

A SWEET ROMANCE

IT'S NOT LIKE
IT'S
REAL



GRACE J. CROY

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*This one is dedicated to Kelli Hixson. You know why. THANK
YOU!*

Trigger Warning

Emergency situations are described in this novel, such as fires and auto accidents. Injuries and death are discussed in relation to the main character's job as a firefighter.

Chapter One

NAOMI

I SHOULD WORK, BUT I KEEP GETTING DISTRACTED BY MY NEW home. It's a small rental, nothing fancy, but it's all mine. At least this half of the duplex. The other half belongs to a single father and his daughter.

Instead of focusing on QuickBooks, I keep looking around at this little square of the world and think, *This is mine. My efforts brought me here.* It's such a satisfying, empowering feeling. How am I supposed to focus on invoices?

When my stomach rumbles, I decide that ten-thirty in the morning is the perfect time for a grilled cheese sandwich with pesto, tomatoes, and avocado. I grab the ingredients from the small fridge and get to work on my second breakfast.

It's only been six days since my son Trevor and I moved out of my parents' house. I love my parents and appreciate all they've done in opening their home to us after my husband fled the country and left me destitute and a suspected accomplice of his illegal activities. But after living with them for ten months, it was time to claim my independence.

While the bread toasts in the pan, I wipe down the laminate countertops. Even though the kitchen is small, I love cooking my own food again. I love the three gray kitchen cabinets, the tiny island with two bar stools, and the fridge the perfect size to fit a week's worth of groceries for two people. I'm the only dishwasher, but there's a double sink with a detached spray nozzle.

Everything about this place is perfect because it's mine.

The sandwich is almost where I like it, with melty, creamy cheese and the bread toasted crispy brown. Just another thirty seconds to make it perfect ... when the secret phone, aka the burner phone my husband sent in a simple package a few weeks after he fled the country, rings from my bedroom.

I throw the spatula over my shoulder as I run to grab the call before Seth hangs up. When I reach my bedroom, I can't remember where I put it for safekeeping. It rings again from the dresser drawer. I dive across the bed and rummage inside until I find it.

"Hello?" I say breathlessly.

All I get is a dial tone.

When I lived with my parents, we had a code. If I wasn't able to answer when he called, then he would call back within an hour. It gave me a chance to find somewhere private to talk. My parents couldn't find out about the burner because he's still wanted by the FBI.

My cheerful mood deflates rapidly.

Every time he calls, I feel like I've walked into a prime-time crime show. Taking calls from a known criminal doesn't make me the good guy.

When we talk, I only tell him the things he wants to hear. Which is why he still doesn't know I'm filing for divorce on grounds of abandonment. He believes I'll eventually give in, uproot my life, and relocate to wherever he's hiding.

I know I will never leave my family to live in hiding for the rest of my life. There isn't any reason to stay married, and my family is pushing for the divorce.

That doesn't mean I can't still talk to him. He may have done a stupid thing by embezzling from his wealthy clients, but that doesn't mean I don't miss him.

An hour of pampering while I wait for him to call back will make me feel better. While the tub fills with hot water, I strip down to my bra and underwear, dry brush my skin, put my hair up in a bun on the top of my head, cover my hair in a shower cap, and exfoliate my face with my favorite green tea scrub.

As I'm about to wash my face, the smoke alarm blares from the living room ...

The sandwich I left on the stove!

I run, faster than I have ever run before, straight to the pan. There are no flames, but a lot of smoke. I cough as I lift the pan by the handle and toss it in the sink, where I turn on the water to cool it down. More black smoke billows up from the pan, and I wave a hand in front of my face to dispel it.

Through the smoke, I see my front door is wide open. A man stands in my tiny living room, his expression blank. All I can take in are his big boots, his ratty jeans and frayed T-shirt, and the wild hair and beard.

I do what any sane person would do when they see a stranger in their house. I scream.

He rushes over. I grab the pan from the sink and jab him in the stomach. Water sloshes out over the sides and across his chest. The soggy sandwich pllops to the floor.

I keep screaming. Maybe the neighbor who lives on the other side of the wall will hear me and come save me from this stranger.

When I pause for breath, he lifts his hands like I hold a gun and not a pan, and says in a stern, no-nonsense voice, loud enough to be heard over the alarm, "I'm your neighbor. I'm here to help."

That makes me pause. I've only seen the neighbor once, and yes, this intruder looks familiar now that I have a better view of him. Who's supposed to save me now? I guess I'll save myself.

"Out!" I yell. "Get out!" I point the pan at the door to emphasize my words. The movement makes me aware that my boobs jiggle more than usual. I look down to be reminded that I have no clothes on. I'm in my nice underwear. The stuff that leaves very little covered.

I no longer care about the fire. I need to hide.

I run back through the living room, screaming as I go. "Get out of my house! And shut the door on your way out."

The first door down the hallway is the bathroom. I run inside and slam the door behind me, only to be met with a bathtub seconds away from overflowing.

I turn the water off and collapse on the edge of the tub. That would make a great second impression on my neighbor: flood the duplex after almost setting it on fire.

I'll never be able to look him in the eyes after today.

Chapter Two

FIVE MONTHS LATER

CONRAD

IF I DESCRIBED MY WORST NIGHTMARE, IT WOULD BE THIS moment: standing in the firehouse shirtless, a female photographer taking my picture in innocent but increasingly uncomfortable poses, while my coworkers watch. And they don't watch quietly, but heckle like this is the most entertained they've been in years.

"Can you flex your biceps a bit more?" the photographer asks with a pleased smirk. "Really make it pop."

She punctuates the "p," and my fellow firefighters' laughter grows until it's louder than the passing cars on the busy street in front of the fire station.

"Yeah, Beck," Smith hollers at me. "Make that biceps pop!"

I pretend the hand clasped around the fake fireman's pole is around Smith's neck, and squeeze, making my biceps "pop."

"Perfect. Now hook the thumb of your other hand into the waistband of your pants."

I do as she instructs.

My turnout pants ride low. Without the red suspenders, they'd probably be around my ankles. I have to resist the urge to pull them higher up my hip. The last thing I want is for her to come over and tug them back down.

Her smile widens further. "Perfect."

"Perfect," Harris mimics from the right, popping the p like it's a competition.

I shoot a glare at the guys, but it only makes them laugh harder.

"Oooh, that's sexy," she says. "Give me a little more smolder."

Not for the first time I curse Perez for putting me in this situation. We had a friendly wager a few months ago, his idea. Whoever raised the least amount during our Fill the Boot fundraiser would have to do a favor for the winner.

I lost by twenty-six cents. I expected Perez to ask me to babysit his three kids while he took his wife out on a date.

Instead, when Captain Hill asked for a volunteer to represent Fire House 25 in the inaugural Tucson, Arizona firefighter calendar, Perez volunteered *me*, and the captain loved the idea. Now, because of a quarter and one penny, I get to look forward to being humiliated next year, for all thirty-one days of August.

If I wore my uniform or full turnout gear, I would be fine with the photos. Well, mostly fine. I still don't like the idea of my face hanging in homes and offices all over the state. I had enough of that sort of visibility years ago when my social media-obsessed ex-wife posted innumerable selfies of us online. But it's not just my face. All I have on are yellow turnout pants like we wear to fight fires, with my freshly shaved chest oiled until it shines like a waxed floor. There is little not on display for anyone willing to pay twenty-five bucks.

The heavenly scent of brisket wafts down the hall and when Nolte, this afternoon's chef, rings the bell, the guys each yell out one last comment before they disappear. My stomach grumbles jealously. How much longer can this take? She only needs one photo for the calendar.

"Fold your arms across your chest and look to the right," the photographer says. "You've got a great jawline. Let's show it off."

At least the guys aren't around to hear about my jawline. I'd never hear the end of it. As it is, they're going to ask me to pop my biceps every time they see me for at least a month.

The photographer lets her camera hang from the strap around her neck and I slouch with relief, thinking we're finally done, but then she waves her hand for me to follow.

“Let’s get a few shots of you leaning against the firetruck.”

Following her directions, I lean for “maximum sexiness.” I didn’t know that was a thing until this moment.

When the photographer finally feels like she has enough blackmail material, I escape to the showers and scrub until I’ve stopped shining. Fully clothed in my uniform, I feel like myself again. I let my nose lead me to the kitchen, but I don’t make it inside for lunch before the staccato alarm sounds.

Lunch abandoned, everyone runs to the engine, pulling on full turnout gear as we head out.

IT’S A BUSY SHIFT WITH MULTIPLE CALL OUTS INCLUDING A shooting, an industrial fire, and a cardiac arrest.

My twenty-four-hour shift ends at eight in the morning, but at seven-forty-five we get a call for a car accident, and we head out again. It’s a minor accident with no one needing to be rushed to the hospital, but it’s still almost ten by the time we get back to the firehouse. I grab my bag and quickly head out to pick up my daughter from my sister’s place.

It’s only a fifteen-minute drive and on a Saturday morning, traffic isn’t terrible. Before my sister remarried six months ago, she lived on the other side of my duplex. She worked from home as a freelance writer and appreciated the extra income I paid her to watch my daughter. Our arrangement worked out perfectly for all three of us.

Now that she’s married to John and doesn’t need the extra income, nor does she live next door, it isn’t so perfect. But we make it work.

As I walk up to the front door, seven-year-old Lola runs out of the house and jumps into my arms. I’m enveloped by the scent of bubble bath and Cocoa Puffs cereal. She’s still in her pink nightgown and sports a crazy bedhead.

“Daddy, you got your haircut.”

The volunteers putting the calendar together were insistent I look worthy of their publication, and they sent someone to style my hair and trim my beard yesterday. It's a nuisance to get my haircut regularly, so I usually just wait until it interferes with my fire helmet, then buzz it short myself.

I run my fingers through the shorter locks. "Do you like it?"

She nods a little too happily, excitement shining in her eyes, then pats my cheeks. "You look handsome. Next time you see Sammy's grandma, smile and she'll like you."

"Sammy's *grandma*? How old do you think I am?"

"She makes really yummy cookies." She giggles, before growing mock serious. "I like Sammy's mom, but she's married to a really big guy and he might beat you up if you smile at his wife."

"Is that right?"

I tickle her stomach, and she laughs and squirms.

Over the last year, Lola has been dropping not-so-subtle hints that she wants me to get married by telling me all about the single mothers, or in this case, the single *grandmother*, of all her friends at school and from dance.

It's better this way, just the two of us. Getting attached to someone means getting hurt, and neither of us needs that.

My sister Izzy comes out on the porch. "Are you planning on staying out here all morning? Come inside and have some breakfast."

I stop tickling Lola to glance at my watch. "Can't. We'll be late for dance if we don't get moving."

Izzy looks back into the house at the wall clock. "Right. I didn't realize it was so late. Lola, go grab your stuff. I need to talk to your dad for a minute."

Lola kisses me on the cheek before wiggling out of my arms. I don't want to let her go because I know exactly what my big sister wants to talk to me about. I resist begging my daughter to stay, and a second later, Lola disappears inside.

I say a preemptive, “No.”

“You haven’t even heard about her yet.”

“I’m not going on a blind date.”

Izzy is even more insistent I date than my daughter. She means well and only wants me happily married like she is, but what she can’t seem to grasp is I’m happier alone.

“If you would find your own dates,” Izzy says, “I wouldn’t keep trying to set you up. It’s been three years since the divorce.”

“I’m not interested in a relationship.”

As my older sister, Izzy does what she always does: ignores my protests. “John and I met this amazing woman at a friend’s game night last week.”

Whereas our first marriages both ended when our spouses ran off together after a year of cheating behind our backs, we’ve taken different lessons from the experience. Izzy became more outgoing, expanded her social circle, and met her current husband, John, through a mutual friend. While my tolerance for people has shrunk until it includes the guys on my engine, my daughter, and my sister. I’ve begrudgingly included John. If Izzy doesn’t quit trying to set me up on dates, I might have to rethink her inclusion on the list.

“No,” I say again.

Izzy continues, as if she can change my mind. “She just turned twenty-six. Never married. She’s happy and chatty. When I told her about my firefighter brother, she asked to meet you. Come on, give her a chance.”

I give her a level stare. “Do I look like I want ‘chatty’ in my life?”

That makes her laugh. “Lola wants a mother. Isn’t that a good reason to at least try?”

“She has a mother.” A poor defense since Lola hasn’t seen her mom in over a year.

Izzy rolls her eyes. “Carmen was never the mothering type. Being a mom is more than giving birth and taking pictures.”

Carmen and I might not have been the happiest together near the end of our marriage, but nothing prepared me for her affair. The betrayal was enough to convince me not to try again.

“Lola and I are fine the way we are. Besides, Lola has you.”

Izzy looks back into the house, but Lola isn't on her way yet. I'm not surprised. It always takes her a long time to pack up her things. Most mornings, she needs someone to prod her along.

When Izzy looks back, she gives me her scrunched-up face, which always means there's something she doesn't want to say. “John got the promotion.”

The bottom drops out of my stomach. “You're moving.”

I knew John was up for the promotion, but neither of them had mentioned it for weeks. I thought that meant they had passed him over. At least, that was my hope. Izzy is my only reliable family.

She nods. “We're moving to Houston at the end of November, right after Thanksgiving.”

“Oh.” It's the only response I have.

John's parents and sisters live in Houston and in just under three months, she'll be with them. It's like someone pushed me under ice cold water and I'm fighting to find my bearings. Our parents are nomads, moving every two or three years. My wife left me, and now my sister. The only family I'll have left nearby is my daughter.

“I want a change,” Izzy says quietly. “I *need* this change. To start off fresh with John, in a new city. And this could be a fresh start for you, too. You're not the person you were before Carmen left you. You've turned in on yourself and stopped taking chances. You are not the type of person who flourishes on their own. This woman I met has siblings who have kids. Her parents live nearby. You could give Lola the family we

never had growing up, with grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles. A real support system. So stop being so stubborn and go on a date.”

I scoff like the rebellious younger brother I revert to every time she offers advice, but everything she says is true. Lola isn't the only one who could benefit from a support system. I could too, and Izzy's taking the last of it away. I feel adrift. As a thirty-year-old man, that's not something I want to admit to myself, and definitely not to anyone else.

Izzy keeps talking as if she hasn't said enough already. “You need to let go of the past. Carmen didn't know how to love someone with such a big heart. There's a woman out there who can. But you won't find her unless you try. Don't give up.” Her expression softens. “I hate the idea of you living here alone. Not everyone is out to break your heart. There's someone worth trusting.”

And now it makes sense why she's been so insistent on setting me up on dates over the last few months. It was part of her exit plan.

Lola rescues me from the torture of this conversation when she skips out of the house and takes my hand. Her other hand pulls her wheeled suitcase behind her, and her doll peeks out of the top of her pink backpack. She's changed into shorts and a T-shirt, but still needs a brush through her tangled hair. It's a battle I don't feel up to fighting today.

“I'm ready, Daddy,” she says.

Izzy waves to us both. “Bye Lola, bye Beck. Think about what I said.”

On the drive, Lola tells me about school yesterday and the drama surrounding second grade, while my thoughts are thorny with what Izzy said. I have less than three months to find a nanny. *Or a wife*. I laugh at the ridiculous idea. Been there, done that.

“What's so funny, Daddy?”

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. “I just saw a chicken cross the road.”

Lola sits up in her booster seat and looks around. “Where?”

“You missed her.”

As we pull into our driveway, Naomi and her son Trevor, our neighbors renting the other side of the duplex, come out into the front yard.

The duplex is essentially a double house cut down the middle. We share a wall where our kitchens and living rooms meet, with our front doors only a few feet apart, while our driveways are on opposite sides of the house. Our three-bedroom, one-bath homes mirror each other.

I bought the duplex when Izzy and I were going through the divorce. When Izzy lived in the other half, it felt cozy. Sometimes we’d knock through the wall and yell when we needed something. A text would’ve been easier, but not as much fun. Lola loved it.

With Naomi next door, It doesn’t feel so home-like.

“Run inside,” I tell Lola. “Change quickly, or we’ll be late. I’ll wait here.”

She jumps out of the car. “Hi, Trevor!” she yells. “Hi, Mimi!”

They both wave back before she enters the code to the deadbolt. She leaves the door open, letting out all the cool air. I’m too tired to get out and close it myself, so I stay where I am and glance over at the neighbors.

Trevor is a few years younger than Lola, but they get along great. He’s wearing a soccer T-shirt and cleats, so he must have a game today. I wave, and he waves back. He’s a cute kid. A few nights a week, he goes into our shared backyard and kicks soccer balls into his pop-up goal post. Usually, he has a drawn-on lightning bolt across his forehead, round plastic glasses, and a broom between his legs. Until recently, he was more interested in flying on the broomstick than making the ball in the goal. It’s quite entertaining. When I’m doing yard work, he’ll come outside and talk to me, usually about Harry Potter.

As much as I like Trevor, I can't say the same for his mom. Naomi glances over and gives me a plastic smile, but she won't meet my eyes as she heads toward the mailbox. Besides neighborly pleasantries we can't avoid, we haven't spoken to each other since I barged into her house a week after she moved in to save her from a fire that wasn't actually a fire. We share a wall, and I couldn't ignore the sound. I am a firefighter.

I assume she avoids me because she's still embarrassed, while I haven't approached her because she's a liar.

Before she signed the lease agreement, I lowered her rent because she told my property management company she couldn't afford the original amount. Since she was a single mother, I tried to make it more affordable. I don't know what she does for work, but she's home all day and her clothes look like they come from a boutique on Rodeo Drive. It's infuriating.

Today she's wearing chunky sandals and a pink sleeveless button-up blouse tucked into pressed white slacks. She looks like she's going to a job interview, not a sporting event.

Every time I've seen her, she's had perfect blonde hair, perfect makeup, expensive clothes, ridiculous shoes, and a stiff smile. She's beautiful, no denying, but that's just another mark against her.

She's just like my ex-wife.

The exact opposite of what I want my daughter to grow up to become, which is why I'm not a fan that she's friends with my daughter. Lola even has a nickname for her: Mimi. I can't ban Lola from talking to our neighbor, so I'm happy my offer on a house was accepted and Lola and I will move next month. When Izzy married and left the duplex, it was time to buy a house for me and Lola and rent out both sides here.

Though I will miss Trevor. His passion for Harry Potter reminds me of myself when I was a kid.

Even now, he waves his wand in the air before pointing it at the soccer ball lying on the grass seven feet away.

“Accio ball!” Trevor yells. “Mom, Accio ball!”

Naomi looks over at him and shakes her head. “Even wizards need to learn manners.”

“Accio ball, *please!*”

Naomi kicks it in his direction, softly, and it stops right in front of his foot. He blows on the tip of his wand like it’s giving off steam.

Like I said, cute kid. I guess his mom can’t be all bad. Just bad enough.

Chapter Three

NAOMI

I SIT IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT, STILL PARKED IN THE DRIVEWAY, and look through the mail while I wait for my sister Monroe to come out of my house. I should've known when she said she wanted to touch up her makeup she'd take ten minutes and not two.

"Mom, is Rad coming to my party tonight?"

"Mmm? Who's that?"

I'm distracted by all the hospital bills, one of which has bright red letters proclaiming, *Past Due*.

I'm relieved to see it's for a test I paid for weeks ago. I'll call them on Monday and get it cleared up. Even with the staggering cost of everything my insurance doesn't cover, I'm not a delinquent. At least not yet.

I dig through my purse for antacids. The financial stress of Trevor's last stay at the hospital and all the subsequent doctor visits gives me acid reflux.

"Mom!" Trevor yells.

I look in the rearview mirror to the back seat. "What?"

"Rad." He points to where Conrad is parked in his driveway, both of us waiting on females who don't know what it means to hurry. "Is he coming to my party?"

Now I wish I hadn't had Roe come over this morning to color my hair. Then I wouldn't be waiting for her to come out of the house, which means I wouldn't be sitting in my car with *Conrad* twenty steps away.

I press on the car horn, hoping that will hurry Roe, but knowing it's a wasted effort.

"Why do you call him Rad?" I ask. "Did he ask you to?"

"Lola told me to."

Conrad's so full of himself, he probably calls himself Rad in the mirror every morning and Lola doesn't know any better. Like he's some sort of 80's icon.

I throw the mail into my purse and turn on the ignition. As soon as Roe shows up, we are out of here. There's a knocking sound as the car starts, but I ignore it like I always do. Right now, the unknown is better than a diagnosis, because I can't handle another financial crisis. Only one at a time, please.

Finally, Roe comes out of the house with her attention on her phone. A turtle could move faster. I give another honk, but she doesn't pick up the pace.

Trevor's patience with me has worn out, and he yells, "Mom, Rad has to come!"

"Why?"

"Because he's my friend."

When Conrad is doing yardwork, Trevor will go out and talk to him. Does it follow that they're friends? I didn't think so, but it reminds me I never asked Conrad if Lola could come to the party tonight.

Trevor looks at me with sad puppy eyes. "I want Rad to come."

He looks like his father. Strawberry blonde hair, light skin that burns if not slathered with sunscreen, and adorable freckles. They share the same nose, chin, and hazel eyes. Trevor's eyes are framed with plastic toy Harry Potter glasses.

He wants the neighbors at his party. I would be a terrible mother if I didn't try to get them there.

I turn off the car and climb out just as Roe opens the passenger door.

"Where are you going?" she asks. "I thought we had to leave now, or we'd be late."

"That was five minutes ago. We're officially late. Give me thirty seconds."

The things I do for my son.

Conrad's car is still idling (quietly) as I walk across the grass. Lucky for me, he's looking down at his phone and doesn't notice my approach. It takes great bravery to not look at my feet as I get closer. Every time I see Conrad Beck, I'm reminded of the humiliating moment when my smoke alarm went off and he thought he was saving me from a fire but instead caught me in my underwear burning a grilled cheese sandwich.

He didn't even have the decency to apologize for forcing his way into my house. Not then, and not since. It wouldn't be such an embarrassing memory if we could laugh about it, but he never even smiles.

I'm not sure if it was that moment when he decided I was scum, or if it was something else, but he does not like me. I can tell by the way he glares whenever I smile in his direction.

Everything about the way he looks says, "stay away." From his deep-set eyes to his scraggly beard and wild hair. The breadth of his shoulders, his height, the perpetual scowl.

I'm not scared of him, but I am intimidated.

Which is why I don't want Conrad coming to my son's party tonight. It's a small gathering, just my brother's family and hopefully Lola. He'll ruin it with antisocial behavior.

I stop at his car window and crouch to look inside. He doesn't notice, which means I have to knock to grab his attention. He slowly looks up. It's an excruciating few seconds as he rolls down his window. No greeting. Just his intense stare. And to think, when I first moved in, I thought his green eyes were kind. Ha!

Now that I'm not avoiding looking at him, it's obvious he got a haircut and his beard trimmed. If he were a stranger on the street, they might describe him as handsome. I guess even meanies look good in a blue firefighter uniform.

"Hey, Conrad." I smile and try for a friendly tone, but his frown deepens. I hate how small I feel when I'm next to him.

Still, I swallow my pride and continue. This is for Trevor. “Tomorrow is my son’s fifth birthday and we’re having a small party tonight in the backyard. Trevor would love it if Lola could come.”

He doesn’t speak for a long pause, his expression severe. I suppose one nice thing about this guy is he doesn’t throw out smiles like candy at a parade, and I know exactly where I stand with him. But it makes for awkward silences, and I rush to blurt out an invitation I wish I didn’t feel compelled to give.

“You’re invited, too. It’s just a barbeque and some games. No gifts.”

Fingers crossed, he doesn’t come. We just need Lola. He can stay inside and ... do whatever he does when he has a free night.

“What time?” he asks.

It’s more like a grunt than words, but I decipher his meaning.

“Six. We’ll finish by eight.”

He nods just as Lola comes out of the house.

“Come on, Daddy!” she yells as she runs to the back door of the car. “We’re going to be late!”

Lola’s wearing a pink leotard and tutu like she does every Saturday. Her snarled hair is pulled back in a ponytail. A raccoon could live in there. Every time I see the girl, I want to brush her hair.

“Have fun, Lola,” I say as I take a step back.

“Thanks, Mimi!”

When Conrad tells his daughter, “Buckle up,” he almost sounds nice.

I shouldn’t be surprised. Lola adores her dad and talks about him all the time, so he can’t be all bad. Maybe I’m just disappointed he doesn’t show me the same kindness. It would be nice to have a neighbor who doesn’t feel like an adversary.

With the invitation given, there's no reason to stick around. I power walk across the lawn to my vehicle and climb inside. I've survived breaching enemy territory and now need a nap. But then, I always need a nap, and I never get one.

"What was that about?" Roe asks.

"I was inviting our neighbors to the party tonight."

Roe's eyes widen and so does her smile. "Is there something going on there?"

I turn the ignition and the knocking sound covers my response. "Ha!"

"Is he coming?" Trevor asks.

Conrad never actually answered.

"I'm not sure, but I did invite him." I did my part. Now I can only hope he does his and stays home.

"Why don't you ask Kit to fix your car?" Roe asks. "That doesn't sound good."

I should ask my sister to take a look. She knows everything about cars, but I'm sure whatever it is will cost me a fortune. She'll insist on helping with the cost and I'm supposed to be surviving on my own for the first time in my life. I'd like to keep trying, even if I'm gearing up for a spectacular fail.

THE SOCCER COACH SMILES WARMLY AT ME FROM THE sidelines as his team of five-year-olds runs off the field after the game. He has his hand out and all the little tykes slap his palm, but his attention is squarely on me.

I wish I could pretend I don't notice his interest, but since we're in an indoor field, I have no sunglasses to hide behind. I look away and find Trevor in the middle of the pack of kids. A much better view.

Roe has spent much of the game texting, but I know the exact moment she notices Coach West's attention because her pointy elbow connects with my ribs.

"Ouch." I rub my side. "That hurt."

"He's cute."

Roe's voice is loud enough to make me uncomfortable. I don't want anyone to think there's something going on between me and the coach.

"He's a flirt," I say quietly.

She shimmies her shoulders and says with a twang, "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I don't flirt." I'm not even sure I know how.

"It's never too late to start."

Roe's seven years younger than I am and until this past year, we weren't close. Our personalities are too different and the age gap didn't help. But now, she's one of my closest friends, right along with our two other sisters and sister-in-law. Not that I have friends outside of the family anymore. But even if I had hundreds of friends, my sisters would be at the top. I'm lucky to have them.

Roe knocks her shoulder into mine. "Flirting is fun. Especially when the man you're flirting with looks like that." She points as if anyone within hearing distance doesn't know who she's referring to. "Don't you want to find a babysitter and go out on the town? Forget about your problems for a few hours and eat good food before getting a goodnight kiss?"

The woman sitting in front of us nods. I do not. I still haven't recovered from my divorce and Seth has been gone for over a year. I don't have any desire to date. Nor do I have the time. Or energy. Or know-how. Seth was my first date and my last.

"Nope," I say.

"But he's so cute!" Roe says.

"I don't care." I soften my words with a smile.

I can admit Coach West is an attractive man. One who wears snug T-shirts and short shorts to show off every one of his muscles. But working to make another adult happy when I'm struggling to make myself happy is not on my to-do list.

"Just have a little fun," she says in a softer voice. "It's not like you're married anymore."

True, but Seth still doesn't know about the divorce, so in a way, flirting with another man would feel like cheating.

"How's the new job?" I ask so we can drop the current topic.

"It's better than I thought," she says. "It's only temporary, though. Once Dad's secretary comes back from surgery, I'll have to find something else to do."

She quit her job as a waitress a few months ago, and Dad put her to work while she figures out what to do next. He asked me if I wanted a job at his Medical Supply company, but I turned him down. It would pay better than my current job as a bookkeeper, but right now I can work from home and I need that flexibility with Trevor. Mostly, I don't want to be the product of nepotism. My daily battle cry is, "Watch me survive on my own!"

"Do you know what you want to do next?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Mom's pushing me to go to college, but no thank you. Maybe another waitressing job?"

At twenty-one, Roe has no idea what to do with her life. I just turned twenty-eight, and neither do I. We are two peas who have no pod. Maybe we're square peas and there is no pod that fits.

Roe elbows me in the side again. "Here he comes."

I glance in Coach West's direction, and Roe is right. He's heading our way and his eyes are on me. This is my cue to get out of here. I scoop up my purse and the small throw blanket I use as a cushion and move toward the opposite side of the bleachers. My platform sandals clack against the metal, making it easy for him to home in on me. Roe follows and

grabs my elbow, trying to keep me next to her, but my desire to escape is stronger than her desire to have me fail at flirting.

Coach pivots to meet me at the bottom of the other side of the bleachers, but a mom steps forward, blocking his approach. Hallelujah.

“Coach, do you do private lessons?” she asks in an overly sweet voice. “I think my daughter could benefit from some one-on-one time.”

More like she wants some alone time with the coach herself, but better her than me.

When I reach the ground, Trevor takes a running slam into my side and almost knocks me over. With his arms wrapped tight around my hips, he looks up, his eyes wide with excitement.

“I got two goals!” he says.

Impressive, since most of the kids missed the ball when they kicked. Not that it matters. This league doesn’t keep score. Its mission statement is to teach soccer and sportsmanship while giving the kids experience.

“You were amazing.”

His soccer skills have improved over the past few months, thanks to his older cousin Margot, who loves soccer and is teaching Trevor everything she knows. Which is a lot for a nine-year-old.

He lifts his hair off his forehead. “Can you still see my scar?”

The marker lightning bolt is just visible, and I nod.

Margot is also the one who read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* to him every night for a week while her parents were on a cruise and we were all staying with my parents. Since then, Trevor has been obsessed. We’ve read all the books together and are now on the second time through. I’m hoping he finds a new obsession soon because I’m not looking forward to starting from the beginning again.

I covertly study him, looking for signs he feels sick, but he exudes happiness and health.

“Go grab your snack and say bye to your friends,” I tell him. “Roe’s taking us to lunch, remember?”

He runs off just as Roe comes up beside me.

“I think you hurt his feelings.”

“Trevor’s?”

“No, the coach.”

She’s still stuck on the coach?

“Now or later, I’d have to hurt his feelings. Might as well be now.”

Roe clicks her tongue. “You’re brutal. But if you’re not interested, do you mind if I talk to him?”

And now I understand why she’s stuck.

“Be my guest, but you have five minutes or we’re leaving you here.”

“Ten minutes, and I’ll buy you dessert.”

“Okay, fine. But not a second longer.”

She squeezes my elbow, then turns around and saunters over to Coach West. Soon, I hear her laughter over the hubbub of all the other conversations. I don’t know how she does it, but she’s never at a loss for words.

I stand by myself and people-watch. Many of the mothers are off to the side talking together. They’ve never once tried to include me, and I’ve never learned the art of making friends as an adult.

My thoughts turn to my husband, and the longing I feel for what we had comes to the forefront of my mind. We started dating when we were fifteen, and he was my world. His friends became my friends, and that’s how it continued through college and into marriage. By that point, the only friends I had were the wives of his work associates. When he

left me, I was no longer invited into that social circle, for obvious reasons.

It's in situations like this that I'm reminded of how lonely I am. I would love to find a babysitter and spend the night on the town, but not with a date. With a friend.

Chapter Four

NAOMI

I DECORATE CUPCAKES WHILE TREVOR PLAYS WITH HIS TOY cars and watches the second Harry Potter movie. The cupcakes are, of course, Harry Potter themed. I found a cute sorting hat design online and I'm pleased with how they look. It's also nice to focus on something as simple as using cake decorating tip #12. The repetitive movements are calming.

The kitchen is where I love to spend my time. I can get so wrapped up in everything that's going wrong, but time in the kitchen rejuvenates me. For the first time in a while, I feel zen.

A knock comes at our back door. It's Lola. No one else comes to the back door. In all honesty, not very many people come to the front door, either.

Trevor runs over and answers. "Hi, Lola."

I'm relieved to see she's alone. No Conrad in sight.

"Is it time for the party yet?"

She's thirty minutes early, but I appreciate her enthusiasm. "Why don't you guys play in the backyard until everyone else arrives?"

They don't need further encouragement. It's been a cool September so far, which makes it possible to have this party outside.

Once I finish decorating the cupcakes, I move on to prepping the fruit salad.

The front doorbell rings a second before it opens and my brother and his family tumble inside.

My sister-in-law Avery holds her one-year-old son, Will. My brother Theo carries a folding table in one arm and a bowl of potato salad in the other. Their three girls, ages nine to four, pile into the house and hug me around the legs. They're laughing as they have a competition to see who can squeeze

me the tightest. Margot, the oldest, wins and I'll have bruises to prove it.

"Trevor's out back," I say.

All three of them run through the house to the back door and open it with gusto, making it bang against the wall.

I glance at the wall I share with Conrad's side of the duplex, hoping he didn't hear that. Since the smoke alarm fiasco, I've been very aware of the level of noise we make. No reason to make him dislike me more.

Lottie yells, "Happy Birthday!" She's wearing a party dress, lavender with sequins. She loves dressing up every day, not just for parties.

"Happy Birthday," the youngest, Dora, echoes. She has the most adorable lisp. I kind of hate the idea of her growing out of it.

The door slams shut behind them. They're a cyclone, and I hope I don't regret inviting them over tonight. I purposefully didn't invite all my siblings because I thought that would be overwhelming for Trevor, and I didn't want to make him sick. Which is why I'm spreading out his birthday celebration.

Today was lunch with Roe. Tomorrow my sister Kit and her fiance are coming over for a movie afternoon with caramel popcorn. On Monday, my parents will check Trevor out of school and spend the day with him. Next week my older sister Stella returns home from her trip to Ireland, and she'll take Trevor out to Golf N' Stuff to play at the arcade.

A fun sixth birthday, but spread out over a week so hopefully it won't be overwhelming.

Theo leans the folding table against the wall and envelops me in a one-armed big-brother hug. Avery's much more gentle hug follows.

"How was Trevor's soccer practice this morning?" she asks.

"Great. He'll want to tell you all about it. How was Margot's game?"

“She’s amazing, but she does not get her competitiveness from me.”

We both look at Theo.

“Yep,” he says with pride. “I taught her well.”

Avery laughs. “You should see him on the sidelines. He’s one of those annoying dads who yells and questions every call the ref makes.”

Theo shakes his head, a twinkle in his eyes. “That is not annoying. It keeps the ref honest.”

Avery slaps him lightly on the chest. “I’m sure the ref would disagree.” She gives him a quick kiss. “Will you take the table outside? Then grab the chairs and grill from the back of the van?”

He hands me the bowl of potato salad and gives his wife a salute before heading out the back door with the table.

Avery follows me to the kitchen counter, where the rest of the food is waiting to be taken outside.

“How is Trevor doing?” she asks. “I know you were nervous about this weekend.”

“So far, so good.”

“Any diagnosis yet?”

“No. The last doctor thinks it’s just growing pains. My fingers are crossed that he’s right, but I still worry it’s Cyclic Vomiting Disorder.”

Not a single doctor we’ve visited has an answer, but a few weeks ago while Googling Trevor’s symptoms, I came across a forum for those who suffer from CVD, and everything clicked into place. Episodes of uncontrollable vomiting for hours, even days, coupled with nausea, brought on by any extreme emotion. I don’t want my son to deal with this for the next fifteen years, and that’s only if he grows out of it when he reaches adulthood. Many children don’t. Which is why I cling to the idea it’s growing pains, however stupid it sounds.

Avery lays a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Naomi. I really hope it’s not a disorder.”

“Me, too.” It’s definitely not something I want to think about right now. I want to celebrate Trevor without worrying about his health. “Ready to get this party started?”

Avery grabs the blankets to spread on the grass while I bring out the food and wizard-themed tabletop decorations. The half of the yard closest to the house is covered in pavers, making a perfect patio to set up the table and chairs. The yard itself is long and narrow, perfect for soccer, with a padlocked shed on one end.

There are a few pieces of patio furniture, but I’ve warned Theo’s family not to sit on them. I do not want the wrath of Conrad coming down on me any more than it has already.

Avery and I chat about the kids while we set up. It’s a beautiful evening. A breeze blows by. The smell of marinated chicken on the grill permeates the air. The kids laugh as they run around the yard. It’s a perfect September Saturday night.

I’m very aware of the time. It’s six, six-ten, then six-twenty. By the time the chicken is cooked and the blankets are laid out on the grass, Conrad hasn’t arrived.

He isn’t coming. I’m relieved. The night just got more perfect.

CONRAD

I stand at the back door with my hand on the doorknob. I don't want to go to the party, but Lola begged me to show up and I hate disappointing her when she asks for something I can easily do.

So now I'm wearing my least scruffy jeans and a shirt with buttons, but I still hesitate. Naomi reminds me so much of my ex-wife that the next hour will be torturous. Add in that she obviously doesn't want me to come, and I'd rather stay in and finish the biography of Abraham Lincoln.

Instead, I open the door and walk out onto the paver patio. The things I do for my daughter.

The moment Naomi sees me, she stops laughing and her smile falls. The man and woman at the table notice Naomi's attention has gone elsewhere, and they turn to look at me. There are only us four adults, and it suddenly feels like I've shown up for a double date. The kind of situation I've spent years actively avoiding.

I'm a second away from turning around and disappearing inside when I hear, "Daddy!"

I look over in time to catch Lola in my arms as she launches herself at me.

"You're late," she says with a frown while she points her finger at my nose.

"Sorry." I give my apology to the table at large. "I lost track of time."

Naomi stands and clears her throat, her plastic smile in place. "This is my brother Theo, and his wife, Avery."

Before she can continue, Lola interrupts. "I'm Lola and this is my daddy, Rad."

I don't know where Lola got the idea my name is Rad, but that's how she introduces me to everyone. Trevor has started calling me by that name now, too.

"It's Conrad," Naomi clarifies. She wears a slight frown, as if the abbreviation insults her personally.

It's odd hearing her call me by my first name. Everyone calls me my last name, Beck, even my sister, because we go by our last names at the firehouse. But I don't correct her. It's not like we see each other often, and I'm moving soon.

"I thought you weren't coming," Naomi continues.

Yeah, she definitely wishes I hadn't. Is it such a terrible thing that I went into her house because I thought there was a fire? No. What is terrible is lying in order to get cheaper rent.

Since she's irritated I'm here, I decide tonight I will be charming. I haven't put forth any effort to charm anyone in years, but that doesn't mean I don't know how.

Theo stands and gives my hand an enthusiastic shake. "Nice to meet you. Naomi didn't mention you were friends."

Because we're not.

I smile. "It's great to meet you, too. Naomi never talks to me about her family."

Naomi's mouth drops open at my bold statement. I resist snickering.

Theo gives his sister a teasing smirk. "Should I be offended?"

Naomi seems at a loss for words. Good. Carmen never ran out of things to say, so I feel like I've won the first round tonight.

Avery has a toddler on her lap and stays seated. Her smile is low key but friendly. "I've seen you around over the last few months. Nice to put a name to the face."

Theo turns to the kids and points out his daughters as he introduces them. "Margot, Lottie, and Dora. And this little guy," he pats the boy on his wife's lap on the head. "Is Will."

Lola wiggles in my hold. “Let me down, Daddy. My chicken is cold.”

I let her down, and she runs back to the blanket where she sits between the two older girls. The one in the purple dress, Lottie, I think, looks about her age. I’m glad she’s having fun. I turn back to the table of adults. Not so much fun for me. I’d rather pull up a square of the blanket than a chair. Unfortunately, that isn’t a mature move. I have to sit at the adult table.

“I’m sure you’re hungry,” Naomi says as she shoves a plastic plate into my chest. At least it’s not a heavy pan. “Grab some food and take a seat.”

I do as she says.

Theo asks me, “What do you do for a job?”

I kind of hate this question because there’s always awe when someone finds out about my profession. I don’t like the attention or the accolades, but tonight I’m *charming*, so I don’t show any hesitation in my answer.

“Firefighter.”

Theo whistles. “I wanted to be a firefighter when I was a kid.”

“But not as an adult?”

“I decided I enjoy sitting at a desk with nothing nearby trying to kill me.”

“That’s fair,” I say with a chuckle.

“But you love fire?”

I put my fork down. It seems this isn’t a one-question about my job and move-on sort of conversation. “I can’t say I love fire, but I love *fighting* it. There’s a science to how it behaves, and a knowledge needed to make decisions quickly. But firefighters are called out to more than just fires, and there’s skill involved there as well. I’m also a paramedic, so I have training and certifications to keep up with.”

I look over at Naomi. Her eyes narrow, as if she knows I'm working to charm her family.

"Why do you do it?" Avery asks. "It's a dangerous profession."

"It can be, but it's also a satisfying and exciting one. I can't imagine doing anything else."

I take a bite of the grilled chicken. This marinade is mind-blowing. Avery must be the chef behind the flavor, since Naomi can't even make a grilled cheese sandwich. I wonder if Avery would give up the recipe. I cycle through the same five meals when it's my turn to cook at the firehouse, and I'm sure the guys would love something new.

Naomi studies me, her smile small and pinched. She's hardly touched her meal. Probably watching her calorie intake. Carmen subsisted on liquid meals to keep waif thin for the camera. Naomi doesn't look like she starves herself, but I still have to resist the urge to shake her by the shoulders and tell her to eat something.

"It sounds heroic," Avery says. "You go into situations most people run away from."

I'm used to being called a hero, but I've never liked the correlation. I give her my standard response, but smile while I do. Just call me Prince Charming.

"I'm no hero. It's a job."

"It's a job?" Naomi says. "You could die." She smiles her fake smile. There's a hint of disdain in her voice. I wonder why. "Are you an adrenaline junky? Or do you do it for the money?"

Silence settles over the adult table.

"Naomi, are you okay?" Theo asks.

None of us say anything for a minute.

Naomi takes a breath, runs her finger along the tablecloth, then says, "Sorry."

Her smile is gone and I think I'm seeing authentic Naomi for the first time. Or, the second time if I count the smoke alarm incident.

Now she turns toward me but doesn't meet my eyes. "My ex-husband liked the adrenaline rush of doing dangerous activities for monetary gain. It hits a nerve."

I'm intrigued, but shut that thought down quickly. I'm here for my daughter, not to be sucked into my neighbor's trauma drama.

"Maybe I am an adrenaline junkie," I say with a shrug. "I don't know. What I do know is I've been doing this job for ten years, and I still love it. Every day is different. Every day tests me. I definitely don't do it because of the pay. Most of us have to work a second job to make ends meet. I do what I do because it's a chance to make a difference. But that doesn't make me a hero. It makes me a lucky guy who loves his job."

Everything about Naomi's posture, which has been rigid since I arrived, softens as I talk.

"Oh," is all she says in response to my speech.

The second round goes to me, too.

I ask Theo, "What did you grow up to be instead of a firefighter?"

"An accountant."

Avery leans over and kisses him on the cheek. "My hero."

He actually blushes. "Avery and I own a consulting firm. I have the best coworker in the world."

They make loving each other look easy. They remind me of Perez and his wife. My marriage with Carmen was never easy and that tiny speck of jealousy I do my best to ignore ignites.

Naomi studies me. "Have you ever been hurt doing your job?"

I meant to take the attention off me, but Naomi's question brings it right back. "A few times."

“But you keep doing it, anyway?”

She’s looking at me with an intensity that I find surprising. Why does she care?

“Sometimes we have to take risks to save lives. But I’m never stupid with the risks I take.”

Even though the children are laughing and talking on the grass, there’s a seriousness about this conversation I unintentionally invited. I try again to lighten the mood.

“Theo, Avery, do you live around here?”

NAOMI

I'm not paying attention as they talk about living in Tucson. I'm studying Conrad without wanting to appear like I'm looking at him. For months I've thought of him as my horrible, humorless neighbor, and I didn't want him to come tonight because I expected him to scowl at everyone the whole time.

But he's not like that with Theo and Avery. He's personable and talkative. I barely recognize him, and it's not only because he knows how to hold a conversation; he's not wearing a ratty T-shirt and holey jeans. The arms of his button-up shirt are rolled up to his elbows, showing off his muscular forearms. The recently trimmed beard highlights his strong jawline. Those green eyes appear kind. I will admit it: he is an attractive man. On the outside, and sometimes even on the inside, like tonight.

I notice Avery glancing between us with an inquisitive expression, like she wonders about what kind of relationship we have. I've never told her about the smoke alarm fiasco and how I've avoided him since. Or how he scowls at me anytime we see each other. He's a surprise to us both.

"Naomi feels really lucky to have found this place," Theo says. "How long have you lived here, Conrad?"

Conrad glances at me, and I hurriedly look down at my full plate. After eating half of a pizza at lunch, I'm not that hungry, but Avery's potato salad is delicious, so I take a bite and chew slowly as I listen.

"I bought the place when my ex-wife and I got divorced, about three years ago. My sister was going through a divorce at the same time, and she lived on the other side, but she remarried six months ago and—"

"Wait." I put my hand on his bare forearm. His skin is warm and the coarse hair beneath my palm feels very masculine. When I realize what I've done, I pull back as if

he's on fire. It's been a long time since I touched anyone outside of my family, and from the way my breath catches, it shows. "You own this place?"

He nods like it's a stupid question. Maybe I should have known. He does all the upkeep in the yard, but I didn't. When I signed the rental agreement, everything was through the property management company. In fact, the only reason I know his name is because sometimes his mail gets put in my box. We've never officially introduced ourselves to each other.

"But that means..." I glance at Theo and Avery. They look as confused at my outburst as I feel about this revelation. "Remember how the owner knocked a hundred dollars off the rent so I could afford to live here?"

Realization dawns for both of them at the same time.

Avery shakes her head as she smiles at him. "And you said you weren't a hero."

He tugs on his collar. "It's not a big deal."

"It's a huge deal to me," I say. "You should have seen the sketchy neighborhoods that were in my price range. I'd still be living with my parents if not for you."

I instantly regret my fervent speech when he swings his attention over and studies me fiercely.

Our eyes connect. How am I supposed to feel about him now? Until twenty minutes ago, he was the mean neighbor who couldn't string enough words together to make a sentence. Now I know he helps single mothers on a tight budget and doesn't ask for anything in return.

Trevor comes up beside me and tugs on my sleeve, forcing me to break eye contact. Thank goodness.

"Can we play quidditch now?"

"Of course!" Nothing like a game of wizard soccer to keep me from obsessing about this new revelation. "Go grab the brooms from the kitchen, please?"

Trevor runs inside while Avery and I fold up the blankets and stack plastic plates on the table. Theo sets up the collapsible soccer goals with Margot's help, while Conrad finishes eating. I notice how he devours a second serving of my chicken, and I try not to let it go to my head. There is nothing like having my food appreciated.

Once all the kids have a dollar store broom between their legs and pick their teams—Margot and Trevor against Lola, Dora, and Lottie—I whistle and the game is on.

Margot makes a goal within thirty seconds. Then Trevor. It's pretty easy to see how this game will play out. Lola skips more than runs, and Lottie is more interested in twirling in her dress than playing goalie. Dora is the only one on her team chasing the ball with any sort of focus, and her short four-year-old legs are no match for nine-year-old Margot.

“What kind of game is this?” Conrad comes up beside me and stands with his legs spread and his arms crossed over his chest. He looks dour again, his friendliness from earlier gone. “Is this just soccer with brooms, or are there special rules?”

I try not to let his scowl bother me, and answer upbeat, a smile plastered in place. “No special rules. I tried to convince Trevor to play a different game, but this is what he wanted.”

Lola runs over, grabs her dad's hand, and tugs. “Daddy, we need help.”

I have never seen him smile like he does when he looks at his daughter, like she's his world. He follows her onto the grass without argument. It's cute, watching little Lola lead such a large man.

“Don't forget your broom!” I call out, and he circles back and grabs one of the last brooms from the porch.

“I can't let him have all the fun,” Theo says, and races onto the grass where he borrows Dora's broom, then picks her up and puts her on his shoulders. She giggles with glee and holds onto his hair with both fists.

It's quite the sight, the two dads and three girls playing against Margot and Trevor. I wish Seth were here tonight,

cheering on his son just as loudly as Theo and Conrad are their daughters. It's not fair that Trevor has to grow up without him. The yearning for my previous life drowns me some days.

"I like Conrad," Avery says from where she sits at the table with Will. "Why haven't you ever mentioned him before?"

"I never had a reason to."

"Then what do you call what's going on between you two?"

"Nothing. We're just neighbors."

Not even friendly neighbors. Tonight has been out of the ordinary.

"Really? There's a lot of tension."

I'd say it's more antagonism than tension.

"Mom," Trevor yells from the makeshift field. "Come play. We're losing."

Not surprising with the two dads on the opposite team. I'm about to say no, I haven't chased a ball since high school and would make a fool of myself, but since I'm the only parent Trevor has, why not?

I turn to Avery. "Want to be on our team?"

She laughs at the idea. "No way. But you have fun."

CONRAD

Naomi won't play. She's too haughty, and I feel bad for Trevor. Maybe I should switch teams. Before I can, she kicks off her sandals, grabs the last broom, and comes out on the grass. She still wears the white slacks and pink blouse from this morning, and I doubt having her on the team will be much of an improvement. But kudos to her for making Trevor happy.

Theo has the ball and kicks it toward the goal, but Naomi intercepts. She holds the broom out to her side as she kicks the ball into the air, and hits it with her knee once, then twice, before it drops to the ground.

She laughs with a lightness that makes me stop in my tracks. Her genuine smile lights up her face and for a few seconds, I'm blinded by the sight.

In one smooth motion, she turns and passes the ball to Trevor, but he's more concerned about his mom's broom than the ball and it goes right past him.

"Mom, you're falling! Get on your broom!"

"Oops!" She puts the broom back between her legs. "I'm safe."

Theo runs for the ball but slows as Margot approaches it too. She gets there first and shoots it into the net. Lottie, as our goalie, never stood a chance.

Avery claps from the sidelines. Theo whistles. Margot sprints over to Naomi and they give each other a high five.

I stand in the middle of the grass, marveling at what I just saw. Naomi is not only a good sport, she's sporty. And fun. In less than a minute, she's transformed before my eyes. Into what, I can't guess. Maybe for the first time in our acquaintance, I see her as different from Carmen. My ex-wife

would never play a sport, and definitely not barefoot. She'd be too afraid of chipping her nail polish.

Margot brings the ball to center field and Theo and I stand back so Lola can have first crack. She kicks ... and misses the ball. She kicks again and sends it spinning in my general direction.

I have the ball for five seconds before Naomi comes up beside me, leans in, her shoulder pressed against mine, takes the ball, and dribbles it halfway to her goal before I know what happened. This time when she passes the ball to Trevor, he stops the ball and kicks it into the goal without interference, since Lottie is sitting on the grass picking at a scab on her knee.

The next ten minutes don't go any better for our team. Lottie doesn't want to swap places, so we try to strengthen our defense, but Theo has his daughter on his shoulders and I'm going thirty hours with little sleep.

As for the other team, Naomi is fast, Margot has a powerful kick, and it's Trevor's birthday, so we all take it easy on him.

When Lottie abandons her post to play with her little brother on the patio, I take her spot as goalie and think we'll finally stop them. I block a few kicks from Trevor and Margot, and Theo gets a kick past Naomi and into our goal.

