drink and couldn't come home alone." She still wouldn't look at me. "So I picked him up. I just couldn't leave him by himself. I didn't think he'd be sick at the time, but I knew he wasn't okay. He was scared, and I knew...I knew he'd try to push you away somehow. Although I hadn't imagined he'd use me for that. Jerk." After she mumbled the last part, she startled and faced me. "I mean, Team Benny." She cheered poorly with her hands in the air, making me giggle.

We remained in silence after that, and she stared at her pastry, while I stared at her. After a while, she lifted her eyes to look into mine, urging me to believe in her. "That's why I didn't want you there."

"Why didn't you dispute him when he implied you slept together?"

She considered my question for a moment. "For a couple of reasons." She shifted in her seat, and I could see her mind working to find better words. "I could've denied it all at that moment. But aside from my surprise that he was playing that card, I didn't wanna start a new side argument. I had no idea how he'd react, and I'd rather talk to him about it without you around first. It felt like betraying his trust and breaking our loyalty. We...*talked* about what happened that same morning, but it wasn't exactly beautiful. I didn't want the worry of mincing words and having you as a spectator for what we had to deal with.

"Besides, that's the kind of truth you should hear from him, not from me. If I'd told you at that moment, you wouldn't

have believed me. I would've thrown Benny under the bus and betrayed his loyalty for nothing. And even if you'd believed me, it wouldn't be quite a victory."

"How come?"

"You should believe we had nothing together because *he* said so. Because you trust *his* words. Not because a third party came to you." It weirdly made sense. "Benny did that a lot with Zee and me over the years. Trying to push us away, I mean. Especially when we were kids." Her lips stretched into a nostalgic smile. "I think after realizing we wouldn't go anywhere, he just stopped trying to get rid of us."

"You guys seem to be very close," I observed.

"We are." She nodded. "We've been through a lot together over the years. We all know no matter what any of us do, we'll stick together. We know our highest qualities and our biggest flaws. We made a lot of mistakes together, and we also fixed shit. Our bond is as solid as it can get. I knew I could overlook the stunt he was pulling, but I wasn't sure you'd be willing to.

"So when you showed up, I wasn't happy. Because I didn't want you to see it. That Benny wasn't the real one. That was the scared and scarred jerk who acted before thinking. He wasn't the funny, caring, loyal man he truly is."

"So you were trying to protect me?"

"I was also trying to protect him," she explained. "From himself and potential heartbreak. I know he made a mistake, and I'm not making light of it. I just don't want him

to be punished for reacting to something that's been tormenting him since he was a kid."

"How could our relationship be tormenting him since then?"

"Loving someone is a torment to him. Letting himself be loved is a challenge, maybe the biggest one he's ever faced."

"So you think he loves me?" I asked, trying to hide my hope.

"I think that's an admission he should be the one to make...but I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe it." She grinned conspiratorially, as if telling me a huge secret. In a way, she was.

I smiled back. For whatever reason, I couldn't not smile at her. But my insecurities were still running high.

"Sometimes I'm afraid this is just a lost battle I'm stubborn enough to keep fighting."

"How come?" She resumed eating.

"He's still not comfortable enough to confide in me. But I see how he is around you, and I feel like I'm never gonna have what you guys have."

"That's because you won't." She stated like it was obvious.

"Ouch. That's a kick in the gut," I muttered.

"No, it's not...damn it, that's why I'm not allowed to talk to people without a buffer." She rubbed her forehead and

took a deep breath. “You’ll never gonna have what we have, and you don’t want to.”

“How can you say that? Of course I want—”

“First of all, we don’t have sex,” she interrupted me, raising her scarred eyebrow and challenging me to rebut that. How could I? She grinned knowingly. “That’s what I thought. More than that. We have a different kind of history. We’ve been together since we were kids. We lived and saw things that were bound to bond us. There are things he hasn’t told you *yet*,” she emphasized, “that he didn’t need to tell me, because I was there living it with him. But that in no way diminishes what you have growing between you two.

“You’ll never have what Benny and I have, you’ll never have what Benny and Zee have.” She shrugged. “Just like we’ll never have what you and Benny have. I’m not talking only about having sex and the baby. You’ll always have a part of him, a connection with him, I’m not privy to. I’m fine with it, because I don’t want that part. That piece of him belongs to you and only to you. Believe me, it does. Because no matter how hard he tried to fight it, he never gave it to anyone else.”

Fighting tears, I looked outside, only then realizing the sky was getting darker. Mia let me absorb her words, and I started to see they made a lot of sense. That made me hopeful. More than that, they made me respect the small spitfire sitting before me.

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked quietly.

Just as quietly, she answered, “Because for the first time, Benny’s found someone with a heart big enough to love

him for who he is, fears and all. You're good for him, and I do believe he's good for you."

As she resumed eating for the umpteenth time, I remembered our previous interactions, this time without jealousy clouding my judgment. What I thought was jealousy in her eyes when she saw us together, I recognized as worry. What I imagined as a threat to my relationship with Benjamin was protection.

Despite my not-so-warm welcome to her, she was the one welcoming me and trying to ease my fears and insecurities, because she loved the man I was *in love* with. I felt ashamed to admit while I was trying to come up with ways to make him choose between the two of us, she was trying to help us find our way to each other.

After a while of somewhat comfortable silence, she pushed her empty plate to place both of her forearms on the table. "I know it's a lot to take in. I know you're rightfully careful because you have your baby to consider. I'm not trying to convince you to give him another chance." Shaking her head, she corrected, "No, that's a big, fat lie. I want you two together. I'm not saying you should take him back easily, though." Pushing herself to the edge of her chair, closer to the table, she stressed, "But I know he can do right by you. You want someone like him in your corner. Once he lets you in and you become a part of his carefully chosen family, you'll want for nothing.

"He's the best friend, brother, protector—and I'm sure partner and father—you could ever ask for. I know I have no right to ask you this, but please, don't let that day get in the

way of him being a part of your and your baby's lives," she stressed. "He deserves to have this family you're creating, just like you deserve to have someone like him to love you. No matter what he says, he's more than capable and deserving of love."

I considered what she was saying. "He's very lucky to have you."

She gave me a small smile. "Thank you." With a devious grin, she pointed a finger at me. "Make sure to tell Benny that. Maybe we should write this down." She looked for a paper, making me giggle. When she came up empty, she fished a napkin from the holder and pen from her backpack. She actually wrote my words down and slid the paper to me so I could sign on the designated spot. "I might hold this until I need it."

After our light banter, she adopted a somber posture. "I do believe your baby has the right to grow up with his father, just like Benny has the right to be with him. But if you decide that's not what you want, I'll respect that. If that's the case, and if you don't mind...I'd like to be in your baby's life either way. As much as you allow."

Talk about a surprise.

"I know it might be weird, but he—or she—is Benny's baby. That means family to me. I already care about this baby more than you know. We all do. If you find it in your heart to let us in—and again, I include Benny—you'll be set for life. I don't mean just financially. But like a family. We can be weird, but we love and protect our own. Whether you're ready to acknowledge it or not, you're a part of us now."

My heart was full and warm. I blamed it on my crazy hormones. Seeing the vulnerability in Mia's eyes, I wanted to hug her and promise we could all be a big family.

She was more supportive in those few minutes than my mother ever was in my whole life. The same mother I'd yet to admit to I was pregnant.

"I think I took up enough of your time." Mia raised from her seat. "Do you still have some donuts left? I wanna surprise Gabe."

"Sure." I motioned with my hand for her to follow me. "Can you believe I haven't formally met him yet? I just saw him from afar."

"You're kidding?"

"No. I also haven't met your brother."

"You're gonna love them. It's impossible not to. Gabe is just the most wonderful boy, and Zee is, well, he's his own brand of special." There was so much love and admiration for them in her voice.

I selected what I imagined a kid would love. "I'm not a mother yet, but I'm not sure a toddler should eat that much sugar, especially at night."

"Probably not, but that's Haley's problem," she answered mischievously.

"Oh, really? So that's how it's gonna be when my baby comes?"

"No!" she answered way too quickly, her voice dripping with guilt. "I'm not stuffing him up with sugar and

sending him back to you after teaching him new ways to drive you and Benny crazy, if that's what you're implying."

I chuckled. "I see. I might need to set some ground rules before letting you babysit. I hope Benjamin knows how to put you in line."

Understanding the promise I wasn't saying out loud, she gave me a big, grateful smile as she grabbed the box of goodies from my hand. "For your Little Bean, I'm willing to play by the book...most of the time."

My throat constricted at her term of endearment. "I'll hold you to it. And the box is on the house." She started arguing with me, but after our conversation, I felt like I owed her, and I said so.

"You don't owe me anything. On the contrary. I feel like I'm gaining a lot since you came into Benny's life. Our lives." And there was me fighting tears again.

Lifting the box, she said, "Thank you, Izzie...for everything." She put a bunch of bills into the tip jar—more than the cost of the donuts—and turned to leave.

As she headed for the door, I realized for the first time since I found out I was pregnant—for the first time ever—I felt I wasn't alone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEN

As the weeks went by, I had the sense I knew even less about babies and pregnancies than I'd expected. I was beyond grateful for having the guys to help me navigate such scary waters.

After the debacle between me and Mia, I came back to my office to find *What to Expect When You're Expecting* on my desk, a gift from Zach. I also started taking advice from Haley and Danny about kids, babies, vaccines, clothes. There was so much to learn.

Despite not having kids of their own, Zach and Mia were fundamental in helping Haley raise Gabe—hell, Mia even brought Haley to live with her right after we met them—so I also asked them a lot of questions when I didn't wanna tire Danny and Hay with my stupidity.

But even facing the scariest experience of my life, I felt a thrill I hadn't known. Nothing could beat the sound of my baby's heartbeat the first time I heard it. It was as overwhelming as it was marvelous. I felt both powerful and humbled when I held Isabella's hand and we heard the life we created.

As she cried freely listening to it, I limited myself to keeping my tears at bay while I kissed her forehead. That

moment made everything feel more real. I couldn't wait to listen to my baby again.

It didn't hurt I started spending more time with my Forest. There was nothing as much as a kiss yet; she was playing it safe. But I was accepting what I could get. I was craving her like crazy, but I was giving her the time to trust me. If I was being honest, I also needed that time to trust myself.

Until we could take a step further, I came up with ways to spend more time with her, while also learning about kids and stuff.

"I think I'll try that *quilates* thing with Izzie," I blurted.

Mia seemed confused as she lifted her head from the file she was reading, pushing her glasses up her nose with her knuckle while curled up on one end of the couch of my office. She even stopped munching on the peanuts she'd brought.

"Try what?" That came from Danny, who was sharing the couch with Mia, the same confused expression on his face.

"*Quilates*. That stretching thing. I've been listening to this podcast, and the lady said it was good for pregnant people."

"Right." She nodded in understanding. "I heard the classes are golden," Mia snorted, making Danny chuckle and leaving me muddled.

He suppressed his laugh. "I think you mean *Pilates*. *Quilates* is Portuguese and Spanish for 'carats.' As in gold."

"You little shit." I threw an eraser at a laughing Mia, who dodged just in time. "Why are you like this?"

“Because you make it easy for me. All joking aside, how is she doing?”

I smiled on instinct. “She’s doing great. According to our last appointment, the baby was healthy, and so was Isabella. I think we’ll be feeling him soon. Or her. I’m crazy to know which; I wanna give a proper name to the baby. We might learn this week.”

“It’s an experience you’ll never forget.” Danny’s voice carried wonder and love. “Although, when you first carry your baby in your arms...” He shook his head in awe. “There’s no comparison. You see that little life that depends so much on you, and you realize you’re willing to do whatever it takes, *whatever it takes*, for that little person.” He was still in that contemplation when his mood shifted. “Then you remember who her mother is, and you feel like dying.”

Mia squeezed his meaty arm. “How are you? About that, I mean?”

“We’re leaving her,” he announced. “I can’t stand to stay in the same room as Andrea. I thought being stuck with her would be good for Sofia, but it’s proving to be dangerous. I can’t keep Fee in a toxic environment like that, especially with her connection with that cartel guy.”

“I didn’t see him again.”

“Still. I can’t go on like this. I’m taking Fee with me. I don’t know if Andrea will put up a fight, but my baby goes where I go.” He was resolute, and I admired him even more.

“If you need anything—some time off from work, witnesses for your divorce and custody process—whatever

you need, you can count on us.” I nodded along with Mia’s words.

“I need to work to keep my head from exploding. But I won’t say no to you guys helping me with the process. I’m not sure she’ll let go that easily. Not that she cares about Sofia or me. She only cares about herself. That’s why she can make my life a living hell.” His eyes were so despondent, it tugged something inside me. “So now I’m looking for a new place to live. And I might need a nanny.”

“I’ll talk to Mom. She might know someone.” Mia smiled and squeezed his arm.

“I’m sorry, guys. I didn’t wanna put a damper on our afternoon.”

“Come on, man. We’re more than friends here. I hope you know you can come to us for anything.”

Danny nodded, smiling in gratitude. “I appreciate that.” He shook his head. “Don’t let my bad experience tarnish your vision of love and family. I’d hate for my nightmare with Andrea to get in the way of your fighting for something good.”

“It won’t,” I promised.

The mood remained somber for a while; Mia and I were trying to be mindful of Danny’s situation, giving him time to deal with his emotions. He was the one to break the silence, intent on infusing some lightness.

“I hope you have some good savings, because I’m gonna tell you, I still don’t understand how something so little can cost so much.”

I groaned and rubbed my hands over my face just as Zach entered the room.

“You opened an account for her, didn’t you?” Mia waved at her brother while asking Danny. “I remember you talking about it.” Mia turned to me. “He opened a banking account for Fee. Like a trust fund. You know, because kids are expensive and all.” She nodded, urging me to say something. “It seems like a good idea to do that. You can keep feeding the account, you know, for college, unforeseen occurrences. It’s just good planning.” At my silence, Danny suppressed a grin. “I’m hinting. I’m telling you you should do the same for your baby; it’s a hint.”

She was already losing her patience at my wordless stance when Danny chuckled. “I think he got it.”

“You weren’t that subtle, you know?”

“It’s not that hard to do. I opened a trust fund for Gabe, I can help you do the same for your kid if you need.” Realizing we all got silent at his words, Zach ignored my raised brow and walked to the chair across from my desk and sat down, shifting it so he could look at all of us. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen Zach blush.

He fished a flier from my table and started making origami. “We have an emergency meeting in a few.” Always responsible and discreet, he changed the subject.

“What happened?” Danny asked, once again professional.

“I’m not sure yet. It has something to do with The Train.”

I was wondering when we'd hear about him again. Since Mia, Aaron, and I busted that huge shipment, it was radio silence about Santiago Cruz. From the moment we first learned about him, we knew he was someone we should keep our eyes on.

"Thank you for coming here. Gabe is running a fever, and I didn't wanna leave him and Hay alone." Mia welcomed us inside her place, a lollipop dangling from inside her mouth.

"He's not feeling better? I thought the medicine would've kicked in by now." Zach was tormented.

"It's working, but he's still tired and under the weather."

"I'll check on him."

As Zach strode to Gabe and Haley's bedroom, Danny, Mia, and I gathered in her living room. Hugo pranced toward us, his damn furry tail rubbing every surface within reach. He walked to Danny, soaking up the love he was getting.

"He didn't leave Gabe's side. Such a good boy." Mia patted his butt, then the little shit came to me. It's not that I didn't like him. But he felt more like a little brother who thrived on annoying the shit out of me by eating my food when I wasn't looking or humping my leg when I ignored him. As if challenging me, he climbed onto the sofa and sat pressed against my leg, almost on my lap, leaving a huge space open on his other side and limiting my sitting space.

Mia snorted. "Just pet him, Benny. We all know you want to."

Zach came back from the bedroom and sat on the loveseat. "He's sleeping now. I'll check on him again later before we go." His eyes were troubled.

"Kids are resilient," Danny comforted him. "They're made to last. It's maddening when they're sick, because we wanna take all the bad away with our hands. But they recover fast. He'll be his normal self again tomorrow." He slapped one of his big hands on Zach's tense shoulders and sat on the other end of the couch I was forced to share with Hugo.

Mia came from the kitchen baring snacks and drinks for us and sat on the floor, next to Hugo and Gabe's toys.

"Aaron called me, asking us to check on this guy. Santiago Cruz." She was in business mode. "They're not sure what his role is. If he works alone. If he's acting on behalf of someone. What we know so far is that someone is supplying him so he can deliver their goods. The DEA still doesn't know who, but whoever they are, they must be big, because the shipments seem to be huge. Although they can't attest for sure, as they have yet to bust them."

"Did they give you any indication?" Danny was nursing a beer, but his eyes were alert.

"No. I'm not sure if they also don't know, or if they don't wanna tell us."

"I don't think Aaron would hide that kind of information," Danny mused, only to scoff later, "but I wouldn't put it past the DEA."

"So we're basically in the dark?" I asked.

“Sort of. From what Aaron told me, and from the brief research I’ve done, Santiago Cruz has been running all over the country. Not him, exactly. His minions. They’re believed to be delivering their supplies. That’s why they called him ‘The Train.’ But no one could find anything illegal yet. We know he’s dealing, but we don’t know what, where, to whom, nor from whom.”

“In other words, we have shit?”

“Basically, yeah,” she answered. “We also have the name of his sort of partner. Bryan Keyes.”

“What’s his deal in all this?” That came from Zach, who kept looking at the hall, alert to any noise Gabe or Hay could make.

“That’s the thing. They’re not sure. They think it’s his goods being transported, if as a front or as the supplier, they don’t know. But they don’t call him ‘The Package’ for nothing.” Her brows furrowed into a V as she pondered. “From what I learned, if I had to guess, I’d say he’s not so big into drugs as he is into human trafficking.”

As we cursed under our breaths, Danny asked carefully, “Do you think it has something to do with your last case?”

“I think so. I believe that’s one of the reasons Aaron came to us.”

Right before she was expelled from the DEA, Mia and Danny were working on a huge task force intent on arresting some big names of bigger cartels. After she busted Pablo Salazar, the agency got greedy. The problem was, during their

investigation, she came across a huge web of human trafficking happening alongside the drug dealings. Against the agency's orders, she acted on it. They had an in that could help put a huge dent in their operation, if not dismantle it entirely. Right before she could conclude her strategy, the DEA learned about her intentions and stopped her.

The victims were moved away and never found again. Despite Aaron's best efforts, even with her being The Bryant Prodigy, she was fired from the agency under the guise of indiscipline. Which never sat well with me.

Besides Danny, we didn't know the details of those troubling times. I wasn't even sure he knew everything. All we learned was that, after that debacle, Mia came up with the idea of opening our own company.

"So the cartels are expanding? They're dealing beyond drugs now?" If that was the case, it was worse than I thought. The most common scenario was that the recipients of those shipments dealt with only one venture. They'd explore vertically—heroin, weed, cocaine, meth—but not horizontally—drugs, people, guns, exotic animals.

Dealing with more than one kind of venture like that demanded a solid structure. An organization and reach small dealers didn't have. Aside from being expensive beyond their rank, it brought a lot of unwanted attention to them. Not only that, their market and consumers were potentially different. The guy who bought a dose of coke for his own consumption hardly was the man who could afford to buy a person. Buy a person. How was that even a sentence?

If this organization was dealing alone or joining forces to deal with two of the biggest forms of trafficking (drugs and people) to the point of the DEA asking for help, it could only mean they were bigger than their pay grade. And ours.

“That’s what I’m thinking. There’s someone,” she picked up a little soldier from Gabe’s toys scattered around her and placed it on the coffee table to visualize her line of thought, “who’s supplying both of that merchandise. Whoever they are, they’re big enough to do so. The DEA was sure Santiago Cruz is the middle man, the one taking the stuff from the supplier to their several destinations.

“We can’t fool ourselves, though. He’s more than a mule. I bet he’s the one closing the deals with local recipients. But why? Why aren’t the original dealers doing it?” She was mumbling more to herself than any of us. “And at what moment did Bryan Keyes,” she lifted a rocket toy, staring at it as if it had all the answers, “join Cruz in the dealing? Are they really working together?”

“We need to establish if they’re dealing with everything together or if each of them is focusing on one side of the business.” Zach dissected our next steps. “If it’s the latter, they’re probably trying to get a bigger reach of buyers.”

“We also need to go back to the origin and find out who’s supplying them, and why, separately,” I input.

“Dividing the ventures can be the double of work in supplying, security, manpower for the shipments,” Danny considered.

“But it also takes the heat off the main supplier. If you break the operation into several steps, it gets harder to

connect them with its source,” Mia mused. “But what you said is true. Whoever is behind this must have lots of money and a lot of wiggles. Another thing we need to consider is: are they working on their own as the middlemen? Or are they now members of some cartel or whatever?”

As we considered what we brainstormed, we heard a light noise from Gabe’s room that made Zach jump off his seat and head to the kids’—and his momma’s—bedroom. “I’m gonna check on them.”

“I’m sure you will,” Mia muttered.

“What?”

“I’m updating my will,” she enunciated, waving her phone. “You know, in case I...die.” She made a face and focused on her phone for good measure. Her locked phone.

“Smooth.” Danny laughed.

As Zach checked on them, Mia ordered food for us. We were officially on board on The Train’s case.

“Who is the guy?” Mia closed her file and shifted to gaze at her brother.

“It’s Aaron. He said he tried calling your phone but you didn’t answer, so he called the Company.”

She pulled her phone from beneath the sea of files on the couch. “Huh, would you look at that? He did try calling.”

“Why do you have that thing if you won’t answer it?” It wasn’t the first time they had that conversation. I doubted it’d be the last.

“I answer it. Sometimes. I just didn’t hear it ringing.”

“Of course you didn’t,” he exclaimed. “It’s always on vibration mode, I bet you don’t even know your ringing tone.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t deny him. “What’s the big deal? Aaron called the Company, we didn’t lose anything important.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” he stressed. “What if we have to alert you about something dangerous, something that might put you at risk? I need to know I can reach you and be sure you’re safe.”

She pursed her lips and scrunched her nose. “I hate when you’re sweet.”

I rubbed my hand over my face to conceal my chuckle—I needed to shave. “Is he coming to us, or will he call again?”

He placed the origami on my desk. “He said he was near Holy Water, so he’s coming.” We heard the scrunching of gravel outside the building. “That must be his car.”

We stood in a symphony of groans. I stretched my hands above my head to realign my spine, while Danny shifted his torso from side to side. Mia leaned against the head of the couch with her eyes closed, waiting for her dizziness to go away. What a sorry bunch. Zach was the only one who seemed presentable.

He went to the lobby to greet Aaron—Haley was enjoying her day off—then we headed to the conference room.

I hoped it wouldn’t take long. I planned on taking advantage of being in town to surprise Izzie. Although it

probably couldn't be called a surprise if I did that repeatedly.

We sat down as Aaron glared at Mia. "You need to answer your phone. What if I need to alert you—"

"Yeah, yeah." She rolled her eyes. "The other daddy already scolded me."

He frowned at her as Danny and I snorted, but he let it go. "First of all, the agency is very pleased with the work you've done so far."

Mia raised her scarred brow. "I highly doubt you're here to compliment us."

He shifted in his seat. "No, I'm not." He took in a deep breath, and his exhaustion was palpable. "Santiago Cruz was murdered last night."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IZZIE

The last few weeks were as wonderful as they were confusing. I didn't wanna bring down my defenses so quickly. But it was getting hard to maintain my wariness when Benjamin's effort was so evident.

He was invested in my pregnancy and well-being. That first few days after our coming-to-Jesus moment proved not to be a fluke. Every time he did something sweet, another brick on my wall fell.

For whatever reason, I felt him being reticent about decorating a nursery at my place. To be honest, I was, too. The loft was a good place for me, and I could raise a baby there for a few months. As my kid grew, it'd be harder to have a child upstairs.

I was trying not to freak out about that, reminding myself I still had time until that moment came. I was just enjoying being pregnant and swooning whenever Ben did something sweet—he'd send texts asking me if I was fine or asking about the baby; he forwarded articles about pregnancies; he bought toys and utilities for infants.

I hadn't told him yet, but I also loved how involved his family was. They bought gifts for the baby, they guided Ben on what was important to know about kids (then he'd pass it along to me). It was endearing when he admitted he was

getting help from the guys. Mia and Haley seemed to have made it their mission to stop by a few times a week to check on me. Zach, the sexy and quiet hunk I'd finally met, showed up a few times when Ben was out of town. Even Danny came by with his daughter—a wonderful little girl who was the spitting image of her loving daddy. The man was built like a bear but sweet like a puppy.

I'd yet to meet Mia and Zach's parents and Gabe. If I was being honest, I was a little more than scared to meet them. Gabe and Sofia were the little mascots of the group, and I hoped my kid would be friends with them. The guys' parents seemed to be more than "my friends' mom and dad." Benjamin spoke very highly of them. It was clear they were important to him.

I still didn't know how they became so close, but I knew their relationship started when he was just a kid.

I was at Beans, rubbing my belly fondly. It wasn't my rush hour, so there weren't a lot of customers, but they'd start coming soon. I heard the wind chimes ringing over the door and saw Haley walking in.

Her curly blonde hair was loose, framing her delicate face. She smiled shyly at me, always trying to avoid calling attention to herself. I rounded the corner and gave her a hug in greeting. That wasn't something I used to do. I'd never had that many friends. I found myself feeling more and more comfortable around Haley and Mia. They were an interesting duo. I didn't know if it was because Haley inspired that in people or because of her past (which I wasn't privy to yet), but Mia was especially protective of her. Whenever they were

together, I noticed she was mindful to make Haley feel comfortable and protected, like a big sister.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I thought you’d be at work.”

“I have the day off, so I decided to see you. Can I?” She pointed to my belly.

“Have at it.” She rubbed it gently. I was starting to show, and as scared as that left me, I couldn’t wait to see it round with my baby. Speaking of babies. “Where is Gabe? I’m starting to think you guys made him up.” I went back behind the counter and started preparing her tea as usual.

She giggled. “I left him with Rosie and Jackson, Zach’s parents.” She hopped her small frame onto one of the counter benches. “We spent the morning together playing with Hugo, then he asked to go see *Gamma* and *Pawpaw*.” She shook her head but smiled. “They spoil him rotten, and I don’t have the heart to tell them to rein it in.”

“He calls them *Gamma* and *Pawpaw*? That’s so sweet.”

“For what it’s worth, they’re his grandparents. They’ll be for your baby as well. Believe me, they don’t know how to say ‘no’ to a child, but they’re the best grandparents a kid and their momma could ask for.” She thanked me for the tea and cupcake I placed in front of her. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. I started to feel a little burning, but nothing worrying. And some kind of...vibrations?”

She beamed, and I noticed nostalgia in her eyes. “That must be the baby moving. I missed that.”

“You miss being pregnant?”

“No. I meant I missed that *while* being pregnant with Gabe.” She noticed my confused expression. “My pregnancy was a difficult one. I barely had time to wrap my head around the fact that I was about to become a mother. It was all a blur to me well into the first few months of Gabe’s life. So I missed those moments. The first movements. When he started kicking. Setting up the nursery.” Despite her longing smile, her eyes were sad.

“Why did you miss it?” I asked quietly.

“Because I was busy running away.” She looked down in shame. “Gabe’s biological father proved to be a terrible person. He was the Devil personified.” She couldn’t hide her contempt. “When I realized that, it was already too late.” She cupped her teacup with both her hands and started scratching it with the nails of her thumbs. I didn’t even think she realized she was doing that. “It was hell on Earth for so long, yet I couldn’t escape. When I found out I was pregnant, I knew I couldn’t let my baby grow up with that man.” She hastily cleaned the single tear she couldn’t hold as she still refused to look at me. “So I ran.

“I ran for so long, trying to survive with the little money I managed to steal from *him*,” she scoffed. “I had no idea where to go, I had no one to count on. I was hiding in a women’s shelter when I gave birth. As soon as I could, I ran again. I needed to put as much distance as I could between him and us.” My heart was breaking at her story, but I didn’t interrupt. “A few months after he was born, I ended up here. My measly savings were almost gone, and more than ever, I needed money. I could go a few days with little to no food, I

knew that from when I was a kid. But I couldn't let Gabe experience that.

“That’s when I found the Company and interviewed for a position.” She seemed lost in her memories. “I was laughingly underqualified for the job. Gabe cried during most of the interview. I was sure they’d kick me out.”

“What happened?” My voice was quiet as I kept my tears at bay.

A few more tears rolled down her face, but she was smiling then. “I was about to lose it in that room with Zach, Mia, and Ben. I had no business trying to get a job at a place like that. Gabe was fussy and colicky the whole time. Mia took me to the kitchen so I could take care of Gabe and calm him down. We talked for a while until he fell asleep in her arms. It was the first time anyone other than me ever picked him up. I hadn’t understood she was sort of changing the scenery so I could calm down. When I thought she’d send us away, Mia offered me the position. A few days later, she invited us to live with her. We’ve been living together ever since.”

She sniffed lightly. “They all embraced us. Ben and Mia became *Unkown Bee* and *Auntie Mia*. Rosie and Jackson are *Gamma* and *Pawpaw*. He even has two best friends: *Feefee*, Danny’s little daughter, and Hugo, his first friend ever. And Zach...” Her eyes shone, and her smile grew. “They’re inseparable. They’re always coming up with things to do together. Whenever he wants chaos, he goes to Mia and Ben. But for cuddly time or if he needs to feel protected, he seeks Zach. Gabe adores him.”

Just Gabe? From the little she told me, I guessed diving into a relationship with another man must be hard.

“He’s just so patient. He cares so much about Gabe, and it’s easy to feel safe around him.” When she noticed my smile, Haley’s cheeks turned pink, and she seemed to realize she’d let on too much, so I didn’t call her on it.

Before she could feel awkward, my phone rang. I dreaded it’d be my mother, who still didn’t know she was about to become a grandmother. It was April telling me she was sick and couldn’t come to work. She apologized profusely for not calling sooner, but she’d hoped she’d feel better until she started her shift. I felt for her because she didn’t sound well, and I knew she wouldn’t skip unless she needed to, but the Universe in all its toxic irony chose that moment to start the rush hour.

As customer after customer started to get in, I began to freak out, thinking I still had baking to do. Noticing my distress, Haley went behind the counter to help me manage the orders. She was a huge relief, but I still didn’t know what to do about the next batches.

My schedule was tight. I had to follow the timeline I’d set so I could bake in advance, but not so much that the goodies weren’t fresh. Either I’d spend even more hours baking—which was already proving to be hard, as I was getting tired and sleepy—or I wouldn’t be able to bake as much, and that would affect my sales.

I was trying hard not to freak out, telling myself I shouldn’t panic over things out of my control. Right on that day, a bus full of tourists from some church came in, keeping

us busier than I'd ever been. Between the orders Haley was placing, she fished her phone from her pocket and typed something fast.

"I'm calling reinforcements."

I wasn't sure what she meant by that. A few minutes later, Benjamin, Mia, and Zach walked in.

"Where do you need us?" Mia asked.

I was speechless for a moment, not quite understanding what was happening.

"She needs help baking," Haley explained.

Benjamin came behind the counter and kissed me on the temple. "We've got this, Forest." He strode to the kitchen, for what, I didn't know.

"Mia and I can handle the tables. If Hay needs some help at the cashier, we can pitch in. You're okay with that, Izzie?" I just nodded at Zach like a lunatic and went with the flow. "Good. You might wanna give Ben some pointers." Then they headed behind the counter to sanitize their hands and started delivering the food.

I hadn't understood what he meant. When I noticed they'd be able to handle the customers, I went back to find Benjamin wearing an apron and picking ingredients from the fridge. His eyes met mine, and he gave me his signature cocky grin.

"So what's the call, Chef? What should I bake?"

"Do you know how to bake?" My incredulity was evident.

“I sure do. I’ve learned from the best. Rosie is a great baker, and she taught me everything I know. I guess she knew I needed that skill to impress my woman someday.” He winked.

I wanted to jump on him and rip off his clothes—and I couldn’t blame the hormones for that. I wanted to kiss him with gratitude. I wanted to bake with him like a longtime couple and teach our kid to bake as well.

“I’ve just bought a special apron for this occasion at Mrs. Robinson’s.” He was tying the knot behind his back.

“‘Kiss The Cook!’ I loved it.”

“*Kiss the cook?*” He looked down in surprise. “Damn it, I read it wrong. It was supposed to say ‘*Kiss the coc—*’”

“I got the picture.” I laughed.

Getting a hold of my emotions, I jumped into action, guiding him through what I wanted. He followed my recipes, and we baked for quite some time. I couldn’t say if seeing him kneading the dough was what brought my lust to never before seen levels, or if it was because he was doing it to help me, while his family was doing the same out front.

Now and then, I’d check outside to see if I was needed, but they were dealing with everything like a well-oiled machine. With so many hands on deck, I completed my self-imposed tasks way sooner than expected.

While Benjamin cleaned himself, I met the guys at the counter to find the rush hour had subsided. There were a few customers here and there, already eating. Haley and Zach were in the corner of the counter, talking and smiling intimately, and

Mia was leaning on it, chatting with one of my favorite regulars, Mr. Cross.

“How come are you over there? Are you allowed, young lady?” There was no bite to his words, and his lips were pulling up behind his stern facade.

“I have an in,” she whispered in conspiracy. “My brother is sleeping with the owner, so I have a free pass.”

His frown was immediate. “You’re related to the no-good-man that knocked the poor woman up?”

Her eyes brightened up. “Yes! You know him?”

“He’s not a no-good-man,” I defended.

Whispering dramatically, Mia contradicted me to the old man just as Benjamin came out. “*He is.*”

Mr. Cross turned his stern eyes at my man. “You’re the trouble?”

Benjamin shifted his gaze between the three of us, trying to comprehend what was happening. “I see you’re already making friends,” he stated drily to Mia, who just beamed and gently petted Mr. Cross’s hand.

“This is my new good friend: Mr. Cross.”

Flattered by the true little trouble, he petted her hand back. “There are no formalities between friends. You can call me John.” He turned his sharp eyes to my man. “But you call me Mr. Cross.”

“I’m still not sure what I did wrong.”

“You impregnated her, and I don’t see any rings on her finger.” Mia just nodded along solemnly. “Why isn’t there a

ring on her finger?”

“Yes, Benny. Why isn’t there?”

“Are you still needed here, Mia?”

Ignoring his annoyance—which I was sure wasn’t real—she gave us a big smile. “I’m hanging out with my friend John here, and I have nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Before he could answer, Mr. Cross scolded him again. “Don’t even think about saying any crude words to this young lady.” He’d officially claimed a favorite person. “And what about your baby and his momma? What are your plans?”

I didn’t have time to intervene before he answered. “I’m planning on taking care of them.” He was firm yet respectful. “That’s what I did today, and what I’ll keep doing. They’re my woman and my kid, so beside them is the only place I can imagine being.”

My heart swooned, and Mia grinned proudly. Mr. Cross wasn’t as touched—or horny—as me, though, and he still seemed reluctant until Mia stepped in.

“What about we give him a trial period? He seems legit.”

“*Seems?* We’ve known each other for years—”

“Shush, we’re talking,” she scolded Benjamin.

“Fine,” the old man conceded. “I’ll trust your word, young lady.”

She grinned cockily at Benjamin and mouthed, “You’re welcome.”

We stayed talking until the last customers began to leave. I was more listening than talking, too caught up with emotions. When the last person left and I shifted the sign at the door to show I was closed, I almost burst into tears in gratitude. Those four people dropped everything to help me, including me in their little group.

They started cleaning the place, sweeping the floor, washing dishes, organizing the tables, all while they talked and joked.

“Danny asked me to tell you he’s sorry for not being here. After we finished our meeting, he had to run to Sofia. His neighbor called, telling him Andrea had left her with the lady and hadn’t come back yet, the woman was worried,” Zach explained, fuming with each word.

After the swearing wore off, I strode to them until I reached Benjamin, who pulled me into his arms as if we did that every time. Maybe we should be doing so.

“I can’t even begin to thank you guys for what you did today.” I choked. “I wouldn’t be able to do half of what we did, and I’m so grateful for that.”

“This is what family is for.” At Zach’s words, I had an even harder time holding back my tears.

“Speaking of...” Mia turned to Benjamin. “Can we count on you for Sunday? They miss you.”

“You can. It’s been long overdue.”

They all started to get ready to leave, except for my man. I hurried to pack some pastries for them to take, which

they did after some insistence on my part. We shared hugs, and I walked them out.

Zach looked at us over his shoulder. “Don’t forget to lock the door.”

I locked the front door and ran to Benjamin, losing the battle against my tears. He held me tight, kissed my head, and let me have my outburst.

“Today could’ve gone wrong, Ben, so wrong.”

“But it didn’t.”

I sobbed—damn hormones. “Because of you and your family.”

“You can call them your family too.”

I peeked up at him, cataloging his features. His soft lips, his week’s-worth beard, his hazel eyes with his pupils already dilating. I could feel him hardening against my stomach, but he didn’t make a move, respecting my pace. I shared his lust and also felt something blossoming inside my chest. Something I wasn’t ready to name, but it felt an awful lot like love.

Moved by so many emotions, I crashed our lips together, pouring all my feelings onto them. He kissed me back, jumping right into it and letting his tongue seek mine in a private dance. I thrust my fingers into his unruly hair, pulling him even closer to me as he grabbed me by the butt and placed me on the counter.

I needed him something crazy, and I showed him that when I started grinding my core against his crotch, feeling heady and proud when he let out a groan. We broke our kiss,

gasping for air, and he ran his thumbs over my cheek when he cupped my face.

“I want nothing more than to feel you against me again. But we need to do this right this time.” I was in such a daze, I couldn’t grasp what he was saying. “Every Sunday, we all have dinner at the Bryants’ house. I’ve missed quite a few. Since I...since I screwed things up with you.” He diverted his eyes in shame. “It’s time to go. To have dinner with them.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond; I just knew I wanted to be with him again. “You can come here after dinner if you want, I’ll wait—”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I want you to go with me.” He clasped our hands. “I want you to meet them. I wanna introduce you to my whole family.”

His ever-flirting eyes were vulnerable as he waited for my answer. Even though I was nervous about the prospect of meeting the Bryant seniors, there was no way to respond other than, “I’d love to.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

IZZIE

As we neared the Bryants' house, the butterflies sharing space with my Little Bean went crazy. This was nothing if not me meeting my boyfriend's parents. The neighborhood was quiet; if I wasn't so anxious, I would've noticed how nice it was. Not luxurious, but pleasant.

We arrived at what I assumed was their place, and I saw Mia and Zach's cars were there. I looked at the house, and despite my nervousness, I felt warm.

The lawn was well-kept, with a few flower beds—nothing ostentatious, just to give the place some color—and several kinds of stones sided a path that led to a couple of steps at the entrance. As I looked to my left, I saw there was another path that led to the yard, where they already were, based on the noise coming from the back.

As I took it all in, I didn't realize Ben had already gotten out of the car and was opening my door and stretching his hand to help me get out. I placed my hand on his, and he squeezed mine in reassurance.

We weren't entering any nefarious situation. But that was huge for me. When I looked at him and noticed his purposeful eyes, I realized it was huge for him as well.

We walked the path sided by the stones and climbed the few steps. My Little Bean was particularly bouncy. If it was because of my nerves or his excitement, I wasn't sure.

When we approached the front door, Ben turned to me. "Are you ready?"

"Are you?"

He chuckled. "To be honest, I shouldn't be nervous. Neither should you. Rosalinda and Jackson are wonderful people. If they took me in when I was an annoying teenager, you have nothing to worry about."

"Then why are you nervous?"

He thought for a moment and looked me straight in the eye. "Because this is important to me."

Before I could say anything, he knocked on the door, grabbed his keys from inside his pocket, and opened the door. Looking at my puzzled face, he just shrugged with a small smile.

"We just let them know we're here, but we all have the keys."

We stepped into the hall still holding hands, and I saw a living room to our left and stairs to our right. The place was cozy and lived-in. It wasn't pristine by any means. A blanket was haphazardly thrown over the couch. A few toys were scattered.

But what grabbed my attention was the many pictures exposed everywhere. The mantel over the fireplace, several others were nailed to the wall. Over the piano, surprise, more photos. Up along the stairs, again pictures.

Zach and Mia playing as kids. Their parents' wedding. A shadowy picture of the guys' grandparents. As time passed for them, they included some familiar faces, like Ben, Haley, and Gabe. Even Danny and Sofia made appearances. I didn't see anyone who could be Andrea, though.

I didn't even realize I'd let go of Ben's hand to see them all. When I reached the mantel and its back wall, I saw many other moments the Bryants had eternalized. With my heart warm, I grabbed one of the photos.

The whole Bryant clan was portrayed, plus Ben, Haley, and Gabe. They were all wearing matching Christmas-themed pajamas, even Hugo. One could think it'd be tacky, but it seemed fun and something a loving family would do. The picture was hilarious, and even being static, it showed glimpses of their personalities.

Mia was sitting cross-legged on the floor, laughing so hard that there were tears in her eyes. Gabe was round-eyed on her lap, pointing at Ben, who was sitting on the floor next to them, with a disgusting look on his face, as he tried to get away from Hugo, who was humping his arm. Behind them stood Haley with her hands over her mouth, with an adorably shocked yet entertained face, while Zach had his arm *casually* around her waist and was looking at her with barely contained admiration. Mr. Bryant was trying to keep his composure while looking at the camera, the ends of his lips turned up and his nostrils flared in an attempt not to laugh, and Mrs. Bryant was looking at whoever was taking the picture, telling them to wait.

A few of the pictures were *civilized*, poised. But most of them were like one in my hand. Free and finding them having fun, without even realizing they were being photographed. Or an attempt to be a professional and organized moment turned into a chaotic and exciting memory.

Wherever you looked, you saw love and care. It was beautiful. Also overwhelming. I didn't realize I was quietly crying until Ben ran his thumbs under my eyes.

“You were so lucky.”

Looking at the wall as if for the first time, he agreed. “I guess I was. I am. I didn't have an easy beginning, but it led me to this very house. My life forever changed.” He looked back at me. “Now you can be lucky, too.”

I couldn't say anything. I just hugged him tightly, hoping he could understand how thankful I was.

When we heard steps, I tried to compose myself as Mr. Bryant reached the living room. He was around his sixties, not as tall as Ben, but his presence was easily noticed. He had a little belly pooch, like you'd expect a dad to have, but that didn't diminish his attractiveness. Maybe it was his gentle eyes and easy smile, or his gray hair that still seemed thick, but he was a handsome older man. If I had to imagine Zach in the future, I was looking right at it. Sans the belly.

