



# Miracle

— SINGLE DADS 7 —

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
RJ SCOTT

# MIRACLE

Single Dads, 7

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RJ SCOTT

*Love Lane Books*

# Copyright

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Miracle (Single Dads 7)

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# Dedication

Always for my family.

## Single Dads Series

1. **Single** - Asher and Sean's story
2. **Today** - Eric and Brady's story
3. **Promise** - Leo and Jason's story
4. **Always** - Adam and Cameron's story
5. **Listen** - Nick and Elliot's story
6. **Pride** - Gray and Logan's story
7. **Miracle** - Arlo and Jax's story



## Miracle

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**An abandoned baby, a poignant note from his long-lost twin, and unexpectedly, Jax's world is turned upside down.**

Despite being adopted by a loving family when he was a child, Jax feels part of his life is missing, and driven by dreams of his brother being in danger, Jax is consumed by his search for his biological twin. Shocked to find a surprise delivery on his doorstep, Jax discovers that not only is he an uncle, but apparently, he's a legal guardian to baby Charlie. He calls on the unwavering support of his friends and family to solve the mystery surrounding the new arrival, but also finds help from an unexpected source—Arlo, the enigmatic bear of a man who works for him.

Arlo is no stranger to caring. When his parents passed, he dropped out of college to care for his siblings, working construction to pay the bills. With his brothers grown and having left home, it's Arlo's turn to live, but when the next stage of his life means owning up to his love for Jax, he can't find the words to be honest about how he feels. The problem for Arlo is that he's been in unrequited love with his boss for three years and can't bear to not be part of his life. Is it too much to wish for a miracle to make Jax fall for him too?

*Miracle*

RJ SCOTT

# Chapter One

## JAX

“WHAT DO you want me to order to celebrate finishing this?” I scrolled our usual list of restaurants that delivered, drawn to Chinese for the third Friday running, but wondering if we should go bigger. “What about Dawsons? They have a special offer on that Thai banquet we had last month. Oh, and I could get them to add Tom Kha Kai if you fancied it.” I could almost taste the chicken and coconut, and if it was accompanied by a few sips of Chang Beer, then it would be the good kind of celebration.

Arlo mumbled something I couldn't hear. He had his head in a cupboard under a sink, all six-five of him sprawled on the tile. I knew he wouldn't be at all worried about the choice of food. In his words, he'd eat anything, with his favorite being desserts, which he blamed for his soft belly. I loved his soft belly, it was a hundred kinds of cute and pokable when I was teasing him, and hell, it was the only part of him that *was* soft, so I ignored his self-critical moaning. And also the bits where it was my fault because I ordered in cake.

Everyone should be able to treat themselves to cake every so often.

Particularly Arlo.

“How about getting delivery from Bleu Bohème? Remember that chicken we had? The one with the cream? I can't see it on the menu, but I bet they'd know what it was if we asked.”

*Mumble curse mumble* was all I could hear.

“What?”

Arlo cursed again, loudly. Now, that, I could hear clear as day.

“*Mumble mumble* tonight,” Arlo said, louder.

“What?”

*Mumble mumble.*

We were here doing final checks on the finishing touches to a kitchen renovation in a single-level home in the desirable “Santa streets” area of Solana Beach. The client had wanted the best finishes, and I’d fought hard for this contract, cutting my margins to the bone just to get it, but the end result was fantastic, and Arlo and I always celebrated the wins.

Only, he seemed off today—brooding, not the smiling man who loved his work and was excited to finish this project. In fact, he’d had his head in that cupboard for way longer than he needed, and I’d heard nothing but muttering. I hated that he’d been prickly all morning because that wasn’t *him*, and where we’d normally have this high between us about completing a job, he was too quiet. It made me think there was something wrong with this project that he didn’t want to tell me, and it freaked me out because, despite being in the black, things were tight.