We're tied when Naomi dribbles the ball slowly toward me, our eyes locked. How have I never noticed her pretty blue eyes before?

Out of nowhere, Lola runs in front of her legs. Naomi trips, slides into a fall, and face plants in the grass. The cheap metal broom handle bends under her weight.

Lola jumps up and runs to me where she hides her face in my side. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. It was an accident."

I pat her back.

Theo comes over to Naomi. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Naomi groans.

Any second she's going to get up and start yelling at Lola for tripping her. Her white pants are most likely ruined and that looked like a painful fall, especially with the broom handle in her gut.

Instead of yelling, Naomi rolls over onto her back and stares up at the sky.

"Ouch," she groans. "I'm too old for this."

Where are the hysterics? The rantings? The pointed finger at Lola?

Trevor leans over her. "Mom, are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she breathes out. "Give me a second to catch my breath, and I'll be ready to play."

"You're sure you're okay?" Theo asks again.

"Yep." She sits up and looks down at her clothes. Both her blouse and her pants have green stains down the front. Now she'll start yelling at Lola.

I already have my rebuttal ready, but she just smiles as she looks up at Theo, a real, full, beautiful smile and not the fake one she always gives me.

"We're tied. Are you ready to have your butt whooped?"

Dora gasps. "She *thaid butt!*"

Theo shakes his head as he takes Dora from his shoulders. "As much as I love the trash talk, I'm done. I've been carrying around 40 extra pounds and my legs are tired. I probably won't be able to walk tomorrow." He turns to the kids. "Who else is ready for cake and ice cream?"

They all cheer, except for Lola, who is still hiding behind my legs, and follow him back to the table.

Naomi yells after him, "You just don't want to lose!"

"You got that right!" he yells back.

Naomi for the first time notices me and Lola standing by the goal. My daughter's head is still pressed against me, but

she peeks out, almost as if she is also waiting for the lecture to come.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

Naomi holds out her arms. “Oh, sweetie, it’s okay. It’s all part of the game. No serious damage.”

Lola leaves my side and climbs into Naomi’s lap, where Naomi holds my daughter like she cares deeply for her.

I don’t understand what’s happening right now.

“Do you want some cake and ice cream?” Naomi asks her.

Lola nods.

“Go over and join everyone else. Give me one second and I’ll bring it out.”

Lola skips to the group.

The fall is forgotten. All is forgiven.

That was not how I saw this going.

I walk over and hold out a hand to help Naomi up, feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude for how she handled my daughter. Also, a fair bit of shame for how I’ve lumped her in with Carmen. Naomi is not my ex-wife. I may dislike her style, her fake facade, and the way she doesn’t eat, but underneath, she’s patient and kind to little kids.

She looks at my hand, then looks at me, a crease between her eyebrows. She hesitates as if I’ll help her up just to push her back down. Finally, she puts her hand in mine. Her grip is firm, her skin soft.

Once standing, her nearness momentarily paralyzes me. I haven’t been this close to a woman in a setting outside of doing my job, and it shocks me how much I enjoy the proximity. She smells like a fancy perfume and grass. It’s a heady combination.

She is not frozen like I am, and immediately drops my hand and moves away.

“Thanks,” she says over her shoulder.

I fist my hand, trying to keep the warmth of her touch a few seconds longer. I follow much slower, thinking through everything that happened tonight. Knowing that Naomi isn't corrupting my daughter is a relief. Maybe Mimi isn't such a bad nickname.

Theo comes over and asks if I'm interested in joining a pickup basketball game next week with some of his friends. It's a night I'm working, but he grabs my number and promises to let me know the next time they play. I think my sister would be proud of me for making a friend. It's not a girlfriend, but it's something. I think I'm proud of myself, too.

A few minutes later, Naomi comes out carrying a tray of cupcakes with five lit candles. She's changed into dark slacks and a white knit shirt. I can't blame her, but I personally liked her hair disheveled and her clothes looking less than perfect. She appeared more human.

Once Trevor blows out the candles, Naomi makes sure everyone gets a cupcake and an ice cream sandwich, even me. The cupcake has a hidden center filled with red icing, sorting me into Gryffindor. With how I've treated her the last few months, I'm surprised she didn't slip me a Slytherin cupcake.

The cake is delicious. Probably the best I've ever had, but I still have a hard time swallowing around my shame. I have to apologize to Naomi.

AS I TUCK LOLA INTO BED AND SAY GOODNIGHT, SHE STOPS ME at the door with a surprising question.

“Mimi's really pretty, isn't she Daddy?” Lola says.

I hum in agreement, while not actually saying anything. I can see my answer making its way to Naomi through my daughter, and I'd rather not be quoted.

“Trevor has cousins,” Lola continues. “They're fun. Especially Lottie. I wish I had cousins.”

“Izzy might have a kid or two,” I say. “They’d be your cousins.” Even if they’ll live in Texas.

“Oh.”

The idea doesn’t excite her, which makes me realize she wants Trevor’s cousins as her cousins and not some hypothetical baby in the future.

“Mimi is really nice.”

She’s apparently moved away from trying to set me up with dance moms and grandmas and has moved on to Naomi.

“Mmmm.”

“Maybe she could babysit me when you’re at work instead of Izzy? Then I would have Trevor to play with while you’re gone.”

“You like staying with Izzy.”

“But she doesn’t have any kids for me to play with.”

I open my mouth to explain that Naomi can’t be her nanny, but stop. Izzy is moving. Soon enough she won’t be ten minutes away, but fifteen hours. I need someone to watch Lola while I work. But Naomi? I don’t dislike her like I did before, but I still don’t know her.

“I’m sure she already has a job,” I say.

“Mimi can quit her job and then she can watch me.”

The simple way a kid’s mind connects the dots. If only it were that easy.

“I doubt Naomi will want to quit her job.”

She pouts. “Mimi would for me.”

I chuckle. “Let’s keep this idea just between us, okay? Good night. I love you.”

Once I’m settled in bed with my tablet, I wonder if Naomi might want to watch Lola. Our children are friends and they go to the same school, so drop off and pick up would be easy. And I would pay her. After finding out she really needed the break on the rent, I wonder if the extra income would help her.

Maybe then she could get her Toyota Corolla into the repair shop, something I couldn't understand why she didn't do before now.

Naomi, as Lola's nanny, is at least something to think about. I don't have to broach the subject with her yet, if at all. I have a few months before Izzy moves.

Chapter Five

NAOMI

IT TAKES A LONG TIME TO GET THEO'S KIDS WRANGLLED AND IN the van. When they're finally loaded up, Theo turns to me before climbing in himself.

"I know you didn't want any of us celebrating your birthday, or even mentioning it, but tough."

I groan. A few days ago I turned twenty-eight and I just want to ignore that I'm getting older. I wasn't supposed to be a divorced and single mom by this age. Growing old alone doesn't feel like something to celebrate.

He continues. "When Kit comes over tomorrow for the movie, she's going to look at your car."

Ugh. No one seems to understand I need to do this on my own. "I have it under control."

"No, you don't. And that's okay. This is what family is for. Once Kit knows what's up, we're all going to chip in to pay for parts."

I lean my head back and look up at the sky so he doesn't see the embarrassment in my eyes. I hate that they all know I need help. "Everyone's chipping in? Even Mom and Dad?"

I'm trying to convince Mom that I'm succeeding on my own, but if she's helping to fix my car, then it's obvious I'm not doing a good job of it.

"Yeah, and me, Avery, Stella, Kit, and Roe. All we want to hear from you is 'Thanks.'"

Knowing my car won't give out on me would relieve some stress. I just need to swallow down my pride to admit it. "Thanks."

He hugs me. "Accepting help doesn't make you weak. Love you. See you next week."

Trevor and I wave as they pull out of the driveway and disappear down the street. A feeling of optimism overtakes me.

Trevor's healthy and happy.

Soon, I'll have a car that I can rely on.

In the next six months, I'll pay off the rest of the hospital bills.

We're going to be okay.

"Did you have fun tonight?" I ask as we make our way inside.

"So much fun."

"Me, too."

It wasn't even bad having Conrad over. By the end of the night, I didn't feel hostility coming from him. I still can't believe he's the one who cut my rent, but also the one who's treated me like the butt of one of those awful blonde jokes since the smoke alarm fiasco. I don't think he dislikes me anymore, and that feels like a win.

Once Trevor is in bed, I crawl into mine.

With the lights off, I go back through the events of the day, but this time insert Seth. I imagine what he would have said about Coach West staring at me. ("Who could blame him? I can't keep my eyes off of you either.") How we would have shared our favorite pizza at lunch (Hawaiian). When Roe teased me about the fruit on my pizza, he would've teased her about the lack of meat on hers. And tonight, Trevor would have had even more fun playing wizard soccer with his father.

To these happy memories that never were, I fall asleep. But not for long. Around midnight, Trevor comes into my room.

"I heard noises," he says as he climbs under the blankets.

This happens more nights than not, but I never send him back to his room. Instead, I snuggle beside him. Sometimes we both need a little extra comfort.

I'm almost asleep again when my secret phone rings from my bedside table. I expected Seth to call this weekend with it being both mine and Trevor's birthdays, but not this late.

The phone trills as I shrug sleep out of my brain and pat the top of the table, looking for it.

"Do I have to talk to him?" Trevor whispers.

"Of course not," I say. "You go back to sleep."

In the dark, I find the phone after it rings a fourth time, but the call has disconnected. I turn the ringer off and grip it in my hand so it doesn't bother Trevor when it rings again.

"Everything's okay," I whisper. "You can sleep."

He tosses and turns and I sing him a lullaby while I wonder why he doesn't want to talk to his dad. Lately, Seth has been calling after Trevor's asleep or while he's at school, so it's been a while since they've chatted. Trevor should know his father, even if it is through illegal phone calls.

Except it shouldn't be over the phone. Seth should be here with his son.

The anger and hurt I've felt since Seth disappeared have mellowed until all that's left is yearning for him and the life we would be living if he had made better choices. Instead, I'm in Arizona and he's ... somewhere in the world where he can hide without fear of extradition.

How is it possible to be furious with someone for all they've done to implode your life and that of your child, but miss them so deeply it's emotionally numbing? It's a mystery I doubt will ever be solved.

When Trevor finally falls asleep, I slip out of bed. In the kitchen, I flip on the light above the stove. It's soft and makes the place look less gloomy and lonely, but I'm too antsy to stay still. So I go out the back door and take a few deep breaths of fresh air.

A voice from the dark makes me jump. "You couldn't sleep either?"

A dark shadow sits in one of the patio chairs, an ankle crossed over the other knee.

“Conrad?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I’m irritated that he has invaded my solitude, and I hope he’ll go inside. Something akin to understanding passed between us earlier, but that doesn’t mean I want to share the backyard with him, and I’m sure he feels the same way. Except he doesn’t move, which means he’s waiting for me to leave. It is his backyard, so I try not to resent it.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” I say and turn to my door to wait for Seth’s call inside.

“You don’t have to go,” Conrad says quietly. His voice is kind. “I don’t mean to chase you off if you want to stay.”

I pause in my retreat, confused. “Are you going inside?”

“Not yet. The patio is big enough for both of us. Do you want to have a seat?”

My confusion only deepens, and I don’t move toward my door or the offered chair. What is he playing at?

He’s the one who breaks the silence. “So, you’re a soccer star hiding out in suburbia.”

That surprises a laugh out of me. “Hardly. I played a little in high school, but not since.”

“You’re good.”

I’m leery of the compliment. “It was fun to play again.”

Another stretch of silence.

He takes another stab at the conversation. “The cupcakes were delicious. What bakery did you buy them from? My friend’s son has a birthday coming up, and I’d like to buy some for his party.”

“I made them.”

“Really? You bake?”

His shocked response negates any pleasure I might have received from his compliment.

“Wow,” I say. “I don’t think you could be more surprised if I sprouted a second head.”

Now he laughs, a low throaty sound that makes my skin tingle. “Sorry, you just don’t seem like the kind of person who likes to spend time in the kitchen.”

I’m irritated that he has taken no interest in getting to know me over the last five months, but feels comfortable telling me what kind of person I am.

“You know absolutely nothing about me.” There’s a bite in my words.

His laugh disappears. “I know you burn grilled cheese sandwiches.”

Oh! He did not just go there. Now we’re both thinking of past me wearing very little, surrounded by smoke, standing in my kitchen.

“I had a phone call,” I say defensively. “I forgot I’d put the sandwich on the stove! It was just a little smoke.”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re right, you shouldn’t have.” I will not be easily appeased. “But at least you know how to apologize. I was convinced it wasn’t a skill you possessed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I don’t want him to think I’ve been waiting for an apology because he walked into my house without knocking, so I quickly say, “Nothing. Never mind. What are you doing out here so late, anyway? Are you an insomniac?”

He scratches his chin. “No, you’re right. I should have apologized months ago for coming into your house without permission. I’m like Pavlov’s dog. I hear an alarm and I act. It’s been hard wired into me.”

The mental image makes me laugh, but not unkindly. “That’s your apology? You acted like a trained puppy and

couldn't help yourself?"

"Let me try that again. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have walked into your house without being invited in." A pause. "Though you left your front door unlocked. You should really bolt the door at all times, even when you're inside. You don't know who's walking down the street, looking for a crime of opportunity."

I can't stop laughing. "Wow, a lecture too? It's my lucky night."

Now he laughs. "I'm sorry my apology sucks. I'm sorry for that afternoon with the smoke alarm. I'm sorry for assuming things about you. Will you forgive me?"

What other things has he assumed about me? I don't think I want to know. Still, his earnest apology makes my anger toward him disappear. Apparently, that's all it takes for me to forget five months of glares and growls.

"I guess so."

"I mean, it is my duplex, and I thought you were burning it down. Anyone in my situation would have done the same."

His voice is teasing, and I like it. Except, I'm confused.

"Why are you being nice?" I ask.

He pats the arm of the seat next to him. I hesitate for a minute, then step forward and sit. This is closer than when we sat next to each other at dinner. I can feel the heat coming off of his body, but I don't move away. It's a chilly night and I might even lean a little closer.

"I owe you another apology," he says. "The first thing I knew about you was you were a single mother who decided not to rent here because it was out of your budget. I told my property manager to lower the price and didn't think too much about it until you moved in."

I'm envious that he doesn't need to obsess about money every day. An extra one hundred dollars a month would make a vast difference to me, but I don't comment. No need for him to find out just how financially strapped I am.

“Then I saw your designer clothes, the frequent hair color touch-ups, your perfect makeup. Trevor’s going to that fancy soccer league, and it isn’t cheap. It seemed like you’d manipulated the situation to get a better deal and weren’t in any sort of financial trouble. It’s what my ex-wife would have done.”

His impression of me hurts like a thousand daggers to my soul.

“I would never do that,” I say. “I haven’t bought new clothes since my husband left me and my sister does my hair for free. My parents pay for the soccer league.” It was hard to accept but I couldn’t deny Trevor because of my pride. “I honestly couldn’t have afforded one hundred more each month to rent here. You could’ve asked.”

“You’re right. I should’ve. I made assumptions, and I’m sorry. Can we start over?”

He shifts in his seat so he faces me full-on and holds out his hand. It’s dark, but he’s close enough that I can see his features.

“Hi, I’m Conrad Beck, but most people call me Beck.”

Yeah, I’m going to keep calling him Conrad. If he’s spent the last five months believing I cheated him out of money, I can spend the next seven months of my lease calling him by his first name.

I take his warm, calloused hand in mine and shake it firmly.

“Conrad, was it? Nice to meet you. Naomi Anderson.” A yawn interrupts my introduction. I repeat the questions I asked earlier. “Are you an insomniac?”

I can’t think of anything more sad than insomnia. I love my sleep. Some days, I crave it like a drug.

“You could say that.” He leans back in the chair. “I slept for a few hours, but my sleep schedule is screwed up from work and sometimes it just doesn’t stick. I like to come out here instead of lying in bed awake. You?”

I lift the phone in the air and wave it around, but it's a flip phone, completely different from the smartphones of today, so I'm sure he has no idea what it is in the dark.

"I'm waiting for a phone call from Seth, my ex-husband."

Having an ex-husband is not a term I ever imagined I'd relate to myself, and it's a sharp pain whenever I do.

"It's late to call," he says.

"He doesn't usually call this late."

Maybe the words come out a little defensively. My family loathes Seth, as does everyone who knows what he did, and it's hard dealing with that animosity toward a man I loved with all my soul for so many years.

He nods like he understands. "When my ex calls, it doesn't matter when, I answer. I like to know she isn't in Tucson and is about to drop by for a visit."

He's estranged from his wife? "Doesn't she live around here? I thought she had Lola while you worked."

"No," he says. "Motherhood never took with her, and now she lives in Phoenix. She hasn't visited in over a year. My sister watches Lola when I'm working."

Lola not having a relationship with her mother makes me indescribably sad. It reminds me of Trevor not having a relationship with his dad. Parents should be the kind of people their kids know. Not parental delinquents or crooks.

"I'm sorry. That must be hard on her."

"I think it's actually easier not having her mom pop in and out. My ex has a habit of skipping out on stuff because she would rather do her own thing. Expecting nothing is easier than expecting something and not getting it."

That I understand. Some days I carry around this stupid phone because all I want is to hear Seth's voice. Or I can't sleep because I wish he would call, but he doesn't. It would be easier on my heart if I expected nothing from him at all.

"Does Trevor get to see his dad?" Conrad asks.

“No, Seth doesn’t live around here.”

It’s not a secret what Seth did. There are newspaper articles and news clips on YouTube for anyone who cares to Google him, but I never talk about his actions if I can help it. People either know, or they don’t.

“But he calls.” Conrad comments. “That’s something.”

“Yeah, he calls.”

And I answer, but if I’m honest with myself, every time we hang up, I feel just a little more broken. A bit more lonely. I keep expecting this to get easier, but it just gets harder.

“Thanks for inviting me to Trevor’s party,” he says, as if he knows I don’t want to talk about Seth any longer. “It meant a lot to Lola to have me there.”

“I’m glad you came.”

“Really? Because I got the impression the invitation was not given happily.”

I don’t deny it. “I can change my mind. I enjoyed listening to you talk about being a firefighter. Did you always want to be one?”

“Yeah, since I was nine. My neighbor’s house caught fire and as I watched the firefighters work to put it out, I knew that’s what I wanted to do. What about you? Do you enjoy... um, I’m not sure what it is you do.”

“I’m a bookkeeper, which means I balance the financial books of a small business.” I don’t want to answer the second part of that question because I hate whining. I’m lucky to have this job, and I know it.

When the silence stretches on, he asks another question. Almost as if he wants to get to know me.

“Have you always been a Harry Potter fan?”

I snort. “No. Fantasy really isn’t my thing. Trevor’s the fan. Margot read him the first book, and he was hooked. I’ve been reading Harry Potter every night for seven months now.

I've had enough Hogwarts to last me many lifetimes, but Trevor can't get enough."

He chuckles again, and I rub at my arms where they tingle from the sound.

"Have you read him all the books? Those later ones are scary."

It doesn't sound like a critique of my parenting, so I answer.

"Yep, I've read them all. I did a little research before reading the fourth one, and apparently, people who read scary books deal better with real-life scary situations. It's like they've already lived through the experience once in fiction, so they're better prepared when it happens in reality. We talk about all the scary parts and he's never wanted me to stop." I think about what he just said. "Wait, if you know they're scary, does that mean you've read the books?"

"Yeah, I read them when I was a kid. I was a huge fan. Still am, actually."

He does not strike me as a reader. Definitely not the type to be a fan of children's books, even when he was a child, because I can't imagine this big man as anything smaller than a gorilla. Not that I will say so out loud after I got mad at him for making guesses about me based on one burned sandwich.

"Lola and I go on a picnic every Sunday that I don't work. Care to come along tomorrow? We're picking up takeout and heading to the park."

I can't tell if he's serious. "It's dark and I can't see your face. Are you teasing me?"

He lets out a long sigh. "I really am sorry for the last few months. And I am serious. Lola would appreciate it. She gets bored with just me. She likes to be around people, and I don't."

"So it isn't just me you don't like being around? Good to know."

That earns me another one of his laughs.

How would it be to spend the day with Conrad? I know Trevor would have fun. And tonight has been ... nice. I've enjoyed our conversation. I guess I could survive a picnic with him, for Trevor's sake. Tomorrow is his sixth birthday, and as long as he doesn't get too excited, it should be fine.

"Can we be back by two?" I ask. "My sister is coming over tomorrow afternoon."

"No problem. Meet at eleven-thirty?"

"That works," I say.

The phone buzzes in my hand. I rarely hesitate to answer, but I don't want to be rude to Conrad. And maybe a tiny part of me doesn't want this conversation to end. Who knew that the rude firefighter next door could be nice?

Conrad stands and heads toward his door without me saying a word. It's just me and the phone.

"Hi," I say, as I stifle a yawn.

"Hey. Sorry, I'm calling so late."

He doesn't offer an explanation. He never does. I know very little about his life now because he refuses to tell me. Even though he never calls from the same number and I only talk to him on this burner phone, he's afraid the FBI will find him if he drops any clues.

"Is Trevor still awake?" he asks.

"It's past one in the morning. He is not still awake."

"I'd really like to talk to him. It's been a few months since I heard his voice. Will you wake him up?"

I close my eyes and brace myself to disappoint Seth. When possible, I try not to.

"No, I can't wake him up. You know that if he has Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome, sleep is very important, so he doesn't have another episode."

"You said he might not even have it. It might just be growing pains, right? Wake him up. Just for a few minutes, so I can wish him a happy birthday."

I would wake Trevor up if he wanted to talk to his dad. But for whatever reason, he doesn't. "I'm not doing that. He needs his sleep to stay healthy."

"I have a right to talk to my son."

"Then come home," I say. It's a challenge because I know he won't.

"The best solution is for you to come to me. I'll get you out here. No one will ever find us."

"I'm not leaving, Seth."

He expects me to leave my family, my home, and cut off all future contact with them. I don't even know where he is. He isn't close to his family, and he just doesn't understand. I'm sick of having this conversation every time he calls. There is no compromise and we both know it. I'm stuck in this limbo of wanting Seth to come home so we can be a family, yet knowing if he did, he'd be arrested and we still wouldn't be a family.

"I hate this," he says, defeated.

And yet "this" is all his fault. If he hadn't been selfish, he would still be here. We had a comfortable life before he started his embezzlement scheme. He's brilliant. Focused and dedicated. He rose quickly at work, bringing in investors his colleagues said were impossible to land. And he blew it all because of greed. What we had just wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

If he were still here, I wouldn't be dealing with Trevor's illness and the medical bills alone. Sometimes I wonder if Seth's leaving was the catalyst. Trevor's first episode happened after we moved back in with my parents. It was the morning after I told Trevor why his dad wasn't coming home. The doctors thought it was a one-time thing, but then he had a second episode a week after we moved here and he started all-day kindergarten at the end of last school year. I live in daily dread over it happening a third time.

It's silent on the line for a few minutes. Both of us alone, together.

“Tell me about his soccer game,” Seth asks, almost like an apology, but not.

He has never apologized for what he’s done to his family or to all those people he stole from. I’ve stopped waiting for one. Unbidden, Conrad’s apologies from earlier come to mind. It might have taken him a while, but he managed something Seth has never been able to do.

I tell him about Trevor’s two goals during the practice game and then his birthday party. I don’t mention the neighbors coming. The idea of a single father living next door would turn this conversation into another argument, and I’m too tired to deal with his frustration. I have enough of my own.

It’s past two when I finally get back to bed.

It’s six when Trevor shakes me awake.

“Mom,” he groans. “I don’t feel good.”

I have only a minute to sit up, flip on the bedside lamp, and take in his pallor, the clammy feel of his skin, and the sheen of sweat along his brow before he throws up all over the bed. Again and again, he heaves long past when he has anything left in his stomach. It’s painful to watch, but there is little I can do but rub his back until his stomach stops convulsing.

Now he’s sobbing, and I’d love to do nothing more than to hold and comfort him, but we need to get to the hospital before his stomach spasms again, which won’t be long at all.

Chapter Six

CONRAD

THE SLAM OF A CAR DOOR WAKES ME JUST AFTER SIX A.M. THE sound of the knocking engine clues me in that it's Naomi's Corolla. I get out of bed and peek through the slats of the window blinds. I catch sight of her blue car as it pulls away.

She never leaves this early in the morning, especially not on a Sunday, and because it's abnormal, I have the horrible feeling something is wrong.

Not my problem, I tell myself. She's only the neighbor, and she won't even be that in a few weeks. As Carmen liked to remind me, it is not on my shoulders to save the world. Just those who call 911.

Still, I can't help but worry as I make coffee and grab my tablet. As I settle into my armchair, I try to focus on my book, but my thoughts are not cooperating. I keep thinking of Naomi. Where did she go? Is there something I could do to help?

I am aware that this is a one-eighty turn from a day ago, when I wouldn't have thought twice about Naomi leaving so early in the morning. I probably would have made some mental comment about her rushing off for Botox, and I'm ashamed of myself.

Last night, when we had our first proper conversation, both of us in our pajamas in the dark, I realized how much I respect her. Divorce is hard. Single parenting is hard. But she manages it with a grace and hopefulness I admire. I haven't been neighborly, but I will be better going forward. Thus, the invitation to the picnic.

It isn't long before Lola wanders into the living room, wiping sleep from her eyes. Her half-awake grin is my favorite, and she doesn't hesitate to climb into my lap and snuggle into my chest. Lola is the best thing in my life. Even when she takes the tablet while I'm in the middle of a sentence

and pulls up the site where the online comics post every Sunday.

“Read to me,” she says. “Please.”

We spend the morning reading our favorite comics and then watch funny animal videos on YouTube until it’s time to get ready for lunch.

When eleven-thirty rolls around, Lola and I stand on our front porch and stare at Naomi’s empty driveway.

Over the past few hours, my worry has grown. If only I knew what was going on, but I can’t find out because I never got her phone number. I could ask Theo since I have his number, but I get the feeling she won’t like that, kind of like how she didn’t like me running into her house when I heard the smoke alarm. I should ask permission first.

And, I remind myself, unless she calls 911, she isn’t my responsibility. Maybe she is like Carmen and decided there was something better to do today and didn’t bother to tell me.

“Where are they?” Lola asks.

I now regret telling her Trevor was coming with us. She was thrilled with the news, and now she’s disappointed.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Why don’t we leave them a note before we go? I hope you’re hungry because we’re going to have a lot of food.”

She runs inside, not even this setback dimming her inexhaustible energy. When she returns a minute later, she’s written out in big, uneven, second-grader letters, “Where are you? We left. Call my dad.” She wrote my number below.

I’m not sure where the tape is inside the house, but I know I have some duct tape in the back of the car, so we grab the roll and attach the note to their front doorknob.

After we pick up the taco order I called in, we head to Lola’s favorite park, the one with the longest slide. She quickly makes friends, and while she plays, I keep glancing at my phone to see if Naomi’s seen our note and sent a text.

Nothing.

It's a cool afternoon for Tucson in September and Lola doesn't tire until she's met every kid in the park and gone down the slide fifty times. When she collapses in my lap, exhausted, we head home with our extra tacos. I decide if Naomi isn't there when we arrive, I'll text Theo for her number. It might irritate her, but I'll be useless until I find out.

When we get home, Naomi's car is not there, but a classic Ford Mustang is parked in her driveway. I whistle softly. It's a gorgeous car, beautifully restored. I have to believe she didn't do a trade-in after learning of her tight budget last night, but I wouldn't blame her if she did.

Just as I turn off the ignition, a man and woman come out of Naomi's front door, pulling a small suitcase behind them. I've been so worried about Naomi, I forgot she told me her sister was stopping by today.

I head over to them as they make their way to the Mustang.

"Hello," I say, loud enough they turn around. "I'm Beck, er ... Conrad," I amend. "I live next door. Is Naomi okay?"

The woman's face goes from confused to smiling. "Hi, Theo told us about meeting you yesterday. I'm Naomi's sister, Kit. This is Aaron."

Aaron holds out his hand, and we shake. They're not visibly upset, so nothing too serious has happened.

Lola comes up beside me.

"This is my daughter, Lola."

"You must be the one who wrote the note," Aaron says to her. He bends down to get closer to her level. "We planned to deliver it to Naomi personally this afternoon."

She hides her face in my side, suddenly shy.

"Where is Naomi?" I have a one-track mind at the moment.

Kit's smile falls. "The hospital."

My heart rate spikes. "What? Why? Is she okay?"

“It’s Trevor,” she says. “He’s sick again.”

“Again?”

She looks at Aaron, who shrugs. After a slight hesitation, she explains.

“When Trevor gets anxious, he throws up and can’t stop for half a day. He’s hooked up to an IV, so he doesn’t get dehydrated. The doctor wants to keep him until he hasn’t thrown up for twenty-four hours.”

As a firefighter and paramedic, I’ve heard and seen a lot of strange things, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard of this. Poor Naomi. I can’t even imagine what I would go through if Lola were ill.

“But he was fine yesterday,” Lola pipes up.

“There isn’t much of a warning.”

“Does this condition have a name?” I ask.

“Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome, though the doctors can’t committed to that diagnosis.”

“Are you headed to the hospital now?”

“Yeah, to bring Naomi a few things, since it looks like they’ll be there for at least another day.”

I nod as if this all makes sense. “Let her know we say hi and hope Trevor gets well soon.”

It sounds insignificant considering their situation, but I mean it in the sincerest way possible.

“Sure. And we’ll give her your note.”

“Thanks.”

They head off to their car, Kit taking the driver’s seat. Lola and I head back inside.

“We should make Trevor a card,” Lola says. “When my teacher was sick, we made cards for her. And it’s his birthday today,” she reminds me. “We need to go get him a present.”

It sounds like an excellent distraction for both of us.

We track down some blank paper and crayons, and Lola sets out to make the most colorful cards ever created. Now that we have solved the mystery, I can focus on something else besides my neighbor. At least that's what I tell myself. When I get out my laptop and set it up at the kitchen table to go over my investments, I look into Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome instead.

When my phone rings, I expect it to be Naomi calling after getting Lola's message, or maybe that's just my hope. It's a disappointment to see it's my ex-wife.

"Lola, I have to take this call. I'll be just outside if you need me."

"Okay."

She doesn't look up, and I see why she's been so quiet for the last thirty minutes. Her art box is open, and she's gluing Fruit Loops onto a piece of paper in a rainbow shape. She has six other cards scattered across the coffee table, all with Trevor's name on the front.

When I get outside, voicemail has picked up the call. I take a second to collect myself before I call Carmen back. I get frustrated when I talk to her, and it's my personal goal to never let her get under my skin again. It isn't easy. Not only is her second husband my ex-brother-in-law, he was also one of my best friends. We worked at Fire House 25 together for seven years. That's how he met Izzy. I still carry around a lot of guilt over introducing them.

Carmen calls me back before I get a chance to call her.

"Carmen."

"Hey, Beck. Hudson and I are in Hawai'i and I was thinking about the time we came here before we were married. Do you remember?"

I take a breath and hold it while she continues to describe all the things we did together nine years ago. I proposed on that trip for the first time. She said no. It wasn't for another year, on my third proposal, that she said yes. What can I say, except I'm determined when I want something. I wish younger

Beck was smarter, but then I wouldn't have Lola, so maybe not.

I don't know why Carmen likes to call me every few weeks and keep me updated on her life with Hudson. My guess is she wants me to remember I lost her because of my devotion to our daughter, and if I had done things differently, she'd still be with me instead of him.

I have no regrets when it comes to Lola. I take my responsibility as her father seriously. She needs me. Carmen never needed me. She kept me around to pay the bills and make her feel desirable. You can't build a healthy marriage on one-sided devotion. Young Beck was an idiot.

Carmen continues by telling me all the fun she's now having in Hawai'i with Hudson. Like Young Beck, Hudson worships Carmen. If no kids get in the way, they might actually make it.

I listen patiently until Carmen reaches the end of her travel log. I haven't been paying too much attention. She has needed no encouragement from me to continue, and I have given none.

"Anyway," she says, "Hudson and I want to meet up with you, Izzy, and her new husband for dinner. It's time to let bygones be bygones, you know?"

I notice she says nothing about seeing Lola. Not surprising.

Dinner is a terrible idea. If there are any two people on this planet, my sister does not want to see or talk to, it's those two. She might have opened herself up to a better man and remarried, but that doesn't mean she's forgiven Hudson and Carmen. Carmen and Izzy were tight like sisters until the affair came to light.

"Are you stopping in Tucson?" I keep my voice even and uninterested, though I feel the opposite.

"We don't have solid plans," she says slowly. "But I want to. We're not married anymore, but we're still good friends. And I miss Izzy."

I manage not to let my derision in her obvious delusion be heard over the phone. “When you know your plans, let me know and I’ll see if we can work something out.”

Carmen squeals. “That would be great!”

I have my doubts about her making her way down to Tucson soon. She changes her mind a lot, and we’re not a priority in her life. If Carmen ends up visiting, Izzy will have hopefully moved by then.

“You know,” Carmen continues, “Izzy never answers our calls. It’s been years. When is she going to let this go? We’re all happier now, so it was a good thing.”

I would never call her affair a good thing, but I am happier without her. So is Lola.

“Enjoy the rest of your trip,” I say.

“Sure will. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

I end the call and can’t help but laugh at her parting words. I said a total of three sentences. That must be enough to get her by for another few weeks.

It’s later that night, after our shopping trip for a birthday gift and Lola’s asleep, that I get the call I waited for all afternoon.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Conrad, it’s Naomi. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know we wouldn’t make the picnic. I forgot we had plans.”

“That’s okay. You had other things to worry about. How are you? How is Trevor?”

She blows out a breath. “He’s finally sleeping.”

“Kit mentioned he might have Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome. It sounds rough.”

“It’s awful.” She sounds exhausted. I wonder if she was able to get any sleep last night. “I shouldn’t have thrown him the party. Now he’s in the hospital on his birthday. I’m a terrible mother.”

“You’re a great mother.” I’m not sure where the fervor comes from, but I mean what I say. Even when I thought she was like Carmen, I couldn’t deny she loved her son and would do anything for him. “This is not your fault. There’s no way to know if this was caused by the party. It could be anything.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she says quietly. “But it’s easier to believe one thing caused it than by anything. How do I plan for innumerable possibilities? I want him to be happy, but what do I do when a fun day makes him sick and miserable?”

It’s odd that she’s opening up to me about this, and maybe a little flattering. The Naomi of two days ago wouldn’t have. The ragged edge in her voice makes me think she’s desperate for someone to talk to, and maybe I’m distanced enough from the situation to be useful to her right now.

She goes on. “I just wish the doctors could do more. It’s like, once the vomiting starts, we’re in it until the end because any medications he takes he just throws right back up.”

“I’m so sorry. What can I do to help?”

“Tell me about your picnic? Or anything really, as long as it has nothing to do with half-digested food or the hospital.”

She doesn’t ask for much, and it’s easy enough to do. For twenty minutes I tell her everything I can think of, even about the comics from this morning. I mention the birthday gift we bought Trevor and the half dozen cards Lola made.

“Trevor will love that,” she says. “And thanks for talking. Your voice is better than a meditation app. This is the most calm I’ve felt all day. Maybe I’ll be able to sleep a little.”

I sit taller at the compliment, feeling like I just jumped through a fire and saved a life.

“Can I do anything else for you?”

She yawns. “No. I’ve had family in and out all day, worried and frantic and altogether overwhelming. This conversation has helped more than you know. I’m sorry if I kept you up.”

“Anytime.” And I’m surprised to realize I mean it. “I work tomorrow, but when I get home Tuesday morning, I’d like to stop by and see how you and Trevor are doing. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I’d like that. We both would. Good night, Conrad.”

“Get some sleep.”

“I’ll try.”

I stare at the phone long after she hangs up. I don’t know how it happened, but in one day, she managed to make her way into my highly exclusive circle of people I care about. Now I regret that Lola and I are moving so soon. I don’t want to leave Naomi alone. As egotistical as it sounds, I think she might need me.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been needed outside of my roles as a father and a firefighter.

Chapter Seven

NAOMI

TUESDAY MORNING, AS I DRIVE HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL, I can barely keep my eyes open. I think I got about ten hours of sleep over the last two-and-a-half days, and I am desperate for a nap. Unfortunately, I won't get one today. I'm a day-and-a-half behind on my job and as of now, it'll be a struggle to get caught up by the weekend.

At least Trevor feels better. He slept until early this morning, not counting all the interruptions from nurses throughout the night. He's on a liquid and easily digestible diet for the next few days, and I'll keep him home from school until his energy is back. But for now, he's better, and for that I'm grateful.

Once home, I look for Conrad's car in the driveway, but it isn't there. He usually gets home around eight-thirty or nine after he works a shift, and it's already past ten. I'm disappointed that he won't be able to stop by this morning like he promised. Then I chastise myself for caring. We were fine without him for the past five months and I won't let myself rely on him for anything, even a visit.

I'm still surprised by myself for calling him on Sunday night. I just wanted to apologize, but his voice was deep and calm. Comforting, even. I didn't want to hang up, so instead I made a fool of myself and told him he was better than a meditation app. I've been beating myself up about that comment since we said goodbye two nights ago.

It's good he's not coming over today. It's not like I want to see how many times I can embarrass myself in front of the neighbor, and I have work to do.

I lift Trevor from the car. His head lulls against my shoulder. He's wrung out and lethargic, which I expect, but it's still hard to witness. He wakes up as I walk inside.

"Are we home?" His voice is weak and raw.

“We’re here. Do you want to camp out on the couch?”

“Yeah.”

I get him situated with the TV remote in hand and a bottle of water nearby, then I head to the shower.

I’m anxious about leaving him alone, but I have to wash off the hospital smell and change into clean clothes. A shower is the difference between collapsing into a heap of exhaustion on the floor and not moving for a week, or getting my work done so I get paid.

Once under the hot water, it’s hard to convince myself to leave. The shower has amazing water pressure. The heat relaxes my muscles and the headache that’s been hovering for two days lessens.

I want to stay here forever, except the sound of a knock at the door spurs me to turn the water off. I hear a deep voice inside my house. I should’ve locked the door when we got home, but I forgot. This could be the idle stranger who is looking for a crime of opportunity like Conrad warned me, but I think it’s much more likely it’s Conrad himself. I know it’s no one from my family since I begged them all to give us a day before bombarding us with phone calls, visits, and care packages.

I wrap a towel around my body and lean my head out of the bathroom.

“Trevor, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” comes his weak voice.

A second later, Conrad appears from in the hallway. “It’s just me.”

I quickly disappear into the bathroom, hoping he didn’t notice how I look. No one sees me with no makeup and wet hair, especially not the neighbor. A minute later, I peek back into the hallway, relieved when it’s empty, and run across the hall to my bedroom, still wrapped in a towel.

I quickly put on slacks and a teal blouse that was Seth’s favorite. He said it brought out my eyes. I smile at the

memory, even as I grab my make-up bag and apply the bare minimum so that I look presentable. Then a quick blow-dry with the round brush and a straightener to tame the mane, which has a tendency to wave when given half a chance. Seth isn't here anymore and he would never know if I looked less than perfect, but it's been ingrained in me to care.

Only then do I head to the living room. As I come around the corner from the hallway, I stop when I see Conrad sitting on the couch next to Trevor. I can tell from the music they're watching a Potter movie together. My son is smiling. The last few days he's been wretched, and now with this simple bit of attention, Trevor is a little less miserable.

Before I'm ready to be noticed, Trevor looks over at me.

"Mom, Rad brought me food."

Of all the things I might have expected him to say in his tired, frail voice, it was not that.

On the kitchen counter are three paper grocery bags. I go over to look inside. Applesauce. Yogurt. Graham Crackers. Ginger ale. Cans of broth. The next one has Gatorade, a box of rice, and instant potatoes. I'm speechless.

Conrad comes up next to me. "Just a few things I thought wouldn't upset Trevor's stomach. I also picked up some ingredients to make dinner for you tonight."

I blink away the moisture in my eyes. Hopefully, Conrad doesn't notice. Seth never liked when I cried, and I don't want Conrad to think I'm an emotional person.

"Thank you," I manage. "But making dinner isn't necessary."

"I want to help."

I'm not sure how to respond to his generosity. Who is this man, spending his money buying me groceries and his time cooking me dinner? If he had asked what he could do, I would have told him we needed nothing. But when he steps in without giving me a chance to turn him away, how can I say no?

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate it, but only if you and Lola eat with us.”

Though he stands next to me, I don’t look up, so I don’t know what his expression is saying. I hope it’s not pity that’s motivated him to be kind. I had enough pity to last me the rest of my life when Seth left.

“We would love to,” he agrees. “Do you want to take a nap? I can stay with Trevor.”

Such cruelty! Taunting me with a nap. I don’t have time. His making me dinner is one thing, but I am not letting him babysit my son. I’m about to tell him thanks, but no thanks, when I yawn. A huge yawn, one that goes on and on. I can’t hide how I’m half-asleep on my feet.

Conrad grins at me. It changes his whole expression and makes him almost unrecognizable. It leaves me momentarily stunned.

“Seriously,” he says. “I have some work I can do on my laptop. Take a nap.”

I really want a nap. Desperately. Just a short one, and then immediately to work. But that doesn’t mean Conrad needs to babysit. I could call my mom and she would be here in thirty minutes. Except, this morning when she stopped by the hospital, she wanted to follow me home, but I told her we’d be fine and she finally agreed to let me do things my way. I’d hate to call her now after my hard-won battle.

After another yawn, I give in. “Just a half-hour. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I set a thirty-minute timer on my phone as I walk back to my room. I don’t even bother to change before I crawl under my covers. It’s absolute bliss. So much so that when my alarm sounds, I turn it off and allow myself five more minutes.

But five minutes later, light no longer streams through the blinds. Panic shoots through my system. It wasn’t even noon when I laid down for a nap, and now it’s *dark*?

And what is that smell? It's soothing, like chicken noodle soup or macaroni and cheese. My stomach grumbles.

As I stumble into the living room, I'm once again shocked by what I find. Conrad's on the couch with Lola on his lap. Trevor is stretched out next to him just like before, but his smile is wider. Conrad reads from the illustrated *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. He does an amazing Hagrid voice, a gravely Irish brogue. Trevor will never be satisfied with my reading again.

It's a cozy, sweet scene and I feel a tenderness toward Conrad I don't know how to interpret. If I hadn't left my phone on the bed, I'd take a picture. Then the thought *Seth should be sitting on the couch with his sick son* intrudes. It turns the scene bittersweet. Thoughts of Seth do that regularly.

The three of them seem content, and I will not ruin it with my sadness over Seth, so I pull out the smile I always keep ready for such occasions.

I'm about to walk into the room when my stomach rumbles loudly. Everyone hears, and they all look over at me as Lola bursts out laughing.

"Are you hungry?" she says. "We made dinner!"

"It smells delicious," I say.

"Did you have a good nap?" Conrad asks.

As if sleeping seven hours is a "nap." That's more than a night's sleep taken in the middle of the day.

"I'm sorry to make you stay so late. You really should have woken me up."

"It was no problem."

It's like a thoughtful neighbor swapped places with my awful neighbor. I don't want the old one back.

Lola jumps off Conrad's lap and runs to the table. "Can we eat now? We've been waiting forever for you to wake up."

Only when I notice Conrad staring at me do I realize I must look horrible. I run my fingers through my hair, and it's a disaster. The mascara feels gummy and has probably glued my eyelashes into bizarre configurations. I feel pillow creases on my cheek, and this blouse is a wrinkled mess.

I also need to use the bathroom in the immediate future. I might not have eaten much the last few days, but I drank a lot of Diet Coke.

"I will be right back, and then we can eat."

One look in the bathroom mirror, and I look worse than I expected. If Seth were, he would be horrified.

Ten minutes later, I feel much better with my hair in a low ponytail, my makeup redone, and a fresh shirt. When I come into the main living area, Lola runs over and grabs my hand. Conrad is at the counter, dishing a casserole onto three plates.

"Let's eat, Mommy."

Both Conrad and I freeze.

"What?" he says.

She looks up at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. "Mimi. I meant Mimi."

A weird tension fills the room, and I can't look at Conrad as Lola leads me toward the table. I first stop by the couch where Trevor is looking at the pictures of the illustrated Harry Potter book.

"Trevor, do you want anything?" I ask.

He shakes his head, but once I'm sitting, he gets off the couch and comes over to climb onto my lap.

Conrad sets a plate before me filled with steamed vegetables and a chicken casserole. I haven't tasted it, but I love it already because I didn't do a single thing to make it appear. I didn't plan it, shop for ingredients, make it, or even dish it up. As much as I love cooking and my independence, right now I really appreciate being taken care of, especially because Conrad isn't hovering over me and Trevor, worrying.

Lola sits on one side of the small square table, and Conrad sits across from me. It's cozy. I'm familiar with just me and Trevor, where half of the table is empty. With four of us, it's like the square is complete.

And with that crazy idea bouncing around my head, I take a bite. It tastes divine. The chicken is tender and melts in my mouth. There's a creamy sauce, cheese, and crispy stuffing on top. It takes a conscious effort to eat at a normal pace and not stuff my face. I am starving.

While we eat, Conrad quizzes Lola on her spelling words and they make up silly sentences for each. It's sweet, especially because I suspect he's trying to give me some space to breathe by not making me contribute to the conversation.

It's thoughtful in a way I'm not used to.

After spending three days at the hospital with Trevor, the peace I feel is a surprise. Waiting in the wings is the worry and weight of all that has happened, all the bills that will continue to come long past when I thought I would pay them off, and the bookkeeping I need to do to catch up at work. But for this moment, with Trevor in my arms, and the Becks' spelling goat, each, happy, and night, I'm at peace.

All because I have a friend who didn't wait for me to tell him no.

Chapter Eight

CONRAD

NAOMI EATS WITH GUSTO WHILE TREVOR FALLS ASLEEP ON HER lap. She looks relaxed and content. No fake smiles or stabs at awkward small talk. I like her like this—normal. I like *us* like this—as friends.

Growing up, Izzy and I never had family dinners together with our parents. Because they worked opposite shifts at the hospital, they never seemed to be home at the same time. When they had the same day off, they spent it together, without us. I often wondered why they even had kids, if they didn't want to help us grow up.

I now understand what Izzy wants for me and why she pushes so hard for me to date. This is what family feels like. If I had the chance, I would spend every night at this table with these people.

Naomi snuggles Trevor closer and lays her cheek against his forehead. I somehow know if Lola was sick, Naomi would hold her just as tightly. She has a lot of love to give.

Stop, I tell myself.

This feeling of family is what I've always wanted, my Achilles heel. It has me wanting to pursue more than friendship.

Seriously, stop.

I thought when Carmen became pregnant, our home would feel like this. But it never did, and I gave up on that hope.

A relationship with Naomi would be the same dead end. It's obvious she's still in love with her ex-husband. They may be divorced, but she answers his calls at one in the morning and the way she talked about him that night made it clear she wants him back.

One "family" dinner doesn't change the fact that I don't want to be in a relationship. Love makes me blind and stupid.

About the time Lola and I make it through her list of ten spelling words, Naomi finishes her second serving of chicken stuffing casserole. I ask Lola to help me clear the table, and even though she grumbles, she picks up her plate, takes it to the counter, and then goes back to the table for another one.

I fill the sink with water as Naomi stands and gently lays Trevor on the couch. He wakes up.

“Can I watch Mad-Eye Moody?” he asks in a groggy voice.

“Quietly.”

Naomi turns on a Harry Potter movie. The volume is so low I can barely hear it, but I can see the screen. It’s the Triwizard tournament.

“Will you stay with him, Lola?”

Lola’s grumpy frown turns into a smile now that she doesn’t have to help with the dishes. “Okay.”

Naomi comes over to where I am. The kitchen is tiny, especially the space between the sink and the small island. We both do not fit here, and her arm brushes against mine. I inch away so we’re not touching.

“You are not doing the dishes,” she says.

I squirt in the dish soap. “I’m pretty sure I am.”

“You cooked. It’s only fair I wash.”

She has a good point, and if she insists on standing so close, walking away might be my only way to escape her perfume. It’s making it hard to think clearly.

“Then you have to let me dry,” I say.

She takes a dish towel from a drawer and hands it over before we swap places. I stand nearby, but not too close, as she scrubs a plate.

“Thank you for today,” she says quietly. “You really didn’t have to babysit, buy groceries, or cook us dinner, but I appreciate your help.”

“You’re welcome.”

For long minutes, the only sound is the indistinct murmur of voices from the television, the splash of water, and the rattle of utensils as she adds them to the sink.

“You are very good around the kitchen,” she says. “Did you and your ex-wife cook and do the dishes together when you were married?”

“Carmen wasn’t the homemaker type. I usually did the cooking and cleaning.”

Her eyebrows raise.

“Are you really so surprised?” I ask, arching my eyebrows in response. “Men can cook and do housework.”

“Not in my experience. My husband wasn’t much of a homemaker. We had very specific roles.” She turns away and focuses back on scrubbing dishes. “What does your ex do for work?”

Why this interest in Carmen? Maybe this is her trying to have a conversation, when I would prefer silence.

“She’s a photographer and artist, but she makes her money through social media, where she posts about fashion. I’m not sure how it works, but sharing her life online is an obsession and she makes good money.”

“You sound angry about it.”

“Do I?” There’s probably still some resentment, but I don’t let myself dwell on the past. I shrug. “It got to where she took a lot of pictures of Lola for her followers, but that was really the only interaction the two of them had. Lola was a doll she could dress up, nothing more. It caused a lot of contention and was the catalyst for our marriage falling apart.”

She grimaces. “I’m sorry. That’s sad.”

I couldn’t agree more, but I don’t want to talk about Carmen, and this is as good a time as any to share what I learned from Trevor this afternoon. I glance in the kids’ direction to be sure they’re still not listening to us. Nope, they’re both engrossed with the lake scene.

I lean my hip against the counter and speak quietly. “When Trevor and I were talking this afternoon, he mentioned his dad.”

Her hands slow as she scrubs the casserole dish. She looks over her shoulder at Trevor and whispers, “What did he say?”

“That he’s afraid his dad is going to show up and steal him away from you.”

The dish slips from her hands into the soapy water but she doesn’t seem to notice. Her eyes are wide and unfocused.

“Trevor said that?”

What he actually said was his mom needed him and he couldn’t leave her. From those few words, I read a lot into the divorce. It was rough on her and Trevor saw, even if she tried to hide it. Kids are smart. Lola surprises me often with how much she notices.

“Yeah.”

One soapy hand goes to her chest. Water seeps through her shirt, but she doesn’t seem to care.

“How could I not know?” she whispers. “Why wouldn’t he tell me he was afraid?”

“He probably doesn’t want you to worry.”

She gives a flat chuckle. “So he told you?”

“Kids tend to trust firefighters.”

For a minute she digests what I’ve said, then looks up at me, her forehead creased with concern.

“Did Trevor mention why he thought Seth might take him away?”

“When they talk on the phone, he tells Trevor he needs to come and live with him. It sounded almost like a threat.”