“Look who's finally back home.” He went straight to Ben, gave him a tight hug, slapped his back twice, and closed his eyes. Ben hugged him just as tightly, showing he missed that man and his house more than he let on.

“Hey, Jackson. It’s been a while.” Ben was close to bashful as they separated. “How have you been?”

“I’m good, I’m good, I can’t complain.” He looked at me, a full grin on his face. “So this is the lady who decided to make an honest man out of you.”

Smiling proudly, Ben spread his arm in a silent invitation. “She sure is. Jackson, this is Isabella. My girlfriend and baby momma.”

Mr. Bryant took my raised hand in greeting and pulled me into a warm hug. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. How are you feeling? How is the baby? Is this young man treating you right?”

A little overwhelmed, and a lot touched, all I could do was nod. Then I remembered my manners. “Thank you for having me here, Mr. Bryant. You have such a lovely home.”

“There’s no ‘Mr. Bryant’ here, just call me ‘Jackson.’ And you’re more than welcome in this place.” Turning to Ben again, he put his hand on my man’s neck fatherly. “Now the whole family is here.”

My heart was overflowing.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a little...distant lately,” Ben started.

“I understand your reasons. I just need to add, Rosie might not be as understanding. We missed you here, and it’s not the same when your chair is vacant. Even if you can’t come for whatever reason, just check in every once in a while. We worry about you.”

Looking like an embarrassed kid, Ben nodded. “I promise I’ll do better.”

“I have no doubts about that. I’m sorry to bring this up. You’ll see soon enough. We just want our kids to be happy and as around as they can be.” He sighed deeply. “I hate being so harsh on you.”

Was that him scolding Ben? Where were the derisive comments and mean remarks I grew up hearing?

“Oh, my God! Are they here? I can’t believe they’re home.” Mrs. Bryant came hurriedly from the back of the house and right into Ben with a crushing hug. “You’re here,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

She stepped back, still holding his shoulder. A small and fit woman, her full dark hair in a bun, she’d seem inoffensive if her big, dark eyes weren’t so alert and sharp. She was classically beautiful, and I could see a lot of her in Mia.

She looked intently at Ben, letting her eyes roam over his face, making sure everything was fine with him until she frowned. “You’re too thin. You’re supposed to take better care of yourself. Is Mia delivering the food I send you? Why hasn’t she told me? I need to talk to her.”

“I think you should. And what food? I know nothing about that.”

“Stop trying to get her into trouble,” I whispered to him, making Mrs. Bryant look at me with soft eyes.

“And you’re Isabella. You can’t begin to imagine how pleased I am to finally meet you.” I was surprised again when

yet another person pulled me into a hug. I couldn't even remember when was the last time my mother hugged me. And it was never like that.

She stepped back, looking at my stomach again. "May I?" When I nodded in agreement, she carefully touched my growing belly, caressing it softly. Her eyes began to shine with tears when she gazed up at me and Ben. Not worried about concealing her love, she touched Ben's cheek. "I'm so proud of you."

"You'll have a new grandson to spoil," Ben offered.

"Grandson? It's a boy?" Jackson choked.

We nodded, both of us smiling like loons. We'd give the same big smile if the baby wasn't a boy. "We just learned yesterday," Ben explained.

Mrs. Bryant looked at me, full of wonder and gratitude, then hugged me again. "Thank you."

Shaking her head to control her emotions, she was energetic again, motioning with her hand for us to follow her. "Come, come, the kids are in the yard, and dinner is almost ready."

As we approached the kitchen, we could hear voices coming from the back, Hugo's lazy bark, and Gabe laughing and panting, indicating he was running. Mia emerged from the kitchen, biting on a carrot with her back teeth and smiling at us, her "*I understand, I just don't care*" shirt on full display.

She made a show of gazing at her *watchless* left wrist, tapping it with her index finger and looking at us with mock disapproval. I couldn't not think about Bugs Bunny. With all

her sassiness and a carrot dangling from the side of her mouth, she might as well be the flippant rabbit.

“Look, darling, they’re here. Have you congratulated them already? It was about time we had another baby in this family. I feel for Gabe, you know?” She told us quietly. “He’s so full of life, but without a little cousin or brother or sister, it breaks my heart how lonely and sad he is.” Mrs. Bryant was on a roll and seemingly oblivious to Mia trying to hold back her grin, a single brown raised.

Right on cue, Gabe squealed in delight at whatever he was doing.

“I think it’s courageous how he pushes through his pain,” Mia stated dryly.

Ignoring her, Mrs. Bryant went on. “He needs a companion, someone to play with him, to be his best friend. Of course, he might have friends in school, but it’s different when your best friend is family. Look at Zach, Ben, and Mia, they were inseparable. It’s heartbreaking seeing Gabe so despondent.”

Yet again, his laugh was heard, loud, and infectious, the kind of child’s laugh that warms your heart and makes you smile without noticing.

With faux reverence, Mia pointed to the back. “You hear that? That’s the sound of bravery.”

“I have half a mind to leave you without dessert,” Mrs. Bryant turned to Mia, who wasn’t at all affected by her mother’s attempt at scolding.

She just laughed and hugged her sideways, kissing her mother's cheek. "It's sweet that you think you can follow through with that threat."

"Come on, Mia. Give your mother a break," Jackson intervened. "It's clear that little guy is in pain." A small smile trembled out of his mouth.

Mia snorted, then schooled her features. "I'll be more mindful about that. Thank you for keeping me grounded, Dad. I should probably rescue him from Zach's vicious claws." At this point, Mrs. Bryant was rolling her eyes, and I learned where Mia got that from.

"While you're at it, take him away from that fury beast. That thing is dangerous."

Mia turned to Ben, fire in her eyes. "Don't call Hugo that."

"That little shit is a predator."

"He's the goodest boy, yet you always had a problem with him."

"He steals my food, he picks up my clothes and shoes, he—"

"He's trying to call your attention, he's seeking your love, and all you do is ignore and badmouth him. If you don't want him to grab your things, don't leave them scattered around."

"Are you blaming me?"

As they went on with their...argument, Jackson whispered to me smiling, "Every Sunday."

When we finally reached the wraparound porch in the back—Ben and Mia were still arguing, somehow their discussion went to the time he took her books without asking—we saw the origin of Gabe’s laughter.

He was running around dressed in Brazilian soccer gear, playing with Zach and Hugo, who was trying to grab the ball. Haley filmed everything from the side, love pouring from her happy eyes.

Zach faked going for the ball, the thing too big for the kid, who ran excitedly and kicked it with all his might, not making that much difference. Even being on the opposite team, Zach encouraged Gabe to kick it again and again, until he could kick it into the goal.

Zach celebrated loudly as Gabe ran to him. “You see that? I kick so hard *nike* you tell me. You see me?”

“I sure did, kiddo. You kicked so hard, right into the goal, I could never stand a chance.” Zach hugged him tightly before throwing him in the air, grabbing him again and kissing his puffy cheek. His golden, wavy hair was plastered to his sweaty forehead, and his whole face was red with excitement and exertion.

Haley was clapping and rooting for her son while she walked toward them. “Way to go, Gabe!” Without letting go of Zach’s neck, Gabe leaned down to give his momma a wet kiss on her cheek, forcing Zach and Haley’s heads closer. Zach had no other choice but to close his eyes and smell her hair deeply.

When I glanced around, everyone was looking at that intimate scene but didn’t intrude. All I heard was Mia’s mumbled words. “My God, they’re taking their sweet time.”

Haley realized they weren't alone, and her cheeks turned scarlet when she saw us.

"That was one mighty kick, Gabe." Jackson was the first one to talk, letting Haley and Zach off the hook. The kid smiled proudly and shimmied down Zach's strong arms, running to Jackson.

"I'm so *stwong*, Pawpaw." Midway, Gabe looked at us and proceeded to run as fast as his little legs would let him. "*Unkow* Bee!"

Ben squatted in front of the kid, a big grin on his face. "Hey, Gabe-boy. Whoa, what a strong hug! What have you been eating?" Gabe giggled and hugged him tighter, showing all his little boy strength. "I missed you, Buddy."

"I missed you, too," Gabe took a step back and put his pudgy little hands on Ben's face, a serious look in his eyes, "*Unkow* Ben?"

"Yes, buddy?"

"I'm *hungwy*."

Leave it to a toddler to keep things real. As we chuckled around him, Mrs. Bryant played with his hair.

"Oh sweetheart, dinner will be ready in a minute."

As she went back to the kitchen, Zach and Haley followed her, offering whatever help she needed. Gabe turned to me, a curious look on his adorable face and big, round, brown eyes.

"I don't know you."

Before we could find a response, he turned to Jackson. “Can I have a cookie?”

Jackson glanced at him with sharp eyes. “What’s Pawpaw’s rule?”

Gabe looked down, crestfallen, and I wanted to give him whatever he asked for. “No cookies before *wunch*?”

“No. That’s your mother and Gamma’s rule. Pawpaw’s rule is, ‘If you get a cookie for you, you get a cookie for me.’”

Jackson winked Gabe’s sadness away, and the boy smiled brightly running toward the kitchen.

I looked around. It was an overload of sensations. Just like back in the living room, there were toys scattered on the porch and in the back yard. The smell from the kitchen was delicious and got me hungry. Their voices, even muffled, were comforting.

Zach announced dinner was ready, and we headed to the kitchen.

We sat at a big wooden table to eat, with unstoppable chat. Ben sat to my left, and Gabe was perched on his high chair between my man and Mia, on whose lap Hugo leaned his head. Mrs. Bryant sat at the head of the table, while Jackson, Zach, and Haley were facing us, still leaving room for more people to join.

Dinner was pleasant, and even being the new face around, they didn’t make me feel self-conscious. They included me in their conversation without forcing me and let me be when I wanted to absorb everything.

“Gabe, you need to eat all the vegetables.”

“But I don’t *nike* beets, Momma.”

“I know, honey, but you need it to be strong like Zach,” she draped her small hand on Zach’s arm, lingering a little too long, until she realized what she was doing, turning—ironically—beet red. “And Uncle Ben, of course. I’m gonna grab more lemonade for us.”

When she left to grab the juice, Ben and Mia acted fast. He picked one of the beets from Gabe’s plate, while Mia ate the other, gagging the whole time. She ran her index finger through the beets’ juices and rubbed them on Gabe’s lips.

“We need to pay attention to every detail. Remember that, Gabe-boy. Now you look like a boy who ate his vegetables.” She smiled proudly at her work.

Zach and his parents were either too engrossed in their hushed conversation or didn’t mind the deceit the three hellions were creating.

“Why don’t you just admit that you’re together, son?”

“Please, Dad, just leave it. She needs time, and I’ll give her as long as she needs.”

Haley came back, putting a stop to their talk. She looked suspiciously at her son’s artfully dirty face, then peered at Ben and Mia, who kept eating without looking up at her.

When conversation around the room resumed, Gabe leaned forward and stared at me again. “I don’t know you.”

Everyone stopped talking, waiting for a response.

“This is Isabella, my girlfriend.” Ben grinned at the boy and held my hand under the table.

“What is a *gewfwiend*?”

A devilish grin formed on Mia’s face. “Oh, this is gonna be fun.”

“A girlfriend is someone you care for. Someone you wanna protect and make happy.”

Gabe processed Ben’s words, frowning his little eyebrows in concentration. “What you do with a *gewfwiend*?”

“Yes, Benny, what do you do with a girlfriend?” Mia was seated sideways, one arm over the table and the other over the back of her chair, not caring one bit at Ben’s glare.

“Uhm, we go out...”

“For *ice cweam*?”

“Something like that. We play, we have fun, we tell each other what we like and don’t like.”

Gabe leaned his head to the side. “You kiss?”

“Yes, we do sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how you show people you love them.” My eyes snapped at him, who looked at me sheepishly while squeezing my hand.

After nodding a few times, considering what he learned, Gabe turned to Zach. “That’s why you always kiss my mommy, Zachy? Because you *nove* her?”

Haley gasped. Mia choked on her juice, coughing repeatedly. Ben and Jackson burst out laughing. Mrs. Bryant and I didn’t know what to do. Zach had a wonderful smile

spread on his face. He couldn't contain it, even if he wanted to. By the pride in his eyes, he didn't.

Mia coughed between broken chuckles, with tears streaming down her face. "What a wonderful day to be alive."

"That's right, kiddo. I love your mommy, and I love you, that's why I kiss you both...differently, of course." He mumbled the last words.

Despite being unequivocally shy about the whole situation, Haley's eyes shined as she tried to suppress her beam.

"I *nove* you, too," he added brightly. Being done with the conversation, he asked Mrs. Bryant, "Can I have cookies, Gamma?"

"Did you eat your whole dinner?"

"No."

"Then just two."

After dinner and cleaning the kitchen (with all hands on deck), we all went outside to relax. As Jackson, Haley, and Zach sat on the L-shaped sofa chatting, Mia sat on the floor, her back against the column near the stairs. She had one arm around Gabe's waist, who was tucked between her crossed legs, munching on his cookies. As she brushed her cheek absentmindedly on his hair with her eyes closed, she petted Hugo, who was napping beside them.

Ben and I shared the cushioned porch swing, and I've never felt lighter. I leaned my head on his shoulder, and he put his arm around me, tucking me in closer while pushing the floor with his feet to swing us lightly.

Gabe gave a little jump on Mia's lap, startling Hugo, who looked up with droopy eyes and ruffled fur, just to stretch and go back to sleep.

"Tinkow, I need to tinkow."

Zach stood up. "Come on, kiddo." He grabbed the little boy's hand. "Just like we practiced."

As they headed to the bathroom, Mrs. Bryant was coming out with a beautifully wrapped package. My eyes rounded and I took in a breath when she handed it to me before sitting by my side.

"When I found out Ben was bringing another child into this family, loving the baby was immediate. Just like Gabe, your boy is another blessing for us. You can always find a family within us. Your baby will be a forever member of this group, just like you. So this is for you. Well, for your baby."

My eyes were already watery, making it hard to see. I opened the package, careful not to tear the wrapping paper, and gasped when I lifted the lid. I pulled out the gorgeous pearly-colored knitted blanket and hugged it to my chest. Without thinking, I pulled her into a tight hug, choking on my *thank you*.

"Did you knit it yourself?"

"I sure did." She seemed proud about it, as she should; it was wonderful. "Only my best for my grandkids."

In one single afternoon, I felt more comfortable and accepted than I'd ever felt in my whole life. When I looked at Ben, his gratitude was clear, and so was his love.

“Thank you so much, Rosie. I could never pay you all.”

She clasped his hand between her own. “That’s the beauty of families. You don’t have to pay for anything, because we didn’t provide a service. We provided love.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bryant.”

“Pff, who is Mrs. Bryant? For you, I’m Rosalinda or Rosie. Whatever you feel more comfortable saying.”

“Then thank you, Rosie.”

At that moment, something shifted in Ben. I couldn’t understand what it was, I just noticed he was more emotional and less wordy. Not knowing what to do, I looked around and saw everyone smiling at us. Zach, who was by the door having come back from the bathroom with Gabe in his arms, draped a hand on Ben’s shoulder, squeezing it in reassurance.

He nodded at his best friend and then stood up slowly, offering me his hand. “Come on, I wanna show you my room.”

Seeming to understand what I couldn’t, Rosie lightened the mood, yet still being a mother hen. “No funny business upstairs, young man.”

Mia snorted gazing at my belly. “It’s a little late for that preach, don’t you think?”

“You so deserve that little shit.” Despite his words, Ben had a smile tugging at his lips.

“Do not call Hugo that, Benny!” she called at our back, while Ben chuckled, taking me upstairs.

When we reached the top, he paused for a second, taking in a deep breath. He looked around, seemingly reviving his past.

He squeezed my hand and tugged me gently along the corridor. He pointed to the first door to our left. “This was Mia’s bedroom. That bigger one at the end of the hall is Jackson and Rosie’s suite. The last door to the right is the upstairs bathroom, which Zach and I shared with Mia. And this,” he stopped at the first door to our right, diagonally to Mia’s bedroom, “was Zach’s and my bedroom. My haven.”

We strode into the big room, and it was like a trip to the past. It was clear the Bryants didn’t change a thing, leaving it like the boys still lived there. Soccer posters hung from the wall. I didn’t know the players, but from their uniforms, I knew they were mostly Brazilians. There were also pictures without the portraits hanging from the wall, funny pictures mostly of the boys and Mia. Outdated school books lined the shelf in the corner; the shelf was also filled with other memorabilia—snow globes, hot wheels, medals, trophies, and Zach’s origami. Two desks were pressed against each other, both against the wall opposite the beds.

Two brown armchairs sided the desks. They looked worn, but that made them seem even more comfortable.

I perused the space. “Is that a Brazilian little flag over the desk?”

“Yes. Rosie is from Brazil. She moved here when she was a teenager. A few years later, she met Jackson, and they got married. The guys have a lot of Brazilian habits.”

“Like what?”

“I’m sure you noticed they’re huggers. Even Jackson was converted. Rosie also eats pizza using cutlery. They like to eat avocado with squeezed lemon and sugar.”

I laughed. “I could never imagine eating avocado like that.”

“I’m glad they taught me that. It’s quite delicious.”

I sat down on one of the twin beds, near the closet, looking around.

“Nice choice. This was my bed.” He sat next to me, leaning his back against the headboard, then took my hand. “This is where my life was saved. My new beginning.”

I leaned back as well, shifting to him, my bent knees over his stretched legs, and I was faced with so much vulnerability.

“If you don’t wanna talk about it, it’s okay.” With my free hand, I caressed his cheek, his stubble scratching it, while he put his hand over my belly protectively. “Don’t feel like you should open up if you’re not ready.”

“I think it’s time. I want you to know about me. My past. This place. This is a big part of my life, and so are you. I need to stop running. I wanna love you as you deserve.” He took in a deep breath. “Falling for you was the craziest thing I’ve ever done, and it fixed a part of me I didn’t even realize was broken. So I want you...no, I need you to understand

where I come from. Why I am the way I am. How those people downstairs saved me. How you made my life better.”

I scooped closer to him without saying a word, letting him get a grip on his feelings.

“My mom was called Leslie. She was so pretty and loving. We struggled a lot when I was a kid, but she always baked me at least a cupcake for my birthday and made sure she had a gift for me, even if she had to go without something she needed. Sometimes a coat for the winter, sometimes medicine. Every night, she tucked me into bed, kissed me goodnight, and told me she loved me.

“The last time she did that, I was nine. Right before my father killed her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BEN

I felt her gasp more than I heard it. My story wasn't a beautiful one, but I was tired of hiding it from her. She deserved the truth, even if I lost her because of it.

"I could never prove it. How could I? I was nine years old. Michael was a deranged man who only knew how to talk through his fists, even with his wife and kid, while wasting food money gambling, drinking, or whatever. I never knew for sure what he did. The first years of my life were a mixture of love from my mom, who did everything she could to shield me from him, and utter fear for our lives whenever he was around.

"He'd leave from time to time, stay away for weeks in a row, doing God knows what. During those weeks, we could breathe. Then he'd come back, and somehow things were even worse than before. Hit, leave, come back, repeat."

I took a deep, broken breath, trying to clear my head so I could narrate the past without reliving it. It wasn't an easy job when the past involved seeing your mom walking toward death with each beating.

"I was four when I first tried to protect my mom. That was when he broke my nose. When I was five, he started using his belt. That damn belt with the big buckle," I cursed through gritted teeth. "I think he was bored by only throwing fists. He'd hit me with his fucking belt wherever he could reach.

Sometimes it was my back, sometimes it was my legs, sometimes my belly. When I was seven, he twisted my arm so hard that it broke.

“But the worst part was when my mom tried to intervene. It was frightening. I think he liked when she did that, it was a game for him. He’d beat her up in front of me and drag her to the bedroom. I’d hear her muffled cries through the locked door as I banged on it, begging him to stop.”

I could feel my shirt getting wet over my shoulder where she leaned her head. She was mostly silent, except for her soft sniffing.

“One night, he beat us up so hard. It was right before my birthday. I don’t even remember why, and that doesn’t even matter, because he didn’t need a good reason for that, he’d just unleash hell. It was so bad that she could barely walk and my back was raw from the belt. Still, she baked me a cupcake the next day for my birthday, and we drank lemonade. He wasn’t home, having gone away for one of his escapades. She put on a happy face for me, and we celebrated.” Despite my best efforts, I was trembling, dreading what was to come. “That night, she lay down on my bed beside me and kissed my cheek, but instead of saying goodnight as she used to, she told me she loved me and that she was sorry.”

I could feel my nose sting, and my throat constricted. We spent a few minutes in silence, and not even once did she urge me to go on. I fell for her even more. After getting a grip on my emotions, I resumed.

“When I woke up, she wasn’t with me. I found her on her bed and thought she was asleep. The day went by, and she didn’t move, but she was so tired and hurt, I couldn’t disturb her. So, I waited a little more. Hours later, I went to her again; I wanted to tell her she needed to eat. That’s when I noticed her shirt was a little lifted and her stomach...her stomach had a weird shade of red. Looking back, I figure what I thought was a bruise was a sign of internal bleeding. The bastard hurt her so hard, she bled inside until her body shut down. I lay down there with her, holding her still warm hand until Michael came back late that night.”

Isabella squeezed my hand so tight with one of her own, while she rounded her free arm on my waist, getting even closer, almost as if she wanted to fuse us.

“I don’t know why I didn’t call for help, why I didn’t call the police. I guess I was already jaded. How many times have I gone to school limping, walking funny because of his punches, his kicks, and his belt? Not even once did a teacher or someone from school approach me about it. Michael was smart enough not to mark my face once I started school, but damn it, they should’ve seen the signs.”

I shook my head, once again enraged for my past, for the negligence I endured, for my loss, and for my shitty excuse of a father.

“I didn’t even have the opportunity to mourn and say goodbye to my mom. Right after that, we moved around for a while. About a year later, we landed here. Surprisingly, Michael enrolled me in the local school. I think he wanted me out of the way. That’s how I met the guys. What so many

adults failed to realize, they noticed right away. We were all kids who didn't know any better, but Mia and Zach were sensitive enough to stay close.”

Despite the horrors of my past, my memories of that year when I met the two people who changed my life forever were almost fond.

“I was a scared and scarred kid who didn't trust anyone. At first, it was annoying when they'd come to me every recess. I was the new kid with pants too short and shirts too old, who didn't bring food or money to school, because most of the time I had neither. I was a sitting duck for the kids' picking. I was waiting for the moment Mia and Zach would start bullying me. But they weren't the ones to start it. They were the ones who stopped it.”

Once again, grown-ups failed to protect me. It took two kids who were seven and ten years old to realize I needed help, I needed saving. I worried about my baby. I'd never intentionally hurt him, but the world could. The world could fail him so badly, and that was a scary thought.

As I rubbed Isabella's stomach, I felt my son moving and kicking, already so full of life. That was only possible because my past led me to that incredible and patient woman. I vowed to always be around, to always be their haven. I prayed he could find his own Zach and Mia. Even if he didn't, I'd care and protect him.

I remembered my story wasn't finished and I needed to get it out.

“They weren't exactly popular, but they were those kinds of kids who could talk to anyone and be a part of any

group. They were nice to the geeks, yet the popular kids respected them. They were friendly to the ones struggling, but they never made us feel like they were doing us a favor.”

Looking back, I felt like a charity case for a while, but it was a reflection of my demons, not a response to the way they treated me. Their care and the way they meandered seamlessly from one group to another was the result of loving parents who taught them to be good people, not condescending ones. I just hoped I could be even a fraction of what Rosie and Jackson were.

“Zach and Mia were always together. Wherever you saw one, you could find the other. I thought it was so weird. They weren’t the same age, they were a boy and a girl, yet they were inseparable, and Zach didn’t seem to mind the little thing following him around. Sometimes he was the one following her. When one of them had to skip school for whatever reason, the other seemed to be lost. I guess I was jealous of their easy connection. I shouldn’t be, because they were so generous that eventually I felt welcomed to be a part of their bubble.”

“Did it take long for you to move in here?”

I was startled at her soft voice, almost like I’d forgotten she was there. Just like I felt back in that time, she was anxious for me to get out of my hell and right into my solace.

But I had to experience hell again.

“A few years. Hell, it took me some time to even let them close enough to see there was something wrong. But they knew. They mightn’t have known what it was, but they knew

there was something. What amazed me is that not only did they realize it, their parents acted on it as well in time.”

I leaned my head back on the headboard, my hand still caressing her stomach, and she nestled a little closer as my arm tightened around her. I turned my head to her, running my nose over her hair.

“Mia and Zach noticed I rarely had something to eat at school. They started sharing their lunch. They used to say they weren’t hungry, just so I could have more to eat. I’m almost positive they were taking food without their parents knowing at first. Back then, I was a little shit, full of pride and shame.” I chuckled. “Leave it to Mia to set me straight.”

As soon as the bell to recess rang, I ran out of the class to hide behind the cafeteria. I sat on the grass, feeling it prick the back of my legs. The smell of food made my stomach roar, so I started thinking of other things—the cars passing by outside of school, how relieved I was that Michael left two days prior and hadn’t come back. It was scary being alone, but it was worse when he was around.

I was lost in my fighting hunger thoughts when I heard footsteps. I didn’t need to look up to see whom they belonged to. There were only two people who would look for me. There were more before, but since the other kids weren’t picking on me anymore, it could only be Zachary and Mia.

“Hey, Benny.” I gave her a nasty look that did nothing to faze her. I said I hated when she called me that, but I never fought hard enough to make her stop, and I couldn’t understand why.

As Mia sat in front of me, Zachary sat to my right. “You ran out of class before I could reach you. We want you to come with us to our place after school. I could use your help with some homework.” That was a big lie. If anything, I was the one in need of help.

I stayed silent, especially after he grabbed a bag and pulled out homemade bread, some fruits, and juice.

Being discreet and polite, Zach tried to justify with a small smile why he was walking around with what I’d call a feast. “Mom always sends too much. Good thing you’re here to help us.”

“I’m not hungry.” Just to make me a liar, my stomach chose that moment to make a loud noise. I expected some joke, but they ignored it and resumed talking.

Mia parted a little piece of the bread with her fingers, and as she munched it, she handed me the loaf in a silent offer. I shook my head, and my stomach grumbled again. Mia ignored the noise, and Zachary started talking louder, telling me all the good reasons for me to go to their place after school.

I was so hungry, I was even a little dizzy, but still, I couldn’t make myself eat and prove to them what a loser I was. By the third roar, Mia had had enough.

“If you’re hungry, why don’t you eat, damn it?”

“Mia!” Zachary warned quietly.

“I’m sorry, Zee, I know we’re not supposed to say a bad word”—they were that kind of family?—“but he’s clearly hungry and still not eating.”

“That’s his choice, and we need to respect it.” Not even once did they raise their voices. I was waiting for the moment one of them would lose it and start throwing punches, but that moment never came, and I didn’t know how to deal with that kind of dynamic.

The insistent girl turned to me again. “Why won’t you eat? Do you like something else? We can arrange it.”

“I don’t need your pity or your help. I still have my pride.” I was such a little shit.

“Pride?” She scrunched her nose in disbelief.

“It means I don’t need you to save me.” Which was a huge lie, as my rumbling stomach proved once again.

“I know what pride means,” she huffed, right before she mumbled, “it’s a fancy word for stupid.”

Zachary sighed and put a hand on her knee to calm her. “We’re sorry if we offended you. We just wanted to hang out, and if we could do it while eating, even better. My parents are really good cooks, and we wanna share it with you, but only if you’re comfortable with it.”

“Why? We don’t even know each other.” That didn’t make any sense. Why were they so nice to me? I had nothing to offer them.

“So you should definitely come to our place. That way, we can get to know each other.”

“And be friends like we’re supposed to,” Mia added. “You’re only getting in our way. This,” she circled her little finger, indicating the three of us, “is happening. Stop fighting it.” How can a thing so little be so bossy?

“We really want you to come.” There was something calming in the way Zachary spoke. Calm wasn’t something I had very often.

Without waiting for my response, Mia stood up. “I need to get some books, but I’ll see you both after class.” As if my coming with them was settled. Before she went off, she turned to me with shame in her eyes. “I’m sorry for calling you stupid, Benny.” That damn “Benny” again. “I thought you already knew. I promise the next time you’re stupid, I’ll try not to point it out.”

Is this girl for real?

As we watched her go away, Zach spoke up again. “We’re not inviting you over pity. We want you to come. We’ll have pizza tonight, and it’s Friday, so you could stay with us for the weekend, I could talk to your father to ask—”

“He doesn’t mind,” I answered quickly. The last thing I needed was hose people meeting the Devil. “Okay, I’ll go with you.” Better get it over with fast.

Zachary gave me a big smile that confused me even more. Why did they want me around? Why were they so intent on feeding me and inviting me over?

We stayed silent for a few minutes, both of us lost in our thoughts.

“She will, you know? Point out when you’re stupid, I mean.”

“So you’re sure I’ll be again?”

“Yes. We both will. When it happens, she’ll be there to point it out.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun.” A sarcastic little shit I was.

“I’d rather have her pointing out my stupidity than not have her around. You’ll realize that soon.”

And that I did.

“One day they invited me to their place. They spent weeks trying to convince me to go, I wanted to, but I was aware I was the boy from the wrong side of the track. Eventually, I caved and came. Rosie and Jackson never called me on being too skinny or on my rotten clothes. After that, Mia and Zach started to bring even more food, always giving some excuse not to hurt my pride. ‘Mom baked too much.’ ‘It was whoever’s birthday yesterday.’ ‘Dad tried this new recipe but miscalculated, so now there’s a lot of food.’ And if feeding me wasn’t enough, they started to clothe me.

“I was shorter than Zach back then. Malnourished is more like it. They’d say he’d outgrown his clothes, but there were times when I found the labels they forgot to cut off. They never made a big fuss about it, so I wouldn’t be uncomfortable.”

I looked down at Isabella, who was smiling softly, most likely thinking my dark days were finally over. Not yet.

“That was only my first weekend in this place. It went on like this for about five or six years. Michael started to be away from the house for longer periods, which was a blessing, and I started to spend more time here. Weekends. School days. Holidays. All of our birthdays. I’d spend nights in a row, and

not even once did they complain or make me feel unwelcome. They even tried to come up with excuses to keep me around longer. I think they dreaded my going to *his* house as much as I did. We had good reason for it.”

I felt my heartbeats speed up, and my mouth got dry. My tongue and throat felt made of sand, and my breathing became heavier. I hated thinking about *that* day. At the same time, I wanted to let it out.

“They didn’t travel a lot. I don’t know if it was because of their jobs and because Rosie didn’t wanna leave her parents alone, or even because of me. Then one day they decided to go away for a long weekend. Nothing crazy, just to get out of here for a few days. They wanted me to come with them. I’d never felt more excited, it was my first family trip...”

“What happened?” Her voice bore the dread I was feeling.

“Michael happened.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BEN

School seemed to go on forever.

I looked up at the wall clock and saw I needed to hurry. I had little time to spare, so I could pick up some last-minute things to throw in my duffel bag, then head to Zach's place so we could go.

I didn't call that house my home. Zach and Mia's place was way more my home than anywhere else.

Every time I walked into it, I'd feel one of two things: relief because Michael was gone, or anxiety when I sensed he was back. In my excitement to go on a trip with the Bryants, I didn't realize my relief never came. That was just the first in a series of mistakes that could jeopardize everything.

"Going somewhere?"

I turned around in startlement, my heart galloping in my chest. Why was he back so soon?

"I asked you a question, asshole. Where do you think you're going without talking to your daddy?"

"I'm going to the Bryants'." I was proud of myself for keeping my voice steady. "And why do you care? It's not like you'll miss me while I'm gone. Go do whatever it is you do and leave me alone." I turned my back to him so I could finish packing while ignoring the man I hated the most.

That was my second mistake.

I should've anticipated the punch to the side of my head. I was bigger and stronger, no thanks to Michael, and I could take him. But that first punch threw me a little, and it took me a while to recover.

When I turned to him while trying to stay upright, he took advantage and threw another punch, this time to my stomach.

"You ungrateful son of a bitch." Punch. "After everything I gave you." Blow. "Even when you screwed my life, this is how you treat your father?" Jab. "I should've ended you when I dealt with your bitch of a mother."

Something snapped inside me. I was bent over in pain and self-preservation, so I took it to my avail. Angling my body against his stomach, I plunged, throwing him against the wall.

It was the first time I stood up with any chance of winning, and Michael realized that. I took him by surprise, fighting back as I'd never been able to before. Every resentment, every pain, and every grief that was forced upon me because of that man moved me forward.

But our struggle took too long. I should've gone away sooner and not lost myself in that snippet of twisted justice. I was supposed to be at the Bryants', and when I didn't show up on time, they should've gone without me.

They didn't. They waited for me, and Mia wasn't known for staying put. So when I heard her distant voice calling for me at the front door, I panicked.

That was my third mistake.

Before I could yell at her to go away, Michael grabbed a heavy vase over the mantel and smashed it on my head. My legs went weak, and I couldn't support myself anymore. My vision got blurry as I fell on my back, and the buzz in my ears was deafening. In the back of my mind, I knew there was something I should be doing, I needed to say something to someone, but I couldn't organize my thoughts long enough to realize what it was. Especially since Michael took that moment to kick and punch again, this time without much resistance from me.

He was straddling my chest, making it hard to breathe, and was about to hit me again.

"Get off him now!"

His weight was lifted abruptly, and I could breathe again, but wait...

No, no, no. What is she doing here?

When I looked up with only one eye open, as the other one, starting to swollen, refused to cooperate, I saw Michael bleeding on the side of the head as Mia held an iron bar.

It hurt so much to talk. "Go away. Now."

"Look at that. The little girlfriend came to your rescue. You couldn't even do it yourself, you useless piece of shit."

"Get away from him." She raised the bar as a baseball bat, and I had no doubt she'd use it again.

I tried to get up and talk, but it hurt too much. "Mia." Wheeze. "Go...away."

She readjusted the grip on the bar. "I'm not leaving without you. So just...try to get up, and let's go. They're waiting for us." She started walking slowly sideways to get to me, still facing Michael. That left her vulnerable, cornered, and with nowhere to go.

"Go away, Mia."

Michael's snide smile sent a shiver down my spine. "That's really sweet, but I think it's time we wrap this up." If I wasn't living in hell already, it all broke loose.

He lunged toward Mia, who in reflex swung the iron bar again, reaching his left knee. It delayed his attack, but he was so possessed that nothing could've stopped him.

"The girl has some fight. Let's see how good she gets when I break her."

Mia's eyes were equal parts scared and determined. For the first time since my mother was gone, someone stood up to fight for me. The problem was that the first one who did it had died at Michael's hands, and I couldn't let that be Mia's fate as well.

Once again, he advanced against her. She swung the bar, but this time it only scraped him. Wrathful as he was, he threw a blow on her nose, making her fly back against the wall.

As I watched in horror, I tried to get up to go to her, to give her enough time to run, but the smallest of movements made my vertigo even stronger, and I felt an unstoppable urge to puke. I was too far, too dizzy, and my vision was too dark to get to her.

She was holding her nose in pain, in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding. Being the evil he was, Michael grabbed the fallen iron bar and hit it against her leg, the side of her small body, and her arm.

She recoiled against the wall, and for as long as I lived, I'd never forget the fear I saw in her eyes. I forced myself up, screaming at him to stop. That took his attention long enough for us both to lunge on his body, making him stumble. But we were too hurt to make him fall. All we did was take his wrath away from her for a few seconds, and for that, I felt grateful.

But it didn't last long.

I felt the impact of the bar against my knee, and as I fell on my knees, he turned to Mia, already pulling out his belt from the loops on his pants. His damn belt, with the fucking huge buckle made of whatever it was that was encrusted in it.

He didn't even pull the opposite ends to intimidate with a loud snap, like he used to do. He was past the point of making a show; he just wanted to inflict pain. He lifted his arm, holding the belt, and swung it back down with all his might, hitting the buckle right on Mia's face, the stoned side close to her left eye. The impact was so strong, her face whipped to the side, and soon enough she started to bleed around her eye, as well as her already bleeding nose.

"You fucking demon." For the umpteenth time, I raised and lunged against him, punching as hard as I could with my yet-to-be-recovered balance. "You hit me, you hurt me, but you don't fucking hurt her."

But I wasn't a match for him at that moment, and he was ready to show me that. Yet when he raised his arm, right before he could hit me again, Michael was thrown against the sofa.

Coming out of nowhere, Zach was enraged. My always put-together, invariably calm friend was furious as he struck blow after blow on Michael's face while vomiting words I'd never thought I'd hear from Zach's respectful mouth.

Before Michael could even prepare himself to hit back, Mia grabbed the fallen iron bar again and swung it against Michael's stomach, making him bend over in pain.

She put her small hand on Zach's arm and said softly, calming a caged beast, "It's okay, Zee. Enough. We can go now." With the urgency the situation required, she urged me, "Grab your things. We need to leave. Benny! Let's go. Now!"

I picked up my still-not-fully packed duffel bag and headed to the door. Mia was still trying to get Zach out of his enraged haze. He stared down at the poor excuse of a human being lying on the floor and wheezing. Zach's fists were clenched tightly, and his breathing was labored.

"Come on, Zee," her voice had never been so soft, "he's not worth it, and we need to leave now." She pulled his arm again, urging him to follow her, while her free hand was holding her shirt upright over her nose. With her belly partially exposed, I could see a bruise already forming on her side, and if I didn't want to kill Michael already, I would've vowed to do so then.

"Not worth it, huh?" Even beaten down by three teenagers, one of them half his size, he didn't let go. His

wrathful gaze turned to me. *“This isn’t over. I’ll teach you how to treat a father, you fucking asshole. And you,” he sneered at Mia, “you’re next. I’ll come for you, you little bitch, and I’ll be the last thing you see.”*

Zach threw one last punch in his face, finally knocking him out, grabbed Mia’s hand, and led us hastily out of that hell hole as she limped by his side, trying to keep up.

Before I could panic about how we’d get away from there, I saw Jackson’s car parked right outside.

“You were both taking too long.” Zach explained why he was there with a car he shouldn’t be driving. “Get in the car before Mom and Dad freak out. They didn’t know you were gone and didn’t see me take the car. We’ll get your bike later, Mia.”

“Damn. You can’t drive yet.” Mia’s eyes were as worried as they were impressed. We hurried inside, and Zach turned on the car. “Avoid the main street, there are cops there sometimes patrolling the area. Mom and Dad are gonna be pissed,” she mumbled from the back seat.

“They won’t. They’ll understand and fix this.” He was already the calm leader, even if his bruised knuckles gripped tightly the steering wheel. “Let’s just get home and tell them everything.” He glanced at me pointedly. “Everything.”

I held my duffel bag tightly on my lap. I tried so hard to hide that shameful side of my life. I didn’t want them to pity me, and I feared the day they’d see how dangerous it could be to be around me. Michael had already taken so much from me; I couldn’t let him take away my family again.

“Maybe they won’t notice anything wrong.” I pivoted my body, hissing from the pain, and looked at Mia with my one good eye in disbelief. I wasn’t any better, but she was a sight, bleeding from the gash over her eyebrow, her shirt striking red, and dry blood surrounding her little nose. With a mischievous smile on her lips, she was already trying to lighten up the situation. But her truthful eyes were too round to be calm.

“I’m sure they won’t. One can always expect three kids to come home all banged up.” Zach sighed deeply and glanced at me before looking back ahead. “They’ll know what to do, don’t worry.”

It was impossible not to worry. My still dizzy and aching head was running a mile a minute, thinking about everything that could happen. None of the scenarios I came up with were good. It was one thing to show up being hurt, another one was to have your devil father hurt another kid.

I felt my throat constricting as I realized that was most likely the last time I spent with my two favorite people. I wished the distance to their place was longer, so I could steal a few more minutes with them.

Once again, my wish wasn’t fulfilled, and Zach was already parking as we reached what had become my haven. Dreading the separation I thought was coming, I was the last one to get out of the car. Zach picked the duffel from my hand and gave me a reassuring smile. Mia followed us to the front door, an uncharacteristic somber look on her bloody face. At some point during our route, she tried to clean it, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her it made it worse.

When we reached the top step, before we could sneak in, Jackson opened the front door. "Where were—" His eyes widened like saucers. "What happened?" He stepped back, letting us inside, looking paler and paler as he saw each one of us.

"Thank God they're back." Rosie came hurriedly from the kitchen, a worried look on her face, then gasped, staring at us. "Oh, my God."

"Would you believe us if we said we saved a frail old lady from a bear?"

"I don't think now is the time, Mia," Zach mumbled.

Realizing I wasn't gonna answer Jackson, Zach stepped up. "Michael attacked Ben, so we had to intervene." He left it vague so they wouldn't know Mia was irresponsible enough to ride on her bike to that hell all alone.

"We look bad, but you should see how we left him."

"Not now, Mia," Zach warned her quietly.

Taking me by surprise, Rosie touched my face carefully, her eyes already filled with tears. She pulled me into a tight hug, grabbing Mia's arm and motioning to Zach to come closer so she could hug us all. "My babies, my poor babies." Feeling emotional again, I held back my groan of pain. I needed her comfort more than I needed to take a painless breath.

Jackson was cursing quietly as he rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Let's go to the kitchen. We need to talk."

We all followed him, and my heartbeat sped up. I was too afraid to talk. I wanted to be kept in Rosie's hug until

everything disappeared. We sat at the dinner table as she prepared some tea and cookies for us to eat. Not that we could stomach anything; maybe she just needed to keep herself occupied.

“Now explain.” Jackson’s order was directed to the three of us. We stayed quiet for a while, and not even once did he lose his patience or urge us to go faster.

“I didn’t realize he was there.” I hadn’t spoken since I left Michael’s house, and I hadn’t anticipated my voice would be so hoarse. “He punched me, and Zach and Mia helped me get out.”

“I’m gonna need more than that, son.” Jackson’s voice was surprisingly reassuring. I didn’t wanna implicate any of my friends, so I just kept opening and closing my mouth, looking for the right words. I didn’t know how to deal with a loving and worried parent, and I was afraid he’d go off the rails and prove to me all fathers were like Michael.

He’d be in his right to be furious, but I couldn’t be the one to push him over the edge.

“I need the full story from the three of you. No trying to cover for the other. What. Happened?”

After a moment of silence, Zach started making origami out of a paper towel. With all his confident calmness, he resumed.

“Mia and I were worried because Ben hadn’t come on time, and we knew he wanted to go on the trip with us. He wasn’t answering his phone or responding to the texts, so we

knew something was happening. I should've known she was going to him, but I was too late to realize that.

“She rode on her bike and got there before me. I’m not sure what happened, but I know by the time I arrived, Michael had already hurt them both, but they were fighting back. I stepped in to help, then we got out and came home.”