“What have you found? Is it bad news? Will it cost me money?” I crouched next to him so I could better hear his answer. Of course, by me, I meant my company Byrne Construction, of which I was owner, but Arlo was my right-hand man, and I wanted him to be my business partner—only. — Only, I hadn’t had the conversation with him to make it real. Hell, I had all the paperwork at home, but there were several things stopping me from handing it over.

The biggest was my undeniable attraction to him, and the fact I was torn over making him a partner in my business or flirting even more than I did already and encouraging him to be my partner in every way.

I’d been lusting after him since I’d first set eyes on him, but as Mama said: “you don’t shit in your own bed.” Well, she didn’t say that exact thing, it was more of a proverb rattled off in quick Italian, but the meaning was there.

“No... *mumble...*” he cursed again.

This time, I tugged on his leg to get him out of the cupboard. “Out!”

He unfolded himself from where he'd been lying and propped himself up on his elbows. There was a smudge of paint over his left eyebrow, the same snowy white as the streaks in his steel gray hair. He was only thirty, but like his dad, his dark hair had lightened to salt and pepper when he hit puberty. His gray was as much part of him as his gorgeous eyes, and yes, I stared at him a lot.

When he wasn't looking of course.

"What were you trying to say in there? Did you find something?"

"No."

I sighed with relief. "So, what was all the mumbling about?"

"I can't come over tonight," he admitted, and couldn't quite meet my gaze.

"What? Why?"

Wait, could I even ask that question? That wasn't the kind of thing a boss asks the man who works for him, right? Arlo was under no obligation to spend time with me, but on the weekends when I didn't have my girls staying, he would always come to my place on a Friday. We'd have beer, and he'd stay over in my spare room after we'd talked until late.

It was our thing.

"Are you okay?" I placed a hand on his knee to let him know I was there for him. He moved his knee, shrugged my touch away, and I wasn't stupid, there was something off about all of this. "Are you ill? Shit, is something wrong with one of your brothers?"

"No, and no." Arlo shimmied up, then leaned against the sink cupboard. "It's just, I have this thing."

"What thing?"

He stared at me and seemed to be steeling himself to give me bad news, so I sat my ass on the floor and crossed my legs. It couldn't be too awful because, yes, he seemed distracted, but not completely miserable, so my first guess was it had

something to do with his brothers—they were the only reason he'd skip what had become our regular thing. Although, why would any of that affect our standing date-slash-non-date, I didn't know.

“What thing?” I repeated and poked him to encourage a smile.

He wouldn't quite meet my gaze, and again, he moved away from my touch. That never happened—Arlo was a big cuddle monster, a soft bear of a man who was tactile and open with his feelings. His heart was so pure, so freaking full of love that sometimes, he couldn't even contain it and would hug me so hard I couldn't breathe.

He bit his lip, a typical Arlo habit when he was stressed. This was at odds with him saying everything was okay.

“Thaveadate,” he blurted in one long run-on sentence, then dipped his gaze, and I swear his face was scarlet.

I slowed down the words to parse their meaning.

*I. Have. A. Date.*

“You've got a what now?” I asked after a pause; not sure I was hearing right.

He cleared his throat and, at last, held my gaze. For a moment, I was lost in watching him tug at his gray hair and seeing the uncertainty and nerves in his intriguing gray eyes. “A date,” he repeated in a softer almost apologetic tone.

Of all the things he could tell me, why was it something that was going to make me spin out?

Since when did Arlo date? He'd told me point-blank that being responsible for his two younger brothers, plus working for me, was enough without contemplating dating. I'd taken that at face value and almost settled into that sweet spot where we could be friends and I could lust from afar, ignoring the unrequited *everything* I had going on.

The last thing he needed, or should expect, was for me to ask why he was going on a date. *Don't ask. Don't freaking ask.*

“Why?” Shit. I couldn't help myself.

He shot me one of his affectionate, patient smiles. One of the cute ones that made his eyes sparkle with mischief. Or something.