She wavers as if she’s about to collapse, and I go around the island to grab a chair from the table. She sits as she whispers, “Thank you for telling me.”

“I’d want to know if Lola was afraid of anything.”

I wash the last of the dishes while Naomi is lost in thought.

“Seth wants us to live with him,” she says. “Every time we talk, he asks me to trust him, to follow him. I didn’t realize he was saying the same thing to Trevor. I never would have guessed that’s how Trevor would interpret his dad’s words.”

There’s a softness that enters Naomi’s voice when she talks about her ex-husband. I’m envious that the guy has someone who cares, and he probably doesn’t deserve it. Did their divorce have something to do with his obsession with money and taking stupid risks like she mentioned at the party?

“Are you tempted to go?” I ask.

She gives a humorless laugh. “No. I don’t even know where he is.”

When she doesn’t continue, I want to ask for details, but it isn’t any of my business.

With a headshake, she stands and takes the towel from my shoulder to dry the last few dishes. Once again, we stand much closer than feels safe. I have to remind myself that Naomi is off limits. I shouldn’t even have to have this conversation with myself. Am I really so lonely that I’ve forgotten how unhappy I was in my last relationship?

I’m relieved when Lola comes over and tugs on my hand, so I have an excuse to take a step away.

“Have you asked her yet about babysitting me?” Lola’s whisper is louder than most people talk. There is no way Naomi didn’t hear. I still haven’t decided if I’m even going to ask, and with Trevor coming home from the hospital today, it definitely isn’t the right time.

“We’re not talking about that,” I whisper back. “Remember?”

Her smile deflates. “But Daddy,” she whines.

“Lola.”

She pouts and stomps her foot. “Fine. Can I give Trevor his gift now?”

“It’s up to Naomi.”

Lola clasps her hands together and looks up at Naomi with the biggest, brownest eyes. A total transformation in less than two seconds. “Please?”

Naomi laughs, which does a lot to smooth out the worry lines she’s worn for the last few minutes. “Of course, you can give it to him.”

“Yay!”

She’s out the back door before I can say a word.

“What was that about babysitting? I’m happy to reciprocate anytime I’m available. I owe you.”

“That’s not exactly it,” I say slowly, unprepared to discuss the topic right now. “We can talk about it later. You’re probably tired.”

“I just slept for seven hours. Believe me, I am wide awake.”

Okay, I guess we’re having this conversation. I scratch at my cheek, but before I speak, Lola bursts back through the door, breathless.

In one hand she has the stack of cards she made, in the other the gift, which is a bit of a mess. I tried to talk her into a gift bag, but she wanted the birthday paper and ribbon and wrapped the box herself. She runs to the couch and thrusts it at Trevor.

“Open it!” Lola says, her excitement palpable.

Naomi leans back against the counter, and I stand beside her, both of us watching as Trevor tears open a corner of the paper. It isn’t fast enough for Lola.

“It’s a bug kit,” she says. “We can catch bugs and put them in the jar and then there’s a glass we look through and it makes them big.” With each word, she gets more excited. “There’s a notebook, too, and we can draw the bugs like real scientists.”

I thought we were buying a gift for Trevor, not Lola.

“Lola, calm down,” I say. “Trevor’s tired, remember?”

She covers her mouth with both hands and takes a step back while nodding her head. “Sorry,” she mumbles.

Trevor smiles and even laughs a little. He tears off the rest of the paper and inside is exactly what Lola said would be there. Her patience has worn out, and she grabs the box and rips it open. They take out each piece of the kit and lay them on the couch.

Naomi turns back to me.

“Are you going to tell me about when you want me to babysit?”

My mouth goes dry. Why am I so nervous? Maybe because I want her to say yes and I’m pretty sure she’ll say no.

“My sister is moving to Texas in November. I need to find someone who can help with Lola while I work, and I was wondering if you’d be interested. It’s more of a nanny position than a one-time babysitting job.” I sweeten the pot by telling her a slightly larger amount than what I pay my sister, and her eyes widen. “I’d pay every two weeks when I get paid. My shifts are twenty-four hours, starting at eight a.m. Ten to twelve shifts a month, usually every third day, but sometimes I pick up overtime, especially during the summer. Lola’s in school at the same time as Trevor, though you will need to feed her and put her to bed. I don’t need an answer now, but maybe in the next few weeks?”

She looks a little shell shocked, but not for long. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

I was expecting a maybe at best. “You don’t want to think about it first?”

“No. We have the third bedroom. It’s tiny, but she’ll have a place to sleep. Because of Trevor’s...” She waves a hand in the air, but doesn’t expound. “I want to leave his situation as normal as possible, so I’d rather not stay over at your house.”

“Agreed.” I don’t want Naomi sleeping in my bed. It doesn’t matter if I’m not there. “Lola won’t have a problem sleeping over. She’s used to it.”

Naomi nods like this arrangement is a done deal. Which I guess it is? I feel like it happened so quickly and I'm still not sure it's the best idea.

"When do I start?" she asks.

"Izzy's here until November. So at the end of October?"

"I can start right away if that's okay?"

I pause before answering. "Are you sure? With everything going on?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Her finances must be in even worse straits than I'd assumed. After Trevor's recent stay in the hospital, I shouldn't be surprised. "My next shift is Thursday morning to Friday."

She thinks for a minute. "Trevor will stay home from school for the next few days and I have to catch up at work. Three days later would be Sunday. Is that your next shift? Can I start then?"

"Um... okay. I usually drop Lola off at my sister's on my way to work. Can she come over around seven-thirty? On weekdays, you would need to take her to school."

"Perfect. Thank you, Conrad. I ... Just thank you."

"I'm the one who needs to thank you."

"If you only knew." She blows out a breath. "Let me make you dinner tomorrow night? As a thank you for today?"

I scratch my cheek. "You don't owe me anything."

"It'll be an easy dinner. Tomorrow at six?"

I nod. My reluctance is only because I hate to put her out, but if she insists. Now that everyone is fed and the dishes are done, I head to the back door.

"Come on Lola, it's time to go home."

She instantly deflates. "Can't we stay a little longer?"

"No, Trevor needs to rest."

She grumbles, but puts down the magnifying glass and shuffles to the door. We say goodbye and head home. She takes my hand for the short walk back to our door.

“Did Mimi say yes?” Lola asks, looking up at me.

“Yep. Starting next week, you’ll be staying with her while I work.”

She jumps up and down. “Trevor will be like my brother! Which makes Mimi my mom!”

“No, it makes her your nanny.”

I may as well be speaking to an empty room.

Maybe that wasn’t a Freudian slip earlier when she called Naomi mommy. Once Lola gets an idea inside her head, she is more stubborn than a donkey. I’m not sure how she will push her idea of me and Naomi as a couple, but I’m sure she’ll try.

Oh, boy.

Chapter Nine

NAOMI

TREVOR IS SNUGGLED INTO HIS BED WHILE I SIT NEXT TO HIM and read Harry Potter. He's only made one comment about how Conrad has better character voices, and that feels like a win.

I'm not paying any attention to the words coming out of my mouth. My thoughts are struggling with how to talk to my son about the fear he has of his dad.

I reach the end of the chapter and slowly close the cover.

"Trevor, have you been worried about anything lately?"

He burrows down under his blanket and hides his face against my thigh. I wait. Finally, he nods his head. His words are muffled.

"I can't hear you, sweetie. Can you try again?"

He tilts his face up. "I don't want Dad to come back."

He cowers a little like he expects me to be angry. Really, I'm struggling not to show how heartbreaking I find his confession.

I run my fingers through his hair. "Why?"

"He wants me to live with him. I don't want to leave you."

"And if he comes back, he'll take you away?"

He traces his finger down my leg, but won't look at me. "He said if I came to live with him, you would come too. But you won't go and I want to stay with you."

I've said as much every time I speak to Seth, never expecting Trevor would create an entire story in his head. I know from my experience with irrational fears that they can't be rationalized away. So I don't try.

"Your dad lives far away and can't come back. But if he did, what would make you feel safe?"

He thinks. “We can get a dog like Fluffy.”

I should have known he’d rely on Harry Potter for an answer. Fortunately, the lease doesn’t allow for pets, especially not the three-headed variety.

“Mmmm, we could get you a stuffed Fluffy, but we can’t have a real dog. What else?”

“Rad told me his door code, so if Dad comes I can hide under his bed. Dad won’t think to look there.”

I am touched that Conrad tried to help Trevor feel safe. “That was nice of him.”

“I memorized his phone number, too.”

He sings Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, but instead of words, it’s the same ten numbers over and over until the end. Now I also have Conrad’s phone number memorized.

“Does knowing his number make you feel safe?”

“Yeah.” He looks up at me for the first time during this conversation, hope in his eyes. “Maybe Rad can be my dad? He can protect me.”

I suppress the laugh that comes at such an outlandish idea. Conrad’s friendship is very new. That’s a huge jump to marriage, especially because there will be no marriages happening in my future, to Conrad or anyone else.

“We’re not getting married. Any other ideas?”

He thinks for a minute. “I don’t want to talk to Dad anymore.”

“You never have to talk to him. Understand?”

He nods.

“If you think of anything else, will you tell me?”

“Okay.”

I leave the book on the top of his dresser and head to the door.

“Good night,” I say. “Love you.”

“Can I turn off the light?”

“Yep.”

He pulls one of his wands out from under his pillow and points it at the ceiling light. “Nox!”

I flip the switch, and the room is dark but for the light shining in from the hallway.

“Keep the door open?”

“Of course,” I say.

Once I’m back at the kitchen table, I pull out my laptop and log into my work account, but I can’t sit still, nor can I focus. I keep cycling through everything I learned tonight. I wish Trevor had told me sooner, but what I really can’t get over is how he never should have been afraid.

I need fresh air. I head outside and collapse on one of Conrad’s porch chairs. It’s a beautiful, peaceful night. The smell of wood smoke permeates the air as if someone is having a bonfire. The air is warm on my skin.

The calm out here does not calm the upheaval inside of me.

Trevor’s latest CVS episode is obviously my fault.

Trevor was sick this week and ended up in the hospital on his birthday because of Seth’s call. Seth calls because I answer. Even though he is far away and I can do whatever I want, I still live my life as if his expectations matter.

In doing so, I’ve neglected to do what’s best for my son.

It’s awful to recognize how blind I’ve been.

Guilt swamps me, pulls me down, fills my lungs, and tries to suffocate me. I tug on my hair, bite my lips, and scrub at my eyes.

“Why did this happen?” I say, my voice loud in the silence. “How did we get here?”

This wasn’t the life Seth promised me.

A scream rises in my throat. I cover my mouth with both hands and bend over until my face presses into my knees, and I let it out. One scream, then another. Another. I don't stop until my throat is raw. Something inside me breaks, and all the thoughts and memories I've suppressed come to the surface.

Since our first kiss at fifteen years old, I planned my whole life around Seth. Everything I've done, all the sacrifices I've made, were for him. Now that he's gone, who am I?

I don't know.

Instead of finding out, I've fought against reality every day.

Reality sucks. Living from paycheck to paycheck, dealing with the weight of hospital bills, worrying over Trevor's health, being stuck in a job I hate, pretending to my family that I'm flourishing while some days I'm barely hanging on. And the loneliness. I miss ending the day with someone by my side.

I've ignored my loneliness for a lot longer than the time Seth's been gone. I've been waiting for him to come back to me for years, even while we were living in the same house.

It wasn't always like that. He's a charismatic person who dominates a room. Even in high school, he knew everyone, and everyone loved him. I was the lucky girl he chose. We spent all our time together. I was his everything, just like he was mine.

It was after we were married and he landed his dream job that work became his priority, and Trevor and I took second place.

Because of his natural charisma, he landed accounts that no one believed he could. With each success came more responsibility. More expectations from his bosses.

It wasn't all at once, but eventually, he worked late every night. When he was home, he cloistered himself in his office. Having grown up in poverty, he swore his life would be different than the one his parents lived.

I wanted him to succeed, so I overlooked the birthday parties he missed, the holidays he worked through, and the family vacations he promised but never planned.

The higher he moved up in the company, the more he took an interest in how I dressed, the style of my hair, and the makeup I wore. Even if I spent the day at home, he wanted me to look perfect in case a neighbor stopped by. His remarks about my body, especially after I had Trevor, made me try every crash diet so I could be a little skinnier.

I never allowed myself to admit how unhappy the changes in our marriage made me. I just held on, believing once Seth obtained his goals, he'd come back to me. As soon as he got that promotion, or I lost five more pounds, or Trevor stopped waking us up in the middle of the night, then he'd be happy. Then *we'd* be happy.

A chill starts in my bones and radiates outward. I wrap my arms around myself as I shiver.

It's easy to imagine what my life would be like with Seth when he isn't here to prove me wrong. In my fantasy, he loves me no matter what. He goes to Trevor's soccer games. He loves the dinners I make and doesn't comment on the amount of fat and carbs in my chocolate cake. I've spent a year pretending Seth was the kind of husband I thought I married, instead of the man he became.

If he were here, he'd be disappointed. The house is a mess most of the time. I haven't cleaned the bathroom in weeks; the laundry is piling up; and Trevor's toys have taken up permanent residence on the living room floor.

And me, I've gained ten pounds. I no longer fit into half of my clothes. I've stopped counting calories and keep eating.

Not only have I lied to myself, but I've lied to my son. I answer the phone when Seth calls and pretend like it's a good thing that he wants to be a part of Trevor's life, when for years he's been on the periphery. Those phone calls were for me. Because I've been too afraid to leave behind the life I worked toward for so long.

It stops right now. I'm not sure I'd be able to let go for myself, but for Trevor, I can. I want to feel strong as I make this decision, but I'm terrified. What now?

I hold myself tighter, but I still shiver.

Conrad's back door squeaks open. He takes a step out, then goes back inside. That bruises. Until he returns less than a minute later, this time with a blanket. He doesn't hand it to me, but drapes it over me, tucking it behind my shoulders.

He smells better than a bonfire, though I can't pick out any individual scent, and I take a big whiff before he steps back. The chair next to me squeaks as he sits.

"Thank you," I whisper into the night. I feel warm, and it isn't just the blanket, but the company. I don't want to be alone right now.

"You're welcome. How's work coming?" he asks in his quiet, rumbly voice.

I snort a short laugh. "Are you shaming me for not working right now?"

"Not at all. I'm honestly curious."

Then I will respect his honest curiosity by giving an honest answer. No brushing off his question and pulling out a smile and a cheerful attitude. I'm too heartsore to pretend.

"Terrible. I can't focus on numbers right now." Then, because I need to confide in someone, I keep going. He's proven to be a good listener. "It's my fault Trevor was sick on his birthday."

"That's not true. How could you predict CVS?"

"He was anxious because of the phone call from Seth. If I had stopped taking Seth's calls months ago, then Seth wouldn't have called, and Trevor would not have been anxious. I should have known."

"You're a mom. Not a mind reader."

Isn't that the same thing? I don't want to be talked out of my self-flagellation. I deserve to feel this pain.

Conrad continues. “I wish I could say that as a firefighter, I always make the right decisions, that I save every person I’m called on to help, but I’m not and I can’t. I discovered a long time ago that the only way for me to be present the next time I’m called out is to look to the future, and not the past. Maybe Trevor was triggered by the phone call. Now you know, and now you move forward with that knowledge. But don’t beat yourself up because you made a mistake. Worrying about might-have-been won’t help you now.”

I stare at his profile in the dark, in awe at the calm reassurance this man offers. Anyone else would try to convince me that this isn’t my fault when it obviously is, but he’s telling me how to accept responsibility and move on. This is not the same person who grunted at me from his car four days ago.

I wish I could catch and hold on to his words of wisdom, but they slip through my fingers.

“I don’t know how to do that,” I say. “I’ve spent so long living in the past, I’m not sure how to be present in the now.”

“Practice. I might make it sound easy; It’s not. Each time I catch myself thinking about my mistakes, I make myself stop and think of what to do if I’m in that situation again, so I don’t make the same mistake. And I freely admit it’s harder when I’m thinking about it in relation to Lola than to my job.”

I have no response to this, so instead I say, “Thank you for helping Trevor feel safe. Neither of us will ever forget your phone number now.”

He grins, his straight teeth catching the little light available in the dark. I wish it were daytime so I could see him more clearly. His whole countenance changes as his eyebrows lift with the corners of his mouth.

I almost tell him what Trevor said about wanting *Rad* for a dad, but stop myself. It’s a cute anecdote, but bringing up the idea of marriage, however humorous, will be more awkward than funny.

“Do you think your ex-husband would try to kidnap Trevor? Should I be on the lookout for slow-moving vehicles driving down the street?”

What does it matter if Conrad knows the truth about what happened? Seth is not me. His actions are his own. If I’m letting him go, then I also get to let go of all the responsibility I’ve held on to for his criminal activity.

“No, I don’t think so,” I say. “A few years ago, he started embezzling funds from his clients. He fled before he could be arrested, and I don’t know where he is. Somewhere he doesn’t fear extradition.”

His eyes widen as I speak. “That’s awful.”

It really is awful.

“He’s not coming back. I thought I was helping Trevor by letting Seth talk to him, but really, I’ve been filling my son with fear. This is my fault and I don’t know how not to hate myself for causing Trevor to feel like this.”

Conrad stands so abruptly his chair knocks back against the side of the house. He paces three steps in either direction and tugs on his beard.

I sit up straighter, not understanding what is going on. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re blaming the wrong person for this situation. He broke the law. He left. He put you in danger by sending you that phone. If the FBI found out you were talking to him, they could charge you with aiding and abetting a criminal. He’s the one who frightened Trevor. He’s the one who threatened his son in order to get you to follow him. None of this is on you. The only thing you did was trust a narcissistic —.” He cuts himself off before he finishes that thought, then plops back down in his chair. “A selfish jerk. Sorry for going off, but that needed to be said. Good men don’t treat their wives like expendable doormats.”

For someone who has judged me for months, it’s strange to realize he’s not judging me at all now when I feel like I should be judged. Most surprising of all, everything he said is true.

My family hasn't blamed me for what Seth did, but they also haven't stood up for me like Conrad has. I don't blame them, because they don't know the entire story. But Conrad's speech, his anger, does more for me than the introspection I went through earlier. In fact, now *I'm* angry. Furious even. Seth put us in danger by sending that phone. He threatened my son. He has treated us like we're insignificant and therefore easy to abandon. Then, he expects us to uproot our lives and follow him like we belong to him.

I've been looking at my life through a distorted telescope for years, but now I can finally see clearly. Minutes ago, I decided to give up Seth for Trevor's sake, but now I want to give him up for my own.

I've never felt seen and supported like I do right now. I want to thank Conrad, but I don't know how. This night is monumental. Potentially life-changing. I can let go of this person who I've been tethered to for years.

The silence stretches on. It's comforting to sit with him and have no expectations placed upon me.

He clears his throat. "Last night, I asked if you like your job. I assume you don't based on your lack of response."

Conrad doesn't look at me as he speaks, almost as if he's embarrassed by his outburst. I want to reach across the space separating us and give him a hug. I don't but since I've already made a huge admission tonight, why not another?

"I hate it." I can't leave the answer so stark and depressing, so I continue. "I'm grateful to have the job. It allows me to work from home and pays decently. It's the first job I've ever had, and it's rewarding to earn that paycheck. Since I have no prior experience with bookkeeping, I never would've gotten it without my brother."

"Theo, the accountant?"

"Yeah. So even though I don't like it, I'm glad to have it."

"If you could do anything, what would you rather do?"

Why is this question so hard to answer? For too long, all I needed was to be Seth's everything, and now I just need to

survive. Does it really matter what I want?

“I don’t know.” A long-forgotten memory resurfaces. “When I was a teenager, I wanted to be the chef at an Americana restaurant. I came up with an entire menu and tried it out on my family. No one complained, except sometimes my mom, because our grocery bill doubled.”

“Do you still want to work in a restaurant?”

“Not at all. The hours are horrible and don’t work well for a single mother. Also, the kitchen is one place I feel like myself. I’d hate to have that safe space attached to stress and criticism.”

“The place I feel the most me would be with my daughter. The second, in the middle of an emergency.”

I laugh. “That’s the definition of stress.”

He shrugs. “I like being needed.”

The air between us hums. I want to reach out and take his hand in mine. I long for the comfort of physical touch. I miss the physical closeness I had with Seth. Not that I want that kind of relationship with Conrad, but I would like to hold his hand.

We sit together for a while longer until the work I haven’t even started presses on my mind too forcefully to ignore.

“I need to get back inside. Thanks for tonight.”

“You’re welcome. I’m out here a lot if you ever want to talk some more.”

I will take him up on his offer.

Chapter Ten

NAOMI

I GET ABOUT FOUR HOURS OF SLEEP BEFORE I'M UP AND BACK to work. I'm slowly making progress, and if I'm lucky, I'll catch up by the weekend.

When I was first hired on at Quality Discount Camping Equipment, I could stay on top of expenditures and purchases within the hours Trevor was in school. But over the last six months, business has exploded. I'm lucky to stay on top of everything if I work before Trevor gets up in the morning and after he goes to bed.

This is an hourly position, so I get paid for the extra time, but the paycheck doesn't go far enough with hospital bills. Which is why Conrad paying me to watch Lola is such a gift. It may be more work, but in some ways, it will be less work because Trevor will have a friend to play with in the afternoons. I might have the time to get this house clean.

In an act of rebellion that Seth will never see, it's past ten and I'm still in my pajamas. I didn't even brush my hair this morning, just put it into a ponytail. My makeup remains in my makeup bag, untouched. It's such a silly, small thing not to dress for the day, but for me, this feels liberating.

I expected to feel bereft this morning without my fantasies of Seth to comfort me, but all I feel is freedom from the past.

Trevor shuffles into the living room, rubbing his eyes. "Am I late for school?"

I ruffle his hair. "No school for the next few days. You need to take it easy."

"My lightning bolt is gone. Will you draw a new one?"

I grab the marker I keep on the top of the fridge for this very purpose and draw the mark. I follow it up with a kiss.

"Can I watch TV?"

I rarely let him watch so much TV, but there isn't much else to do when he's sick.

"Yep, just keep the volume low."

He sleeps for a good portion of the day, watches cartoons while he's awake, and eats a bowl of applesauce with graham crackers Conrad brought yesterday.

It's afternoon when the buzzing of text messages hitting my phone brings me out of my zone. I try to ignore it, but they just keep coming. It's obviously my family group chat because no one else has so much to say.

I stand to stretch and grab my phone before heading over to the couch to check on Trevor. He's zonked out again. The tip of his tongue sticks out between his lips, reminding me of a sleeping cat, and I snap a quick picture before reading through the chat.

Monroe: *Mom wants to know who's coming tonight for waffles. Arokit? Theavery?*

Theo: *Drop the couple names. They're awful.*

Monroe: *Would you rather be Avertho? I thought it was a little too close to Arokit, but up to you.*

Does anyone actually like couple names? Still, it's a nice distraction. What is a good couple's name for Aaron and Kit? Or Avery and Theo? Kia? Eory?

Aaron: *I prefer Ronkit myself.*

Theo: *Don't encourage her, Aaron.*

Aaron: *It's Ronkit, Theavery.*

Kit: *Do I get a say in this? Because I'm all about Kitron.*

Aaron: *Yes! Let's be that.*

Avery: *I vote we're Avereo.*

Theo: *Avery! No. We sound like an avocado.*

Avery: *But better!*

Roe: *Sorry, but nothing is better than guacamole.*

Mom: *As much as I love this conversation, I'm still waiting to know who's coming to dinner tonight. Kit, I wasn't sure if you would be back from your dress fitting. And Avereo, do you still have that backlog of work to catch up on?*

Theo: *Et tu?*

Mom: *Dissuading Roe when she's made up her mind takes a greater woman than me.*

Roe: *hehehe*

Theo: *Stop cackling. Just wait until you get married. The payback will be sweet.*

Roe: *We'll see, Avereo.*

Avery: *Hey, I'm all for the couple's name. Don't rope me in with Theo here!*

Roe: *Sorry, Avery. "We'll see, Theo." Imagine that said in my witchiest voice while rubbing my hands menacingly.*

Kit: *Kitron will be there!*

Avery: *Avereo will be there with kids in tow!*

Theo: *I give up.*

Roe: *hehehe*

Mom: *Naomi? Stella? We want to hear all about your trip!*

Stella: *I'm barely awake from jet lag. Going to bed early tonight. Sorry to miss out!*

This is where the conversation has stalled as they wait for my response. I've lost track of days, and forgot tonight was our weekly dinner, and I told Conrad I'd cook for him. Besides, Trevor needs rest.

Naomi: *Trevor isn't up to it this week. We will definitely be there next week.*

Kit: *You better! Aaron and I have so much to do to get ready for our engagement party and you all must help!*

Mom: *Naomi, how is Trevor?*

I send the picture I snapped of him a few minutes ago.

Naomi: *Really well, considering. He's a trooper.*

The family floods in texts of well wishes and love. I can't answer all of them, so I send a few heart emojis.

Then a text comes through from Stella, just between the two of us.

Stella: *How are you doing? Up for a chat? I have a break from work right now.*

Stella and I are the closest in age in the family. She's been my best friend since we were toddlers and she's my sole confidant. She got back from her Ireland trip last night, and though we've texted, we haven't talked.

Naomi: *Yes.*

I slip into my bedroom but leave the door open so I can hear if Trevor wakes up and needs anything, then video call Stella. She's sitting in her car when she answers.

"Welcome home!" I say. "I've missed you. How was your trip?"

Her smile widens. "So good. Wait, are you still in your pajamas?"

I laugh. "If Trevor gets to stay in his pajamas all day, then I thought I might as well, too. Tell me about your trip."

She tells me a few highlights of her adventures but regularly interrupts herself with yawns. She really should have taken another day off to rest, but she hates wasting vacation days by sitting at home.

"Enough about that," Stella says. "I only have eight minutes left on my break. How are you? I'm sorry I wasn't here when Trevor was sick."

"You wouldn't have been able to do anything. All we could do was wait until it stopped."

"And he's okay now?"

"Yeah, he will be. He's just tired. It really wears him out."

“I still want to take him to the arcade when he feels better.”

“How about Saturday? We both could use a reason to get out of the house, and he’ll have more energy by then.”

“That works for me. I’ll come pick you up. How is everything else?”

I say nothing for a long moment. “I had an epiphany last night about Seth.”

Stella stills and studies me. “Yeah?”

I pause. I’ve never dared ask anyone this question before now. “Do you think Seth is a bad person?”

She doesn’t answer immediately, and when she does, she speaks slowly as if weighing her words, most likely fearing the effect they’ll have on me. “He stole millions of dollars. That isn’t the action of a hero.”

Hero. It’s funny how she uses that word since it now brings Conrad to mind. The firefighting, single mother-helping hero.

“What about before he stole all that money?” I ask. “Like when we were in high school and college? Were there signs that he’d grow up to be a criminal?”

Again, she hesitates. Instead of answering, she asks a question of her own. “Why are you asking this now?”

She isn’t implying I should have asked that question sooner, because that isn’t how Stella thinks. She just wants to understand.

“Trevor’s latest episode was brought on by Seth calling.”

Stella looks horrified. “What did he say to Trevor?”

“It’s not what he said this time, it’s what he’s been saying for the past year.”

Stella is the only one who knows about the secret phone, and though she told me I should hand it over to the FBI, she didn’t make me feel like a bad person by keeping it. Which is why I hold nothing back about the last week. I’m not far into the story when her phone alarm goes off.

“Do you need to get back to the library?” I ask. “We can talk more tomorrow.”

“No, this is more important. I’ll make up the time later.”

So I continue telling her about my realizations, my conversation with Conrad, and his anger on my behalf.

“Conrad could see things in a way I couldn’t,” I conclude. “I can let Seth go. I will talk to him one more time to say goodbye, but then no more.”

Stella wipes tears from her face. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried! So many times, before and after he left. Seth has a way of sucking people in, blinding us to what’s really going on. He was a part of the family, and we all trusted him. Just like his clients, we had no idea what he was up to. What I didn’t trust was the way you lost yourself to him. Over time, your identity became a reflection of him. He swallowed you up. But every time I tried to talk to you about it, you brushed me off. After he disappeared, you were fragile, and I didn’t know how to help you see him clearly.”

I don’t know how I got so lucky to have her as a sister. She has supported me in ways I hope I’ll be able to repay when she needs me.

She gives me a cheeky smile. “We’re really lucky you have Conrad. He saves you from burned sandwiches *and* ex-husbands.”

The smoke alarm fiasco. For so long, every time I saw Conrad, that incident was the only thing I thought about. But that memory has been supplanted by our evening chats.

Still, I’m glad Stella’s the only one in the family that knows about that afternoon. If Roe and Theo knew, it would make its way into family lore and never die.

“He thinks I don’t know how to cook,” I say. “You should have seen his surprise when he realized I made edible cupcakes for Trevor’s birthday.”

We devolve into fits of laughter, interrupted when Trevor comes into my room and climbs up on the bed.

“Hi, Stella. Did you bring me back a present from your trip?”

“I sure did. I’ll give it to you on Saturday when I take you to the arcade.”

They chat for a minute longer, then we say goodbye so Stella can get back to her library job.

“Mom, I’m tired of sleeping.”

“Good. Because you need a shower. You stink.”

I boop his nose. He giggles and boops mine right back.

“No, you stink!”

The rest of the afternoon goes quickly, and I spend none of it working. After Trevor’s shower, we start in on dinner.

I told Conrad yesterday that it would be something simple, but I lied. He has yet to understand my skills in the kitchen and probably still thinks I burn food regularly. That’s a misconception I won’t let stand for one day longer. Besides, I owe him for last night, and food is a commodity I trade in.

At six o’clock, there’s a knock on the back door. Trevor’s supposed to be cleaning the toys off the floor of his room, so I grab the door. Lola comes right inside and hugs me around my middle.

“You’re going to be my nanny,” she says with gusto. “It’ll almost be like you’re my mommy.”

“Lola,” Conrad says in a warning voice.

She continues to smile up at me like she didn’t hear her dad. I can’t meet Conrad’s eyes or he’ll notice the blush on my cheeks. Lola’s statement is cute, but it also implies that her dad and I have something going on, which is way off target. A man and a woman can be friends with nothing romantic developing between them.

“Can I see the room I’ll sleep in? Will I have a princess bed? I have a princess bed at home. Maybe I can leave some

of my toys here. I bet Trevor will want to play with them when I'm gone."

"Lola, you're not moving in," her dad says.

I peek at Conrad, and I can't hold back a laugh. His cheeks are pink. I doubt that happens often. Or maybe with Lola, that happens all the time.

"I'll live here half the time with Mimi, and half the time with you," she explains. "I can leave toys here for Trevor and if I need them when I'm living with you, then I can come back and get them."

Now we sound like we're divorced parents sharing our kids.

"Lola," I say, "How about Trevor show you your room after dinner? As of now, there is no bed, but we'll get you one by Sunday." It'll be second hand, but maybe we can make a project of repainting it. "Right now, let's get the table set. Dinner is almost ready."

Conrad and Lola follow me to the cupboard as I get out plates and cups. Lola carefully carries four plates to the table.

"It smells delicious." Conrad takes a long sniff, two cups in each hand. He peers over my shoulder and looks into the pans on the stove. He stands too close, but I don't move away. "What is all this?"

"Chicken cordon bleu, mashed potatoes because they're Trevor's favorite and soft on his stomach, and sauteed green beans and mushrooms because they're my favorite and I haven't had them in a long time. And apple pie for dessert." I take out the silverware and stick it into the chest pocket of his button-down shirt. I'm amazed he has more than one, since for months all I saw him in were old t-shirts. "Take these to the table, too?"

Anything to get him away so he's not so close and staring at me as I place the pie in the hot oven.

The table's set by the time Trevor appears. I dish up the meal and everyone sits.

On Conrad's first bite of chicken, he slows his chewing. "This is delicious." He takes a bite of potatoes and does the same thing. "Like, restaurant-level delicious. You really should work in a restaurant. It would get a Michelin star. *Five* Michelin stars."

My chest puffs up with the compliment. I try to hide the smile my lips threaten to form because I don't want to appear like a person who needs praise. But I really do.

"A restaurant can only earn three Michelin stars," I explain.

He uses his fork to point to the chicken. "You deserve five. How do you know how to cook like this?"

"I read a lot of cookbooks."

He tilts his head. "You *read* cookbooks? Page by page like a novel?"

"Yep. I've read hundreds of them. Maybe a thousand. I make the recipes that sound good."

"Mom," Trevor says. He's barely touched the chicken I cut into small bites, but is going to town on the potatoes. "Can Lola come with us to the arcade on Saturday?"

Of course, he would ask while she's sitting across the table. Her eyes go big with the promise of the arcade, then go pleading because the invitation doesn't have the parental stamp of approval yet. I don't know how Conrad ever tells her no, but I'm going to attempt it.

"It's your birthday date with your aunt," I say to Trevor. "We can take Lola to the arcade on a different day, maybe while her dad's at work. How does that sound?"

Now Trevor is giving me the pleading eyes. "But I want her to come this week."

"Please, Mimi?" Lola clasps her hands like a plea.

Trevor copies her hand clasp. It's cute, even if it is manipulative. I hate disappointing them, and I don't think Stella will mind if Lola comes along, so I pawn the decision off on someone else.

“It’s up to Lola’s dad.”

“Thanks,” he mutters, though not angrily. “Make me the bad guy.”

“Or the good guy. Up to you.”

“Daddy,” Lola says, excited. “You can come, too!”

“No, Lola. We can’t crash their family party. We’ll go another time.”

“But I want to come this time!” Lola glares at her dad, her eyebrows low and her lips set in a frown. “Mimi doesn’t mind and Trevor wants me to come.”

Conrad looks at me. I give a tiny nod.

“Okay, you can go.”

“And you too, Daddy!” Lola insists.

Why not? Stella would enjoy meeting Conrad, and he’s nice to have a round.

Before he can tell Lola he won’t be coming, I say, “It’s decided. All four of us and Stella.” Because of the murderous look Conrad shoots in my direction, I predict he’ll try to get out of it. I continue with, “Stella’s car can hold all five of us, so we’ll drive together. Just let me check with her really quick.”

I text Stella asking her if she supports the updated plan. She responds in under a minute.

STELLA: *An enthusiastic yes from me!!! I’m happy to drive. I can’t wait to meet this man who knocked you out of your Seth rut.*

My Seth rut. I’m surprised that there’s no twang of longing. With how tight I’ve been holding on to him, it’s a shock that his memory no longer has any bite.

I look up to find Conrad staring across the table at me. We have this moment of silent communication. His quirked eyebrows ask, *Do you seriously expect me to show up on Saturday?* My smile emphatically answers, *Yes, and you better enjoy yourself.*

“Stella is enthusiastic about the plan and is happy to drive,” I say. “We’ll leave after dance and soccer on Saturday. One o’clock work?”

Lola and Trevor cheer. Conrad rolls his eyes up to the ceiling, but there’s a secret smile hiding on his lips and he doesn’t refuse to go.

Chapter Eleven

CONRAD

IT'S NINE O'CLOCK, LOLA'S IN BED, AND I'M RESTLESS. I PULL out my game console but don't feel like playing anything. Then grab my book. Nope. A movie? After thirty minutes of scrolling, nothing looks good. My quiet home life has been pushed into an upheaval, and it's all Naomi's fault.

We left her house an hour ago, and just like Lola, I wish we could've stayed longer. It's not because I'm interested in any sort of romantic relationship with Naomi, as Lola wishes. I like our friendship. The feeling of acceptance I feel in her home. Lola and Trevor's friendship. I didn't realize how much I needed a friend outside of work and family until this week.

A text comes through from Izzy, which is a momentary distraction from my own thoughts.

IZZY: *I met this really nice woman at the grocery store! Sonia. 25, is a yoga instructor, and loves kids! She gave me her number.*

The text is followed by a selfie of Izzy standing in a checkout line with a brunette woman wearing a Phoenix Suns T-shirt.

I don't respond. I'm sure Sonia is a nice person, but I'm not interested in dating anyone, especially not a stranger my sister met while shopping.

I head out the back door and collapse on a chair. I come out here regularly to think or get out of the house, but tonight I know it's because I hope Naomi will come out for a chat. Light streams from her kitchen window. She's probably working, and she might need a break. I'll wait. For thirty minutes, but no longer.

Normally, I find my backyard relaxing. Not tonight. My knee bounces as the time draws closer to my thirty-minute cut-off. Finally, her back door opens.

“Hey, Conrad. I wondered if you’d be out here.”

“Needed some fresh air before heading to bed.”

“I need a break from all those numbers. My vision is swimming.”

She drops into the chair that I think of as hers and pulls her knees up to her chest, her toes hanging off the end of the seat. Like the last two nights, she’s wearing pajamas with a matching top and bottom, a collar and buttons down the front. These are striped. Last week they were green, and last night she had a blue pair with some sort of animal. I think sheep, but it was hard to tell in the dark. If she wears different pajamas every night, she must do a lot of laundry.

With her head resting on her knees, she looks like she needs sleep.

“Do you have a lot of work to do tonight?”

She nods without lifting her head. “Yeah. Do you know the story of the shoemaker and the elves?”

“At night, the elves make the shoes while the shoemaker sleeps?”

“That’s the one. I wish there were bookkeeping elves who came out after I was asleep and did all the stuff I didn’t get done that day. I could wake up with a fresh list of tasks each morning, instead of spending all of my time trying to catch up.”

I want to help her. I want to cut her rent in half and buy her groceries. Make her dinner, though I don’t have her cooking skills. Whatever it takes to remove the stress that clings to her. Now that I know the real person who hides behind her fake, happy persona, I want to protect her.

Which is utterly stupid. I save lives; I don’t rescue struggling single mothers. There’s no reason for me to feel so protective of her. She is capable of taking care of herself and is doing a fantastic job of it.

“Did you marinate that chicken for your son’s party last week?” I ask.

“Yeah. Why? Do you think I bought it like that?” she jokes.

I’m ashamed to remember how I believed at the time it must have been her sister-in-law who made the meal. Better not to open that box, so I focus on the end goal.

“Could I get the recipe? It’s my turn to cook dinner tomorrow for the guys and they’re bored with my repertoire.”

“Sure. I can text it to you. It’s really easy, but I like to marinate it for at least six hours to really let the flavors soak in.”

Her eyes light up as she talks.

“You really love food, don’t you?”

“Yes, but mostly I love the process of making food. The scents, flavors, textures. Bringing everything together and having someone enjoy it, that’s what I love.” She pokes my shoulder. “Tonight, you were the perfect recipient. I haven’t cooked a full meal in forever because I don’t have anyone to cook for. Trevor isn’t a picky eater but he doesn’t care if it’s mac and cheese from a box, or my homemade New York macaroni and cheese, with the crispy edges and tangy cheddar.”

“That sounds absolutely incredible.”

She’s thoughtful for a minute. “Seth didn’t really care, either, truth be told. The last few years we were married, he became obsessed with his appearance and was happy with tasteless grilled chicken and steamed broccoli. Boring, right?”

Hearing her talk about her idiot ex-husband makes my blood boil. How she’s still hung up on the creep is a mystery to me. It shows more for her dedication and ability to love than it does for his character. It’s really none of my business.

“Favorite meal to eat?” I ask.

“I love a good pasta.”

“And to make?”

“Mmm ... I’d have to go with the chicken cordon bleu. I haven’t made it in forever, so thanks for giving me a reason to pull it out.”

“I am glad to be a recipient of any meal you make. I have never eaten a home-cooked meal like that before. And the pie! It blew my mind. And my tastebuds. I’m jealous Lola gets to eat at your place a few nights a week.”

“You’re making me blush,” she says as she hides her face in her knees. “But please, don’t stop.”

We sit outside and talk for what feels like no time at all, but it’s over an hour later when Naomi goes inside to work. It’s selfish of me to keep her outside for so long, since it means she’ll get even less sleep. The opposite of being helpful, but I have a hard time regretting it.

THURSDAY MORNING, INSTEAD OF TEXTING IZZY LIKE I normally do to let her know Lola’s heading inside, I get out of the car and follow my daughter up to the front door.

Izzy’s drinking coffee and watching the national news in the kitchen when we walk in.

“Good morning,” I say.

She looks up, surprised to see me. “Is something wrong?”

“Can we talk outside for a minute?”

“Sure.”

She kisses the top of Lola’s head as she passes. “There’s cereal in the cupboard, if you want any.”

Once we’re both in the backyard, I make sure the door is closed. I just want to tell her about my arrangement with Naomi, but I know my sister and she’s about to give me an inquisition and I’d rather Lola didn’t hear. It’ll just reinforce her desire for Naomi to have a more permanent position in our lives.

“What did you think of Sonia?” Izzy asks.

“Sonia? Who’s that?”

“The picture I sent last night.”

I wave my hand in the air, brushing away the thought. “Izzy, you won’t see me married by the time you move to Texas, so you may as well stop. You’re stubborn, but I’m even more stubborn, and I say no.”

She frowns theatrically. “Then what do you want to talk to me about, all secret-like?”

“I found someone to nanny Lola starting next week.”

“What!” She pushes my shoulder angrily. “No.”

I’m momentarily confused. “What do you mean, no? You’re moving. You can’t watch Lola from Texas.”

“I’m not moving for another two months. You couldn’t wait two months?”

I shake my head. Here I had expected her to be happy and relieved. Instead, she’s annoyed.

“This sort of dropped in my lap. Besides, you want to go on business trips with John and never do because of Lola. Are you really that angry?”

It’s hard to tell sometimes because she can get upset over the stupidest things and then five minutes later it’s like it never happened.

“Yes.” She shrugs. “No, I guess not. But now I’ll never see you guys.”

“You’re moving to Texas,” I remind her again.

“Not for two months! I need to get as much of you and Lola as I can before then. So this means you need to come over for dinner more often. And I’m going to crash your Sunday picnics. And probably spoil Lola rotten with gifts, so she remembers me once I’m gone.”

“If you’re really bothered, I can hold off on Naomi watching Lola until later.”

I'm not sure how I'll break the change in plan to Naomi since it seems she needs the money. Maybe I can ask her to cook me dinner and I'll pay her an exorbitant amount because it's just that good.

"No, don't do that," Izzy says, at first resigned, then happy. "You're right. John is going to Boston for a week next month. It'll be nice to go with him." Now she's smiling. "Tell me about this new nanny and how you found her so quickly. And more interesting, how you trust her so soon." Her coffee cup pauses halfway to her mouth. "Wait, a second. Naomi? This wouldn't by chance be your renter who reminds you so much of Carmen? The one you rant to me about every time Lola disappears inside her house because she doesn't make a good role model?" She shakes her head. "No, it couldn't be."

I can feel a blush on my cheeks and I will the hot blood out of my face. Blushing is for boys, not men. I scratch at my cheek.

"It is! Spill! How did this happen?" She screeches, her voice shrill. I'm sure I'm partially deaf now. "Are you friends? More than friends?"

"Calm down, or I'm leaving and you'll never know."

"Sorry, sorry. I'm calm." She bounces on the balls of her feet, negating her words, but at least she's not screaming anymore.

"I may have judged her harshly. She's not too bad."

Izzy arches an eyebrow. "She's *not too bad*, but you're paying her to watch Lola? There's more to the story, so hand it over and no one gets hurt."

This is even worse than I expected. Why was I so vocal about my dislike for Naomi for so many months? Eating humble pie with my sister as a witness is my punishment.

"I was wrong about Naomi. She's nothing like Carmen. Except for her clothes. I don't understand her need to look perfect all the time. Even when she's in her pajamas and ready for bed. I bet it's exhausting."

At least I would find it exhausting.

Izzy's mouth drops open. She pokes me in the chest, hard. "Conrad Beck, how do you know what her PJs look like?"

Okay, so her pajamas were a stupid thing to mention. "We've talked at night a few times after the kids are in bed."

Izzy studies me. "So you misjudged her and now she's your nanny and you've booted me from the job two months early."

"I didn't think you'd mind. You don't need the money, but she does."

She pokes me again. "You and that marshmallow heart. You'll get yourself in trouble if you're not careful. Are you sure she isn't manipulating you again like she did about the rent decrease?"

"I was wrong about that, too. She's broke. No manipulation there, just a misunderstanding. Lola loves her, and she has a son."

"Yeah, Trevor. Lola's mentioned him before."

"They play well together. It's a good fit."

She smiles. "I'm proud of you for admitting you were wrong, little bro." But then she pokes me in the same spot for the third time. "Let this be a lesson. A woman can be beautiful and not horrible. They're not mutually exclusive."

I rub at my chest. "Will you stop poking me?"

She doesn't apologize. "You and Lola need to visit me a lot over the next few months so I can get my fill before we move. Deal?"

"Deal."

"How about Saturday night for dinner? John's sister's family is in town for the weekend, and we can make a party of it."

We should be home from the arcade by then. "Sure, okay."

"If you want," she says as she waggles her eyebrows, "Bring the pretty neighbor and her son."

“It’s not like that, Izzy.”

There’s a bang from inside. We look over to find Lola has her face smashed against the glass door. Her mouth is open wide like a blowfish and her tongue wipes against the window. It’s wonderfully gross and we both laugh. Lola laughs with us, breaking her suction on the door, before going back to being a blowfish.

“I don’t think I’ve washed that door once since I moved in,” Izzy says thoughtfully.

“She still eats dirt occasionally. She’ll be fine.”

Chapter Twelve

NAOMI

“MOM, WHY IS DRACO MEAN TO HARRY?”

“Why do you think he is?” I ask, not giving the question much attention. It’s the middle of Thursday afternoon, and Trevor is restless. He slept in late this morning but has jumped from toy to toy and keeps asking me questions whenever he gets bored. About Harry Potter (because he always has Potter on the brain), chickens, rainbows, and a dozen other topics. I don’t know how that kid’s brain works, but I’m almost caught up on yesterday’s invoices and need another two hours distraction-free. I should have sent him to school today. If there were more than an hour left, I’d walk him there now.

“Because his dad is mean to him?” Trevor guesses.

I’ve forgotten his question. Is Trevor thinking about his own dad? Should we talk about Seth? Before I can say anything, he goes on.

“I wish we had a house-elf so he would clean my room.”

I look around the living room and the mess that’s formed in less than a day, and I would not object.

“If you wanted to free a house-elf, what would you give him?” Trevor asks.

“A hat.”

“I’d give,” he giggles and just manages to get out, “Underwear.”

He can’t stop laughing, which causes me to smile.

We get through the day, but dinner is quiet with just the two of us. I miss Lola and her chatter. I miss Conrad’s pleasure at the meal. Trevor picks at the stir-fry, and I’m reminded why I make nothing elaborate when it’s just the two of us.

After I tuck Trevor into bed, I go outside and sit in my chair, but there’s no Conrad to talk to. It’s really annoying that

I miss him when not that long ago I didn't waste energy thinking about him at all. And I just saw him yesterday!

It's proof of how lonely I've been without friends these past few years. I need another friend, so when Conrad isn't available, I'll have someone else to talk to. I see two problems: I don't want to talk to anyone else, not even Stella, right now. And how does a single mother who works from home go about finding friends?

On Friday, Trevor goes to school, and the house is blessedly quiet. Until the secret phone buzzes in my purse.

Bile rises in my throat. I promised myself the next time Seth called would be the last time I answered. I'm committed, but this won't be easy. It's not just that I'm saying goodbye forever, it's knowing I'm going to disappoint the man I worked so hard for so many years to make happy. It's closing the door to my past and looking toward the unknown future.

Ready or not, the time has come.

"Hi, Seth."

"Naomi. You sound sad. Is everything okay? I wanted to wait until Trevor was home from school to call, but I got impatient to hear your voice. How is he?"

I rest my forehead on the edge of the table. "He had another episode this week. We spent a few days in the hospital, but he's doing better."

"What happened?"

He's worried, but there's also an accusatory tone in his words. Does he believe I'm to blame? My fury from days ago reignites. He's not here. He has no right to pass judgment on me.

"I haven't been completely honest with you, Seth."

"Trevor wasn't sick?"

I start with the major thing first. "After you left, I started the process of divorce."

He harrumphs. "Is this a joke? It's not funny."

“I knew you were never coming back. Separating myself from you was what my family expected of me.” I take a breath and blurt out, “We’re divorced on the grounds of abandonment.”

“Wait. You’re serious?”

“Yes, I am. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Trust me so that we can be together. Definitely not divorce me.”

That he’s so shocked speaks to how I’ve kowtowed to him for the last few years of our marriage, even after he left. I have to remind myself of what Conrad said to me earlier this week. I have to look to the future and learn from the past, not live in it.

“How could I not divorce you?” I keep my voice calm. “You fleeced your investors of millions of dollars and then left me with nothing. If you were findable, you could have contested the divorce.”

“I can’t believe you would do this to me.” His voice is wounded, disbelieving. “I might not be there, but I took care of you. I left you that account with three hundred thousand dollars, yours outright, all from investing my money. It was under your name, and the FBI had no claim on it.”

“I gave it to them to pay back at least a little of what you stole.”

It was a rash decision, but I’m glad I don’t have it even if it would pay off the hospital bills. It felt dishonest to keep.

“Naomi! Those men already have millions. I just skimmed a little off the top. They didn’t need that money, you did!”

“No, what I needed was my husband. I didn’t care about the money, Seth, I never did.”

“You can say that because you lived in an enormous mansion on the hill all your life. You didn’t grow up with a single mother who worked multiple jobs to take care of three kids. If you knew what my childhood was like, you wouldn’t dismiss money so easily.”

“Strange how you’ve done to us exactly what your dad did to you. You’ve left me a single mother, scrambling to support my son.”

Seth hates his deadbeat father, who never could hold down a job. His voice turns cold with fury. “That is unfair, and you know it. I’m nothing like that man.”

“It doesn’t matter now. You made your choices. I’ve made mine. Whatever we had together before, is over. We have no connection anymore.”

“What about Trevor? We’re connected through him. Or have you forgotten? Are you really that selfish—” He pauses. “Wait, a second. You met someone, didn’t you? You’re cheating on me?”

I laugh at his absurd jump in logic. “This is about you and me. There is no one else.”

“There has to be. Why else would we be having this conversation? You’re leaving me for someone else. But you can’t take my son away. He’s just as much mine as he is yours.”

“Then take it up with the court system. Sue me for custody.” I’m so close to telling him Trevor doesn’t want to talk to him, that he’s afraid of his father and hardly remembers him, but I’m not vindictive. I’m finally ready to end this. “However hurt and angry you are right now, I’m even more so.” My voice cracks. “This was your choice, and this is the consequence.”

“Don’t get emotional, Naomi.”

The derision in his voice causes me to lose my cool.

“Life is emotional, Seth. I can be emotional if I want to. Do you know what else I want? To stop living in the past. There is no future for us. After I hang up, this phone is going in the trash. If you send me another one, I’ll hand it over to the FBI.”

“Think about what you’re doing.”

“I have. I’m finally doing what’s best for me and my son. Goodbye, Seth.”

“Naomi, I love you.”