Jackson nodded his head, absorbing what he’d just heard. His jaw was clenched, but he was keeping his composure. He looked at me. “How did it start?”

I took a deep breath but regretted it immediately, especially when my wincing made Jackson curse and Rosie gasp again. “He punched me when I was turned away. It was a mistake to turn my back to him.”

“His violence is not on you. You’re not to blame for being assaulted. He’s the only one responsible for what happened.” I was too ashamed to acknowledge what he was saying. “Look at me, son.” His voice was firm yet supportive as he leaned on his arms, which were placed on the table. “Do you understand what I’m saying? This is not your fault.”

I just nodded, not trusting my voice as my throat was constricting again.

“What happened next?” Rosie pushed gently.

I looked down at the table and took a shaken breath. I related the nightmare we’d just gotten out of, trying to mince the gritty details, although he could watch the results on our faces. Literally.

As I narrated how he punched me and hurt Mia before Zach stormed in, I tried to ignore Jackson’s escaped curses

and Rosie's sniffing. I finished my tale, and the silence that descended upon us was deafening.

I waited for the verdict that was kicking me out as Zach and Mia gave me a reassuring smile. Rosie cleaned her tears away and offered me more tea, the one I hadn't drunk yet.

With his shoulders hunched forward and rubbing his face, Jackson looked older than ever. "How are you kids feeling?"

When none of us answered, Zach volunteered. "I wasn't hurt, Da. But they were. They should be checked out."

"I don't need to. I'm fine; just a little sore," I added quickly. Anything to keep me in that house a little longer. If I set foot outside, I feared I was never going back.

"But you threw up after he hit you on the head. There must be something wrong." Mia so needed to shut up.

"And you, too, honey." Rosie grabbed Mia's chin lightly, leaning her face to the side so she could see the cut above her eye. "This gash is nasty."

Jackson placed his hands on the table and straightened up. "That's settled. We'll go to the hospital. Then we're pressing charges."

Another wave of silence came over us.

Mia was the first to break it. Shocker.

"We can't press charges."

"Sweetheart, we can't let this slide, it was criminal. I'm surprised you don't want us to pursue this." Jackson's tone was placating.

“Because if we press charges, we’re all gonna pay.”

“You all acted in self-defense, anyone can see that, and Michael will be held responsible for what he did.”

She shook her head and winced at the motion. “I’m not worried about that, I’m worried about Benny. They’ll take him away from us.” Mia’s voice carried a desperate note, which was unlike her.

We stayed a few more moments in silence.

“He only has his father,” Zach whispered, seemingly understanding whatever it was Mia was saying.

“Exactly. If we press charges and Michael goes to jail, they’ll take him away, because he’s still a minor, and then we’ll never see him again. I know that, I’ve heard you talk.”

I looked back at Rosie and Jackson in surprise, wondering what they’d been saying about me.

“We can’t go to the hospital either.” Mia was on a roll. “They’ll ask questions and call the police.”

“Honey, you need stitches near your eye, your eyebrow is still bleeding. And Ben probably has a concussion.” Rosie was trying to calm Mia, who was shaking her head intensely.

“We’ll deal with it here. We can’t go, and we can’t press charges. Benny isn’t safe anywhere else but here, you all know that.”

Gone was the sarcastic little thing that was so fond of bugging me. This was protective Mia. Still a little thing but refusing to let someone she cared about get hurt. Zach wasn’t behind.

“He needs to stay with us. He can live here, stay in my room. We just grab his stuff and move him in. No one will question us, because we’re always together. I highly doubt Michael will complain.”

Jackson and Rosie looked at each other for a while, talking with their eyes, like only a connected couple could do, until she said in a low voice, “We’ve talked about it already.”

He nodded and turned to me. “From what I see, you were forced to deal with a lot of things no kid should ever endure. We don’t wanna force upon you another situation you’re not comfortable with. We want you to stay. But you’re only moving in if it’s something you really want. We’d hate to make you do something you don’t want to. So what do you say?”

“You’re already a part of this family, honey,” Rosie affirmed caringly. “We just wanna make it official.”

I didn’t trust myself to say anything and not start weeping. I just nodded emphatically, and they all smiled at me.

“Do you think you can go there tonight, so we can grab your things?” I nodded again at Jackson’s question.

“So let’s get his stuff.” Mia was already standing up, wincing a little in the process. She tried to mask her pain, but her parents were too observant.

“You’re not going anywhere, young lady.” Jackson’s firm voice was back. He got up from his chair and looked at me and Zach. “Let’s do this quickly.”

“Why can’t I go? That’s not fair.”

“You’ll stay here with your mom and help her set things up for Ben. We’ll improvise tonight, then tomorrow we’ll get you settled for good.” He explained the last part to me, who was still in shock over that turn of events.

“But Dad—”

“Enough.” He raised one palm to stop Mia, walked to her, and bent down a little to look her in the eyes. “You were extremely irresponsible today. I can’t believe how reckless you were.” She looked down in shame for having disappointed her parents. She was a firecracker, but she still cared about what they thought. He held her bruised face with his big hands, mindful of not hurting her more. “And I’ve never been prouder.” He glanced at me and Zach. “Of all of you.”

Her eyes snapped up to him and she gave him a small smile as he rubbed his thumb lightly over her cheeks. When he looked at the cut near her eyes, his breath broke a little, and his eyes were tormented. He looked at me with sad eyes as he took inventory of my many bruises, then gazed at her again.

“You’ve done more than enough today. Now I want you to stay here so your mother can take a look at your pretty face, clean this up, and try to heal this. When we get back, we’ll take care of Ben as well. Then tomorrow, after a good night’s sleep, we’ll see about going on that trip if you all still wanna go. Deal?”

She nodded a little and gave him a tight hug. “Thank you, Daddy.” She looked at me and thanked him again, with a broken voice, making me feel she wasn’t thanking him for the trip, but for taking me in. He hugged her back and kissed her on her uninjured cheek.

Jackson, Zach, and I left the house and made quick work of picking up my stuff. Thankfully, Michael was already gone.

I didn't have, nor did I want, many things from that place. I took my clothes, school gear, some photos and memorabilia that belonged to my mother—which I hid under a loose wooden slap under my bed—and some toiletries. On the way out, we grabbed Mia's bike that was still thrown there, then headed back to their place. Our place.

Rosie had prepared a few sandwiches, and without the heavy doubt about what would happen to me, I realized I was hungry. We ate mostly in silence, then she cleaned up my injuries as best she could. "I don't think you should sleep the whole night. We don't know what happened to your head. We'll let you take a nap, but we'll wake you up every couple of hours."

I lunged forward, placed my arms around her, and hugged her tight. My mom had done everything she could to take care of me, but she was mostly trying to survive. After everything I went through, after I thought everything was over, I had a new family in my life.

A caring mother to heal my bruises. A brave father to protect me. Two bold siblings to face my demons with me and fight my battles by my side.

After she kissed me on the cheek, I went upstairs so I could settle for the night. I stopped at Zach's door and saw him organizing everything, making space for me.

"You take my bed tonight, I'll sleep on the inflatable mattress."

“You don’t need to—”

“I know I don’t, but you’re hurt. I’ll feel better if you take the bed until we get you a proper one.”

“You’re all already doing so much letting me crash at your place.”

He walked to me, with a serious look on his face. “You’re not ‘crashing.’” He made quote signs with his hands. “You’re living here. This is your place as well.” Being a hugger like only the Bryants could pull off, he hugged me tight, careful not to hurt me. “Welcome home, brother.” Choking back my tears, I hugged him back until we heard little steps approaching down the corridor.

We separated, and Zach went back to arranging everything. When I looked out, I saw Mia getting out of the bathroom after her shower and going to her bedroom.

She gazed at me. With her clean face, I could see her small, pointed-up nose was a little swollen, but what tugged at me was the gash over her left eye. Rosie had done her best to clean it up and close it with butterfly bandages, but I was sure it’d leave a scar. Her once clear face would be marred forever. Because of me.

I looked down at her. Her bruised arm, the contusion at the side of her leg visible after the brim of her shorts, and the spot I knew was getting bigger on her stomach, although her clothes were covering it.

“Stop.”

I looked up at her, embarrassed for being caught and worried she’d think I was being a creep.

“I’m sorry, I was just—”

“I know, you were blaming yourself. Just stop.”

“It was my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t. Dad said so, and you need to believe him.”

“It’s easier said than done.”

She sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes. “Are you always this exhausting? You didn’t hit me, you didn’t get hurt on your own. You’re not to blame. That’s already settled, so why bring it up again?”

“I didn’t, you did.”

“Because you were looking at me full of guilt, and this won’t fly here.”

“It’s not wrong to worry about you.”

“Then you worry, but don’t blame yourself.”

“It’s not like I could turn it off.”

“So try harder.”

Before I could respond, Zach came out of the room. “Is this how it’s always gonna be?”

Mia smiled in mischief. “We’re gonna have so much fun.”

I couldn’t help grinning back, as much as my injured face allowed me. Her eyes turned hard, and she furrowed her eyebrows, which wasn’t a good idea, what with her cut.

“Don’t touch my books.”

“What?”

“My books.” She pointed her little finger at me. “If you wanna borrow my books, you ask me. So I can say, ‘No.’ Do not touch them without my approval.”

It was my time to be mischievous. “You’re right. We’re gonna have so much fun.”

She squared her little shoulders. “Game on.”

“Or we can all behave ourselves and not turn everything into strife.” Poor Zach. Always the peacemaker.

“But what’s the fun in that, Zee?” Mia asked him right before she mouthed theatrically to me, “I’ll come for you.”

Zach shook his head and went back to the room. “Good, now I have to babysit two grown kids.”

Right before I followed him inside, Mia called me again.

“Benny?” I turned to her and didn’t feel like giving her a hard time for calling me that. “You’re safe here.” I didn’t know what to say, and she wasn’t waiting for an answer. She just gave me a small smile. “Welcome home.”

Before I could respond, she entered her bedroom and closed the door. Once again, I found myself without words.

After I left Michael, I thought I’d never be safe or see these people again. Instead, I’ve gained a new home, a new family, and a new sense of safety and belonging.

I had a new purpose: to deserve those people who so selflessly loved me back.

Drying my eyes before Zach could see me, I walked into my new bedroom and welcomed my new life with my arms wide open.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IZZIE

My whole body shook as I sobbed. I cried in pain for the little boy who lost his momma, I cried for the teenager who had to learn how to survive, but I also cried in relief for this man who has found a new family. He hugged me tight, comforting me and telling me everything was okay when I should be the one to do that to him. He pulled me onto his lap, kissing my head and rubbing my back in slow motions. All I could do was snuggle into his broad chest, seeking the solace I should be giving him.

“Shh, honey. Everything is fine now, it’s all in the past.”

“But i-it’s new f-for me. T-things could have b-been so different.”

“But they’re not. I found my people, and it all led me to you. So yeah, it was a shitty start. I wish my mom hadn’t suffered at his hands and that Mia wasn’t another one of his victims, but it turned out better than I expected.” He pressed his forehead to the side of my head. “I’ve got you, we have a baby on the way, who will never face the demons I fought, and a family that loves the three of us.”

My sobbing subsided, and I thought about us, about the life we were creating for us and our boy.

“Have you told her that you love her?”

“What?”

“Mia. Have you told her that you love her?”

He moved us so we were facing each other. “I told you it was never like that—”

“I know,” I interrupted. “I can see that now. You’re not *in love* with her, but I know you love her. I know you love all those people downstairs, and you should, because they’re rare and special. I’m asking because we’re bringing a new life into this world. We were both handed the smallest stick when it came to parents. I know our backgrounds are different and you had it way worse than me—”

“It’s not a competition, don’t downsize your pain.”

I shook my head. “That’s not the point. What I mean is that you had a devil of a father, and I have an awful mother. I wanna do it differently for our Little Bean, and we have the chance to do so. I want him to never doubt he’s loved. I want us to say we’re sorry when we make a mistake, I want him to know he can count on us, and I want us to say to him that we love him. We’re carrying so much baggage, and I don’t want us to dump it on him. I need us to be more vocal about how we feel, so he never, ever lives in fear.”

I took a deep breath, trying to organize my thoughts.

“That’s why I asked if you ever said you loved them. Because it’s clear they’re your family, I yearn for them to accept me as a part of it as well, and I deeply hope our baby will be embraced and loved as you are. As Gabe and Haley are. So have you told them all that you love them?”

Maybe I was acting like a lunatic, but our boy deserved to have the life and love we weren't blessed with from the beginning. We were both given a second chance in our lives, and I wanted to get the best of it.

He thought about what I said, then looked down and scoffed, with shame framing his eyes, "I've never even thanked them." He laid his head back and rubbed his hand over his face. "How messed up is that? After everything they did to me, I've never even said I'm grateful."

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad. I'm sure they're not expecting you to say those words. They didn't make anything because they needed to be acknowledged. It was unconditional, no questions asked, no thanks needed. I'm just suggesting we try and make things different for us. For our Little Bean."

He nodded slowly, seemingly lost in thought.

"I used to think I'd never learned what it was like to love someone and be loved. I believed I couldn't be in a committed relationship, let alone be a father, because how could I? I didn't know what that entailed. I was so wrong." He looked at me with clear eyes, also a little shocked at whatever revelation he was having. "My mother loved me how she could. After her, I experienced what true love is. I grew up learning from Jackson how to respect the woman he loves. I learned from him and Rosie how to love and protect your kids, myself included. I learned from Zach and Mia how to be loyal and do whatever it takes to fight for the ones you care about." He shook his head in awe. "I spent the better part of my life believing I was a product of Michael's rage and that I was

bound to fail and prone to violence. But I'm way more Jackson's son than I've ever been Michael's."

He looked around the room, at the memories he created with his family. "I'm still not good at it, but I learned how to love. I've seen it, I'm living it. I promise you I'll do better. I'll make myself worthy of being your man and our baby's father. We're not getting married yet, but this is my vow: I'll love you and respect you and care for you. I'll love and respect and protect our little boy. I'll take a chance on myself and work hard so I can be the man you deserve."

With tears streaming freely down my face, I straddled his lap and placed my arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. He hugged me back, placing his head on the crook of my neck, and we stayed silent. It wasn't just comfortable. It was comforting. Recharging. I felt we could tackle the world or just lay there and enjoy ourselves. As long as we were together, I wouldn't worry.

After a while, we loosened our embrace. There was so much love and vulnerability in his eyes, even as he gave me his crooked smile. His face got closer as he held my face with one of his hands. He gave me the sweetest kiss of all, full of promises and love. His tongue danced languidly with mine, and even though I could feel him stiffing under me and knew he could feel me getting wet, he never made a move to take things further.

He finished giving me a peck on my lips and rested his forehead against mine. "If we're aiming to be better and more vocal about our feelings, it's fair to start with ourselves." He looked up. "I love you, Isabella." My heart was beating so

loud, I was sure he could listen. “I love you, and I’m grateful for everything you brought me, for the family we’re building. I already love our boy, and I can’t wait to meet him and protect him.”

I smiled brightly, not caring about my happy tears. “I love you, Benjamin. I trust you with my life, with our baby’s life. I have no doubts you’re exactly what we need and what we crave.”

A few moments later, we stood up and went downstairs holding hands. Before making our presence known, we stood in the living room, close to the door that led outside.

Haley and Rosie were talking animatedly in the kitchen as Jackson made some coffee. He walked around the kitchen, picking up snacks and appliances, and as he passed them, he kissed Rosie on the head and squeezed Haley’s shoulders.

The rest of them were still on the wraparound porch. Zach was on the sofa, making origami, and Mia was sitting next to him, her shoeless feet on the edge of the sofa, resting her head on her brother’s shoulder. Her eyes were closed, but I could see she was awake, because she was drumming her fingers on her bent-up knees to whatever melody was playing inside her head.

Hugo was cuddled next to her, still napping, and Gabe was lying on the sofa, with his head on Zach’s leg, his little legs crossed so he could lean his tablet on them as he watched some cartoons. Zach ran his fingers through Gabe’s hair, and the kid nestled even closer to his *Zachy*.

My heart was full and warm as I was bombarded with so much love coming from everywhere. Especially from

behind me, as Ben hugged me, splaying my back on his chest and rounding his arms over our baby. He leaned his chin on my shoulders and whispered in my ears, “Welcome to the family.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IZZIE

After we left, we went straight to Ben's home. I was feeling energetic, and the tension between us was all-consuming. It'd been too long since we got intimate, and I was craving him. His strength. His warmth. Him.

We drove in silence. I wanted to tell him or show him I needed him, but I was feeling insecure. Noticing my uncertainty, he placed a calming hand on my knee, rubbing it with his thumb. All it did was increase my desire. When we parked in front of his house, he shifted his body to stare at me.

"We don't have to do anything. What transpired earlier today was enough for me."

"Don't you wanna...?"

"More than anything. But only if you're comfortable with it. We have the rest of our lives for it, there's no need to rush anything."

"I want to. I'm just nervous." I felt my cheeks burn at my admission. Instead of calling me on it, he leaned closer and placed the sweetest kiss on the corner of my lips.

"That, I can work with."

Grinning, he left the car and rounded the hood to me. He opened my door and helped me get out. Holding my hand, we walked to his front door and into his living room. I looked

around, remembering the last time I'd been there. The pain I felt when I thought he'd betrayed me, and how far we've come since then.

Before I could get lost in that rabbit hole, he locked his front door, pushed me against it, and pressed his lips to mine. Catching me by surprise, I gasped, and he took advantage of it, plunging his tongue inside. He kissed my fears away, and I felt my core getting wet.

His kiss was possessive, almost desperate. It was the result of the months we'd spent tentatively getting to know each other again. Weeks of pent-up sexual chemistry that needed an escape before it exploded.

Recovering my boldness, I draped one of my legs over his hip and raked my fingers through his hair. He picked me up, never breaking our kiss, and I rounded my legs over his waist, grinding shamelessly against him. I could feel his hardness already pulsing, increasing my need.

He pulled his head back, both of us panting. "If it gets too much, let me know—"

"Don't you dare stop."

Giving me his signature grin, he attacked my neck, kissing and nibbling the sensitive skin behind my ear. With one hand holding me up from my butt, the other one started to roam my body. Over my legs, my ass, my sensitive breasts. He pulled down one strap of my dress, exposing my right breast, and feasted on it. He exposed the other one and alternated his caress between my globes, already fuller from the pregnancy.

As he pinched one nipple with his fingers, he sucked on the other one, his cheeks hollowing and tongue lapping my pebbled nub.

I needed more. I needed to feel his skin against mine. I needed to feel him lose control. I needed to feel him inside me.

As he explored my body, still ravaging my breasts, I unbuttoned his shirt and ran my hands on his hot skin, sliding his shirt off his strong shoulders. Feeling brave—and horny—I slid down his body and met his confused eyes.

It was my time to grin at Ben. Kneeling in front of him, I cupped his cock over his jeans and felt empowered when I heard him hiss. “You’re gonna be the death of me.”

“So let’s make sure it’s worth it.” I unzipped his pants and ran my nose on his underwear, over his shaft. He ran his fingers over my face, bringing my hair back so he could look at me. Staring into his eyes, I pulled down his clothes, freeing his cock, which jumped up proud and ready.

I placed one hand on the back of his leg, bringing him closer to me, and with the other one I grabbed him, thriving on his heat. I squeezed his base as I licked the bead of precum. He grabbed my hair in his fists, making me groan in pain and anticipation. Not wanting to let him wait for long, I closed my lips around his engorged head and sucked, leaving with a loud *pop*.

He moaned, saying my name in reverence, and I was sure my underwear was ruined by my desire. I went down again, this time taking as much of him as I could. My head bobbed up and down as I licked and sucked his shaft,

squeezing up and down with my hand the length I couldn't take in.

Feeling empowered by his groan, I sucked until I felt him at the back of my throat. I breathed through my nose and worked my throat to get him deeper. Making him lose control was a heady feeling. When he shouted and took over, fucking my mouth with desperate thrusts, I almost came.

Before he could spill inside my mouth, he stopped, breathing heavily, and placed one hand on the door behind me for support. "As much as I love your mouth, our first time again together won't end with me on your tongue. I wanna feel you come on my cock when I'm buried deep inside of you." He pulled me up, picked me in his arms, and all but ran to his room.

Despite his desperation, he gently laid me on his bed and undressed me. Not leaving a single inch of me unattended. After we were both naked, he climbed on his bed, hovering over me. He let his eyes take me in, not bothering to hide the lust and the love he was feeling. When his gaze reached my stomach, he ran his hands and caressed it lightly. Leaning down, Ben pressed his lips against it, then rested his forehead on my belly, his eyes closed in reverence. "I'm gonna take care of you." He peered up. "Both of you." He pressed one last kiss on my stomach and declared to our baby, "I love you."

After our sweet moment, the beast was out again. He grabbed my legs, opening them so he could get comfortable in-between, and pulled me closer, making me shriek as I slid down the bed until his cock was resting against my core. "This is gonna be fast. I promise you I'll take it slower next time."

Before I could respond—not that I knew what to say—he thrust inside me in one powerful motion. I pulled him down by his neck, and we shared broken kisses as he ravaged me. Holding the back of my thighs, he pushed my legs against my torso, making me feel him even deeper.

He lunged again and again. “Touch yourself.” I obeyed him happily. Still holding his neck, I slid down my other hand until I found my nub. I was so sensitive that even a light flick made me buck. Ben cursed and increased the pace when my insides clasped him. “I won’t last long, Forest. Touch yourself and come with me.”

I applied more pressure and rubbed myself. I was getting closer and chased that high. My massaging became more erratic, just as he began to lose control of his strokes. I felt my orgasm building, and when he leaned down over my belly to suck on my nipples again, I lost it. I shattered around him, feeling wave after wave of pleasure engulf me, also ignited by his sexy moan as he pressed deep inside me.

He dropped his body to my side, bringing me closer to him, still not pulling out. I rested one leg over his hip, and we shared a breath, our noses close and arms holding one another.

I trailed his SEAL Trident tattoo over his chest, right under his mother’s name. In my exploration, my finger rubbed his dog tag and the third of a circle necklace.

“What does this mean?”

He picked it up, inspecting it with a shy smile. “When Zach and I were about to join the navy, I felt emotional. I only got that far because of them. I wanted something to always connect us, something that, no matter where we were, would

make us think of each other. I guess I needed that reassurance that we were endless.” He caressed it with his thumb. “I had a compass charm made and asked the woman to divide it in three, like a puzzle. Then I gave the other two pieces to the guys. Zach, Mia, and I each have a third of the same original compass.” He chuckled in embarrassment. “I see now how cheesy it is.”

I caressed his face in admiration at that wonderful, vulnerable man. “I think it’s beautiful.”

“It seemed fitting. They were always my north. I was about to face the unimaginable during my time in the navy, not knowing if I’d ever come home to them. I didn’t know at the time Zach and I’d end up on the same team. After everything we’ve been through together, I felt protected knowing we’d shared this piece of direction. It was as if both of them were by my side.”

“I’d noticed they both wore a necklace, but I’ve never seen their charms.” Up close, I could see the coordination in his part of the compass.

“It’s the completion of this one. Zach also wears his dog tag as well. It’s yet another way to keep us connected. It’s comforting. As long as each of us carries this piece, I know we’re fine.” He let go of his charm and shifted to me, running his fingers through my hair. “Now I have you as well, my new layer of safety and love. My direction.”

He kissed my lips, our caress escalating as we yearned for one another once again.

I was finally home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

IZZIE

Autumn was just around the corner. As the leaves began to change, it was also clear the change in Ben and my dynamics. After he opened up about his past and we admitted our feelings, things seemed to move more lightly.

We went back to spending more time together. Since that fateful dinner, there wasn't a night he was in town when we didn't sleep together. Another new thing in my life was said dinner. The Bryants made it their business to include me in their weekly occasion, even if Ben wasn't around.

It was wonderful to be a part of something. Somewhere safe and happy where I felt cared for, and where my baby would grow up being loved.

My life was wonderful and full. I was happy and excited about the future. As cliché as it might sound, I should've anticipated things were about to go south.

I was finalizing my baking for the next day, waiting for the last batch to be ready. I walked out front to see if April needed anything, but she was already a pro. As she walked around the tables, spreading joy, I walked to the end of the counter, where Mia was working on her computer, typing furiously, eyes focused on the screen, as she munched on a pain au chocolat.

It was hypnotic seeing her entranced in whatever she was working on. Now and then, she'd push her glasses up with her index knuckle. She'd look around from time to time, moving only her eyes, checking for any possible threats, then she'd devote her attention to what she was doing, not breaking her concentration. What kind of threat she was looking for in quaint Holy Water, I had no idea. Even as she peered around, she didn't stop typing.

It should be exhausting.

She was lost in her reading, tactilely tapping her hand around on the counter to find her drink. After a few failed attempts, she grabbed her already empty cup, and when nothing came out of it, she shook the thing before trying again, as if the liquid would magically appear. Not once looking away from her computer.

I prepared her a new cup of cappuccino—her favorite poison—and walked to her, giggling to myself when I saw her wearing a shirt featuring a little bird holding two guns over the inscription "*Pew Pew Madafakas.*" When I placed the cup near her, she was startled, as if she'd forgotten I was around.

"You've been at it for hours. You should stop a little."

She picked up her beverage. "Thank you." She blew the steam and took a sip. "No time to stop." She shrugged. "Things are a little hectic right now."

"Another reason for you to rest." I noticed the light circles around her eyes. "What's going on? Can you talk about it?"

She thought for a moment, pondering her words. “Right before we started the company, I made an arrest.”

“Working at the DEA?” At her surprised expression, I explained, “Ben told me.”

She nodded in understanding. “Yes. Then, a few months ago, we had a breakthrough on a case we’ve been working on.” She took another sip and sighed in tiredness, rubbing her eyes with her thumb and index finger under her glasses. “The guy responsible for the bust we made was murdered a few weeks ago. We think it might be connected.”

“Are you guys in danger?” My voice trembled in consternation.

She shook her head and waved a hand. “Nah, we’re small fish. Nothing to worry about.” But I could see her eyes were as tired as they were disturbed.

I was about to spew more of my wariness when my phone rang, making me jump. My groan was unstoppable when I noticed it was my mother. Why couldn’t I enjoy my happy wave a little longer?

Mia furrowed her brows and leaned her head to the side at my reaction but stayed silent as I answered the dreaded call.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Well, if I’m not the one to make the call, I’d never hear from you again, huh?” Always so loving.

“And if you don’t need money, I don’t hear from you,” I muttered.

“What was that?”

“How are you?” Redirecting the conversation was the best course of action.

“Pff, as if you cared.” Or so I thought. *“How is your little shop doing? Had to close it yet?”*

She was toxic, and her derisive comments were cruel just for the sake of being so. After watching how Rosie treated her family, more than ever I understood what a mother should be like, and how far away from it mine was. “I’m thriving, but I appreciate your concern.”

“Always a disrespectful bitch, I see.” Even though it embarrassed me to no end to know Mia was listening to it—my mother only knew loud volume voice—I needed someone who cared for me to be around, so I could get over that conversation. Hopefully, I’d finally be able to tell my mother about my pregnancy. *“I need more money. It’s impossible to keep my lifestyle with the amount you sent. Not that you care that much about your mother.”*

“I won’t be able to send it this time. I also won’t be able to do so in the future. I’m...” I took a fortifying breath and almost cried in gratitude when Mia took my hand and gave it a light squeeze. “I’m pregnant. You’re about to be a grandmother,” I tried to infuse some cheerfulness. “So, I need to focus my expenses on the baby.”

“You learned nothing from me, huh? Are you really that stupid? After seeing how ruined my life was when I had a kid, you had to spread your legs like a bitch?” It shouldn’t have surprised me, but it still did, and it hurt.

“You mean when *I* was born and ruined your life?” I was proud of myself for holding back my sobs.

“*Yes. Exactly that. Do you even know who the father is?*” she sneered.

“Did you?” I snapped.

“*You ungrateful bitch.*” As she went on and on, finding every bad word in the book, I sensed my wall crumbling down. Was it too much to ask to have, for once, a loving mother who was happy for me?

Being done with the whole altercation, Mia pulled the phone from my hand to *talk* to Mother Dearest. “*Shhh, grrrr.* She’s *grrl* tunnel. *Shhh* not hearing. *Grrrl* screw you.” She then ended the call.

We were in silence for a moment. I couldn’t even look at her. I leaned on the counter, hiding my face in my hands when she stood up, balancing herself on the support between the legs of the stool, and laid her little frame over me in a weird yet comforting hug.

“Why does it hurt so much?” I wondered, with a broken voice.

Mia pondered my question. “Because for better or for worse, she’s your mother, and it’s only natural to expect her to love and cherish you. As she should.” She leaned back, sitting again, and tipped her face down, almost touching the counter, pretty child-like, so we could stare at each other. “She’s the one in the wrong here, not you.”

“I’m her only daughter. I’m having a baby. Her grandchild. Why can’t she be thrilled?”

She fished a few paper napkins from its case and handed them to me. “Some people aren’t wired to love another being other than themselves. It’s her loss, not yours. I can only imagine how hurtful it might be, I’m not making small of that. But you don’t have to ever worry about being alone or not being loved. You have a whole army of lovers now.” She squinted in thought. “That sounded weird. Benny wouldn’t like to hear that.” She ignored my watery giggle. “I can’t wait to tell him.”

Subsiding my chuckle, I took in a deep breath. I scanned my phone, gazing longingly at it. “I wish I could say it wasn’t always like this.”

“I’m no cactus expert, but I recognize a prick when I see one. And that, honey, was the poisonous kind. I wasn’t sure how you wanted to deal with it. If you wanna let her get closer again in the future. So, I chose not to be so emphatic when ending the call.”

“Right,” I said slowly. “That’s why you just told her to screw herself?”

“It seemed fitting.” Mia shrugged. She wasn’t wrong.

“Is it super ugly that I envy you for having the family you have?”

“Not ugly, but at this point, it’s kind of stupid.” I wondered if she ever learned how to mince words. “They’re your family as well. If you ever need an extra dose of momma and daddy, I’m okay with sharing mine. They’re kind of the bomb.”

How had I ever thought this little thing was a threat?

Needing to change the subject so I wouldn't bawl at her sassy sweetness, I tried a different course. "Good thing you were here to babysit me. Did Ben put you up to that?"

"He's a little worried as you get closer to labor. He thought it'd be safer if one of us was with you from here until the end. Wow, that was poetic. *From here until the end.*" Sometimes it was hard keeping up with her mind.

"I'm still weeks away from it. There's no need for you guys to change your routine for me."

"I'm not getting into that with him. Especially now that he's been reading about what happens during labor. I know more about it than I planned on ever knowing." I started laughing. "So now you're stuck with one of us."

"I can't complain about the companion. It's fun hanging out with you guys." She tipped her chin in agreement, a small grin on her face. "And to be truthful, I kind of enjoy knowing how invested Ben is."

"It's endearing, actually. He's so into your pregnancy and what happens after the baby is born. I can't recall any other time he was so deeply focused on something." She smiled proudly. "My boy is growing up."

As we kept chatting about mundane stuff, April approached us from the kitchen. "I took the last batch out of the oven."

"I'd totally forgotten! Thank you so much."

"Don't worry. I just wanted to let you know." She gave me her big and sweet smile.

Before she could saunter to the next task, Mia called her. “Hey, April. Do you know of anyone who’d be willing to babysit? Someone trustworthy and responsible.”

“I sure do. Do you remember my friend Lisa? Lisa Specter. We graduated from college together, she’s from here as well. She’s my best friend, amazing with kids, and you’re gonna love her.” Her positive energy was invigorating.

“Yeah, I remember her and her parents. Do you mind giving her my contact? I have a friend in need of someone to care for his daughter while he’s working.”

“Sure! I have your information, I’ll pass it along to her today.”

“Thank you, hon. By the way, I loved the green in your hair.”

April’s smile turned even bigger before she threw us a kiss and sauntered away.

When Mia and I were alone again, I asked quietly, “Danny?”

She nodded. “It’s a relief to know he’s divorcing that... *person*,” she sneered.

“You know what? It’s calmer today. What do you say I close things earlier and we go...I don’t know. Home? Out? Wherever.”

“Are you sure? It’s okay for me. I could stay here if you wanna close at your regular time.”

“I think we both need a breather. I’ll send April home, and we could just enjoy the rest of the day.” I was getting fond

of that idea. “It’s getting harder to be up on my two feet for long periods.”

“You’re the boss.” She closed down the lid of her computer. “If you need any help closing things here, just order me around, and I can make it happen.” I took her up on her offer, and she was a good sport about doing the things I instructed.

After I announced to my patrons we were about to close, April, Mia, and I cleaned everything until the last person left. I sent April home and texted Ben, letting him know we were about to close Beans and head to Mia’s home, as per her suggestion.

Mia slid the strap of her backpack over her shoulder. We were finishing checking that the windows and back door were closed when I heard the wind chimes indicating someone was coming. “I’m sorry, we’re closed for the—” My skin broke out in goosebumps when I saw him. “The man,” I whispered.

Mia peered around. “What man—”

“Look whom we have here.” His friendly voice didn’t fool anyone. His evil eyes gave away enough to know he wasn’t someone to be messed with. “Hello, Mia. It’s been a while.”

Her shoulders tensed when she gazed at the man who’d been lurking around the cafeteria and creeping me out for the last few months. Contrary to me, instead of panicking at his approach, she remained calm, although her voice was surprisingly hard. “What are you doing here, Michael?”

Looking for another three teenagers to beat up your sorry ass?”

Oh my God, is that...?

Hiding the flash of anger from his features, he perused my body from top to bottom, making me shiver. “Can’t a man reunite with his long-lost son and his newfound family?”

“A man can. *You* can’t.” She shook her head like it was a normal conversation.

Ignoring Mia, he stepped closer to me, his hand outstretched in greeting. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced yet. Although I must say, watching you around was a lot of fun, *Isabella*. I’m Michael Walker. Benjamin’s father, and your baby’s granddaddy.” His grin made me shiver and coil away from him.

Mia stepped closer in protection so I could be diagonally behind her. She was so much smaller than I was that it should be funny. But I was more than grateful for having her with me. “What do you want, Michael?” Her voice was leaving no place for whatever he was planning.

He dropped his unshaken hand to his side and looked at her with hatred. “You were always an annoyance. Since a little kid, you were someone I would’ve loved to break and squash under my shoes. I should’ve ended you when I had the chance.”

“Oh, honey.” Her voice was dripping with sweetness and sarcasm. “Do you really think you had a chance? Are you that delusional?” She *tsk’d* in mock pity. I wanted to ask her not to engage, not to infuriate him, but my shaking frame

wasn't even allowing me to whimper in fear. "Do you think it's all the booze you drank? Or is it from when I hit you on the head all those years ago? You know, when I was just thirteen."

When he shifted his body closer, barely containing his rage, I made myself even smaller. She, on the other hand, lifted her chin and squared her shoulders in defiance. If she wasn't about to get us killed, I'd have the hugest girl crush on her.

"You still can't get over that day, huh?" She went on. "I don't blame you. It was embarrassing for you. What with a trio of skinny minors defeating you and all. Have you ever thought about that day? Is that why you're here?"

He tried to compose himself, but his tightly closed fists and flared nostrils were a dead giveaway Mia was getting to him. "Maybe I want another shot. Without your goons this time. Just you and me. What do you say?"

"I'm game. I have tons of shots for you. Would you rather get a nine-millimeter or a thirty-eight?" She tilted her head to the side, seemingly lost in thought. "Between your eyes, or on your heart? So many options," she muttered.

"Do you really believe you could take me?" he scoffed.

"I think I did. And I know I could do it again." One corner of her lips turned upward in a half-smile, and she winked. She freaking winked.

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a guarantee."

“I’d be more careful with your statements. What a shame it’d be if you challenged me and someone else got caught in the crossfire.” He peeked at my stomach. “I’d be devastated if my son never got to experience the joys of becoming a father.”

“What are you doing here, Michael?” Her voice made it clear she was done with his little game. “Call me a cynic, but I find it hard to believe you’re just an overzealous father caring for the son you almost beat to death. So what is it? It’s your brand of Twelve Steps? The first step: almost kill your son and his friends. Second step: get beat up by teenagers. Third step: drink your weight in alcohol. Eleventh step: hopefully off a cliff. Twelfth step: fight the devil for the Hell Headquarters. If it’s any consolation, I put my money on you. Satan has no idea what he’s up against.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but you’re too small a nuisance for me to still be hung up on what happened.”

“Is that why you’re trying to intimidate us when we’re alone? Because you don’t care enough?” That battle would be fascinating if I wasn’t so scared. That was the man who almost killed the man I loved so many years ago. He was the one who assaulted the small woman who was defending me. The man who not only knew who I was, but also that I was pregnant with his son’s baby.

“I’m just a businessman making up for lost money.” My confusion was clear, contrary to Mia, from whose profile I could see appeared unaffected. “One thing I learned: sometimes you have to put losers to rest. Pausing my life months ago to come to this forsaken place was a necessity. I

just wanna do my job and count my profits. I'm not here for you. *Yet*. Although I must admit, seeing how grown up you are is definitely a bonus." He gazed up at her scarred eyebrow, the result of his nefarious work. "Who knows? We have no use for Isabella and my son. Getting rid of them will be as easy as it'll be a relief. Maybe we could let go of old scars, start over, and raise Benjamin's kid together. I have so much to teach you both."

He must have been an idiot—or incredibly confident—for not anticipating that threatening her family and trying to touch her face was a terrible idea. Right before he reached her scar, Mia grabbed his forearm, twisted it behind his back, and used the momentum to throw him against the wall, making one of the decorative plates fall. She kicked the back of his right knee, forcing him to squat until her mouth could reach his ear, and fisted his hair with her free hand.

"I advise you to leave this town before your son sees you. But I can assure you, whatever shit you try, no one, not even him, can stop me from coming at you." She pulled his hair back and hit his head against the wall. Then she forcefully pushed him away, making him stumble.

All pretenses gone, he turned around and stared at her with hatred. "You should've let things go. Ending that piece of shit I call 'son' is long overdue. But destroying you is a pleasure I've been saving for last." He stepped closer to touch her again when a police car passed by the coffee shop on a routine patrol, making him rethink his intentions. "I came to count my money, but I can't wait to fulfill my old promises. Don't even bother watching your back. I'm coming for you, and I'm not coming alone. This time, your big brother won't

be able to save you. He'll be hardly able to recognize you after I'm done."

"Just tell me the time and place, and I'll be happy to put an end to this. But you're sorely mistaken if you think you can come to my town, threaten my family, and get away with it."

She motioned to go to him, and without containing himself, he stepped back. Noticing his show of weakness, he threw me a kiss to save face. "Such a pleasure to meet you, Isabella. I can't wait for next time." He pointed his finger at Mia, simulating a gun, and mimicked a shooting, blowing the tip of his finger. "I'll be back."

"I'll be waiting."

Mia watched him until he was gone, walked to the glass windows to make sure he was far away, and mumbled his license plate to herself as he drove away, trying to memorize it.

Remembering I was close, she turned to me with worried eyes. "I'm so sorry for that. Are you okay?" Feeling like I could finally let it out, I burst out crying and let her envelop me in her small arms. "I'm so sorry for getting you involved in that."

She calmed me down, although I was still weeping. "You have nothing to be sorry for. He was the one to...oh my God, all the things he said to you. About us. About you." I broke out crying again, feeling it was getting hard to breathe.

"Don't you worry about that. Focus on your Little Bean. Maybe we should go to the hospital and check that

you're okay."

I shook my head emphatically. "I just wanna...get out of here." She nodded and took my hand, guiding me to her car.

I let her help me inside. I barely registered that she was holding my wrist to feel my pulse, counting my heartbeats quietly. "The guys must be waiting at my place. But before we go home, I think we should get a couple of things out of the way first."

She went back quickly to lock the front door of the coffee shop, then ran to her car, climbing onto the driver's seat. We drove in silence, and I didn't even have the strength to question her about where we were going. "Mia?" She glanced at me, her big doe eyes disguising her worry. "What do you think this all means?"

Under other circumstances, I'd be happy she was being honest. I wasn't ready for her blunt truth, though.

"I think Michael just declared war."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IZZIE

I felt a huge weight inside me, and that had nothing to do with my Little Bean. After our encounter with Michael, Mia tried to convince me to go to the hospital, but even though I was shaky, it wasn't necessary. We had more urgent things to solve.

Like getting a restraining order.

After going to a pharmacy to measure my blood pressure (Mia was adamant about it), we went straight to the police station to press charges for harassment and stalking, and to file a report for a restraining order.

I was exhausted, afraid, hungry, and beyond sad, getting a glimpse of the hell Ben was subjected to. I rubbed my belly, thinking about my son and how much love and care he already had.

Between Benjamin's father and my mother, we could barely amount to one parent, and the excuse of a parent that we had only hurt us. Even before being born, our son had more love than any of us could ever dream of.

Mia was visibly worried about me, glancing in my direction every so often, then looking back at the road as she drove to her place. We stayed quiet for a long time, both of us lost in our thoughts.

As I was trying to come to terms with what was going on, besides caring for my unborn baby, she was trying to hide her feelings. I knew it had to be hard for her. After everything Michael did to her and Ben, I knew she was having a hard time trying to think of ways to stop the devil.

But as I noticed was her usual *modus operandi*, she was putting herself in the back of her mind to care for everyone else.

“Are you okay?”

I didn't know how to respond to that.

“How did he live with that...thing? How was Ben able to survive that?” Mia was pale, her skin fairer than usual, and she looked sad at my rhetorical question. Not so rhetorical, as I knew the answer. “He was able because of you and your family.” My gratitude was transparent.

Self-consciously, Mia shifted in her seat. “He's a part of our family, we couldn't do it any differently.”

“That's the thing, you could. If it weren't for you all, he wouldn't be the Benjamin I know today, he wouldn't be *my* Benjamin. I don't know what I'd do if I hadn't met the man he is today.”

“It's a good thing you did meet him, and you don't have to worry about what-ifs. He's your Benjamin, the one you love.” She smiled at me, albeit tiredly.

Her eyes became more serious. “It won't be easy disclosing what happened today to him. This will open a door to a past we thought was long locked. If you don't mind, I'll tell him.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of me going away.” She started nibbling the inside of her lips. “I know Ben and I had some issues in the beginning, but I know my place now, both our places. We belong to each other, and I’m not going anywhere. I know you’re worried about his reaction to all this, and so am I. But I’m worried because of him, and not because of us as a couple. As a family. No matter how he reacts, I’m gonna be right by his side.”

Even though her eyes were still cautious, her shoulders relaxed. Despite Michael being a threat to her as hell—he made that abundantly clear—Mia’s first urges were to care for us. If I hadn’t realized it already, that would be the time I’d see she was someone I wanted in my corner.