“Just because...” He sighed. “Sutton left for college, and now... I’m ready to move on. I *need* to date.” He stared at me.

I tried to read his expression and the determination in his tone. “Date,” I repeated.

A familiar smile teased his lips. “Trace downloaded this app thing, and I swished or swiped or whatever, and then, someone matched me, so I’m meeting this guy called Wilton tonight.” In one sentence, he threw open all my tightly checked emotions and ripped apart my ordered world.

*Apparently*, he was ready to date.

Date *other* people.

With no warning.

“I’m meeting him at this place called The Angel Bar,” he told me. Then, while I stared at him open-mouthed, he slid back under the sink, knocking on something as he spoke, his voice muffled again. “Apparently, Friday night is karaoke night.”

What kind of name was Wilton, and who in God’s name chose a karaoke bar for their first date??. I wasn’t going to say any of that, though.

I reached out to keep the cupboard door open as Arlo worked. God knows what he was messing around with under there, but I knew better than to ask him. Instead, I focused on this *Wilton* and began cautiously “Don’t you think a first date should be the getting-to-know-you bit? Y’know, dinner, and drinks, and talking?”

He wriggled back a little farther, his head in the cupboard, his voice muffled. “Says the expert on dating?”

I huffed. “I don’t have to be an expert to know karaoke is a shit first date,” I snarked loud enough for him to hear.

Arlo chuckled, a rumbling—*sexy*—sound that hit me hard. “I don’t care; hell, it’s been so long since I dated, I’ve



forgotten how to do it. Might as well get drunk and sing.”

I leaned over to peer into the cupboard under the sink, strands of my long red hair falling around my face. “What do you know about this guy? He’s a stranger.”

“Well, duh.” Arlo said. “I mean, that’s the definition of a blind date.”

“Whatever.”

“Jesus, Jax, get your hippie hair out of my face.” Arlo shoved at me.

I tucked the wayward strands behind my ear as he attempted to push me. He was back to his teasing self, as if the date announcement had been a barrier inside him holding back his happy.

Arlo gestured that he was sliding out, and I moved away, not staring at all as his T-shirt caught on the corner of the door and dragged upwards, revealing sun-kissed skin, muscles, and that damn soft belly he forever griped about wanting to fix. *Stop staring.* I always laughed it off when he bemoaned his belly, patted him there and told him it made a nice pillow and that he didn’t need to fix a damn thing. All of which was inappropriate, and always left him flustered and me feeling as if I’d crossed a line. Sue me, but I happened to love his belly, and had complete fleshed-out, fantasies of the two of us lying in bed, me resting my head on all that gentle sweetness, with kisses that would move lower... *much* lower.

He tugged the shirt down with a frustrated huff, and I mourned the loss of the belly and the glimpse of the treasure trail disappearing into worn jeans. Both of us startled when his phone emitted a tone I recognized as being from the dating app. Fuck. Another match? Or a message from Karaoke-guy? Arlo ignored the sound given we were working, but still, how many matches had he gotten? Jeez, I bet there were hundreds of men in and around San Diego and the ’burbs all wanting a piece of Arlo Marshall.

*Mine.*

“You should have a look at this, make sure you’re happy.” Arlo gestured at the open cupboard, grabbing my attention back to work, which was where it should be. Only, I felt wrong, my skin tight, as if everything had changed.

Work. I could focus on work. I pushed the door and it whisper-closed as it was supposed to.

“It’s perfect. The whole thing is as perfect as...” He glanced at me, waiting for me to end that sentence. “... a perfect thing,” I finished.

He rolled his eyes again.

“Yeah, it’s good,” he mused, then ran a finger along the counter—more frowning, peering at it from an angle, and then, huffing.