I hang up and bend the phone back on itself until it snaps in half. I take it outside to the trash can and toss it in, just like I promised. When I sit back down in front of my laptop, I feel relieved, but also a little lost. I can’t believe Seth is gone forever, that our connection is completely severed. I feel the loss like it’s new, but I know I’ll be okay and that this is the right decision.

At the end of the day, when Trevor’s in bed and my eyes are bleary from staring at my computer screen for so many hours this week, I turn off the kitchen light but don’t go to my room immediately. It’s past midnight, so I doubt Conrad is outside, but I’d like some air.

Except when I open the back door, there he is. He doesn’t move.

“Conrad?”

He jumps, and I realize he fell asleep waiting for me. I’m sure I have a big, goofy grin on my face.

“Why aren’t you in bed?”

He scratches his cheek. “I must’ve fallen asleep. How’s work going?”

“I’m almost caught up. A few more hours tomorrow morning before soccer, and then I never want to look at QuickBooks again for the rest of my life. Or at least until Monday.”

I go over and hold out my hand. He takes it and stands, then I push him gently toward his door. His muscles are firm beneath my hands and might linger a little longer than necessary.

“Go to bed. See you tomorrow.”

He doesn’t argue and waves as he steps inside. “You, too. You work too hard.”

I'M HAVING A CRISIS IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR. WHAT DO I wear to the arcade?

Seth wanted me to look the part of a wealthy banker's wife, no matter if I was going to a dinner hosted by the bank or the mailbox. He's gone and I no longer need to dress like everyone I meet will ask for an investment referral. I haven't needed to for a long time, but then what do I wear? My closet is full of slacks, skirts, blouses, and blazers. None of them I want to wear to Golf N' Stuff's arcade.

But there, on the top shelf of the closet, is a pair of skinny jeans I wear to clean the house. I pull them down and hold them up to my waist. There are a few paint flecks from when I painted Trevor's dresser, but they don't look bad. Next, I pull out my University of Arizona T-shirt, also sporting a few barely visible spots of paint.

I pull on the jeans and T-shirt before I can change my mind, and tuck the front of the shirt into the waistband. It's so comfortable. Why wasn't I always wearing jeans? I pull my hair up in a high ponytail and put on light makeup.

A knock comes at the front door. Stella.

"Mom," Trevor yells as he runs into my bedroom. "It's time to go!"

I follow him into the living room, and once Stella is inside, she lifts him into a hug.

"You're getting so big. How have you grown so much over the last three weeks?"

"I'm in first grade."

"That explains everything."

She gives him a slobbery kiss on his cheek, making him giggle, before she puts him down and pulls me into a hug.

"I've missed you," I say

“Right back at ya.” She looks me up and down. “What are you wearing? Can this really be Naomi?”

She’s joking, but I’m insecure about this choice and I look back down at myself. “Does it look okay?”

“It looks great.” She must see my doubts, and she leans closer. “I promise. I’m surprised, but it’s a great surprise. You look phenomenal.” She turns to Trevor. “Who is ready for fun?”

“Me! I am!” He jumps up and down.

“Then let’s blow this joint.”

Chapter Thirteen

CONRAD

I COME OUTSIDE CARRYING LOLA'S EXTRA BOOSTER SEAT TO see Naomi buckling Trevor's booster in a deep blue Ford Escape. I stop where I am. She's wearing jeans that fit her perfectly. I should not be staring, especially when she bends over, but it's difficult to look away.

A willowy brunette walks over to me. "Hi, I'm Stella. You must be Conrad?"

"Yep." It sounded more like a grunt than a word. I clear my throat and try again. "I'm Conrad. It's nice to meet you, Stella."

The sisters look nothing alike. I'd never pick them out as relatives from a line-up, but then Naomi doesn't look much like her sister Kit, either. Naomi's blonde and curvy, while her sisters have dark hair and are not.

Stella glances over her shoulder at Naomi, who's still messing with the car seat. "I'm really glad you two are friends. She used to complain about you all the time, and it's fun for me to watch her discover you're not the neighborly version of Mrs. Norris."

I'm confused. "She thought I was Filch's cat from Harry Potter?"

She laughs. The sisters might not look alike, but their laughter is identical.

"I knew I'd like you. But no, not Filch's cat. Mrs. Norris is the horrible aunt in the book 'Mansfield Park' by Jane Austen. Rowling named the cat after her."

She thought I was like a horrible aunt? This is a strange conversation. Stella ducks her head as if she's just realized the same thing.

"Are you ready to go?"

I nod, and we walk toward her vehicle. Naomi finishes with the booster and turns to see us approach.

“Hi!”

My breath hitches and I can’t look away. I didn’t know my kryptonite was short blondes wearing jeans and university T-shirts, but now I do. Maybe she should change back into her slacks and blouses.

She takes the booster from my hand. “I can put that in. Do you want the front seat? It’ll be squishy in the back.”

It’s kind of her to offer, but I’d rather not sit up front and try to decipher whatever Stella says next.

“No, I’ll sit in the back with the kids.”

Lola tugs on my arm. “But Daddy, I can sit in the front and then you can sit next to Mimi.”

I give her my severe *we’ve talked about this already* face, because I explained again this morning how Naomi and I are just friends.

She doesn’t back down. “Please, can I sit in the front?”

“Lola, you’re not big enough. You’re sitting in the back with me.”

“Are you sure?” Naomi says. “You’ll be more comfortable in the front. There’s more legroom.”

“I’m sure.”

When the other booster is in, I climb into the middle. My shoulders are forced forward and my feet don’t fit in the space provided. Definitely not comfortable, but it isn’t a long drive.

Once we’re on our way, Trevor and Lola talk to each other from either side of me, but I’m more interested in what’s going on in the front. The radio is just loud enough to make it impossible to hear what Stella and Naomi are saying, but a lot of laughter is involved. At one point, they dance in their seats to the beat of a song I’ve never heard before, their arms and the tilt of their heads synchronized. I’m nervous we’re going to end up in an accident because Stella has both hands in the

air and steers with her knee, but it's also entertaining. I'm mesmerized by how happy and carefree Naomi is with her sister. I've never seen her this real and alive before, making it even more impossible to look away.

We arrive at Golf N' Stuff and the kids tumble out. I do not vacate the vehicle with the same ease, but I eventually make it to solid ground. Lola holds out her hand and I take it. I'm surprised when Trevor does the same, but I take his hand all the same.

"Rad, do you know how to play Skee ball?" Trevor asks. "My mom always gets the highest score. I'm not very good, but she's really good."

I look up at Naomi, where she stands looking between the three of us.

"Is Skee ball another one of your hidden talents?"

Naomi smiles. "Yeah, it is. So you better watch out."

Stella comes to stand beside her. "Awww, that's so cute. Stay there. Let me take a picture."

Picture taken, the two sisters walk in front of us to the entrance. It's rather cruel. If I didn't know Naomi was still stuck on her ex-husband, I might get ideas. Thank goodness I know, because *I am not interested in a relationship*. I try not to stare.

Once inside, Lola lets go of my hand and looks around, her eyes wide and mouth open at all the lights and games. We've never been to Golf N' Stuff before, and she's acting like it's Disneyland, another place we've never been.

"Let's go!" Trevor runs toward the arcade room.

"Hold it," Naomi says, looking over her shoulder at us. "We have to pay for tokens first."

That is my cue to surge forward and stick my credit card into the machine before they can. I don't know how many tokens we need per game, but I get forty dollars' worth just to be on the safe side.

“Ten dollars would have been plenty,” Naomi says. “How long were you planning to stay?”

The rattle of the tokens into the bucket is loud and long. I went overboard. It sounds like I just won at a slot machine.

The moment the kids each have a bucket full of tokens, they grab Stella by a hand and tug her away.

“See you later!” Lola yells as they disappear.

“Hey, Trev, wait up,” Naomi says.

He turns and shakes his head. “No, we just want to play with Stella.”

Stella laughs as they drag her after them. “We’ll see you back here in an hour.”

“Fifty hours,” Lola says.

Naomi and I look at each other at the same time and burst out laughing.

“So Lola’s trying to set us up, huh?” Naomi says.

“It’s that obvious, is it?”

“She might be a mastermind, but she is not subtle.”

“I didn’t give her enough credit. She’s much more diabolical than I ever imagined.” I look down and shuffle my feet. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“Nonsense.”

She links her arm through mine as if we’re the kind of friends who link arms regularly. Her bare skin against mine is a shock.

“Come on, let’s go play Skee ball. I’m ready to win some tickets. There’s a candy necklace at the prize counter I have my eyes on.”

The kids took all the tokens, so I stick my card in and get a few more dollars’ worth before we head over to the Skee ball games, still with our arms linked.

“I haven’t played Skee ball since I was a kid,” I admit.

“That’s what I love to hear. How about, the loser has to buy the other a slice of pizza? I’m hungry, and food here is expensive.”

“You’re that sure you’re going to win?”

“Oh yeah. You just admitted to not playing in twenty years. I can already taste the cheesy goodness.”

It’s not crowded in the arcade for a Saturday. Most of the crowds are focused on mini golf, bumper boats, laser tag, and batting cages, so it’s easy for us to get two of the Skee ball games next to each other.

The game has an incline lane, smaller than bowling but has the same idea. There is a jump at the end and holes at the top, with each one being worth a certain amount of points, from zero to one hundred. Simple enough, just roll the small ball up the lane and aim for the holes with the largest point value. The highest score wins.

We each put in four tokens and get nine balls.

“Ready?” Naomi asks. “Set. Go.”

“Am I being judged on speed?”

Her first ball is already down the lane. It flips into the air at the end and lands neatly in the forty-point hole.

I roll my first ball toward the top corner where the hundred-point hole is located. It misses and slides into the no-point zone. My next three balls go the same way, but I finally make it in the corner hole and have one hundred points. I glance over at Naomi and see that she has two-hundred forty points. How did she do that?

As she did with her first ball, she rolls the next down the lane and lands it in the forty-point hole. Her last two balls bounce off the edge of the forty-point hole and roll into the ten-point zone. She has three hundred points.

“Those last two duds were your fault,” she says. “You were staring, and I got nervous.”

“If I’d known I’d make you nervous, I would’ve stared at you the whole time.”

“Now I get to return the favor.” She waves her hand toward the lane. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I have four balls left, and if I make just two of them in the one-hundred-point hole, we’ll at least be tied. Easy peasy.

Or not. I miss three times, but the last ball goes in. Two hundred points. I’m the loser.

“I guess I owe you pizza.” I don’t mind getting her pizza, but it is embarrassing to miss seven out of nine times.

“I’m impressed you made two balls in the corner hole,” she says. “Those are hard because they’re smaller than the other holes and way up in the corner.”

I study her expression. “Are you mocking me? I can’t tell.”

She laughs. “I’m serious.”

“But you still won.”

“The secret is slow and steady wins the game. If I go for forty points, I’m more likely to make it than the hundred or fifty-point holes. And if I miss, I still get ten points. If you miss with the higher holes, you get nothing. Let’s play again. Two out of three games. I’ll enjoy my pizza more if I really work for it.”

“Now that I know your secret, don’t expect to win.”

I give her four more tokens and we get nine more balls. Instead of starting in with my game, I watch as she makes all nine balls into the forty-point circle for three hundred and sixty points. I guess any nervousness she had with me watching is gone.

This time, I aim for the forty-point hole. The balls don’t go in easily. I miss half the time and she wins for the second game.

“Three out of five?” I say and hand her four more tokens. Me winning the next three games is unlikely, but it’ll be fun trying.

Before we start, she turns to me. “One more bit of advice. Roll the ball, don’t drop it.”

“I am rolling.”

“No, you toss it toward the middle of the lane and then it rolls the rest of the way. You want to stay low, close to the ramp, and roll it. It makes for a better aim.”

I try to crouch a bit, but it isn't the most comfortable way to stand. “Staying low is easier for you, as you're so short.”

There's a shocked moment of silence before she bursts out laughing. “I'm average for a woman. You're just a goliath. Come on, let's play one more game. You owe me the pizza already, but whoever loses this time has to pay for a round of laser tag.”

“Are you sure you want to go there? I may suck at Skee ball, but I'm fantastic at laser tag.”

“So am I. And as you said, I'm short. A goliath has a harder time hiding than a mere David.”

Unsurprisingly, she wins again, but at least this time she doesn't beat me so spectacularly. We grab our tickets and head over to the prize counter.

“How did you get so good at Skee ball?” I ask.

“Practice. Seth and I came here all the time when we were in high school.” She looks around, a nostalgic look on her face. “This was actually our first date, and even after we were married, we came here every couple of weeks until Trevor was born.”

I wish I hadn't asked. I don't like how much I hate that I just spent the last half hour playing the game she played with her creep of an ex-husband.

She buys the candy necklace and I buy her the matching bracelet. She sticks them in her pocket.

“Pizza or laser tag first?”

“Laser tag. I've gotta work up an appetite.”

There's a game about to start, and we're able to join. There are eight people on each team. I'm on the blue team, she's on

the red. Unfortunately for Naomi, most of her team is under the age of twelve.

Everyone takes a vest with sensors on the front and back that act as targets for the other team to shoot with the laser guns. Whoever wore mine last must've been a kid because the straps are pulled so tight I can't even get it over my biceps.

Naomi snickers. "Come on, let me help you."

I hold my arms up above my head and she loosens the straps, one by one. Her fingers touch me in light, glancing strokes, and my skin burns as if I'm shirtless.

"There, now pull it on."

I do as she says, and she buckles it in the front. Her proximity makes my body feel like we know each other better than we do. My brain is buzzing, and I speak to break the tension in my body.

"Whoever is on the losing team has to pay for nachos." It's more of a taunt.

She looks up at me, her eyes teasing. "Whoever has the least hits, individual not team, owes the other a home-cooked meal."

Now that is motivation to win, not just because I'd love another of Naomi's dinners, but also because I want to spend an evening at her house. I might not know the secret of Skee ball, but laser tag is different. I have no doubt I'll win both wagers.

All geared up, with safety instructions given, the doors open and everyone runs into the arena and hides. Naomi gives me a salute with her gun before she disappears. We only have a few seconds to spread out in the semi-dark before our guns and targets turn on.

I have not been to this laser tag court before, and I take a second to get my bearings. Neon-dark lights cast tall shadows around the barriers. Loud techno music plays overhead. The place is circular, with stairs and ramps on all sides that lead up to unconnected platforms.

After looking around, I go in the direction Naomi disappeared. Overhead, the lights flash a few times before dimming again and a voice booms, “Go!”

Within seconds, the target on my chest lights up with a hit. I have five seconds to find cover before I come back to life. I’m sure it was Naomi who shot me from higher ground, and I run up the ramp as I scan for where she might be hiding.

On the second level, I keep the target at my back against the wall as much as possible. When I reach the half wall where I think Naomi is hiding, I peek over. It’s two kids, both with blue lights like Naomi. They aim, but I’m faster and get them both before either of them hit me. They laugh as they run away. I take their place and look out over the arena.

It’s dim and sensor lights flash as players are hit. It’s impossible to know if any of them are Naomi from this vantage point. I aim at the targets of a few moving shadows, and their lights flash.

I’m hit again, this time from behind. I look over my shoulder in time to see Naomi’s light-colored shirt disappear behind a barrier. The dark lights make her clothing almost glow, which should be to my advantage, but I have yet to hit her and she’s hit me twice.

I head in her direction, keeping my back to the wall, scanning for anyone who might try to take me out from the front. In one fluid movement, I turn the corner, ready to shoot, but the space is empty. My front target lights up from another hit.

She’s goading me, moving from place to place, but keeping me in her sights. If I were smart, I would forget Naomi and focus on the game, but stalking her is definitely more fun.

Ten minutes later, I have yet to catch her. The bright overhead lights come on at the same time our guns deactivate. Back in the room where we leave the vests, they display the scores on a large screen along one wall. My team lost to a bunch of twelve-year-olds and Naomi. Both of our hit counts are pretty low since we were only trying to shoot each other,

but Naomi still comes out on top. She hit me over a dozen times, and I never found her long enough to get a good aim.

Naomi comes up beside me. Her face is flushed, and I've never seen her smile so wide.

"You owe me a home-cooked dinner!" she crows. "And nachos! And pizza!"

"Let me guess," I say. "Not only did you and your ex play Skee ball throughout high school, but also laser tag?"

"Pretty much."

"Let's play again. This time we're on the same team. No bet. I'll go broke before I win against you."

We have to wait thirty minutes for free spots on a team, so we get the pizza slices and nachos while we wait. The conversation flows easily, which doesn't happen often with me. I really lean into the strong, silent stereotype, but Naomi doesn't have to do much to get me to talk. She tells me about growing up with her three sisters and brother, and I even share a little about growing up all over the United States.

While we're eating, I get a text from Izzy.

IZZY: *I invited a single friend over for dinner tonight. No pressure! The group will be big enough that it won't be like a date. Just talk to her and see if anything sparks. I really like her!*

"What's the frown for?" Naomi asks.

"You know my sister is moving in November?"

"Yeah. That's why I get to watch Lola."

"She's worried about me not having any family nearby. She thinks if she finds me a girlfriend, she can accomplish two things: make sure I'm taken care of and appease her guilt for leaving me behind." I turn my phone so Naomi can see the text. "I guess since I didn't call any of the women she's found for me to date, she's decided to be more proactive."

Naomi looks like she's sucking on a handful of Sour Patch Kids. "Does it bother you?"

I chew a chip slowly. “No, I guess not. Before I found out she was moving it did, but now I understand why she’s so pushy.”

When our game is called up for play, I once again need Naomi’s help to get the straps on my vest loose. I don’t mind the burn her fingers leave behind.

Once inside the arena, the other team doesn’t stand a chance. Naomi knows the best vantage points. After we hit a few players on the opposite team, we move to the next spot. We keep our backs together, our guns up, and move through the court like we own the place. She’s got quick reflexes and a deadly aim. I just follow along.

We head up a steep ramp. I go first and trip over my own feet. I fall fast and hard. A second later, Naomi lands on top of me, then rolls off to the ground next to me.

Someone runs up behind us, shoots us both while we’re down, and jumps over our prone bodies. It’s so ridiculous, we burst into laughter. When I’m around Naomi, it seems I smile and laugh a lot more than usual, and I like that about our friendship.

I sit back on my heels.

“Are you hurt?” I yell over the music.

She shakes her head as she sits up, still laughing. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “Sorry for tripping you.”

“Apparently it’s a Beck family trait.”

I stand and help her up, just like when Lola tripped her during the soccer game. Someone runs down the ramp and bumps into her back, and she stumbles into me. My arms go around her, and I drop my gun. Her hands land on my biceps. Neither of us moves. Our laughter dies and we stare at each other in the dim arena, the lights flashing around us while the stamp of footfalls goes past. I get shot in the back, but don’t care.

Hair has fallen out of Naomi's ponytail, and I reach out and tuck a lock behind her ear. I can't be sure, but I think her breath catches at the soft touch.

She is beautiful, something I've known from the first moment I saw her, but I don't think she's ever been more beautiful than now, with her shirt untucked and her hair coming undone. She's still breathing hard from our run across the arena. Another shot in the back and my front sensor flashes, the light playing across Naomi's face.

I cup her cheek in my palm. I half expect her to pull away from my touch, but she leans into it. Her smile slips away, and her eyes dart to my lips. Is that an invitation to pull her close and kiss her? Because I want to.

I hesitate. She's become a good friend, and I want nothing more than that. Friendship is safe. My physical attraction to her is not ideal, but easily ignored. Okay, maybe not that easily, but doable. Crossing this line will get messy, especially because I don't want a relationship with anyone. I want to keep my emotional independence more than I want this kiss.

Sometimes it would be nice if I could shut off my brain.

She leans closer.

For a second I don't move, but then I pull away. Just a little, but enough that hurt flashes across her expression before it disappears. One second she's leaning against me, and the next she stands a foot away, my arms empty.

I feel a flash of disappointment, followed by resolve. Friends.

"Come on," I say. "We're almost out of time."

We move up the ramp, back-to-back, and finish out the last few minutes of the game. When we get out into the lobby and check the score, Naomi and I have the highest hit count, and our team dominates the board.

"We make a good team," Naomi says, holding up her hands for high fives.

It's as if the almost-kiss never happened. I'm relieved. I don't want to lose her friendship. It's normal to feel attracted to a beautiful woman. I won't lower my defenses again.

Chapter Fourteen

NAOMI

I CAN'T BELIEVE I ALMOST KISSED CONRAD!

As I take my time removing the vest, I try to understand why I would do something so stupid. Maybe it's a mixture of loneliness and adrenaline. Throw in my attraction to his biceps and taut stomach, and how could I resist when he touched me so tenderly? And those eyes! There's also my recent liberation from Seth. Now that I'm free, why not kiss the hot neighbor who takes losing in stride and doesn't criticize me for eating an enormous slice of pizza and two-thirds of the nachos?

At that moment, I didn't care if it was a bad idea. Luckily, Conrad kept his wits about him.

He waits for me next to the exit, his hands in his pockets. It doesn't matter why I almost kissed him. What matters is we didn't kiss. I don't want another relationship; not now. Maybe never. My first kiss was at this place, and that didn't end well. The last thing I want is to repeat the past.

Conrad smiles sheepishly as I approach him.

Once we're in the hallway, I ask, "We're good, right?"

He sighs like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. "Yeah, we're good."

Before we can say more, Lola and Trevor run toward us, Stella following behind.

"Did you guys have fun?" I ask. "What games did you play?"

Lola isn't interested in talking how they spend the afternoon. She looks up at me with wide, excited eyes. "Did you have fun on your date?"

I glance over at Conrad.

"Lola," he says, as if he's spent every ounce of energy for the day. "This wasn't a date. Remember how I told you Naomi

and I are just friends?”

She pouts. “But you two were alone, and you played games and ate food. I know because we watched you. That’s a date.”

Conrad bends down and looks Lola in the eyes. He speaks in a stern voice. “You need to drop this. Friends do stuff together, like you and Trevor do stuff together.”

Lola cries, the poor girl. Conrad picks her up and tenderly holds her in his arms. I take Trevor by one hand and Stella by the other and lead us toward the prize counter to give them some time to talk.

“Trevor, what do you want to buy with your tickets?”

While he looks through the glass case, Stella hands me his bucket of tokens, still over half full.

She smirks as she says, “We didn’t use many, so you’ll have to come back. You can bring your firefighter friend with you when you do.”

I look over at my firefighter friend and his daughter. Lola has her arms wrapped around his neck, her head on his shoulder. It’s such a tender scene. My heart squeezes and I have to turn away. I cannot like the man any more than I already do, or I might just kiss him next time the opportunity presents itself, damn the consequences.

On the way home, Trevor falls asleep, his head on Conrad’s shoulder. I glance back once, but after that, I can’t look again. It’s too much.

Stella pulls into my driveway and we say goodbye to the Becks. Lola is not her energetic self, but instead reminds me of Eeyore as she plods to her house, all droopy. Conrad waves before he goes inside.

“I’ll be right in,” Stella says. “I just need to grab your souvenirs from my trip.”

As we walk up to our front door, Trevor asks, “Are you sad?”

“Why would I be sad?”

“Because Rad doesn’t want to marry you.”

That *is* a sad way to look at the situation. “No, because I don’t want to marry him either.”

Once inside, I collapse on the couch. Trevor sits beside me.

“I want to live with Lola when they move. She says they have a big house with a swing.”

I’m stymied for a moment. “They’re moving?”

Trevor nods. “Lola said we can share a room.”

If the Becks are moving, why didn’t Conrad mention it? I pull out my phone and send him a text.

NAOMI: *Are you moving?*

He doesn’t respond immediately, so I turn back to Trevor.

“Sorry to tell you, but we’re not moving with them,” I say.

“I’ll miss Lola.”

“You’ll still see her. We’re taking care of her a few times a week, remember? We’ll have sleepovers and go to Golf N’ Stuff together.”

With the amount of tokens left, the arcade will be a weekly excursion.

“Oh.” He thinks about that for a minute. “Can I play outside?”

“Yes. Just stay in the backyard.”

He grabs a soccer ball and runs out the back door. His pop up goals aren’t out, so he kicks the ball against the side of the shed.

Stella comes in the front door with two wrapped souvenirs and a soft-sided cooler in hand. She hands me the cooler.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“A little birthday gift.”

“I told everyone not to get me anything, and no one listens.”

“I don’t think you’ll mind this gift.” She unzips the top. She stuffed the inside with ice and cans of Diet Coke.

“You are right. I don’t mind at all.”

I grab two leftover birthday cupcakes from the freezer and pop them in the microwave for a few seconds to defrost. Stella tears a cupcake in half and shows me the yellow middle.

“Hufflepuff. You’re just as good as the actual sorting hat.”

I open a Coke. Even the fizz gives me pleasure. I let it settle on my tongue before I swallow. Coke is not in my budget, so I enjoy when I can.

Once we’re both settled on the couch, she leans forward. “Okay, now you have to tell me what is going on with you and the neighbor. You said on Wednesday you were just friends, but Lola, Trevor, and I spent a lot of time spying on you two today. All she talked about was how you were going to move into a big house together.”

“You spied on us?”

“At Lola’s insistence, and you know how persuasive she can be. It seemed like you were both having fun. I haven’t seen you that happy in years.”

I grab a throw pillow and cover my face as heat crawls up my cheeks. “It was fun,” I mumble.

Stella pulls away the pillow from my face. “What?”

“Friends have fun together. It doesn’t have to be romantic.”

Even if it is impossible to banish the way he looked at me before our almost-kiss. Like I’m beautiful and desirable and wanted.

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

She knows me too well for me to keep a secret from her, so I tell her about our second game of laser tag. Once I finish, she studies me as she finishes the second cupcake.

“You two almost kissed and you still think you can remain just friends?”

“I don’t want a relationship, Stella. Even though it’s been over a year since Seth left me, I’ve only recently left him. I don’t know who I am on my own and I want to find out. And you know me, once I commit to something, I stick with it, hell or high water.”

“Or ex-husband who runs off with millions.”

“Exactly. Conrad is the one who pulled away, so I’m sure he feels the same. I can’t deny there’s an attraction between us, but a relationship doesn’t have to follow.”

“I guess not. I just really love seeing you happy.”

“Maybe I’m happy because I’ve let go of Seth. And because I have a friend and I’m not so lonely. Not because I’m in a romantic relationship. Did you think of that?”

She tilts her head as she’s considering the idea. “Game point goes to you. Lola will be very disappointed. She has your wedding planned. She was going to be the flower girl and Trevor would hold the rings. She said I could be the maid of honor, just so you know if you change your mind about her dad. You can’t renege, I’ve been promised. She has quite the personality. Poor Conrad. She will be a handful when she gets to be a teen.”

“She already is a handful, if she’s planning a wedding when her dad isn’t even dating anyone.”

“Mmm... it’s not just anyone Lola wants as her mom. Have you noticed how Mimi and Rad sound like Mommy and Dad?”

“Yeah, but you don’t think she did that on purpose?”

“I absolutely do.”

“Oooh, she’s good. She will definitely be a handful.” It hits me all over again that they’re moving. “I can’t believe they won’t be living next door.”

It’s devastating. I’ll miss talking to Conrad at night. It won’t be the same when I only see him when he drops off or picks up Lola. I shouldn’t care as much as I do, but it seems

exceedingly cruel for fate to give me the friend I desperately need just to take him away.

A text comes in from Stella. I give her a quizzical look. “I’m sitting right here.”

She nods at my phone. “Open it.”

It’s the picture of Conrad, Lola, and Trevor in the parking lot, all of them holding hands. Conrad is not smiling, but he isn’t frowning either. It’s his normal, neutral face, and it is breathtaking.

Stella bumps my shoulder with her shoulder. “It’s a cute picture, right?”

“I already have Lola playing matchmaker. I don’t need you as well.”

“I like him and I like how you are around him. I’m glad he’s your friend.”

As I gaze at the picture, a text comes through from Conrad.

CONRAD: *Yes. In a few weeks. The house is on the other side of the elementary school.*

The confirmation makes my stomach drop. At least I’m Lola’s nanny and they’ll still be a part of my life, even if it isn’t as much as I want.

Chapter Fifteen

CONRAD

SUNDAY MORNING LOLA'S UP EARLY. SHE STANDS BESIDE MY bed and whispers, "Is it time to go to Mimi's yet?"

It's the first day of Naomi watching Lola, and to say she's excited is an understatement. I feel a little bad for Naomi, having to deal with my overly enthusiastic daughter. She doesn't know what's about to hit her.

"It's barely six," I mumble. "I'm sure she's still asleep and would not appreciate you waking her up. Go back to your room for an hour, okay? I'll get you when it's time for breakfast."

In the quiet, I can still hear her breathing right next to my head. If she doesn't say a word, she can stand there for as long as she wants.

"Will you read the comics to me?" Lola says softly.

"Later. Go back to bed."

"But I'm not tired."

"Go play with your dolls."

"They're still sleeping."

I wish I was. I crack an eye and look at her, standing beside the bed. My heart wells with love for this little girl. I sit up and lean back against the headboard.

"If you go grab the tablet, we can read comics."

"Yay!" She's back in only a few seconds and launches herself onto the bed.

With her little body snuggled up against my side, I feel like the luckiest dad in the world. The luckiest tired dad in the world.

I read slowly and we take time to talk about the pictures, but it's hard to hold Lola back. She's impatient to head over to

Mimi's, so at exactly seven-thirty, we lock our front door and Lola skips the ten feet over to her front door. She doesn't stop knocking until Naomi opens it. It's only seven-thirty, but she's dressed in dark slacks and a pink blouse, her hair and makeup expertly done. I can't understand why she dresses like this for a Sunday morning spent at home.

"Hi, Mimi!" Lola yells. She probably woke up the neighbors with her excited greeting.

"Come in." Naomi opens the door wider and steps back.

Lola goes inside, but I stay on the porch.

"I need to head out, so I won't come in." I hand over a list of phone numbers. "If you have questions, you can text me. And here's my sister's number if you need help, and a few other numbers, too. Just in case."

"A true paramedic; always prepared. We'll be fine. We're going to head over to my parent's place for lunch, then we'll set up Lola's room. My brother's giving me an old bed and dresser."

"She'll love it."

I missed talking to Naomi last night. By the time we got home from my sister's, it was late and all the lights in her house were off. It didn't stop me from going out back just in case, but she didn't show up.

"Thanks for your help with this." I take a step back. I'm jealous of my daughter. Maybe she should go to the firehouse, and I'll stay here.

"Wait. I have something for you. Just give me one second."

When she comes back, she holds out a reusable shopping bag, almost shyly. I peek inside and find two large, reusable food storage containers.

"Stella and I made dinner last night. It's just leftovers, so if you don't want it, my feelings won't be hurt."

An emotion I can't quite describe fills my chest and I bite my lip so I don't smile. It's a thoughtful thing to do, and she

did it for me. I'm not used to that. "I want it. It's Stewart's turn in the kitchen and that's always a poor eating day. All the guys will be jealous."

Her smile is radiant. "There are also cookies. Enough for everyone if you want to share."

"Thanks, Naomi."

"Be safe."

I'm touched by her words. "Always."

Before I climb into my car, I turn back, and she's still at the door watching me. She waves. I wave back.

I really wish I wasn't moving. Before, my regret was because I felt the need to help Naomi. Now it's for me. A guy could get used to a beautiful woman sending him off to work with a home-cooked meal and a smile.

Too bad that life isn't for me.

THE FIREHOUSE IS ALWAYS CHAOTIC WHEN THE SHIFTS CHANGE. I head to my assigned room just as Hixson from the previous shift leaves.

"Hey, Beck." She holds out her fist and I knuckle bump her. "It was busy last night. I hope you have a quieter shift."

"Thanks, Hixson. Catch you next time."

The three shifts share the same rooms, but each of us has our own locker. I stuff my bag inside, then collapse on the bed and cover my eyes with the crook of my arm until a knock comes at the open door.

Perez leans into the room. "You have lunch duty next shift. We're heading to the store later. Which of your meals are you adding to the shopping list? Harris is compiling it now."

"I have something new to try. I'll text him the ingredients."

He whistles. “After all these years, you’re trying something new? Miracles do happen.”

It’s a typical morning of cleaning the firehouse and washing the engine. Smith has the radio set to a rock station, and some of the younger guys sing along while they wipe soapy sponges along the sides of the truck. I might not join in with the singing, but being a part of the firehouse family keeps me sane. Lighthearted moments like this draw us together in the same way fighting fire and saving lives do.

At lunch, I bypass Stewart’s spaghetti and take out the container Naomi sent with me. Baked Ziti. Even warmed in the microwave, it’s delicious. Goopy, tomatoey, goodness.

Perez sits down next to me. “What have you got there? Are you cheating on Stewart?”

I take another bite and really savor the flavor. “Stewart isn’t that bad.”

“Right. How can canned tomato sauce and overcooked noodles be bad?” He leans in and takes a long sniff. “You couldn’t bring some of that for me?”

It’s a big container and I could probably share, but I don’t want to.

“Nope. But I will share my cookies if you’re nice.”

That gets everyone’s attention, and now I have to share the cookies whether or not I want to. Me and my big mouth. I take the container out of the bag and pop open the top to reveal a few dozen bite-sized chocolate chip cookies. Knowing the guys around the table, I take out a handful before I pass it to Perez.

I pop one in my mouth and am once again amazed at Naomi’s skill in the kitchen. It’s a chocolate chip cookie, but it has an unexpected depth of flavor.

“Where did you get these?” Perez asks, still chewing his own cookie. “I know you didn’t make them.”

“My new nanny.”

Perez laughs. “Hey, guys. Beck’s new *nanny* is cooking for him now.”

“Right, your *nanny*,” Harris says. But he slaps me on the back as he passes. “Good for you.”

All the guys razz me about my new *nanny* while we eat, and I don’t say a word. They wouldn’t listen, and truth be told, I like it. After Hudson ran off with Carmen, it was an unspoken rule not to tease me about my dating life, or lack thereof. After three years, it feels like things are back to normal. It doesn’t even matter that my nanny isn’t my girlfriend, like the guys imply.

The overhead speaker clicks, followed by three sharp beeps. We still as we wait for the dispatcher to tell us where we’re headed.

A fire at a residential neighborhood. Everyone else is happy enough to leave their lunch behind, but I stuff my mouth with one last bite of ziti and take my cookies for the drive.

Firefighters load into the truck, while the paramedics load into the ambulance. Both fire station bay doors open, and emergency lights and sound flick on as we turn onto the main road. We race down the streets, slowing, then speeding up as traffic and lights allow. A fire can double in size every minute, and our driver swears at slow-moving vehicles who don’t get out of our way fast enough.

The plumb of dark gray smoke is visible in the sky before we arrive. We pull up in front of a two-story, wood-framed house, the lot small and the building close to the houses on either side. Luckily, there’s no breeze today, so there’s less of a chance of it spreading to other structures.

Smoke billows from the right side of the house, first floor. No visible flames yet, but from the amount of smoke, there is definitely a strong fire burning inside.

Neighbors already line the street. Police keep the front of the house clear for the firetruck and ambulance. A hysterical woman is on the sidewalk, screaming. She’s frantic, making

her words indecipherable, as she screams at the cop holding her back from approaching the house.

Chief Hill is the first out of the truck, and checks in with the police. The rest of us know our job and we unroll the hose and run it to the nearest fire hydrant, three houses down, to hook it up.

When we're back, Captain Hill tells us the plan.

“Two children, seven and nine, are inside. Top floor, Mom thinks in the front left bedroom. The stairs are inside, to the right. Harris, Nolte, take the hose line inside to the kitchen on the left. Let's douse the flame before it spreads. Perez, Beck, upstairs for the kids. Smith and I will move the ladder to the north window on the second floor for evacuation if needed. I've called in another ladder truck and an additional ambulance for the kids. Go.”

We burst into action. Adrenaline burns through me as I hoist the air tank onto my back, put the mask over my face, and fix the helmet strap under my chin.

Perez and I are inside just before the line hose guys are, and we're instantly plunged into thick darkness. Movies never accurately show how much smoke a fire creates. Enough that it's impossible to see further than two feet in front of us. Crouching low, there's enough visibility to find the bottom step. There aren't any flames in the hallway, but the smoke thickens the higher we climb.

The house groans and creaks as if it's in pain. I can't see the flames, but I can hear them crackle. Larger fires roar, so at least we have that on our side. Still, in every house we enter, there's always the need to have a second exit in case the flames spread quickly. I'm glad the ladder is waiting at the window if we need it.

When we reach the second landing, we crawl along the floor since there's less smoke and it's cooler. Unspoken, we both head to the left for the bedroom where the mother said her kids were probably located. I keep my hand against the wall so I don't get turned around in the dark. There's a pile of

material, probably laundry, which slows me down. Perez occasionally makes physical contact by touching my leg.

“Room,” I call out.

We’ve done this many times, and we anticipate how the other will move. I stay along the perimeter, keeping my hand to the wall while sweeping the room with my other hand. Perez goes to the middle of the room. We call out as we move, letting the other know everything we touch or move, like the chair or desk, keeping track of the other by sound, since we can’t see anything.

This would be easier if the room were clean, but there are toys and clothes all over the floor, which means it takes longer to find a child.

There’s a lot of rising heat. Sweat streams down my face and into my eyes, but I can’t see anything, so it doesn’t matter.

“It’s hot up here,” I say into the radio. “How’s the fire looking?”

“There’s a lot of black smoke, but we still can’t see the flames,” Harris down below with the water line says. “You better hurry.”

That is not good. If the heat continues without visible fire, we’re near a flashpoint, where a room collects heat and gas to the point it bursts into flame instantaneously.

Captain Hill comes over the radio. “How’s it looking up top?”

“Still searching.”

If Harris and Nolte aren’t able to diminish the fire, then we have less time than I like.

We search everything as quickly as possible while being meticulous. The closets, under beds, behind furniture. Kids don’t make much noise when they’re frightened and hide, which makes them more difficult to find. Even if they’re crying, it’s hard to hear them over the sound of the flame. Though with smoke this thick, they could be unconscious. We

need to find those kids. Each minute they're lost cuts down on their chance of survival.

"Clear," I yell, after making it around the perimeter of the room.

"Clear," Perez echoes.

"I'm at the door."

A few seconds later, Perez touches my ankle, and we head down the hall until we find the next room and start over with the search.

Harris comes over the radio again. "We're reaching a flashpoint down here. Water is not raining down from the ceiling. Heading back out."

Bad news. It means the heat along the ceiling is so hot, the water vaporizes. I open the closet, frantic to find those kids.

"Perez, Beck. Get out now," Captain Hill commands.

It kills me to leave anyone behind, but if we stay, there will be four casualties instead of two. I hate this part of my job.

Then, my hand brushes against what feels like a leg, then another. Then two more.

"I found them," I say into the radio. "Heading out."

Perez follows my voice and is next to me in seconds, each of us taking a child. They don't move, which is bad. If they're breathing, it's shallow and we need to get them outside and give them CPR as soon as possible.

We no longer crawl along the floor, but crouch low and move quickly toward the stairs. I'd rather go the way we know than find the window with the ladder when I can't see.

I stumble over the pile of laundry, my center of balance off with the child in my arms and crouching so low. Before I can yell out to Perez to warn him, he trips and falls. His helmeted head hits the back of my leg.

"Beck, I twisted my knee."

I message into the radio that Perez is down and our location. Captain Hill and Smith are coming in to help. I reach down and feel around with my free hand. Perez is sitting up against the wall and helps me lift the second child under the armpit.

“I’ll follow. Go!” he says.

With a child under each arm, I move as fast as possible down the stairs with no vision, shoulder against the wall. Smith radios that he’s coming up, and I yell out his name so he doesn’t run into me. He takes one of the children while Captain Hill goes up the stairs to help Perez.

Just as Smith and I reach the front door, fire consumes the house behind us. The force and heat of it hit my back and causes me to stumble forward. A silent countdown starts in my head as I run toward the paramedics. Our turnout gear can only handle the heat of a flashpoint for fifteen seconds, at most.

Paramedics meet me and Smith far enough from the fire that the heat of the flames don’t seriously affect them. They start CPR immediately. It’s impossible to know if the children are male or female because they are covered in a thick layer of soot.

The mother rushes over, but a police officer holds her back so the paramedics can do their job. The other fire truck has arrived, and now both fire teams are working from the outside to keep the fire from spreading to the other houses.

I watch the door of the house, resisting the desire to run inside. I feel helpless, but as a firefighter, my goal is to keep the death count as close to zero as possible.

I reach ten. Twelve.

My gut clenches. Perez is my closest friend. The brother I never had. He can’t be gone. There had to be some way to save him. Maybe if I had grabbed his hand and dragged him down the stairs ... Even as I have this thought, I know if I’d tried to help him, I wouldn’t have gotten the two kids out before flashpoint.

At the count of seventeen, Captain Hill runs from the house, fire and smoke billowing out behind him, Perez in a fireman's carry over his shoulder.

"He's burning!" Captain Hill yells. "Beck, Smith, over here."

The scent of burning flesh reaches me before the captain's words do. Perez's left side, from hip to knee, is melted. The pants under his turnout gear are still burning. I knock off my helmet and tear off my breathing apparatus as I run to the truck for the fire suppression blanket and first aid kit. When I reach Perez, I put out the last of the flame. Lucky for him, he's unconscious.

The captain lays him on the ground, and Smith and I take over.

The captain from the second engine runs over. "We have another ambulance on the way."

The two captains leave and confer together.

We take off Perez's breathing apparatus and helmet and lay him supine on the ground with the blanket under his legs. He's breathing erratically, his skin is clammy and pale, and his pupils are dilated. I check his vital signs while Smith removes the burned clothing. Then we wet blankets and lay them over his burns to limit tissue damage and help with the pain, rotating them with fresh ones as they suck out the heat.

It's only minutes later when we hear the wailing sirens of the third ambulance. When it arrives, the paramedics take over and load Perez into the back of their truck. I can't think about Perez or the children. They're getting the help they need. My focus is back on fighting the fire. We keep it contained, but the house is unsalvageable.

The adrenaline doesn't wear off until after we're back at the firehouse. I'm antsy and irritable, so I head straight to the workout room to lift weights.

Now that it's over, all I can think about is Perez. The burns will heal eventually, but it'll be a tough few weeks for him and his family. I know every day off I'll spend at the hospital while

Lola's at school. Perez will need the distraction from the pain and immobility. He's the kind of guy who never sits still.

It hits me he could have died. For a few seconds, I thought he had. If we had been a minute later finding those girls, I would have been right there with him. The difference was only as long as it took me to get to the bottom of the stairs, less than thirty seconds.

I know the dangers of my job. I've worked with fighters who don't make it out of the fire and have attended firefighter funerals all over the state. I've been hurt, burned even, but that was before Lola was born. Over the years, I've gotten complacent. Unconsciously, I've thought of myself as invincible, but I'm not.

If anything were to happen to me, I know Izzy would take care of my daughter. Carmen gave up her rights to parent a long time ago, and I have to believe she wouldn't fight for custody.

Lola will be fine with Izzy, but Izzy's moving to Texas.

I'm not thrilled about her move, but now it takes on a deeper ache. I don't want Lola to be uprooted.

When Izzy and I were kids, our parents moved us around every few years. I lived in six different states and attended nine different schools before I turned eighteen. I've never wanted that life for Lola. I want her to grow up having a neighborhood and friends and a school that are solid and remain the same. This is our home. Not Texas.

But if I were to get caught in a fire and die, then Lola would have to start all over, find new friends and a new place to belong, all without me there to help her.

I'm not going to die. I have to believe that or I might hesitate to enter a burning building. But Perez is next to me in almost every fire we fight. If it can happen to him, it can happen to me. I need something more for Lola. I just don't know what that is yet.

Chapter Sixteen

NAOMI

“SWIMSUITS?” I ASK.

“Check.” Lola lifts her shirt to show me her pink swimsuit underneath.

“Check.” Trevor lifts his shirt as well and points to his swim trunks.

“Towels?”

“Check.”

“Check.”

“Sunscreen.”

We continue down the list until we’re sure we have everything packed for the afternoon at my parents’ house. We pile into the car and head out.

My parents live in a swanky neighborhood up on the east hill of Tucson. It’s the house I grew up in, and even though I left it when I married Seth, I still think of it as home, even if I don’t want to live there permanently. It’s been the constant in my life between college, marriage, divorce, and now.

Our welcoming committee, Margot and Lottie, run out onto the porch and meet us at the car. Even though the three girls have only spent time together once, they’re now best friends. They hold hands and run back to the house, with Trevor chasing after them. It’s Margot, the conscientious one who lets no one feel left out, who turns back, takes his hand, and together they run after the other two.

I follow slowly behind, enjoying the quiet. The sun beats down while a slight breeze cools my skin. I should have a hat on so my freckles don’t multiply, but right now, I don’t care.

When I asked Mom if I could bring Trevor and Lola over to play in the pool, it somehow turned into the whole family

coming over for a barbeque. Cars line up on the street in front of the house. We're the last to arrive.

In the kitchen, Mom and Stella are at the island prepping burger toppings. Everyone else is outside, visible through the glass sliding doors to the back patio and pool. Roe talks to Dad at the grill as he flips burgers and brats. Theo and Avery talk to Kit and Aaron. Or maybe I should say Avereo and Kitron.

"Hey, Naomi," Stella says. "Looks like Lola fits right in with the family. She gave me a hug as she went by. A real love bug, that one."

I can't disagree. She makes friends with everyone of all ages, just like Roe.

"How are you and Trevor holding up?" Mom asks.

"We're good. I think he's back to normal. I'm impressed with your restraint this week. You only called once a day."

She snorts. "It wasn't easy. I'm relying on you to tell me when you need something, so don't be a martyr. Before I forget to mention it, Kit's looking at your car today, so take the help graciously."

She gives me a pointed look, which makes me feel like I'm twelve again. I lift my hands in the air in the universal sign of surrender.

"I already got the lecture from Theo. Don't worry, I won't resist."

This is one instance where beggars can't be choosy. I hate it, but it's where I am in my life. Getting the car fixed, free of charge, is more important than ever after Trevor's last hospital stay.

"Good. Now come out and play."

Like Lola, I have my swimming suit on under my summer dress, and I follow Stella and Mom out onto the patio with a bowl of food in each hand.

I love my parents' backyard. It's far enough away from the city that there's little traffic noise and they're distant from neighbors, so it's as if they aren't even there. They have the

manicured part of their yard, with the patio, pool, and lawn, but beyond that, there's the natural landscape of native bushes and shrubs.

It's a crazy, loud group who gather around the tables. I fix a plate for Trevor and Lola and sit them down at the smaller table meant for the kids.

Before I get my food, Lola tugs on my hand and pulls me down until she's looking into my eyes.

"Mommy," she says in a whisper that is louder than a yell.

Everyone goes quiet. Lola doesn't notice the attention, but I do. I pretend nothing is out of the ordinary. She just meant Mimi. Another slip of the tongue. Still, knowing this does not stop my ears from burning, as I feel the attention of every adult on the patio.

In that same loud whisper, Lola says, "Will you braid my hair like Lottie's?"

Lola's hair is a mess of snarls, just like every time I see her. Sometimes it's worse than other times. Today is one of those worst times. I've had an itch to brush out the tangles for months.

"Of course. Now, or later?"

"Now."

That works for me. Anything to escape the scrutiny of my family, especially Mom. I take Lola's hand and lead her inside. Once we enter the house, the conversation outside picks back up. Hopefully, none of it revolves around Lola's slip-up. Trevor doesn't need to have his hopes encouraged any more than Lola does.

We head to Monroe's room. I look through her overfull bathroom cabinets and find the conditioner and a wide-tooth comb to get out the snarls.

We sit on the bed, and I begin.

"If this hurts, let me know, okay? I'll try to be careful."

“Daddy always hurts my head when he brushes my hair. My mommy used to do my hair and take my pictures.”

“Did you like that?” I’m curious about her mom from what little Conrad has said.

“I liked how she did my hair. Daddy hated it. They would yell about it a lot.”

“I’m sorry. That must’ve been hard.”

“Sometimes. But now Mommy’s gone and my daddy is sad all the time.”

“He seems happy when he’s with you.”

Before she can say anything, she hisses in a painful breath. “That hurt.”

“Sorry. Your hair is really long. If you want, I can trim it so it doesn’t get so tangled.”

She bounces on the bed, and I almost hit her head with the comb.

“Can you cut it today?”

“Let me check with your dad first.”

Once all the snarls are out, I French braid her hair and borrow one of Roe’s hair ties. She has a full-length mirror in her room and Lola turns from side to side, smiling as she studies her reflection.

“It’s pretty.”

When we make it back outside, the kids have already jumped into the pool with Theo. He’s the shark, and he swims after the kids. I can’t help but watch Trevor extra closely to be sure he isn’t getting scared or anxious, but he’s laughing and splashing just like everyone else.

Lola lets go of my hand and runs to the pool, jumping in. She joins in the game, folded in as if she’s part of the family. I guess if she gets hungry later, she’ll come back and eat.

Dad comes over and stands next to me. “She called you mommy? What is going on with that?”

“She meant Mimi.”

We both watch the kids playing.

“I know what you shared with Seth was special,” he says slowly. “I’m sure it’s hard for you to imagine finding love again. But it’s okay if you do.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. First Lola, then Stella, now my *dad*? I’m finally realizing I don’t need a husband to be happy, and now they’re all trying to get me a husband. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Just in case you need to be reminded that you still have a life to live and you don’t need to live it alone.”

He winks, then walks across the patio and jumps into the pool, joining in with the kids as they try to escape the shark.

LOLA IS THE EASIEST CHILD TO NANNY. IT ALMOST FEELS criminal to take money from Conrad to watch her, since she played with Trevor all day Sunday. It was like she was his babysitter, getting him water or a snack whenever he asked for one. I should pay her for a job well done.

Monday morning, the kids are at school and I’m at the kitchen table staring at my closed laptop. A day and a half off from work wasn’t nearly enough time. I didn’t get up early. I just couldn’t get myself out of bed for more spreadsheets, so once again, I’m behind. But at least this time it’s just a few hours.

It’s only after I hear Conrad’s car pull up outside and the sound of his front door closing that I flip open my laptop and get to work. For hours, I don’t allow myself a break, but I do half listen to the movements on the other side of the wall. The walls are thick enough that everything is muffled, but I can still hear a cupboard shutting and the radio playing.

It isn’t until now that I realize how attuned I’ve become to Conrad’s movement over the last few months. It’s comforting to know that someone is close. I might not have appreciated it

when my smoke alarm went off and Conrad came running, but I do now.

Early in the afternoon, my phone buzzes with a reminder I don't remember setting. I'm grateful enough for the disruption. I stand and stretch before looking to find out what it's reminding me to do.

In one hour, I have my one-year work review at the office, thirty minutes away.

Immediate panic sets in, and for a few seconds it immobilizes me.

“Naomi, go.”

I fly out of the kitchen and straight to the bathroom, calling my mom as I strip out of my jeans. She doesn't answer. I try Avery next, but she doesn't answer either. Then Roe. Why won't anyone pick up? This is an emergency!