For better or for worse, I knew she’d do everything to protect us. I just hoped it wouldn’t be for worse.

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“You didn’t,” I reassured her. “You’re caring for us, and I’m grateful for that. But we’re in a better place.” As she contemplated what I said, I added, “That being said, I think you should be the one to tell him.”

“What?” She startled and glanced at me. “But you just said—”

“I know. I just meant there’s no need for you to fight our battles for us. You’ve been carrying our burden for a long time, and it’s time for you to rest a little. But this situation... you know about it more than I do. You were there when everything happened, you were there when he needed you, and

as much as I want to understand it, only you can convey what this truly means for him and his demons. Yours as well.”

“Tomorrow, we rest,” she whispered, and I didn’t understand.

I rubbed my belly, getting a light relief knowing my baby was still safe. “This must not be easy for you.”

She tightened her small hands on the steering wheel, then took a deep breath and ignored my comment. “I’ll talk to him. I’d like for you to be around, though. And Zach.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”



After we pulled over to her house, she turned off the engine, and with one hand on the handbrake and the other draped over the steering wheel, she took a deep breath.

“Are you afraid?” I asked.

“About his reaction? We can deal with it.” I liked that she said “we” instead of “I.” But that wasn’t what I meant.

“About this Michael situation. Are you afraid?”

Shifting her head, she looked resolutely into my eyes. “We won’t let anything happen to you or the Little Bean.”

“I’m afraid of what might happen to Ben. I don’t trust that man, and it was clear how intent he was on destroying us.” My voice was shaking as much as I was.

Mia turned fully to me and took my hands in her small ones. “I give you my word that nothing will happen to Benny.

I'm making myself personally responsible for this. I won't let anything touch your family. I guarantee you that no one will harm you, Benny, or our Little Bean."

What about her? Would someone make sure Mia didn't get hurt?

Before I could ask her, she pushed her door open and got out of the car. She opened my door and helped me climb out as well. I wasn't in that stage of the pregnancy yet, but I appreciated her support.

We entered through the front door, and I heard the distant sound of the television from the other room. It was on, but the volume was low. It was just white noise, while Zach and Ben talked animatedly about something in the living room. My heart was saddened, knowing we were about to disrupt that peaceful moment.

When Ben saw me, his eyes lit up, and his lips stretched into a full, constantly mischievous grin. He lazily headed my way, in all his sexy glory, to greet me. "Hey, love."

"Hi, sweetie," Mia responded before I could answer, making me giggle. He smiled at her before giving me a deep kiss. It was brief but intense, with his tongue teasing mine seductively. When he pulled back a little, he nibbled the corner of my lips, making me shiver.

"Hi, babe." His eyes turned bright at my term of endearment.

Then, to my delight, he bent down and kissed my belly over my clothes. "Hey, Little Bean."

Still in a haze after his welcoming kiss, I looked up to see Mia laying a kiss on Zach's cheek, right before pouring her love on her furry companion. Hugo's butt wiggled so much, his whole body shook at seeing his momma.

Stroking my belly, Ben turned to her in mock indignation. "Fancy of you to show up. You've been out of the Company for hours. Where have you been?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "That's how you're gonna greet me?" She sniffed the air. "From what I can tell, you haven't made dinner yet. It's unbelievable." She planted her hands on her hips. "I work my ass off all day long, and you don't even have the decency of having a warm meal waiting for me."

"Would it kill you to give a call or send a text saying you'd be late? The kids don't even remember what you look like." He faked a crying voice, making me laugh.

"Oh my God, you're such a pain in my ass. That's why I sleep with other men before coming home!"

Even though we were chuckling, I could still hear Zach mumbling, "I didn't need to hear that."

"Sorry, Zee, you were a casualty in what I think was a fair argument." Mia kissed him again, this time on the side of his head.

Their closeness and how freely they showed their love was inspiring. I hoped to raise my kids to be as open about their feelings as they were. *Kids*. Apparently, I wanted to expand our family beyond our Little Bean. I hoped Ben was open to that.

As I saw the subtle change in Mia's demeanor, I remembered we had a lot to deal with first, before popping out multiple kids.

Zach also noticed something was different, sitting up straighter on the couch, and staring at her. She gave him a sad smile and went to the little table on the corner to pour two glasses of scotch, one for Ben, and another one for Zach. Being so different from what she drank, Ben tensed. I hadn't understood yet why she had that cart if she didn't drink alcohol. Then I realized she didn't have it for her. It was for her family.

“What's going on, Mia?”

Before she answered, she tipped her head to the armchair, in a silent invitation to Ben to sit down. She headed to the fridge and grabbed two bottles of water, one for her, and another one for me.

Zach ran to the other room to turn the TV off and came back to sit on the couch as Mia toed off her shoes and sat next to him, sideways. She perched herself on the armrest and rested her criss-crossed legs on the cushions.

Ben took my hand, and we both went to the armchair, but instead of both of us sitting together, I sat on it as Ben leaned on its armrest, with his feet on the floor. More than anything, I wanted to sit on his lap and hug him, but I knew he'd need his space to digest the news. I was grateful I had Hugo, who brought his toy to sit with me and boop my belly.

Ben and Zach both sipped their drink, while Mia played with the label around her closed bottle of water.

Without waiting for either of them to ask again, she dropped the bomb. “Michael is back in town.”

After a moment of silence, Zach rubbed one of his hands on his face, clearly in distress. “Fuck.”

Ben was worriedly quiet. Until he stood up, threw his glass against the wall, near the fireplace, and boomed, “*That son of a bitch!*”

Mia stared at the broken glass, the liquid running down the wall, and muttered to herself with eyes slightly narrowed, “Uh...I should’ve guessed that. Maybe giving him something made of glass wasn’t a good idea.”

“How long?” He shook with rage.

“Apparently, for a few months.” She sighed deeply. “He knows about Izzie and the baby.”

“I’m gonna kill that fucker!” Gripping his hair, Ben looked like a caged beast. “How do you know?”

“He’s been following and keeping tabs on her, especially on the bakery.” She was nothing if not a straight shooter.

“*What?*” He turned furious eyes at me. “Are you fucking crazy? Why the hell didn’t you tell me that?” I knew his anger was taking the front seat. More than that, his eyes showed undeniable fear. I knew he wasn’t lashing out at me. He was scared. Before I could even respond, Mia intervened.

“Back off, Benjamin.” Her tone was hard as she stood up. “She had no way of knowing who he was, so watch your tone.”

As he was about to freak out on her, Zach stood and enunciated calmly, yet firmly, “You better calm down, Ben. Now.”

“Calm down? *Calm down?* How do you expect me to calm down? The devil’s spawn is back in town, harassing my woman, and you think the answer is to be calm?” His voice wavered at the end.

“Yes, I do. We need to understand what’s going on and then act on it. Losing our minds won’t get anything done. I’m gonna tell you again. Calm. Down.”

Breathing hard, hands on his hips visibly trembling, he shifted to engage with Mia again, working hard to keep his voice still. “What happened?”

Crossing her arms, she leaned back against the armrest. “I didn’t know about him being here either. I was with Izzie leaving the bakery when he approached us. He was less than friendly and tried to intimidate her, then—”

“Wait a second. You were *leaving* the bakery? Izzie sent me a text hours ago, saying you were leaving.” His rage was boiling out of control again. Misplaced another time. “What the fuck, Mia?! Michael’s been following Isabella and my baby for months, you learned he was in town, and it didn’t occur to you that, I don’t know, *I should be informed of that?*” His voice gradually raised. “You, better than anyone, know the man he is. The first thing you should’ve done was tell me.” He threw his hands through his hair. “I can’t believe you could be so irresponsible as to not disclose it to me the moment you learned what was going on.”

“Excuse me?” She was indignant, rightfully so, as she raised from her leaning, standing tall. As tall as her short frame would allow.

“You were supposed to be a professional about it and check your priorities.” He was lashing out at the wrong person, fear moved him, but he was crossing a line. I was afraid of the damage it could do between them.

“Watch it, Benjamin! You know Mia can more than handle whatever situation that’s thrown at her. She did it when we were kids, and she’s doing it now.” Zach’s words were full of meaning.

Mia was fuming and trying hard not to lose it on Ben. Before things could go south, I turned to him, stopped his pacing, and placed my hands on his face. “Babe, please, look at me. We came home as soon as possible, and everything is under control for now. Please, let’s not take this so far that we could never go back. We’re fine now, we’re safe.”

“But that’s the thing, we’re not fine, and we’re certainly not safe.” There was such turmoil in his eyes. His fear, just like his anger, was palpable, and that broke my heart a little for that impetuous, loving man. He shifted again to Mia. “And you knew better than that, you should’ve run to me as soon as—”

“You wanna know why I didn’t tell you before?” she asked, deceptively calm. “Because you *weren’t* my priority.” Before he could go ape shit about it, she raised her voice. “You weren’t my priority because I had more urgent matters to attend to. You didn’t even cross my mind.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel bet—”

“Wanna know why?” she interrupted. “Because my first instinct was to defuse the situation, make him talk as much as possible, so I could get a sense of what he wanted, and to get him the hell away from Izzie.”

Stepping closer to Benjamin, she went on. “My priority was to make sure Izzie and the baby were fine, safe, and healthy. My priority was to drive to the police station, so we could press charges and file a restraining order. So no, I wasn’t thinking about you or even planning on running to you. Because I’m a professional, I know what I’m supposed to do, and hell, I’m damn good at it!” She was on a roll.

“I understand you’re scared. That piece of shit is back, and we’re talking about your woman and your baby, they’re your family. But *damn it*, they’re mine as well. I’d rather *die*,” both men went sickly pale, “than let anything happen to any of them.” She pointed a finger at him. “So don’t you *dare* imply I’m not able to take care of my family!”

She was bravely trying to contain her hurt. “I need a few minutes, otherwise I’ll say something I might regret.” She turned on her heels, picked up her sneakers, and stormed off to the back yard.

Ben’s breath was labored, and he looked despondent as he watched her leave. Zach was standing with his hands on his hips and his head hanging low.

I went to Ben and hugged his waist. His arms immediately surrounded me, and he held me close. His heart was beating a mile a minute, and his eyes were desperate and tired. He looked down at me, hugged me even tighter, and placed his lips on my forehead, lingering.

“What should we do?” Fear was evident in his broken voice.

Zach approached us, placed a hand on Ben’s shoulder, and gave him a small yet confident smile. “We do what we always do. We present a united front and fight this head-on. No one, not even Michael, messes with our family and walks away unscathed.” He peered down at me. “We’ll deal with this and put it to bed.”

Sighing, he gazed outside. “I’ll go check on Mia before she decides she’d rather come back here and punch you in the face instead of calming down.”

Zach slapped Benjamin’s back twice, gave me a sweet kiss on the side of my head, and squeezed my arm in reassurance. “We’re gonna deal with this. Tomorrow, we rest.” He went outside, leaving me and Ben hugging in the middle of the room.

We stood there for a while, his right hand hugging me tight, while his left one roamed up and down on my back. I had a feeling it was more to make him calm down than for my benefit.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was so quiet, I could barely listen. “I’m so sorry for this mess, for bringing you into my life while I still have so many demons.” He looked so broken and ashamed.

“Stop this. Stop it right now,” I ordered softly, caressing his cheek, his short beard prickling my skin. “I didn’t sign up to be with you only when things are easy and fun. I want you, all of you, demons and all.”

I shifted his head slightly so he'd finally look at me, his amber eyes shining with dread and sadness. I kissed his closed lips with our eyes still open. It wasn't a sensual kiss, not even a passionate one. It was meant to reassure him I was all in. That I trusted him.

“That man changes nothing for us. We're a family no matter what. We'll deal with him however we can. Maybe he was able to hurt you in the past, but you're a grown man now. You rule your present and your future. I have so much faith in you.”

He took in a deep breath and shook his head. “You're right. I'm not gonna let him win this time. It's just...scary.” He gave me a timid smile. It couldn't be easy for him to admit that. “I have so much to lose. But again, I have so much to lose! So, I'll fight like hell to end this.” He dropped his forehead against mine and put his hands on the base of my neck. “I love you. I love you so much, it hurts. I didn't come this far just to let my past get in the way of me and the woman and baby who were meant to be mine. I'll fight for us. I'll fight for our family. I'll fight for our future.

“For so long, I went with the flow. Besides the Bryants, I never let anyone get too close to me. I don't want you just 'too close.' I want you all the way in. So I'll fight, because the only kind of life I want is the one by your side. One where you'll feel loved. Safe. Cherished. Mine.”

I was close to tears when he dipped his head and gave me a sweet kiss. So full of love and promises. I had no doubt he'd live up to them. I wasn't lying when I said I trusted him.

“I love you, too. I can’t wait to live the rest of our lives with each other. So let’s fight together.”

He grinned at me, his hands on my nape, then peered up at the yard through the glass doors. “I need to make amends.”

Nodding, I agreed, “You do. I admit I was scared, but she was so good to me, so good at dealing with everything. She doesn’t deserve—”

“I know.” He sighed again. “I freaked out and said awful things I don’t even believe in. But as I said, I have so much to lose. Those two out there...” He shook his head. “I can’t even imagine what my life would be like if I didn’t have them.” He kissed me again softly and headed outside.

I understood that all too well. I hadn’t lived most of my life with them. Yet I was afraid of even considering losing one of those two wonderful people.

As I watched Ben get out, I ignored the dread growing inside of me, and I prayed we never had to experience what it was like to live without either of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BEN

As a peace offering, I'd picked some ice cream sandwiches from the freezer before heading to them. They were Mia's, so I was using her stuff as the offering, but I didn't have much else to go on.

I walked outside and saw them sitting on the porch steps. Zach had his arm over Mia's shoulders, and she was nestled against her brother. They were silent, just enjoying each other's company. That was Zach's primary way of calming someone. He'd be quiet and let the other person take the lead either to vent, yell, or just be. His presence was serene enough to calm us down, no matter how mad we were.

They didn't need to look back to know it was me approaching. "I'm not really in the mood to talk to you right now. I might still say something hurtful, it's not safe yet."

"I'll take my chances. If you lose your mind, I most certainly deserve it."

She stared up at me with annoyed eyes, trying to conceal her hurt, as I sat on the other side of her. "Don't be humble. I'm mad at you, I want to be mad, and you'll ruin this experience for me if you're apologetic."

Zach and I chuckled before I waved my full hands. "I come bearing gifts." They looked at my treats unimpressed,

and Mia raised one single eyebrow. Once again, that raised eyebrow was intimidating. “I didn’t wanna lose my window of opportunity to talk to you by going out to buy something.”

“I don’t need your gifts.” She huffed...as she snatched one sandwich from my hand.

As I gave the other to Zach, he turned to his sister. “I’ll let you two talk. I’ll pick up Gabe and Haley from Mom and Dad’s. She needed to, uhm...buy some stuff, and I promised Gabe I’d play soccer with him, so we might be a little late. I’ll bring them tonight, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll leave the front porch light on for you.” She inclined her head so he could kiss her cheek.

He did so and stood up. “Don’t forget to lock the door.”

“I won’t. Love you.”

“I love you, too.” Then he looked at me. They always did that. Whenever one of them would say those words, they’d look at me, including me in their professed feelings, without making me feel self-conscious or pressed to say it back.

When we heard the door being closed, she unwrapped her snack. “Where is Izzie?”

“I think she’s watching TV with that furry beast.”

Mia eyed me sideways. “Badmouthing Hugo won’t get you in my good graces.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Izzie is with the goodest boy. She wanted to give us privacy to talk.”

She stayed silent, and I didn't know how to approach the subject. She let me take my time to organize my thoughts. Maybe that was a Bryant thing.

"I shouldn't have said that." I took a bite of the cold desert and munched on it. "I trust you with my life. Our lives. It's just...I freaked out. I know it's not an excuse, but..." I sighed deeply. I wasn't sure how to explain my feelings without showing her my fears. Which was stupid. She'd seen me at my absolute worst. She watched my many mistakes and helped me fix them. I wanted to be more open about what I felt. I promised Isabella I'd try, and I owed them both that.

"Maybe I was naive, but I thought this was over and he belonged in my ugly past. Now he's back, targeting my family. Again. Once again, you were the one standing up against him. He threatened you already, and the last time you had an encounter, he..." Even my sigh was broken. "I'm not only scared for Izzie. The last time you were together, he assaulted you and threatened you. He's just done it again. What'll happen next?" My shaken voice was a dead giveaway about my fears.

She looked at me with disbelief in her eyes. "Wait. So that's what this is about?" She shook her head and mumbled while rolling her eyes. "Oh my God, you're exhausting."

"I'm serious!"

"And so am I. I can take care of myself. We all can. We're not those clueless kids anymore. We grew up and made a name for ourselves. We were trained and tested, we're experienced and smarter. Come on, we protect people for a

living. We're not winging it as we did back in the day. As we were *forced* to do."

I haven't thought about it that way. I was still seeing things from the beaten boy's perspective, not from the grown professional.

"I understand this is disturbing. It's been so long, and we've lived such a free life, now he's back and old feelings are resurfacing." She shrugged. "I think he's your biggest dragon yet to be slayed, and now you have so much to lose."

"I also had a lot to lose that day. I still do. Izzie and my baby are part of the family I'm building. But you, Zach, and your parents, hell, Haley and Gabe, you're all my family. I've already almost lost it all." I felt my heartbeat speeding up as I ran my free hand through my hair. "Now he's back. Fuck, I believed this was over." He needed to be stopped.

"We need to be smart about it. Treat it like a case we're working on, and not a personal threat."

"How are we supposed to do that?"

"I have no idea." She snorted. "Right now, I'm treating it like a personal threat, and not a case we're working on."

"What do you think he's doing back in town?"

She took in a deep breath and stared ahead. "You're not gonna be happy about it."

"I'm already not happy about it, so there's no harm."

She played with the wrapper of her long-gone snack. "I think he's somehow involved in Santiago Cruz's murder."

My eyes snapped to her, who was still not looking at me. I stopped breathing for a beat. It was so much worse than I imagined.

“Why do you think that?”

“During our...chat, he mentioned something about making up for lost money, being here to put losers to rest, and he let it slip he’s been in town for a few months. He was probably here to receive the drugs. When they never came, he was part of the murder. The guy had lost that huge shipment, which cost them millions of dollars. Remember? The one with nearly two hundred bricks of cocaine and the horses?”

My heart was galloping, and my stomach was in knots. “You mean the shipment *you* were responsible for stopping? Damn it, Mia, he’s here after you!”

“We don’t know that.” Even she didn’t believe this.

“Really?” My *ees* were too long and my *elles* too pronounced even for my ears. “So let’s recap, shall we? Almost twenty years ago—”

She rolled her eyes. “Man, this is gonna take long.”

I ignored her. “You hit Michael—repeatedly, I might add—and stopped him from hurting me...”

“Killing you.”

“Then he threatened to kill you.”

“He didn’t say it *per se*. He said he’d be the last thing I saw.”

“And that’s a lot better.” My sarcasm was oozing from me. “Years later, you arrested Pablo Salazar—Carlos Gomes’s

right hand. You know, the same Carlos Gomes who'd been supplying the better part of the country with cocaine and is suspected of being involved with human trafficking."

"In my defense, I didn't know he was so close to the kingpin when I arrested Pablo."

"Yes, you did."

"Yes, I did."

"And I don't think they care if you knew or not, especially since he spent the last few years in jail."

"They don't know it was me, I don't think they had my full name. They probably even think *The Bryant Prodigy*," she made a face as she said it, "is a man. You know because women are so inferior and all." She huffed in disgust, and despite being an infuriating and misogynistic notion I was sure they had, I chose to ignore that as well.

"Fast forward to months ago, when for some crazy reason you figured out an unassuming truck transporting two horses that were just supposed to breed or whatever was also transporting a huge amount of cocaine, evaluated in millions of dollars in market value. The money they lost."

"They were bringing the horses from down the country to little ole here for breeding and training. Please." She scoffed, not at all fazed by my retrospective.

"If that wasn't enough, the guy transporting the animals was arrested, and Santiago Cruz, the one who sent them and was responsible for the drugs, was murdered in the countryside nearby, when Michael, the same Michael who threatened you almost two decades ago, came to this town to

‘put losers to rest’ and ‘count his money.’” I made quote signs with my fingers. “Am I forgetting something?” Before she could respond, I resumed. “Michael already has a vendetta against you for what happened when we were young, now you’re wanted for inflicting on them this huge financial loss. That arrest was significant, and people heard about it all over the country.”

“Instead of being mad, you should thank me. We’ve closed a lot of missions with the government after that. Besides, my name wasn’t on display on the news. Again, they probably don’t know it was a woman.”

“I can assure you Michael knows. And if he doesn’t, he most certainly doesn’t care.” When I saw the change in her demeanor, her eyes becoming sharp and her clenching jaw, I knew there was something she wasn’t telling me. “What did he say to you?” She nibbled the inside of her lips. “Mia. What did he say to you?” My voice was clipped.

“Please, don’t go all ballistic about it. As I said before, we know how to deal with this kind of thing, and we’ll solve this. To say Michael’s words, we’ll put it to rest. That’s an interesting expression, don’t you think? ‘Put it to—’”

“Mia!” I interrupted her babble.

She took in a deep breath. “That was another point of suspicion for me. He was paid to do whatever he did. He said he was already counting his money, but he was more intent on making good on his old promises, then he said...you know... something about watching my back.”

She wasn’t looking at me, which was a good thing. I was sure I was about to transform into an evil gremlin. “Fuck.

Fuck! I can't believe he'd...I'm gonna..." I stood up and started pacing as I vomited every bad word I could remember.

"Good Lord, you kiss Izzie with that foul mouth? You're hurting my proper and prude ears."

I was still huffing and pacing her back yard as she watched, still seated on the porch steps, her arms draped on her bent knees. "I'm sure you've heard worse."

"I'm a lady, I shouldn't be hearing that."

"Have you heard, Danny? It's a miracle Sofia is such a cutie, what with everything he says. And he curses in two languages." I signaled the number two with my fingers.

"What you said was rude. I'm officially offended right now, and I expect your apologies. In writing."

"I'm not gonna write you an apology. What the hell kind of lady are you? You're wearing a shirt with a little bird shooting two guns and saying, '*Pew Pew Madafakas.*'"

"But the fabric is so soft." She roamed her little hands over her shirt, looking down at her torso. "Here, feel my sleeve, it's really comfortable." She raised her arm in my direction.

"I'm not gonna feel...I won't touch...why are we talking about this?"

"I figured you needed a distraction." She shrugged one shoulder.

My shoulders fell, just like my head, and I felt despondent and helpless. But for whatever reason, arguing about her *ladyness* helped ease some of my anxiety. I sat back

down next to her, and she leaned her head on my shoulder, so I leaned my head on hers. “You’re in so much danger. God, I can’t believe this is happening again.”

“Actually, and I can’t believe I’m saying this to you, we’re all in danger. It’s not just about me.”

“But this is so much bigger than us, even than him. He’s here to collect his threat, but he’s not alone. I’m still wrapping my mind around the fact that he seemed to be involved with a cartel. And you were central in bringing them down a notch with the arrests and stopping the shipment.”

“Again, they don’t know who I am, and we were all involved. They don’t know my name, they’re probably out there looking for a man right now. I’m far away from their radar. We should focus our energies on bringing Michael down.”

“He made himself abundantly clear that he’s here for you—”

“And you.” She pointed.

“We need to make it stop.” I raised my head and rubbed my hands over my face. “Please, God, make it stop.”

She looked down, still playing with the wrapper of her snack. Cautiously, she raised her eyes to me, and I could see her determination overruling her distress. “If it comes to it, we need to bring him down.”

“That’s the idea, we get him arrested—”

“That’s not what I mean.” She took in a fortifying breath. Her eyes focused elsewhere, she nodded her head, making peace with whatever she was thinking. “If it comes to

that, we need to be ready to stop it. Once and for all. He won't stop until he's stopped." She turned her body to me. "What I'm saying is that, if I need to, I *will* kill him. I need to know you're okay with it."

I was at a loss for words. I'd never imagined there would come a day when I'd hear her say that.

"I know there's no love lost between you two, but he's still your biological father, and I need to know you won't resent me or feel guilty if it comes to it."

"This is not your battle."

"Yes, it is. It's been for quite some time. You're not fighting this alone, and it pisses me off that you're trying to leave us out of it."

"I can't let you carry that burden." My voice broke, and I wasn't comfortable with the knot forming in my throat.

"Taking care of my family isn't a burden. I'm sure Zach and Danny feel the same way. Just like my parents and the rest of us. If we need to, there won't be a shred of hesitation from any of us."

I could only nod at her words and ignore the dread growing inside me. "I won't resent you. His being gone would be a dream come true, no matter how ugly that sounds." I looked straight into her big brown eyes. "But I need you to promise me you won't get hurt in the process." My words came out in urgency. "Promise me you won't go down along with him. No matter what happens, I need you to be safe. Even if we can't end this now, we can find a way to do that later.

Promise me you'll be safe and that you won't put yourself at risk to keep us unharmed."

She shook her head, her eyes full of contrition. "You know I can't promise you that. We can't control what happens, Benny. We both know handling this comes with risks, and if given the opportunity, I'll go all the way down. This has been going on for far too long." Before I could argue, she placated me. "I promise you I'll work my very best to end this with as little loss as possible. That's the best I can offer you, because I can't lie to you. I never will. Just like I know you'll never lie to me."

I was too emotional—and frightened—to answer her. I just drew myself closer to her, enclosed her hand in mine, and we stayed in silence for a while.

I spent the better part of my early years being beaten up by the man who was supposed to love me. I learned from him that I was useless and a nuisance. I grew up believing in his words, so when I met the Bryants, not only did I have a hard time letting them in and caring for me, I felt guilty for having something so good in my life even being such a bad person—as I was told.

Then I met Izzie and felt my heart expand almost to the point of suffocating me. It'd been scary at first—it still was sometimes—and all-consuming. When I found out I was having a baby, my world collapsed.

After a while, I understood that everything I was feeling was so foreign to me because I was in love—something I'd never been before—and that I was looking

forward to the future and whatever it'd bring me because I had my woman by my side and my boy on his way.

Cue the guilt. How could I be so happy being the person I was? Wasn't it wrong that everything in my life was working out? If anyone deserved to have it all, it was Zach, yet he was still waiting for a traumatized woman to give herself and her baby boy fully to him. Or maybe Danny, who was devoted to her little girl and had to put up with his dreadful, soon-to-be—hopefully—ex-wife. And Mia, that loyal and selfless, little spitfire, who was willing to put herself at insurmountable risk to protect the people she loved.

In a rational capacity, I knew my guilt was a result of my upbringing. By building a family and loving someone, I wasn't getting in the way of Mia's love life or muddling Zach's attempt at having his own family, nor was I turning Danny's wife into a hateful person. I was still a work in progress, I knew I'd have to fight that sense of unworthiness from time to time.

But the question still nagged at me.

“Are you seeing someone?”

She was startled at my odd question. “Where is this coming from?”

“Don't you wanna be in a relationship?”

She looked brokenheartedly at me. “You're bored already, aren't you? Is it because I'm better than you at Pictionary? Do you want to see other people?” She gasped. “Are the sparkles gone?”

“Come on, you little witch.” I poked her side, making her laugh. “I’m serious. I’ve never seen you with anyone. Not in a relationship capacity anyway.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’m exactly looking for someone.”

“Don’t you wanna find your better half?” I joked.

“That’s the thing. I’m already whole. I have two good halves.” She raised her free hand, its palm facing me, to better explain. “Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t mind finding someone who could add something good to my life, but I don’t need someone to complete me. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.” I bounced my head from side to side in thought. “Don’t you miss it, though?”

She thought for a while. “Sometimes. It’s not that easy, though. Especially considering what we do for a living. Most men are intimidated by that. Then they get intimidated by you and Zach. On that note, you’re really putting a damper on my sex life.”

“I never said sex life, I meant your love life. *Love*,” I emphasized.

“Oh, you’re so sweet. And naive.” She shook her head at me. “But they’re intimidated. I noticed from the few first dates I went on, that from the very beginning, they wanna control me. They’re not comfortable with a woman who does a *man’s job*.” She huffed again, rolling her eyes. “They seem to think I’m being braver than them or making more money. I don’t mean to sound conceited—”

I laughed at her worry. “Come on, Mia, I know you. You’re the farthest thing from conceited as you can be.”

“Thank you. It’s irking, really. Not only do they resent what I do for a living, they resent the men around me.”

“What do you mean?”

“They turn up their noses at my job, they try to diminish what I do so they can feel better about themselves. Then they meet you and Zach, or Danny and Dad, and instead of working on themselves to live up to what you all are, they make backhanded comments about you and me. Men claim to love independent women, as long as they’re not their women.” She snorted in all her *ladyness*. “Dating is so fun.”

I laughed at her dry voice but considered what she was saying. It shouldn’t be this hard for her.

“If I’m supposed to be with someone,” she resumed, “I want a partner. A man to fight by my side, root for me, and respect my choices. Someone encouraging who understands my job is important to me, and so is my family. I know this might sound silly, but I want him, whoever he is, to get along with you, and to be a good fit for me *and* for my family. Not someone who spends the better part of dinner time trying to make little of me and compete with the men in my life.”

She stared ahead again. “I look around me, and I see what I want. Look at Mom and Dad. After decades, they still love and respect each other. Then you have...well...” she cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered, “Zach and his love interest, who should remain unnamed.”

I chuckled at the worst-kept secret. “I wonder whom you’re talking about?”

She let out a light laugh. “You can’t deny he’s patient, though. The way he treats them is so beautiful.” I nodded in agreement. “And then there’s you.” She looked at me, smiling proudly.

“What about me?” I was a little afraid to ask, as I never expected to be a part of her relationship goals.

“Come on, look at how far you’ve come. You’re supportive of Izzie, you respect her fears, and you encourage her dreams. You went from running from anything resembling a relationship to running for Father Of The Year. You faced your deepest fears for them. And for you. Despite everything you thought you knew about yourself, you were brave enough to put in the effort to be better. Your journey is admirable, Benny.”

I’d never thought about it that way. I always felt like I was winging it, without a single clue as to how to navigate in such wild waters. But what I said to Izzie the other day was true—I had some really good examples of how to be a good partner. Hearing someone whose opinion I valued so much telling me I was doing a good job was humbling.

“Is it too much to ask? I just want someone to respect me...but who would also handcuff me to the bed every once in a while.”

“For God’s sake...”

“I wouldn’t mind some light spanking.”

“Please, stop.”

“And I’ve always been curious about choking.”

“I’m leaving right now.”

She cackled at my faux discomfort—not so faux, if I was being honest. “I see what true love looks like. I have a front row seat for it. I can’t settle for less than that.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“And I don’t need to. I’m surrounded by love. I know it’s not the same as the romantic kind, but I know I’m loved and cared for. My life is so full, I’m actually a little afraid of adding someone who would change this whole dynamic.” She squeezed my hand and gazed at me. “I feel like as long as I have you all in my life, I’m fine.”

I understood where she was coming from. My life was way brighter with Izzie and my coming boy. But despite my many demons, I was already a happy man.

I owed that to the person holding my hand, her brother, and her family. Even thinking about going on into my future without either of them made it hard to breathe. It was a paralyzing thought.

She shifted her body so she could face me and leaned back on the column of the porch, placing one foot on the top step and the other on the next one, bending up her knees. “I consider all that even when you all piss me off.”

I mirrored her stance to look at her. “What are you talking about? All we bring you is joy.” Her scoffing made me realize she wasn’t joking. “Seriously, what are you talking about?”

She was quiet for a while, and it was my turn to give her the time to organize her thoughts before speaking. It wasn't easy.

“I don't think you and Zach realize that. Sometimes you treat me like I'm not as part of the Company as you are. You undermine my suggestions, you try to leave me behind to do fewer on-field activities, leaving me with menial tasks, as if I couldn't handle them or you don't trust me enough to accomplish them.”

Her normally witty eyes were downcast, and I felt terrible. Had we really been this unfair?

“You act like I'm a little girl who needs to be handed everything, otherwise she won't know what to do. It annoys me, because I was never that girl to begin with. I know you wanna protect me, but I don't need your protection. I'm trained and professional. I know what I'm doing, as I've been doing it for quite some time, way before we started working together.” She shook her head. “I'm an equal, damn it.”

I didn't remember seeing her so disappointed. Only a few minutes ago, I'd listed a few of her many accomplishments. Over the years we decided to work together, she was fundamental in closing more cases than any of us—Zach, Danny, and me—combined.

Yet we still managed to be idiots.

I wracked my brain, trying to think of something to say. “I'm sorry.” And I meant it. “I'm the last person who should make you feel like that. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. I'm not just saying it.” I added when she started to refute my statement. “I owe you my whole life. From the

moment we met until now, you did nothing but save my sorry ass. I'll do better. I promise. I'll rein in my assholeness and treat you with the respect and trust you deserve." I rubbed my hands over my face. "I can't believe I've been such a jerk. To you of all people."

After a few moments, she stretched one of her legs, poked my foot with hers, and gave me a small smile. "You're okay sometimes. I should've told you that already, it's just not easy. I need to talk to Zach. But we're doing well, you know. We all have such great chemistry, I don't wanna jeopardize that by creating a ruse or an uncomfortable situation. I'm afraid Zach will refute me, and that will hurt. I think I'm cowardly trying to avoid the disappointment." Her tone was self-deprecating.

"You should talk to him. If he refuses to accept, make him see it your way. You're just as much a part of this Company as the two of us, even more so, since you were the one to come up with the idea and you're always solving our issues. We're complete jerks by making you feel like you should choose between making a stand or maintaining peace. I say you go for it and say your piece. He's the one who should deal with it, not you."

We stayed in silence for a few minutes, while she thought about what I said. I wasn't done.

"I think this is your fault."

"How do you figure?" Her eyes snapped at me.

"You spoiled us."

"What?" She snorted in confusion.

“I know Zach is always trying to put out fire cans. But you’re the one who’s always making sure everything is running smoothly, everyone is taken care of. You’re the one who started feeding me when we were kids. Then you fought off Michael. You hired Haley when she had zero experience and a crying baby. You opened your house to them, even though we knew nothing about her. You offered Danny a job when he was trying to get back to civilian life. You made me see my errors in the way I was treating Izzie and helped me get her back. Yet you never ask for help.”

“Wouldn’t all that make you realize I’m capable?”

“You’d think so. But I guess we’re so used to you running around fixing our mistakes without complaint that we stopped considering you expect things from us. You know, like respect and stuff.”

“And that’s my fault?”

“Pretty much, yes.” I smirked at her.

“Why, thank you for enlightening me. I had no idea I was supposed to request your respect after cleaning up your messes. Duly noted.” Her sarcasm was right on point.

She sighed, as if feeling all the weight we inadvertently put on her shoulders, and once again I felt awful. “I’ll talk to him.” It was clear she was dreading that conversation. Not because Zach would mistreat her. He adored her. But that was a confrontation she wasn’t comfortable initiating. In all the years we’d known each other, I never saw them having so much as an argument. They disagreed here and there, but it was always easy-solving and soon forgotten.

I could understand her wariness, but Zach would listen to her. At least I hoped so.

We stayed outside in companionable silence for so long, the colors in the sky started to change. A soothing orange with hues of pink was taking place. I should probably go home, but I didn't wanna leave just yet, and I saw earlier Izzie rummaging through Mia's fridge and pantry, so I knew she was fine.

She could've come out, but she wanted me and Mia to have our time, and I loved her even more for that. I needed that reprieve and that truthful moment, and it filled my heart with love and respect that Izzie was not only fine with it, she also encouraged it. She was a marvelous woman, and I'd try my best to deserve her.

After a while, Mia stretched and broke the silence. "Man, I need to eat something."

"God, I'm so sorry. Are you feeling okay? You should've eaten sooner." I stared at her face attentively, roaming my eyes to see if I could find any sign of dizziness or distress.

"I'm fine. It's just been a weird day. I'm happy we got to talk, though. I missed that." Her grin was timid.

"I'm glad, too. I think we both needed it."

"I'm not in the mood to cook, I'll buy something for us. Is there anything Izzie isn't supposed to eat or something she's been craving lately?"

I gave her my most devilish smirk. "Me."

“She’s not supposed to eat you, or she’s been craving you?”

“She most definitely craves me. Oh boy, does she crave me? We’ve been having really good trimesters, you know.” It’d been that good. There was something about the way your woman couldn’t get enough of you that just made you feel like you could take on the world.

“I hate to break it to you, but her hormones are the ones to blame.”

“I’m grateful for them, because I’ve been collecting the fruits.”

“That’s it, Walker. You’re eating Hugo’s food. Don’t worry, it’s organic, you’ll still be able to perform tonight.”

I chuckled but was looking forward to another performance. “Pizza is fine.”

“Pizza, it is.” She fished her phone from her jeans pocket and proceeded to order our dinner. Right then, during such a mundane occurrence, I felt the urge to say what I should’ve said a long time ago. Repeatedly.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. It’ll be here soon enough. The delivery guy is fast and super friendly.”

I was sure he was.

“Not for that.” I took a deep breath. “Thank you,” I looked straight into her eyes, “for everything.”

She never did things expecting something in return. She didn’t need my gratitude, even though she had it. She

could've dismissed me and said it was no big deal. But it was important to me, and she knew that. So, I was even more grateful when she didn't make little of such a huge moment for me, while also not making a big fuss about it.

Her lips stretched into a small smile, and she nodded in acknowledgment, no words needed.

“I know it's long overdue. We've been through so much together, the last few months were even crazier. It's come to my attention that I need to be more vocal about my feelings.” She gazed inside the empty living room through the closed glass doors, understanding what—or rather who—made me wake up to it. “So thank you. For absolutely everything, all the uncountable things you've done for me.” Then came what I thought would be the hardest part, but it was deeply fulfilling. “I love you.”

Her eyes filled with unshed tears as she grinned at me. She raised from where she was seated and offered me her hand to help me stand up. Then she surprised me by circling her arms around my waist and burrowing her face into my chest, not caring that her glasses bent in the process. I hugged her back just as tightly and leaned my chin on the top of her head.

“I love you, too,” she choked out.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Izzie through the glass doors. She beamed, overjoyed, tears running down her face. I felt so grateful for those two women who, very differently, taught me how to love.

As I hugged who couldn't have been a better little sister if we shared the same blood lineage, I wondered why it

took me so long to be open about my feelings. It was empowering and liberating.

But it was fine, because that was only the first of many hugs we'd share. Mia would always be around for when I needed another shot of endorphins.

Right?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BEN

As the leaves started to fall, my anxiety grew. So many things seemed to be happening at once, and I wasn't ready for either of them. Right when we needed to focus on our investigation about *El Rey Alacrán*—what with Michael seemingly being involved—we had an influx of new cases, both private and from the government.

We were stretched thin trying to deal with everything, while still managing to keep a close watch on our private lives. Mia had been bugging us for recruiting more people, and she was right. We couldn't handle everything by ourselves for much longer. It wasn't like we couldn't afford more people. With all the new cases we were being assigned to, the cash flood was sweet.

Which was great, since I was about to become a father.

That was another point of dread. Not so much anymore because I didn't think I could handle it. That was still a scary thought, but what tormented me was knowing Michael was somewhere out there, keeping a close eye on us.

Since his encounter with Izzie and Mia, he was radio silent. That proved to be way worse than hearing from him. The uncertainty was taking a toll on us. We didn't know how he planned to strike, so we were extra careful with our family.

We increased the security in our places—including Rosie and Jackson’s. We never let Izzie, Gabe, Sofia, and Haley alone. The kids even started to hang out at the Company more often. Every time one of them had to go somewhere, Zach, Mia, Danny, or I would tag along. That proved once again we needed more people.

Izzie was closer to her due date, and I was doing my best to not freak out. The highlight, though, was that I wasn’t comfortable with us living in separate homes, especially after the baby was born. So after the Michael debacle, I finally got the courage to ask her to move in with me. I was exhilarated when she said yes, without an ounce of hesitancy.

She planned on sublocating the loft above the cafeteria, but so far there was no tenant, so she still used the space to rest whenever it got to be too much to run around the coffee shop.

After she was settled, we decorated the nursery. All that was left to do was get our baby. I was equal parts excited and anxious. I couldn’t wait to see his face, but I’d rather see it after we got Michael.

Life had other plans for us. As ready as we thought we might be, we couldn’t be prepared enough.

“I can’t believe I missed your appointment today,” I lamented.

“*It was so boring,*” she placated me over the phone. “*Just measuring my weight and blood pressure, then the doctor measured our Little Bean, who continues to grow healthy and strong.*” No matter what she said, I was mad at myself for not being with her. Even though it wasn’t my fault.

“I wanted to see him again,” I whined.

“*I know.*” She giggled. “*I asked the doctor for a picture. I’m nearing forty weeks now, so I’ll have a couple more appointments you can attend.*”

“This is so messed up.”

“*And none of this is your fault,*” she reminded me. Izzie made it her purpose always to tell me what was happening wasn’t to be pinned on me. “*You’re out of town working. You didn’t leave me unattended. I have with me my own security detail.*”

“*Hey, Benny,*” Mia greeted, probably having heard through the speakerphone.

“How is everything there? Is Izzie feeling fine? How was the appointment? Is there anything she’s not telling me?”

“*Why, thank you, I’m fine. How about you?*” she sassed.

“Mia—” I groaned in warning, just to be scolded by my woman.

“*Be nice to her.*” Great. They were ganging up on me.

“Hi, Mia. How are you?” My voice was strained, but I wasn’t mad at her. I was just being a jerk.

“*I’m great, thank you for asking. What about you?*”

“Wonderful. Are you taking care of things? Are you being careful?”

“*No. I’m letting things run wild, and I’m just going with the flow.*”

“Why are we talking again?”

“*Because you miss me.*”

“Just...Forest?”

“*I’m here, babe.*” She was still giggling. “*I’m fine. Things have been quiet around here, and Mia hasn’t left my side. She’s even been working at Beans. She slept at our place last night.*” She did her best to calm me. I trusted Mia to take care of her. But as I said to her, I wasn’t only worried about Izzie and my baby. It killed me that I had to be away when so many people I loved were at risk.

“Wait. What about Haley and Gabe?”

“*You really need to ask?*” I chuckled at Mia’s dry voice. They most certainly didn’t sleep alone.

“I’m almost finished here. I’m going back home today.”

“*There’s no need to rush, babe. We’re fine here. Do what you gotta do. We’ll be waiting for you.*”

“God, I miss you.” I sighed.

“*I miss you, too,*” Mia butted in.