This kitchen, nearly eighty thousand dollars of work, and, if I was right, twenty in profit, should have been signed off Monday, but Arlo had found small imperfections, one after another, until this morning, Friday, he’d finally said he was happy to sign off. This was what Arlo did, he huffed, and he picked at details, and he made me want to wring his neck at times, but also, to hug him and tell him not to worry so much, that he was a craftsman and, then maybe, to add that he was my best friend.

*Oh my God! Get a grip.*

I could see the tension in him and the way his hands twitched to touch everything we’d created. I stood behind him, pushing my fingers into his shoulders, the muscles tight. “Breathe,” I instructed as I dug into where he held all of his stress. At least, he didn’t shrug off *this* touch.

“I just want it to be right,” he protested.

I carried on working the knots loose, and his shoulders dropped that half inch I wanted to see, and when I released him, he rolled them with care.

“It is right,” I murmured.

He mumbled something, then shrugged off my hands and smoothed his T-shirt, his focus darting from one finished

cupboard to the sink, to the door for the walk-in pantry, and then, up to the recessed lighting. He might be more relaxed, but the patented frown didn't disappear.

“Do you think I should take condoms?” he blurted.

I stiffened. “The fuck you asking me that for!” I snapped. “I'm not your fucking father.” Shit. Way too many fucks in there. And what a dick move to mention a father when he didn't have one. Or a mom. “Shit, Arlo, sorry.”

He stared at me. I stared at him. Then, he nodded and tugged a hand through his stormy-sky hair. I was mesmerized for a moment because, when I was around Arlo that was how I rolled—he moved, I watched, and I pined. He smiled because he didn't have a clue what I was thinking, and my heart hitched. He decided he wanted to date some random stranger, and I got all up in my head and hated it. He was beautiful; he was sexy and strong; and I wanted him to be more than just Arlo-who-works-for-me so bad I ached with it. But I'd never done anything about it.

And now, I was too late.

He met my steady gaze with his own. “But you think I should?” he pushed. “I mean, I haven't dated since...” Since his parents died and left him guardian of his two younger brothers is what I assumed he was going to say.

*What? I don't know, but I don't want anyone else but me touching you.*

“Condoms it is ,” he murmured, his normal sunny expression dipping for a moment, almost as if he were disappointed by my weird silence. Well, jeez, what did he want? It wasn't as if a discussion about sex and STDs was an appropriate workplace conversation. And now, the room was heavy with the weirdest interaction we'd ever had. All because of me not getting my head out of my ass.

*Make this normal again.*

I peered into the space he was checking, deliberately getting in his way, and he elbowed me, and I elbowed him back. What started then was a familiar shoving and teasing,

and it only stopped when I stepped back and left him to it, and I watched the muscles in his thighs flex as he crouched. I spent way too much time considering his thighs, and his ass, and his chest, and his soft bits, and the hard bits, and his eyes.

God. His eyes. At the last July Fourth fireworks, we'd been drunk, sitting by the fire pit, and I'd told him that his eyes were the shade of a can of Moonmist paint from the Sherwin-Williams catalog. He'd gone quiet, and of course, I told him I was joking and then, fell out of the garden chair. He laughed at my joke; I laughed at falling—crisis averted, because page one in the employee handbook probably said: thou shall not comment on an employee's stunning eyes by comparing them to cans of paint.

Or, indeed, commenting on them at all.

So, not only did Arlo have eyes so pretty I could stare at them all day, but he was taller than me, wider, built solid, muscled from construction work, with a belly that showed his love of all things cake-related, and he never met a T-shirt that didn't cling to every God damn curve. And he'd swiped right with a total stranger.

What now?

## Chapter Two

## Arlo

SO MUCH FOR putting myself out there in the vain hope Jax might ask me out instead.

Two years, three months, and two days since he told me I had eyes the color of paint, and somehow, I'd crossed a line in my head where he wasn't only my boss, but also the man I lusted after.