My button-up blouse gets stuck on my head, and no matter how hard I tug, it won't come off. I take precious seconds to unbutton the top button and throw it across the room. I pull the shower cap over my hair and climb into the shower.

I think of one last person to call. Conrad, my only hope.

While lathering my body with soap, I tell my phone to call Conrad. He answers on the second ring.

“Naomi. Hi. Um ... are you in the shower?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” I rush to explain the reason for my call, not allowing myself to feel embarrassed. I'm in a time crunch. “Can you pick Trevor up after school and watch him for an hour at most? I have a meeting I forgot about and I need to leave in twenty minutes. I'm so sorry to ask, but there's no one else.”

“Sure I can. No problem.”

“Thank you. I owe you.”

“You don't owe me anything. I can help.”

Twenty minutes later, I'm as put together as I can manage in so little time. I rush out of my room and to the front door,

my mind already jumping ahead to what streets to take to get to the office the fastest.

Once in my car, I turn on the ignition, only to have my eyes drawn to the flashing light on the dash. I need gas. I don't waste time banging my head against the steering wheel, but I'd really like to at this point.

I don't know how I manage it, but even with a stop for gas, I make it into the building with two minutes to spare. I slip into the chair outside of Mr. Tremain's office, and his secretary looks up and smiles. If she wonders at my breathless, sweaty state, she doesn't show it.

After all my rushing, it's a bit frustrating to be made to wait fifteen minutes, but finally, Mr. Tremain opens his office door and waves me inside. He's in jeans and a plaid shirt, definitely not what I expected, since this is a professional meeting. I look down at my pencil skirt and silk blouse. I'm overdressed.

"Sorry for the wait. My daughter was on the phone. She's home sick from school and needed to talk with her dad."

One thing I like about working for this company is how focused they are on family. However, when they speak as if everyone who works for them *is* family, it gets weird.

"Take a seat, Naomi."

I sit in the offered chair while he sits on the edge of his desk. Not only is he casual in attire, but also in manner. I'll be better prepared for this meeting next year.

"I'm very pleased with your work over the past year, especially the last few months when business has picked up. Our new marketing manager has really made us work for our bonuses this year, right?"

I smile and nod.

He clears his throat and looks out the window to the parking lot, the quiet stretching between us. As the silence lengthens, the feeling in the room shifts from welcoming to uncomfortable. A tight ball forms in my chest. Something is going on here and I predict I won't like it.

“I don’t need to talk to you about your performance this year,” he says slowly, still not looking at me. “My brother and I have no complaints about the work you’ve done, but we’ve decided with our growth, it would be better if we had an accredited accountant managing our finances.”

I keep a friendly smile on my face, hoping to keep any strain out of my voice. “In addition to me?”

He clears his throat again. “No. Instead of you.”

My forced smile slips. This cannot be happening right now. “You’re firing me?”

Another throat clear, followed by a lengthy swallow. “I wouldn’t put it in those terms. As I said, we’re very happy with your performance. It’s a layoff, not a firing. Our accountant starts on Wednesday.”

They’ve been planning this long enough to hire someone and have them start in two days and they’re just telling me now?

“We’d like you to stay on through the end of the month, to help him get up to speed on how we like to manage our books here. We have a very generous severance package for you. Two months’ pay, including your yearly bonus. It’ll give you a few weeks to find a new job.”

If only it were that simple. “I need this job,” I say. “I need the insurance.”

“Oh, well, um ...” He smacks his lips. “We can offer you COBRA until you find a new job.”

“That’s kind of you.” Sort of. It would allow me to keep my insurance with them, but I would pay the entire premium out of pocket. Not really an option. “Except, I can’t afford it.”

“I’ll give you a glowing recommendation. Don’t worry about that.”

What I’m worried about is any lapse in insurance. I’m already afraid of the next round of bills arriving from Trevor’s last hospital stay, and that was when I was covered. What am I supposed to do now? I can’t lose this job. A full-time

bookkeeping position with benefits is like finding a unicorn in an ocean of ponies.

Only when Mr. Tremain says my name do I realize I've zoned out. He stands with his hand pointing to the door.

"I'm glad you understand."

I want to throttle him for not telling me sooner, for making me come in when he could have fired me over the phone, and for not having any sympathy for what kind of situation they've put me in. Their slogan, "We're all family here," is absolutely bogus.

I stand and act like begging for my job won't shred my dignity.

"Is there any way I could work a little longer? Even part-time, just enough hours to keep my insurance? My son has been sick, and I'd hate for him to be without medical insurance if he were to get sick again. You can understand that since your daughter is unwell, right?"

"She has a cold."

"If only all children were so lucky," I say, and instantly regret it since his eyes narrow. "I've been working ten to twelve-hour days to keep up, and you're just getting busier. Even an accredited accountant will need help to keep up with all the orders and expenses."

He purses his lips and studies me. "I'm sure my nephew can handle everything on his own. I'm sorry, Mrs. Anderson, but this isn't a discussion. We've already made our decision."

Mr. Tremain's *nephew* is replacing me? I don't know if it makes it better or worse that I'm losing my job because someone in his family needs the position. When he tells his employees that family is important, I didn't realize he meant only *his* family.

"Please," I say. "I need longer than two weeks to find a new job."

"I'm sorry."

He does not sound sorry, but I will not beg again.

Everything around me is a blur as I leave and shuffle back out to my car. I want to scream and cry and punch something. Instead, I breathe. A tear rolls down my cheek, then another, which infuriates me and I wipe them away. I don't cry, and I refuse to start now.

I slump over the steering wheel, suddenly exhausted. Every time I feel like I'm getting ahead, something comes along and knocks me back even further. The weekend was perfect. Watching Lola went really well. I had so much hope that I could now afford all the bills and even start saving again. Then this. Why do I keep trying? Life obviously wants me to fail.

My throat burns with held-back tears. I don't have time to cry. I need to get home. I told Conrad he'd only be watching Trevor for an hour, and at this time of day, traffic will only get worse. But the tears keep building, and a few leak out without permission.

"Don't be so emotional!" I yell.

That is exactly what Seth would say if he were sitting in the passenger seat. Not only am I furious at Tremain and his brother, but now I'm furious at myself for internalizing bull crap.

"I can cry if I want to!"

Those words crack me open, and the tears flow freely. They multiply until I'm full-out crying, and the crying gets louder and more pathetic until I'm sobbing. I use every tissue in my purse, but it isn't enough to staunch the flow of tears and snot, so I scrounge until I find a few napkins in the glove compartment. Each time my sobs slow, I think of Trevor and how I'm failing as a mother, and it starts all over again.

I've been able to deal with everything else, but without insurance, I'm sunk.

While I sob, I come up with a plan. Work for my dad. Move home so Mom can watch Trevor after school. I don't want to do it, but what is my other option? Hopelessness sinks me.

Finally, I'm spent. My head aches, my eyes are puffy. My makeup is gone. The damage has been done; now it's time to go.

I turn the key in the ignition. Nothing happens. I try again. Still silent.

Yesterday, after Kit looked at my car, she said there was something wrong with the emissions. This was causing a misfire in the engine, which meant the pistons were coated with carbon deposits. I understood nothing, but it sounded expensive. She refused to tell me how much parts and labor would cost, but we made plans for me to take it to her shop next Sunday, after her engagement party.

Of course, my car couldn't last six more days.

And to think only last week, I believed things couldn't get any harder. What else can I do but laugh? It's just as uncontrollable as the crying, but at least it doesn't produce water, because I have nothing left but my sleeves.

I type out a text to Conrad apologizing for not being back yet and letting him know I'll probably be a few more hours. I start to type out my predicament, but stop myself. I don't want his pity or for him to feel a responsibility to help me. This is my mess and I'll figure it out. Also, I'm humiliated. I lost my job. My car won't start. To move home, I'll need to break my lease. I am a complete mess.

I send the text without an explanation.

CONRAD: *Take as much time as you need.*

NAOMI: *Thank you.*

CONRAD: *No problem.*

Next, I call Kit.

"Hey, Naomi. What's up?"

"My car won't start."

"Oh, shoot. I'm sorry. This is my fault. I should've looked at it sooner."

“It’s my car. I take responsibility. But I do need some rescuing.”

“Tell me where you are, and I’ll send out a tow truck.”

I give her the address.

“Mmmm... It looks like it’ll be at least an hour. I’ll come out and meet you so you don’t have to wait alone.”

“That is unnecessary. I’ll go hang out at the Wendy’s across the street.”

“I enjoy hanging out at Wendy’s. I’m coming. Lucky us, I have Aaron’s truck and not my motorcycle since I had to pick up a delivery on my way to work. You can drive the truck home and I’ll have him pick me up from the shop later. Then you don’t have to wait for the tow truck at all.”

I close my eyes. More help. “Kit, that’s really unnecessary.”

“This isn’t up for discussion. I’ll see you in twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes later, she finds me at Wendy’s drowning my sorrows in a frosty with an extra large fry.

She plops down on the bench opposite me. “You look awful.”

“Wow, way to make me feel better.”

“I should’ve fixed your car weeks ago.”

“Stop. I should’ve gotten it checked out months ago. No guilt, okay?”

She steals one of my fries. “You look like you’ve been crying for the past hour. Of course, I feel guilty.”

I point at my face. “This is not your fault. I wasn’t crying because of the car.” I let out a long sigh. “I just had my one-year review at work and they fired me.”

Her jaw drops. “They what? Why?”

“They’re upgrading from a bookkeeper to an accountant. I’m going to have to move home and work for Dad, and I’d

rather have that conversation with Mom and Dad on my terms, so don't mention it to anyone?"

"Of course, I won't tell. I'm so sorry. What can I do to help?"

"Fixing my car is helpful enough." I pat her hand. "Tell me how the engagement party plans are coming."

"You're really going to change the subject?"

"Yes. I've been stewing about my job situation for too long and I'd rather think of something else. Like your wedding. Have you picked a date yet?"

Her face falls.

"What's wrong?" A terrible thought barges its way into my brain. "You and Aaron are okay. Right?"

They're so happy together and Kit's loved him for so long, if they were to break off their engagement I'd likely burst into tears again. Their relationship started while mine ended and I have so much hope that they'll last fifty years like Seth and I didn't.

Her eyebrows lift, and her expression softens. "Yeah, we're good. The problem is every time we set a wedding date, Aaron's anxiety kicks in. He might not talk to his mom anymore, but her dysfunction has infected his brain, and he's afraid he'll be just like her. So still no date, and each week we don't book a venue the more guilty he feels. I try to tell him there isn't any rush, but he thinks he's disappointing me, and he's not. I'm not going anywhere."

She reaches across the table and takes my frosty, where she digs in the spoon and takes a big bite. She speaks around her full mouth. "It's been almost six months since he proposed. With the engagement party in a few days and no wedding date picked, I'm afraid people are going to question us about the situation. That will put more pressure on Aaron and make him even more miserable. A wedding is supposed to be happy."

She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and then steals another fry before leaning back against the seat.

“We both want to be married, but getting married is proving to be a problem. If we could just wake up and go get married, he’d be fine. It’s the anticipation where the doubts have time to build.”

“You know,” I say slowly. “Seth and I almost eloped.”

“No way! You and Seth? You’re the last two people I would ever imagine would elope.”

“Yep. Mom was so insistent about us not getting married until after I graduated with a college degree, but we were impatient. We didn’t want to wait. So we made plans to forget the formal wedding, and drive to Vegas to have Elvis marry us.”

Kit bursts out laughing. “That, I cannot imagine. It’s too tacky for you and Seth. You would’ve hated those wedding pictures.”

Kit’s right. But that was me seven years ago. I don’t think I would mind so much anymore.

“That’s why we never did it, but we had fun planning it. All I’m saying is you don’t have to wait if you don’t want to. If you’ll be happier just getting up one morning and getting married, then do it. Forget everyone else.”

Another frosty bite disappears into her mouth. “Aaron might struggle with setting a date, but he’s really been into wedding planning. You should see his Pinterest board. It’s crazy detailed. Every few days, there’s another package delivered with samples or wedding decorations.”

“At least he cares. If it was up to you, there would be mismatched tablecloths and Costco cake.”

“True. I have my dress and that’s all I really care about. And the groom, of course.”

Kit passes the frosty cup back. I eat the last of it. She finishes my fries.

“Aaron said you could keep the truck until I finish fixing your car. I filled her up with gas, but don’t worry about filling

it up before you return it. I know how much you hate stopping off at the gas station.”

I want to sink to the floor with shame. “Kit, it’s too much.”

“Don’t argue with me. Someday I’m going to need you for something, and I promise I won’t bellyache about the help. So return the favor now. And get out of here. You have a son who’s waiting for you.”

I take her keys with no more bellyaching and pass her mine. Then, before I leave her alone to wait for the tow truck, I hold her in a long hug. It’s something we both need.

Dread builds as I drive home. I don’t want to face Conrad. I enjoyed feeling capable and independent with him. I liked how he saw me as a chef, a laser tag warrior, and a Skee ball champion.

When he finds out about my job, I’ll go back to being the struggling single mother who can’t get her life together.

I thought my tears were gone, but they stream down my cheeks as I drive. I wipe them away regularly so I can see the road.

When I pull into my driveway, the only way I can staunch the flow is by forcing my largest, happiest smile on my face and opening my eyes wide. I just need to go into Conrad’s house and grab Trevor. Then I can spend the night crying as I start my job search. I’m not giving up, but my optimism is running on empty.

Chapter Seventeen

CONRAD

WHEN A KNOCK COMES AT THE DOOR, LOLA BOUNCES OUT OF her chair and runs over to open it.

“Mimi!”

I get up from the table and move closer to the door. I’m surprised she’s here since I didn’t hear her car. I’ve been worried about her long absence and the lack of details, but now she’s back and I’m relieved that everything is okay. Until she walks in. Her eyes are puffy and red, and her makeup is non-existent. It’s obvious she’s been crying.

Trevor jumps up from the table and runs into her arms. When she finally looks in my direction, her plastic smile is in place. My heart sinks. I thought we’d moved beyond the fake interactions. She won’t meet my eyes but focuses on my hands.

“Thank you, Conrad. I appreciate your help.” Her voice is overly bright and animated. “Come on, Trevor, let’s go home.”

“No,” Trevor says. “I haven’t finished eating.”

She looks over at the table and then turns to the kids. “Did you guys save any dinner for me, or did you eat it all?”

Trevor giggles and holds his hands out in front of his stomach like his belly is big and round. “I ate it all. Nom, nom, nom.”

Naomi leans over his back and tickles his belly, holding him against her legs. He laughs and squirms, but doesn’t try to get away.

“What?” she says. “You ate my dinner?”

“Me, too!” Lola yells, giggling. “I ate all the enchiladas.”

Naomi reaches for Lola, but she runs out of reach. Naomi kicks off her heels and goes after her.

“What little stinkers I have here. What am I supposed to have for dinner?”

“You can eat me!” Trevor squeals.

In one fell swoop, Naomi picks him up in both arms and pretends to eat his stomach.

The kids think this is funny, but I can tell she’s putting on a show to prove she’s not been crying. It’s all a little manic. For my benefit, or maybe her own. It bothers me, but something is bothering her, which is why she’s acting this way, and that is more important. I move to the window and peek out, wondering if she had her car fixed, and that’s why she was late. There’s a Chevy Silverado parked in her driveway.

She’s still chasing the kids around the living room so I can’t ask, but I head back to the kitchen and move my plate to the counter. I only have three chairs. That’s all I’ve ever needed when Izzy lived next door. I should probably buy another one for nights like this ... except I’m moving. I keep forgetting that detail when Naomi’s around.

When Naomi stops, breathless, and leans against the counter, I point to the spot at the table.

“Have a seat. I’ll dish you up some dinner.”

“Can I get it to go?” she says in that same annoying, chipper voice. “And the rest of Trevor’s? Just some plastic wrap on top, and we’ll be good. I’ll return the plates tomorrow. I have so much to get done tonight. But consider this your debt paid in full.”

What debt? “What does that mean?”

“You lost the laser tag bet. You owed us dinner.” She waves her hand over the table in exaggerated moves. “And you made us dinner. So thank you.”

Whatever happened today really messed her up. I wish she would tell me what it was.

The kids chase each other around the living room. Trevor is trying to eat Lola.

I lean close and ask quietly, “Do you want to talk? I noticed you don’t have your car.”

“My sister Kit swapped me.” Her smile falters for one second, but then she’s plastic again.

“Do you want to meet me tonight on the patio? Maybe I can help.”

She shakes her head emphatically. “No, I don’t think so. I just have so much to do. About that plastic wrap?”

She’s put up a wall, and I have to respect that, even if I don’t want to. I grab the plastic wrap and cover her plate and Trevor’s before I hand them over.

She holds out her hand to her son. “Come on Trevor, let’s go.”

“I want to stay.”

“Not tonight. Come now.”

His shoulders slump, and he hangs his head as he follows her out the backdoor.

Lola stares after them. “Why did they have to go?”

“Naomi had a lot to do tonight. Maybe you can play with Trevor tomorrow after school. Come, finish your dinner.”

Lola groans and shuffles her way back to the table as if I’m forcing her to eat worms and snails. This is her favorite meal. I guess it doesn’t taste as good when your friends leave. I feel the same way.

After we clean up dinner, we watch a few episodes of *Bluey* before bed. It’s one show both Lola and I enjoy, but tonight I don’t pay any attention. My thoughts are on Naomi. What happened at her work meeting? Or was she upset because of the car trouble? I wish she hadn’t pushed me away, and not just because I’d like to help. For purely selfish reasons, I hoped to talk to her about the fire yesterday. Usually, after a rough call out, Perez and I talk and joke to let go of the tension. That won’t work this time, and I have a lot more tension to blow off because of Perez’s injuries.

There's always a pall over the firehouse after an injury, and we blow off steam by pranking each other, but it isn't the same without Perez.

I can't talk to Izzy. She had enough firehouse talk when she was married to a firefighter, and I never bring up my job to her anymore.

This is a stark reminder of how small I've shrunk my social circle over the years. I could use a friend outside of work right now.

As I put Lola to bed, she says, "Love you, Daddy. I wish I had a mommy to love, too."

What a stinker. She will never let this go. Best not to engage.

"Goodnight, Lola."

I go into the living room and turn on a war documentary. Even with a distraction, I can't help but think of Naomi. Something bad happened today. I can't make her talk to me, but I can let her know I'm here if she changes her mind.

CONRAD: *I'm sorry you had a rough day. I hope tomorrow is better. If you need anything, I'll be home.*

I don't expect a response and go back to the documentary. When that proves to not keep my focus, I pull out my tablet and read. I read the same page five times, understanding none of it when my phone dings with a text.

NAOMI: *I'm sorry I was rude to you tonight. It was a rough day. But your enchiladas were delicious and I feel much better. Maybe we can play laser tag again with the same wager because I would like to eat this again.*

Stress seeps out of my shoulders. Only now do I realize how much I feared she'd shut me out forever. We've been friends for such a short time and anything could have happened. This is an olive branch I am more than thrilled to accept.

CONRAD: *Or quidditch in the backyard? You win, I'll make you enchiladas. If I win, I get another five batches of*

*those cookies. Every firefighter was jealous that my new nanny bakes for me. And wow, that ziti. *Chef's kiss*

NAOMI: *Are you sure you want to jump to soccer? I was a soccer star in high school.*

CONRAD: *Star? You said you played some. I didn't know I was competing against a celebrity.*

NAOMI: *Now you do. Let me know when you're ready to make me dinner, and we'll head out back. I'll even let Lola be on your team. You'll need the help.*

I laugh out loud. Lola tripped her last time. I know what kind of help Lola would be on my team, and I might just take Naomi up on her offer.

BECK: *I'm pretty skilled myself. Last time I was going off of no sleep. Be prepared with cookies because you won't know what hit you.*

I wait for a response, but nothing comes through. It's past ten. She's probably going to bed. But that doesn't stop me from checking for a text every few minutes. Just as I decide to head to bed myself, my phone dings.

CONRAD: *I lost my job today. Laid off, not fired, as if that soothes the sting. In two weeks, I'll no longer have health insurance.*

And with Trevor, she needs insurance. Before I can respond, another message comes through.

NAOMI: *If that wasn't bad enough, my car wouldn't start after said firing. Kit came and rescued me.*

I would have rescued her.

CONRAD: *What will you do?*

NAOMI: *I've spent the last few hours looking for jobs, but it's hard to find full-time bookkeeper work. I may have to move back in with my parents for a while. My dad will hire me at his business, and my mom can watch Trevor after school. If I do this, I won't be able to nanny Lola.*

I hate this plan. I can't lose Naomi. Without her being Lola's nanny, we'll have no reason to see each other ever, and I'm not sure our fledgling friendship will survive.

CONRAD: *Do you really need to move in with your parents to work for your dad?*

NAOMI: *They live across town and it would be a thirty-minute drive for my mom to pick Trevor up from school. It would be easier for her if he were closer. Don't worry. I know my lease is for a year, and if I leave early, I'm responsible for the rent until the management company finds a new renter. I have a little money saved and a severance package. I'll still pay my rent.*

CONRAD: *That is definitely not what I meant. I won't charge you rent if you're not living here. I'd like you to stay because you seem happy.*

NAOMI: *I love living here, but I don't feel like I have many options at this point. I need a job now and nothing is available.*

CONRAD: *Can you ask Theo for help again?*

NAOMI: *I will if I have to, but I'd rather figure this out on my own.*

She is stubbornly independent, but it is her life. I wish we were having this conversation in person.

CONRAD: *Do you want to talk outside? Maybe we can brainstorm some ideas.*

NAOMI: *No, not tonight.*

I'm sure the way she looked after crying has something to do with her decision.

CONRAD: *You know, I cry all the time. At least a few times a week.*

NAOMI: *You are such a liar!*

CONRAD: *I cry when I listen to sappy songs on the radio, during heartwarming commercials, and Bluey episodes. Ask Lola.*

NAOMI: *I will ask because you are a LIAR. I hate crying. Seth used to say my face puffed up like a strawberry every time I cried, and he isn't wrong. I promise I rarely cry. Today was an extenuating circumstance.*

I hate her ex-husband.

CONRAD: *No judgment here. Have you seen the baby race episode of Bluey? I cry every time.*

NAOMI: *I haven't ever watched Bluey. I don't like cartoons.*

CONRAD: *Now I'm judging you. It's not a cartoon, it's art. Each episode is a finely crafted, heart-warming story.*

She sends a laughing emoji.

NAOMI: *You're a good man, Conrad Beck. But I still don't believe you.*

NAOMI: *My mom wants to meet you. She said anyone who raised a daughter as wonderful as Lola is worth knowing. She also said she's keeping Lola as an honorary family member, so even if I end up moving, we'll have to plan some playdates. Lottie and Lola are best friends now.*

My heart squeezes. This is exactly what I want for Lola, a support system in Tucson. Which is why nothing can happen to me, because she cannot move to Texas. This is home.

CONRAD: *She wouldn't stop talking about how much fun she had yesterday. She also loves her braid. She won't let me take it out until you can redo it.*

NAOMI: *I can teach you how to braid.*

CONRAD: *She hates it when I touch her hair.*

NAOMI: *I promised I'd give it a trim so it wouldn't get so tangled if that's okay with you.*

CONRAD: *You will be doing me a huge favor if you do.*

NAOMI: *How was your weekend? Did you save lives?*

She probably means the question as a conversation starter, but it's a tough one to answer because I don't know. I've made

it a rule not to follow up on rescues like Sunday's fire. What if the answer is they both died? I'd rather live hoping they live a long life than be told otherwise.

I type out a response, but don't send it immediately. It's not fair of me to toss this out and expect Naomi to catch it, especially when she has her own problems to deal with. But I don't have anyone else to talk to, and even if she doesn't want to talk about it, it will help me just to tell her. She did ask.

I hit send.

CONRAD: *We pulled two children out of a fire Sunday. My buddy was injured.*

I expect a text. Instead, she calls.

"Hi," I say.

"Conrad, I'm so sorry. I was joking, but your job isn't a joke, is it? Is your friend okay? Are you okay?"

A tremendous weight lifts from my shoulders to have someone to confide in.

"I visited him today. He will be okay, but right now, he's in a lot of pain."

"You really are a hero."

"Just doing my job."

"I don't believe that for a second. If it were just a job to you, then why not find a different job? One where you're not risking your life for so little pay?"

She's right. This isn't just a job for me. I'm a firefighter because I need to save people. Because that mother from Sunday has two children who almost died but didn't (or so I let myself believe). Because of my efforts, they'll dress up for Halloween and open gifts on Christmas. Without that purpose in my life, I would be miserable.

"I can't do anything else. I can't compartmentalize my life. If I didn't have satisfaction in my work, then my unhappiness would bleed into everything else I did. I love saving people. I

love fighting fire.” I smile wryly. “But that doesn’t mean I’m a hero.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree. Tell me what happened?”

We talk for a long time, and when we finally say goodnight, I sleep like a hibernating bear.

Chapter Eighteen

CONRAD

USUALLY, LOLA WALKS HOME FROM SCHOOL WITH HER friends. Lately, that's been Trevor and Naomi. Today, I'm restless and decide to walk to pick her up myself. Since Naomi walks to pick up Trevor, I may as well wait for her and double-check she's okay after getting laid off.

I wait until I hear her front door close, then open my own front door. We stare at each other from our respective porches.

"Picking up Lola from school?"

"Yes. Mind if I walk with you?"

Any vestiges of her crying are long gone and her real self shines through her smile. "I'd love it."

I stuff my hands in my pockets as we walk side-by-side down the sidewalk.

"How are you feeling today?" I ask.

She covers her face with both hands. "I'm so embarrassed about how I behaved at your house last night. I don't think I properly apologized."

"After the day you had, it's easily forgiven. Any luck with the job search?"

I really hope it's going well. When she grimaces, it's a sign it's not.

"I'll keep looking. I just don't have the luxury of waiting for something to eventually come along. I need something now."

The same need to protect and care for my neighbor that I felt a few Sundays ago when she left early to go to the hospital gathers in my chest. But it's a much deeper feeling now that I know her better. I have to do something. I have to help. I just haven't figured out how.

It's only a seven-minute walk to the school and when we get there, we wait on the sidewalk. As kids stream out of the school and toward the buses and waiting parents, I spot Trevor and Lola holding hands. The first grade hall is on the opposite side of the school from second grade, and I think it's remarkable how Lola looks out for Trevor. Almost like he's a younger brother. I shake my head to dislodge that thought.

When Lola sees us, she waves and runs. Trevor does his best to keep up.

"Mimi! Daddy! You're together." Her eyes shine with hope.

Maybe this was a bad idea. It's too late now.

When Lola reaches us, she throws her arms around Mimi first. I mean, Naomi. Trevor hugs me around the legs. He's never done that before. Naomi looks between me and Trevor, her brows furrowed as if she's surprised, but not upset.

"Daddy, can we visit the house?" Lola asks. "I want to show Mimi and Trevor."

I look at Naomi. "It's only a five-minute walk in the opposite direction if you're up for it."

She looks down the street, at her watch, and then at the sky, as if checking the location of the sun will help her decide. Finally, back at me. "Um, sure. Okay."

Like he did when we were at the arcade, Trevor takes my hand. Lola holds my other hand. Naomi shakes her head and follows behind since four people won't fit across the sidewalk.

Lola talks nonstop about her three best friends and the boy who got in trouble for bringing his pet lizard to class. Trevor interjects occasionally with observations about his own day at school. I've never enjoyed a walk as much as I do today.

We turn on Ponderosa Pine Way and two houses down is our house. When Lola sees it, she runs ahead and up to the front door and wiggles the knob. Trevor and Naomi stay with me and we stop at the end of the drive.

“It has a blue door,” Naomi says. “I’ve always wanted a blue front door.”

I didn’t really think about the blue door when I bought the place. I was more interested in the location. It’s within the same school boundaries, so Lola doesn’t have to change schools. I also liked how the front yard landscaping. There are a few mesquite trees that offer shade, and bunches of wildflowers and native plants growing untamed along the fence and inside planter boxes.

“It’s really beautiful,” she says.

“I won’t get the key for three weeks,” I say. “But we can go through to the backyard and peek inside.”

She nods, and I lead the way through the gate and around the side of the house. Lola and Trevor run around the cement path that circles the large yard. It’s perfect for riding a bike or skating. At the back of the yard is a firepit, and in the middle is a swing set.

“No pool?” Naomi asks.

“I’ve been called out to too many pool accidents over the years.”

It was one thing I didn’t want when looking for a house, and in the Arizona desert, there are a lot of houses with pools.

I lead the way to the back sliding glass door. We cross over the large patio and under the pergola to peek inside. From here, we can see into the main living space. It’s larger than I like. I’m not sure how to fill it with the few pieces of living room furniture I own. Further back is the door to the dining room and kitchen. Just off the living area is a door that leads to a mother-in-law suite. What can’t be seen from here is the master bedroom off of the front foyer and the stairs going up to the second floor, where the other bedrooms and bathroom are located.

“Are you going to paint the walls?” she asks.

“I wasn’t planning on it. I like white walls. Why, don’t you?”

“They’re just a little...boring.”

I guess so, but I shrug. “I don’t mind.”

She lays her hand against the glass door. “It’s a lovely house, Conrad. Let me know the day you move, and I’ll help. I bet I can get Theo and Aaron out, too.”

“Thanks, that would be great.” I’m surprised by the offer, but I appreciate it.

On the walk home, Trevor and Lola follow behind us, their heads close together like they’re planning a cookie-stealing heist.

“Should we be worried?” Naomi asks me.

“They’re seven and five. I should hope not.”

As soon as we arrive at the duplex, Lola and Trevor run into the backyard.

Naomi and I walk up to our respective doors.

“Well, thanks for walking with me,” Naomi says.

“Yeah. It was fun.” Fun? Really? I sound like my daughter. “After Lola’s in bed, I’ll be in the back if you want to join me.”

She ducks her head but nods. “That sounds nice.”

I’d like to linger, but there really isn’t a reason to. “Well, see you later.”

She goes into her house, and I reluctantly go into mine.

Just as I put dinner into the oven, Lola runs inside. “Daddy, hurry. There’s something in the shed. Come quick!”

When I look outside, the shed door is open, which is odd because I’m always sure to keep the door locked. There isn’t a handle or any way to open the door from the inside, and I don’t want some neighbor kid wandering in and getting locked inside.

“Did you take my key?” I call after Lola, but she’s already gone.

I follow, wondering what has made her so worked up. Lola and Trevor are nowhere to be seen. I go to shut the shed doors and put the padlock back in place, but when I get there, Naomi's inside, looking behind the mower.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Trevor told me there was a hurt cat in here. Do you hear anything?"

I listen. "No."

She searches around the storage tubs along one wall. I can't figure out how a cat got in here unless Lola let it in. I'll ask her about it just as soon as we find whatever it is she hid in here.

I step inside to help Naomi look, but first I prop open the door properly. It's a small shed, and I have tubs and gardening tools stacked along all the sides, with the lawnmower and weed whacker as well. There are only a few feet of free space in the middle. It's a tight fit for both of us, and our arms brush. She doesn't seem to notice, but I feel it through my whole body.

I look around but don't see or hear an animal in distress. I'm about to leave to talk to Lola when the door slams behind us, leaving us in pitch dark.

Lola giggles from outside, but I don't think this is funny.

"Lola, let us out right now. One of us could get hurt."

Silence on the other side of the door. I know it's useless, but I still try to push the doors open. They won't budge. We're stuck.

"Do you have your phone?" I ask.

"No. These pants don't have pockets."

"Yeah, I left mine inside on the table. You're not claustrophobic or about to freak out, are you?"

"No, I'm just afraid to move because I might trip and you have a lot of tools with sharp edges in here."

I reach out and take her arm, then pull her closer. I move us both nearer the door and away from the sharp gardening tools.

“Conrad, there’s not a cat in here, is there?”

I scratch my beard with my free hand. How do I word this?

She squeals and steps closer, her chest against mine. “I felt something on my leg.”

“There are probably spiders.”

“Spiders?” Her voice goes up an octave.

“You’re afraid of spiders?”

She gets even closer. “Not when it’s light, but in the dark when I can’t see them? Yes, I’m afraid.”

I wrap my arm around her back, and her hand rests on my chest. My muscles twitch.

“I will protect you from spiders.” Not sure how, since I’m as blind as she is, but I can’t help but offer.

Her scent makes me forget myself for a moment, and I want to pull her closer and hold her tight. It’s been a long time since I’ve held a beautiful woman in my arms. Even before Carmen left, we’d distanced ourselves from each other. We were two people living together and struggling to stay emotionally connected. I didn’t know at the time she’d already given up and moved on with someone else.

There will be no cuddling with the neighbor.

I bang on the door. “Lola, let us out right now. For every minute we’re in here, you’re grounded for an hour. No friends, no Trevor, and no dance.”

Naomi laughs softly, not even a hint of hysteria in the sound, and I can feel it everywhere on my body, with her breath on my neck and her body against mine. Her laughter grows louder and more boisterous. Her forehead presses into my shoulder. Is it wrong to enjoy this as much as I do considering the situation?

“We’ve been parent trapped.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Like in the movie *Parent Trap*.”

“I don’t know what that movie is.”

She takes a steadying breath and lifts her head. When she talks, her voice is so close, I bet our lips are only a few inches apart. It’s hard to focus on her words.

“It’s about two kids who decide to get their parents to fall back in love so they manipulate the situation so they have to spend time together. I thought Lola was creative when she ditched us at Golf N’ Stuff, but this is on another level entirely.”

Naomi continues to chuckle, but I find nothing funny about this situation. My body is waking up for the first time in a long time.

Lola speaks to us from the other side of the door. It sounds as if her mouth is right up against the slit where the two doors meet. “Have you kissed yet?”

That girl will not know what happened when her usually calm father completely loses it.

“We kissed,” I say. “Now open the door.”

“It’s got to be a good kiss. One that makes you get married.”

Naomi laughs again.

“Aren’t you angry?” I ask.

“No. We’ll get out of here, eventually. I mostly feel bad that her planning will not pay off.” She pauses. “Right? Am I right to assume we’re on the same page about staying friends?”

“One hundred percent. I don’t want a romantic relationship.”

“Me either.”

Except ... Her words spawn the craziest of ideas.

I've been trying to figure out a way to help Naomi with her insurance, her housing, and her job. I've also been wondering how to give Lola what she needs if something happens to me.

Maybe there is a way to give all of us, including our kids, what we need.

"Naomi? What if there was a way for you to get insurance and not have to move in with your parents, but might be a little..." I try to think of the right word. "Unorthodox."

"I'm listening."

"After the fire on Sunday, it hit me I don't have a solid plan for Lola if something happens to me. Tucson is her home. It's going to sound crazy, but—"

The shed door opens, blinding us with light.

"See Trevor, it worked!" Lola yells enthusiastically. "They're in love!"

I blink at the brightness but don't move. Neither does Naomi. We stand holding each other, our faces mere inches apart. If we stay next to each other too long, Lola's going to think she's right, and I step out of the shed.

"You're still good to talk tonight?" I ask Naomi.

She nods.

I turn to Lola. She is about to meet angry dad. "Inside, right now. And don't think you're getting out of your grounding." I lift Naomi's hand and look at the time on her watch. "We were inside for ten minutes. That's ten hours of grounding."

Lola's whole body droops. Her shoulders crumple inward and her hands hang at her sides. "Daddy, why can't you marry Mimi?"

I hold out my hand. "Give me the padlock and key and wait for me inside. Now."

She knows not to argue and plods to our back door crying. Trevor stares at me with wide eyes. I hate to frighten the kid,

but what they did was not okay. I know Lola was the mastermind, but her ideas are not always good ones to follow.

Chapter Nineteen

NAOMI

CONRAD'S ANGRY VOICE WOULD FRIGHTEN ANYONE, BUT I think what makes Trevor cry is realizing Conrad and I are not getting married. Our little group will not stick together.

"I don't want Lola to leave," he says with a snuffle. "She's my best friend."

I won't promise that we'll see her a few times a week, because I'm not sure nannying will work out at this point. So instead I say, "We'll plan play dates. You'll get to see her."

"But she won't live next door."

"No, she won't live next door," I agree. It depresses me, too.

He looks at me glumly. "Are you grounding me?"

I'm not sure he knows what grounding is, but there's a tremor in his voice, and whatever he's imagining is probably worse than the real thing.

"No. But don't lock anyone into a small space ever again. Even if Lola tells you it's a good idea. Understand?"

He nods.

"Now help me get dinner ready. You're in charge of toasting and buttering the bread, got it?"

He wipes his eyes. "Okay."

All evening, I can't stop thinking about what Conrad said earlier about an unorthodox plan to get me insurance. I don't believe he would do anything illegal, but I thought the same about Seth, so what do I know? And what did he mean when he said he wanted a solid plan for Lola if something happened to him? I don't know! It's killing me to wait. I'm impatient to find out what he's thinking before I develop crazy ideas of my own.

When Trevor's asleep, I go out back, but Conrad hasn't arrived yet. I wait, my leg bouncing, for what feels like forever, until his back door opens and he comes out and sits in his chair.

I want to ask what he's thinking, but I make myself calm down, at least outwardly. Inside, my heart is knocking around my chest like a bouncy ball.

"How is Lola taking her disappointment?"

He scratches his chin. The familiar rasp of his nails through his beard is comforting by this point.

"Not well. She cried for most of the afternoon. I don't think I've ever seen her so crestfallen."

"Poor girl." I wait for him to say something about his idea, but he says nothing for a long few minutes. My patience runs out. "Are you going to tell me about your plan now, or make me wait even longer? I'm dying to know."

"Now that I've had time to think, I'm positive you won't like it."

"Tell me and let me decide."

"Will you do me a favor and let me explain everything before you respond?"

There's an ominous feeling in the air now. Maybe it is illegal. Curiosity wins out and I nod in agreement.

"I have a dangerous job. Firefighters all over the nation die every day, and that's a fact I face."

I don't like this fact. At all. But I keep my mouth shut like I promised.

"Out of everyone I know, you're the person who understands Lola the best. Who could love her the way she deserves to be loved if something were to happen to me." He rushes on. "I know it's a big ask, but I have savings, some good investments, and a few rental properties. I'll leave everything to you if you will take care of Lola if anything happens to me."

I clarify to make sure I understand what he's asking. "You want me to be her guardian if you were to ...?" I don't finish the thought. "Of course, I'll do it. I love Lola."

His expression softens. "Yes, but more than that. I want you to be her mother. You need insurance. I can help with that. If..."

He pauses. I couldn't move if I tried. Not a word leaves my mouth as I wait for the other shoe to drop. With what he's said so far, I'm sure I know what it'll sound like.

"If we were to get married," he finishes.

Married. To Conrad. So I can get insurance and Lola has a mom. What?!

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I am. I know it wouldn't be for love, but why can't marriage between friends work out just as well? You're a wonderful mother. Lola would be lucky to have you in her life. Me, too, honestly. I believe we can build a life together that benefits us both and our kids."

I sit with the idea for a minute, and all I can think about is how I gave everything to my marriage with Seth and this is where I've ended up.

"Conrad, I don't want to get married again. I finally have the chance to find myself without a husband. To be happy on my own. I don't want to give that up. I need a friend, not a husband."

"I'll still be your friend, and you wouldn't have to give anything up, I'd make sure of that. The house I bought for me and Lola has that mother-in-law suite, with a walk-in closet and a private bathroom. You could have that or the master suite, and I'll take the other. The kids will be upstairs."

"So we'd be roommates, raising our kids together?" He's right. I'm not liking this plan.

"*Friends* raising their kids together," he clarifies. "And why not? It isn't the traditional reason people marry, but I tried marriage for love and that was a mistake. When Carmen left, I

knew I never wanted that kind of physical, emotional relationship again. We wouldn't have that in a platonic marriage."

"Then why get married at all?"

"Because we'll be better together than apart. There are financial benefits to being married. I wouldn't have to pay for a nanny. You don't have to worry about insurance. We would live together in a big house without your parents getting involved with our lives. We'd be partners."

He knows exactly where to hit to convince me a platonic, friendly marriage is plausible. Autonomy from my parents is a bonus to the other benefits.

"There are things we need to discuss first," Conrad continues. "Like how we'll raise our kids. We will probably disagree at times on how to do that, but we'll figure it out. We make decisions together."

"As partners," I say, repeating his earlier definition. I like the taste of the word on my tongue.

"And how will we handle finances?" He really has thought a lot about his proposal today. "I would like us to share an account and budget together, pay bills and such, together. I don't want this to be his and hers, but ours."

Tears prick my eyes.

"Thank you," I say.

"For what?"

"For wanting me to be involved with household decisions. Seth liked to be in control."

Each time I say Seth's name, his past influence over me weakens. Like when characters in Harry Potter said Voldemort out loud, it weakened his power over them. Whenever I acknowledge an injustice from the past, Seth's memory has less power over me. That brings a smile. When I glance at Conrad, he turns away and looks up at the sky.

"You wouldn't even have to work if you didn't want to," he says to the stars. "I can support us."

I huff. “Oh, I have to work. I have too many hospital bills to pay off to even think about not working. But also ...” I pause as the random thoughts coalesce into a concrete desire. “I never had financial independence with Seth. I relied on him for everything and I love making my own money. I won’t give that up.”

It sounds like I’m agreeing to his plan, but I’m not. Am I?

“That makes sense,” he says. “But married, you’d have the time to figure out what you want to do instead of working a job you hate because you have to.”

It sounds like a fairy tale. It can’t be that easy, right? Just marry the handsome neighbor and be free of QuickBooks forever?

“It’s insane,” I say, but not with conviction.

“You’re taking the idea better than I expected.”

Why is that? I shouldn’t entertain marriage to Conrad for a second. Marriage is a binding agreement. It wouldn’t be just between us, but it would involve our children. Where is my drive to keep my hard-won independence now, when I need it most?

Except I am keeping my independence. He wouldn’t be supporting me. We’d be supporting each other and making financial decisions, together. We’d both contribute to the benefit of all four of us.

I think of what it would be like living in the house on Ponderosa Pine Way with Conrad and Lola. As I looked inside the back door, I thought of how much I would love living somewhere similar. It’s the kind of home I wanted while married to Seth, not the mausoleum in the gated community that he picked. Conrad’s house felt like it could be a home.

Could I really fake a marriage to attain that dream? Maybe not for a house, but for insurance, so Trevor gets the best care possible? I think I can. Next question, do I want to?

“If we do this, we can’t tell anyone,” I say. “Every person in our lives would have to believe that this relationship is based on real love. Especially Lola and Trevor.”

He leans back in his chair, relaxing. Only now do I realize how hunched forward he was sitting before.

“So you think it’s a good idea?” he asks.

“Maybe. I like it better than the alternative, but there are so many potential problems. People who love each other struggle to stay married. What if discover we hate each other? Maybe we never agree on anything and fight all the time. We’ve only known each other for a few weeks.”

“I can’t see us hating each other. I’m a pretty laid-back guy, and you’re not the sort to get angry easily.”

“What if you meet someone in the future and fall in love? We have kids to think about. We can’t marry, just to divorce a few years down the road.”

“I won’t fall in love with anyone else. I promise. My ex-wife had an affair with Izzy’s husband. I would never do that to you.”

I place my hand on his arm. “I didn’t know that she went off with your brother-in-law. How horrible.”

“It was bad. She and Izzy were best friends, and he was a good friend to me and a coworker. I would never put you through what I went through. But what if you fall in love with someone else?”

“No, I won’t.” I consider my next words. “I lost myself in Seth. I don’t want that kind of relationship ever again. A marriage based on friendship sounds ... doable. Maybe.”

The more I talk, the more I think this is a terrible idea. So why am I still sitting here talking about it? I can’t figure out my brain right now.

“But what about this?” Conrad says. “Trevor’s five. In thirteen years, he’ll be eighteen. What if we commit to thirteen years of marriage? If we have a minimum time commitment, then if things don’t work out, we know how long we have to stick it out.”

“And then we get divorced?”

“Then we reevaluate. I don’t want to go through a divorce again, so I hope you’ll want to stay married. It sounds nice growing old with you instead of alone.”

It makes me think of the two of us in forty years, our kids grown and living their lives with their own families. We’re sitting on the back patio, talking like we do now. I like the image. I like the idea of seeing him every day. Watching Lola grow up. Trevor feeling safe. What are the downsides?

“What would your expectations be for ... marital relations?” My whole body heats at the question.

I can see his smile in the dark. “I have no expectations. When the physical gets involved, so does the heart. I don’t want that kind of marriage. We’ll have separate rooms. In public, we’ll probably want to hold hands. Maybe I can kiss you on the cheek if the situation demands it, but this a union between friends.”

I’m relieved. Maybe a teeny, tiny bit disappointed? I agree that this hypothetical marriage can’t be physical, but I also can’t deny I miss the intimate aspect of my relationship with Seth.

My mind goes back to when Conrad held me in the shed. His hold wasn’t sexual, but so tender I felt it to my soul. Maybe he might be convinced to hold me tight like that again. It will be enough.

“If you need to think about it for a little while, you can,” he says. “There isn’t a rush.”

“There is a rush. My insurance stops at the end of next week. If I can’t find a job, then I need to move in with my parents. Or... I need to marry you.” I take a deep breath. “If we move forward, it would have to be a quick engagement. Four weeks at the most. Trevor could have another episode. Our engagement, the wedding, or even moving to a new house might trigger one. I just don’t know.” I chew on my lip while I think. “With a quick engagement, we’d need to plant seeds in the minds of our families now, so it isn’t so out of the blue when we get married a few weeks later.”

It's like I've already decided to move forward without fully considering the ramifications of this decision.

"How would we plant seeds?" Conrad asks.

"My sister Kit's engagement party is this Friday. We could go together? Like, a date?"

A date with Conrad seems so weird, which is stupid because we're talking about marriage. Marriage! Marriage is so much bigger than a date to my sister's party.

"Works for me," he says. "My sister can watch the kids. It will help sell the idea that we're a couple to both families. Now she'll have to stop trying to set me up on dates with other women." He sobs. "If this works between us, it'll also help Izzy let go and live her own life in Texas without regret. She deserves that."

He's always thinking of other people. As much as I want to live under that umbrella of safety and care, I don't want him to sacrifice so much of himself for me. I'd agree to be Lola's guardian even if we don't marry, and all he gets out of the deal is a free nanny. I benefit the most from a marriage of convenience.

As ready as I am to jump in with both feet, I can't be rash with this decision. Marriage will have far-reaching consequences for all four of us. I want them to be good things, not terrible.

"Let's think about this for a few days. After we see how things go Friday night," I say, "We'll decide if we'll go through with the marriage."

He holds out his hand on the arm of his chair, palm up. I place mine in his, and our fingers weave together. This contact is easy. Comfortable. Companionable.

"Sounds like a good plan," he says.

"Until Friday, no nighttime meetings. I need to think through everything on my own."

Holding his hand is a little thing, but on the inside, it feels big. I like the feel of his hand in mine. I enjoy sitting with him

and talking. Those things shouldn't blind me to the pitfalls of his plan.

Conrad nods. "If that's what you need, okay."

He sounds disappointed, but I don't let that affect my decision to avoid the patio for the next three days. I need to make sure I'm not being stupid because of the masculine pheromones he puts out.

"I'll see you Friday night," I say. "The party starts at six."

"We should leave around five to drop off the kids at Izzy's place."

I let go of his hand and instantly feel chilled by the warm night air.

Before I go inside, I can't resist looking back at him. Weak light streams out of the open door on his face. He's looking straight back at me, and if I'm not mistaken, there's a touch of longing in his expression.

Chapter Twenty

NAOMI

WEDNESDAY MORNING, LOLA KNOCKS ON THE DOOR BY herself. When I look outside, Conrad's leaning against his car. I wave. He waves back, then gets into his car and drives away without a word. The image of him in his blue firefighter uniform, arms crossed, is forever emblazoned on my brain, making it even harder to focus on my job.

Mr. Tremaine's nephew starts today, and we spend the day messaging back and forth as he asks questions. I should feel resentment about training him to take my job, but I'm too relieved to hold a grudge. I think about Conrad's promise: if we marry, I would have the time to figure out what I want to do with my life. It definitely isn't bookkeeping.

Wednesday night at six o'clock, I drive over to my parents' house for Waffle Wednesday. The normal half-hour drive feels like an eternity, with both kids buckled into the front seat of Aaron's truck. I need my car back, so they can sit in the back where it's safer if we have an accident.

When we arrive, Kit and Aaron pull up in my car. Wish granted.

I head over to them immediately. "That was fast."

"I put it at the head of the queue," Kit says.

She washed the outside and vacuumed and cleaned the inside. I know she's trying to help, but I feel like a very irresponsible sister, leaving her a messy car to deal with on top of everything else. At least it was full of gas when she picked it up; one less thing for her to do for me.

As promised, all I say is, "Thank you."

"I expect you to pay me back tonight as we put together the centerpieces for the engagement party. You have an eye for flower arranging and I do not."

“It’s nice to know I’m good for something.” I say it like a joke, but I mean every word.

Kit and I walk into the house with linked arms, Aaron and the kids following. Once inside, Lola grabs Trevor’s hand and they run through to the backyard where my nieces are playing.

The kitchen is full of activity as everyone works to make waffles, cut fruit, and put together other toppings. We’re all here except for Roe. She sent a text to the group chat saying she would be late. She’s bringing the whipped cream, so hopefully not too late.

I grab a few blueberries from a bowl and chew as I think about moving back home. I don’t want to. I’ve loved my freedom for the last six months. Working for Dad and relying on Mom for childcare stinks like failure.

The front door bursts open, and Roe comes flying into the kitchen. Everyone stops talking at her entrance, which is a normal reaction for her. She knows how to grab the attention of a room.

“You will never guess what I found at the store!” she practically screams.

“Hopefully the whipped cream,” I say.

“This.”

She holds up a wall calendar with a half-dressed firefighter on the front. He looks familiar.

“Wait,” I say. “Is that ...”

“Your ridiculously hot fire-fighting neighbor? Why yes, it is.”

I grab it out of her hand to study it better. How is Conrad Beck *shirtless* on the front of a calendar? The only thing covering his smooth skin are two red suspenders. He leans against a fire engine while he looks off to the right, a sexy smolder on his face. I never would have believed it possible if I wasn’t seeing this with my own eyes.

“It gets better,” Roe continues. “He’s also August.”

I flip through until I find August. In this photograph, he stands just as shirtless as the other, but he's next to a fireman pole, one arm above his head. His biceps really pops out against the blurred background of the fire station.

"Those photos have got to be Photoshopped," Theo says from where he's looking over my shoulder. "Don't you think so, Aaron? No normal guy has a six-pack that is defined."

"Agreed. Those packs do not look real."

"What do you say, Naomi," Kit asks. "Are those muscles the real deal? Or are these guys just jealous?"

The air in the room has suddenly grown hot and I swallow thickly. "Why do you think I would know what his abs look like?"

"You are his neighbor," Roe says. "Doesn't he mow the lawn shirtless? Or maybe go on a run in just shorts?"

"Not that I've seen," I respond.

Even if there is some photo editing going on, he still has an impressive physique. I can't look away.