Izzie snickered at my groan. “*We’re leaving the clinic right now. I can’t wait to see you again. We love you.*”

“Love you, too.” Then I disconnected the call, fighting the dread growing inside me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

IZZIE

My feet were swollen. I was sweating, despite the crisp weather. I couldn't be standing up for more than twenty minutes without my back trying to kill me. Preparing contractions were already tormenting me. Yet I was excited. I felt that way every time I saw my Little Bean.

I wouldn't admit this to Ben; otherwise, he'd feel guilty and blame himself again, but I wanted him with me. That was why I didn't tell him our boy was still in a breech position, increasing the chances of having a C-section. That fun talk, we'd have in person.

It was the first appointment I attended when he wasn't with me. Although, it was fun hanging out with Mia. She was my protection, without being a reminder that I needed it.

She was worried about me and my baby, she was always alert, yet she acted with light and breeze. I knew she was keeping her worries to herself, and as selfish as that might sound, I was grateful for that. I was already freaking out about my baby's arrival, the scary labor, all while knowing there was a madman on the loose with a vendetta against my family. It was refreshing just enjoying my time.

Despite always goofing around, she took my appointment seriously. When we arrived at the clinic, she asked if she could go inside with me. At first, I thought it was

because of my security. Maybe it was for that as well. But she wanted to see the baby. It was endearing seeing her keeping her emotions at bay when she met her second nephew.

“Is there anything else you wanna do? I’m your driver for the day, and Benny isn’t around. We can do whatever we want.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“I’d love some ice cream. Can I still call it a craving?”

“Wow, you’re up to no good,” she replied wryly. “*Ice cream*. Devious,” she whispered in a joke. “I’ll never say no to ice cream. And yes, you can call it a craving. When the baby is born, just say it’s good for the milk. People can’t refute that.”

She helped me get into the car—it was getting harder these days—then rounded the hood to her seat. We left the clinic set on the outskirts of town, on the opposite way to Bryants & Walker.

“Shoot. The entryway is closed.” She furrowed her brows. “That’s weird.” She drove slowly by the barriers. “I can’t see why it’s blocked. We’ll need to round the space. It’ll take a little longer, but I can get a shortcut in a while. Can you wait another ten minutes for your ice cream?”

“I can try.”

“Let’s go. I don’t want your kid being born with an ice cream face.”

“What?”

She glanced at me, then seemed to remember I didn’t normally understand what she said. “Sorry. It’s a Brazilian thing. When a pregnant person has a craving, we need to grant

it ASAP. Otherwise, the baby will be born with the face of the thing they craved.”

“That seems...”

“Scientific? I know.” She nodded solemnly.

“So let’s say I’m craving...beets.”

“If you don’t eat it soon, while still pregnant, your baby will be born with a beet face.”

“I was craving Ben’s cock, so—”

“If he can’t dick you soon, you’ll have a problem on your hands. For the sake of Little Bean, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

She kept driving as we were joking around, coming up with weird cravings, when we approached a dirty road. Mia tensed as we passed it by, while she kept glancing at the open gate.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” She dragged out the word, not convincing either of us. “It’s just this weird feeling.”

I became wary at her statement. I was a firm gut believer. And I trusted Mia’s judgment. If she was uncomfortable, we most likely had good reason to be watchful. She shook her head, dismissing whatever theory was running through it. The energy within the car changed, and we were both observant. For what, I had no idea.

When I was about to come up with whatever new subject to talk about, she instructed me in a stern, yet controlled voice, “Pick up your phone. Keep it with you.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing to worry about yet. It’s just a precaution.” Despite her calming smile, her eyes were sharp as she peered at each one of the rearview mirrors.

I did the same and saw a truck I hadn’t noticed before was behind us. “Mia, what’s happening?”

“Nothing yet.” She threw me another reassuring smile. “We can handle it. I’m just being cautious.” Her words were intended to keep away my fears. But her eyes were as shrewd as when we met Michael a few weeks ago. “Just for safety, I’m gonna call the guys. Keep your phone with you in case we need to make any other calls, okay?”

All I could do was nod. She turned on the Bluetooth of her car and dialed someone.

“Bryants and Walker Protection, this is Haley.”

“Hey, hon. Could you pass me on to Zach or Danny? Now?” Mia’s voice was calm, yet she transpired the urgency of the matter.

“Uhm, sure.”

“Hey, Mia,” Danny answered.

“We’re on the outskirts of town, on the road up north.” She cut right to the chase.

“What’s going on?” Danny’s voice became stern.

“Everything is fine.” She answered more for my benefit than Danny’s. “We’ve passed that gate to the dirt road where I followed Andrea. I just saw that same car.” It seemed

cryptic, and I didn't understand what she meant by that. Danny sure got the meaning.

"Cristo, Mia. What the fuck is going on?" We could hear him moving around in what I assumed to be his office.

"Nothing yet." Despite her answer, she accelerated. "I just thought it'd be safer to contact someone to come to us." She peered at her rearview mirror again. "I have reasons to believe someone is tagging us."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because someone is tagging us."

"Don't hang up the phone, I want you to guide me. I'm coming to you and instructing Haley to call Zach—"

"Don't leave her alone!" Mia stressed.

"Mia, I can't bring her with me."

"It can be a trap. Leave her at my parents' or wait for Zach to arrive, but don't leave her alone. I can try to lose them until you get to us...*damn it.*"

"What?" His voice was worried.

"All the shoulders to go back to town are blocked. We're getting further away. I can't just turn back; otherwise, I'll drive right by them."

I shook in silence at her side, feeling scared and useless.

"Where is Zach?" Even in my state of fear, I admired how coldly she dealt with a crisis. A big one, if I was getting the energy right.

“He texted Haley a while ago, telling her he was already coming back.” He panted, indicating he was running. We could also hear him instructing Haley in the background.

“Are Sofia and Gabe with my parents?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She turned to me. “Call or text Zach, whatever it’s easier, and tell him to go straight to my parents’ house.” It was good to be able to do something. She focused ahead again. “Danny, have Haley call Aaron and explain what’s going on. Leave her with my parents as well. Hon, are you listening?”

“Yes.” She sounded fearful. Just like I felt.

“This is important. You’re not to leave the house, okay? You need to stress that to my parents and the kids. No one leaves the house until Zach gets there. Turn on the security system. All of it.” She continued to speed up, but unless she wanted to brave one of the dirt roads, there was no way but ahead.

We sped for our lives, meandering a road that, were it not for the threat behind us, would’ve been gorgeous. Those high trees wouldn’t seem so ominous.

“I’m heading to you now.” Danny’s been with us the whole time. Mia instructed him on where we were, and we kept going, with nowhere to turn. *“The normal exits are closed. I’ll go around and meet you guys from your opposing route.”*

I noticed the truck behind us getting closer, yet I was too stunned to say or do anything. By my side, Mia started

mumbling something in Portuguese I couldn't quite grasp. Just after she started, Danny followed her, speaking in Spanish. I wasn't able to understand what they were saying, but I knew it was the same thing, as they followed the same cadence.

Mia placed her tiny hand over my clasped ones. "I won't let anything harm you." The situation wasn't ideal, but I felt her confidence warm me. Until we felt the collision from behind. "Son of a—"

"*What happened?*" Danny was alert from the still active call.

"The driver bumped us."

"*Hold on, I'm coming.*"

They hit again, and Mia pushed the gas even more, which was dangerous considering the many elbows on the road.

"I don't wanna brave a dirt road. God only knows where they'll lead us."

"*Don't do it! That's probably what they want. Keep on the road a little bit more, I'm close.*"

"I don't get what he's doing. He's not once tried to pass us or block our path. He hasn't tried to throw us out of the road. He's just urging us along."

"*That's better,*" Danny countered. "*They're just trying to scare you.*"

"I don't like this. It seems like he's pushing me into a trap, but I don't know what it is yet. Why just run us along?" Her eyes narrowed into slits. "I wanna slow down."

“*What?*” That was the first time I talked during the whole running away thing.

“*That’s not a good idea, Mia.*”

“The guy isn’t trying to do anything. He hasn’t shot, hasn’t run us by. All he does is speed and force me to speed along. This is a trap.”

“*What kind?*”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like this. I wanna stop.”

“*Don’t. You’re not alone.*”

“So far, it’s just one car. I can deal with it. What happens when he gets me where he wants?”

“*You don’t know that’s what he’s trying to do.*”

“I’m telling you, Danny, it’s a trap. I can see an entrance to a dirt road on my right. I’m getting on it just to make a turn. Then I’m going back. I can’t go on this road like he wants me to.”

“*I’m so close, Mia.*”

“I need to try this. I know there’s something wrong—*er*, other than just being followed.”

“*What if you can’t make the turn in time to ditch them?*”

“I need to try.”

“*Just a few more miles, Mia.*”

“Danny, I need to—”

“*Mia, look out!*” I shouted.

A truck came out of the many trees from the other side of the road, its light off, and sped right into the driver's side. Mia tried to swerve to avoid the brunt of the collision, but she couldn't stop the crash. I could hear Danny's loud curses below my screams.

After we overturned a few times into the trees to our right, the car stopped, thankfully with its wheels down.

The last thing I saw was Mia's bleeding temple, her head fallen to the side and eyes closed. Then darkness engulfed me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

DANNY

I was terrified. Even though I didn't see it, hearing the crash was a nightmare. I wasn't sure what had happened, so my head was conjuring every disastrous scenario.

Even worse was not getting any more responses from Mia and Izzie. I could only hope they were *just* passed out. I couldn't fathom any other option.

I drove faster, and the few miles I claimed to have ahead proved to be longer than expected. Or it was just my dread making it seem further. I saw no trucks along the road, so either they were at the accident scene or they just caused it and left. If that was the case, then once again Mia was probably right—it'd been a trap.

My panic was rising. Two women I cared about—one of my best friends and my other best friend's girl—were in danger. Not only that, if Mia's assessment was correct—and more often than not it was—it was the same car she saw driving Andrea around.

I wasn't ready to comprehend what that meant for the safety of my baby. Sofia was my world. I'd stop at nothing to protect my little girl. That was a hard feat when her own mother thought it was a good idea to get involved with a member of a drug cartel, which also ventured into human trafficking.

More than ever, I needed to cut all ties with the woman who, besides my angel, only brought me hell.

Closer to the point Mia said they were, I slowed down. The road was empty. Most likely due to the many blocks between town and the roadway. I was willing to bet my paycheck the blocks were a ruse.

There was no car around. No side of any truck, nor Mia's vehicle. I was starting to freak out when I saw the shattered glass on the ground. Inspecting closer, I saw the tires mark on the road, indicating the accident must've happened there. Still no sign of her car.

I crossed the roadway to the other side and parked. After turning off the engine, I got out of my truck. With the eerie silence enveloping me, I could listen to my heart thumping loudly and faster. Then I heard it.

I followed the sound of more shattering glass, which led me into the woods. I ran down farther away from the road and stopped in my tracks when I saw Mia's car all battered up. The driver's side was deeply dented. The top sank, and the hood was destroyed. There was no salvaging it.

I heard the sound again and found Mia breaking her window, what was left of it. Seeing her alive pushed me out of my haze, and I ran to them. She was bleeding from her head, yet she kept punching the window with her hand enveloped by what seemed to be a hoodie.

When she finally broke it, she struggled to climb out of it, and I pushed myself faster toward her. I wasn't fast enough, though, and she fell on the ground with a thud, like a newborn baby giraffe.

“Mia!” I screamed.

She didn’t seem to listen. When I got to her, I helped her sit up. Her eyes were dazed and unfocused. She pressed her head with both her hands. I crouched down in front of her and called her name again. After a few tries, Mia realized I was there, yet she still seemed out of it.

“Danny...”

“Hey, *cariño*. It’s okay. I’m getting you both out of here.” I used my softest tone so as not to bother her. She seemed to be having a hard time with her head.

“I need to...” She didn’t finish her sentence, but her urgency increased.

I wanted her to stay sitting, but that didn’t seem to be an option. I helped her stand up, and she all but ran—as much as she could with her entwining legs—to behind the car. Where Mia threw up. I held her as she heaved, worried she could have more than just a head injury.

When nothing else was getting out of her, she leaned against the car and cleaned her lips with the back of her arm when we heard a whimper.

“Izzie,” Mia cried and ambled back to her door. “Izzie. Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“Mia?”

“Thank God,” she whispered in relief, leaning against the totaled car.

“Mia.” Izzie’s voice was distressed, increasing my uneasiness. “I’m all wet. And...*ahh*...it hurts so much.” She

groaned, and Mia went rigid beside me, just like I was. “I think...I think my water broke.” Izzie cried, and I froze.

Mia shifted to me with startled eyes, then waltzed to the passenger side, all the while clutching my arm for balance. She tripped a few times during the short walk, and I didn’t know if I should blame the unsteady ground or her probable concussion.

Izzie’s dark window was cracked but not broken, so it was hard to see through it. We tried checking on her through the windshield, but any wrong move, and we’d have shattered glass all over her.

“I’m going in again,” Mia announced.

“*Cariño*, you’re barely able to stand up,” I countered.

“I can climb back in through the window and assess her situation. Try to make her more comfortable.”

Her suggestion wasn’t off. “I’ll help you get inside, then I’ll call for help.”

“Was Haley able to reach Aaron?”

“She contacted him, and he told us he wasn’t far away. Although, he knows the road we were driving on, not our precise location. Nor does he know about the accident, because it happened after we talked.”

Mia nodded in thought. She still seemed dizzy, but her eyes were sharper. As much as possible, considering her situation. “Don’t tell Zach yet. He can’t leave the kids and the others. He’ll just worry without being able to do a thing.”

“I’ll try Aaron and call the closest hospital. If she’s in labor, we need to act fast. And we need to tell Ben.”

She nodded and flinched in pain, palming her head. I helped her walk back to the driver’s door and boosted her up to get in through the window. Mia ended up getting cuts on her legs and arms from the points of the glass she wasn’t able to punch out, yet she was too numb to feel the pain.

I pulled out a switch knife from my pocket to slash the airbag and handed it to her so she could do the same to Izzie’s. Then I kicked off one of my boots and jabbed the glass from the inside out, clearing the whole window if Mia needed to get out again. She settled inside, kneeling on her seat, and touched Izzie’s face and neck, trying to see what kind of injuries she had. From the state of the car, Mia took the brunt of the crash, and even with the top dented, it didn’t reach Izzie’s head. The only—huge—problem seemed to be her getting into labor.

“Izzie? Honey, how are you feeling?” Mia held one of her hands, trying to calm her.

When Isabella tried to move, I warned, “No, no. You shouldn’t do anything more forceful until we get medical assistance. I’m about to get us some help; we just wanna make you comfortable first.”

“I’m scared,” she whimpered. “And it hurts. So much.”

Mia brushed away Izzie’s tears and asked in a soothing voice, “What hurts? Can you describe it to us?”

“My stomach, I guess. It seems to be a contraction.” She breathed heavily, seeming rightfully agitated.

“We’re gonna start monitoring it until someone comes, okay?” I suggested. “Mia, do you have a watch?” When she nodded, I instructed, “Time her next contractions. We need to know how long they last and how far apart they are. Maybe she should lie down. Can you move the seat back without moving her neck or head?”

“I think so.” She perused around her car. “We should immobilize her,” she mumbled. Picking up her hoodie from her seat, she turned to me. “Are you wearing a belt?”

“What are you planning?” I asked, already unhooking the accessory.

“I’ll hold her head to the seat with your belt and stabilize her torso with my jacket. That way, I can lean her back without moving her body too much.” Grabbing the makeshift security apparel, she slid to the back seat as swiftly as she could without disturbing Izzie and settled next to Gabe’s car seat. She slashed her coat with my knife to tear off the hood.

Mia placed the torn piece on Izzie’s forehead, then looped my belt around her head and the seat rest, mindful of not hurting her or restricting too much. She rolled the rest of the sweatshirt into a snake form and pressed it against Izzie’s chest, tying the sleeves behind the seat, which she leaned back carefully.

“You’re both settled?” At Mia’s confirmation, I promised, “I’ll get us some help and be right back. I couldn’t get any signal, so I’m running to where I parked my car.”

“I need Ben.” Izzie sobbed, holding her stomach. Mia was still in the back seat, brushing Izzie’s face lightly, cleaning

the flood of tears.

“We’ll get him.” I hoped my promise wasn’t empty. “If anything weird happens, scream.” I stared at Mia. “Are you prepared?” Meaning, *Are you armed?*

She nodded. “Be careful.”

I ran back to the side of the road, all the while checking my phone for any signal. I reached my car, which seemed to be the only vehicle ever to have passed that road. No living being. No other cars. And much to my dismay, no signal.

I tried calling Ben, Aaron, and any hospital around, with zero luck. I texted them, explaining what happened, but the message wasn’t sent. I paced around the side of the road, vomiting every bad word I could remember. I wasn’t sure if I should drive away to get help or go back to them.

When I heard a faint yet keen scream, I knew the answer. I grabbed some snacks, bottles of water, and a blanket from my car—the perks of being a father—and darted back.

I reached the car and peered inside the broken window. When Mia faced me with worried but hopeful eyes, I felt like a monster for shattering it. I shook my head slightly, indicating I wasn’t able to reach anyone, and she breathed heavily.

“Thirty-one seconds. Twelve minutes apart,” she said quietly. *Damn it.* It was reaching a point I wasn’t ready to entertain.

“I brought a couple of things from my car.” I dropped them on the driver’s seat from the broken window.

“Did you talk to Ben?” Izzie was breathing heavily.

“I texted him.” I hated leaving my answer so vague, but I couldn’t tell her we were alone right when she needed all the professional—and emotional—help she could get.

Before she could panic, Mia soothed her, still rubbing her cheeks. “Now we just have to wait.” Contrary to her worried eyes, her voice was steady. “I’m not sure what they teach during those Lamaze classes, but I know they talk about breathing. I guess it must be something like meditation. What do you say we try? I think it could be helpful.”

At Izzie’s agreement, we all tried focusing on our breathing. Mia and I did it for moral support, as much as for our own sake.

From time to time, I walked around the car, trying to get at least a figment of a signal. I didn’t wanna leave them alone again, seeing as how Izzie’s contractions were getting longer and more frequent. It was getting hard to ignore we’d probably have to take matters into our own hands. Mia grabbed the blankie I’d brought and threw it over Izzie, rubbing her arms up and down to keep her warm and comfortable.

Until her next contraction came. Every time she tried to control her desperate scream, I became more despondent.

“Five minutes. Almost forty seconds.” Any other person wouldn’t have noticed the waver in her voice, but I’d been working with Mia for far too long not to pick up on it.

It was time to face reality.

“Pull the blankie over your heads. Cover as much of her as you can. I’m breaking her window, and the one from the

back seat.”

As Mia worked fast on her end, I trudged to their side of the car and pulled out my jacket. The cold weather only served to push me forward. It was invigorating.

I rolled my coat around my hand and forearm and started punching the cracked window. When I broke through, I toed off one of my boots again to jab out the few points of glass that remained. Careful not to hurt them, I bunched up the blanket that covered the girls, pulled it out of the car, and shook it to let the shattered glass fall away. When I was satisfied with my job—as if I ever could be satisfied in a situation like that—I draped it over Izzie again.

I looked up straight into Mia’s eyes, and we knew what we should do. “Do you have a first aid kit?” She nodded and pulled the box from under the passenger seat. “Good. I’m going inside.”

I rounded the hood to the driver’s seat and heard her saying to Izzie, “Honey. I’ll slide your seat back so you can have more room between your legs, okay?” Isabella agreed despite her distress, and Mia pulled the lever beside the seat, easing it all the way back.

Mia put the stuff I brought on the back seat, grabbed one of the bottles of water, and let Izzie sip it, while she gorged on the other one.

“I’m scared. It’s been too long, I don’t think I can wait for someone to come for us.” Right on cue, she let out another scream, holding Mia with strength until both their hands became white.

I placed my hands on the top of the door. “Hang on tight. I’ll try not to move the car too much.” I pulled myself up and slid into the car through the driver’s window. Once inside, I turned to Izzie. “Is it okay if I check your dilation?” I took her whimper as an agreement. Mia pointed to the glove compartment, from where I fished some surgical gloves and sanitizer.

Getting between her legs was a challenge, since I was too big for that, but we managed to make it work. I placed Izzie’s right foot on the dashboard and the left one on the change gear. After we were settled, I sheathed my hands with the gloves and pulled up the hem of Izzie’s dress to feel her.

When I curled my lips, Mia’s eyes turned troubled, and she mouthed, “We can’t lose this baby.”

She understood my distress. It was time. Concealing my worry, I tried to infuse cheer into my words. “Let’s bring your baby to the world.”

“*What?*” She panicked.

“We’re delivering your baby,” I announced. “But don’t worry, we have everything under control.”

I hated myself for lying to her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IZZIE

That couldn't be happening. It was supposed to be one of the greatest days of my life. I should be feeling excited and sharing it with my man, the father of my child.

I shouldn't be strapped to a car seat, after being thrown off the side of the road by maniacs, terrified I could lose my baby before he was even born. As much as I trusted and loved Mia and Danny, I should be surrounded by professionals, not by a man who could barely fit inside the car and a woman who was still bleeding from the side of her head.

I let out another painful and fearful scream.

Danny touched my knee, waiting until I looked at him. "We don't have time to wait for someone to arrive. But we got you. We got this, okay?"

All I could do was nod. I felt if I tried to say anything, I might throw up from fear and pain.

All my insides were coiled, and I could feel the lingering pain from the last contraction. Once again, I heard Mia's mumbled words. When I peered up at her, her eyes were closed in concentration. Danny followed her again, just like he did over the phone.

"What are you doing?"

She opened her eyes, and serene determination dominated her features. “We were praying.” I wasn’t expecting that. “Whenever we have something important to do, we pray afore. It helps to keep us grounded and feel that someone bigger than us will take charge if it gets to be too much.”

At my conflicted expression, Danny squeezed my knee. “I know it might sound weird. I was doubtful at first, even being raised by a Catholic mother. But it feels like an extra layer of protection.”

As he talked to me and Mia ran her hand through my hair, I saw Danny working at my feet, laying things from the first aid kit around on the driver’s seat and positioning me for my dreaded fate. I was about to refute their theory when I felt it again. My body was most certainly being ripped in two. The pressure on my back became too much for me to bear. Wave upon wave of excruciating pain coursed through me, tightening my muscles beyond my control. My trembling legs would’ve left their position if it weren’t for Danny holding them.

Mia gave me another sip of water, and I caved. “I wanna try. I wanna pray.” I vaguely remembered learning “Our Father,” but I had no recollection of how that worked. Between my sobs, Danny and I repeated after Mia. I wasn’t sure if it was the prayer, if it was knowing that despite everything going so freakishly wrong I wasn’t alone, or if I was losing my strength. All I knew was that something within me relaxed, and I felt ready for what I was supposed to do.

Satisfied, she nodded in reassurance and stared at Danny. “Tomorrow, we rest.”

“Tomorrow, we rest,” he agreed. Whatever that meant.

Danny smiled down at me, and I trusted him with my baby and my life. He inserted his fingers again, and I cringed at the pressure.

“It’s showtime.”

Involuntarily, I pushed, groaning and panting the whole time, as Danny encouraged me.

After a few more instinctive pushes, he claimed, “I can feel him.” I was about to smile when I saw his frown. His gaze landed on me. “Everything will be fine. It’s just...it’s not his head.”

“What?” I screeched.

“It’s his bottom. He’s turned around.”

“Oh, God. The doctor said...no. No, no, no, no, no. I can’t lose my baby. You need to do something.” I freaked out. Full-on panic moved me. “You need to save my baby. Please, do something. Oh, my God.” I sobbed beyond my pain. Overwhelmed. Terrified.

“We won’t lose our Little Bean,” Mia promised me. How could she be so sure?

“We can bypass that. The same thing happened when Sofia was born,” he assured me with his soft eyes. “*Cariño*, whatever you do, it’s important you don’t push anymore. I’ll talk you through it so you don’t feel in the dark. I’m gonna insert my hand and position the baby with his legs astride my arms.”

I should've been self-conscious. One of my man's best friends had his hand deep inside me, while another friend watched. But I was way too exhausted and had too much pain coursing through me to care.

After a little while, he announced, "I've got it. See, it's working out. Now, I'm carefully holding his little face. I'm using my thumb and index finger to bring it close to his sternum." The pressure was insurmountable. "Now it's time to pull."

As Danny started to pull my baby from between my trembling legs, I screamed even louder than before. They chanted soft words, but I couldn't comprehend them. Then our salvation came.

From up the road, we could hear shouts. Whoever was up there seemed to be calling for someone.

"Aaron!" Danny responded just as loudly. "Down here," he shouted, not once taking his eyes from me. "It's almost done, *cariño*. Hang tight."

A man approached the car and cursed under his breath before laying out orders. "We need medical assistance. *Now*." He ran to the passenger's side, standing by my side. "What can I do?"

Before anyone could respond, I felt an intense decompression in my abdomen, which was concentrated all on my pelvis. Letting out an ear-shattering roar, I felt something—rather someone—leave me. Then I heard it. His sharp scream. My baby was announcing his arrival. Unable to move my head, I shifted my gaze to Mia, who had tears running down her face, framing her awed smile.

Danny was holding my screaming baby with his thumb and index finger surrounding the back of his neck and the other one holding his legs. He was dirty and covered in blood and other fluids. His little scrunched face was red from his exertion. I'd never seen anything more beautiful.

I sobbed in relief. "I want my baby, let me hold him."

Danny looked relieved, and Mia seemed exhausted. His knees rested on the edge of my seat between my legs. Her tiredness, the accident, and being cramped inside a battered car seemed to be catching up to her. To us.

She cleaned her face with the back of her hand. "We need something to cover him first. There must be some residual glass on this blankie. And we need to cut this." She pointed to the umbilical cord.

Right on cue, the paramedics the Aaron guy was calling ran down to us. It was hard to understand what was going on, since I wasn't able to move freely to see. I was mostly picturing everything in my head, based on what I heard.

Another man came to us, cut the cord, and encased my baby in a thermal blanket. I was grateful for that, because I was starting to feel the cold myself.

He was about to take away my boy when Danny, Mia, and I yelled in unison, "Wait!"

"Let her meet her boy first," Danny said.

"He needs medical assistance," one of the paramedics warned.

“She’s his mother. Just let her feel him for a bit. They both need this,” Danny pleaded my case, and the man conceded.

He picked up my boy from the guy and carefully placed him on my chest, both him and Mia holding him, since I wasn’t as steady. As my Little Bean rubbed his little head over my chin, seemingly looking for me, I burst out crying. I shifted my head as much as I could to kiss his sticky hair. I was filled to the brim with the overwhelming love I felt for that little person.

The guy asked for my baby again, and with reluctance, I nodded that Mia and Danny could hand him my little life. “Take care of him,” I pleaded.

“Don’t worry, Momma.” Another rescuer approached me, a woman this time. “We’ll get you out of here in no time. Your baby is getting great care right now. Soon, you’ll be together again.” Her voice was comforting. She turned to Danny. “Are you the father?”

“No. The baby’s our nephew.” He waved a finger between him and Mia. “I couldn’t get ahold of the father.”

I thought he’d texted him. “Someone needs to tell him.” I whimpered again, and Mia and Danny leaned over me from their places to calm me down.

“I contacted him.” Aaron stepped in. “When I got your message, I talked to both Ben and Zach.” I’d yet to get a good look at the man who brought the assistance we needed. His face appeared through the vacant back door window, and he touched my arm lightly. “Hi, Isabella. I’m Aaron Scott. I’m friends with Mia and Danny. I also know Benjamin. You’re

safe now.” Even though it was the first time I met him, his severe demeanor didn’t put me off. On the contrary, it made it that much easier to trust him. He oozed competence and honesty.

“Wait. Someone should go to the hospital with the Little Bean,” Mia stated, with urgency. “He can’t be alone. He needs family around.”

I was about to freak out again when Danny squeezed my knees and carefully placed my legs down. “I’ll go with him. You girls gonna be fine?” Satisfied with my affirmative grunt, and Mia’s nod, he leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “I’m so proud of you.” Looking away, he told Aaron, “Mia also needs medical support. She hit her head with the crash and threw up behind the car. I’m not sure what else happened to her, but as you can see, the collision happened on her side.”

“I’m fine, Danny.”

Aaron ignored her. “I’ll keep an eye on her and make sure she goes through a check-up. I’ll catch you both later to talk about what happened.”

Danny moved to the driver’s seat with care before getting out through the broken window. He nodded at Aaron and promised me not to leave my baby’s side. He stretched his hand inside the car to hold Mia’s and tipped his chin at her. Then he ran up to the road and my Little Bean.

More feet strode our way to work around us. Even though I was relieved my baby was receiving the care he needed, I felt a crushing longing for not having him by my

side. I just wanted to get out of there, feel my boy in my arms, and feel Ben's warmth envelop us.

"We need to get them out of here," a new voice stated.

"Mia, you need to get out of the car." Aaron rounded the hood to the driver's window. "I'll help you out."

"I'm not leaving," she asserted and leaned back, away from his stretched hand.

"You've already done enough. The guys need to saw the doors to get her out, come on."

"I'm not leaving this car without her. If they need to saw it, they'll do so with me inside."

Aaron rubbed his hand over his mouth and complied. "Keep her steady."

"We've done that already." She pointed to my torso and head. "It wasn't that professional, but that's all we had." I wanted to hug her embarrassment away. If it weren't for the strap, I would.

"You did good," Aaron praised. "But things will get rocky. Cover yourselves with the blankets. As soon as we can get the doors open, we'll get you both out of here."

Shouts overlapped, and people gathered around the car. There was a commotion outside as they settled to work on getting us out. The sounds from the machines were deafening, and a new wave of tears rolled down my face.

Mia, who was seated on the floor in the back seat, settled closer to me, both of us sharing the blanket Danny brought. She draped one arm over my chest and the other on

top of my head, then she leaned her forehead to my temple and started talking to me. I couldn't understand what she was saying; I just knew her voice was soothing.

My emotions were catching up to me. The close call with death was sinking in. Not having my baby to cherish and my man to protect us was proving to be too much. Being stuck under the blanket was a necessity, but a suffocating one. My out-of-place labor was turning out to be even more draining than I expected.

I wasn't even that reluctant to let the darkness surround me. My last thought was of my baby touching my chin, and that was enough.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BEN

I wrapped up my job and was going back home. Even more than the other times I had to leave town, I was anxious to get back to my Forest. I hated being away when she was so close to her due date, especially since Michael was still out there. But something felt different.

I was driving for a while, but with each mile, my dread grew, and I couldn't put my finger on why. It seemed to be more than being worried about his threats. My heart constricted, and rubbing my chest wasn't enough to alleviate the pressure.

My only relief was that Izzie hadn't been alone one single time since I was away. Mia was with her at the moment, and I trusted her with my woman and baby's lives. The drawback was that Mia also had a bull's-eye on her head.

Leaving town during those turmoiled times meant leaving exposed more than my woman and kid.

The easiest line of thought was to blame me for what was going on. In a rational capacity, I knew it wasn't my fault. But it was hard acknowledging my so-called father was the one behind all that restlessness.

I was going back and forth between blaming myself and hating Michael when I heard several pings alerting me that

I'd received numerous messages. With my heart already speeding up, I chose to open first the one sent from an unknown number.

They look so pretty today. And alone. What a shame.

My vision darkened, and it was a hard fit to drive. I was shaking so hard, it took me a while to realize my phone was ringing. On autopilot, I turned on the Bluetooth to answer.

“Walker.”

“*Benjamin, it's Aaron.*” My insides were coiled. “*There's been an accident.*” Screeching the tires, I swerved to the shoulder of the road.

“What are you talking about?” I didn't care that my voice wavered.

“*Danny texted me a while ago.*”

“What happened?” I lost it.

“*I'm not sure yet.*” He let out a heavy breath. “*Someone followed Mia and Isabella, we believe it was someone from the cartel. Whoever the guy was, he wasn't working alone. It seems they tried to run them off the road. Danny was on the phone with them when it happened. After Haley talked to me, he texted me, asking for help...I haven't been able to get ahold of either him or Mia ever since.*”

I froze for a moment. Fear was engulfing me, and it was getting hard to breathe.

“The message.”

Hearing my whispering words, Aaron questioned, “*What message?*” I explained it to him as best as my broken words allowed me. “*Do you have any idea who could’ve sent it?*”

I hissed. “It can only be him. Where are they?”

“*Danny sent me their approximate coordination. I’m heading there. One more thing.*” He hesitated. What other bomb could he possibly throw at me? “*It appears your girl went into labor.*”

Something snapped inside of me. I roared and banged on the steering wheel repeatedly, not caring that I sounded like a deranged person.

“Send it to me. I’ll meet you there.”

“*I’m texting you now...just be careful. They need you alive.*”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. “I’ll make sure to stay alive to kill who did this.”

“*I’d rather you didn’t say those kinds of things to me. If you plan on doing something, the less I know, the better. I’ll keep you posted.*”

I lunged the car forward, pushing the gas, but not before responding to the text: *I’m coming for you.*

Unknown number: *it’s already too late.*

I drove back home like I was running away from a fire, when in reality I was running towards it. I knew I shouldn’t

have left town. I understood it was my job, but I was going crazy imagining all kinds of deadly scenarios. I could feel my panic turning into rage. It wasn't all bad. Rage moved me, whereas panic only would've held me back.

I just hoped I'd be able to rein it in before getting to Izzie and Mia.

Faster than I should have, I got closer to the town limits. Another text came from Aaron. There was no information on what had happened, how they were, or if they found who did whatever. It was just an address. In Gratitude. A town over.

It could mean only one thing: they were sent to a hospital, and the situation was so dire, they couldn't be admitted to the hospital in Holy Water.

I inserted the address on my GPS and sped up. I then opened the windows, hoping it'd help me breathe better. It felt suffocating inside the car. I barely felt the crisp air seeping in.

After what felt like forever, I caught sight of the hospital. I parked the car in what was most likely someone else's spot and darted inside so fast, I couldn't remember if I'd locked the door. At the reception, a woman was startled by my sudden approach.

"Isabella Turner. I need to see her. She's pregnant." I panted.

The woman scurried to type on her computer, looking for what I demanded.

"I'm the father. Where is she? I need to see her. She's in labor."

A nurse approached me. “Sir, you need to calm down.”

“*The hell I do!*” I shouted. “I need my woman. She’s been in a car accident, and she’s far along in her pregnancy.”

“She already delivered the baby,” the scared woman behind the desk informed me in a small voice.

“*What?*”

“Sir,” the nurse touched my arm to get my attention, “I can get you to talk to the doctor.”

“*What happened?!*” I screeched, already following the woman down the corridor and behind a door.

In a calm, professional voice, which only infuriated me more, the nurse explained, “There’s been an accident. She went into labor and delivered the baby on-site. They were both rushed here after the police got to them.”

“*How the fuck did she go into labor on the road? Who...*”

“There were a man and woman with her.”

At the mention of Danny and Mia, I looked up and saw her seated on one of the chairs in the waiting room. She was hunched over, her head between her bouncing legs and hands thrust into her hair. Aaron leaned against the wall beside her, talking hushedly on the phone, while Danny paced the room.

Aaron was the first one to spot me, watching me with intent while whoever was on the line kept yapping, but I was too focused on Mia and Danny. His lower half was covered in blood and fluids. She looked up, and I saw dry blood on the

side of her pale face. She stood up quickly and had to grab the back of her seat to steady herself before she limped my way.

It felt all too real. Like a *deja vu*. But this time, it wasn't my life on the line; it was that of my girl and baby. It was that of my sister. My temper got the best of me, and I wanted to punch someone.

Marching in their direction, I pointed an accusatory finger at her. "You had one job," I snapped.

Shame overtook her features, and she opened her mouth. I didn't wait to hear her apologies. I was on a roll. Rage and fear were catching up to me, and I lashed out. Once again, against the wrong person.

"Your only job was to be safe and to keep them safe. Not play the gino. You had one job, and you failed."

"There was no time, we couldn't wait. We had to do something—"

"Yes! You had to keep her out of danger, not run right into it."

Danny intervened, "There was nothing else to be done, man. It was either deliver your baby or—"

"It shouldn't even have come to that!"

"Sir!" The damn nurse again. "Want to see them?"

I cast one last glance at them. Danny seemed dumbfounded. Aaron was reproachful, ignoring whoever was still babbling on the call. But Mia's regretful eyes tugged at my heart. Instead of making amends, I followed the nurse until we reached one of the rooms.

“A doctor will come find you in a bit. Until then, there’re a couple of people for you to see.”

She opened the door, and my heart nearly stopped. Leaning back on the bed was my woman, holding a bundled blanket. I walked inside tentatively when Izzie peered up at me. She looked pale and worn out, yet her smile had never been brighter.

“Wanna meet our Little Bean?”

Her whisper summoned me to them. I stepped around her bed, almost afraid to get too close. When I reached her side, I saw him. My baby. My boy. The one I vowed to love and protect.

My heart was full of wonder. Brimming with love. I felt the sting in my nose as I stared at him. His peaceful features as he napped in his momma’s arms. His puckered lips. His little hands tucked under his chin. The wisp of dark copper hair. His chubby cheeks. That little living being had stolen my heart in one glance.

I was officially a father.

She shifted to the side, giving me space beside her. I eased myself onto the hospital bed, draped one arm over Izzie’s, and dropped a lingering kiss to the side of her head.

“I was so scared,” I admitted quietly. With my free hand, I touched my boy’s cheek, feeling a sharp tug in my heart. “I was so close to losing you both, and I wasn’t even there to stop it.”

At my broken voice, Izzie rubbed her forehead to my face. “Don’t suffer for things that never happened. We’re here

now. We made it. We all made it.” It was hard to see her with unshed tears brimming my eyes. “Why don’t you hold our baby?” she suggested softly, a sweet smile forming on her lips.

With her help, I enveloped my kid in my arms. He seemed so small, so fragile. I’ve heard people say how strong a pull you feel when you first hold your baby. But nothing could’ve prepared me for that moment. A surge of love coursed through me. It was as powerful as it was frightening.

“Hey, kiddo. I’m your daddy,” I said as softly as I could, so as not to disturb him, but we needed to be properly introduced. “I’m sorry I’m late. I came here as fast as I could.” Izzie rested her head on my shoulder, both of us admiring the little boy we created. “I’m new at this, so I need you to be patient with me. But I love you.” I choked. “You have no idea how much I already love you.”

Izzie sniffed at my side and cuddled closer. We stayed in silence for a while. Our little family. Bundled together in bed. A family that was almost ripped from me mere hours before.

I hated to bring it up and burst our peaceful bubble. I hated even more that it had to be done at all. “What happened?” My woman shuddered and closed her eyes, distress returning to her face. “I’m sorry. If it’s too much, we can talk about it later.”

“It’s okay. The sooner I get it out, the better.” She ran a finger over our son’s hair, getting the courage from him. “Not long after you called, Mia noticed someone was following us. She seemed to recognize him. He followed us for a while until she realized it seemed to be a trap of some sort.”

“Well, yeah, he was following you.”

“No, beyond that. She thought it was weird he was just following. She said something about him leading us along, so she decided it’d be better to make a U-turn and go back instead of remaining on our route. Before she could do that, a truck came out of nowhere and ran us off the road.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “How did you get help?”

“When Mia noticed the man behind us, she called the company. Danny stayed on the call with us until the crash. He was the one who called for help.”

“And then?”

Before she could answer, a young doctor entered our room. “How are you feeling, Momma?”

“I’m a little better. Just sore. Everywhere.”

The woman gave her a sympathetic smile. “That’s to be expected. You both had quite the ordeal.” She turned to me. “Are you the father?” I nodded like a loon. “I’m glad you could make it. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr...”

“Walker. Benjamin Walker.”

“I’m Ariel Miller. I was responsible for admitting your girl and your baby. We ran some exams on both of them, including an MRI on Ms. Turner.”

Why does it bother me so much that Izzie isn’t referred to as ‘Mrs. Walker?’

“And everything is fine. You’re bound to be sore and uncomfortable for a while, due to the crash and the labor. But nothing that could bother your recovery.”

“What about him? Isn’t it worrisome he came early?”

The doctor gave a patient smile and answered Izzie. “I understand you were thirty-nine weeks along, right?” At our nods, she went on. “Thirty-nine weeks is considered full term in pregnancy. He came when he decided to come. I do believe the crash might have pushed him a little, but he was ready. He’s a strong baby, and his vitals are great. No reason to worry about that.”

“What can you tell us about the labor?” I was almost too afraid to ask.

“I heard your friends had to take charge. It wasn’t an ideal scenario, I give you that. They did a good job, though. It was sure handy to have someone with a medical background. They did everything they could, given their circumstances. I’m sure it wasn’t easy, especially considering your baby’s position.”

That’s when it dawned on me what we’d been hearing in the medical appointments. “He was turned,” I whispered.

“Yes. Your boy was in a breech position. In cases like that, it’s riskier to have a vaginal birth or one without medical assistance. Yet they made it work. Proof of it is that beautiful boy you’re holding. Ms. Turner passing out after what happened isn’t a point of concern right now.”

“*She passed out?*” I was sure they all could hear my heart thumping fast.

“It was for a brief moment. She woke up on the way here, according to her chart, but yes, she did. As I said, though, it’s not a point of concern. Her exams were great, and

the toll a pregnancy takes on a woman is tremendous. She was in labor, in an inhospitable scenario, and had to give birth under less-than-ideal circumstances. It was the way her body found to recharge.”

I held my baby even tighter against my chest, making him mewl, and kissed Izzie’s head again.

“I must say, despite the situation, your friends really stepped up. You’re all lucky everything turned out so fine. If they hadn’t taken charge until help came, the result could be a lot different.”

Once again, shame filled me. “How is she?” At the doctor’s quizzical look, I explained, “The other woman involved in the accident.”

“She refused any care. Said she wouldn’t leave the waiting room until she knew how this duo was. The man who came in with the baby, the one responsible for the labor, said he wouldn’t let her be alone until he, and I quote, ‘*talked some sense into her stubborn head.*’” She looked at my boy fondly. “He’s a really pretty baby. Do you want him to spend the night here, or would you rather he goes to the nursery?”

“Here,” Izzie and I said in unison.

“If you need anything, or have any questions, don’t hesitate to buzz me. I’m here for the whole night.” With that, she left the room, leaving us in our cocoon once again.

My chest constricted, while my mind played all kinds of *what-if* scenarios. It was a grueling game. I couldn’t stop thinking about how close I came to having lost it all. My woman. My baby. My family. My little sister. And all I did

was snap at her. Once again, I let my fear dominate me and lashed out in the worst possible way.

I hugged my boy tighter, smelled his hair, and gave him back to Izzie, who sensed my agitation as I got up from the bed. “What happened?”