I knew it was a bad idea when my youngest brother Sutton created an online profile for me after lecturing me on how I needed to get out more and life wasn't all about work. Trace, the middle brother of the three of us, said it was long past due for me to find myself a partner, particularly, as I was now lonely in the big old house after they'd left for college.

They both said I needed to jump Jax's bones and get it over with.

Even though I said I was neither lonely nor pining for Jax, they were right on both counts. They wanted to fix me, but I only agreed to the profile because I *did* want to jump Jax.

In my more fanciful moments, I imagined him finding out I wanted to date, then swooping in, and declaring he'd always been in love with me.

Well, seemed as if that wasn't happening now, and why would it? Jax and I were best friends, and yes, we spent time outside work together, and yes, we talked about everything under the sun, but no, I needed to move on from my insane that idea there was any chance he wanted to be with *me*.

My first match had been Wilton Hythe-Barron, accountant, safe, sexy-ish, with a steady job and a profile that didn't include a dick-pic, so I thought it might be a good first choice. He didn't seem to be thrown by the description of me Sutton had put up, explaining I was a carpenter by trade, and loved cake, and was searching for romance. It threw me when the staid accountant-type I'd connected with suggested karaoke as

our first date, followed by a night at his place, and did I mind if he invited some friends as well. Although, he did add that the friends were for karaoke and not for the sex, in case I thought he was weird.

Was it weird that the group sex thing never even crossed my mind? #Vanilla.

Maybe that was what the dating scene was like now.

Karaoke. Sex. Strangers as an entourage. Or sex with a group. Or... My cheeks heated again. There wasn't going to be *only* sex because I wanted to be wooed, which was freaking crazy these days—I wanted dinner, and talking, and long walks on the beach.

Or whatever.

Also, there was the not-at-all-small issue that I didn't want to date anyone other than Jax, not when I had all these *feelings* for my boss simmering just below the surface. In the back of my mind, as my brothers talked at me about dating apps, I had this mad idea if I told Jax I had a date after telling him for so long that I wasn't ready to date, he would realize I was telling him I was ready, then jump me and tell me I wasn't allowed to meet up with Wilton and I was his.

Yep. Didn't happen.

"You can't go on that date," he blurted.

Hope swelled in my chest, and I waited as his mouth opened and shut as if he had things to say. "Why?"

He stared at me, blinking, and I waited with my best attempt at patience.

"Because karaoke is shit," he said.

Silence. I stared at him, waiting for more, waiting for *anything*.

"I've never done it, so you know, it might be good for me to get out," I offered, to fill the awkward silence.

He shrugged. "Find another guy on that app, someone who will do things right." His words were staccato sharp, as if he

were warning me and knew the dark secrets of app-dating. “If you don’t look hard enough, then you’ll end up with the ones who only want sex.”

Hope died, and for some reason, I wanted to poke at him, to get a reaction better than him pretending he knew best. “You do realize I’m just looking for sex, right?” I pushed, and he winced. “Wilton probably won’t even want to make it to the singing in public part.”

Jax turned away from me, picking up paperwork, placing it down again, shuffling it around so it was square on the counter. “Just... you’re a nice guy, Arlo, and they’ll eat you up.”

“Maybe I want to be eaten up,” I deadpanned and winced inside as he turned on his heel with an anguished expression. “Find someone who doesn’t mind a thirty-year-old soft-in-the-middle tradesman.”

“Don’t do that!” he snapped.

I deflated. I’d tried to get him to see I was there, he hadn’t taken an interest, and now, he was acting as if I was doing something wrong, and he was shaming me for wanting to move on with my life. But I didn’t want random sex, so why was I even pushing this?

“Do what?” I poked, and God knows where this pushy side was coming from, with all the needling and poking I was doing.

“Pretend no one would want you and you’ll take anything you can get, and like all you want is to go out and have sex as if it means nothing.”

“If I can get it, then sex doesn’t have to mean anything at all,” I needed because he was getting antsy, and maybe he’d just spill that he wanted to date me, and then, I could release this stupid tension with a kiss.