"Well, it's now yours," Roe says with a flare of her hand. "I dare you to put on red lipstick, kiss his picture, then hang it somewhere he'll see it. Do you think he'll blush?"

"I know I will."

Everyone laughs as they go back to prepping dinner. I haven't moved. Conrad stares at me as if he's asking me a very important question: *Will you say yes?*

I've spent the day trying to talk myself out of it, but I've failed. I like Conrad. I respect him. The way he treats Trevor is a testament to his character. Marrying a friend so we can raise our kids together will mean I'm not alone anymore. I want to marry him.

I mentally tell his shirtless photo, *Yes, I will marry you.* I need to wait until Friday to find out if he's still willing, but I am in.

Now is the time to plant seeds just in case. I make sure the kids are still outside and the door is shut. I don't want Lola and Trevor to get ahead of me and Conrad. We should talk to them together.

"I can't believe he didn't tell me about the calendar," I say to no one in particular, but loud enough to be heard over everyone else. "I mean, we have gone on a few dates. You'd think this would have come up."

It's not a lie if I count our conversations in the backyard as a date.

Silence. Every head swings in my direction. My hands sweat, and I put the calendar on the table so I don't ruin it, then look up and meet every shocked expression.

"Kit and Aaron—I mean, Kitron—can I add a plus one for your engagement party?" My voice is steady, if a little strained. "He'd really like to come and meet everyone. Just don't tell the kids yet, okay? We want to make sure it's going to stick before we get their hopes up."

Another beat of silence, then absolute pandemonium. Kit gives me an enthusiastic yes. Theo tells me how much he likes Conrad. Mom and Dad can't wait to meet him. Roe goes on and on about how she guessed it weeks ago. Stella is the only one who seems confused by the news.

I honestly can't believe they bought the lie so easily.

Roe takes a serving spoon and taps it on both of my shoulders. "I knight Naomi and Conrad, Conmi."

"No." It makes us sound like we're conning everyone, and we're not. Our marriage is unconventional, but not fake. "I like Minrad," I offer as an alternative.

She purses her lips. "Mmmm... Okay, Minrad it is. Let it be known far and wide. Minrad is officially a couple."

"I like Conmi better," Stella says from across the kitchen.

I give her a glare and she shrugs as if to say it's the truth. She knows something is fishy about my story.

By then, the food is ready; the kids come inside, and we drop the topic. At least vocally. I catch my siblings smiling at me, or they pat me on the back as if to say, “Congratulations.” All because I’m bringing a date to Kit and Aaron’s engagement party. Wait until they find out we’re getting married.

IT’S WHEN I’M HOME AND TREVOR’S ASLEEP THAT MY PHONE rings with a video call. I don’t even have to look to know who it is. Stella.

“Hey—” is as far as I get before she interrupts me.

“What happened in the last four days for you to go from ‘we will never date’ to ‘we’re dating and can he be my plus one?’”

I’m the one who insisted Conrad and I keep the real reason for our marriage a secret, but I can’t not tell Stella the truth. She’ll see right through any story I tell that isn’t the whole truth. Besides, it’ll also be helpful to have someone on the outside who can tell me if my new marriage comes across as real.

I tell her about Conrad’s proposal.

She’s studying me like a specimen under a telescope. “I don’t understand why you’d want to marry someone you don’t love. Walk me through it.”

“Both of us are better off together than separate. He no longer has to have a nanny, which will save tons of money. If anything happens to him, he knows that I’ll take care of Lola. I’ll get insurance and a home. I’ll figure out what I want to do for work without any of the financial pressure or time crunch.”

For a long minute, she says nothing. “It’s so mercenary.”

I try to explain again, this time focusing on the aspects that aren’t monetary. “Single parenting is hard. His only family is leaving for Texas in November, and he needs support just as

much as I do, just in a different way. We won't be alone anymore. Why can't friends parent together? Our kids will have a sibling. That's a relationship they won't have in any other way."

"Those reasons I can understand a little better, but why rush it? How well do you really know him? Can't you date for a while before marrying? Mom and Dad can help with insurance for a few months."

I don't have a suitable answer except I don't want to wait. Waiting would mean moving home temporarily, working for Dad, and putting off my future. I wouldn't get to see Conrad and Lola as much living thirty minutes away. There's no reason to drag this out when I already know how it will end—in marriage.

I try to explain my reasons so Stella will understand. "I knew Seth for almost half my life, but did I ever really know him? I haven't known Conrad long, but I know that when I'm with him, I'm authentically me. I can say how I feel with no censure. You know that he's the one who got me out of my Seth rut. I have so many good reasons to marry him, and only one not to."

"And that is?"

"What if someday we can't make a marriage work any longer? We might get divorced and that wouldn't be good for the kids."

"Is eventually falling in love on the pro side, then?"

I snort. "You read too many romance novels. Love like you're thinking is out of the question. I've been in love, and it was a whole body, soul, mind situation and I never want to be there again."

"Friends. That sounds very ... separate. Not like husband and wife at all."

"Exactly. We want to raise our kids together but keep our independence. We don't need romance or any of the physical stuff that entails."

She snorts. “Is that why you couldn’t take your eyes off Conrad’s shirtless picture?”

I feel the heat on my cheeks. I hate how easily I blush and how obvious it is with my light complexion. “He’s a very attractive man. He looks good in a shirt. I didn’t realize he’d look so good without one.”

She laughs like I hoped she would, but quickly sobers. “Are you sure you’ve thought through all the challenges you’ll be facing? You’re friends now, but you almost kissed him last week, and he drew away. I don’t want you to fall for him and not have the feelings reciprocated. I saw what happened to you when Seth left.”

“That’s the beauty of our plan,” I say. “There will be no kissing or any other physical relationship. If he leaves me, which I know he won’t because of what he wants for Lola, it’ll be hard and I’ll miss him, but it won’t gut me like before.”

“And if he falls in love with you? Are you prepared to break his heart?”

I know that won’t happen. I wasn’t enough for Seth, and I don’t see how things will be any different with Conrad. He’ll stick with me because of Lola and Trevor.

“He won’t,” I say.

“I think you’re being naïve, but I suppose every healthy marriage has its hurdles. Or so I hear. I have no experience in that area. You should talk to Avery and Theo. They can give you some pointers.”

“No one can know the truth except for you,” I say. “Promise you won’t tell anyone.”

“Cross my heart. If this is what you want, then I support you. Good luck, Conmi.”

“It’s Minrad, and it only works when you’re talking about me and Conrad together.”

“I like Conmi better. It fits what you’re both doing.”

I stick out my tongue at her. “We’re not conning anyone. We’re creating a family on our own terms, even if our reasons

aren't traditional. I thought you were supporting me!"

"Me being honest is supporting you. Now I have to know, am I your maid of honor? Because Lola promised me the role in your wedding."

"Yes, of course, but I'm not sure we'll have anyone walk down the aisle but for the kids."

At least, that's what I have envisioned. I'll have to talk to Conrad about it. If he still wants to marry me, anyway.

After I hang up, I pull the rolled-up calendar from my purse and look at the cover, then flip to August. My fingers itch to text Conrad, and I finally give in. I can't see him in a calendar half-naked and not ask who's blackmailing him. He might not even respond if he's out on an emergency call.

NAOMI: *You're a calendar model now?*

He answers immediately.

CONRAD: *It's out? It would've been nice to have a warning. How does it look?*

Do I dare be honest? No, he doesn't need an ego boost.

NAOMI: *August is passable. The cover is a shocker, though.*

CONRAD: *Why? What's on the cover?*

He doesn't know!? I laugh as I lay the calendar out as flat as I can on the couch cushion and send a picture. I wish I could see his face right now.

CONRAD: *I agreed to the photoshoot because I owed Perez. Now that I'm on the cover, he owes me.*

NAOMI: *Isn't he the one who's in the hospital with burns?*

CONRAD: *He won't be there forever.*

NAOMI: *I'm sure you'll sell a lot of calendars.*

CONRAD: *And I'm the one who's going to buy them all. Interested in a weekend of driving to every grocery store in the city?*

NAOMI: *It's a date. You can give them all to Perez as a Christmas gift.*

CONRAD: *That's an A+ plan. I knew I liked you.*

It's a throwaway comment, a joke even, but it still hits me in the heart.

NAOMI: *Good night. Be safe.*

CONRAD: *Always*

I miss Conrad and I talked to him last night. I want to marry him. Stella's concerns can't dissuade me.

There's something I have to do. I should've done it a long time ago.

I go to my bedroom and open up the closet. Every piece of clothing I own is from my life before, and I don't want to bring them into my future. I plan to live in jeans and knit shirts every day, and the way I'm financing my new wardrobe is by putting my old one in consignment.

I pull out the suitcase from under my bed and zip open the top. Inside are all the clothes that don't fit anymore. They're nicely folded, waiting for me to lose those ten pounds so I can fit back into them. The only way I'll drop a size is if I starve myself, and I refuse to do that ever again.

From the closet, I take out each item of clothing. Some I love and they stay where they are. Others I hate and they go into the suitcases. By the time I'm done, my closet has a fourth of the clothes it did an hour ago. I feel happier and lighter. This is one more way I'm leaving Seth behind.

Chapter Twenty-One

CONRAD

FRIDAY NIGHT, MY STOMACH IS IN MY THROAT AS I WALK WITH Lola to Naomi's front door. Tonight is the night when I find out if I'm getting married or saying goodbye to Naomi and Trevor. With each passing day, my desire to marry Naomi has only grown. As have the fears.

What if we marry, but she leaves me like Carmen did? Right now, I can give her a home and insurance, but in the future she might not need me anymore. I don't doubt I will ever stop needing her, and not just for Lola. She fills a part inside me, earmarked for a friend I never knew I needed. No one else has ever filled it, and no one else ever will.

Lola knocks on their door excitedly. She glances up at me; her smile as big as her face. She's glowing. To her, a date means we're practically married. It'll crush her if Naomi says no. Me, too.

Trevor answers the door.

"Mom," he yells, "They're here!"

Lola giggles and jumps up and down. "They're going on a date!"

"Does this mean I can move into your house?" Trevor asks me.

"This isn't a big deal," I say for the hundredth time since picking Lola up from school this afternoon.

It's useless. We're all hoping it's something more. It all hinges on Naomi.

The days since our last conversation on the back patio have felt like weeks. Only now, when I'm about to see Naomi again, do I recognize why I've been so impatient at work. Everyone assumed it was because of what happened to Perez, and that was part of it, but also because of Naomi's embargo on communication. It was hard to be mad about the calendar

cover when I was just so glad she sent a text. It gave me hope she might say yes.

I hear her before I see her. “Trevor, why didn’t you invite them inside?”

She opens the door wider. My breath catches. I resented her for a long time because of the way she dressed and her forced cheer, but I was an idiot. She’s gorgeous inside and out. The light blue, knee-length dress cinches just under her bust and has a flowy skirt. Her calves look amazing in those heels. Her long hair cascades down her back.

“You’re so pretty!” Lola says as we step inside.

My thoughts exactly. I’m glad Lola said it because I’m having a hard time finding my voice. I’ll have to get used to this sight if we share a house, but right now, my response is new and a little overpowering.

“Thank you,” she says. “Your dad looks handsome in a suit, don’t you think?”

Lola nods enthusiastically. I suppress my smile so no one will guess how much her compliment affects me.

Naomi puts a dangly earring in one ear, then swings her long hair to the other shoulder to do the other ear. “I just need to grab Trevor’s backpack and change over his booster seat to your car, then we’ll be ready to go.”

“I can grab his booster.”

She throws me her car keys, and once everyone is ready, we pile into my car. As we drive to Izzy’s house, I’m tongue-tied. I haven’t been on a date since marrying Carmen, and my palms sweat like I’m nineteen again. It doesn’t help that we have two chaperones in the back and a family dinner at the end of the drive.

Mostly, I’m eager to learn Naomi’s decision at the end of the night.

The moment we pull into Izzy’s driveway, she comes out on the front porch. Her hands are clasped in front of her like she’s been praying for this night for years. Come to think of it,

she probably has. Not the date in particular, but me finally moving past what happened with Carmen and taking a chance.

“She’s going to want to meet you,” I tell Naomi. “I apologize in advance for whatever comes out of her mouth.”

“You haven’t met my family yet and it’ll be ten times worse for you.”

We get out of the car and Izzy comes straight over to Naomi and gives her a hug like they’re long-lost sisters.

“It’s so good to meet you,” Izzy says.

“You too.”

“He must be an okay landlord if you agreed to go out with him. He can be a grumpy grizzly bear, right?”

Naomi laughs. “Absolutely. For months, he wouldn’t speak to me. All he did was growl. I almost asked for a dictionary so I could decipher what he was saying.”

Izzy mock glares at me. “Beck!”

I give both women a look, letting them know I do not appreciate their observations. I’m not grumpy. I just don’t want to talk to most people.

Naomi points at my face. “And he’d look at me just like that. I was sure he loathed me.”

“No. He just didn’t want to get close because he’d sworn off love and the minute you gave him the time of day, he knew he’d fall.”

Her words have a ring of truth to them. I think I was afraid to get pulled into her orbit, but I’m too smart to fall in love.

“Izzy,” I say, in my grumpy grizzly bear voice. “Really?”

“Oh, don’t be a bear. Come on kids, let’s get your stuff inside. Are you ready for the most fun you’ve ever had?”

Lola cheers, so Trevor cheers, and the two of them run to the front door. Naomi grabs Izzy’s arm before she can follow them with their bags.

“I’m sure Conrad explained the situation with Trevor,” she says. “I just want to make sure you know to call me if anything happens. And not just throwing up, but if he’s anxious or doesn’t feel good or just wants to go home.”

Izzy places her hand on Naomi’s shoulder. “Of course. I promise to call you at the first sign of distress.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Izzy steps back and calls over her shoulder as she walks away. “Have fun, you two. See you in a few hours.”

Naomi doesn’t move to get back into the car.

“Are you okay with this?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s just the first time I’ve left Trevor with anyone outside of the family.”

“You left him with me and he did okay.”

“But you’re not a stranger.” She takes a long breath before turning to me. “He’ll be fine. Izzy will take good care of him. Let’s go.”

Naomi gives me instructions up the hill to her parents’ house where the party is being held. The houses are spread apart this far up from the valley, so there is a lot of space on the street for parking, and most of it has already been taken. They tied white balloons out front and then along posts that line a path to the backyard.

We park far enough away that we have a two-minute walk. The sun is setting to the west, making the sky a deep pink. A few of the streetlights flicker on.

As we approach the edge of the yard, Naomi slows and ducks her head. Her shoulders visibly shake. I lay my hand on her upper arm.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I ask quietly.

A couple come up behind us and I move to the side, bringing Naomi with me, so we’re not blocking the path.

She turns to face me and I'm surprised to see she's holding in laughter.

"I'm fine." A giggle slips out, and she covers her mouth with both hands.

I can't help but smile. "What's so funny?"

She shakes her head as if to say nothing. With her eyes filled with mirth and that smile, she's more beautiful than anything or anyone I've ever seen. It isn't her perfect makeup or her wide eyes or even the cut of her dress, it's who she is. I'm not only physically attracted to her but also emotionally attached. Once we're married, I'm glad our bedrooms will be across the house from each other.

If we get married. She hasn't decided yet.

"Are you going into hysterics?" I ask, teasing.

I'm pretty sure her laughter is her way of coping with her nervousness about the part we're playing tonight.

"I'm fine, I promise."

But then the giggling turns into peels of laughter. She leans forward and hides her face in my shoulder to muffle the sound. My arms go around her back. She fits perfectly. It's some minutes before she stops laughing, but she doesn't pull away.

"Are we being ridiculous for even thinking about marriage?" she asks.

"I don't think so. I want Lola to be taken care of, and you're the person I want to raise her."

She looks up at me. "But marriage? Are you sure? You haven't changed your mind?"

I meet her eyes and say with utmost honesty, "I am one hundred percent sure I want to marry you."

She tugs on my lapels, then shyly looks back up at me. "I accept."

Does she mean what I hope she means? I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

“I will marry you, Conrad Beck.”

Relief rushes through me. She said yes. Except there’s one thing...

“I have a stipulation.”

“Now you bring it up?”

“I didn’t want to say anything unless you agreed.” I pause, trying to find the right words.

Another couple heads up the walk, and I move us further away.

She pulls out of my arms completely. “You’re making me nervous. What is it?”

“I don’t want you talking to your ex-husband once we’re married. If the FBI found out, who knows what they would do? It could ruin everything.”

I leave my jealousy out of my plea. We may not love each other romantically, but the idea of her talking to another man when we’re married does not sit well. Even though Seth will be part of our marriage either way. She talks *about* him all the time, which means he’s on her mind a lot. If I want to marry her, it’s something I have to deal with, and if there is no contact between them, I think I can.

I expect some sort of pushback to my stipulation, but she nods. “I understand, and you don’t need to worry. I threw out the phone last week. Seth is out of my life. I will never speak to him again.”

She acts like this isn’t a big ask, while I’ve been worried about how to bring it up since Monday afternoon.

“You’re sure?” I ask. “He won’t try to contact you another way or sue for custody of Trevor?”

“I’m sure. He won’t do anything to jeopardize his freedom.”

I still have my doubts that it’s that easily resolved. Her ex doesn’t seem the type to let go of her, but I have to trust that she knows him better than I do.

She chews on her bottom lip. “Now I have something I’d like from you.”

“I’m listening.”

She breathes in and then out. “Complete honesty from both of us. Seth lied to me and kept secrets. For my part, I let him get away with it. If we have a disagreement or misunderstanding, we talk about it and don’t let it fester. I want a marriage with honesty and communication.”

This is easy for me to promise. “Okay.”

“Then let’s get married.” She holds out her hand, palm up. “Ready to head in?”

I take her hand in mine. Her soft, short fingers interweave with my long, rough ones. This is happening. Now I wonder if *I’m* about to burst into laughter at the combination of relief and nerves. I’m getting married again, something I never wanted, and instead of feeling dread, I’m thrilled.

Together, we head up the walk. Now that it’s grown darker, I see the balloons have lights inside. Maybe they’re glow sticks. Lola would love that. I’ll have to try it for her next birthday.

“It’s annoying how calm you are about getting married,” Naomi says quietly. “I’m sweating through my deodorant in minutes instead of the sixteen-hour protection it promised.”

I’m glad I appear calm. Inside, I do not feel it. I’m about to meet my future in-laws.

We come around the house into the backyard. There are lights everywhere. Along the fence, in tree branches, and floating in the pool. Tables set up on the other side of the pool have centerpieces of jars filled with lights and flowers. A live band plays on a small stage next to a temporary dancing floor.

A loud voice off to our right makes me jump.

“You brought the hot firefighter.”

It’s a sister, but I haven’t officially met this one yet.

“Conrad, this is my sister, Roe. Roe, his name is Conrad. Not hot firefighter.”

“Can’t he be both?” Roe holds out her hand for a shake. “It is nice to meet you, Conrad, the hot firefighter. I am very familiar with your modeling work. Were those calendar pictures Photoshopped or not? I say not, but Theo and Aaron are pretty sure your muscles are fake.”

Shoot. They’ve seen the pictures. In a few weeks, this will probably be everyone’s response. I’ll be rescuing someone from a house fire or giving life-saving CPR, and the first thing they’ll say is, “Aren’t you the guy on the cover of that calendar?” Can’t wait.

I look to Naomi for some sort of a hint on how to handle Roe.

Naomi’s holding back a laugh. “You don’t have to answer, Conrad. Roe, are you trying to frighten him away? He might never come back.”

Her eyes widen, as well as her smile. “So this is more serious than a plus one to an engagement party? Fantastic. Conrad, I apologize if I embarrassed you. I promise to be on my best behavior tonight and in the future. Hopefully, you’ll stick around so that we might celebrate more than one engagement this year.”

“Roe!”

Naomi doesn’t find this nearly as funny as the accusation that my muscles are fake. I’m not sure why since it’s true. We’re officially engaged as of ten minutes ago and will get married before Kit and Aaron tie the knot.

“Just putting the idea out into the universe,” Roe says with a wink in my direction.

There is something refreshing about having someone say whatever is on their mind. I like this sister. I like all of Naomi’s family, and for the first time, I think beyond the immediate marriage. It’s not just Lola who will gain a supportive family; I will too.

I wrap my arm around Naomi's back. Might as well make the relationship appear real. Naomi leans into my side. She looks up at me with such an open expression for one second I think the love in her eyes *is* real.

Roe claps and laughs. "You two are so cute! But come on. We're all eating these fancy appetizers while we wait for Kitron to show up. They're trying for fashionably late, but if they don't show up soon, they're just plain late. Which is rude, because we can't eat dinner until they get here and the appetizers just aren't cutting it. You do not want to see me turn hangry."

I imagine it would be entertaining.

"What's Kitron?" I whisper to Naomi as we follow Roe.

"Kit and Aaron mixed together."

I'm not sure how to interpret that. Mixed together like a cocktail?

I thought I liked Roe, but she leads us straight to a man and woman who can only be Naomi's parents. I'm not quite ready to meet the parents of the woman I'm marrying. I thought I could ease into the introduction; get my feel for the family by spending time with her siblings.

Her mom looks like Naomi, only thirty years older. She glances down at our clasped hands. Naomi squeezes mine as if trying to send me strength. Does she think I need extra strength in this situation? Or is she the one asking for it?

"This is my mom, Michelle. My dad, Steve."

Steve holds out his hand and sizes me up as we shake. He has a thick beard and a bald head. It works on him, but it makes him come across as intimidating.

"It's so good to meet you," Michelle says as she shakes my hand.

"You as well."

Naomi points out an older man standing nearby with hunched shoulders, bushy white eyebrows, and a scowl. "And this is my Grandpa Joe."

Joe barely acknowledges the introduction. He wears a black coat that looks at least forty years old and goes down to his knees. Any second I expect him to say, “Bah, humbug,” and storm off.

Michelle smiles as she says, “I had it on good authority Naomi would never date again.” She sounds happy about her daughter dating. I marginally relax. “If she’s bringing you to meet the family, it must be serious.”

“It is,” Naomi says without preamble.

Both Michelle and Steve’s jaws drop in sync. It’s as though they practiced. They look at me with renewed interest.

“In fact,” Naomi continues. “We’ve started talking about marriage, but don’t tell anyone else, okay? I don’t want to ruin Kit’s night.”

They share a look between themselves until the phone in Steve’s front pocket rings with an alarm.

“We need to find Kit, but we’ll talk later,” Michelle says to Naomi, then she turns to me. “We’re glad you’re here, and I imagine we’ll talk to you later, too.”

Was that supposed to sound like a threat? Because it did. They walk off toward the house, Joe following behind, leaving us alone in the middle of the milling guests.

“I can’t believe I just told my parents we’re getting married,” she whispers, leaning her face into my lapels again. “This is real. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I just need a minute.”

“You have five seconds. Roe, Theo, Avery, and Stella are heading in this direction.”

She might actually curse. I can’t tell since her words are muffled.

Roe rubs her hands together like an evil sorcerer. “Tell us, Minrad, how serious are you?”

She's looking at me, but I don't know who Minrad is. I glance around to see if anyone else is nearby.

Naomi pulls her face from my chest and looks up at me. "It's our couple name. Naomi and Conrad. Minrad. Just go with it."

Couple name? So not a cocktail.

Naomi turns and faces her siblings. "We're serious,"

To prove her words, I kiss her temple because I can. Just scattering more seeds.

"Then why did you act like you weren't dating at Trevor's birthday?" Avery asks.

"And," Roe says, "Before we left for Trevor's soccer game a few weeks ago, you were looking at Conrad like he was the devil's spawn."

It's right now that I realize Naomi and I should have come up with a plausible story for this sudden shift. Why didn't we?

Naomi comes to the rescue. "We didn't want the kids to know we were dating. It was best not to get their hopes up until we were sure, and since we were keeping it a secret from them, it only seemed right not to let others know yet. We liked having the secret just between us."

"I knew it!" Avery says. "You guys were not very convincing actors at the birthday party. You were pretending to not like each other, but it was obvious there was more."

Really? That's a surprise to me.

"And now you're sure?" Theo asks.

Naomi looks up at me. "Yeah, we're sure."

"Now it makes sense why you wouldn't flirt with Trevor's coach!" Roe says.

Trevor's coach wants to flirt with Naomi? Not a fan. My arm tightens around her waist.

Roe has a twinkle in her eye. I can tell she's the kind who likes to cause trouble. This will be Lola in ten years, no doubt.

“Tell us about the first time you met. Was it love at first sight?”

This is a question I can answer easily enough. “The first time I met Naomi, I knew she was going to throw my life into turmoil.”

Naomi looks up at me, a crease between her eyebrows. Doesn't she know what I'm referring to? I can't say we officially “met” that day, but it was the first time we exchanged words.

“I'm sure you've already heard her side of the story,” I continue. “Let me tell you mine. It was a few days after she moved in. I'm at home, minding my own business, when I hear the unmistakable wail of a smoke alarm coming from the other side of the duplex.”

Naomi's hand covers my mouth. “Don't. You. Dare.”

“We have not heard this story,” Theo says. They all lean in closer. “Please continue.”

“Yeah,” Roe joins in. “You can't leave us hanging. What happened next?”

With a frightening stare meant as a warning, Naomi removes her hand from my mouth.

“Nothing,” Naomi says.

I nod in agreement. “We met, and the rest is history.”

Roe's shoulders droop, and she scowls. “That is a really boring history. Give us some details. Juicy ones, please. Tell us, tell us, tell us.”

“Roe,” says Avery, “If they don't want to say, let them keep it a secret. Every couple should have some of those.”

I agree. I catch Naomi's gaze. So does she.

“Stella, do you know something we don't know?” Roe asks. “You've been awfully quiet.”

Stella shrugs, making it clear that she knows stuff. How much has Naomi told her? We were supposed to keep our

agreement a complete secret from everyone. Something tells me Naomi broke the rules.

Roe crosses her arms across her chest, much like Lola does. “Fine, Stella. Keep their secrets. But Naomi, there’s got to be something you can tell us. What about your first date? Or the first time you kissed? Or when you knew you were falling in love?”

All four of them look at us, waiting. Stella’s eyebrows arch, as if she can’t wait to hear the lies we’ll come up with.

I look at Naomi. She looks at me. We have no answers to any of those questions. We are not very good at this lying game.

Before we’re forced to answer, the music stops. “Welcome!” a voice comes over the portable speakers and we all turn toward the stage where Kit, Aaron, and Naomi’s parents stand.

“We are so happy to have you here tonight to celebrate our engagement,” Kit says.

A cheer goes up.

“Why is she wearing her wedding dress?” Roe asks quietly.

“That’s weird, right?” Avery says.

It looks like a wedding dress: white, long, and flowy. And I agree, very weird for an engagement party.

“She didn’t do it,” Naomi whispers. “No way.”

“She didn’t do what?” Roe whispers back.

Aaron leans in and speaks into the microphone. “As you know, we’ve had a hard time picking a wedding date. So, we did things a bit differently. Yesterday, we picked up Kit’s parents, Grandpa Joe, and my sister and stopped by the courthouse.”

Naomi gasps, but it takes the rest of the guests a second to catch up, and a rumble goes through the crowd as everyone talks to their neighbors.

Aaron throws his arms into the air as if he's made the winning goal of a soccer game. "We're married!"

Kit finishes with, "Thank you for celebrating our wedding with us!"

She passes the microphone to Michelle. "We welcome you to our home. Dinner will be served in twenty minutes, so find your seat. Enjoy the evening."

Aaron and Kit kiss, then kiss again. And again.

Everyone cheers. Even me. I'm honestly happy about their happiness, which is weird because I hardly know them. But soon they'll be family and their happiness is now important to me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

NAOMI

KIT COMES OFF THE STAGE AND HEADS DIRECTLY TOWARD US. Others try to stop her progress, and she offers a smile and a “Thank you” to everyone but doesn’t pause her progress.

When she reaches our group, she opens her arms and all of us come in for a sibling group hug. When we pull back, I’m not the only emotional one. This is a happy beginning for two people who have been through a lot.

Conrad stands outside of the circle, and I pull him in. His arm goes around my waist again and I lean into his solid chest.

“I can’t believe you eloped!” Theo says. “You married my best friend and I wasn’t even there to witness it.”

“Are you mad?” Kit asks all of us, not just Theo. “We didn’t really plan it. Naomi mentioned the idea last week.”

All eyes swing in my direction, some accusatory.

“The more I thought about it,” Kit continues, “The more I liked it. When I mentioned the courthouse to Aaron, I expected him to say no, but he was more enthusiastic than I was and everything fell together. We wanted to invite you all, but we also just wanted to get it done.”

“But you took Grandpa Joe,” Roe points out.

“Because Grandpa Joe would have killed me if I left him out of the wedding.”

“Doubtful. You’re the only one in the family he likes.”

“How did you pull it off?” I ask. “I have a hard time believing Mom was a will participant.”

“I told them Aaron and I were taking them to lunch and they had no idea. Even when they arrived at the address, we gave them and it was the courthouse, they thought we were

going to a restaurant nearby. Until they saw Aaron and I dressed for our wedding.”

“And Mom didn’t try to talk you out of it?” Stella asks.

“Not too hard. It was a lovely, brief ceremony and now we’re married. All of our favorite people are here tonight, so we don’t need to plan a reception for later. You don’t know what a relief it is.”

Roe isn’t buying it. “The ceremony would have been so much better if you’d invited your sisters.”

“Undoubtedly, but then we would’ve had to invite all of Aaron’s family and it would’ve gotten big fast.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Roe concedes. “But I was supposed to be your bridesmaid.”

“You’ll have to content yourself with being the sister of the bride. Enough about that. What is this?” Kit points between me and Conrad. “You said you went on a few dates, but this looks like more. Are you guys serious?”

“Yep,” is all the answer I give.

Conrad pipes up. “I’ve been all in for a while, but Naomi’s taken a bit of convincing.”

That’s a bit of an exaggeration, and I pinch his side.

Kit laughs. Her joy is so close to the surface, I’m sure anything would make her laugh. “Isn’t that just like Naomi? She might take a while to persuade, but once she decides, she is all in.”

A loud gong sounds.

“Go find your seats for dinner,” Kit says, waving her hands toward the dining area. “If we don’t have time to talk tonight, Aaron and I will be at Waffle Wednesday next week and I can answer all your questions.”

The six of us find our name cards at a round table nearby. Servers come out from the house, one for each of the ten tables. As food is being served, Roe leans forward.

“Naomi, I have not forgotten about you. It’s story time. Something about you and Conrad, and it better be good.”

I look at Conrad. He looks back. There isn’t much to share about us, at least nothing Roe would find entertaining.

Except for the moment we met. I know I stopped Conrad from sharing it earlier, but maybe it wouldn’t be such a big deal, as long as I edit the story a little. It might get Roe to stop asking questions. It’s definitely better than coming up with a bunch of lies to appease her nosiness.

Once the server finishes serving our food, I start in on the story.

“The first time we met was a few days after I moved in.”

Roe drops her silverware and claps. “Yay! I love it when I get what I want.”

“Trevor was at school. I was hungry and made myself a grilled cheese sandwich. I got a phone call while it was still toasting in the pan and went to my bedroom. I completely forgot about the sandwich and was about to jump into the shower.”

Roe nods. “This already has so much potential.”

I turn to Conrad. “Care to continue?”

Everyone turns to look at him.

He finishes chewing a bite of bread and swallows it down with some water.

“Well,” he begins slowly, probably waiting for me to change my mind. “When I heard the smoke alarm going off next door, I ran over and banged on the door. No answer, so I checked the knob, and it was unlocked.”

He arches his eyebrows in my direction. I remember his lecture from a few weeks ago. I still don’t lock my door regularly, though when we live together, that might have to change. *Live together*. Nerves hit me with force. I reach out and take Conrad’s hand to ground me.

“Ahhhh,” Avery says at our clasped hands.

“I thought the house was on fire, and I’m a firefighter. I’m trained to save people, so I go inside the house. Smoke is coming from a pan on the stove, but there isn’t any flame. I take a step in that direction, but a streak of red comes from the hallway and runs right in front of me. It’s Naomi. She takes the pan, dumps it in the sink, and pours water over it, making even more smoke. All the while, the alarm is blaring and I’m just standing there, a little shocked at what I’m seeing.”

This is the part I’m nervous about. I don’t want him to comment about what I was, or wasn’t, wearing. So I interrupt.

“When the alarm went off, I had green scrub all over my face and a shower cap on my head. I grabbed a robe and went running. With the pan in the sink, I think everything is fine, but I look up to see this big burly man standing in my house. I didn’t recognize him as my neighbor, and even if I had, I didn’t know he was a firefighter.”

“She screams,” Conrad interjects. “Loudly. I think she’s burned, so I race over to help. She lifts the still-smoking pan and jabs me in the stomach. Hard. The soggy sandwich slops onto my boot.”

“Have you seen those abs?” I say because I know everyone has. “It was like hitting a rock wall. I didn’t hurt him.”

By this time, everyone is laughing, and it’s hard for me to keep a straight face. It is an entertaining story when I’m not living through it.

Conrad rubs his stomach. “I had the bruise to prove otherwise. And the pan was hot and filled with scalding water that splashed all over me. It ruined my T-shirt.”

Now I’m laughing. “It was an old T-shirt. It was fraying along the bottom. You should have thrown it out years ago.”

“It was comfortable.”

I turn back to our audience. “After I jab him *gently* with the pan, he steps back, hands up in surrender, and says, ‘I’m your neighbor. I’m here to help.’ At least that’s what I think he says. The alarm is still blaring. The house is full of smoke.

And I suddenly remember what I look like. The shower cap, the face mask, the robe.”

“She runs away, pan still in hand, and yells as she goes, ‘Get out of my house!’”

I join in on their laughter. Making this a joke takes away the stink of embarrassment that’s followed me around for months.

“What did you do next?” Roe asks Conrad.

“I opened the windows, made sure the stove was off, then left, locking the door beyond me.”

“What did you two think of each other after that?” Avery asks.

Conrad looks over and studies me. His soft green eyes slay me. “I thought she was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I still do.”

All the women swoon just a little, even me, and I know he’s lying. I wore a green mask! I could have burned down his house! He thought I was like his ex-wife!

“I didn’t think too much about it beyond how humiliated I felt,” I say. “Not only because of my appearance, but because I looked incompetent. Conrad assumed I was a mess in the kitchen for months after that.”

“I bet she proved you wrong quickly,” Theo says.

“Not quick enough,” he said. “Have you ever eaten her chicken cordon bleu? Amazing.”

I blush again and can guarantee he’ll be eating chicken cordon bleu once a month going forward.

“What I don’t understand,” Avery says, “Is how you kept your dating a secret from Lola and Trevor. I can’t even keep my contraband ice cream a secret from my kids.”

I want to lie as little as possible, so I stick as close to the truth as I can. “Most of our dates took place in the backyard after they were in bed. Then doing things with the kids all together without calling it a date.”

As we eat a chicken fried steak, my family asks a few more questions about us, but eventually, the conversation moves to other topics, thank goodness. At times, Conrad talks to Theo while I talk to my sisters. He fit right in.

Kit and Aaron visit all the tables, before taking over the microphone from the band for speeches. There aren't any bridesmaids or groomsmen, but a few of Aaron's siblings get up to say a few words. Then Theo, my sisters, and I.

The catering staff bring out a sheet cake. It's obvious the cake bit is a last-minute inclusion, since this wasn't originally a wedding reception. When Kit and Aaron each cut slices of cake to feed each other, Aaron feeds her a bite tenderly. It's sweet and tears prick my eyes. I'm happy Kit found someone like Aaron.

The dancing begins soon after. Roe doesn't need a partner to have a reason to let loose and heads out to the dance floor alone. Theo and Avery follow.

Conrad leans close and asks, "Care to dance?"

Why not plant more seeds? I take his hand, and he leads me to the dance floor. In a fluid motion, his left hand is on my lower back, and his other hand holds mine. It's just like the other times he's held me. Every muscle relaxes. All the concerns in my head quiet. He smells distinctly male and I huff in a few breaths incognito.

Stella sits at the table and watches us, a wistful expression on her face. I know she's happy for Kit and me, but I also know she wants what we have. Well, maybe not what I have. She would never marry for anything less than whole-hearted love.

I lay my head on Conrad's chest. "Thanks for not mentioning I wasn't wearing a robe when you saved me from the fire."

"Of course. It was obvious you didn't want anyone to know."

"Seth would have said something. Anything for a good story."

There is no pinch of regret, no burn of anger, or yearning for the life I might have had with Seth. After years of pretending a perfect marriage, it's freeing to admit out loud how imperfect our relationship actually was.

"Do you know what else he would have done?" I whisper. "Criticized me about how I looked."

Mostly about my weight gain.

Conrad pulls me closer and leans his head down until his lips are close to my ear.

"Seth didn't appreciate what he had." His whisper is hoarse, almost as if *he* appreciates what he has. Right now, in his arms. "That afternoon, when you ran past wearing very little, I could hardly look away. I did, but it was one of the hardest things I've done in my life, and I fight fires for a living. You were stunning. You *are* stunning. Every day I struggle to look away. I'm the luckiest man at this party because I have you in my arms."

Then he kisses my temple, his lips soft against my skin. My whole body ignites from the inside.

This is not the speech of a man who proposed we get married and keep our relationship platonic. At the moment, I have a hard time caring.

He lingers for just a moment as the song ends, before stepping away until we're only connected by our clasped hands, and leads me back to the table.

IT'S ALMOST TEN BY THE TIME WE LEAVE, MUCH LATER THAN we meant to stay with two kids waiting for us. It was hard to get away once Roe got all of my siblings and spouses out on the dance floor for a group dance. She started making up dance moves, and then Theo joined in. They continued to one-up each other by creating the most ridiculous moves. I don't think I've laughed so hard in years.

When Conrad pulls into Izzy's driveway, two little faces peek out from the window. Before he's turned the ignition, they're outside and running toward us.

The first thing Lola says when I open my door is, "Are you engaged now?"

Maybe we didn't make it clear that it was an engagement party for my sister, not for us.

Either way, the answer is yes.

Chapter Twenty-Three

NAOMI

SATURDAY MORNING TREVOR STANDS ON A CHAIR AT THE stove and stirs scrambled eggs with a spatula. I tucked my apron under his armpits, which always makes me smile.

I flip a pancake. I like them thinner than regular pancakes, almost like a crepe.

I asked Conrad if we could talk to our kids separately about the wedding. I want to temper Trevor's response and without Lola's enthusiasm, it will be easier. Lola will be here in fifteen minutes and I still haven't told him. He'll be thrilled with the news, but that may be the problem.

"Remember how you said you wanted Rad to be your dad?" I say conversationally.

"Yes." He continues to stir.

"What if I told you he wants you to be his son?"

The spatula stills, but Trevor doesn't look up. "He does?"

"Yep, he does. And Lola wants to be your sister."

He looks up, a huge smile on his face. "We're getting married?"

I nod as I flip the pancakes onto a plate and pour out more batter. "Yep. I know this is very exciting, but let's remain calm, okay?" It's stupid to tell a kid to remain calm when they're getting what they've wanted for weeks, but I send a silent prayer that it will be enough to keep him well. "We have a lot of work to do to get ready for the move."

His face shines with excitement. "We get to move to the new house with them, too?"

He jumps off the chair into my arms. I catch him, then I hike him up higher so he's on my hip.

“How are you feeling?” I ask. I feel his forehead. “Are you nervous about the wedding or moving?”

“No. If we move, Dad will never find me.”

Oy. That hits hard. As does the guilt that follows. *Learn from the past, don't live in it.*

When the knock comes at the door a few minutes later, I beat Trevor to answer it. Lola walks in, wraps her arms around my waist, and looks up at me with earnest eyes.

“I knew you would be my mommy.” Her voice is calm and even. I’ve never heard her speak like this before. “I wished on a star and my heart’s desire came true.”

I manage not to laugh. “I’m very excited to have you as my daughter.”

She beams, then turns to Trevor and pats his arm like he’s fragile. “You’re going to be my brother for real, and not just pretend.”

Trevor’s eyebrows wrinkle as he looks at her. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m a princess and this is how princesses act. Daddy told me to not jump or talk loud or be too excited. We have to remain calm.”

I glance at Conrad. He widens his eyes and shrugs. He mouths, “I didn’t think it would work.”

“Do you guys want breakfast?” I ask. “Eggs and pancakes?”

“Yum.” Lola skips to the table and stands on a chair so she can reach across to grab a pancake. I suppose the princess has left the building and the hungry little girl remains.

Trevor stays where he is and looks up at Conrad. “You’ll protect me?”

Conrad squats in front of him so they’re at eye level. “Always. Are you okay with me being your dad?”

Trevor nods. “Can I ride on your shoulders next time we play Quidditch like Dora did?”

Conrad quirks an eyebrow and glances up at me before he says, “We can try, but you’re a lot bigger than Dora. I think you’ll enjoy the game more if you have your own broom.”

“I won’t.” He goes back to his breakfast.

We’re left alone. He’s only taken one step inside and the door is still open.

“Do you want anything to eat?” I ask.

“I gotta go or I’ll be late.” He leans close and whispers, “That went better than I expected. Trevor seems okay.”

I nod. “Let’s hope the next few weeks go just as well. Hold on one second. I have cookies for you to take to work.”

Before grabbing the cookies, I take a pancake and put eggs in the middle, then wrap it into a napkin.

“Have a good day,” I say, as I hand him the cookies and breakfast.

“When did you have time to make cookies?”

“I woke up early this morning and couldn’t get back to sleep.”

He looks at me for a long moment; the humor leaving his eyes as he becomes more serious. “I think I’m going to enjoy being married to you. The guys, too, if you keep sending them cookies.”

He leans forward and lightning-quick kisses my cheek. Then he’s gone, and I’m left with a wildly beating heart and hot cheeks. I think I’ll enjoy being married, too.

WE DECIDE SENDING A VIDEO TO OUR FAMILIES ABOUT THE engagement will be the easiest since we plan to marry in a few short weeks. Then everyone will know at once and none of my sisters will feel slighted that they heard about it last.

Also, if I had to tell everyone individually, I probably wouldn’t be able to get through the explanation without

bursting into nervous laughter.

Sunday afternoon, I prop my phone on a stack of books on the coffee table while we sit on the couch. Trevor sits on Conrad's lap, and Lola sits on mine.

"They'll never believe us," I say to Conrad softly, under the noise the kids are making. "We're supposed to be madly in love and we aren't even touching."

"Easily remedied." Conrad moves closer and drapes his arm over my shoulders. "Relax. Your back is ramrod straight."

I do as he says and lean into his side. His body is warm, and he smells so good. I hope the way we're sitting doesn't look staged, because it feels like it is from where I'm sitting. At least the kids are natural.

"Are you kids ready?" Conrad asks.

"I'm ready!" Lola says.

"I'm ready," Trevor echoes.

"And you remember your lines?"

Lola nods her head enthusiastically.

"Okay, go," Conrad says.

"We're getting married!" Trevor yells.

"Surprise," I say. "We've been talking about it for a while." *Read: five days.* "And have made it a quick engagement because I'm being laid off at the end of the month and Trevor and I need insurance."

Lola does not need any prodding. "We're getting married the second Saturday of October at the church down the street."

It was lucky I found the place and that they'd had a recent cancellation. That gives us three weeks to pull together a small wedding.

Conrad says, "The ceremony will be at ten o'clock, with a casual luncheon at noon. We hope you will join us."

"More information coming soon," Lola finishes.

Then, because Lola insisted, she throws confetti up into the air. Or more accurately, throws confetti, but most of it ends up in her dad's face.

He sneezes, which makes us all laugh. A great ending to our video message.

The kids go outside to play, but Conrad and I stay where we are. We crop the beginning when we were trying to figure out how to sit, then watch it a few times before I send it to my family group chat. It takes less than a minute for the messages to come through. Conrad and I read them together.

ROE: *Minrad, you tricksters. I bet you were engaged on Friday and you didn't say a word! You and Kitron are full of surprises!*

MOM: *You lost your job? Yes, we will have a long talk. I will pick you up at ten tomorrow morning.*

KIT: *I want to know everything as soon as we get back from our honeymoon! I saw you all laughing during dinner at our wedding party, and I feel like I missed out.*

EVERY: *Congratulations!!! I'm so happy for you both!*

THEO: *I might have a lead on a job. I'll text next week when I have a better idea.*

STELLA: *You two are perfect together. I'm so excited!*

ROE: *Can I get full artistic license over the bride's hair and face? I have a vision of hair down, curled, but with a loose braid, kind of like a crown. It will look gorgeous!*

KIT: *Do you want to borrow my Mustang for after the wedding? As long as NO ONE desecrates my precious with tacky decorations, you can drive off into the sunset in style. I mean it Aaron and Theo, NO DECORATIONS. You either, Roe.*

AARON: *I would never put anything TACKY on your precious. But anything not tacky, I can't make any promises.*

ROE: *Your announcement video would have been better if you'd shared a kiss.*

STELLA: *Do you need someone to watch the kids the weekend after the wedding? I volunteer as tribute!*

KIT: *We had some decorations and centerpieces we bought for the wedding reception we won't be having if you want to use them.*

DAD: *Congrats you two. Tell Conrad we will have a talk this week. I need to make sure my daughter will be well taken care of.*

“Should I be scared?” Conrad asks me.

“No. Just convince him of your undying devotion to me. He's a softy at heart. Any message from your parents?”

He lets me read the message his dad sent.

SR: *Congratulations! We wish we could come, but we have a medical conference that weekend. You all make a nice-looking family.*

“I'm sorry they can't make it,” I say.

He shrugs. “I honestly didn't expect them to. But Izzy and John will be there.”

He shows me their message.

IZZY: *WHAT?!? YOU SAID YOU WOULDN'T GET MARRIED BEFORE I MOVED! I'M SO HAPPY YOU WERE WRONG!*

“Are the capitals really necessary?” I ask.

“For Izzy, yes.”

I add Conrad to my family's chat. He's officially part of the Jacobson clan. I know they'll make him feel welcome, especially my parents, once I convince them rushing the marriage is a good thing. We'll be his support.

Chapter Twenty-Four

NAOMI

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING, THE FOUR OF US HEAD BACK to the duplex after spending the evening at dinner with my family, Izzy, and John.

The kids are asleep in the back, and I'm struggling not to join them. The quiet peace of the car makes me drowsy. It's no easy feat to plan a wedding and pack up two houses in three weeks. It took a lot of talking to convince Mom we're making a good decision marrying so quickly. Once she got to know Conrad, she could see what a good man he was for me and Trevor and stopped arguing with me on the date.

With eyes half closed, I study Conrad's profile as he drives. He got a haircut today, the same style as for the calendar photoshoot, and it looks good on him. Everything about him looks good. All night, as he talked and laughed with my family, I struggled to look away. He isn't the same grumbly, stay-away-from-me neighbor of two months ago.

I play with the ring on my left hand. It's rose gold with a twisted band and a round-cut diamond. All four of us picked it out together. The twisted band makes me think of how we're coming together to form a family.

He pulls into the driveway, and we sit together.

"Ready for tomorrow?" he asks.

I'm impatient for tomorrow to be over so we can start our new life on Ponderosa Pine Way. The realtor gave us the keys to the new house yesterday, but we've been too busy to go see it with pulling together the wedding.

"I'm ready," I say.

He holds out his hand, palm up, and I lay mine in his. Holding hands has become our thing. Conrad isn't overly demonstrative in public (and never in private), but he will always take my hand, wherever we are.

We would sit here for longer, but Lola wakes up, and she wakes Trevor. With our peace shattered, we might as well go in and get the kids to bed.

Conrad carries Lola to his front door. Trevor plods behind me as we head to our front door.

“See you tomorrow,” I say.

The next time we see each other is when I walk toward him down the aisle. Even with weeks consumed with planning and packing, it doesn't feel real that our wedding is in twelve hours. This is our last night sleeping in separate houses.

Conrad gives me a smile. “See you tomorrow.”

My house is a jumble of moving boxes. Trevor and I maneuver around the stacks and get ready for bed. As I brush my teeth, I mentally run through the schedule for the next few days, checking to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

Tomorrow the ceremony starts at ten at the church. It will be a small wedding. Just our families and Conrad's firefighting team and their wives.

After, we'll go to the garden behind the church for pictures and a luncheon provided by a gourmet burger food truck that will arrive at noon. The same band that played at Kit's engagement/wedding party will play at ours.

In the afternoon, Conrad and I will tell everyone goodbye, climb into Kit's Mustang, and drive to the local hotel for our “honeymoon.” We have two rooms booked for one night. From the moment we arrive to our late check-out time, I plan to sleep. The last three weeks have pushed me to the brink of exhaustion.

I crawl into my bed and switch off the lamp. I'm looking forward to that honeymoon.

After the honeymoon, I'll finally get to see the house from the inside. I'm excited to unpack all our boxes and settle into our new lives. We just have to get through the ceremony first.

The ceremony itself is straightforward. Trevor is the ring bearer, and Lola is our flower girl. I asked Dad not to walk me

down the aisle. I won't be given away, or allow Conrad to take me on as a responsibility. I'm walking down the aisle as an independent woman, marrying a good man because it's mutually beneficial. We're not exchanging personalized vows. We'll say "I do," kiss, and walk back down the aisle together.

Wait. Kiss. The pastor is going to ask us to kiss. How did this not cross my mind earlier? The only person I have ever kissed is Seth. I know how to kiss Seth. I don't know how to kiss Conrad. Everyone will watch that kiss and know that we are love fakers because I will be awkward, I just know.

For an hour, I toss and turn in bed. I know what will help me calm down. Practice.

I call Conrad.

"Naomi," he says. He sounds half asleep and alarmed. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm coming over right now," I say. "We need to talk."

"What is it? Are you canceling the wedding?"

"No, it's something else. I'll be there in thirty seconds. Backdoor."

I hang up and head over. My pajama top is thick enough that I don't put my bra back on. This will be a quick visit and then I'll be able to sleep.

He's waiting with the door open when I arrive. His place is also full of moving boxes. It's always trippy being over here. It's exactly the opposite to mine, so it's familiar, but also different.

He shuts the door behind me, then leans back against it, arms crossed.

"You have freckles," he says, studying my face.

I cover my cheeks as I groan. How could I forget about my freckles? "They're the worst."

He shakes his head. "I love them."

The fervent honesty in his voice forces me to drop my hands. I'm momentarily speechless. I hate my freckles.

Though I love Trevor's. I suppose it's in the beholder's eye.

"Did you have something you wanted to talk to me about?" he asks.

It brings me back to the purpose of my visit. "Oh. Um. The wedding is tomorrow."

"I remember."

I shift from foot to foot, my freckles forgotten when I take into consideration the purpose of my late-night visit. This is harder than it should be. We'll be living together starting tomorrow. Why can't I say the "k" word in front of my soon-to-be-husband?

He continues to wait, not saying a word. It's the exact opposite response Seth would have given me in the same situation. It's enough to nudge me to say what's on my mind.

"Everyone will know we're love-fakers when we kiss for the very first time tomorrow. We have to practice, so it looks natural."