“I need to talk to Mia and Danny.”

“What did you do?” Despite her words, there was no judgment in her question. I could even feel her understanding.

“I need to talk to them,” I repeated as I stormed out of the room.

She was covered in blood when I saw her. Her head was bleeding. She saved my woman and baby’s lives. She could’ve died. That thought took charge in my head. She could’ve died. It pained me to consider it was probably *his* goal.

I stomped into the waiting room, and my sight zeroed in on her again. She noticed my approach and stood up from her chair, once again getting ready to apologize. I was probably looking like a madman, because from the corner of my eyes, I was aware of two forms running toward us to stop whatever was about to happen. I was on a roll, and nothing would keep me from doing what I had to do.

When she was within reach, ignoring the men’s warnings, I pulled Mia’s arms and crushed her right into my chest. My arms enveloped her tightly and lips pressed her temples as I chanted, “Thank you.”

She hugged me back, and I sensed the rigidness leave her body, which made me feel worse knowing I was part of the

reason for her discomfort.

“I’m so sorry.” I squeezed her tighter until she winced, and I had to say sorry for other reasons. I released her yet still held her shoulders to take a better look at her.

She was dressed in clean clothes this time, but she still portrayed an unhealthy shade of pale. Aside from the purple shadow to the side of her face.

“How are they?” I didn’t even have time to ask about her.

“They’re great.” My smile formed of its own accord. “They’re healthy and resting, and I can’t wait to take them home.”

She beamed at me and shrieked. “I can’t believe you’re a father.” She hugged me again, and just then I acknowledged the two goons guarding her back.

Ignoring Aaron’s wary observation, I asked Zach, “Where is Danny?”

“He went to my parents to stay with Sofia and keep an eye on everyone else. So, I came here to congratulate you.” He pulled me closer for a hug and slapped my back. “I’m so proud of you, man.”

Even Aaron came to me, once he realized I wasn’t a threat to Mia. “I see congratulations are in order.” He shook my hand and slapped my shoulder, with a small smile forming on his lips. I’d forgotten he could smile.

“I can’t believe I’m a father. And I can’t believe what happened out there. By the way, *what happened out there?*” I stared at Mia. “How are you? You should see a doctor.”

“I know, but where could I find one?”

Chuckling, I pulled her against me once again. “Stop being a little shit and go check yourself.”

“I don’t wanna leave without knowing they’re really fine.” Her demeanor changed, abandoning all banter. She was still worried about my family. “All people said was that they were going through exams. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” I reassured her. “I swear they’re fine. I can’t wait for you to meet him. He’s so beautiful and—” Before I could say anything else, Dr. Ariel Miller walked into the waiting room. I was about to freak out, worried about my woman and boy, when she sauntered to Mia.

“I think now it’s time you check yourself—*Aaron?*”

“*Ariel?*” His voice was uncharacteristically loud. “What are you doing here?”

“I work here,” the doctor snapped.

Zach, Mia, and I looked between them as I asked the stupid question. “Do you guys know each other?”

“Mr. Scott is...a *friend*.”

Am I the only one who saw him wincing?

“Wait.” Mia stared at Aaron in shock. “Do you have other friends besides me and Danny?”

“We used to hang out...our families know each other,” he mumbled in clear discomfort.

“Wait again. Do you have a life besides the DEA?” She infused as much surprise in her voice as she could.

“Shouldn’t you be looking for a doctor to see you?” he questioned in annoyance.

Mia gazed back at the woman. I was only then noticing how beautiful she was. Her dark skin was flawless, and her curly black hair framed her face, giving her a regal stance.

“She’s a doctor. I want her to check me.”

He rubbed his hand over his mouth. “I miss being able to reprimand you.”

“Did it ever work?” Her question had merit, and I was sure we all knew the answer to that.

“You really should be checked.” The doctor steered the subject right on track.

Mia seemed reluctant to leave. “I don’t think you should be alone. We don’t know if they’ll come or—”

“I’ll stay,” Aaron offered. “You guys can go home, *after you see a doctor*, and we’ll meet again to discuss everything once Ben and his family leave here.”

She looked at me in confirmation, and I ended up putting more distance between her and her needed exams. “Could they meet my boy before she gets checked?” I knew she wanted that.

The pretty woman thought for a while and nodded in agreement. She pointed a finger at Mia. “But right after that, you’ll follow me, and I don’t wanna hear a complaint about it.”

She nodded in agreement, turned back to Aaron, and mouthed, “She’s hot,” making him furrow his always stern

brows.

Aaron stayed behind, giving us privacy as Zach and Mia followed me and the doctor to Izzie's room.

"I'll be back in a few," Dr. Miller warned.

The three of us entered the room as quietly as we could. Izzie was awake, albeit drained, staring in awe at our little boy. She gazed up at us, and her eyes teared up. "Mia," she choked as Mia strode to her side. The two women embraced tightly. "I was so worried about you. Thank you. Thank you," she whispered, with thick emotion heavy in her voice. "Are you okay? Have you seen a doctor?"

"I'm fine. There's no need—"

"She'll see a doctor in a few minutes," Zach stated, not leaving room for any arguments, which earned him an eye-roll from his little sister. Ignoring her, he approached the bed and placed a soft kiss on Izzie's head. "Congratulations, Momma."

My Forest gifted him with her watery beam. "Thank you. And thank you for coming. I still can't believe my boy is here." She looked down at him again with evident love. "Do you wanna hold him?" she asked them both.

Mia gave a step back, saying she was too dirty to touch him, which was odd, given the circumstances under which he was born. That's when I noticed her trembling hands and chastised myself for not making her see a doctor before. When she realized I was watching her, Mia slipped her hands into the pocket of her hoodie and tried to distract me with a cheery smile. Too cheery.

Zach picked him up. He seemed to know exactly how to do it, placing my baby just right in his arms. He sat down on the seat by the bed, and Mia followed, squeezing herself beside him so they could both admire my boy. I found my place again at Izzie's side, and we watched two of our best friends getting emotional over our baby.

"Have you guys decided on a name yet?" Zach asked quietly.

"Won't you guys leave it as Little Bean? It seems so fitting."

Izzie giggled at Mia. "As much as I love that idea, I think we found the best name for him." She peered up at me and nodded, confirming the brief conversation we had a while back. "His name is Theodore."

"Theodore. That's just so pretty," Mia swooned.

Then I completed it. "Theodore Bryant Walker."

Zach and Mia's eyes snapped at us, surprise etched into their faces. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down in emotion, and her big brown eyes turned glassy as she nipped her lips.

"He's a Bryant," Mia nodded as her voice quivered.

"It's an immense honor," Zach said, his voice wavering.

Mia rested her head on her brother's arms as they both admired Teddy, who was still oblivious to the crazy amount of love that surrounded him.

Izzie and I settled on our bed, and for the first time, I felt somewhat peaceful. There was yet a lot to be resolved, but

at that moment, all I cared about was that my family was with me.

I pulled my woman closer to me. “Is there anything you need? Anything I could get you?”

She thought for a while and glanced at Mia. “I think I could use some ice cream.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s good for the milk.” She smirked, and I was left confused yet unable to deny her anything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

IZZIE

True to his words, Aaron stayed with us—right outside our room—the entire time we stayed in the hospital.

After Mia left to go through some exams and clean her slashes and bruises, Zach went to their parents with her, so they could release Danny and Sofia and everyone could get some rest.

A big lie, if I'd ever heard one.

I was worn to a frazzle, but for the life of me, I couldn't sleep. I napped here and there, only to startle awake, looking for my baby or a menacing truck. I could calm down only after a few moments, when I noticed my surroundings and checked on Teddy in his hospital crib beside my bed.

Ben wasn't any better. His sleep—if you could call it that—was agitated, and he spent the night jumping awake in the hospital bed by my side, ready to tackle whatever threat he was dreaming about.

I hoped when we could get to our place, being surrounded by our stuff and the familiar scent, things would be better, and we'd feel more comfortable.

When I was discharged, Ben texted our family to let everyone know, and I contacted April, finally having remembered I had a business to run. Being the godsend she

was, she reassured me everything was fine, and she even opened Beans for a few hours, letting our customers know I was away for a while and getting them the coffee that would make them come back for more when I was ready.

I was glad for the insight she had weeks ago by suggesting to me I should teach her how to make some of my recipes. She wasn't ready to do them all, but she baked quite a few.

As hard as it was for me to give the reins to her for the time being, I was trying not to freak out. I already had a lot to deal with, what with a newborn and crazy men trying to attack my family.

Speaking of which, when we arrived home, I noticed a few familiar cars parked outside. The mixture of scents—from lemon-scented cleaning products to warm cookies, from baby powder to chicken casserole—enveloped me the moment I stepped inside the living room.

Lively chatter greeted us, and I was happy to see Teddy was awake as Ben brought him in in his baby seat. I wanted his first experience in his first home to be the best one he could have. Even if he couldn't remember that day, I wanted him to feel how loved and cared for he was.

Hugo was the first one to notice us. He crawled and whined as he approached us with the care only a good boy could have. His happy tail was so excited, his entire butt wiggled. Gabe was next, being not so subtle about it.

“*The baby!*” He ran as fast as his short legs allowed him.

“Careful, Gabe,” Haley warned.

Zach intercepted his eagerness, mindful not to make him feel embarrassed. “Would you look at that, kiddo?” He crouched behind the boy, who was oozing with excitement, and hugged him. “Let’s wait for them to get settled, then you have a new friend to meet.”

Ben placed the baby seat over the sofa, and Zach guided Gabe to stand in front of Teddy. Zach squatted again behind the kid, placing his chin over the boy’s head. Ben and I sat on each side of our baby, and I introduced the boys I hoped would become best friends.

“Gabe, meet Theodore. His friends call him Teddy.”

Ben whispered in conspiracy, “So you can call him Teddy.”

The boy’s face lit up. “So he’s my *fwiend*?”

“He sure is, kiddo,” Zach asserted.

As the new friends got acquainted and Hugo tippity-tapped around us to bring his toy for my baby to play with, Rosie and Jackson came from our kitchen, followed by Haley and Mia, who was munching on some apple slices.

“Our new boy,” Rosie choked out, and Jackson rubbed her arms before she sauntered toward us. Before I could get up to greet them, Rosie placed a hand on my shoulder. “You stay seated, sweetie. A new mom needs all the sitting and lying she can get. May I?” She pointed at Teddy.

“Of course. He’s excited to meet his Gamma and Pawpaw.”

She picked him up and cooed at my boy, singing praises about him. She sat on the loveseat and ushered Gabe to her side. Jackson came to me, leaned down, and pressed a kiss on the top of my head. Then he pulled Ben, who was standing up, into his arms and slapped his back.

“Congratulations to you both. Having a child is sure a lot of work. But you’ll know no bigger love than that. Now, let’s meet my new grandkid.” He perched himself on the arm of the seat where Rosie was settled, draping an arm over her shoulder as he watched my baby with unrestrained love.

Haley settled beside me, looped her arm inside mine, and squeezed my hand. It was her sweet way of showing me her love as she waited for her time to fawn all over my boy.

“Have the guys told you his name?”

“We thought it was best if you did it,” Mia answered Ben.

Rosie and Jackson stared at us in expectation, so my man announced, “Theodore Bryant Walker.”

Rosie burst out crying, and Jackson cleared his throat to keep his emotions at bay. “I thought we were supposed to give you a gift, son, not the other way around.”

“You’ve done more than enough for me, Jackson. This is a way for me to start giving it back. My debt is insurmountable.”

“Having you guys around is all the payment we need,” he choked out.

Gabe watched the whole scene around him, his little brows furrowed over his contemplative eyes. “I also wanna be

a *Bwyant*.”

“Don’t worry, Gabe-boy,” Mia reassured him. “Your Zachy is working on it.”

Zach just beamed as Haley hid her smile behind her hair and the rest of us all chuckled.

It was good to be home.

“I know you guys are beaten, but I think we should address what happened,” I heard Zach mutter to Ben.

After introductions, all the grown-ups—apart from Ben and me—finished cleaning our place and fixing lunch. Gabe and Hugo played on the floor by our feet, glancing at Teddy from time to time. They were getting tired of waiting for my boy to react and start playing with them.

Our family hinted at leaving a couple of times, to let us rest. I was as reluctant to let them go as they were to leave us alone.

“Is Aaron around?” Ben questioned.

Mia leaned her arms on the back of the couch, looking upside down at Teddy, who was back in his seat, while she ran a finger on his hair and cheeks. “He was working on-site today. He went back to the place of the accident.”

“Danny said he wanted to stop by to see you guys,” Zach informed her. “We could call Aaron as well, so we could

all discuss it here. That way, we could keep an eye on everyone.”

With the meeting settled, I felt myself getting anxious. More than anything, I wanted to get to the bottom of things, yet I was also afraid to do so. The tailing on us was deliberate. What about the crash? Was it a typical case of hit-and-run? Was it intentional?

I tried to get those thoughts out of my mind, at least while feeding Teddy, who was slurping like crazy on my breast. It could be insane thinking on my part, but I didn't want him to pick up on my wariness. Besides, this was my moment with him. It was uncomfortable at first until both of us understood what to do. Then it became an experience I'd cherish forever. The connection was just so strong.

After he finished his meal, Ben lifted him from my arms, settled him up with his little face over Ben's shoulder, and bounced him around the room to burp our boy. It was a sight never to forget. The big, once detached man, holding our baby boy and whispering sweet words in his little ears. Every time they bounced by me, I could hear some broken words. Promises, love declarations, nonsense tales about family.

I looked around, expecting to see everyone watching that wholesome moment. But Rosie had her worried eyes fixed on her daughter. Mia was sitting on the ground, in the corner of the living room, and Hugo was curled on her lap. Her head was hanging low and eyelids closed as she massaged her temples with trembling hands. She blinked her eyes open slowly, furrowing her brows as if the clarity bothered her. With foggy eyes, she gazed at me, and it took her a while to realize

Rosie and I were watching her. She dropped her hands on Hugo's fur and smiled like nothing was happening.

Before I could go to her, Zach announced our guests.

Danny walked in first, holding Sofia's hand. She looked so fragile and small next to her hunk of a father. However, his care for her and the way he tended to her needs and listened to her nonstop babbling were proof enough of who had the reins between them. Aaron closed the front door behind him and came to greet me as Danny led Sofia to meet Teddy.

Ben squatted in front of the little girl, who gushed at her new friend. She seemed awed at seeing a real life baby. Gabe and Hugo approached to greet her.

"He's my new *fwiend*. He can be your *fwiend*, too," Gabe offered. "But he doesn't do much."

"He's napping?" Her high, sweet voice made me smile.

"He just naps and eats."

"Just wait for a while. Soon, he'll be able to play with you and do more than eat and sleep," Ben promised.

"Until then, why don't you two come play?" Rosie suggested.

Fee turned to her father, who'd crouched beside her. "Can I, *Papi*?"

"Of course, Princess. Be the good girl you are, okay?"

She nodded her head emphatically, her pigtailed bouncing with her enthusiasm. He kissed her on the cheek

before Gabe took her hand and they headed to the back yard. Hugo trailed behind them with Haley, Rosie, and Jackson.

Danny stood up, and Ben pulled him into a hug, crushing my baby between them. “Thank you.” He slapped Danny’s shoulder and fisted his shirt. “And I’m so sorry.”

Danny rubbed Ben’s head, messing his hair. The man was built like a wall and looked lethal. But he was sweet, like a giant teddy bear. “No apologies needed.” He ambled my way to kiss my head, then Mia’s, who’d stood up from her corner. “How are my two brave girls?”

“Tired. In love. Already in need of a vacation. Ready to tackle the world for that little boy.”

He chuckled at my answer. “I can relate to that. I don’t know if that’s helpful or not, but here’s a hunch: we’ll feel that way for the rest of our lives. What about you, *cariño*?”

“I’m fine.” At everyone’s suspicious expression, Mia added, “I’m just tired, I give you that.”

“What did the doctor say?” Aaron asked.

“You mean, your sweet and helpful friend Ariel?”

At his groan—and Mia’s attempt to change the subject—Zach butted in. “She had a grade two concussion.”

“What does that mean?” I questioned.

“It means she should stay home,” Zach asserted.

“*It means*,” she frowned at her brother, “I should be alert, but there’s no need to freak out.”

“You need to get some rest,” Danny insisted.

“That’s the last thing I’ll be able to do. Besides, I got a second opinion. Another doctor deemed me fine to be active.”

“Which doctor?” Zach was rightfully suspicious.

“When did you have the time to go see another one?” Ben bounced Teddy to her.

“That’s not important. The thing is, I’m not backing down.”

“Who’s the doctor, Mia?” Zach stood firm.

“We have so much more to discuss—”

“Are you talking about a doctor-doctor, or someone with a PhD? Because if you think you could mend those two, you’re sorely mistaken.” Stern Zach was so sexy. But I still wasn’t getting it. “You have a *doctorate*, you’re not a medical doctor. You saying you can go back to work doesn’t mean shit, and it sure as hell can’t be called a *second opinion*.”

“That’s rude,” she complained, although she didn’t dispute her brother’s allegation.

Ben snorted. “Were you really trying to sell *your* second opinion to us?”

“I know my limits. And let’s face it, we’re not in a place to be without a working person. More than ever, we need all hands on deck.” That was the hard truth none of them could argue against.

“Before we can decide who’s working on what, we should discuss what happened.” Aaron tried to pacify everyone. “From the beginning.”

Danny asked Ben if he could have Teddy. As the giant bear cuddled my baby, my man sat next to me, while everyone else got settled. Nestling closer to him was a natural response.

Mia explained everything. From the moment we left the clinic to the blocked roads. From the man following us without trying to attack the car to the crash. From calling the Company to ask for help to the labor.

“How did you notice it seemed to be a trap?”

She shifted on her seat, crossing one leg over the other on the couch, and peered at Ben to explain. “He didn’t try to do anything but tail us. He just kept forcing us along faster. I figured if he wanted to do something to us, he’d have done it already. By the time I realized that, it was too late. Right before I could turn the car around, the truck surprised me off the road.”

“Did you get a good look at who was following you?”

She gulped before answering Danny. “It was the same man I saw with Andrea. Same guy, same car, around the same place I spotted them.”

“Fuck,” the men chorused.

“I noticed the gate was open when we drove by. That seemed odd enough. Right after that, I saw the car.”

At my quizzical face, Ben explained, in clear discomfort, “Mia saw him a few months ago—”

“My soon-to-be ex-wife was cheating on me with that man. He’s a member of a dangerous drug cartel. Now I’m hating myself for not dumping that piece of work sooner.” Danny’s hatred was clear. So was his worry.

“You’re doing it now, that’s all that matters.”

“She put my baby in danger, Mia. Andrea put Sofia and all of us in danger.”

“I don’t think he attacked us because of her.” She raised a hand to placate him. “She can surely make it easier for him, I give you that. But there are a lot of other things involved. Now your baby can be safe. You’re divorcing that... lady.” She gritted her teeth to stop herself from saying something else. “So you can move on with your life, knowing your baby is being properly cared for.”

He grumbled in half-agreement, not convinced.

“About the truck. The one that crashed you.” Aaron sat down on the loveseat and placed one shin over his knee. “What can you say about it?”

“It came out of nowhere,” I answered. “He crossed the road right into the car. There was only time to scream.”

“You couldn’t see it?”

I shook my head, and Mia explained, “It was an arboreal stretch on both sides of the road. To our right, there was an entrance to a dirt path. The road was narrow and curvy at that point, so I planned on using that entrance to make the turn and go back toward the clinic to get rid of the tailing car.” She explained the dynamics using her hands. “Before I could do it, the truck came from the other side of the road, my left side, and drove directly against the car.”

“Did the driver honk?”

“No. And despite there being a ‘daylight headlight section’ close by, his lights were off. He left from between the

trees and advanced. No warning. No lights. Nothing.” My insides coiled as she told them. Remembering that moment made everything real again.

“So it was deliberate,” Ben concluded.

“It appears so,” Aaron agreed. “Besides, I checked the blocks along the road. All bogus. They closed all your ways of getting away.”

More curses surrounded us, including mine. We stayed in heavy silence until I voiced a question that was nagging at me. “They knew where we were because they planned it. They knew the roads we’d take, and even that I had an appointment. They must’ve been keeping tabs on us and probably knew how far along I was in pregnancy and that I wasn’t driving anymore. Why didn’t they just crash us from my side of the car? If they wanted to endanger me and my baby, why not attack *me*? Or why didn’t they try to get to me when I was alone?”

Silence descended heavily on us. Mia took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes in defeat and exhaustion.

Aaron was the one to answer me. “Because you were the bonus. Not the target.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re hardly ever alone, so that could be an answer for them not getting to you sooner. But what you brought up makes sense. If they wanted you out, they’d find a way to get to *you*. The thing is, they didn’t want you alone, or just you and your baby. Having you out is a victory for Michael. Yes, I know about him,” Aaron informed me when he saw my

surprised face. “But getting her out of the way,” he pointed at Mia, “was his main goal. You’re the afterthought.”

My eyes snapped at her, and I saw her rubbing her forehead in worry and discomfort.

“I believe they waited for the moment you were both on the outskirts of town, with Ben being gone, to decrease your chances of getting help. If he attacked here, at her place, or even at your cafeteria, with this being a small town, help would be there in a second.”

“Mia’s been working more locally for the last couple of weeks,” Danny uttered, pressing my baby closer to his chest, as if in protection.

“Which can explain why they waited until just now to try something.” At Aaron’s perception, Zach and Ben cursed.

“So do you think Michael is involved?” Ben’s pained question saddened me. To consider his father would try to kill his best friend—again—and his woman and kid must’ve been crushing.

“I do. I ran his license plates from when he approached Mia and Isabella and went back a few months, following his whereabouts. From the investigation I’ve been running on that front, and from what you’ve gathered so far—thank you, Danny, for the files—I think he’s indebted to the *Alacrás*. That’s why he was involved in Santiago Cruz’s murder.” He hesitated for a while, and I felt my skin getting clammy and cold.

“What else?” Ben’s clipped voice exposed his alarm.

He rubbed his hand over his mouth. “I have reasons to believe he’s also after *The Bryant Prodigy* on behalf of the cartel. It might be a way for him to solve his debt.”

Ben thrust his hand into his hair in distress. Danny let out a chain of Spanish curses. Mia’s eyebrows were raised, and her eyes were a little bigger, but not in fear, more like in contemplation. Zach stood up from his seat, pacing the room like a beast. He strode out the front door, and all we heard was his shout and punch on something hard. Our wall, maybe.

I didn’t know what being “after *The Bryant Prodigy*” meant. From Zach’s outburst, which was so out of character for him, I figured we should be worried.

He stayed outside for a few minutes as Mia went to the kitchen to prepare some hot chocolate for her and me and pick up some heavy drinking for the men, while dread surrounded us.

I was almost too afraid to ask. “What is *The Bryant Prodigy*?”

“The question is, ‘Who’ is,” Danny grumbled.

Mia came back from the kitchen with everyone’s beverage. “That was the nickname I was christened with when I worked at the DEA.”

“Why?”

“It’s just a stupid banter—”

Aaron accepted the drink from Mia and leaned forward, placing his forearms on his legs. “She was responsible for more arrests than we could count during her time at the agency, including the right hand of the head of the

cartel we're investigating. Apart from all the drugs she busted."

"*We* busted," she corrected him. "Besides, like I told Ben a while ago, they probably don't know who I am. Bryant isn't an uncommon name, and it's just an expression, a joke. I hardly doubt they're after me, *Mia Bryant*."

"We shouldn't dismiss this, *cariño*."

"I'm not making light of it, Danny. But we have more important matters at hand than to entertain this jest. Michael is after us for a selfish vendetta. We still don't know why the cartel guy is fooling around with Andrea, but I think it's safe to say he's here to expand the business, what with the huge shipment from a few months ago and all. I honestly don't think they're choosing this place for me."

"Why, then?" Aaron seemed open to other options.

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Maybe the proximity to Canada. It could be easier for them to export not only drugs, but people as well."

"Or maybe we could consider the obvious alternative that they're after you," Zach snapped, already back. I was having a hard time compromising the calm and loving big brother to the wild bear ready to attack.

Knowing his anger was based on fear, Mia ignored his sharp tone. "If that's the case, then I should focus on that side of the investigation."

"How is that a good idea, Mia? They're trying to shoot you down, and your answer is to meet them head-on?" Even

from afar, I could see Zach's vein in his forehead was pumping.

Mia stood up in annoyance. "So what's your suggestion?"

"You should leave. Go somewhere safe until things cool down," Zach exclaimed in agitation.

"If you think I'll run right now, then you don't know me at all. It offends me that you could even consider suggesting that. Any other person, and you'd agree to build an offensive to end this."

He thrust his hands into his hair. "*You're not any other person!* You're my little sister, damn it."

Placated by his turmoil, she approached him and touched his arms to stop his pacing. "I'm your *trained* little sister. I've known them for a long time, Zee. I investigated the cartel with Aaron and Danny. I know how they operate. My going away won't stop their advances. It'll only make them worse."

"This isn't supposed to be happening," he whispered.

Mia hugged his waist in comfort. "I know. But it's nothing we can't deal with. We're gonna put an end to this."

Zach hugged her back, but the agony didn't leave his eyes. I could only pray she was right.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BEN

Eighth.

That was the eighth diaper I changed. That day. And still counting.

I loved my boy. He was the most precious living being I'd ever encountered, and my heart soared whenever I saw his toothless smile. But how many dumps does a baby need to take? He was way too small to release that much shit.

It was still an adjustment to take care of him. Yet as tired as I was, I'd never felt happier or more fulfilled.

Sleepless nights were getting old already. Seeing his attentive eyes following me around was priceless. His wails broke my heart, and I wanted to snatch with my bare hands whatever was bothering him. The little noises he made trying to communicate never failed to make me smile.

I wasn't comfortable with leaving Izzie alone with him. Not only was the threat still very real, I also didn't wanna be away from them. Every day, there was something new happening with Teddy I didn't wanna miss.

Whenever I could, I worked from home. When that wasn't possible, I left them with Rosie and Jackson, who were more than willing to spoil my baby, along with Gabe. There were also times I brought them with me to the company. I

figured if Haley could take care of Gabe while working when they first got here, Izzie and I could make it work as well.

The bonus was that, in all those scenarios, Izzie wasn't taking care of him alone. At least one of us could keep an eye on them.

The danger was still haunting us. I couldn't even blame my sleepless nights solely on Teddy. It was hard to sleep knowing your family was being targeted by a cartel. It was even harder to consider your father was in on it.

Since that was a federal investigation, and Mia and Danny were so close to it, Aaron got us some undercover agents to keep an eye on things. Mia dove into the investigation, trying to get a connection between everything going on and anticipating their attacks.

Danny was assigned to assist her, while Zach and I dealt with our clients. Whenever we got too swamped, Danny and Mia would step in, putting out fires. Since Danny and I had kids, we normally went home early. With me being the father of a newborn and Danny being already a factual single dad (Andre had finally left the house, leaving Sofia behind), sleeping and resting were a luxury. Mia and Zach were active in taking care of Gabe, but whenever Haley was with his boy, the Bryant duo would work late to catch up with business, new assignments, investigations, and research.

To say we were all worn to the bone was putting it mildly.

Even weeks after my boy was born, we weren't close to getting an answer on the cartel's next step. At least we knew

our enemies and were aware of what they were capable of. Not that that was reassuring at all.

Just like me and Haley, Danny started bringing Sofia with him. Since Haley started working with us, Mia turned one of our offices into a playroom/nursery. We installed cameras inside, so we could watch and hear Gabe. We started using it for our other kids as well. It wasn't ideal, but we could keep them close during those trying times.

Jackson and Rosie offered to babysit all three kids, but even though Haley, Izzie, and I took them up on their offer a few times—even Danny on the rare occasion—he wasn't comfortable doing so. Seeing as how his situation was different from ours (Haley lived with Mia, and Izzie and I were co-parenting, while he was totally alone), he was on the lookout for a nanny.

I was in the playroom, working on a couple of files for new clients, while Teddy was lying on his playmat, trying his best to reach for the colorful animals above him. From time to time, I'd shake the animals, enjoying how excited my boy got when his toys danced for him.

I was lost in that cycle when Mia walked in. "I see you're having a very productive day."

"I can't get enough of how active and smart he is." There was no hiding my wonder.

"That, he is." She lay down on her stomach beside him, rested her head on her arms, facing him, and started making noises and faces to my—not so little anymore—Bean. "Look at those strong legs. You'll have one hell of a kick, won't you,

buddy?” Still playing with him, she asked me, “Where is Izzie?”

“I told her to take a nap in my office. She needed the rest.”

Mia poked my boy and shook his toys, making him squeal in delight as she giggled.

Those kinds of moments fed me. When things were hard enough to drive me crazy, when all I wanted was to storm outside and shoot at everything like a madman, all I needed to do was love on my son, hug my woman, or see my family caring so much for him. He had more love in his few weeks of life than I had for almost all my formative years.

“You know?” Mia was still on the floor, playing with Teddy. “Some ducks and birds imprint on humans when they’re hatched. They normally follow and get attached to the first large moving being they see when they’re born.” More poking. “Danny and I were the first people he saw.”

“Yes...”

“I guess it’s safe to say we’ll be his favorite.”

“By that theory, babies were supposed to attach to the mother’s doctors. And are you really comparing my boy to a duck?”

“First of all, I’m not an anonymous doctor. I’m his favorite auntie. I’m way more special. Secondly, ducks are cute. They can fly, walk, and swim. They do it all weirdly, but they do.”

“What are you doing up here?”

“I needed an energy boost, so I came to see this little guy. I was also looking for Danny, but that can wait.”

“Looking for me?”

Mia hoisted herself up, kneeled beside Teddy, and turned to Danny. “I arranged a meeting with that girl I talked to you about. Since we’re spending most of our time here, I thought it’d be easier for you if the interview was at the company. She’s getting here any minute.”

“Thank you, *cariño*.”

“What meeting?”

“I need a babysitter for Fee. Mia told me about this girl who moved back here after college. I’ll interview her today, and if I think it’s a good fit, I’ll schedule another one with Sofia to see how she handles my girl.” He sat down on the other side of my boy, squeezing his crossed, tree-like legs, and picked up a musical toy to play with Teddy.

“Where is Fee, by the way?”

“My parents have Gabe, her, and Hugo for today,” Mia answered me.

“My mom is coming to spend a few days with me. She wants to spend more time with Sofia, so she’ll be with her when I’m working until I can hire a nanny. I hope this woman is a good fit, because so far I’ve had zero luck.”

“Do I know her?”

“I don’t know if you’ll remember her, Benny. She’s younger than us and just graduated from college. She’s the Specters’ oldest daughter. Her father had a heart attack, that’s

why she came back. From what I remembered, she's a good kid. And in need of a job."

The red light on the phone blinked a few times. We wanted a way to reach out to the person inside the room, without risking waking up the kids. Whenever someone called the room, the phone would just light up.

Mia answered it and listened to whoever was talking to her—most likely Haley. "Please, send her to the playroom, Danny's here with us. Thank you, hun." She disconnected the call. "Lisa's here. She's coming our way."

Right on cue, someone appeared at the door. Mia stood up, picking up my baby, and I mirrored her so we could greet the girl. Her light brown wavy hair was pulled up in a ponytail, which made her look younger than she probably was. Mia stretched her hand to greet her.

"Hi, I'm the one who texted you. I'm Mia."

"Hello. Thank you for arranging this interview. April talked a lot about you guys." Her amber eyes seemed sharp at first, but when she smiled, they became mesmerizing.

And mesmerized, my giant of a friend was. Seemingly having forgotten how to stand up and say hello to people, Danny punched a squeaky toy, pulled down a chair, and kicked a stuffed giraffe.

"Hello—" Cue cough.

What the hell is wrong with him?

Mia started again, trying to talk louder than Danny's breakdown. "This is—" another toy found its way onto the floor, "this is our china shop. And this," she pointed her thumb

over her shoulder to Danny, “is our bull.” It was my time to cough so I could hide my laughter.

Finding his voice again, Danny stepped closer, not tearing down anything this time. “Hi. I’m Daniel Delgado. I’m the one who wants you. *For my baby*. She doesn’t have her mother now. Well, she does. I don’t mean I expect you to be her mother. I can be what she needs. Not that I could be a mother, because I’m her father. I just need a nanny. Again, for her baby. *My baby*. Not for me. I can take care of myself.” The girl suppressed a melodic giggle, whereas Mia stared at him, horrified. “I’m not saying you couldn’t take care of me. Not that way, I mean—”

“Tell us about you, Lisa,” Mia asked, putting a pause on the train wreck.

She didn’t seem appalled by Danny’s awkwardness, so that seemed like a good sign. I guided her outside the room to show her around. After he seemed to get ahold of whatever happened with him, he took the lead and guided her to his office so they could talk.

“Good Lord. What the hell was that?” Mia asked as I cackled.

“Whatever it was, we need to vow to never let that story die. We need to tell it to our generations and always remember this day.”



Another few weeks have gone by, and I was killing it at the parenting thing. Most of the time. With a lot of help. It was certainly overwhelming, but we were starting to establish a new routine.

Danny ended up hiring the girl—that seemed promising—who was starting a couple of weeks away, after his mother went back home. We were all settling into our new reality.

Zach, on the other hand, wasn't himself. Since the last time we talked with Aaron, Zach was anxious and tense. Even his relationship with Mia wasn't as fluid and easy as it used to be.

I was starting to realize what she complained about months before, when she said Zach and I didn't treat her like a colleague. He wasn't being fair to her, especially since he was still trying to get her out of the investigation. However, I most definitely related to Zach's dread over Mia.

They weren't talking as much as they normally did. Whenever they interacted with one another, it was always tense. Zach bursting at the seams, ready to lose control, Mia trying to placate him while also standing her ground.

It was during one of those strained exchanges that I witnessed what I swore I'd never watch. If I could, I'd do anything for their first fight, their only fight, never to happen.

Zach stormed into my office and closed the door. "We need to talk."

"Did something happen?"

“We can’t let Mia go on with that investigation.” His hair was pointing in all directions, his eyes were round, and the circles around them were pronounced. I could barely recognize my pacifying friend behind his cloudy eyes.

“We can’t keep her out of it. She was right. Out of all of us, she’s the one who knows the cartel the best. Danny is a close second.”

“I don’t care!” He thrust his hands inside his hair. “They’re after her. They’re getting closer to her. You know they’re after *The Bryant Prodigy*; it’s only a matter of time until they figure out it’s Mia. Then what? There’s no stopping them if they want someone.”

“Is there anything you’re not telling me?”

He bit his lip and shook his head, ignoring my question. “I can’t lose my sister, Ben.” His turmoil was killing me. What did he expect from me? “We need to outvote her.”

“*What?*”

“She won’t listen to me if I tell her to back down. Mia’s been ignoring me this whole time, she’s been putting herself in even more danger. She needs to step back.”

“We can’t kick her out of the investigation. And I hope to God you’re meaning just to leave her out of the investigation, not the whole company.”

“They already tried to kill her, Ben! What’s next? They won’t stop until they do. We need to do something.”

“Getting her out won’t solve a damn thing, Zach. You know that, right?”

“It’ll give us time until we can bring them down.”

“Without her?” I scoffed. “I’d love to say we’re able to do so, but without her, it’ll be a hell of a lot more difficult. First of all, because she’ll make our lives a living hell. Also, because we need her mind. The insights and fast thinking she has? That’s not something you can teach and learn. You’re either born with it, or you’re not. She was.”

“There has to be a way to leave her out.” His tone was panicky.

The doors burst open as she strode in, with her anger barely hiding her chagrin. “Please, tell me you’re not trying to kick me out.”

Danny appeared behind Mia, a look of uncertainty on his face.

“Were you listening behind the door?” Zach sounded affronted.

“You weren’t exactly whispering, Zachary.” At his birth name, he winced.

“Look, sis, this isn’t personal—”

“*Like hell it isn’t!*” she bellowed.

All three of us men jumped in surprise at her outburst. Danny and I stared at each other. Just like me, he had no idea how to intervene in a Bryant duel. So far, we’d never seen one.

“First and foremost, this *is* personal. You’re trying to get *me* out because *you* don’t think I can handle it. It can’t get more personal than that.”

“I’m not saying you can’t handle it—”

“So what are you saying, Zachary?”

“It’s just...this is...” He rubbed his face and groaned. “This is just too much. You can’t ignore how dangerous this is.”

“I’m not ignoring it. But I know what to do. I’m an adult, I’m a professional, I’ve done this before, and I’ll do it again.”

“Just because you lucked out the first few times, doesn’t mean it’s gonna work out again.” The worst choice of words if I’d ever heard them.

“Are you really saying I had *luck* while doing my job? Are you seriously saying I didn’t accomplish what I did out of hard work, good choices, and dedication? For you, it was *sheer luck*?” Her voice grew louder with each word. “What am I to you? Your lucky biscuit? A four-leaf clover? *What the hell am I doing here, then?*”

“*Driving me crazy!*” he yelled back. “Every time you step foot outside of here, I cringe, thinking of everything that could go wrong. You leave on an assignment, and I count down how long it’ll take for you to get back.”

“Are you out of your freaking mind, you controlling jerk?”

Not listening to her, he just went on. “All I think about is that day, years ago, when you left without telling me and I was almost too late in taking you and Ben away from Michael. All I can think about is that you jumped right into danger and I wasn’t around to protect you. What if you do that again and I’m too far away to do something?”

“*I was thirteen!* I don’t need you to save me anymore. I’m not a fucking damsel in distress who needs my big brother to slay my dragons. I’ve been doing that on my own for quite some time, but you’re too stubborn and arrogant to see that.”

“I’m not saying you can’t.” Zach tried a new, placating tone, but his shaking voice was a dead giveaway of his torment. “But I can’t work or function knowing you’re in danger. *You* are the bull’s-eye.”

“So your answer to *your* problem is, instead of working on *your* issues, to get *me* out?” She shook her head in disgust. “Clear this up for me: you’re saying you can’t rest since you *saved* me all those years ago and you don’t know if I’ll need your saving again. Why aren’t you as worried about Ben, then? Aren’t you worried he’ll be caught in a situation where he’ll need you, oh knight in shining armor, to rescue him? Why do you trust him to do his job, but not me to do mine?”

Before things could get any further, I intervened. “Mia, it’s not that we don’t trust you; we’re just worried.”

“We?” I should’ve stayed quiet. “*We?* Are you siding with him? Do you also think I should be left out because, God forbid, I have to take action and do something?”

I peered behind her at Danny, only to be met by his incredulous expression, which served to prove to me how wrong I was. “We all need help eventually.” My argument was as weak as my voice.

“Then help me hone my skills instead of pushing me away. Show me you believe in me and you trust my work. A work, I must add, I did very well at, without you goons

holding my hand every step of the way. I know. Shocker.” Her sarcasm cut deep, but her hurt was way worse.

Heavy silence surrounded us for a few moments before Mia resumed in such a tired tone that it made me feel even more like a jerk. “You know what the problem is? We all lived together for far too long.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll never regret living with you, Benny. Don’t get me wrong. Having you as a brother was a gift. But I think...I think growing up as closely as we all did was supposed to make you value me and truly know me. Instead, it made you both disrespect me. You two still force me into this frame of the helpless kid,” she scoffed. “As if I’d ever been one. You blaming me for what Michael did decades ago is a low blow, Zachary.”

“I’m not blaming you,” he retorted, although without conviction.

“Aren’t you? Because it seems to me you’re implying things could’ve been different if I weren’t so defenseless. This is how you see me. How you both see me. As someone you need to take care of. Someone who needs guidance in every little thing.” She placed her hands on her hips and hung her head in defeat. “I feel like the only one who truly sees me as someone who has something good to say is Danny. I’ve spent my whole life living with you two, yet he’s respected me more in the years we worked together than you ever did my whole life. I think growing up together made you entitled to disregard me.”

Zach tried to justify our wrongs. “We worry because you’re our little sister.”

“That doesn’t make it okay to dismiss me so easily. We started this company together because I believed you trusted my abilities. I believed you saw something in me I could bring to the table.”

“We started the company with you because you asked us to.” It would’ve probably hurt her less if Zach slapped her in the face. “No, that came out wrong.”

“So all this,” she waved her arms around, indicating the building, “is what? You indulging me? Playing with the little sister until she takes a nap? Why are you here if you don’t believe in this?”

“I do. I think it was a great idea, and I love working with you. I worry, though. I have good reason to be worried. You’re my little sister, and taking care of you is something I’ll always do.”

“I love you, Zach. I do. But once, just once, I wish you didn’t treat me like a sister. If you’re just trying to appease me, indulge me on this: for just one time, don’t be my big brother. Don’t think of me as your little sister. Think of me as a co-worker. A partner. Someone you do business with. Just for once, forget I’m your little sister and look at me like someone you could bring yourself to trust and respect.” She choked on the last words, turned on her wheels, and headed out, shaking her head.

After throwing us a disapproving glare, Danny followed her.

“She isn’t wrong,” I uttered.

“I can’t risk losing her.” He sounded as defeated as he looked.

“Why do you think she can’t handle things? She did prove once, and time and again, she’s way smarter than all of us combined.”

“I know. She’s also proved she’d do whatever it takes for us. Even if that means putting herself in the eye of the storm. I can’t let that happen. Because this storm is way bigger than anything we’ve ever faced. I fear she’ll get herself into a situation where she needs to decide if she’ll save one of us or herself. We both know what she’ll choose.”

“Maybe it won’t come to that,” I retorted weakly.

“Those guys are capable of anything. If they found out already she’s the one they’re looking for, then her head is already wanted.”

At that moment, I changed the course of our lives. I could blame it on my exhaustion. I could say it was a result of my desperation. No matter the motivator, I was about to ruin my family. My ultimate betrayal of one of the people I loved the most would cost me more than I was able to afford.

“What if they thought it was you?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

IZZIE

Teddy's first Thanksgiving came and went too soon. We gathered once again at Rosie and Jackson's for dinner. Even Sofia, Danny, and his mother, Sonia, joined us. Gabe and Fee played with Hugo as Teddy kicked his legs in excitement. All the grown-ups who weren't babysitting participated in making dinner. There was chatter, laughter, and so much love surrounding us.

However, there was also underlying hurt. I wasn't sure what had happened between the guys. All Ben said was that Mia and Zach got into a fight, something he'd never seen before, and he didn't know how to fix it. To make matters worse, Danny and Ben took sides in the whole situation: Danny joined Mia, while Ben sided with Zach.

They were mindful not to make the day awkward, though. Mia and Zach played with the kids (separately), made jokes (not with each other), and behaved the whole day. There was no denying the strain between them, though, which was heartbreaking.