“Jesus, Arlo.” He sounded frustrated.

*What the actual fuck?*



“You don’t get to judge me,” I warned him in a quiet tone that may well have crossed the line, but then, he was the one getting all huffy over me dating. I was an adult and perfectly capable of having all the random sex with any and all kinds of men I wanted to.

I waited for him to explain that he was my boss, or my friend, and that he had every right to look out for me, but instead, he turned back to the paperwork. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

Well, that wasn’t what I expected, and I deflated.

“Just look after yourself,” he finished in a quiet voice. “Condoms are good.”

Silence.

Awful impenetrable silence that was nothing I’d ever experienced around Jax before. It hurt, and it was messing with my head because I’d done this all wrong, I’d pushed him into reacting, and then fucked up even more when he hadn’t reacted how I wanted him to.

*Way to go, Arlo.*

“Anyway, let’s finish this.” Jax wasn’t looking at me. He was tense, and I wished I could rewind to a moment where I hadn’t told him I had a date.

I rummaged in my tool kit for the tiniest screwdriver to adjust the cupboard door and pretended to fix a gap that no one else but me would have seen. Only Jax was still staring at me, and I couldn’t help but feel this was a very bad day.

And since I’d met Jax, where work was concerned at least, I hadn’t had bad days.

The first day I met him, I’d been all dressed for the interview with an emerging cutting-edge construction company, or at least that was what the job spec said. I’d been drawn to the rainbow in the logo, and it might have meant nothing at all, but I went into that interview determined to get a job with a company that was queer-friendly, and family-friendly. Back then, my little brother still lived at home with me, and I wanted to work somewhere flexible enough to give me an hour or two, here and there, to see one of Sutton’s

games as long as I made the time up. Even though Jax had been prickly, stressed, grumpy, and worst of all, had forgotten I was there for an interview, I wanted that job.

He'd been in the middle of a call concerning roofing tiles, and just as he was about to lose his shit over a delay, I was compelled to take over the call to interrupt the flow of the rising anger on both sides. I guess it was being pseudo-dad-slash-big brother to my siblings, but I'd broken up more than one heated debate. After a few moments of talking the supplier down and getting him to agree to a next day delivery with a discount for the client, and thus, not a cent of profit lost by Byrne Construction, I had handed back the phone, and Jax had blinked at me.

He'd hired me on the spot as temporary contract carpenter, which had become permanent three months in. I'd been with Byrne Construction—with Jax—for three years now, and it was unfortunate that, along with fitting in seamlessly with the work, I'd fallen into lust that had no hope of being returned.

My youngest brother, Sutton, said if I pretended to date, it would make Jax sit up and take notice. Yeah right.

What did little brothers know about anything?

Because now, I had a date I didn't want at a freaking karaoke bar.

Idiot brothers.

I stepped back from the cupboard space and avoided meeting Jax's fixed stare as I turned a full three-sixty to look at the expansive solid wood and granite kitchen. My chest swelled with pride—this had been my first real solo-led project, and along with our second carpenter, it had been a dream to work on and every detail of the hand-crafted oak kitchen was flawless.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

“Okay, I'm done. You can sign off,” I announced at last.

Jax blinked at me, then his eyes widened as if he'd forgotten where we were.

“Cool,” he said; then, we did this super awkward bro hug back slap, and I fought the impulse to pull him in and hug him properly—something else I fought daily. Maybe today, I felt it even more keenly, given the lack of reaction to my date thing, but I did cling for longer than usual, and he was solid against me as he squeezed me hard. I wondered what he felt when he hugged me—did he like the fact I was taller and stronger, or did he feel the soft parts of me and think I was less than he wanted?

“Let go of me, you freak,” he teased and shoved me away, playful, the way we usually were.