He's not smiling now. In fact, he's frowning. "Is that really necessary?"

"Yes, it is." I take a step closer to him. "Come on, kiss me."

He presses up against the door as if kissing me isn't only a bad idea, it's also an abhorrent one.

I'm hurt. "You don't want to kiss me?"

He blows out a breath. "No, it's not that. You're an attractive woman, and I'm only human. If we let physical intimacy enter our agreement, it could ruin everything."

I'm momentarily at a loss for words. That's a problem I didn't foresee when I headed over here. I try to pretend that him calling me an attractive woman when I have freckles showing doesn't affect me, but it's impossible when I feel the blush travel up my neck and warm my cheeks.

"We have to kiss tomorrow anyway," I say.

"Yes, but we'll have an audience and I'll keep my wits."

I remember what my physical response was when I kissed Seth, but I won't feel that way with Conrad. Tonight isn't romantic. It's practical.

I try to explain. "We're practicing a brief kiss for our friends and family, so they buy into our quickie romance story. We'll practice from the beginning." I point to the end of the sofa. "You stand over there, and I'll approach down the aisle."

He doesn't move.

"Please, Conrad?" I sound like Lola begging for something. "I need to run through it once or I'll never be able to sleep."

He walks to where I point, but shakes his head the whole way there. "Fine. Let's do this."

I hold my hands in front of my chest as if I have my bouquet and take slow steps forward while humming the wedding march. With each step, my anxiety drains away. Practicing this whole thing, not just the kiss, is a good idea. I feel more confident already.

Conrad's expression softens as I approach. A smile touches his lips and my heart expands. What am I trying to prove to our family with this kiss? I might not love Conrad as a husband, but he's become my best friend. Why isn't that enough? Why am I forcing Conrad to kiss me when it's obvious he'd rather not? All I know is I don't want to stop. I want to see our rehearsal through to the end.

I stop in front of him and look up. "The pastor will say his spiel, and finish with, 'You may now kiss the bride.'"

Conrad moves quickly and his lips touch mine for only a second. Not long enough to register the kiss. I blink a few times.

"Feel better?" he asks.

I feel worse. Like I had a taste of chocolate cake, but just enough to want more.

"When Avery and Theo married, their kiss went on forever. At Kit and Aaron's party, they kissed twice, both

kisses at least five times longer than that. We need to give a little more to be believable.”

He scratches his cheek and looks down at his feet. Guilt swamps me. He obviously isn't comfortable practicing, so I'll just have to trust that a half-second peck on the lips will cut it with my family. I'll need to prepare myself for their teasing afterward.

“It's fine,” I say. “We can stop.”

“No.” He waves his hand to where I began the procession. “Let's start at the beginning and do this one more time. How long does the kiss need to last?”

Good question. “Five seconds will be enough.”

I go back to my spot, pick up my imaginary bouquet, and hum the wedding march as I walk toward him again.

This time when I say, “You may now kiss the bride,” he hooks his hand around the back of my neck, and leans down slowly. His lips touch mine and I shiver with the contact. At first, that's all it is, our lips touching, but when he tilts his head and moves his lips against mine, my body wakes up. I've been asleep for years. All it took was a kiss from Prince Charming to wake me up.

He moves to draw away from me, but my hands fist into the front of his shirt, pulling him closer.

His kiss was sweet, but mine becomes hungry as my senses come alive. I'm surrounded by warmth and his distinct scent. It has a drug-like effect on me, making me weak at the knees. I see stars behind my eyelids. The warmth of his other arm coming around my lower back, pulling me nearer, makes me feel protected. Cherished. Wanted.

I reach one hand up to his cheek. His beard is soft against my fingers. Seth never grew a beard, and the soft-yet-prickly sensation against my lips is wholly new. Uniquely Conrad.

I sink deeper into the kiss and lose myself in the sensation. His hands caress up and down my back, drawing me closer, releasing, then closer again, until they travel to my neck and

weave through my hair. My hands skim down his shoulders and around his sides. Muscles twitch beneath my palms.

When he tries to end the kiss a second time, I follow his lips until I'm on my tiptoes. I don't want to let him go, but he's taller than me.

My eyes slowly open, bringing me back to his living room. I hold on to his firm biceps so I don't collapse to the floor. His arms are around my upper back.

I understand why he didn't want to kiss me. Just this bit of physical intimacy has changed things between us, and I don't believe I'm the only one who feels the shift.

"That might be a little too much for a wedding ceremony," I whisper. "There will be kids in attendance."

"Right."

"Somewhere in the middle of those kisses, but closer to the first, should hit the right spot."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry for forcing you to kiss me."

"The problem wasn't kissing you." His voice is low, soft, and tender. It's almost as powerful as the kiss. Almost. "The problem was stopping."

"It can't happen again," I say with more conviction than I feel. Getting physical will mess up our platonic plans for this marriage. We're friends, and not the kind that comes with benefits.

"I agree. No more kissing."

I wish he would argue with me. It's only been a few minutes, and I'm already craving more. He is a drug. One I can't have ever again.

"Never again," I reiterate, more for my benefit than his.

"After the ceremony tomorrow, never again," he agrees.

I stay where I am for another few seconds, soaking in the feel of him, then pull away. I'm instantly cold, but force

myself to the back door.

“Goodnight, Conrad.”

“Goodnight, Naomi. See you at the church.”

I don't look over my shoulder as I walk back to my place. Conrad's door doesn't click closed, so I suspect he's watching.

I was mistaken. Practicing the kiss means I don't sleep at all. Our kiss runs through my mind on repeat. Bad, Naomi. Very, very, bad.

Chapter Twenty-Five

CONRAD

THE ORGAN PLAYS BEHIND ME AS I LOOK AT OUR GUESTS seated in the chapel. The pastor stands at the front. Lola's in the foyer and every minute or so she runs, skips, or gallops past the open doors. Her enthusiasm is boundless. It helps to have her so excited because I've been feeling less so since last night.

The idea of this marriage between friends is brilliant. All four of us benefit, but only if Naomi and I keep our hands off each other.

Naomi's a beautiful woman and I'm attracted to her, but I had a plan to keep physical contact just enough in public to make us look in love. In private, we would never touch unless she wanted to hold hands. That's safe.

But the kiss last night proved that we have chemistry. I can't shake the memory. Naomi enjoyed the kiss just as much as I did. It blew my optimism over a platonic marriage into fragments.

I can no longer deny that I'm falling for Naomi. I can't yield to my desire to love her with all my mind, body, and soul. I can't put myself in the same situation as I was in with Carmen, where I love a woman who can't or won't love me back. Lopsided love will tear apart our family eventually, and I want us to last forever. No physical relations is how our marriage between friends will survive. That's why Naomi and I can never kiss again.

When I couldn't sleep last night, I contemplated calling the wedding off. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to resist Naomi for the rest of my life. But I can't pull out now, so I have to be strong. Naomi, Lola, and Trevor are relying on me. I won't let them down.

I look out at her family in the pews. Over the last few weeks, they've welcomed me into their lives. Michelle and

Steve treat me like a son. I've played basketball with Theo and Aaron twice and I can see us becoming like brothers.

Last night at dinner, Stella pulled me away from the group and thanked me for taking care of Naomi. "She won't let anyone else help her," she said. "I'm glad she's found you."

All of them are relying on me, and I've come to rely on them.

I repeat to myself the pep talk I've had on repeat for the last twelve hours: *I can handle my attraction. I won't fall in love. We'll be in different bedrooms. I spent a third of my time at the firehouse. I'll pick up overtime if I have to. I can handle this.*

My buddy Nolte and his wife slip in, and I count our guests. They're all here, with two minutes to spare. Naomi's mom and dad are the last to enter, and they sit in the front row. The organist finishes her melody and then starts an arrangement of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

Everyone turns in their seats to look back at the chapel entrance. Lola and Trevor make their way down the center aisle together, holding hands. Trevor was supposed to come first, followed by Lola, but maybe he was nervous. He doesn't look up as they walk. Since they hold hands, Lola has the long-handled basket around her neck and is using her free hand to throw flower petals into the air. They rain down like confetti.

It's all very traditional, which makes me feel like we're liars. Getting married in a church was a bad idea, it just reinforces the feeling. Maybe a trip to the courthouse like Kit and Aaron would have been the better option. Too late now.

My dry mouth makes it difficult to swallow. My hands sweat, but I resist the urge to wipe them down my pant legs. I wish I hadn't tied this tie so tightly.

Lola and Trevor make it to the front and stand next to me. They're supposed to sit with Michelle and Steve, but Trevor takes my hand and Lola has yet to let go of his other one. I remove the basket from her neck and place it on the floor. We

have no groomsmen or bridesmaids, so it's the three of us waiting for Naomi.

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow” melds into the wedding march. Everyone stands and faces the foyer to wait for the bride.

Instead, Carmen and Hudson enter.

What is my ex-wife doing here? My fist clenches, as does my jaw. I imagine Hudson heard about my wedding through the firefighter grapevine. He still has connections to Tucson, and firefighters have a brotherhood that extends past city and state borders. That doesn't give them permission to crash my wedding.

Carmen lifts her shoulders and covers her mouth with both hands as if she's embarrassed everyone is staring at her, but what did she expect? The wedding march is playing. She's wearing an off white pantsuit. Even I know wearing white to a wedding is tacky.

She waves and mouths, “Sorry,” before pushing into a pew and making everyone else shuffle down.

Lola moves to stand on the other side of me and leans against my leg. Her infectious enthusiasm has dimmed. She's frowning, and her brows are low and broody.

You and me both, kiddo.

I'm so angry, I miss Naomi's entrance. It isn't until she blocks my view of Carmen that I even realize she's entered. Her smile is shy, and she bites her bottom lip as she approaches.

I've thought it many times since the smoke alarm incident, but she is stunning. I can't describe what kind of dress she's wearing, but it fits her perfectly. It's shimmery; tight at the top, flowy at the bottom. She really should have gotten something with sleeves, because her bare shoulders are sexy. I want to kiss them, and I cannot kiss my wife. It will unravel me.

Any remaining thought of Carmen disappears. I don't care about her and her bid for attention when I have someone authentic and honest gliding toward me. Like I told Naomi

weeks ago, it's best to leave the past behind and look to the future.

I stand straighter and meet her shy smile with one of my own.

When Naomi stops next to me, Lola throws her arms around her. Everyone laughs, and the last of my tension disappears.

We're going to be okay.

Naomi holds out her hand, and I take it. Trevor still holds my other hand. All four of us are connected as the pastor says all the words he has to say. I don't hear a single one. It isn't until Naomi squeezes my hand that I realize I missed my cue.

"I do."

When we exchange rings, there's a slight tremor to Naomi's hand as she slips a silver band onto my finger.

"I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

I move like I did last night, with one hand behind her neck, the other at her lower back. Our lips touch, separate, touch again. I count to five to make sure the kiss isn't too short or too long. When I pull away, Naomi is smiling up at me, so I think we gave an excellent performance for the family.

A pesky thought intrudes. *I wish this wasn't an act, but real.*

A cheer goes up. Lola's louder than anyone. We lift our clasped hands into the air. Lola and Trevor need a little prod to go back down the aisle. Naomi and I follow.

We did it. We're married.

NAOMI

The foyer is empty, but I can hear the crowd behind us following.

I look at Conrad, feeling like we just got away with something we shouldn't have. We share an incredulous look, then laugh. He still has my left hand, and he lifts it up to his lips and kisses it. My stomach dips and I get lost in his eyes for just long enough to wish he'd kiss me again, like he did last night.

Bad Naomi.

“Congratulations!” Roe says as she pulls me into a hug.

Right, we have an appearance to keep up. That's all Conrad was doing with the back-of-the-hand kiss. Giving our family and friends something to talk about. He didn't mean to make me wish this could be real.

The rest of our family and friends congratulate us as they head out to the back gardens. Trevor and Lola stand beside us, and they get as many well wishes as Conrad and I do.

Izzy hugs me tightly and whispers, “Please take care of him.”

Conrad's ex-wife and ex-brother-in-law wait to talk to us last. I take a breath and hold it as they draw closer. Conrad stiffens.

I can't believe I didn't know Classy Carmen was Conrad's ex-wife. I used to follow her on Instagram until Seth left and I deleted all of my social media. When she first walked into the church and stopped to talk to me, delaying my entrance into the chapel, I thought she was doing a story about me on her social media accounts, which made no sense. It was only after she gushed about how happy she was for Conrad to finally move on that I made the connection.

It's odd, because I remember seeing pictures she posted years ago of her with her husband and toddler daughter. I didn't recognize Conrad and Lola when I saw them earlier this year, but then, years ago, Conrad didn't have a beard and his hair was trimmed short.

It just proves how it's a small world, and how sometimes that really sucks.

Knowing what I know about Classy Carmen now, I struggle to smile as she approaches. She treated Lola like a doll and had an affair with Conrad's friend and brother-in-law. Who does that?

Carmen throws her arms around me like we're friends. I glance at Conrad over her shoulder. He looks like he wants to tear her off of me. I wish he would. Her perfume is cloying and makes my eyes water.

"Congratulations!" she screams in my ear before pulling back. "This is so exciting. I didn't think Beck would ever marry again." She turns to Conrad. "Beck! You're married!"

When she tries to hug Conrad, he holds her off and steps back. "No. You and your husband need to leave. We didn't invite you."

She rolls her eyes. "An obvious oversight, but I'm willing to forgive you."

"Not an oversight. We don't want you here."

I expect her to take offense at his blunt words, but she laughs. Her husband, however, ducks his head and looks at his feet.

Carmen turns to Lola, who is half hiding behind her dad. I can see Carmen in Lola. They have similar noses and chins and the same deep brown eyes. Their energy and charisma match. Not now, but usually.

"Hey, babe," Carmen says in a coddling voice. "How is my little girl?"

"Good," Lola says quietly, almost shyly.

“And this little man must belong to the bride, right?” Carmen holds out her hand. “I’m your new auntie.”

“No,” Conrad says forcefully. “We are not related in any way. You need to leave.”

Carmen laughs. “We’ll see you outside.” She has some thick skin. Or maybe a hearing problem.

She takes her husband’s hand and tugs him after her. He nods at Conrad as they pass. At least he has the decency to look guilty, even if he is spineless. How could he leave grounded Izzy for flighty Carmen? Maybe she isn’t terrible if Conrad once loved her, but bad enough. I completely understand why Conrad wants her to stay away from Lola, but I’m miffed he ever thought I was similar to that woman.

It’s hard to leave the past behind when it shows up at the wedding. I want them to go away, but I’m not sure how to do that without physically kicking them off the property.

“I’m sorry,” Conrad says.

I smooth down his lapels, not meeting his eyes. I don’t want him to see my fury. “It’s obviously not your fault.”

He turns to Lola. “How are you doing?”

She’s already perked up. She takes my hand and looks up to me. “Mommy, can we take pictures now?”

Mommy. That didn’t take long.

“That sounds like a great idea,” I say. “Shall we get family pictures first, just the four of us?”

She nods, and with my hand still in hers, skips toward the exit. Trevor holds my other hand, and Conrad takes Trevor’s free hand and becomes the caboose. I love this family we’ve brought together. My anger over his ex showing up dissipates. Who cares about her when we have each other? Not me.

Now I can meet Conrad’s eyes. I hope he can see how happy this family makes me.

CONRAD

Once in the back garden, I notice Carmen making a beeline toward Izzy. Hudson is on the opposite side of the patio, standing alone. Smart man.

“I’ll be right back,” I say to Naomi. “I need to run interference.”

She looks to where my attention is and squeezes my hand. “We’ll meet you in the north corner for pictures.”

I watch as Carmen gets to Izzy. She doesn’t attempt a hug, so she is aware of the animosity.

Izzy sees me, but I’m behind Carmen and she doesn’t notice my approach.

“We are not friends,” Izzy says.

“We’ve been friends for ten years. Why can’t we get over this and move on?”

Izzy stands straighter and studies Carmen. Carmen drops her gaze first.

“You were my friend,” Izzy says. “I trusted you, and then you stabbed me in the back. Repeatedly. For a year. I will never answer your phone calls. I will never go to lunch with you. I never want to see you again. Every tie we had is severed.”

“I came to this wedding for you, Iz.” Carmen’s voice is soft, apologetic. “I miss you. I’m so sorry for hurting you, but what else were Hudson and I supposed to do? We were in love.”

“You could have distanced yourself from my husband instead of your own. You could’ve been honest and up front with me and Conrad instead of lying. For a year.”

“If I had told you Hudson and I were in love a year earlier, you would have forgiven me and we’d be friends?”

“You seduced my husband. We will never be friends.”

“Iz, please? Can we try?”

“No. I don’t waste my time thinking about you, and you should forget all about me.”

Carmen stands up straight and rolls her shoulders back. “I’ll try again next year. I don’t forget people I care about.”

She turns and rams into my chest. As she pushes away, I see tears in her eyes.

“Izzy might not want to talk to me,” Carmen says to me, “But you still have to. Don’t you dare ignore my calls, because we will be friends until our dying day.”

She glides over to Hudson, and we watch as they leave together. It’s a relief they left because I wasn’t sure how to keep her out of the pictures without making a scene.

The guys of Engine 25 and their wives talk together at a table. A few of them watch Hudson leave. None of them have tried to talk with him. Hudson waves, but they don’t wave back. For the first time in years, I feel bad for him. He gave up a lot when he chose Carmen. I hope he’s happy with the choice he made.

“Are you okay?” I ask Izzy.

“I’m fantastic.” She shakes out her arms and takes some deep breaths. “I didn’t know I needed to confront her until she confronted me. That felt good. Maybe I should go run a marathon.”

John pulls her near and kisses her temple. “You did great.”

“I did, didn’t I?” She points over my shoulder. “You should get over there. Your family is waiting. I promise not to run my marathon until after the luncheon.”

I turn to look where she’s pointing. Naomi is fixing Trevors bowtie while Lola twirls in her new dress. It’s official. They’re my family. I’ve never felt this happy.

I head back to Naomi and pictures. We take one after the other, different configurations, locations, people. Some are just

the two of us, and those are my favorite because I get to hold Naomi in my arms and not feel guilty about it. This photoshoot is infinitely better than the calendar one. Bonus—I'm fully clothed. Just as long as there's no kissing.

“Pull your wife closer,” the photographer says. “Now kiss her on the lips and hold.”

Well, if I have to keep up appearances.

It's only a touch of our lips, but everyone around us cheers and throws their arms in the air. A little over the top, but it helps keep me from taking this kiss any farther.

The next few hours go quickly by. There are less than thirty people, and with so few, everyone feels the need to give a toast after lunch. My friends enjoy trying to embarrass me with stories from the firehouse. Some even mention Naomi's cookies, probably hoping to get more.

By late afternoon, it's time for us to say goodbye and head to the hotel for the honeymoon. Naomi goes inside to change out of her wedding dress, and I wait outside the bridal suite for her. When she comes out, she's in a white summer dress with thin straps. After this, she has to keep those shoulders covered. I'm not strong enough to resist if she teases me like this.

Michelle and Steve meet us in the foyer to say goodbye. At least, that's what I assume until Michelle speaks.

“We know you wanted to pay for your wedding without our help, so as a compromise, we are paying for your honeymoon. You have a suite at the Clearview resort in Scottsdale.”

My stomach drops. I look at Naomi for how to respond. We booked two rooms at a hotel fifteen minutes away. Neither of us wants to share a room.

“Mom, we already have a hotel.”

Michelle is unrepentant. “Now you have a suite at a fancy resort. We booked it through Tuesday.”

“Why?” Naomi asks. She doesn't look any happier than I feel. “We want to move into the new house tomorrow.”

“Because one night at a mediocre hotel in the same city you live in is not a honeymoon. We booked a spa package for you tomorrow afternoon and a different restaurant every night you’re there. All the food is inclusive. Have fun. Relax. While you’re gone, we’ll have everything moved out of the duplex and into your new house. All we need are your keys.”

Wow. I didn’t know a mother could be so bossy with her adult children. I understand why Naomi didn’t want to move back in with her parents.

“Mom, you didn’t have to do this. We were happy moving in ourselves. We thought we’d take our time.”

“We’ll leave all the unpacking to you, but this way you’ll have a bed to come back to after your stay at the resort. Trust me, it’s better this way.”

Better for who? Naomi and I share a look. It seems the only thing we can do is accept gracefully.

“Thank you, Michelle,” I say. “Steve.”

“You’re welcome,” Steve says. “Naomi, your husband knows how to say thank you.”

Husband. Steve might not have walked Naomi down the aisle, but it feels like he is giving her over to my care in this moment. I feel the weight of responsibility settle over my shoulders, but it’s comfortable.

“This is all very thoughtful of you both,” Naomi says, “But what about Trevor? What if all this change causes an episode and I’m ninety minutes away instead of ten minutes?”

Michelle takes her by the shoulders and says, “Naomi, you worry too much.”

She gives a short laugh. “I worry too much? I’m only the princess of worry. You’re the queen.”

Michelle smiles. “We’ll take care of Trevor. You can’t stop living your life because of what might happen.”

Naomi has an expression that says clearly, *Yes, I can.* I admire her restraint at not saying it out loud.

Instead, she says, “I just wish you would have talked to us first. That’s a lot of money to spend on a hotel.”

“It’s an all-inclusive resort, not a hotel, and by the time you get back, you’ll agree its money well spent. It’s your honeymoon! We love you and are excited for you both. We have a key to your duplex, Naomi, so we just need Conrad’s duplex keys and the one to the new house. While you’re gone, we’ll move everything over.”

I pull the keys out of my pocket, but Naomi puts her hand on mine before I pass them over to Michelle’s waiting hand.

“We need to go home and pack if we’re going to be gone for three days instead of one.”

“Izzy added a few things to Conrad’s suitcase, and your sisters packed some extra stuff for you. It’s in the car’s trunk. We’ve been working together to give you this surprise.”

Naomi pulls out her plastic smile. It’s obvious she isn’t happy, but she knows when the battle has been lost. I pass over my keys.

Michelle and Steve follow us outside into the garden. All the guests have lined two sides, making a path for us to the Mustang. Bubbles float above our heads. As promised, there is nothing tacky attached to the car, but someone wrote on the back window, “Just married.”

We give Lola and Trevor a huge hug before we leave.

“Will you be okay while we’re gone?” I ask Lola.

She jumps up and down. “I get to stay with Lottie in her room.”

Lottie, her cousin. They will always be connected as family. It makes me indescribably happy to see her so happy.

Naomi tells Trevor to call her if he feels any worry about us being gone.

We get inside the car and buckle up. I honk as we pull away.

Naomi has her head back and her eyes closed.

“What do you want to do?” I pull out into traffic since everyone is watching us, but at the next street I turn right and park along the curb. “We can still go to our hotel as we originally planned and get a few extra nights.”

“No, we can’t. My family will expect pictures and a travelog about the experience. I don’t want us to lie more than we have to. And my parents spent so much money, I hate to waste it.”

I pull back out into traffic. The Mustang handles like a dream. It makes me want to buy one for myself.

“So we’re headed to Scottsdale,” I say. “It’s a suite, so there will probably be a pullout couch.” We’d still have to share a small living space and a bathroom. Not ideal. “Or we could ask for a second room.” I like that idea much better.

Naomi’s thoughtful. “Let’s get a second room. It’ll be expensive, but I have the rest of my severance pay.”

“We’re married now, remember? There is no more mine and yours, it’s ours. We’re in this together, right?”

She insisted we split the cost of the wedding since we weren’t married yet, but that argument no longer stands.

With a sigh, she nods. “That is what we agreed on. It just means I’ll need to figure out a job quick so I can contribute to what’s ours.”

Sometimes her stubborn independence when it comes to money matters bothers me, but I let it go. I’m not concerned about the money. Now that we’re married, I see everything I have as hers, but if earning her own is so important to her, then I support her in that decision.

Chapter Twenty-Six

NAOMI

WITHIN FIVE MINUTES OF LEAVING TUCSON, I FALL ASLEEP and don't wake until Conrad rubs my arm. It's a warm, compassionate touch and I'm tempted to pretend to still be asleep, so he'll keep doing it.

"We're here," he says in his deep, smooth voice.

I blink and look out the window at the massive front doors of the hotel. Correction: resort. Mom was right, this is no mere hotel. A valet opens my door, and I climb out.

A bellhop takes our bags. As I walk by, he says, "Congratulations."

For a full three seconds, I'm flummoxed at why he would say that to me. It's when I catch the writing on the back window of the Mustang that I remember. I'm married.

"Thank you."

The valet takes the keys from Conrad. It makes me twitchy to have someone else drive my sister's car, but it's not like he'd still have this job if he wasn't careful.

The lobby is impressive. Vaulted ceilings, luxury couches and loveseats, with bulky, wooden end tables and credenzas. This place has got to be even more expensive than I assumed. I've never stayed somewhere like this before. Seth loved to save money, not spend it, unless it went toward making us look wealthy and respectable.

It's a long walk on decorative tile to the front desk. Conrad gives his name, then leans forward and says quietly, "We were hoping—"

Maybe he spoke too quietly because the desk agent talks over him.

"Conrad and Naomi Beck. Congratulations on your wedding. We have the honeymoon suite ready for your

arrival.”

We share a look. How can we ask for a second room when they know it’s our honeymoon?

I shake my head. We can’t. We’re sharing the *honeymoon suite* for four nights. I was annoyed with my parents before, but now I’m mad. Why can’t my mom listen?

Once Conrad has the key, we follow the bellhop as he leads us to the elevator and pushes the third floor button. That same nervous energy I felt at Kit’s engagement party builds up inside of me until I’m sure I’m about to burst into raucous laughter. I cover my mouth with both hands and refuse to look at Conrad, even though I feel his attention on me. It’s too late to change my mind about marriage, but right about now I’m wondering, *What are we doing? This isn’t the plan.*

Our room isn’t far down the hall, and once the bellhop pushes it open, I step through and all the laughter I’ve struggled to hold in disappears. This place is massive.

The bellhop rolls our luggage through the plush carpet of the sitting room and into the bedroom. There isn’t a door separating the two rooms, just an opening double the width of a regular sized door. Who needs privacy on a honeymoon? Just us.

In the sitting room, we have a couch and two lounge chairs, then a round table with a bottle of champagne on ice and a box of chocolates. Beyond that is a wall of glass with a sliding door that opens onto a balcony. The sun is low in the sky and floods the room with a honey glow.

Conrad gives the bellhop a tip, and then we’re alone.

“This is nice,” Conrad says. He rocks from toe to heel with his hands in his pockets.

What are we supposed to do now? I walk into the bedroom. It’s got to be a California king-sized bed, with rose petals scattered on top. It would be romantic for anyone else, but it’s just embarrassing for us.

“Why did my parents book us this place?” It’s a rhetorical question and I’m glad Conrad doesn’t answer. “It’s ridiculous.

Did you see the bed?”

He comes up behind me. I can feel the heat of his body, even the presence of him, but he doesn't touch me. We haven't touched since he woke me in the car.

“It looks comfortable,” he says.

“Yeah, but there's only one.”

He looks around at the suite. “The couch doesn't look to be a foldout bed, but it's long. I can sleep there.”

I walk over to the couch and sit on it. It's firm. I won't offer to sleep on it, because I'm positive Conrad wouldn't let me I did. I pat the cushion next to me.

“Try it out. It isn't very comfortable.”

I stand. It's long enough to fit the length of his body, but as soon as he's stretched out, it's obvious it's too narrow. His shoulder hangs off the side. He shifts around, trying to get comfortable. I can't help but laugh.

“We can both sleep in the bed,” I offer. I have to swallow down my nervousness at the idea. “It's huge. We're adults. We'll be fine.”

He grimaces like he doesn't agree. “I don't mind sleeping here. The mattress at the fire station isn't great, and I sleep fine.”

I cackle as he continues to seek a comfortable position.

“Better than you sleep in your own bed? Because you spend a lot of time outside on the back patio at night.”

He smiles up at me. He still has on his suit coat and tie. So handsome.

“Good point,” he says. “I don't sleep well generally, so the couch will be fine.”

I hold out a hand and help him into a sitting position.

“Come on, let's try out the bed.”

I lead the way, and he reluctantly follows. I jump on the mattress, belly first. It's the most comfortable thing I've ever

laid on. It cradles my body. There is no way I'm robbing Conrad of this sort of comfort. He might actually sleep the whole night through. I close my eyes and wish it was ten instead of six o'clock, so I could go to bed now.

I pat the middle of the bed, the furthest my arm will reach. "Come on, try it out."

He sits on the edge.

"You've got to commit," I say. "Look, I'm way over here. You can spread out and I still wouldn't touch you."

He lays out on his side of the bed, and just as I predicted, we're not touching. Even so, this doesn't feel like a good idea, but I can't in good conscience force him to sleep on the couch when there is this lovely mattress.

I'm laid out on my stomach studying his profile. He turns his head and looks at me. I would really like to crawl closer and kiss him. *Bad, Naomi. Bad, bad, bad.* These kinds of thoughts have to stop because nothing can happen between us. Physical relations can either turn into love or bitterness, and either way, I'll lose him.

"Comfortable, right?" I say. My voice is soft and makes it sound like I'm sharing a secret.

"It's very comfortable," he concedes. "You're sure you don't mind if I stay here tonight?"

"I won't be able to sleep if you stay on the couch, so you'd be helping me out if you slept here. It's really all very selfish."

He chuckles. I wonder what it would sound like if I put my ear on his chest.

Enough of those thoughts. I sit up on the bed and sit back on my feet. I look down at him stretched out and the view is amazing.

Stop it!

"Are you hungry?" I ask. "I'm starving."

He glances at his watch. "Our dinner reservation is at seven. We have about twenty minutes."

“Good. I need to freshen up.”

I grab my makeup bag from my suitcase, which the bellhop kindly placed on a luggage rack, and lock myself in the bathroom. It’s almost as big as the bedroom. The tub has jets and is large enough to fit two football players. I’ll definitely spend some time there by myself.

When I come out ten minutes later, I don’t see Conrad. I go out into the main room and see he’s on the balcony, his hands on the railing.

I join him.

The vista is breathtaking. I’d rather my parents didn’t book us this place, but it’s hard being angry when there’s such a beautiful view. Also, I reluctantly admit it’s nice they’re moving everything over to the new house. Moving is hard work, and we get to miss most of it.

We stand and watch the sun sink lower in the sky. Without the bed taking up so much space in my vision, it’s nice being here with Conrad. It’s almost like our evening meet-ups back at the duplex, just with an upgraded venue.

I put my own hands on the railing next to his. We stand close, but we don’t touch. It seems an unspoken agreement once we left the wedding reception not to. It’s safer this way, but it’s hard not to inch my hand a little closer to his. Would that really be so bad if our pinkies touched? They’re just fingers, and the littlest ones. It’s not like a whole-body hug. Or a kiss. Or even holding hands. Still, I don’t move. At least at first. The longer we stand together, the more my resolve crumbles to keep my physical distance. My hand slides a fourth of an inch closer to his.

My stomach rumbles so loud it’s embarrassing. Conrad takes a step back as he laughs, and his hands drop to his sides.

“Come on, we better get that stomach gremlin fed.”

Dinner is a comfortable affair with amazing food. I want to swim in the chocolate mouse we have for dessert. We talk about everything except the bed waiting upstairs. By the time

we leave, any lingering resentment at my parents' interference is gone. Give me good food, and I'll put up with anything.

When we reach the room, all I want to do is sleep. "Do you mind if I go to bed early? I'm so tired."

"Go for it. I'll probably stay up a few hours and watch TV. Can I use the bathroom first?"

"Yep."

We both head over to our suitcases next to each other on their own luggage racks and unzip the tops at the same time. His arm brushes mine. An electric shock races down my body. And it was just his elbow!

"Sorry," he grumbles.

Then my arm brushes his. The same awareness ripples through me. "Sorry."

This is logistically awkward. I move back while he grabs his toiletry bag and disappears into the bathroom.

I take a moment to really let the trickiness of our situation settle over me. Last night we kissed with abandon in Conrad's living room. He told me he finds me attractive. I'm attracted to him and crave his touch.

Now we're stuck in the same room; the same bed. In a platonic marriage.

This is a mess.

But the food is delicious.

When I hear the toilet flush, which seems like very personal information about Conrad I shouldn't have, I shake those thoughts away and rummage through my suitcase for my pajamas.

It doesn't take long for me to see that my sisters didn't just add items, like this bikini I've never seen before, but they also subtracted some. My dancing llama pajamas are nowhere to be found. What I find is a red, lacey nightmare. I hold it up. It has too many weird straps and ribbons and not nearly enough fabric. My imagination is not up to figuring out how it goes

on. It looks unbearably uncomfortable, but I suppose the point of lingerie is you don't wear it long.

Conrad clears his throat from behind me, and I jump straight in the air. I didn't even hear him open the door. I tuck the red nightmare under my armpit and fold my arms before I turn to face him. Even fully clothed, I feel naked after having him witness the monstrosity. The heat of humiliation suffuses my whole body.

Even his face is pink. He points to the living area. "I'll be in there if you need me. Not that you'll need me, but I'm here. Um, okay."

He speed walks away.

"Conrad, wait." I have to ask for help. If I had my own room, this wouldn't matter. My family is killing me and it's even worse knowing they think they're helping. "I seem to have a problem. My sisters, Roe if I had to guess, stole all my pajamas and left me with very little to wear to bed."

He points to my armpit. "That?"

I look down and see that ribbons and lace are hanging down, and I stuff the rest under my armpit.

"Yeah."

"Well, I'd hate for you to get cold," he says with a small smile.

He goes through his suitcase and pulls out a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. When he hands them to me, our fingers brush. I ignore the warmth this time. We have four nights to get through, I can't lose my head so early in the game.

"Thank you."

This time it's me speed walking away, into the bathroom, and I firmly close the door behind me and then lean against it. My makeup and hairbrush are scattered across one side of the counter. On the other side is Conrad's toothbrush and toothpaste, with his toiletry bag zipped closed. Seeing our things so close together on a bathroom counter shouldn't mean

anything, but it hits me clearer than the shared bed that we're in this together.

I go through my nightly beauty routine slowly, nervous about Conrad seeing me with no makeup and my hair braided. When we met at night in our backyard, I felt safe because of the cover of darkness. I have to remind myself that he likes my freckles, or I might decide to sleep in the tub.

The sweatpants are baggy, even after I pull the drawstrings tight. The T-shirt goes almost to my knees, but the material is buttery soft. I can understand why Conrad wears T-shirts all the time if they all feel like this.

A glance in the mirror shows me the outfit is not attractive, but it's better than the alternative Roe packed. I'll deal with it.

When I peek out of the bathroom door, the lights are off. But for the flickering light of the TV, it would be black. The soft murmur of canned laughter is just audible. I tiptoe to the left side of the bed and slip under the blanket. The mattress feels like a hug as it cradles my body. If this is the sleep a thousand dollars a night gives you, I'm a fan.

"Let me know if the TV bothers you," Conrad says.

I don't mind the sound. I kind of like it. It means I'm not alone. I want to tell him so, but before I can, I fall asleep.

I WAKE, HOT AND IMMOBILE. IT'S DARK, AND MY EYES TRY TO make out the time on the alarm clock next to the bed. My vision is blurry, but I think it's just after five a.m. It was around nine when I climbed into bed. I haven't slept this many hours consecutively since I was five months pregnant with Trevor. And yet, I know I can close my eyes and get a few more hours.

I try to move, but I can't. It's another few seconds before I realize the weight draped over me is Conrad's arm. His body is behind mine. How am I supposed to unbury myself from two

hundred pounds of muscular firefighter without waking him up?

I ponder it long enough that I question if I want to unbury myself. It feels nice to be encapsulated in his warm embrace. This is what a weighted blanket would feel like, I imagine, since they help create a calm, relaxed sleep. That's exactly how I feel.

I was married for five years, but in all that time, Seth and I never cuddled while we slept. He stayed on his side, and I stayed on mine. I assumed I wouldn't like to be this close to someone while sleeping, but I was wrong. The longer I'm awake, the more I love the pressure of his body at my back and the weight of his arm.

What could it hurt to fall back asleep and pretend I never noticed? It's just for three more nights, and then I'll have my own bedroom and this will never happen again. I may as well enjoy it while I can.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

NAOMI

WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT TIME, SUNLIGHT STREAMS INTO the bedroom from the sitting room and there is no man keeping me warm. I don't think I moved the whole night. I'm still on my side, a foot away from the edge of the bed. Conrad sits on his side, the blanket around his hips, with a tablet open on his lap. It's adorable how he sits an inch away from his end of the bed, leaving tons of space between us, as if he didn't breach that space last night.

What most rivets my attention is his lack of a shirt. I can say without a doubt, Photoshop did not touch those calendar pictures.

"Good morning," he says.

"Why aren't you wearing a shirt? I hope you were wearing one last night."

"Nope. I rarely wear pajamas in bed."

"Why not?"

"If I'm sleeping at the firehouse and the alarm goes off, it's a lot quicker to dress than to undress and then dress. Every second counts."

"Helpful information to have had yesterday. I really hope you're wearing some pants."

His smile is slow and a little bit wicked. He's about to say he's bare down to his underwear, I just know it. So when he says, "I am, don't worry," I'm surprised. I even peek under the covers to see if he's lying. Nope, he's wearing a pair of sweatpants just like the ones I'm wearing, but blue instead of gray.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"It's almost ten. I ordered a room service breakfast around eight, so it's cold by now. Do you want to go down to the

buffet?”

I stretch and close my eyes. “I’d rather stay in bed all day. I’ve never slept in like this before and it is wonderful.”

“Sounds like a good plan. We have the spa package scheduled for this afternoon, but I can cancel it.”

“No, let’s keep it. I told you, I have to get pictures and have experiences. My family will think we spent our entire stay in bed if I don’t show them proof otherwise.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

We are supposed to be in love. “No, I guess not.”

“We can spend the time in bed, and what we do or don’t do is only our business.”

He puts his tablet down, then scoots over, eating away at the space that separates us.

“What are you doing?” I panic.

He’s half-dressed and getting closer. Last night in the dark while he was asleep was one thing, but we should not be canoodling in the light of day.

While my brain panics, my body stays right where it is.

He lays his head next to mine on the pillow. He’s so close, I can see the length of his eyelashes.

“Look up,” he says.

I look and see he’s holding his phone with the camera open. Our faces peer back at us.

“Smile,” he says softly.

His breath glides over my neck. Goosebumps pebble my arms. His arm is next to mine. My thoughts turn inappropriate. I have just enough mental power to do as he says and smile, and he snaps a picture.

He sits back up and moves to his side of the bed, but now less space separates us. I could reach out and touch his thigh to get his attention, but really because I miss his touch already.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“Proof for your sisters.”

“That we spent the entire weekend in bed?”

He smirks. “If that’s the story you want them to believe.”

My phone buzzes from the bedside table. It’s not just one picture Conrad sent, but two. The first is of me with my head turned to look at him. There’s a peculiar expression on my face, as if I can’t look away. He is breathtakingly handsome, and it makes total sense.

Except we’re friends who married with a nonphysical agreement in place. My mind knows it’s the best plan, but my body doesn’t agree. I close the photo and toss my phone to the bottom of the bed. I’d rather not think about it.

“What did you order for breakfast?” I ask.

“Pancakes, bacon, and fruit. There’s juice, or I can make coffee.”

“No coffee. Everything else sounds great.”

“I’ll grab it for you.”

“No, I can get it.” But I don’t move. He quirks an eyebrow. “The mattress is holding me hostage. It might take me a few minutes.”

“I got it. Do you want it warmed in the microwave?”

If he insists, I’ll stay right where I am. “No, I’ll have it cold.”

Conrad gets out of bed and heads to a cart in the living area. I shouldn’t look at his shirtless back or the way his pants are low on his hips, but I do. He doesn’t seem to care, so why should I?

I find more than I bargained for. Covering his back, from shoulder to shoulder and almost to his waist, is a tattoo of a red bird with fire for wings. His muscles ripple. The bird doesn’t look like it’s flying, but it does look like it’s moving.

I lean up on my elbows to see him better. “Is that a phoenix?”

He looks over his shoulder as if he can see it from that angle. “Oh, yeah.”

“You really are a Potter Head, aren’t you?”

He chuckles as he comes back to the bed, tray in hand. I sit up and he puts it over my lap. This is the first time I’ve ever had breakfast in bed. I’m a fan.

“The idea of a phoenix existed long before Rowling wrote about the bird. I did not get the tattoo because of my obsession with Harry growing up.”

Eating in bed makes this a decidedly casual meal, so I use my fingers instead of the provided silverware. The bacon is crispy, salty, and cold. I tear off a piece of pancake and dip it in the maple syrup. It’s delicious. Not as delicious as my pancakes, but it’s still good.

Conrad settles back onto the bed, this time on top of the blanket, and picks his tablet back up.

“You’re not going to eat anything?” I ask. The strawberries are sweet and firm. Perfection.

He ducks his head. “Sorry, I already ate. I thought I might wake you up with my stomach grumbling as much as it did.”

I swallow. “It’s fine. I’m glad you didn’t wait for me. What I do mind is if you ignore me while I eat.”

He puts his tablet on his lap and turns his head to look at me. “What would you like to talk about?”

It’s easy to pick a topic. “If you didn’t get your tattoo because of Harry, why did you decide on a phoenix?”

His cheeks go pink. “It’s more symbolic than anything, and I was nineteen. If it happened now, I would’ve just left it.”

“Left what?”

“It was my very first call out to a fire. There were three of us pulling in the water line, and debris fell from above. It knocked my helmet off, and some of the debris went down the back of my turnout coat. I immediately ran outside and took

my coat off, but it still left third-degree burns along my upper back.”

I drop my bacon on my plate. His back is burned? I feel like this is something a wife should know about. “They send you into fires with helmets that fly off your head so easily? That is not safe.”

He chuckles. “Rookie pride. I didn’t buckle the strap when I ran inside.”

I pick up my bacon again and chew slowly. “So you got a tattoo to cover it?”

“Yeah. The phoenix felt like an appropriate symbol of rising from the ashes. Like I said, if it happened when I was older, I would’ve just left it alone.”

“Can I see it?”

He turns on the bed, giving me a full view. Now that I’m closer, it’s obvious the skin is puckered, but the tattoo does a lot to camouflage the burn.

I run a finger down his spine and feel the ridges of skin. He shivers.

“Sorry,” I say, and pull away.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

My finger goes back to the ink, and I trace a wing of fire. “It’s a beautiful tattoo.”

“Thanks.” He clears his throat. “It took a while to find an artist. Burned skin doesn’t take ink the same way unblemished skin does.”

I want to keep touching his warm skin, but when I lay my flat palm against his back, and my other hand is itching to get in on the action, I know it’s time to stop.

He settles back against the headboard. I want to keep talking, but I also want to eat.

“Read to me?” I ask.

He raises both eyebrows. “You want me to read to you?”

“Yeah, why not?” But I quickly add, “But only if it isn’t Harry Potter.”

He laughs. “You’re not that lucky. It’s Arnold Schwarzenegger’s autobiography.”

“Really?”

A shrug. “I like biographies.”

“Maybe I do too. I’m ready to find out if you’ll read it out loud.”

“I’m only a chapter in. I’ll start back at the beginning.”

WE STAY IN BED FOR HOURS AS HE READS TO ME. I’VE NEVER been much of a reader, but I can see the appeal of biographies. They’re real in a way Stella and Kit’s romance books aren’t, and I like that there are no magic wands or evil wizards. What I love the most is listening to the book, rather than reading it myself. Or maybe it’s the reader.

After we each take a turn getting ready in the bathroom (I go out onto the balcony so I hear nothing I shouldn’t while he’s in there), we head down to the spa. I thought we were getting facials and pedicures. Instead, they take us into a small, dim room with two massage tables placed three feet apart. Before Conrad and I are left alone, they tell us to strip, then lay flimsy sheets over our naked bodies.

A couple’s massage. Seriously? Why would Mom do this to us?

I can feel the nervous laughter building. If we weren’t attracted to each other, being close like this wouldn’t be so hard. Or so I assume. Maybe any female in my situation would find this hard. Conrad is on the cover of the Tucson Fire Department calendar because he’s tall, tanned, and muscled.

Conrad runs a hand down his face. He isn’t any happier about the situation than I am.

“We can leave,” I offer. “Maybe they’ll give us a refund. Is a massage even good for your back?”

He nods. “It is. I used to get massages all the time. The oil they put on is great for moisturizing the skin.”

I guess we’re doing this then. “I’ll face this wall. You face that one.”

We turn away from each other. The sound of Conrad’s jeans sliding down his body is too much. To block out the sound, I hum Maroon Five as I pull my sundress over my head.

It isn’t easy climbing on a table while keeping my back to Conrad, but I manage. Once I’m on my stomach with the sheet covering my body and my face in the whole provided, the laughter builds again. How am I supposed to stay calm when I’m in a room naked with my fake(ish) husband?

We wait for the masseuses to come in. And wait. And wait. It does not take this long to strip and lay on a table. What do they think we’re doing in here?

My giggles escape.

“How are you doing?” Conrad asks, a smile in his voice.

I turn my head to face him. He’s looking at me. His sheet doesn’t cover his back and I can see the wing of his phoenix along his broad shoulder.

When I said I would marry him, I never saw us in this situation.

“Do you regret marrying me?” I ask. The question slips out before I can think through the ramifications of his answer.

“Not at all.” He leans up on his elbows. The sheet slips further down his back. I try not to stare. “Before we married, you asked for one-hundred percent honesty. Do you still want that?”

Do I? It’s better to know than to not know, even if I don’t like what I find out. “Yes.”

“In full honesty, this is hard being with you here. Not just this room, but this entire weekend. You’re beautiful. You’re my best friend. That makes you hard to resist. I want to kiss you and hold you, but I know where that will lead, and I don’t want that kind of marriage. I want to remain friends.”

It’s a relief to hear him say so. “Me, too. Can I ask why you feel so strongly about this?”

He doesn’t answer immediately. “With Carmen, it was all about the physical. It made me stupid. I prefer to keep my wits about me. You?”

Because I’m terrified of opening my heart after Seth decimated it. Conrad can leave me just as easily as Seth did, whether by choice or death by fire. Losing a friend will be easier than losing a lover.

To say all of this out loud feels too raw. I break my own honesty rule and say, “Same.”

The masseuses come in before we say anything else. As they wordlessly take their places beside the tables, Conrad doesn’t break eye contact. The awkwardness of this massage and the honeymoon evaporates. We feel the same way about our attraction to each other and want the same thing: to remain friends. We’ll figure this out.

The massage is heavenly, and I catch myself snoozing. It’s a lot less awkward as we get dressed than when we undressed. As we leave the room, he takes my hand, and he doesn’t let go until we get back to our room. All the tension that’s been humming between us since we arrived has settled.

Our dinner reservation is at a fancy Japanese restaurant. At least my sisters didn’t fail me in the dress department, but included one of my favorite dresses. A dark blue chiffon with sparkles that always reminds me of the stars.

When I come out of the bathroom, Conrad looks up from his phone. His jaw drops, and the phone slips through his fingers.

I think he likes it.

On our second night sharing the bed, I open the bathroom door to find Conrad's already in bed, shirtless again, and there are lumps underneath the blanket down the middle of the mattress.

I tackle the shirtlessness first.

"Don't you have a T-shirt you could wear?"

"I had one, but you're wearing it," he deadpans. "Do you want to give it back?"

I put my hands on my hips. "Are you flirting with me? Because that is not allowed."

He laughs. "Sorry." He does not sound sorry.

I like this comradery better than the awkwardness of before. I'm glad we had the conversation at the couple's massage. I'll have to thank Mom for making the reservation, even if I'd rather not admit she was right.

"You have other T-shirts," I say. "I saw them in your suitcase."

"Some T-shirts are for sleeping in, and some are for day wear."

"How can you tell? They all look the same."

"Not to me."

I huff. "I guess I'll have to deal with you half dressed." For three more nights, then only as a memory.

"Under the circumstances, it's better than not being dressed at all."

A valid observation, but he's smirking, and it feels like a teasing taunt. I should've skipped asking about his clothing and gone straight to the lumps in the bed.

Still standing in the bathroom's doorway, I ask, "What is that in the middle of the bed?"

"The extra pillows." His face goes a little pink. Fortunately for him, a beard covers most of his cheeks. "I move around a lot while I sleep."

I can't resist saying, "Does this have anything to do with you cuddling me last night?"

He covers his face with a hand. "You knew?"

"I woke up." In saying so, I'm admitting I didn't move out of his embrace.

He doesn't seem to realize that aspect of our cuddle. "I'm sorry. Carmen hated when I held on to her like that. I promise, it wasn't on purpose."

Unlike Carmen, I liked it. It's better I don't mention how disappointed I am about the pillow barrier. It'll be easier to remember we're friends.

He stands. "Are you going to step out of the bathroom? I promise, I don't bite." I move out of the way, and as he passes, he whispers, "Unless you want me to."

"Conrad!"

I hear his laughter from the other side of the door. Roe was right. Flirting is fun when it's worth the right person.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

CONRAD

THREE DAYS PASS TOO QUICKLY. SPENDING TIME WITH NAOMI brings me back to the person I was before Carmen. Settled. Angst free. Happy.

I try to resist teasing her, but when she blushes so prettily and feigns anger, I can't help myself. We settle into a friendly, comfortable groove and my hope for our success increases with each day.

Watching Naomi has become my new favorite pastime. When her face lights up with laughter, it's impossible to look away. I can talk to her for hours, and she never seems to get bored. When she wears the bikini to the pool, it's painful, but pleasurable pain. Even her swim wrap is see through.

We both agree those sisters of hers are not to be trusted in the future.

Naomi seems more settled herself. Happier and not so uptight. I can't be sure if it's because of this time away from regular life or if it's because she doesn't have to worry about insurance anymore. Maybe both.

I especially love it when she comes out of the bathroom at night and all of her freckles are visible across her nose and cheeks. She even has some on her forehead. While I sleep, I dream about kissing every single one.

When Tuesday arrives, we stay in bed talking until our late checkout time. I think both of us have enjoyed the time away. If not for the kids, who we've only talked to twice in the last four days, we'd both want to stay here for another week.

On the way home, Naomi reads my book out loud while I drive. I've read to her we go to bed, by the pool, during our breakfasts in bed. Only once did I read ahead while she was showering, and she let me know right away she wasn't happy about it.

She finishes a chapter and looks over at me. “We’ll keep reading together when we get home, okay?”

“If you want to.”

“I much prefer when you read. You have a better voice for it.”

“Just as long as I don’t put you to sleep. I have been told my voice would be great on a meditation app.”

She laughs. “I can’t believe you remember I said that.”

When we reach Tucson, our first stop is Kit’s house, so we can swap cars. I’m impressed she hugs Naomi and talks to us about the trip before inspecting every inch of her Mustang.

“Isn’t married life the best?” Kit asks me.

I can’t keep back the wolfish grin. “It’s amazing.”

Naomi slaps my arm playfully, but she doesn’t disagree.