Even Rosie and Jackson didn't know what to do. It was as foreign a situation to them as it was for everyone else.

I knew it wasn't easy for Zach and Mia. Since I met them, one of the things I admired (and envied) the most about them was how easy and loving their relationship was. Their

sad eyes were proof of how much they were hurting. The fact that they were putting it aside so we could all enjoy that day was an indication of how selfless they were.

The first snowfall greeted us. Nothing major, just enough to make us wear our heavy winter coats and smell Christmas approaching. Holy Water went all out on decoration. It was something out of a movie.

The snow added to the whole picturesque scenario, and people seemed even more welcoming than usual. On the main street, every single building and business place was decorated. Garlands hang over doors. Ornaments, angels, and wreaths framed the windows. Colorful lights illuminated the streets. Everyone who passed us by wished us Merry Christmas, even though it was early December.

Ben promised me we'd decorate our place during the weekend, and I couldn't wait. It was Teddy's first Christmas, and our first one as a family. I wanted it to be memorable. I was already splurging on decorations and little presents to display under the tree. It should be a holiday like Ben and I never experienced. After we started our tradition, we'd go to Rosie and Jackson's to perpetuate the one they already had going on.

I was counting down the days. I just hoped everything would be peaceful again until then.

Even though I was on self-granted maternity leave, I missed my coffee shop, so I convinced Ben I could go back, even if it was just to placate my longing. He agreed on it, as long as I wasn't alone.

So to Beans we went, and I loved how domesticated it felt. As I carried the bag with everything our baby needed, Ben brought the baby seat and Teddy himself. It warmed my heart every time I watched them together.

Teddy was dressed for the winter, complete with a pair of gloves, scarf around his little neck, bonnet, and the blankie Rosie knitted for him. Ben was right, he did look like a pig in a blanket. Such a pretty pig in a blanket.

We walked leisurely down the sidewalk to the coffee shop, while Teddy's curious eyes took in everything around him. With each store we passed, Ben explained to our baby what it was, who ran the place, and which one our baby would probably like better. From time to time, we were stopped by the store owners, their employees, and other towners who wanted to gush over our baby. I couldn't blame them. I did that myself every chance I got.

When we finally entered the cafeteria, I was enveloped by the cozy smell of coffee and pastries. I closed my eyes, breathing in deeply, and felt energized. There I was, walking with my family into the place I'd worked so hard to create. A sense of belonging warmed me. Despite everything still so uncertain in our lives, I felt like I was where I was supposed to be, surrounded by people who were meant to be in my life.

I had a family I cherished—beyond Teddy and Ben. I had a thriving business. I had it all. I should've anticipated things were just too wonderful.

Some customers looking for hot beverages to warm up were scattered in the shop and greeted us as we got in. Ben

and I settled behind the counter, and April came to us to coo over our baby.

“He’s so grown. I can’t believe how much he’s changed since the last time I saw him.”

“He’s growing fast.”

At his father’s proud voice, my boy looked up at Ben and gave him a toothless smile. It didn’t matter that I had to deliver him in a crashed car on the side of the road. Teddy’s smiles were more often directed at his daddy.

“He’ll be one hell of a man. Right, kiddo?”

Realizing Ben was talking to him, Teddy kicked his legs, made a squealy sound, always smiling, and grabbed his father’s chin.

It never ceased to amaze me how much love flowed between them. Whenever they were in the same space, even if Ben was working, he’d find a way to do so with our baby closer to him.

The man who was once scared of committing was finding ways to spend more time with us. Even with all the craziness we endured, he’d always find a way to go home earlier so he could bathe Teddy. Burping time was officially Ben’s whenever he was around. If we couldn’t be together, I was supposed to send updates with every new thing Teddy did and record them.

Letting my two men get their quality time, I proceeded to decorate the place as April took orders and manned the tables. Since Teddy couldn’t sit up yet, Ben turned him

forward and leaned on the counter, so our boy could watch the activities while resting on his daddy's chest.

Every time I looked at them, my heart soared. Either Ben was talking to Teddy about anything, as our baby was hung up on his every word as if he understood what they meant, or I caught Teddy playing with one of his toys as Ben kissed his cheek.

We both needed that moment. Ben and the guys had been working nonstop since the day Mia and I were thrown off the road. I knew they were frustrated with not having gotten whoever did that to us.

I was still surprised they'd decided to take a couple days off, and I couldn't agree more with that idea. As much as he went above and beyond to stay with me and Teddy, I missed having Ben with us, without thinking about when he needed to leave again. I missed our lazy mornings, our middle-of-the-night kisses, making love to him without worrying that he should be at the company. Having those uninterrupted hours with just our little family was a gift.

I walked to them behind the counter and let Ben nestle me into his side. "The place looks really good, Forest. Let's see what we can come up with at home."

"We still need a tree."

"That we do. Do you wanna look for one today?"

"I wanted to, but I'm not sure Teddy should be out in the cold for so long."

He squeezed our baby tighter against him. "I think you're right." I felt him tense behind me, although I couldn't

understand why. “I could ask Zach to come with me. He’ll probably look for trees for his place, Jackson’s, and Mia’s. Gabe always likes to decorate. We could do it together, if it’s okay with you.”

“Of course. How are they, by the way?”

Sadness took over his features. “Still uncomfortable. I could ask her to stay with you while I look for a tree with Zach.” Ignoring his attempt to change the subject, I agreed. “If you need a few moments to yourself, well, and Mia, I’m sure Rosie and Jackson would be thrilled to have Teddy with them.”

“I don’t wanna bother them.”

“Actually, Rosie offered to babysit. Three times already.”

I giggled. “We’ll need to arrange more space for the toys she’ll send with him.”

“I have no doubts about it. I’ll confirm with her and text Mia. When she gets here, I’ll take Teddy to Rosie’s and meet up with Zach. Who knows? Maybe we could start decorating tonight.” He gave me a soft kiss on the lips, and *tonight* couldn’t come fast enough.

Not long afterward, Mia walked into Beans, her red pointy nose indicating how cold it was outside, even though it wasn’t snowing at the moment. She took off her gloves and strode our way, making funny faces at Teddy when she got in his eyesight.

“Hey, guys,” she greeted both of us, but her eyes were focused on her youngest nephew. “Hello, little fella. How is

my favorite ducky?” She picked him up from the counter as he squealed in excitement, then she stepped away to show him the ornaments.

After exploring the place, the duo approached us, and Ben fished his phone out of his pocket to see the time. “I better get going. I need to leave Teddy with Rosie and Jackson, then I’ll meet Zach so we can look for the trees.”

“I just left Haley, Gabe, and Hugo there before coming here,” Mia said before giving butterfly kisses on Teddy’s cheek. “You’re gonna have so much fun at Gamma, Ducky.”

“Shoot. Zach said he’s gonna be late,” Ben uttered, looking at the text he got. “He wants to grab the boxes of decorations he stored at the company.”

“Why did he leave them there?”

“To hide them from Gabe,” Mia explained to me. “We store the ornaments and the presents at the company, so he doesn’t get to them before it’s time. Tell him not to worry. You pick up the trees. Izzie and I can grab the boxes.”

“Don’t you mind? Would you do it for us?”

“I’m doing it for Gabe.” She exhaled, and we could feel the weight she was under. “I’m getting tired of all this.”

Filled with sorrow and regret, Ben lifted Teddy from her arms and squeezed her shoulder. “Can we talk about it? Let’s try to clear the air.”

“Go meet Zach. We’ll talk later.”

Ben seemed relieved at her response and gave her a small smile, promising they could solve it all later.

If only that was possible.

One thing I learned from life is that sometimes “later” means it’s already too late.

He grabbed Teddy’s stuff and kissed me goodbye. I loved on my boy and hugged my man, giving him a peck on his lips. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, Forest. Call me if you need anything.” Then he walked out of the store.

Mia leaned over the counter. “What do you plan on doing now that you’re kid-free?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to just meander through the stores. You know? Walk around without a care in the world, not worrying about schedules or routines. Just enjoy this moment and maybe eat something unhealthy.”

She tapped the counter. “Then it’s settled.”

“Do you wanna go grab the boxes first? That way, we don’t have to worry about it later.”

“Today you’re the boss. Just call the shots, and I’m game.”

“Let’s get this out of the way so we can lazy up the rest of the day.”

I settled things down with April, checking if she needed something before we left. We got into Mia’s new car—the crashed one was unsalvageable—and headed to Bryants & Walker.

I was so excited about the holidays and all the activities until Christmas. I talked non-stop as Mia laughed,

indulging me in my zest.

Soon enough, we arrived at the company, and our conversation was cut short. She parked closer to the entrance and climbed out of the car. We braced ourselves against the wind until she punched the security code so we could get inside.

“Brrr. That was cold.” I shivered. “I’m actually rethinking the whole walking around thing.”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry. Here’s normally colder. Since the building is kind of isolated, nothing breaks the wind, and the trees outside just make it all windier. I do believe we’ll get some odd rain today, though. But we can always walk while drinking something hot.”

“Let’s get those boxes fast and head out. I need to feel my hands again.”

“They’re somewhere in the storage. We just need to find them.”

“When you say in the storage, you mean...”

“The huge space full of shelves behind the conference room,” she answered in a laughing tone.

“Great.”

We walked into the warm lobby and headed to the conference room. It seemed bigger without the guys around. Despite protecting us from the cold, it felt ominous for whatever reason.

Mia tried to unlock the first door, but it was already open. “Weird. I thought I’d closed it before I left yesterday.”

Not giving that much importance to it, I followed her into the room and noticed the two doors to the storage were ajar, so I could see part of the many shelves we'd have to survey until we found what we were looking for. Talk about a needle in a haystack.

I was oblivious to anything else, too focused on getting to the task at hand. It took me a while to realize Mia had stopped and was perusing the space. Before I could ask her anything, she lifted her hand, signing for me to stay quiet. Her shoulders were rigid, her stance became cautious, and her eyes were sharp as she walked quietly to the large wooden table in the middle.

After pressing a button on the underside of it, she fished a handgun from the waist of her pants. I knew we were under a threat, but until that moment I hadn't seen a gun up close. Ben was always mindful of keeping them out of my sight when we were together. Her eerie silence added to her sudden predatory posture, which enhanced my fear. At what, I still didn't know.

She tiptoed to one of the opposite doors. I was so close to her, I swore I could hear her heart beating. Maybe it was mine. She tensed in front of me and walked back, forcing me backward as well. "Go back to the car." Her voice was so quiet, if I wasn't glued to her back, I wouldn't have listened. "Lock yourself, get out of here, and call Ben."

"I can't leave you here."

"You can't stay. If there's someone in the building, I can't let them go away."

"But—"

“Do as I’m telling you.” It was the first time I heard her give an order. That the situation warranted her to speak like that was all the indication I needed that things were about to get ugly.

I was about to turn around to head away when I heard *his* voice. “What a nice surprise. I was looking forward to a family reunion again.”

As Mia raised her gun at Michael, I felt someone grabbing my neck from behind, making me scream. I felt something cold pressed against my temple and started shaking as three other men joined Michael and my captor. From the faraway voices, there were more in the storage.

One of them smiled at Mia. “Remember me?”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to try anything stupid, little girl,” Michael admonished. “You wouldn’t want to give the news to my loving son that he became a single parent, would you?”

“This has nothing to do with her, Michael. You wanted my attention, you have it. Let’s solve this between me and you.” She stepped back, getting closer to me, making the man holding me growl. “You don’t need a flock to do your dirty work, just like I don’t need to worry about another person. She leaves, they go back to the cave they came from, and you and I can put our unresolved issues to rest. What do you say?”

“I say you’ve already tested all the limits of my patience. You better play accordingly—”

It all happened so fast. As Michael rambled on, Mia shifted to pull my head down from my detainer and shoot him

in the shoulder. But could someone stand a chance of protecting a helpless person against several armed men and still stay alive?

She turned ahead again and shot another goon. Then one of the men kicked her knee and Michael hit her ribs with the butt of his assault rifle.

After surviving giving birth in a crashed car, death once again surrounded us. The odds weren't letting me believe we'd be that lucky a second time.

As she dropped to one knee, holding her torso, Michael stepped closer and fisted her hair. "I'm tired of your shenanigans. Today is the last day I witness any of them. *What do you say?*" He spit her words back at her right before he banged her head with all his might against the wooden table, letting her limp body fall on the floor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BEN

“Maybe we should’ve looked for an artificial tree. I’m freezing,” I complained.

“They don’t smell like these. We’ll find one soon enough,” Zach countered.

“That’s the thing, we need more than one, and so far we have a total of zero. I don’t wanna leave them all alone for so long.”

Zach’s face fell, and I felt like a jerk. “Maybe you’re right. I just...I wanted something good for Christmas. Something real.”

I was never one to analyze emotional responses, but that one seemed kind of obvious. “Maybe instead of trying to overcompensate for Christmas, we could just fix things with her.”

“I don’t know how,” he admitted in pain. “As much as I know I hurt her, I’m still afraid. Where does that leave us?”

“We’re working on it.”

“Not fast enough! They’re still out there, planning God knows what, while our family is in jeopardy.”

“We set things in motion already. Soon enough, they’ll come for us—well, you—and we’ll be waiting, because this

time we know it's coming.”

“Making them believe I'm the one they're looking for doesn't seem like enough. There's gotta be more for us to do.” He leaned against one of the trees and rested his head back. His looking powerless was such a foreign occurrence.

“For that, we'd need to get Danny and Mia into our little deceit. We can't do more without them.”

“That defeats the whole purpose of what we're doing. Maybe I should go away for a while, pull the cartel's focus away from here.”

“We can't let the guys get blindsided. It could be just as fatal.” I sat down on a tree stump. “Besides...I'm just as worried as you are. I'm pissed, and I hate that my own father is somehow behind this. But maybe we're also being a little unfair. Mia can hold her own. She's smart, she's quick on her feet. I just left Izzie under her security. I'd never do that if I didn't think Mia couldn't handle it.”

“I know that. Damn, she's been Gabe and Haley's personal security for years now.” Zach took off his beanie to run one hand through his hair. “But she can be so reckless sometimes.”

“I don't think that's the right word. I'd say...fearless?”

“That's just as bad,” he stressed.

“At the end of the day, she's a protector. Much like we are.”

“Exactly. We know what we face, being the way we are and doing what we do. I can't help thinking we've had our fair share of miracles every time we come home from a screwed-

up assignment. Every time we do, instead of feeling relief, I feel we're just overstaying our welcome with Lady Luck. And I can't..." He rubbed the palms of his hands on his closed eyes. "I can't get this image out of my head that there will come a day when one of us won't come back home. I don't think I could stand it if it were Mia." I almost couldn't hear his whispered words.

A new gust of wind struck us, its sound showing us Mother Nature was awake and displaying her strength. I couldn't stop myself from thinking that felt like an omen. I never feared rain. But the odd one that was forming seemed to bring a warning.

"I think we should go back. We won't accomplish anything here today. We can get one of those fake trees that smell like the real deal. I need something hot to drink, and we both need to enjoy our time off with family," I suggested.

We headed back to our cars in silence. As we were getting closer, I heard both our phones ping repeatedly, having finally reached an area with service. I felt my stomach drop even before I read the many messages.

Text after text from Danny asking where we were and why Mia wasn't answering her phone. Aaron letting us know someone from the cartel was seen again in our area. But what froze me in my tracks was seeing the message I'd never imagined I'd see.

The panic button at Bryants & Walker had been triggered, proving I was once again mistaken: they'd come for us.

And we weren't ready.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

IZZIE

I didn't know how long I panicked over Mia. After they ambushed us, they locked the door we walked in from, tied us to a chair, and left us in the conference room, closing the other two that led to the storage.

Mia's head was hanging low, but she still seemed to be breathing. I had no way of knowing how long she'd been out. They'd taken our cell phones, and there was no clock on the wall. After the nasty crash she endured, any one minute was too long.

It still wasn't clear on what the men wanted. I thought for sure they'd just hurt us. But I could hear them shouting and walking around in the storage.

After what felt like forever, Mia started shifting and groaning. Much to my relief, she blinked, although she seemed dazed.

"Thank God. Mia? Are you okay?" With foggy eyes, she peered around until reality seemed to crash her. She tried to get up abruptly and stopped mid-motion, grunting with her eyes closed and fisting her hands. "Honey, stop. Take it easy."

She frowned down at her arms, which were restrained with zip ties to the armrest, then peered at me for a few seconds before it dawned on her I was also there.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

“I’m worried about you. Michael hit your head, and your leg made a weird sound when the other one kicked you.”

“Did they hurt you?” she enunciated.

“No. They just left us here.” I lifted my chin in their direction. “They’re in the storage. I don’t know what they’re doing.”

She leaned her head back, her eyes closed against the clarity assaulting her injured head. “They must be looking for something.”

“How do you know?”

“If they were after us, they’d be in this room right now, and we wouldn’t be talking. We took them by surprise. They’re after something else.”

“Like what?”

She squeezed her eyes and opened them slowly. “Probably our archives with our ongoing investigation on them. What we collected over the years since Danny and I worked at the agency.”

“Do you know who they are?” I didn’t wanna bother her when she was in discomfort, but I had so many questions.

“I recognized one of them.” She paused and exhaled. “The one who kicked me? He’s the guy I saw with Danny’s ex. The same one who tailed us on the road.”

“*From the cartel?*” I whisper-yelled.

She nodded and winced at the small motion.

“Why not kill us? Not that I’m complaining.”

“Because we’re not their priority and Michael is too arrogant to believe we’ll try to escape him.”

“He’s right, because there’s no way we can do it. They locked the door we came from, and we can’t just cross the storage to get away.”

She side-eyed me. “Have a little faith in us. Just gimme a minute.” She closed her eyes until her breathing evened out. “Have you seen the other guys? How many are there?”

“I counted five men but heard more voices than that.”

She nodded in thought. “Did you hear anything they said?”

“The man who kicked you said something about doing quickly what they came here for.” I thought back to the last few moments, wracking my brain for any other information. “He also said they were running out of time and should set the timer and get things done.”

“Set the timer?” She furrowed her brows in confusion.

“That’s what I heard.” I gazed at her leg. “Can you move it?”

She looked down and stretched her leg, moving it in several different directions. “I don’t think it’s broken,” she hissed. “It’s just sore.”

“What about the noise?”

“That was me getting old.” She gazed at our free feet. “Are you wearing any belts?”

I frowned and shook my head.

“It’s okay. Just wait for a second, and I’ll cut your tie.”

“How?”

Ignoring me, she raised her pelvis as much as she could to unhook her belt and pull off its hook. She slid the belt into the tie on one of her arms and fastened it. Raising her leg, she hooked her feet on it and forced her leg down to break the tie. With a free hand, she fished a knife from a sheath on her shin and cut the other tie before coming to me to cut mine, limping when she placed her weight on her kicked knee.

After we were free, she paused to listen to what was going on outside the room.

I rubbed my wrist, trying to alleviate the discomfort. “We need to find a way out of it. But if they see us untied, they’ll restrain us more than before. Or worse.”

She looked down at the ties on the floor. “You’re right. Sit on the chair and place the ties back, holding the ends under your arms to look like they’re tied. We’ll think of something soon.”

She slid her switchblade inside her right sleeve before reaching under the table. She rummaged for a while before pulling out some weaponry.

She thrust inside her hoodie pockets what seemed to be smoke bombs and a lighter, then hid a handgun on the waistband of her pants—they’d taken the one she came with. Confusing me to no end, she grabbed a bunch of office stuff—a calculator, a cup holder, even some pens—and filled her pockets. My heart skipped a beat when I saw her pick up a cell phone and turn it on.

My relief was short-lived. Hearing someone approach, I hissed at her to get into position. She hastily hid the ammo she'd collected and sat back on the chair, doing with the cut ties what she instructed me when one of the doors opposite us—one of the two that led to the storage—was thrown open.

“Good. You’re up. It wouldn’t be as fun if I had to have my way with you while you were out.” Michael strode inside the room. He crouched down in front of her, admiring the bruise forming on her temple. “Such a shame. This could’ve been avoided if you weren’t so difficult. I gotta admit, though, I’m gonna have so much fun teaching you how to behave. It’s been long overdue.”

“Were you scared?”

“What?”

“Were you scared to meet me? Is that why you came back with a security detail worthy of a president?” she taunted. By the locking of his jaw, it was working.

“Do you think I’m afraid of you?” His voice was clipped and offended.

“I believe you have reasons to be. History’s proven you’ve yet to win a round with me. Is that why you brought reinforcement?” Tilting her head to the side in mock understanding, she whispered, “It’s okay. No reason to be ashamed.”

What the hell is she doing?

“I made you bleed when you were younger—”

“I left you unconscious.”

“I terrified you at that lame coffee shop—”

“I banged your head against the wall.”

Breathing hard, he said between gritted teeth, “I’ve just knocked you out—”

“Because someone else kicked my knee. Let’s face it. When it comes to me, you don’t stand a chance.”

It shouldn’t have surprised me, but my gasp broke free when he backslapped her face so hard, her head was thrown to the side. He closed his hand around her neck, the vein on his temple pulsing like crazy.

He cocked his free arm to throw another punch, and I was ready to jump on him—forgetting we should pretend we were tied—when the second door to the storage opened.

The man who’d kicked Mia walked inside, took it all in, and reprimanded Michael in annoyance. “That’s not what we came here for. Stop wasting time and pay your dues.”

“She needs to learn a lesson, Matias.”

“So do you. We’ve yet to find anything useful here, we still don’t know where she is, and the clock is ticking. Manuel’s almost done setting everything up, and the timer will start running soon.”

“It won’t take too long.” The purposeful way he said it while squeezing her throat sent chills down my spine. “He’ll thank me later for getting this nuisance out of the way.”

The man marched to Michael, pulled him up from over Mia, threw him against the wall, and pressed his arm on Michael’s neck. “That’s the problem with little shits like you.

You never pay attention to what matters. You're no closer to paying what you owe, and this little trip is proving to be a huge waste of time. Carlos Gomes says thanks to no one. If you wanna live another day, show us what they"—he tipped his head, indicating Mia—"have found, find *her*, and get us the *right* Bryant."

He pushed Michael against the wall another time for good measure and strode away to join the others.

"Pff, that was tough," Mia goaded, not caring she was wheezing. I never wanted to keep someone's mouth shut so much. Michael was furious and stepped closer to her. "Na-ah-ah. Remember what your *boss* said."

"I could end you right now," Michael threatened her.

"But you won't. Because you're not the one calling the shots, are you?" His eyes twitched, confirming her theory. "This must be killing you. You have me here, at your mercy, but you're too unimportant to make a decision." Her laughter mixed with coughing. "Do you think they know I kicked your ass when I was just a kid?"

He fisted his hands, but his fear spoke louder.

Michael turned on his heel and left the room to go to the storage. I thought I'd be relieved that they'd left. They left both doors open, but for some odd reason, it felt safer when Mia and I were alone inside the closed room. It felt like a safe cocoon, whereas at that moment it felt like they were taunting us with the illusion of freedom.

Mia began to repeat their words in a quiet voice, trying to make sense of whatever they meant.

“Why do they want, Zach?”

“What?”

“The Matias guy said to Michael to get ‘*the right Bryant.*’ What does that mean? And who is *her*?” She was talking to herself more than to me, but I needed to occupy myself.

“Danny’s ex?”

“Matias could reach her himself,” she mumbled. “Who are the women we know?”

She was lost in her thoughts, and I felt helpless. I missed Ben. I missed my baby. I was coming to the conclusion they’d miss me as well, because there was no way we could get out of there alive.

“Set the timer. Set the timer. Set the timer.”

As she spiraled into her mind, I felt so alone. I wanted to feel Ben’s arms around me. I wanted to see my baby grow. I needed to tell them how much I loved them. I hadn’t said enough. Why hadn’t I said enough? I had no idea how, and it seemed like crazy and stupid thinking on my part, but I would get out of that hellhole. I would do that for my family.

She tensed at my side, and I froze. Mia gazed at me, her eyes a little too rounder. Instead of sharing her conclusion, though, she promised, “I’m getting you out of here.”

I wanted to believe her. “I need to see them again,” I stressed. “It’s not fair to them. It’s not fair to us.” I’d never worked so hard to control my emotions.

“We’ll find a way. I swear you’re leaving this place.”

“I love them so much.”

“I know. They love you, too.” She stared at me with a longing expression I couldn’t comprehend. “I’m glad I got to see Benny finding his person. I’m grateful I had the chance to meet you and love your boy. Love you.” Her smile seemed sad, yet her eyes were determined.

Before I could question her, we heard a sound of a door slamming on the storage. Even though the two doors from the conference were open, we couldn’t quite see the activity; we just watched them going back and forth.

“The mirrors,” I whispered.

At her confused expression, I motioned my head to the two mirrors facing each other in the conference room. We were sitting with our backs to one of them, while the other was hanging on the opposite wall. They reflected on each other, and I realized we could see a lot more than we first noticed.

“Great call!” Mia shifted to the side so she could get a better angle. “That door is unlocked. The one across the storage. That leads to the entrance hall.”

Her gaze bounced between the two doors, and her brows furrowed. She mumbled to herself, counting the apparel she hid.

“You need to get to that door. Get out in the hall, but *don’t open the front door*,” she stressed. “Go behind Haley’s desk. There’s a handle hidden under the carpet. Pull it up to find a bunker. Get inside and close it after you. I pressed the panic button, so the guys should be here any minute.” Her words were hurried, and I was having a hard time keeping up.

“Wait for them inside. When they get to you, *don't let them come in*. Say to them, ‘Code Black.’ They’ll know what it means.”

“We can’t cross the whole storage without them noticing.”

“*You* can. When the time comes, you run and do as I told you. Remember: close the bunker after you and tell the guys, ‘Code Black.’ Do *not* let them come in without saying that first.”

“Wait. What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be right behind you.”

“I can’t go without you.”

“You have to go first. Don’t worry about me. Don’t look back. Just do it.”

“But how can you—”

“Damn it, Izzie. Don’t push me on this. I *need* you to do as I told you to.” Despite her words, she didn’t seem mad. She was worried. Tense. “Don’t worry about me.”

In the distance, we heard the sound of tires crunching gravel, and my hopes spiked up. The guys had arrived. Between them and Mia’s crazy idea about running away, I started to believe we could pull that off.

What a fool.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

BEN

“They’re not answering.” Zach’s panicked voice reflected our mood.

“If there’s someone at the company, they probably took their phones.” I hated Aaron for bringing that up. But their being taken hostage was the most likely scenario.

I was driving like a lunatic, while Zach was sitting beside me on a call with Aaron and Danny and using my phone to call the girls.

“What about the phones we keep hidden? Maybe they could get one of them.”

“Danny’s right. Try those numbers,” I urged Zach. I was torn between cursing myself for getting them there alone and trying to keep my head in the game.

As soon as we saw the message from the panic button, we contacted Danny, who’d already reached Aaron. He’d sent a detail to Zach’s parents to keep our family safe, while the four of us headed to Bryants & Walker.

“I’m almost there. What’s your ETA?” Danny questioned.

“Five minutes,” I answered. Less than that if I could push the gas a little harder.

“Twenty for me,” Aaron chimed in. *“I’m calling reinforcements. The DEA is sending more agents.”*

“I’ll wait for you before approaching the building,” Danny promised. *“We need to make a plan.”*

“Get them out and kill them. That’s the plan.” Zach’s tone was lethal, and he seemed indeed ready to murder.

“We can’t just barge in. That’ll get them killed.” I couldn’t believe I was being the voice of reason. That was the beauty of being part of a family, though. Whenever one of us was freaking out, the other one would bring stability and restore balance.

I was part of a family. A family that included my woman and honorary sister, and I’d be damned if I lost any of them.

The company was isolated and surrounded by gravel. It seemed every sound had its own amplifier. Even though it’d snowed the day before, I’d cleaned so we could drive around. I should’ve been lazier and left the snow there so it could muffle our sound.

“We’re here,” I announced as I caught sight of Danny’s car.

“Don’t hang up,” Aaron stressed. *“Keep me in the loop.”*

I jumped out of the car and marched to Danny. He was already with a laptop open, trying to access the cameras we’d installed.

To keep himself occupied, Zach kept calling the phones we had around the company, only to curse every time

no one picked it up. We had them exactly for those kinds of situations. I never really thought we'd need them.

We huddled closer to Danny to watch the feeds. Our offices and the rooms upstairs were empty. So was the gym downstairs. The danger was on the level floor.

"I'm counting five men in the storage, but there seems to be more. Two of them are injured." Danny's fast fingers portrayed our agitation.

We were so entranced by that nightmare, it took us a while to realize my phone was ringing inside Zach's tense palm. When I saw Mia's name as the caller, I snatched my phone to answer.

"Mia!"

"*Hello, son.*" My skin prickled at his voice, fear once again engulfing me, making me feel like the long-gone little boy almost beaten to death so many times.

"Fucking son of a bitch." Zach and Danny were alert at my lethal voice.

The devil just laughed. "*Once again, we all get together. It's been so long.*"

"I swear to God, you won't get out of here alive."

My stomach dropped when Danny accessed the conference room. I watched, horrified at seeing Mia and Izzie tied to chairs in our conference room, while Michael and another man from the cartel cornered the women.

"*Fuck!*" Zach exploded.

“I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch,” Danny vowed under his breath.

“I see you already know I’m in wonderful company. I’d love it if you could join us, but you’d only get in our way. Your girls and I have so much to do.” His threat sent a chill down my spine.

“This has nothing to do with either of them. I’m the one you want, they mean nothing to you.”

“But they mean everything to you. I’d love to know which of these bitches called you. Maybe they’ll tell my loving son.”

From the security feed, we could see Michael heading to Izzie as another man watched annoyed from the door. The devil ran his finger over my Forest’s cheek, making her coil in disgust and fear, although she still stared him in the eyes, and I couldn’t be prouder of her.

“I can’t deny you have wonderful taste, son. Such beauty should be explored, cherished.”

I was vibrating in place. I could sense Danny stepping behind me to keep them from invading the building and risking them all.

“I’ll take immense pleasure in cutting off each one of her fingers.” Still laughing, he marched to Mia and grabbed her by her hair to pull her head back. *“I knew I should’ve killed her when I had the chance. Any last words to my dearest son?”* He punched her face, keeping Izzie at gunpoint, which was unnecessary since she seemed to be tied.

“Why don’t you hit me again?” Mia provoked him. *“Ben will need time to get inside. Waste your time on me.”* He threw another swing at her face. *“Tic tac, tic tac,”* she sang, urging him on as I was frozen in place. He punched her again as she laughed.

The annoyed man at the door chimed in, *“We gotta go. Whatever you have to do, do it quickly.”*

“You heard the boss. Do it,” she instigated in a quiet voice. *“Shoot me.”* She leaned forward, putting their faces closer. *“Open a fucking hole in my brain. But you listen to me. I’m the reason you’re still alive. So shoot me, and you’ll never know what HIT YOU FIRST!”*

Filled with hatred to the brim, Michael punched her ribs and threw her chair to the side, making her fall, gasping for air. That was when all hell broke loose. I was coming out of my skin, while Zach turned into a beast I’d never seen as Mia moved her arms—which I thought were tied—pulled a knife out of nowhere, and stabbed Michael’s leg. Izzie jumped forward, grabbed a paperweight from the table, and threw it at the other man’s head, making him lose his balance.

As he stumbled, roaring, Mia stole his gun and shot the man at the door. I had no time to comprehend what was happening when she yelled, *“RUN!”*

Izzie took off running toward the door that connected the storage to the entry hall.

“They’re trying to run away,” Danny announced.

Instead of following Izzie to the door, Mia took a detour and moved even more into the storage.

“Where is she going?” Zach panted while thrusting his hands into his hair in distress. “*What the fuck is she doing?*”

“It’ll be harder for her to get out like that.” Danny was disturbed. “Why isn’t she following Izzie?”

That’s when it dawned on me. “Because she’s not planning on getting out.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MIA

We needed to be fast. There was only one chance to get it right, and I couldn't screw that up for Izzie. Or Benny. Or Ducky.

As soon as Izzie ran through the door to the right, heading for the one to get her out, I took the opposite way, ditching Michael and Matias as I bolted through the left door. When I reached the storage, I could see the other men coming our way—four of them to me, and the other to Izzie.

I couldn't let that happen.

I fished the lighter from my pocket, lit a smoke bomb, threw it behind us, and charged ahead. I knew the place like the back of my hand. I was the one in charge of hiding our files. I could walk around with my eyes closed, which would serve me right at the moment. After I advanced a little, taking advantage of the heavy fog keeping them clueless, I slipped the calculator out of my filled pockets and threw it far to the opposite way I was headed, hoping that would make them look for me in the wrong place.

The motion made me flinch as a shot of pain coursed through me from my most likely bruised ribs. I felt the company phone vibrating against my leg again, and it pained me to ignore it. It wasn't the time to reassure them.

From what I could hear, the four sets of steps that were following me took a detour, Michael and Matias were still screaming in pain and anger—which made me smile—but the seventh guy was still trying to maneuver between the shelves and huge coils of bubble wrap that littered the space.

He was looking for Izzie as she neared the door, and my panic skyrocketed when I noticed he was getting closer. I pushed through my pain and ran to the last shelf before the raised platform. I climbed the shelf, and from the top of it I was able to see that Michael and Matias—both limping—were wasting their time looking for me in the bathroom and gym. The goons I distracted were still trying to find me under the raised platform, but the one chasing Izzie was dangerously close to her. As the smoke began to dissipate, she'd be at great risk.

Praying she could make it, I shifted my body so I could lean my back on the top of the shelf and place my feet on the platform. When I heard her opening and shutting the door, I pushed against the stand and forced my body back.

The shelf I was hanging on leaned back and hit the next one, which hit the next one, and kept it going, creating a resounding domino effect on the line of shelves that faced the door she'd just left from. I threw myself to the side, and my ribs screamed from the blunt force. Shooting pain irradiated to my limbs, making it hard to breathe. The clang of metal on metal reverberated through the space, making my heart speed up.

The last shelf fell on the man tailing Izzie right as he was about to reach for the door. The sound of breaking

porcelain and other apparel filled the huge space. It might sound sordid, but it was satisfying hearing him get crushed under the weight of the shelves and their contents.

I had one less man to worry about.

Besides taking one of them down, the domino accomplished what I intended for it to do. It blocked the only way out, so I knew Izzie was safe enough and away from those men.

That also meant I was trapped with six armed, deranged men who wanted my head and knew where I was.

“I’m officially screwed.”

CHAPTER FORTY

IZZIE

I did as Mia instructed, and not once did I look back. I crossed the threshold, and the door slammed closed behind me, followed by a chain of deafening sounds. I had no idea what was going on, but I was firm in my mission.

I charged to the reception desk and found the handle on the floor. I closed it behind me and was surprised when the lights went on without any prompt. Moved by the haste the situation warranted, I looked for any way to reach one of the guys. I found a button with Ben's name written on a sticky note under it and pressed it. I hastily put on the headphones and waited.

"Hello?"

"Ben!" I cried his name.

"Izzie? Oh my God, where are you? I didn't check my Caller ID. Are you safe? It's so good to hear your voice."

I nodded, although he couldn't see me. "I'm so happy to hear you again." I sniffed, then remembered what I needed to do. "I'm in the bunker. I'm waiting for her to come."

His silence was brief, but it left me uncomfortable. *"We're getting to you, Forest. Hang in tight. Zach. Danny,"* I heard him call away from the phone. *"In the bunker."*

Soon enough, I heard the hinges on the opposite side from where I came from. Ben was the first one to get inside, and I didn't give him any time to prepare before I jumped on him. It seemed he was waiting for it, as he picked me up with ease and crushed me to his chest.

"You're safe." He repeated it as a mantra, more to reassure himself than me. He broke our hug, placing his hands on my face to look me up and down.

"Did you get hurt?" That came from Zach, who looked unsettled.

"How are you, *cariño*?" Danny stepped inside to give me a bear hug.

"I'm fine. Scared. I'm not hurt, but Mia was. She said she'd be behind me, so she must be coming any time now."

I didn't miss the look shared between Ben and Danny, but I didn't know why. Zach, on the other hand, seemed even more agitated.

"We need to get in. *Now*."

"No! Mia said—"

"Aaron is almost here," Zach went on. "We can tackle the entrance to the storage and from the window on the gym."

"You can't go inside yet—"

"Some of us could go through the truck entrance. She's in the storage, we could open that path," Danny offered.

"But she asked me—"

"Depending on how many men Aaron sends, they should climb the building—"

“*Listen to me!*” I interrupted Ben, as I’d had enough. The three men stared at me in surprise. “You can’t go in yet. Mia asked me to tell you not to go inside until I gave you her message.”

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Let her speak,” Ben scolded Zach.

“I don’t know what it means, but she said you would.”

“What is it, *cariño*?”

“Code Black.”

The three men paled before reacting. Danny picked up his phone to call someone, giving orders I didn’t comprehend. Zach honed a murderous focus as he reached for the locked closets around the bunker. Ben grabbed me by the hand and pulled me out.

“You need to get out of here.” His voice was urgent, and I didn’t miss the fear behind it.

“I’m not going anywhere. What’s going on?”

Danny paced by the car, wildly gesticulating and whisper-yelling to whoever was on a call with him, and Zach came out of the bunker with handguns and rifles, a bulletproof vest already on.

“Forest, as soon as Aaron gets here, you need to leave. Someone will take you to Rosie and Jackson’s, and you’ll stay there with them and the kids.”

“I mean it, Ben, I’m not leaving. What the hell is going on? What does ‘Code Black’ mean?”

“I need you to leave.” He was already putting on a vest.

Zach went back to the bunker, only to get out with more apparel. Danny was also preparing himself and grabbing some of the guns.

I pulled Ben’s arm so he’d look at me. “*What did she mean?*”

His eyes were troubled as he tried to answer. “There’s a bomb in the building. Maybe more.”

I gasped and took a step back so I could lean against Danny’s car. It was hard to breathe as I wrapped my mind around what was going on.

“She needs to get out. Why didn’t she follow me?”

“Because she was making sure you left the building. We don’t know what’s going on inside or what kind of bomb there is, or even where. That’s why I need you to leave,” Ben urged once again.

I took in a deep breath. “I’m not leaving here, and that’s not up for discussion. If more people are coming, I can stay back with one of them, but this is my family, and I deserve to be around.”

“Izzie—”

“One of my best friends chose to stay behind, in the eye of the storm, to keep me safe. I’ll stay right here until she gets out.” I held his face in my hands. “Because I know you’ll get her out.”

He nodded, and a new sense of purpose filled his features right before he gave me a hard kiss. It felt like a promise, and I held on to it.

We heard people approaching us, and I looked back to see Aaron and several unknown uniformed men following him. “Are you okay, darling?” I nodded, not trusting my voice. Then the stoic agent cut right to the chase. “What’s the situation?”

“She’s hidden,” Danny announced. He was in his tactical gear and watching something on his computer. We all got closer as he explained. “After she knocked down the shelves, they started looking for her, but they followed the wrong paths. She ran to the bathroom, but we don’t have cameras there.”

“How come they didn’t find her?”

“I don’t know,” Danny answered Zach. “They kept looking in the wrong place, so she sneaked inside the bathroom. She must have distracted them somehow.”

“My explosive specialist is coming,” Aaron informed us. “Until then, you’re on your own, Zach.”

At my puzzled expression, Ben explained, “He was an explosive specialist back in our days.”

“I’ll start perusing one side of the building. As soon as your guy gets here, he can get the other. We need to coordinate with her, so Danny, keep trying to contact her and watch the cameras. Keep us informed on what they’re doing and where she is.” Zach took charge like a leader, even struggling to control his emotions.

“Start with the truck entrance. We can assemble a trap there if the men try to run away,” Ben instructed Zach.

“Why not the conference room where they were?” Danny’s question was legit.

“Mia and Izzie could’ve run away from there, it was the easiest way out. But Mia chose to lead Izzie through the back of the storage, and then to the bunker. That means the main door to the room is most likely compromised. I don’t think she’ll try to seek refuge there. She also advised Izzie to get inside the bunker, and not get out from the front door—”

“She believes there’s an explosive there,” Danny summarized.

“She can’t stay in the bathroom forever, they’ll find her.” My heartbeat was speeding up again. “We need to contact her.”

Ben’s brow furrowed in thought before he stopped Danny. “Don’t call her on the company phone! She must have climbed into the vents. If you call her, even a vibration could echo. Just text her. If she could at least read us, we could guide her out.”

“The vents?”

“You were right, Izzie. If she stays in the bathroom, they’ll find her. But she didn’t go there to stay hidden. She’s planning an attack.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

MIA

I was almost out of office supplies. I threw them left and right to keep them looking in the wrong direction until I could get inside the bathroom and ease the door closed behind me.

My knee was burning, and my ribs were killing me. If I could get out of that alive, I'd spend a whole month lying down and eating junk food. I deserved it.

Climbing on the sink, I prayed the thing wouldn't break under me. I balanced myself over the appliance and took off the vent grid. Climbing into the air vent proved to be more challenging than I expected. Pain engulfed me, and if I wasn't so pissed at the whole situation, and so focused on killing Michael, I'd have given up, curled up on the floor, and waited for my imminent ending.

I got inside and eased the grid back into place as silently as I could, then headed left to the gym. I crawled inside the dirty vent, hoping my allergies wouldn't betray my position. I fought every instinct I had not to shoot any of them just yet. I didn't have many openings, so I had to make good on my meager opportunities.

I crawled over the gym until I reached the side of the elevated platform. I needed to cross it until the corner to get inside the vault. We had more guns in there, so if I could reach

the place, I might have a chance. The problem was, even if I had more guns, I was realistic enough to admit it'd be hard to handle alone a handful of armed men. I'd be really grateful to the Universe, though, if I could take down one or two of them before getting to the vault.

The whole Michael thing had taken long enough, and I'd be damned if I wouldn't put an end to it.

Lying down on the vent, I watched one of them looking for me on the platform. He was alone, which meant the others were downstairs—I was mostly sure the one under the shelves hadn't gotten out yet, if ever. When the man on the platform also got down, I waited a bit and then opened the grid.

I fished out of my waistband the gun I picked up from under the conference table and the small one I stole from Michael and tiptoed around the platform. Just like downstairs, it was filled with shelves. I tried to be smart and meandered around it without being seen.

My saving grace and big risk were that its floor was made of sheets of metal, with a gap of about an inch between each one. Not only did I need to be extra quiet, I also needed to walk around looking for them, being careful not to let my shadow rat me out. I knew the space well enough to know which sheet of metal was loose and noisier, but I wasn't in the position to take chances.