I’d normally tease him back, but I had nothing, but he didn’t seem to have noticed as he took photos of the finished room for our website. If I leaned in a little too much when we took our usual post-project grinning selfie, then it was only to get a better shot, and that was the lie I would be telling myself and anyone who asked me.

“Another one done,” I said, with no small amount of pride.

“How about *you* sign off with the client?”

“Me?” That wasn’t my job. I wasn’t the owner of Byrne Construction. “You’re sure?”

“It’s good work, Arlo. You should be proud.”

He stared at me again, and it was obvious he was waiting for me to say something.

“Sure, I can do that.”

He clapped a hand on my shoulder, and I stiffened. I wished he wouldn’t be so damned nice and reasonable.

I wished he’d tell me he needed me as more than just a carpenter.

God, I wished he saw *me*, and wanted *me*.

## Chapter Three

---

# JAX

THE REALTOR-SLASH-INVESTOR WAS WAITING for his inspection, with exaggerated patience, tapping his foot and checking his watch.

“Arlo is running through the final checks with you,” I said.

The guy didn’t bat an eyelid. Anyone looking at the two of us working together would think we were business partners given the way Arlo had led this kitchen reno, made himself heard, and worked closely with all of our suppliers.

Or maybe it was because I impressed on people we worked with that he had my authorization. I had paperwork at home to make him a full partner, so in my heart, I was one hundred percent behind him. Leaving him to do his thing, I went out to the front, sitting on a low wall and staring at the expanse of grass running down to the road. The expensive house was on a hill, and there were views of trails, a distant man-made lake, and the scent of the ocean mixed with the fragrance from the alyssum, which formed a carpet of snow with its masses of tiny white blooms. I could live here if I had the money, but despite how pretty it all was, I still hankered after a place in the middle of nowhere like Mama and Papa had.

One day.

What in God’s name had just happened?

Why didn’t I tell him that he shouldn’t date whatever-his-name-was because it was wrong?

“Hey, Arlo, how about you forget sex with a random stranger and come on a date with me?” I whispered to no one at all. “Dinner, talking, a kiss, taking it slow, blah, blah.” I scowled at the beautiful view, only pulled from my melancholy when my phone buzzed and vibrated. I was expecting a call for our next project, and had my professional answering voice at hand, but when I saw the caller ID—Leo, my older brother—I immediately relaxed.

“Hey,” I said with a forced smile in my voice because Leo would ask questions if I sounded as stressed as I felt.

Leo’s voice was clear. “Hey. How’s it going with the fancy-ass kitchen installation?”

“Too fancy for the likes of you.” I glanced around. “Arlo’s signing off on it today,” I replied, trying to sound casual, as if this wasn’t a big thing for me to hand over the reins on a completed project.

“Arlo is? That’s big,” Leo said. “So, you’ve actually spoken to him about him being made partner?”

I winced; thankful Leo couldn’t see me. “Not yet.” Because we’d been happy going along as we were, and the time hadn’t been right. I always imagined that one day, I’d get him to sign papers and that was it. But what if I’d missed my chance with that in the same way I had the dating?

“You’re an idiot,” Leo muttered.

“No, please say what you *really* think,” I said with a side order of sarcasm.

“You need to show him the contract you drew up and offer him the partnership, idiot; otherwise, not only will you lose the one person who... whatever. Look, some other construction company will steal him from under you.”

“I’ll do it.” *I will.* “Did you just call to comment on my life, or was there something else?” I couldn’t recall anything family related that I’d messed up in the last few weeks. I’d visited Mama and Papa only last weekend, and I’d been the one to drive our sister, Lorna, to the airport at the ass crack of dawn, so in the ledger of being a good son, brother, and brother-in-law, I think I was in credit.

“Jax...” Leo began and then, went quiet.

I hated when he did that because it meant he was considering how to phrase whatever he was going to say. Although, last week, he’d called with the same gravitas to ask me why he couldn’t get a hair bobble to stay in his daughter’s hair.