Next, we head to the elementary school to pick up Lola and Trevor. We park and walk to the normal place where she waits for them. There are a few minutes before they get out, and Naomi can’t seem to stand still.

“Are you nervous about something?” I ask.

“No. Yes?” She pauses. “Seth bought a house without my input and I hated living there. This is a completely different situation, and I like what I’ve seen so far. I want to love it. I’m sure I’ll love it.”

Seth again. I wonder if she realizes how much she mentions her ex-husband. She might not be talking to him on the phone anymore, but he’s here, alive in Naomi’s mind. The third person in this marriage. Like I’ve been saying to myself for the last few days, *he might live in her head, but I’m the one living with her in the real world*. It doesn’t help as much as I wish.

“If you don’t like the house,” I say, “Then we’ll find one you do. We don’t have to stay there forever.”

“My parents have lived in their house for almost thirty years,” she says. “They’ll never move. When I married Seth, I

thought once we bought our house, we'd be the same."

I don't have a response because moving has always been a fact of my life. I like the *idea* of stability, but it seems unattainable.

The bell rings, and in a few seconds, kids stream out of the school. Once again, Lola and Trevor are together. They run to us, hand in hand.

"Mommy!" Lola yells out excitedly. When she reaches us, she hugs Naomi and then rubs her stomach. "Hello!"

Naomi glances at me, her brow furrowed. I'm just as confused.

"Lola, what are you doing?" I ask.

"My little sister is in there."

I try to hide my laugh with a cough. It doesn't fool Naomi, but Lola and Trevor don't seem to pick up on my response.

"I want a brother!" Trevor says.

"No," Lola says with a level of seriousness I rarely see from her. "It's a girl."

Parents and students walk past, and most pay us no mind, but a few slow down to watch how this scene unfolds. I'm still struggling to contain my laughter.

Naomi bends down and looks both of them in the eye. "There is no baby."

"Yes, there is." Lola is adamant. "My friend Wendy's mom got married and then she had a baby. Do you think my little sister will be here by Christmas?"

"It's a brother!" Trevor says.

I have to turn away so the kids won't notice my snicker. Naomi tries my trick and coughs a few times.

"We can discuss this in the car," she says. "Come on, let's go."

We parked the car close, which is good because the kids are still squabbling about the gender of the nonexistent baby.

After we're all buckled in, Naomi turns and looks over the back of the seat.

"We are not having a baby. That will not happen. We have a sweet little family with just the four of us. Don't you think so?"

I watch their response in the rearview mirror as I wait for a space to pull out into traffic.

"But I want a brother," Trevor says. "Margot has a brother. I want one too."

Lola pouts. "I'll take good care of my little sister."

"I know you would," Naomi says. "But sometimes things don't work out the way we want them to."

Lola gets a stubborn glint in her eye but doesn't say another word. This isn't the last we'll hear of a baby, but she'll catch on, eventually.

It's a two-minute drive with traffic to get to our new house. When I put an offer on it less than two months ago, I never expected how my life would change.

I unlock the front door, and the kids run through first.

"Come upstairs," Lola says to Trevor. "You can pick your room."

Their feet stomp up the stairs like a herd of wildebeests, followed by the opening and shutting of doors.

Naomi walks through the foyer slowly. The entryway has stairs to the right, then an opening into the dining room before it opens into the main living space

Her expression gives nothing away on what her thoughts are as she looks around.

"The master bedroom is in here." I lead the way through the door on the left, off of the living room.

Her family has already set up my bed and dresser in the space. I'm not sure where Naomi's things are, but we'll find them somewhere. It'll be easy enough to swap them out if she

decides she wants this room. Boxes from both of our houses marked “bedroom” are along one wall.

She looks through the closet and bathroom, still not saying a word.

We work our way through the living room, with all of our mismatched furniture, and then into the kitchen, where there are more boxes.

Her silence makes my muscles tense. I open the door to the mother-in-law suite. As she walks past, I catch a whiff of her perfume. I don’t know what the scent is, but I’m drawn to it. Good thing I’m stronger than a bottle of perfume.

This room is where Naomi’s bed and dresser ended up. The closet here is larger than in the master suite, but the bathroom isn’t as nice.

“Now that you’ve seen the house, what do you think?” I ask.

“I love it. The kitchen is amazing. I can’t wait to use it. It feels like a home already and we haven’t even unpacked yet.”

My body sags in relief. She loves the house.

“The only thing I struggle with is all the white walls. Can I paint some of them?”

As long as she likes the place, I don’t care what she does to it. “Do whatever makes you happy.”

She studies me, her eyes bright. “Really? *Whatever* makes me happy? What if black walls make me happy?”

I shrug. “I’m sure whatever you decide will look great.”

She laughs. “Just you wait. It will look phenomenal.”

“Which room would you like?” I ask.

She looks around one more time, spinning in place, before going to the window. It looks out into the backyard. “Don’t you want to choose?”

I move to stand next to her. “I’ll be happy with either.”

“If you’re sure, I’d like the master bedroom, so I’m close to the kids.”

“Okay. This will be my room then.”

Behind us comes a high-pitched wail. When I turn, Lola is on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably.

Naomi runs over and gets down next to her. “Are you hurt?”

She rubs Lola’s back, but Lola wiggles away and Naomi stops.

This is a Lola tantrum. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, she’s a screamer.

I go over and pick her up. She’s like a soggy noodle and doesn’t come easily. But when I have her in my arms, she wraps her arms around my neck and puts her head on my shoulder. Her sobbing does not quiet, but I don’t have a free hand to cover my ears.

“She’ll be okay,” I say to Naomi. She nods so I know she can hear me over the screaming. “Just give us a minute. Look upstairs if you want.”

I take Lola to the dining room and shut the doors, then I pace and wait for her to exhaust herself. There were so many nights when she was a baby when we went through this same routine. I didn’t know why she’d get upset. I came to believe it was because she didn’t yet know how to talk and was impatient with her dad because he didn’t understand her needs.

When her sobs quite to hiccups, I ask, “Do you want to tell me why you’re so upset?”

More hiccups in quick succession. “I want Naomi,” hiccup, “To stay.”

“Of course she’s staying. Why would you think she would leave?”

I FIND TREVOR AND NAOMI UPSTAIRS IN ONE OF THE THREE bedrooms. They're sitting on the floor. Trevor is telling her everything he wants on his walls. Unsurprisingly, it's all Harry Potter.

"Where's Lola?" Naomi asks.

"She's in the master bedroom playing a game on my phone." I turn to Trevor. "Is this the room you want?"

He nods and goes to the door and points across the hall. "That's Lola's room." He points further down the hall. "That room is for the baby. I really want a little brother."

Kids. I'm already exhausted and we still have a lot of unpacking to do tonight.

"Trev, will you want to go play with Lola for a little while?"

"Okay."

When he's at the bottom of the stairs, I turn to Naomi. This will be a hard conversation. I don't want to admit my past mistakes. So I procrastinate. I head to the window and look outside onto the street below.

"I was thinking of getting delivery tonight. What sounds good to you? Pizza? Burgers? I could go for some fries."

"Don't distract me. Why is Lola upset?"

I take a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "The last year of my marriage with Carmen, we slept in separate rooms. She said she wanted space. I assumed Lola was too young to notice or even know that parents share a room. When she overheard us talking just now, she realized we planned to sleep in different rooms and believes you're going to leave us."

She leans back against the wall, her brow furrowed as she thinks. "I knew the kids would ask about the separate rooms when they were older. I didn't think we'd have to figure this all out now. Our marriage isn't as cut and dry as we expected, is it? What are our options?"

"Continue on with our plan. We can explain to Lola that we enjoy having our own space, like she and Trevor do. She'll

eventually come to see we're not getting a divorce. Or we share a room."

"Well," she says slowly. "We shared a room on the honeymoon. It wasn't terrible."

Maybe not for her. I scratch my cheek. "Not terrible, but difficult."

She tilts her head and gives me a questioning look.

"Naomi, I'm only human. We would have to sleep with pillows between us every night for the rest of our lives. Are you up for that?"

She blushes. "We could have separate beds?"

"We could." I sit on the floor next to her and lean back against the wall, mirroring her position. "It would open us up to more questions from the kids as they grow older."

"And if anyone in my family saw the two beds, we'd never hear the end of it."

We sit with this for a minute.

"In full honesty, I enjoyed sharing a bed with you. I enjoyed waking up in the middle of the night and having you close, even if I couldn't touch you."

Her cheeks turn a darker shade of pink. "Was the benefit worth the difficulty? Because I enjoyed listening to you breathe while you slept. I found it a comforting sound." She smiles and a teasing glint enters her eyes. "Kind of like your voice. If you're up for sharing a room and a bed, so am I."

I don't answer immediately. This could be a fantastic idea, or a terrible one. We'll only find out if we try. If it ends up being a terrible idea, we'll only find out once it's too late. I think the benefit could be worth the difficulty.

"I'm in," I say. "But first thing tomorrow, we're buying the largest bed we can find."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

NAOMI

CONRAD'S BED IS SMALLER THAN THE HOTEL BED, AND WITH our pillow barrier taking up a third of the mattress space, it doesn't leave us much room.

I can't regret our decision to share a room (or a bed) because we lay together and talk for an hour before we fall asleep. We don't need the patio anymore for our nightly conversations.

I wake in the middle of the night and look over the barrier to see Conrad isn't in bed. I can't fall back to sleep not knowing where he is, so I get up to find him. As I walk around the bed to the door, I see him asleep on the floor.

Poor man. We have to go furniture shopping as soon as possible. I don't want *him* to regret sharing a bed with me.

The next day, after the kids are in school, we take care of all the online paperwork to add me and Trevor to Conrad's insurance. Once we submit everything, tears fill my eyes from the weight Conrad's taken off of my shoulders.

"Thank you," I say.

He holds out his hand, palm up. I lay mine in his. Our fingers weave together.

"You're welcome."

Next, we go furniture shopping and spend a fortune. It isn't just a new bedroom set we need, but new couches for the living room and a bigger dining table.

That evening, my whole family comes over to help clean and unpack boxes. The kids are all upstairs with Lola and Trevor making a mess, while the adults help downstairs. It's not a standard Waffle Wednesday, but we're all together, and that's all that matters.

I open a box in the kitchen to see that its bath products mislabeled, and head to my bedroom to drop it off. Stella follows and shuts the door after us.

“What’s up?” I ask, conversationally.

“Mom asked me if you and Conrad were in the middle of an argument.”

“What?” I’m horrified. “We’ve been married less than a week and we’re already failing?”

“Not failing. You’re ... in remedial fake marriage 101.”

“This isn’t fake,” I say, before returning to the problem at hand. “What is Mom’s concern?”

“You and Conrad leave at least a foot of distance between you at all times. Watch Kit and Aaron. They’re always in the same room and they can’t keep their hands off of each other. She leans against him. Kisses his cheek. They’re like magnets. Avery and Theo have been married for nine years, and they still sneak a kiss when they think no one is looking. You’ve been married less than a week and you’re all business.”

“We’re moving into our house! I have other things on my mind.”

“I’m just letting you know how your indifference comes across.”

I’m not indifferent to Conrad. I know where he is in every room I go into. When he looks at me, I feel it. I guess neither of us thought about how our lack of touching each other after the wedding would be interpreted while we unpack two households into one.

We have to do something. I do not want Lola to overhear any speculation from my family about the state of my relationship with Conrad. Just since yesterday when she overheard the separate bedroom conversation, she seems less herself. I don’t want her to be afraid of me leaving.

“How much touching do we need to look believable?” I ask. “We’re definitely not kissing.”

“Don’t overthink it. Touch him on the arm. Lean into his side. Hold his hand. You did a great job at your wedding. I almost believed you were really in love and I know the truth.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

With a deep breath, I head back out to face the family, this time as an actress. I find Conrad in the dining room on a step ladder removing an old light fixture. He’s talking to Theo as Theo unboxes the new one.

Stealing myself, I go over to Conrad and rub my hand down his calf. He twitches and almost falls off the ladder, but catches himself and the fixture just in time. That was a stupid move on my part.

“Hey, honey,” I say. *Honey?* Not sure I’m a fan of that nickname. “I want to show you something in the bedroom when you get a minute.”

Theo snickers, and only then do I realize how my words can be construed. This is the worst! Why does Mom have to be so observant? Why can’t we just be married and not have to pretend to be more?

“Ah, sure,” Conrad says. Hopefully, his confusion is only obvious to me. “Now works. Theo, do you want to put this up?”

“Sure. Get out of here.”

Conrad comes down from the stepladder and hands Theo the old fixture. I take his hand and lead him the long way to the bedroom, past the kitchen where everyone can see us holding hands. Mom watches us, and that feels like a success, but this parade through my house also feels like a production, and I can’t be sure if I’m going overboard or not. There should be a rulebook for this kind of thing.

“What’s wrong?” Conrad asks as soon as we’re in our bedroom.

I relay what Stella shared with me.

Right now, with just the two of us, we’re easy together. Comfortable. There’s no pretense. It’s the same when we’re

with Lola and Trevor. I may have to become a recluse because I don't like pretending around my family.

He runs a hand down his face and scratches his chin. "Okay. I can do better."

"Me, too."

By the time everyone leaves two hours later, I decide becoming a recluse is the last thing I want. Conrad running his hand down my arm as he walks past me? The way he loops his pinky with mine when we stand beside each other to see if the mirror he hung with my dad looks level? When I wash dishes and he comes up behind me and places his hands on my hips and his chin on my shoulder? I want these moments to keep happening, and the only way they will happen is if we have an audience. Because once everyone leaves, it's back to being non-touching friends. It's the only way to keep this relationship the way we want it to remain.

Stella is the last one to leave. She gives me two thumbs up. "Way to go," she says softly so no one else can hear. "Even I believe you love each other."

I shut the door behind her and realize that's the problem. It's hard having Conrad pretend something that will never happen. I might start to believe it.

ON FRIDAY, CONRAD GOES BACK TO WORK. AFTER SPENDING every waking and sleeping hour together for the past week, I miss him. When he comes home the next morning, I have a hard time not throwing my arms around him in greeting.

Soon, it's been a week since we moved into the house together and it's hard to remember life before the four of us were a family.

One particular morning when Conrad's at work and I walk the kids to school alone, Trevor asks, "Why isn't my last name Beck?"

The question takes me by surprise. “Because it’s Anderson. Why would it change?”

“Lola said your last name is Beck now. Dad’s last name is Beck and her last name is Beck. I want to be a Beck.”

“Your dad’s last name is Anderson.”

“No, my dad’s last name is Beck. It isn’t fair. I want to be the same as everyone else.”

Nothing has prepared me for this conversation. I wish Conrad were here to help me navigate it, because I don’t know how to respond. I move our conversation to firmer ground.

“Halloween is in less than two weeks and we’ve been so busy we haven’t even thought about our costumes. What do you want to be, Trevor?”

“Harry Potter.”

“Perfect. We already have the costume. Lola?”

“A princess kitty.”

“What does a princess kitty look like?” I ask. “A black cat for Halloween?”

She scrunches her nose in disgust. “Black is boring. Princess kitties are pink.”

“Cats can’t be pink.” Trevor says authoritatively. “Cats can be orange. Yellow. Lots of colors mixed. White.”

Lola’s scowl deepens. “Princess kitties aren’t real, so they can be whatever color I want. I want pink.”

Luckily, we arrive at the school before a full-blown argument breaks out. They’re taking their new status as siblings seriously.

With Conrad at work, the house is too quiet. I’m glad when Mom and Roe come over and we take the bed in the master bedroom apart and start painting. Tomorrow, our new bed will be delivered, and I want the new light blue walls to be a surprise when Conrad gets home in the morning. There’s no way he’ll think the white was better when he sees how blue looks.

Roe runs the roller up the wall like she's a pro. Mom and I edge around the trim. I try to get away with blasting music so we don't have to talk, but I should have known that wouldn't fly with Mom. She turns the music soft so it's background noise.

"Tell me about the honeymoon suite," she says. Of course, the details I glossed over last Wednesday weren't enough.

"Yes," Roes interjects. "Give us all the details."

Not gonna happen, Roe.

"It was beautiful. The room, the view, the restaurants. It was all perfect. Mom, I can't even imagine how much you spent."

She waves my comment away with her hand. "What was your favorite part?"

"Of the honeymoon or the suite?"

"Both," Roe says.

It's an easy answer. "Having Conrad to myself for three days was fabulous. The best part of the suite was the bed."

Mom and Roe snicker.

"Because it was so soft," I say, but it's too late. Might as well throw gasoline on the flame. "FYI, Conrad's abs are not Photoshopped. In fact, I'd say they're even better in person."

Roe laughs.

I describe the pool and the spa and the meals. Mom eats it up. She loves when her plans work out.

"And the couple's massage?"

I feel my face go red. "It really amazing. Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome."

Since I have a captive audience, I bring up what's on my mind. "Trevor wants to change his last name to Beck."

Both of them stop painting and turn to look at me.

"What are you going to do?" Mom asks.

“I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Conrad, but I think he’d love to adopt Trevor officially. We’d have to be married for a year before that can happen, but I’m hesitant. Seth is Trevor’s father. Even if he isn’t a part of Trevor’s life, shouldn’t he keep Seth’s name?”

Roe harrumphs. “No. You own nothing to Seth.”

“I suggest you listen to Trevor,” Mom says. “It sounds like he has a year to decide. He might change his mind, or he might not. You don’t have any contact with the Anderson family, so the family name means nothing to him. Does he even remember Seth?”

Yes, and not favorably. But as he gets older, that could change.

“I feel like I’m erasing Seth from our lives,” I say, encapsulating my real hesitation.

“That sounds like a you problem,” Roe says bluntly. “Trevor shouldn’t be punished because you feel bad for a felon.”

I forget my family hasn’t forgiven Seth because I have. All I feel for him now is pity. He gave up family and home for money. Because he left, I have Conrad and Lola. I came out on top.

“In other news,” Mom says with a side-eye glance. “Lola told us you’re pregnant?”

Roe whistles. “Go you! A honeymoon baby.”

Lola! I’ll have another talk with her on the subject, but I know it won’t do any good. She got her dad married and now she feels invincible.

“She just wishes I was pregnant. I promise, if we have another baby, you’ll hear it from me.”

We don’t stop painting until it’s time for me to pick Lola and Trevor up from school.

Before they leave, Mom hugs me tight, like she hasn’t seen me at least once a week for my whole life.

“I haven’t seen my Naomi in a long time.” After our hug, she studies me. “I forgot what a cheerful person you are. I’m glad to have you back.”

That night, after the kids are in bed, I give the room a second coat of paint. It’s almost one a.m. by the time I finish. I love the calm blue with the white trim. I picture where the bed and dressers will go and I fall in love with the space. As soon as I get a job, I’m buying a long, comfortable couch to go on the far wall in case Conrad ever feels like he needs an escape. I don’t want him sleeping on the floor ever again.

Since Conrad’s bed is in pieces, I sleep in my old bed in the mother-in-law suite. “Sleep” is an exaggeration. I lay awake and think about how much I miss Conrad whenever he works. I’m not allowed to miss him this much, but I do. It’s only now that I realize Trevor hasn’t come into my room at night since we moved into the new house. I assumed he’d be visiting more, not less, with all the changes of the last few weeks.

I go upstairs to check on him. Maybe I’ll climb into bed his bed for comfort. His bedroom door is open, and when I look inside, his bed is empty. Before worry can run rampant, I look in Lola’s room, and there he is, next to her in the princess bed.

Tears rise from seeing them together. Lola is an amazing big sister. Trevor and I are lucky to have her.

If in one year Trevor still wants to change his name to Beck, I won’t try to convince him otherwise. I’m lucky to be a Beck, and he will too.

CONRAD LOVES THE NEW BLUE WALLS IN OUR BEDROOM. WE both love our giant new bed.

The days pile one on top of another, blurring together. Family dinners, Sunday picnics at the park, Waffle Wednesdays, soccer games, and dance recitals. Conrad finishes reading the Arnold Schwarzenegger book to me and

we move on to a Louis Zamperini biography. He also insists I watch his favorite *Bluey* episodes. When we watch the baby race episode, I glance over and his eyes glisten. I begrudgingly admit it's more than just a cartoon.

The job search is ongoing, but I see nothing I want to do. It has to be something I can do from home, and no bookkeeping. Conrad seems unconcerned about my joblessness, so I don't let myself feel guilty for not contributing monetarily to our bank account.

I'm so busy with keeping up with the house and kids, a month slips by before I know it.

Some days stand out from others. On Halloween, we have a pink princess kitty, with a long pink tail and tiara, and Harry Potter, with a temporary lightning bolt tattoo on his forehead instead of a scar drawn on with a marker. I pull together a Hermione costume for me and a Ron costume for Conrad. He doesn't bat an eye when I hand it over and ask him to change. The red wig looks like a mop head. I can't stop laughing.

One weekend we go to Conrad's friend Perez's daughter's birthday party. They postponed it when he was injured in the fire, but better a month late than not at all. Lola and Trevor love the bounce house and playing games with a dozen other kids. Conrad hangs out with his firefighter friends who also brought their kids. I love talking to the firefighter wives and mothers. They're down to earth, inclusive and kind. I've missed having female friends.

"I can't believe you caught Beck," Jill Smith says. "We're all so happy you did. It was devastating what happened with his first wife and Hudson."

Not my favorite topic of conversation, but not unexpected. I hum in agreement.

Nedra Nolte chimes in. "Can you imagine the gall of that woman showing up at your wedding? And wearing white?"

A murmur flows through the group, with many frowns and shaking heads.

“These are so good,” Marci Perez says as she holds up a sorting hat cupcake Conrad asked me to make for the party. She’s on her second one.

“Thank you.” My gratitude is for more than her compliment on the cupcake. I’m happy about the change of conversation.

She winks. “What is your secret ingredient? Sour cream? I’ve heard of putting sour cream in cupcakes, but I’ve never tried it. I would spend three bucks, at least, for something this good. You should open a bakery.”

Her words hit like a lightning bolt to the head. I don’t want a bakery ... but what about starting a catering business? I’d get to pick my own hours, choose what events I’m interested in, work from home, and get paid to do something I love. To start, I could focus on baked goods like these cupcakes.

“That is an amazing idea,” I say. “What other kinds of foods would you be interested in spending three dollars on?”

By the time we leave the party, I have a handful of potential future customers.

As Thanksgiving approaches and Izzy’s departure becomes imminent, she and John come over a few times a week for dinner and games. I live for those evenings, just like I do for Waffle Wednesdays, because Conrad puts his arm along the back of my chair. He’ll take my hand as we sit around after the kids are asleep. He’s even kissed me on the cheek a few times. I hate myself for how much I crave this simple physical contact.

It all ends when we’re out of the public eye.

I also love when it’s just the four of us as a family. Lola still whispers things to my stomach, or randomly pats it as she goes by, but she’s stopped talking about the baby coming by Christmas morning. Every week, someone in my family has to text and ask if I’m pregnant yet.

Trevor prefers Conrad’s reading skills over mine, so on nights Conrad doesn’t work, they read Harry Potter together.

Sometimes after I put Lola to bed, I stand outside his door and listen to them talk about the story.

“Good night,” Conrad says to Trevor.

“Nox!” Trevor yells, and the light magically turns off.

Conrad comes out into the hallway and sees me. He tilts his head and gives me a half smile.

“What are you doing out here?” he asks quietly.

He stands with his back on the opposite wall. The distance between us feels like a canyon. One that can never be traversed. Trying would lead to terrible consequences.

“Just waiting for you to come downstairs and read to me.”

His smile widens. “After you.”

The next morning when he leaves for work, I give him a big container of cookies. I keep threatening to charge the fire house for all the baked goods I send with Conrad, but they’re excellent guinea pigs. So far, their favorites have been my cowboy cookies and oatmeal chocolate chip without the raisins.

“Be safe,” I say, like I do every morning when he leaves.

“Always,” he says in return, like he always does.

Then he leans close and kisses me on the lips. I’m stunned, and from his wide eyes when he pulls back, so is he.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Sometimes I forget this isn’t real.”

“What we have is real,” I remind him softly. “It’s unconventional.”

We stand a foot apart, neither of us moving away from the other. We’re caught in a force field. Neither of us wants to take the leap from friendship to love, so why is he staring at my lips? Why do I want him to kiss me again?

Like an invisible force is drawing us together, his feet stay planted while his body leans toward mine. My body leans toward him.

Then he abruptly spins on his heel and walks toward his car in the driveway.

He is so much stronger than I am. I'm left wanting more. So much more. *Bad Naomi.*

Every day, I work on my business plan. Soon enough, I have a business license for Sensational Catering. It's my childhood dream of being a chef in an Americana restaurant, but it evolved to fit my life as an adult. I have this career because of Conrad.

Chapter Thirty

CONRAD

WHEN I CAN'T SLEEP, I NO LONGER GO OUTSIDE AND SIT ON the back patio. Instead, I lean on the pillow barricade and watch my wife sleep. I can't stop thinking about the accidental goodbye kiss from days ago. Sometimes I forget that this isn't a traditional marriage, that we're only friends, and Naomi still thinks about her ex-husband regularly.

I often wake up before her and go down to the kitchen to start the coffeemaker and the electric kettle. Naomi is not a big coffee drinker, but she loves a cup of tea in the mornings. Once the water boils, I pour it into a mug and steep the tea bag.

When Naomi enters the kitchen, in yoga pants and a baggy sweater with the sleeves rolled up, her tea is ready. I like seeing her like this, unwound and unconcerned that she's not perfectly put together. I especially love when she wears my sweatpants and the T-shirt from the honeymoon, which she has yet to return.

I add cream to my coffee; she likes her hot drink plain. We sit on either side of the table in the breakfast nook. She looks through the recipe books she checks out from the library, and I read the news on my tablet.

This is how we spend thirty minutes every morning before I have to get ready for work, or on days I'm home, before we get the kids ready for school. I have never felt so content. If I had known this is what married life could be, I would have gone on every blind date Izzy set up for me just so I could find someone who I could share a quiet few minutes with in the morning and a home cooked, family meal at night. Though this life wouldn't be the same with just anyone. I'm happy because I'm sharing it with Naomi.

"I need your opinion," she says without looking up from her cookbooks. She has three of them open on the table. "I'm

bringing the sweet potatoes to Thanksgiving. What do you think sounds better? Sliced sweet potatoes in a spiral, kind of like ratatouille, grilled sweet potato chunks, or creamy mashed sweet potatoes?”

“You could make them all and I’ll tell you what I like best,” I say with a teasing grin.

“I could, but how much do you like sweet potatoes? We’ll be eating them for every meal for a week.”

I pick the grilled sweet potato chunks.

At seven o’clock, I leave to get ready for my work shift. Once ready, I poke my head into the kitchen and say to Naomi, “See you tomorrow.”

She looks at her phone, tears streaming down her face while she wears a giant smile. She runs at me and throws herself in my arms.

“The elementary school sent me an order for six hundred cookies for the Christmas carnival next month. My first official order.” She squeals, still holding me tightly in a hug. “I have so many ideas on what kinds to make. Will you make a sign out of wood? I can paint my business name on it, so knows where to buy the best cookies in town.”

I close my eyes and hold her tight. I’m thrilled for her. Her happiness makes me happier. “Yes.”

“Conrad, I officially have a business.”

“Congratulations. Better than being a bookkeeper?”

“By a million times.”

She makes no move to release me. I’ll hang on for as long as she lets me. The excitement in her body eventually dissipates, and she tucks her head under my chin. The hug lasts long enough I’ll be late to work, but I don’t care.

“You give wonderful hugs,” she says before pulling away. “You better get to work, and I need to get the kids ready for school. Then I get to go to the store today and buy ingredients.”

She squeals as she walks up the stairs. I watch her walk up every single one of those stairs before heading out the front door.

OUR FIRST CALL OUT OF THE DAY IS FOR A MOTOR VEHICLE accident, with three cars involved. Traffic has stopped, and we drive down the shoulder of the road to get to the accident. Over the radio, we're told it's a three-car pile-up, with the driver stuck inside the middle car, in critical condition.

Once we stop, the guys and I jump out to assess the situation. I come around the side of the truck and see a blue Corolla sandwiched between two other cars. It's crumpled like an accordion.

Naomi's car.

She's the driver trapped in the vehicle. Critical condition.

I can't breathe. My feet are cemented to the asphalt. Every thought flees except one: how am I supposed to go on without her? I've spent so much time worrying about what would happen if I were to die; I didn't consider what would happen if it was Naomi who left us.

I can't survive this. She has to live.

My vision blurs until the car and all my crew surrounding it appear as smudges.

There is always the possibility of getting called out to an emergency and finding out on arrival it's a family member or friend. In a city the size of Tucson, it doesn't happen often, but it does. I just never expected it to happen to me. Now that it has, why does it have to be Naomi?

I love her.

Desperately.

I am passionate about my wife.

This wasn't supposed to happen, but how could I stop myself? She's beautiful, brave, strong, loyal, and talented. Every time she laughs I feel it in my chest. When she smiles at me, everything about my day improves.

The desire I've suppressed for weeks comes to the forefront of my mind. I want a real marriage with Naomi.

I can't be too late to make that happen.

I shake off my paralysis and run to the car. She needs me now and I won't fail her.

Cries of pain come from inside as I approach. Harris and Stewart are hooking in the hydraulic jaws of life to pry open the door.

My wife's name is on my lips when I look into the driver's side window, but it's a man. Black hair. A suit and tie. His shirt is stained with dark coffee. I catch a whiff of it over the stench of gasoline and exhaust.

Not Naomi. Relief floods my body, leaving me weak. I stumble backward. Luckily, I'm not needed because I feel like a rag doll. The generator turns on and within a minute, the jaws of life pop the door open. The paramedics move in, stabilizing the driver before everyone works to extricate him from the wreckage.

The scene of any rescue can be chaotic, with police directing slow moving traffic and gathering reports from witnesses. Paramedics work to help the wounded. The air is filled with the sounds of sirens, engines, cries, and yells. As I gain my equilibrium, it's all a hum of background noise. Nothing is distinguishable.

Until Captain Hill stops next to me and slaps me on the back. "Beck? What's happening with you?"

I've trained to keep my focus in emergencies and push everything else out of my mind. I need that skill now more than ever.

"I'm okay," I say. As the words leave my mouth, I make it so.

“Then get to work. You’re not here to be a speed bump.”

I get to work.

When the accident is cleaned up and we’re back at the firehouse, I shut myself in my room. I almost can’t breathe, as the same thought that’s been with me all afternoon runs through my head on a loop: I love my wife.

I have for weeks, maybe longer. I didn’t recognize my love for her earlier because the way I feel for Naomi differs from anything I’ve ever felt before.

Love for Carmen was a game. When we were together, she made me chase her. I had to prove my love over and over. If she doubted my affection, she ignored me or withheld affection. I was unsettled and unsure. Our entire relationship had no foundation.

Similar to my relationship with my parents. I always had to prove my worth to them before I received any affection. A good grade in school? I earned a hundred dollars and a high-five. I never felt certain they loved me.

For all my big talk to Naomi about leaving the past behind, I haven’t taken my own advice. I’ve been dragging it with me into this relationship. Because of my past, I expected a marriage based on friendship to be more stable than one based on love.

It’s stupid that I ever thought Naomi would be like Carmen. She’s different from my ex, so why did I fear she would treat me the same way?

My relationship with Naomi is energizing. Hopeful. Happy. She’s never asked me to prove myself to her. If we take the leap from friendship into love, I know our lives will only get better. We have a foundation for love to flourish based on friendship and mutual respect. It’s solid and secure.

Even as I am filled with hope over a brighter future than I have ever dared to imagine, there is a hurdle to overcome. Naomi might not be Carmen, but I’ve fallen into a similar trap. I love her, and she doesn’t love me back. We entered our

marriage with an agreement, and I've broken my half of the bargain.

I want to move our marriage in a more traditional direction. I'm not sure she'll want the same thing.

Naomi asked for full honesty. Tomorrow, I'll give it to her. I'm terrified, but filled with hope.

THE NEXT MORNING, I ARRIVE HOME AFTER THE KIDS ARE IN school. It's the last day of school before Thanksgiving break. Music plays in the kitchen, and I head in that direction.

The kitchen is a mess of dishes, baked cookies, and bowls of different cookie doughs. There are different candies, marshmallows, and five flavors of chocolate chips scattered all over the kitchen island. It smells like baked sugar and chocolate. I like it even better than Naomi's perfume.

Naomi's wearing my T-shirt from the honeymoon as she scoops cookie dough onto a baking sheet. The front of her shirt is covered in flour. Her hair is on top of her head in a bun, but strands have fallen out and frame her face. The desire to wrap her in my arms and kiss her until she understands exactly how I feel is strong, but my respect for her is stronger. We need to talk first.

She looks up and smiles broadly. "How was your shift? Tell me about it."

It's a question she asks me regularly. Some days I need to talk about what happened at work, other times I don't. Today, I have something else to discuss. I stand where I am, feeling the weight of what I'm about to do.

"This is a full honesty moment," I say.

She drops the cookie scoop and gives me her full attention. "I'm listening."

I take a deep breath and wipe my sweaty palms down my pant legs. I have no idea how this conversation will go, and it

makes it hard to speak.

“We had an agreement when we married to raise our kids together as friends. I had every intention of keeping that promise, but I didn’t. I fell in love with you.” I say the words again. They’re freeing. “I love you, Naomi. Do you think you could learn to love me? I’m a patient guy. I can wait. I just need to know if I have any hope.”

“No.” It’s weak, but clear in the silence. “No,” she says again, this time stronger. She wipes a few tears from her cheeks with floury hands. “You can’t do this to me, Conrad. We agreed.”

Not the answer I wanted. I take a breath and reassess. “Is this because of Seth? Do you still love him?”

Her brows crinkle in confusion. “What? No, I don’t love him. I haven’t loved him for a long time.”

“Because you talk about him a lot.”

“No, I don’t.”

I’m glad she isn’t in love with him anymore, but she can’t say he isn’t on her mind. “You’re always telling me about things he did or didn’t do. Going into this marriage, I knew he would be a part of our relationship. I just didn’t think I’d care as much as I do.”

She shakes her head as she studies me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was talking about him. I guess ... it was my way of purging him from my system. I didn’t mean to hurt you. He has nothing to do with us.”

“Then why aren’t you willing to try to love me?”

She closes her eyes and leans against the counter. “I’m scared, Conrad. What if I love you and you leave me?”

I take a step closer to her. I emphatically tell her, “I’m not Seth. I will never leave you.”

She raises her head and looks me straight in the eyes. “You don’t know that. You told me yourself that your job is dangerous. Every time you leave for work could be the last time I ever see you.” Her voice raises with each word she says.

“I can’t go through that again. I can’t love you just to lose you. Our friendship won’t hurt as much as something deeper. I’m sorry, I can’t love you the way you want me to. I just can’t.”

She storms past me. A few seconds later, our bedroom door slams closed.

I stay where I am for a long time. Naomi’s response hurts more than I expected. She’s closed off even a speck of hope, and worse, I can’t dispel her fear. I could die at anytime. Yesterday I realized so could she. But instead of being afraid of that possibility, I want to stop wasting time and live fully together while we can. I don’t want to live until I’m ninety and look back on my life, regretting the years Naomi and I spent together as friends.

It reminds me of what Michelle said to Naomi after the wedding. “You can’t stop living your life because of what might happen.”

The buzzer on the oven goes off and I remove the sheet of cookies so we don’t have a repeat of the great smoke alarm incident. I put the eggs and milk into the fridge, then leave. Perez asked for help with pulling out a tree in his front yard. I told him I’d be by this weekend, but today looks like a better option.

Before I pull out of the driveway, I send Naomi a text.

CONRAD: *I’m sorry that turned into an argument. That wasn’t my intention. I respect how you feel. I will uphold my end of our agreement and we will never talk about today again. You’re still my best friend. I’ll be with Perez for a few hours. I’ll try to be back by the time the kids get home from school.*

Chapter Thirty-One

NAOMI

I CRY INTO MY PILLOW, WRAPPED IN A BLANKET, ON MY enormous bed, alone. How could Conrad do this to me? We were happy as friends, and now he's ruined everything.

When I've cried myself out, I plod to the kitchen. My joy in baking has fled for the day and all I see is a colossal mess that I now have to clean up.

Of course, Conrad took my latest mini-batch of cookies out of the oven before they burned. He's always considerate like that, curse him. Even his apology text was kind, and I'd just told him I couldn't love him. When he does stuff like this, it makes it hard to remember why friendship is better.

I grab a s'mores cookie from the pan and take a bite. Absolutely delicious. I love the toasted bits of marshmallow with the chunks of gram crackers. The cookie makes me feel a smidgen better about the predicament I've found myself in, but I'm mostly still miserable.

I clean the kitchen and then move on to laundry as I wait for school to get out, then walk to meet the kids.

The moment Trevor sees me, he lifts his leg to show me his knee. "I fell and hurt my knee at recess. It was bloody."

It's a minor scratch and I doubt it bled very much. "Do you need a bandaid when we get home?"

"Yes. I took off the one my teacher gave me."

Of course he did.

I've never been so grateful for Lola's skill in talking as I am now. As she prattles on, I focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

When we reach the house, the mailman pulls up and I grab the mail. The kids stay outside to play with the neighbors. I go inside. As I flip through the stack of envelopes, there's another

medical bill. I rip open and instead of finding what I expect, it's a receipt. Everything I owed to the hospital has been paid.

What has Conrad done?

This was my responsibility to pay. I told him I would since it was debt accrued before we were married. Even as I'm angry, his kindness melts my heart. He's too good to me.

The front door bangs open. "Mom!" Lola screams.

I run to the living room, panicked by the panic I hear in her voice. Trevor is hiding behind a chair, while Lola is against the door, her arms and legs spread out as if she can keep it closed with her physical strength. The deadbolt is locked.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"A bad man is watching us," Lola says. "He sat in his car and wanted to talk to Trevor."

I pull back the curtain and look outside. A man is coming up our walk. I recognize his familiar gait before I recognize his features obscured by long, black hair and a baseball hat.

Seth.

He swings his attention to where I stand and our eyes meet.

The shock of seeing him here makes me jump back and let out a small scream. I glance around for Trevor. He must recognize his dad. This is terrible. He probably thinks Seth is here to kidnap him. I have no doubt that this will trigger a CVS episode. We need to get to the hospital before the stomach spasms start. Maybe then he'll be able to keep down medicine.

First, I need to get rid of Seth.

I close the curtains over both front windows just as Seth knocks on the front door. Then go to Trevor and pull him into my arms.

"You are staying with me," I say. I lift his chin until he's looking at me. "No one will take you away. Do you believe me?"

His face is already clammy, and his body quivers, but he nods.

“Good,” I say in a calm, level voice. “I’m going to make him leave, and then we’re going to go to the hospital and get you some medicine. Okay? You’re safe inside with Lola.”

Seth knocks again. “Naomi?” he calls through the door.

Trevor tenses in my arms. I wish Conrad were here to help handle the situation. Perez lives twenty minutes away. Hopefully, Conrad’s already on his way home. If not, I send a text to hurry him along.

NAOMI: *Seth is here. We’re fine. I’m going to get rid of him, but Trevor is panicked and I think we’ll have to go to the hospital. Please come home now.*

After sending the text, I hand my phone to Lola. “If your dad calls, tell him everything is fine, but he needs to get here as soon as possible. Stay with Trevor.”

She sits down next to him and wraps him in her arms. “I will.”

I pause with my hand on the deadbolt. I never expected Seth to show up here. Ready to face him or not, I need to get him to leave. I flip the bolt, open the door, walk outside, and firmly close the door behind me.

Seth is skinnier. He looks different with black, long hair. It doesn’t match his complexion at all. I’m not sure I would recognize him if we were to pass on the street, so I’m surprised Trevor made the connection.

“Naomi,” he says with relief. “It is you.”

He opens his arms like he expects me to fall into an embrace. I take a step back.

“What are you doing here?”

His brows furrow as his arms drop back to his side. “To get you and Trevor.” He says this like the answer is obvious.

“We’re divorced,” I remind him.

“Then we’ll get remarried.” His eyes travel over me as if I’m a dessert buffet. “I’ve missed you. When you stopped answering the phone, I realized how much my actions hurt you. You know everything I did, I did for us. I never expected to get caught, especially so soon. But believe me, I never would have left you if I didn’t think you wouldn’t follow. It doesn’t matter what I have or where I live if you’re not there with me.”

It’s a heartfelt speech, but two years too late to mean anything. “Why would you think I would leave my family?”

He steps closer, but doesn’t reach out to touch me. “We’ve always been in sync. We’ve always wanted the same things. Of course you’d go with me, but then your mom got into your head and you gave up on us. I never have.”

I’ve discovered over the last few months that I didn’t know Seth. Now I have to wonder if he ever knew me. I can’t blame him if he doesn’t because I changed myself to fit into his future. I conformed to make him happy. I’ve given him everything, so why would he doubt my devotion when it mattered to him the most?

“How did you even find me?” I ask.

“I know what school Trevor goes to. You told me months ago. I waited and followed you home.” He looks around at the house. “You’re doing better than I expected from our phone calls.”

“I remarried.”

A flash of anger crosses his face, and he looks down. “You told me there was no one else. You lied.”

“We’re divorced, Seth. I know that’s hard for you to accept, but you stole money and fled the country. I was never going to follow you. Not then, not now.”

Seth snorts in disgust and waves his hand around the house and neighborhood. “Can you honestly say this is the life you want?”

I look at the house where Conrad, Lola, Trevor, and I became a family. The street where the kids play with friends

after school. A neighbor across the street waves at me as she grabs her mail from the box.

I've never been happier.

This life I'm living is mine because of Conrad. Not only has he given me financial security and the opportunity to start my own business, he's shown me what it means to have a partner, a friend, a confidant. I love the time we spend together. I miss him when he's gone, even if it's only for an hour. I store up things to tell him when I see him next because I never want to stop talking with him.

I may think I want a marriage of friendship, but I'm a liar. He's already everything to me. I've fallen in love without giving my heart permission.

Conrad is not Seth. They're as different as chicken cordon bleu and hotdogs.

Seth hid things from me, made me feel inadequate and unworthy of love.

Conrad's love is safe and secure because he loves me, and that love isn't based on what I can offer him. I know he'll always catch me when I stumble.

He might have to leave me some day, but it will never be because he loves something more than he loves me. If he's taken away, which I pray doesn't happen until we're old and stooped, then I will survive because I'm different from I was two years ago. With Conrad's help, I've found myself and I am stronger than I ever dared imagine.

"Yes," I say with a conviction I feel in my bones. "This is the life I've always wanted."

Seth scoffs. "I came all this way for you and that means nothing?"

He takes a step toward me, but the door opens and an apple comes flying out and hits Seth in the arm.

I turn just as an orange goes by. Lola has the fruit bowl in her arms and is standing in the open door.

"Leave my brother alone!" she yells as she lobs a peach.

Seth catches it before it hits him, but it's an overripe peach, and it splatters all over his shirt. As he shakes peach guts out of his hand, another orange hits him in the forehead.

I'm impressed with Lola's aim. I bet she could beat her dad at Skee ball with a little practice.

"You're a bad man!" she says.

An apple misses, but the next one gets his hip.

"Are you going to make that demon child stop?"

"She's an angel, and she's my daughter. Watch it."

That brings him up short. In the distance, I hear police sirens. I don't know where they're going, but it reminds me that Seth is a wanted man. Seth hears the sirens as well and looks around like police cars might race down the street at any second.

"Leave," I say. "I don't agree with what you've done, but I also don't want to see you spend the rest of your life in jail."

"You report me?"

I feel punishment for his crimes is missing out on Trevor's life and living alone in a foreign country. The courts would not agree.

"No, I didn't," I say. "My husband is on his way, and he might."

All the fight goes out of him as we look at each other. Lola must have emptied the fruit bowl, because no more fruit flies past us.

"Goodbye, Seth."

He doesn't say a word as he runs to his car. Just as he pulls away, Conrad arrives. He pulls into the driveway and skids to a stop. As he runs toward me, he asks, "Is everything okay? Where's Trevor?"

How could I ever believe I wouldn't fall in love with this wonderful man? A conversation for later. Right now, we have a more pressing matter.

“Inside,” I say.

“I called Izzy. She’s on her way to watch Lola.” He kicks an orange. “Why is all this fruit on the porch?”

THANKSGIVING MORNING TREVOR FINALLY STOPS THROWING up. Since we arrived at the hospital before the stomach convulsions started, he was able to keep down some medicine and the throwing up wasn’t as regular or violent as in the past.

Conrad didn’t leave my side the whole night. I can’t believe what a difference this hospital stay made to not be alone. The least I can do is get him a cup of coffee. I squeeze his forearm to get his attention.

“I’ll be back,” I say.

When I return from the cafeteria, with a coffee for him and a Diet Coke for me, Conrad holds Trevor in his arms. Trevor’s head is on his shoulder. The IV giving his little body fluid is still attached, but all the other monitors have been removed.

Conrad hums an ABBA melody. I had no idea he listened to ABBA. There’s a lot I don’t know about him, but I’m excited to discover everything I can in the years to come.

I place the drinks on the tray table and wrap my arms around the two of them. Conrad’s arm comes around my back. We stand together.

When Trevor falls back asleep, Conrad gently lays him back on the bed.

“Can we talk?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I take his hand and tug him to the corner of the room so we don’t disturb Trevor.

“I’m sorry for how I reacted this yesterday morning,” I say. “I wasn’t fully honest with you.”

“It’s okay, I understand. You don’t—”

“Will you listen and let me say everything I need to say before you interrupt?”

He gives a little half smile, and I bet he’s thinking of when he had a similar request the night he proposed on the back patio.

“I’m listening.”

“Your declaration of love took me by surprise. I had no idea what we were getting into when we married. I didn’t know we’d be forced to share a bed or that I’d hate the wall of pillows that separate us at night. I didn’t know that I would miss you so much when you’re gone or that I’d enjoy being held in your arms as much as I do. What I expected the least was that I would fall in love.”

“Naomi, you don’t have to—”

I cover his mouth with my hand. “You promised to listen.”

He nods and I lower my arm.

“I’m not saying I love you because you said you love me, but your declaration opened my eyes to how I feel. You aren’t Seth. With him, I lost myself, but with you, I’ve found myself. Not only do I know myself better, but being with you makes me better. Loving you is easy. So easy, I fell without even realizing it.”

He studies me. “You’re sure?”

“Full Honesty. I love you.”

I don’t have time to say anything more because his lips are on mine. He pulls me close and holds me tight to his body. Only now do I realize he was holding back on me the other times we kissed. He kisses me with a fervor and passion I hope never becomes commonplace.

His lips travel down my neck, and my whole body reacts to the touch.

My hands travel under his shirt, feeling the hard planes of his muscles and the warmth of his skin.

He kisses the skin just below my ear, and I shiver.

When he kisses my nose, I move so his lips meet mine again.

We kiss and explore each other with our lips and hands, weeks of desire finally finding an outlet. Until a nurse knocks at the door a second before she enters. Our lips separate with a great sucking sound that makes me giggle. When I try to step away from Conrad, he doesn't let me go. I settle into his embrace and lay my head on his chest. The nurse kindly ignores us as she checks on Trevor.

"You're okay with me holding you like this?" he whispers.

"After the way you kissed me? This is tame."

"True. I've wanted this to be real. Now that it is, I think I might be dreaming."

I know how he feels. I never imagined love could feel like this.

"Just so you know," I say, "The pillow barrier is never coming back. The next time I wake up at four a.m. I want to be wrapped in your arms."

He chuckles. "Sounds perfect."

Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER

CONRAD

We're back at the hospital but for a happier occasion than our last visit. The kids can hardly contain their excitement as we walk down the corridor. Lola skips, her sneakers squeaking against the linoleum floor. Trevor has my hand and is pulling me forward, trying to get me to walk faster.

When I open the door to Naomi's hospital room, her eyes slowly open. Lola and Trevor push through before I can remind them to be quiet for the fifth time since we entered the maternity ward. You would think they were at the playground, the way they jump up on the hospital bed and collapse next to their mom. They jostle Naomi and baby Penelope, but my wife just smiles and rubs Lola's back with her free hand as she introduces them to their new sister.

"I told you," Lola crows. "I knew I'd get a little sister."

"Can the next one be a boy?" Trevor asks.

The next one. Naomi glances up at me. I can see us having another baby, but ask me again after a year of sleepless nights with this one.

"Ope's the prettiest little baby," Lola coos as she pinches her little cheeks and tries to get Penelope to grab onto her finger.

This is the life I was meant to live, and I'm grateful every day that I have the chance to live it with them. The love that swells in my chest is unlike anything I've ever felt before. I never knew a man could feel this happy.

"Conrad," Naomi says. "Will you prop your phone on the TV stand and take a family picture?"

I do as my wife asks.

Naomi has no makeup on, every single one of her freckles are visible, she's tired, her hair is in a messy braid, and she

doesn't care. Nor should she, because she's beautiful in every way.

I set the timer on the phone, quickly stand next to the bed, and lean over so my cheek is close to Naomi's.

"I love you," I say.

She kisses me. "Full honesty. I love you, too."

The camera clicks.

MONROE

Little Penelope is two days old when Stella and I make it to Naomi's house to meet her. We come inside the house and completely ignore our sister as we hone in on the bassinet where the baby lays, asleep.

"You're not even going to say hello to me?" Naomi says.

"Hi!" we say in unison without looking up from the baby. She's adorable. A little button nose, pursed lips, and ten tiny fingers. I love her already.

"Can I pick her up?" Stella asks.

"Of course," Naomi says.

Stella cuddles the swaddled baby close and sighs loudly. I doubt she even realizes she's staring at Penelope with naked yearning. Out of all my siblings, she's the one who dreamed of being a mother the most. She's spent her life mothering all of us. Now she's thirty-one, still single, and still not a mother. I know she hurts.

I'm not sure if having three new nieces and a new nephew all born within the last six weeks makes it harder for her or easier.

Theo and Avery's baby boy was born first. Two weeks later, Kit and Aaron had twin girls. And now Naomi and Conrad with little Penelope. Our family is growing, but Stella's isn't and it's obvious this is hard for her.

She should be as happy as Kit, Naomi, and Theo. Which is why I have a plan to make that happen. She won't like me meddling, but she'll thank me for it when she ends up married with a baby of her own.

I take out my phone, open the dating app I downloaded a few weeks ago, and click on the profile I set up for Stella. I have met no one I think would make a good match for her.

Yet. But I will, and when I do, I'm sure it'll be love at first sight for the both of them.

I hope you enjoyed *It's Not Like It's Real!*

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About the Author

Grace's favorite things include reading, writing, traveling, her cats, and potatoes.

She lives in Utah, in a little house at the bottom of a little mountain, where the snow piles high in the winter.

When she isn't writing, she works as a librarian, planning awesome community events and advising readers on what book to try next.

Her favorite places to travel are New Zealand, California, and Paris. No matter how long she's away, she always loves coming home.

She authored two books in the multiple author *Magical Regency* series, [Intuition](#) and [Bronwyn](#), as well as the [It Must Be Love series](#), and the [Christmas Wishes series](#).