I braved between the shadows, still hidden by the shelves, when I spotted under the platform the two men I'd shot before. They were almost under me. Michael and Matias were further away, still limping and carrying a rifle, looking for me. That was my chance to balance the game.

I squatted down, ignoring the shot of pain on my knee, and placed the front side of both guns on parallel gaps between the metal. My heartbeat sped up, and the constant buzzing from the company phone in my pocket wasn't helping. The men were turned away, but I didn't want to kill them, even though I knew it was either their lives or mine.

Praying I could shoot with the same precision with both hands, I pointed the guns at their back. There was no space for hesitation, I didn't have much choice. I was also aware that move would be the beginning of the end. Most likely my end.

I shot the guns, and the bullets hit their targets. Maybe it was just death breathing down my neck, but the shattering sound that echoed around the space seemed more deafening than expected.

Shooting them again before seeking a hideout was my mistake. My position was already compromised, and as small as I was, as fast as I once had been, there was no avoiding Matias and Michael's rifles.

I stood up from my squatting position and tried to run farther away from the border of the platform, trying to disregard the screaming of the men I shot, the roar of the men who wanted me dead, and the loud shot of their rifles.

The first bullet that broke into my shoulder propelled me further. The second one hit my arm, and despite my pain, I was too high on adrenaline to slow down. The third one, though, struck my leg and made me falter. The sound of my knee hitting the metal floor sounded like a gong announcing my demise.

I powered through my pain. It was more painful to admit I was actually afraid. More shots were fired from under the platform, and I wasn't fast enough to avoid their grazes. As I heard one of the men climbing the metal stairs, my instinct took over, and I braved further to get to the corner, where I could access the vault and gain a few more minutes.

I reached the top entrance to it, cleaned my hand as best as I could on my clothes so as not to leave any blood marks on the hidden door, punched the code, and put the lid again on the display, hiding it. As soon as the door opened, I stepped inside and closed it behind me, locking it from the inside. Since I entered from the raised door and not the floor one, I had to climb down the stairs, which proved to be impossible when you were shot up like Swiss cheese.

I fell down with a thud on the floor, in the middle of a growing pool of my own blood. For some odd reason, though, I felt peaceful.

I was under no illusion there was any salvation for me. I was just relieved I had some time to say goodbye.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BEN

As Danny watched the cameras with Izzie, I studied the blueprints with Aaron as we strategized on the best way to burst inside, while Zach looked for bombs to dismantle around the building.

To make it all more dooming, Holy Water fulfilled its promise, covering us with an odd stream of rain in December. It seemed fitting, though. The rain froze our bones, despite our heavy clothing and high energy. The way only death could do.

Izzie let out a painful cry as Danny shouted a variety of expletives worthy of a polyglot. Aaron and I ran to them, and I had to suppress the urge to throw up. It looked like they'd found her on the platform and were closing in.

"She ran to the vault. Call her." I ran my trembling hands over my face. "Put us all on the call."

Aaron turned to one of his agents, instructing quietly to direct the specialist to where Zach was, so he could come to stay with us. Even though I appreciated his sensitivity on the matter, I hated how goodbye-on-the-death-bed that seemed.

"She's not answering."

"Keep calling. She has to pick up some—"

"*Good Lord, you guys are worse than a clingy boyfriend.*" Despite the heaviness in her breath, hearing her

voice loosened the knot in my stomach. Not for long, though.

“What the fuck are you doing, Mia?” I didn’t mean to snap.

“I’ve been kind of busy, Benny. You know, checking the storage, cleaning the vents, shooting people.”

“Are you safe, *cariño*?”

“I shot two of them besides Matias. Got another one trapped. Don’t worry about me,” she panted. *“Where is Izzie?”*

“I’m here. And I’m so mad at you. That wasn’t what we agreed on. I trusted you’d be behind me.” I’d never seen Izzie so mad. Or afraid.

“That’s on you, honey.” I didn’t like her heavy breathing one bit—not even her sarcasm could hide her struggle. *“You should know better than to trust a Cancer. We’re manipulative as hell.”*

“Save your strength, Bryant,” Aaron admonished her. “We’re getting you out of there.”

“Is that Aaron? For God’s sake, you called the feds on me? Not cool, guys.”

She made a hissing sound right when Zach came running to us. “What’s going on? Why are you making that noise?”

I whispered to Danny to access the computers on the vault, but he was already on it.

“You know me, Zee. I’m getting old as heck, and I don’t have the same vitality from my younger days.” She hissed

again, clearly in pain. *“This is the sound of wisdom and experience.”*

When Danny accessed the feeds, our curses exploded. She was sitting on the floor, trying to make a tourniquet on her wounds. There was so much blood, I couldn’t even tell where it was oozing from.

She peered up at the monitor Danny accessed and was startled when she saw us. *“Good Lord. First the obsessive calls, and now this? It’s getting creepy.”*

Zach thrust his hands into his hair. “You gotta get out of there.”

“How do you suggest I do that, Zee?”

“We’re working on disarming the bombs. I’ve found one already, and Aaron’s guy is looking for others. You could get to the gym or the bathroom, get inside a vent again until you can reach a door.”

“I can’t.” It was the first time her voice wavered.

“If you just climb—”

“I can’t climb,” she answered quietly, but the reality of her inability sounded louder.

“We’ll find a way out for you. Just don’t do anything stupid. We’re working on the bombs, and we’ll barge in,” I promised.

“If you do that, Michael will run away.”

“So we’ll get him later.”

“When? After he plants another bomb this time in our homes? After he runs another one of us off the road?” She

shook her head. *“This ends today.”*

“You promised me you’d be careful!”

“I also promised to do whatever it took to stop him. That’s the promise I intend on keeping.”

“The place is surrounded, there’s no way out for him.” But we all knew Michael was sneaky as fuck. He was as sly as she was stubborn.

Getting to the same conclusion, Aaron ran off to instruct his men and call for backup.

I was about to make more empty promises to convince Mia to stay put when she blurted, *“Hugo gets two walks a day.”*

“What?”

“Hugo. He walks twice a day, so if Mom and Dad can’t walk with him, I need one of you to do so. If he doesn’t hump other dogs or kids, give him an extra treat. You know? For good behavior.”

“What the fuck—”

“Gabe thinks our stack of chocolate is unending because I always fill the bowls again after he goes to sleep. Keep that going.” Her voice was urgent as she tried to let out as much information as she could, while still panting and working on her wounds with a first aid kit. *“I promised Gabe and Sofia we’d go camping in my back yard when the weather allows. Please do that. Bring something of mine, so they’ll know I didn’t back down on my promise.”*

She struggled to get up and had to lean against the wall to catch her breath, her face the clear picture of pain. I still couldn't understand why she was telling us all that.

"I updated my will after the car crash. Talk to my lawyer." She limped to the locked cabinets, clicked the combination with trembling hands, and started to arm herself with the weaponry we'd stashed inside.

"What the—"

"She's saying goodbye," Izzie whispered, making me freeze.

"Mia, stop this nonsense," Zach reflected my distress.

"We don't have time for your joking right now." The mood didn't call for my anger, but it was the only way I knew how to show emotions when things were screwed up.

"We'll find a way, *cariño*, just hang in tight."

She limped around, stocking her pockets with gun loaders and grenades, right before wearing a bulletproof vest. *"Talk about me to the kids...please. I don't want them to be sad. But if they're okay with it, just...don't let them forget about me. Make sure they know how much I love them."*

"Enough, Mia! This is ridiculous. We're not saying anything."

"That's just so rude. At least promise me the first one of you to have a daughter will name her after me. This world needs a Mia." She winked at the camera before throwing things down to create a barricade.

“Damn it, Mia,” Zach snapped. “Put those guns down and stop walking. You’re still bleeding. You need to wait for us. There’s nothing you can do.”

Aaron came running back. “We’re almost getting the truck gate open. We can create an offensive and surround them. We have the advantage.”

“What about other bombs?” Zach asked.

“We’re still working on them, but if we get one more out, we can corner them all inside.”

“Hear that, Mia? We’re coming to you,” I vowed. “Just hang in there.”

“You know what I was remembering? The day you brought Izzie to my parents’ for the first time. You looked so overwhelmed, like a teenager introducing the girl he wants to take to prom. And bang later.” She giggled weakly. *“Then Gabe let on that Zee likes to give away kisses. Danny was about to get divorced. I felt like the surrounding affairs were being put in order. That made me feel peaceful. You have no idea how exhausting it was to take care of all of you.”* A loud bang came through the call, and she paused. *“They found me.”*

“No! No, no, no. We can get to you. We just need a few more minutes.” Zach was desperate.

She stared at us through the camera, and her remorseful smile brought tears to my eyes. *“There’s no time,”* she whispered, shaking her head, and I noticed her eyes and the tip of her nose were turning red. *“I’m just so glad I got to see you guys again.”*

“Don’t say that,” I begged over Izzie’s sobbing. “This isn’t what you promised. You can hide, you can run, I don’t care. Just wait a little bit more. You can’t—this can’t happen.”

The banging became louder as Michael and the others tried to break into the vault. Mia positioned herself behind the barricade, a move that would gain her only a few more seconds.

“You’ve got to move on. All of you. No rearview mirrors. You have so much to live for.”

My cheeks were wet, not only from the rain.

“What about you?!” Zach shouted.

“We always say that tomorrow we rest. You can do it tomorrow. But for me? When this is over, it’ll be my time to rest. I’ve already lived a life full of love. We’ll always have our memories.” She took in a shaky breath. *“This is my love letter to you all. Don’t be sad for me. Just leave the porch light on, and don’t forget to lock the door. Somehow, I’ll find my way back to you.”*

She prepared herself and started praying. Under any other circumstance, hearing her mumbling “Our Father” would bring me peace. At that moment, her prayer seemed ominous. A bad omen. It resembled a funeral instead of a blessed mission.

As the vault door was finally broken, she looked at us one last time. *“They’re here.”* She gulped. *“It was an honor serving with you.”* Then she shot at the camera and disconnected the call.

Hearing the guns blazing from outside put us in motion. Danny, Zach, and I ran toward the building, just as Aaron signed us over, indicating we were ready to barge in. We finally broke into the storage, and a myriad of officers followed us inside. It didn't come as a surprise when we were met by firing guns. The echoing sounds of shooting reverberated through me.

It wasn't the first time we found ourselves in those kinds of situations. We matched their attack and raised them our rage and protection. One of our own was inside, and she was a priority. Killing them was a bonus.

We split as we advanced into the storage, but we all had one goal: get to Mia. From the radio we shared with Aaron and his men, I heard one of them saying they'd found someone under the shelves.

That's one less, just a few more to go—my father among them.

We weren't sure how many were facing us, and how many were getting into the vault. All we heard was the constant shooting from there.

Zach signaled he was going up on the platform, so Danny and I continued our path at the storage, from under the stand. We heard a few arrests being called behind us, but we weren't naive enough to believe it was over.

Danny and I were still perusing the area, getting closer to the other vault door. So close. That's when I heard Danny grunt. One of the men who opened fire against us tackled him to the ground. Danny was a beast of a man who could handle

himself, but not against a rifle at gunpoint. I fired at the man and ran toward them, away from the vault.

I had so much pent-up anger inside me that feeling his nose crunch under my fist was beyond satisfying. I kicked away the gun from him as Danny stood up. There was a level of vicious satisfaction as the man stared at Danny that didn't sit well with me.

When we finally had him down, we heard the shots from above us, where Zach still was. Taking advantage of our distraction, he punched Danny and took off.

“Aaron, we got a runner,” I yelled into our radio.

More shouts and thuds echoed from up the platform, and we'd yet to get to Mia. Danny and I were about to split again so we could help each sibling, when we heard another series of shots inside the vault and the hidden door downstairs bursting open. Mia appeared from it, all bloody, then threw a grenade inside the space, slammed the door closed, and limped as fast as she could.

Ten.

She saw me standing. “Run!”

Nine.

“Zach's still upstairs.”

Eight.

“*What?!*” She rushed to the stairs.

Seven.

“MIA!”

Six.

“We need to get him out.”

Five.

“He’ll find a way, you can’t go there.”

Four.

“ZACH!”

Three.

And as she ran for her brother’s life.

Two.

I ran for hers.

BOOM!

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

BEN

“Do you think something happens after we die?” Zach and Mia stared at me in confusion at my random question. “Minister Paul said something during his sermon about eternal life, and that got me thinking.”

“Well...we were raised hearing about that. I actually believe in it. I do think there’s some sort of heavenly afterlife where we can reap our rewards.” Zach rolled the dice and moved his board pin. “But I don’t think we’re getting there through the sense of justice most people preach these days.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at Minister Paul’s son, my uncle, his husband. Many people still believe they don’t deserve to get into heaven. That’s bullshit. They deserve it much more than the majority of the people I know.”

I nodded in agreement but countered as I made my move on the board. “I don’t think I like the idea of living forever after all this. We feel so much pain here, why risk it all again with a life I could never die away from?”

“But that’s the beauty of the life Minister Paul was talking about. It’s a good life, without pain and grief,” Mia argued.

“So you believe in it?”

“I do. I think we’re here only in passing. Learning, suffering, loving. And after all this is over, we get to experience what it’s like to live a life without pain. You owe me the rent for that.” She took my money and went on. “But I also believe we kind of keep living here.”

“How come?”

“Not with this body,” she explained. “I believe our memories and our deeds can keep us alive. It can be either good or bad, and that’s what defines if your bonus moments here will be worth it. That’s why I think it’s important to always bring up memories of the people we love who are gone. If we keep their memories and their actions alive, we can get them to live a little longer. We can even feel them.”

“So let’s say if you happen to...you know.” It was hard saying the word when we were talking about them two, even hypothetically. “You want us to keep your memories alive so you can still live with us.”

“If it doesn’t hurt you, yeah, I’d like that.”

Some people believed rain was a symbol of the blessings God sent us from above. I, on the other hand, would always associate rain with grief. With failure. With deceit.

The day Mia killed Michael should be a day to feel relief, the ending of a tormenting era. Yet it’d be forever imprinted in my head as the day I failed my family and made them cry.

The acute buzzing in my ears was driving me crazy. It was hard to breathe, and I couldn’t discern the many voices

surrounding me. Then I remembered the explosion, seeing Mia be thrown away from the force of it as I fell on my back. Wheezing, I sat up and tried to focus my sight.

Men in uniform ran around, shouting indiscernible words as they tried to access the platform that was once raised but then lay crumbled on the floor. The platform on which Zach was. The platform under which Mia ran.

With my heart galloping inside my chest, I stood up and stumbled to where I thought I'd find one of them. I spotted Danny also getting up and headed his way.

“Are you okay?”

“If that motherfucker is still alive, I'm killing him myself.” His look was murderous, but I knew it was also a way to block the all-consuming fear of how we might find Mia and Zach.

Aaron ran our way, and after being convinced we didn't need immediate care, we proceeded to look for them.

When I found her lying on the ground, my heart nearly stopped. Her limp body on the ground was covered in dirt and blood. I sprinted to her and sighed in half-relief when I noticed her weak breathing.

“Mia. *Mia.*” I slapped her face lightly, urging her to respond. I was close to panicking when she opened her dizzy eyes.

We heard Aaron yell, “Found him,” followed by colorful expletives. “*We need an ambulance!*” That was what made her situate herself.

Her eyes turned bigger. “Zach!” She struggled to get up, forcing me to hold her tighter than I wanted.

“Calm down.”

“We need to get to him.”

“*Mia, stop!* You’re hurting yourself.” I held her in the middle as she tried to stand up.

“Let me go.”

“You need to see a doctor.”

“Not without him. Let me go. *Zach!*”

“Stop fighting me, Mia.” For someone so battered, she was incredibly strong. “You need to calm down so I can get to him later.” I thought I’d convinced her when she relaxed in my arms. It took me a while to comprehend she wasn’t being complacent. She was shutting down. “*Mia? Mia!*”

I laid her down and noticed the shadows that marred her abdomen. Fear overtook me again when memories of another woman portraying those colors came to my mind. I couldn’t let Mia have my mother’s fate.

“*I need an ambulance!*”

Danny and Aaron turned their troubled eyes to me and started shouting orders so the two siblings could have their care. A couple of first responders rushed inside, rolling two gurneys, and we ushered them to make it faster. It carried a distasteful irony that my two best friends, the two Bryants who saved my life, were being rushed side by side, as they fought for their lives, while I walked mostly unscathed.

People threw away words like “it should’ve been me” because it sounded dramatic and *flair-ful*. But I understood the truth behind those words.

It should’ve been me.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

IZZIE

The place was pandemonium. Policemen, DEA agents, first responders. They all ran around, screaming orders. I was held back by an agent Aaron had assigned to babysit me. It was a smart thing to do, because since we heard the explosion, every second that passed when I didn't see my people was a second closer to me bolting inside.

After what felt like forever, I saw three tall figures following two gurneys, and my heart leaped. I counted my man, Danny, and Aaron. I prayed the two patients were the men tormenting us. But when I didn't see Zach and Mia rushing behind them, my knees turned weak as I concluded who were the two people being carried away.

I escaped my babysitter and ran toward them, already crying.

"They need to be rushed to the hospital." Ben's voice wavered. That was hard enough for me; I couldn't even fathom how wracked he must've been feeling.

We followed them to the ambulances that were already waiting, and Ben's turmoil was even clearer. He looked from Zach to Mia, unwilling to let one of them go but unable to follow them both. He stared at Aaron, and a silent conversation seemed to take place between them. They both looked torn and about to be sick.

“Danny, Izzie, go with Mia. Aaron and I will stay with Zach.”

Aaron was already climbing inside. “I’ll call Dr. Miller, so she can meet us there.”

As the paramedics situated Mia and Zach, Ben came to me and gave me a hard kiss on my mouth. “I’ll fix this. Somehow, someday, I’ll fix this.”

I didn’t have time to question his odd words, I just nodded.

I was climbing inside the ambulance when I remembered. “What about Michael?”

Ben gave me the most regretful smile I’d ever seen. “She fulfilled her promise.”

Danny and I climbed into the back of the ambulance, trying to make ourselves as small as we could so as not to get in the way of the paramedic, which was a hard fit for Danny’s big frame.

The responder quickly connected her to the medical apparel, saying words I couldn’t understand but I knew weren’t good. As the driver rushed us to the hospital in the town over—Holy Water’s was too small for the care Zach and Mia needed—the beeping in the machine changed.

The guy jumped into action. “She’s having a cardiac arrest.”

“Do you have a defibrillator in here?” The paramedic nodded at Danny’s question. “Get it ready, I’ll perform the CPR.” He worked quickly on her clothes, getting her ready for the guy right before initiating the resuscitation maneuver.

I tried to control my sobbing. I didn't want to disturb them. I went so far as to close my eyes and cover my ears with my hands. It was already too late for that, though. The high-pitched sound indicating the inactivity of her heart would be forever engraved in my mind.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

BEN

When the ambulances parked, Mia and Zach were rushed inside. I welcomed the numbness that was enveloping me as I hugged a sobbing Izzie after Mia's scare, who was taken to surgery as soon as she arrived. Aaron looked like a caged beast, pacing around the room as Danny sat in the corner praying.

The drive to the hospital was a nightmare. My heart was split in two, hurting for my little sister fighting for her life in the other car, hearing Zach's weak words in ours.

As promised, Aaron had called his *friend*, Dr. Miller. We'd yet to talk to her. I dreaded that moment. I was terrified of what would come next. I despised myself for the pain I'd deliberately cause my family.

We were still waiting to hear about Mia and Zach when Dr. Miller showed up at the end of the corridor. Aaron and I stared at each other, a dooming understanding passing between us. We knew what needed to be done. It didn't make it any easier, though.

I left Izzie with Danny and plodded down the hall, along with Aaron, already missing the numbness that was supposed to protect me.

For the first time in almost two decades, I knocked on the door and didn't use my keys to come in. My stomach was in knots as I waited for them. I felt myself shaking, but I couldn't blame the cold.

Jackson opened the door and gave me a smile I didn't deserve. "Hey, son. Why didn't you just walk in?" At my speechlessness, he turned wary. "Rosie!" He called, still staring at me with fear in his eyes.

Rosie ambled our way. "Honey! What a nice surprise. Why are you outside in the rain? Come in."

I couldn't move. I kept opening and closing my mouth. I couldn't bring myself to lie to them.

Yet I can't say the truth.

Rosie's smile faded, and she grabbed Jackson's arm for support before whispering, "Which one?"

It pained me that they already understood what I was there to say. I wanted to say something else, yet I vowed not to. By my own doing, I couldn't.

"Zach," I choked out. Rosie covered her mouth with her hand, and Jackson held her tight, his shoulders already shaking. "Mia's in critical condition. But she might make it." Each word felt like a stab, and their sobbing destroyed me.

I wasn't ready for their pain as much as I wasn't ready for Haley's, who showed up behind them, already crying. "Is it true?" I faltered, then nodded and stepped inside.

If that wasn't painful enough, I fished his dog tag and third of the compass from my pocket and handed them to her. "He wants you to have them." Her wail almost brought me to my knees and took my breath away. I wanted to undo it all, to say that wasn't true, but I couldn't. So, I just hugged her close and let her soak my clothes.

Sofia and Gabe were playing in the TV room, and I couldn't imagine how they'd break the news to him. He adored Zach, who was every bit Gabe's father.

Rosie, Jackson, and Haley left the room to recompose before the kids could see us and get ready to go to the hospital for Mia. I wasn't ready for that just yet.

Hugo came to us in distress, whimpering and ambling around us. Sensing our pain, and most likely feeling his own. I used to hear dogs were sensitive and could catch on to their surroundings and what was happening to their owners. I never truly believed that until I saw the food stealer so distressed.

I sat down on the floor, defeated, and the little shit weaseled his way between my bent legs and dropped his head on my chest. Having reached my limit, I finally lost the hold on my tears as I sought atonement clutching my furry friend.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

IZZIE

I thought the pain would subside as the weeks went by. It was hard to deal with grief when everything around you seemed like a reminder of what you lost. Of what you could've lost.

Every time I met Haley and Gabe, my heart would crumble thinking about the love they couldn't explore and the family they didn't have time to create. Whenever I saw Rosie and Jackson, I held back my tears thinking about the son they lost and daughter who almost couldn't make it—that always made me hug Teddy a little tighter.

Every moment I encountered Mia, I felt like Ben and I had lost not only one, but two of our best friends. She barely spoke, making a point to ignore us all. She locked herself in her bedroom, and the only ones who came close to getting a reaction out of her were the kids and Hugo. After days at the hospital, she was slowly recovering physically, but she wasn't the same anymore, and I feared we'd never get our old Mia back.

I feared I'd never get my old Ben back.

Ever since that awful day, Ben seemed lost, defeated, even ashamed. He was still a loving father to our Teddy, and he treated me with love and devotion. But he was a shadow of his old self, and I didn't know how to make him feel better. I

didn't even know if it was possible. Zach's absence left a hole in our lives and hearts.

I felt a buzzing in my pocket and sighed in exasperation when I saw who was calling. I'd been dodging my mother's call for too long, but I never felt ready to deal with her hurtful words, especially after everything my family had been through.

I couldn't help thinking about the irony of the situation. I spent most of my life feeling like a nuisance instead of a daughter. All I learned was despise. Then, after so many years, there I was, having met a family that showered me and my baby with love and care. It was the first time I felt like a part of a family and not a disappointment. But when that finally happened, we were devastated by one of our biggest losses.

It was getting harder to deal with my mother's toxicity after experiencing what it was like to be loved like a daughter, and to love like a mom.

"Hello, Mother."

"Finally. I need to talk to you—"

"Why I feel great, thank you, Mother. And my kid, your *grandkid*, is wonderful. Thank you for asking."

"There's no need to be a bitch. Tell me about your baby if you wanna."

"I can see you're really interested."

"I haven't met her yet, Isabella! There's no connection. What do you want from me?"

“Him. You haven’t met him yet. Whose fault is that?”

“Yours. I’m low on cash because you didn’t send me any, so excuse me if I can’t take frivolous trips to meet a child.”

“My child. Your only daughter’s child. If you couldn’t take a frivolous trip, there are other ways to meet him. You could’ve called to know about him, you could’ve video called. I told you when he was born, and I’m still waiting for your response. You just don’t care. Because you’re too busy being selfish.”

“Selfish? Selfish? You have some nerve telling me that after ruining my life—”

“Ruining your life? For what? Being born? My God, you’re a character. My baby was born, one of my closest friends...passed.” Choking was inevitable. “And my best friend was in the hospital for days, fighting for her life, and you have the audacity to tell me I ruined your life, so I owe you money?”

“So what? Now I’m being punished because you finally have friends and they died on you? Gimme a break.”

I wanted to yell at her. I wanted to scream at the injustice of the situation. Not because I didn’t have a mother who loved me—I did, and her name was Rosie. I might be a terrible person for thinking that, but the injustice stung when I thought about a wonderful man who was gone way too young, before he could even live his love wide in the open, and this hateful and still alive woman who shouldn’t be allowed to have a daughter.

“That’s enough.” I was surprised at myself for being so collected. “I can’t take any more of your abuse, and I’ll be damned if I let you get close to my boy. I don’t need your hatred and your misplaced sense of wrongness. If your life is miserable, it’s by your own doing, not mine. So unless you wanna meet my baby and tell me how wonderful he is, unless you wanna be the mother you never were, unless you wanna meet my man and be happy for me for finding such a wonderful person to be mine, I don’t wanna hear from you. I’m not your ATM. I’m your daughter. If you’re incapable of treating me as such, you’re not welcome in my life.”

I disconnected the call, and instead of being flustered, I felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders. After so much pain and grief, having stood up for myself and my family made me feel less powerless. I was ready to take advantage of it.

I reached Teddy’s bedroom in time to hear Ben’s whispered words to our son. “There’s nothing going on right now. You won’t miss anything special if you sleep. Come on, buddy. We both know you want to, just give in. You’ll miss being able to sleep all the time when you grow up. And to be honest, man to man, you’re cockblocking me.”

I stifled my giggle. It was good to feel anything other than grief for a moment.

“I’ve been neglecting your momma, and I need to make it up to her. You’ll get that one day. You’re a good-looking kid, and I know I’m not biased when I say you’re smart and everyone will love you. Okay, maybe a little biased. But I know you’ll find a good girl for you. Or a good boy.

Look at your old man here. I was a little shit my whole life—I don't think I'm supposed to say 'shit.' But I was. And I still found two of the most amazing people to be my best friends, and a wonderful woman to call mine. If you're lucky, you'll get your own Mia and Zach.” My heart broke when his voice wavered. “And your very own Forest. Until that happens, you need to get a good and long night's sleep, so you can grow strong and I can love your momma. Deal?”

Ben bounced until Teddy slept with his head over my man's shoulder. He was getting bigger each day, and soon enough he wouldn't need the bouncing anymore, but Ben never missed a chance to pick him up and hug him tight.

After he fell asleep, Ben carefully placed him in his crib and turned around to leave his room. He smiled at me in surprise, then pulled me into his arms.

“How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to hear you bargaining with your infant son so you can bang his mother.”

He chuckled in my ear, and I shivered in anticipation. “That wasn't my finest moment. And yet it wasn't my worst.” He sighed and whispered. “It wasn't my worst.”

I held him tight as he placed his face in the crook of my neck, trying to comfort him. I didn't wanna say it wasn't his fault. I'd said it before, without any results. He didn't need those words; he needed his friend back, and nothing I said could accomplish that. But maybe if he could put his pain out in the open, he could breathe a little easier.

I peered at him when he pulled back and felt a tug in my heart at his pained expression. Taking him by the hand, I led us to our bedroom. He could *love on Teddy's momma* soon. It was time to face what happened, though.

I sat down on our bed, and he followed my lead, facing me, although he'd yet to look me in the eyes. I hated the shame he'd bared since that day.

"Tell me what happened." My voice was barely above a whisper, as if I was talking to a traumatized kid. In a way, I was.

I was still holding his hands, and I rubbed my thumbs over them, trying to soothe him. "I still don't know what went on that day, and I know keeping it all locked up is eating at you. Talk to me. Please."

He opened and closed his mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut in despair. I was about to end our conversation to put him out of his misery when he started.

"Besides hiding from Michael and the others, Mia wanted to access the vault to get the weaponry we'd stashed. We had all sorts of guns inside. All legal. Due to the business we led, and always being hired by the government, it was necessary for us to be prepared. Besides weapons, we also had grenades stocked."

He shifted on the bed in discomfort, and I had to hold back a whimper at his troubled eyes. "There were two doors that gave access to the vault, right?" He nodded. "Why didn't she just try to get out from the other door, then?" That was something I'd been wondering, and I hated myself for that. It felt like I was making her accountable for what had happened.

“She was a sitting duck. If she set foot outside, they’d be on her the next second. Besides...I think her plan was to drive them to her the whole time. Especially Michael.”

“It was a trap.”

“And she was the bait. From this moment on, we can only guess and base our assumptions on what the investigation showed, since she won’t say a word about it...about anything.” He shook his head in distress. “Just like she called, there were bombs around the place. On the inside and on the outside. After they got whatever they were looking for, they planned to bring the building down. There was a plastic explosive on the wall that divided the storage and the vault, right under the platform. We don’t think she knew about it. She laid out the grenades around the vault, coaxed the men inside it—of course, Michael would be the first one—and when there were enough of them there and Michael was too far into it so he couldn’t get out in time, she threw one of the grenades she had on her before she stormed off.

“The one she threw went off and activated the other ones. It also set off the explosive outside. Besides the C-four—the plastic explosive they’d set up—four grenades went off as well. The structure of the building was compromised, and part of it collapsed. Two of the men were arrested. One of them, Matias, managed to escape. Michael, the one who chased you and was crushed by the shelves, and the others died.”

I wouldn’t shed a tear over them.

Maybe it was morbid curiosity, although I thought it was from pain. Either way, I needed to know.

“What happened to Zach? Why was the casket closed?” He squeezed his eyes closed and fisted his hands in pain. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that up. It’s just... it’s so crazy...”

“What is?”

“Not being able to see him, to look at him one last time gave me this feeling that he wasn’t inside that thing.” He fidgeted beside me, not looking me in the eye. “Like my gut telling me it wasn’t over. It was probably me being in denial. I just felt...off about it. Like I needed proof.”

He ran one of his hands into his hair, getting agitated. “There are things...” He shook his head. “I just suggested...” He pressed the palms of his hands over his eyes. “I made a mistake, I shouldn’t...I can’t talk about it. I want to, but I can’t yet. Oh my God, what have I done?”

I pulled him to me to calm him down. “Shh. It wasn’t your fault. None of this is your or Mia’s fault. It’ll take a while, a long while to heal. All that’s left for us to do is honor Zach’s memory and love as fiercely as he did. His loyalty will never be forgotten.” We stayed embraced for several minutes until his sobbing subsided. “Did you figure out what they wanted?”

“The two guys who got arrested aren’t talking much. All Aaron’s got so far is that they wanted to find the investigation we had on the cartel so far. They were also looking for a woman, but we don’t know who she is yet.”

“What about what they said while Mia and I were there? About ‘the right Bryant.’ What do you think that meant? Why did they want Zach?”

“They thought...they thought Zach was The Bryant Prodigy.”

That seemed odd, but I wouldn't voice that to him. “Maybe that'll take the heat off Mia.”

“That's our hope.” *Our?*

I touched his cheek, welcoming the prickling of his beard. He looked up at me, staring into my eyes for the first time. “Someday, somehow, I'll fix this.”

“There's nothing to be fixed. Sometimes, life takes it upon itself to show us how fragile we are. How little control we have over tragedy and pain. It's a scary realization, but it also prompts us to love harder, to be better, to fight for the ones we love. I can't even begin to imagine the pain Haley must be in right now, because it forces me to realize I could very easily be the one feeling that pain. It hurts me beyond reason to imagine a world without you in it.

“So, I'm making it my mission to love our son, cherish you, and build our lives with as much love and devotion as I can muster.”

I wasn't sure who advanced first. That wasn't important. All that mattered was that I was feeling his lips on mine after what felt like forever. It wasn't a sweet kiss. It was desperate. Born from pain, blossomed from craving. I yearned for his body as a reminder that we were still very much alive, and just like we could feel lacerating pain, we could also experience all-consuming love.

We tore each other's clothes with clumsy hands, desperate to feel something other than grief. But more than

that, hungry for each other. For the warmth and devotion we only felt together.

He pivoted our bodies, so he could lean back against the headboard as I straddled his legs. It felt like we hadn't been together in forever, yet it was also like we were never apart. Our breaths mingled as we stared at each other, the tips of our noses touching. He held my face in his hands, not even trying to hide the love from his eyes. I positioned myself above him and lowered on his shaft, marveling at the feeling of him stretching me. Not once did we diver our eyes. It'd never felt so intimate. So raw or pure.

We moved in sync. Me going down as he pistoled his hips up. I thrust my hands into his hair and lost myself in the sensations only he was able to evoke. I wanted to stop that moment and live in it forever. Our motions got erratic as we sought our release. I was desperate for that ecstasy, yet I didn't want it to end.

I felt my legs tremble and get weak as I clenched around him, making him groan, which only served to urge me on. With one hand still holding my face, he placed the other between us to coax my bundle of nerves. My buckle was inevitable, and so was my orgasm. I went off the edge, bringing him with me. As I cried out his name, he groaned mine. Despite having started it with desperation, we weren't loud. It wasn't a spectacle. It was like coming home again.

He placed several sweet kisses on my face. "Over a year ago, I took a chance. I took a chance on you. I took a chance on myself. It wasn't easy. I didn't make it easy. But taking a chance on us was the best decision I've ever made. I

love you, Forest. I love everything that came from you. Our baby. Our home. Our lives. I promise to take a chance on us every single day of our lives. Because there's nothing more worthy than having you by my side."

My man was back.

EPILOGUE

BEN

It was the first time walking inside our original building since that fateful day.

After the explosion that killed Michael, it wasn't safe for us to go back just yet. Not that we would if we could. With Mia in the hospital those first few days, Danny and I did our best to comfort our family and friends and deal with our assignments. Going there highlighted memories we weren't ready to relive.

We rented a smaller place downtown until our building was reconstructed. Danny and I worked around the clock to deal with everything, and we couldn't have made it if it weren't for Mia's parents and Lisa, Sofia's nanny. There were moments I felt like I was taking advantage of Jackson and Rosie, but they seemed to need those afternoons together with Teddy. It was their way of diminishing their pain and my way of hiding my guilt.

As far as Danny was concerned, I was pretty sure Lisa was everything he needed. In more ways than one.

Since she couldn't move around very easily in the first few days, along with some other consequences, Mia went back to work from home at first, dealing with bureaucratic issues or investigations she could do off-site. Gradually, she came back to work at the company and on on-site assignments with us.

It hadn't been the same without her. It wasn't the same *with* her either.

It seemed she went out of her way to avoid us. She missed our family dinners. She left the room whenever we weren't talking shop. I even started making up reasons to call her, but she'd hung up as soon as we were done dealing with work, always before I could ask how she was doing. When she finally came back to the field, it seemed she was working her best to challenge Mrs. Death, which became a point of conflict between the two of us. If we weren't working, we were fighting. Much to Danny's dismay.

I knew it'd take time for her to heal, and I dreaded the day she realized I was the one to blame. Yet I vowed to myself I'd fix my mistakes and bring my family back together again. I didn't overcome that much shit, take so many chances, and find the best people to surround me, only to have it all ruined. By me.

Before I entered the property, I spotted Mia's car parked out front. She was still sitting inside, a lost look on her face as she stared at the building. She seemed so lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice my presence until I climbed into the passenger seat by her side. We stayed in silence to the point of getting uncomfortable.

I was about to ask her how she was doing when she whispered, "Please don't." She wasn't ready to talk, so she resorted to diversion, her new way of talking. "How is Teddy?"

My lips stretched into a grin of their own accord. "Gorgeous. Big. So smart. He's definitely Izzie's son." She

smiled softly, and that felt like a win.

She finally shifted her head to stare at me. “I’m proud of you, Benny. You’re one hell of a man. I’m honored to have met you, and for the opportunity to watch firsthand you building the family you deserve.”

Humbled by her opinion of me, and unwilling to break that snippet of normalcy, I left our conversation at that. She wasn’t ready to talk about that day, and none of us was ready for her to learn about my deceit.

DANNY

We’d been working nonstop on everything we got about the cartel, from our previous investigation to the one after that fateful day.

Besides dealing with our private clients and contracts with the government, the renovation of our original building was taking a toll on us. Just a little bit more, and we’d be able to move back. I couldn’t wait to not be crumpled into a tight box anymore.

The setback would be coming back to the place where we lost one of our best friends.

I headed to the company to oversee the renovation and found Ben and Mia’s cars parked. I assumed Ben was in the building, but Mia was still in the driver’s seat. I got onto the passenger’s seat, not caring that I wasn’t invited.

“Ben already checked on me.”

I chuckled and got comfortable. “Allow the father in me to do the same.”

I took her small hand in mine and squeezed in reassurance. We didn’t need to talk. I just wanted her to know she had a safe place in me to feel her pain.

“I don’t think I can get in just yet,” she whispered, sounding as defeated as she looked, not once gazing at me.

“So don’t. There’s no need for you to go inside right now. Take your time to heal. We’ll be here for you when you’re ready.” I waited a bit, unsure if I should say those words, then decided to hell with it. “We missed you.”

“We see each other almost every day,” she countered.

“We see the physical Mia, the materialized one. I miss the one who made jokes and pestered us.”

She bit her lower lip to stop her chin from trembling. I noticed from her profile her nose was turning red and eyes were shiny. She’d yet to look at me. Mia just nodded in agreement, and I took that as her way of saying she missed us, too. I was still thinking about new safe topics for us to talk about when I felt the vibration of my phone.

The call fell before I could answer it. Then it started again. When I saw my mother’s name on the caller, something constricted inside of me. She’d called before, of course, but something felt odd. I answered it, feeling dread rise inside my chest.

“Ma?”

“Mi niño! Oh, Dios! Mi niño, we tried.” She sobbed. *“They took her. They took her, and Lisa is still unconscious. Oh, my God.”*

“Mom! I can’t understand what you’re saying. What happened?” I got out of the car, trying to hear her better.

Upon hearing my desperate tone, Mia jumped out as well. Ben was leaving the company, and when he noticed our tense mood, he frowned and walked to us.

“They hurt her, I’m still trying to wake her up.”

“Who’s hurt?” My insides froze. “And who are they?”

She took in a shaky breath, trying to calm her crying. *“Andrea came here with a man. They barged into the house and took Sofia with them. We tried to fight them off, but they hurt us, and the man knocked Lisa out. I’m so sorry, mi niño.”*

Bile rose from my stomach, and I had to fight back the urge to vomit. I turned to my friends, unsure if my mother was still talking or the call was still connected.

“Lisa is unconscious. And Andrea took Sofia away.”

EXTRA SCENE

Do you want a glimpse into Ben, Izzie, and Teddy's future?

Click [HERE](#) for a bonus epilogue

Or



LET'S CONNECT

If you don't want to miss any news on my upcoming releases, feel free to stalk me.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

Danny and Lisa's story is just around the corner, and I'm sure you don't want to miss the huge, yet adorable single dad fall in love with the sexy nanny.

Here is a sneak peek of *For The Days We Can't Forget* just for you (unedited).

PROLOGUE

DANNY

There were a lot of reasons I could say I lived a happy life. I also had legitimate reasons to say I lived a troubled one. The truth was, like many other people, I had good and bad moments. Overall, I had good health, a daughter I loved more than anything, a neat job, a supportive mother, and wonderful friends.

Despite my general analysis, I could pinpoint my greatest and worst days.

The day I concluded my medical training for the Navy vs. the day I lost my father. The day I met my daughter, so tiny and pretty, vs. the day I married her mother. The day my Sofia called me *Papi* for the first time vs. the day I learned her mother, my ex-wife, was cheating on me with a member of a drug cartel. The day my daughter told me she loved me vs. the

day I lost one of my best friends and almost lost another one.
The day I met Lisa Specter vs. Zach Bryant's funeral.

The day Lisa and I professed our love for the first time.
And the day her cold, lifeless body lay before me.

She hated winter for a reason, and I had it on good authority that she was right in doing so.

I lost my best friend during an odd rain in a snowy December. Exactly one year later, I was kneeling—shaking and frozen to the bone—in front of Lisa's sprawled, cold body in the snow. And only one of us was breathing.

That dangerous seesaw we called life had surely worked its number on me.

I liked to think I was a good person. So if evidence was to be considered, I was paying for way more than my sins.

There was no good answer for what was happening to me. I could only figure that, for better or for worse, some days were supposed to leave a mark on our lives.

And that freezing day in December, when I mourned a year without my best friend and watched one of my worst nightmares unfold in front of my eyes?

That was one day I could never forget.

For The Days We Can't Forget is already up for pre-order and it's on **SALE**. Don't worry, it'll be here before you know it. Pre-order [HERE](#) or



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could never publish this book without acknowledging the ones who helped me turn this once distant dream into a reality.

First of all, my Mom. Since way before I decided to write this story, you were the one who made me fall in love with books. Reading and writing were always a passion, and you were integral in turning me into a bookworm. And when I decided to venture into the self-publishing journey, you were a constant support and believer.

My sisters and my Dad. You believed I could write even before I decided to do so. Thank you for your faith in me.

My friends Angélica, Cristina, and Vanessa. You were my personal cheer leaders, the ones who pushed me forward when I felt everything was collapsing.

M.J. Marino. You were the first one to read my manuscript, my first baby. I was in full-on panic mode when I reached out to you, and you were absolutely incredible. Your suggestions made my story better, and your reassurance was soothing.

Kristin Lee. Writing can be a lonely journey, but you made me feel like I had an ally. I'm grateful for your friendship and advice.

Maria Freitas. I found you by chance months ago and it was a turning point for me. I was completely lost, filled with

knowledge I couldn't organize and piling up doubts about this journey. You taught me the ropes and encouraged me to finally hit the dreaded "publish". I'm doing my best not to *flop* and make you proud.

The Word Slayer. Thank you for your diligent work, for taking such good care of my story, and for your suggestions, that primed this book into its best form.

Grupo Lunas. Thank you for listening to me and for providing exactly what I was looking for.

And, of course, thank you, Reader. You took a chance on me when you had no reason to. Your generosity was humbling, and I hope I've touched you with my story. I also hope you come back for more.

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle P. Golden lives in Brazil, surrounded by books, cappuccino, and ideas.

Writer by passion and reader by vocation, she's been collecting stories in her head since she learned how to read them. Now she delivers contemporary romantic suspense books to anyone willing to get away from reality.

If she isn't working, reading a romance book, or watching suspenseful or comedy shows, she's daydreaming about the stories she plans on writing someday.