“Is this another hair emergency?” I asked.

He didn’t rise to my teasing, but just because he was silent, didn’t mean anything was wrong; although, my chest tightened, and I felt a poke of worry. Was it Mama or Papa? Was something wrong with Leo’s small family? Was it Reid?

“No, look, I don’t mean to dump this on you today, and I could have waited, but I know you’ve booked flights already...” He sighed, but at the mention of flights, I knew what he was calling for. He must have received an email from the agency.

Fuck.

“It’s about Zach,” he began, and then, he paused.

*Please tell me you’ve got good news. Because my heart already hurts, and my head is messed up.*

Leo, a cop, was my inside track in the search for my twin, Zach, but we always kept what we did—researching, following leads—to a weekend here and there. He’d been helping me when he could ever since I’d received a random email, a little after my eighteenth birthday, revealing that I had a biological twin that I’d never known about. I’d been adopted at a young age, and my birth parents were a mystery. All I knew was that I’d been left at a fire station in Bowness, Calgary, when I was a few months old. That I’d been adopted by Mama and Papa Byrne, same as my siblings Leo, Reid, and Lorna—all four of us wanted desperately and loved unconditionally.

There were no clues to my heritage either, although the DNA sample from my ancestry account showed I was forty percent Welsh, with a smattering of Irish, so maybe that was a clue. Since I’d received that email from the Sibling Discovery Network, or SDN as they’d called themselves, I’d embarked on a relentless search, often with Leo’s help, but to date, we’d encountered dead ends, false leads, and nothing more. The SDN promised they would help track down Zach pro bono, said it was sponsored by charities, but it didn’t matter that I never had to pay them, because they came up empty-handed.

I'd never met my brother, heard from him, or even seen him from a distance.

Who knew if he was even alive?

I rubbed my chest—surely a twin would know if his brother had passed on. Right?

Could this day get any worse?

“Check your personal email when you get home, but... I'm sorry, Jax, SDN said the Vancouver lead they had turned out to be a dead end. So, there's no need for you to travel up to BC. I just thought if I called, you could get a head start on refunds on the flight?”

That was Leo, forever practical. Disappointment crushed me, and I slumped to sit on the wall, feeling defeated. I'd been due to fly up next Tuesday, as soon as this kitchen was squared away, and I'd deposited the check, and filed the paperwork. I'd already packed, had a hotel room reserved in the center of the city, and two addresses that SDN had given me to check out.

“They're sure?” Sometimes it felt as if we were chasing shadows.

“The email was pretty specific but read for yourself.”

“I will,” I managed to say, trying to hide my disappointment.

Leo's tone softened. “Don't give up, Jax. We've come this far, and we'll keep searching until we find him.”

I felt grateful for Leo's unwavering support. Despite our sibling rivalry growing up, we loved each other. All four of us, the adopted Byrnes kids, were close, thanks to the love of Mama and Papa Byrne. “Thanks,” I murmured.

“Check the email, and you know where I am if you want to talk, but I'll see you next Sunday at Mom's for dinner anyway. Reid and I are off-roster, and even Lorna will get over, since she'll be back from New York by then.” It wasn't just the four siblings who would be there, there were all the partners and kids, so it would be chaos.



At least, I could stay quiet and hope they didn't ask all kinds of stupid questions.

"I'll be there," I replied. Leo was the easiest one to talk to out of the four of us—quiet, thoughtful, and open to discussion. Maybe he could talk me round and show me that it was okay for Arlo to be out there dating, and that I didn't want Arlo, and that what I was doing was being selfish and spoiled. "Leo, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, I have five minutes until I need to leave. Daisy has a play date, and Jason is working."

I thought I needed longer than five. Maybe a week. Shit. "It's okay, it can keep."

Thank God, he didn't push. "Cool. Oh, and Mama says to bring Arlo to dinner," Leo said.

"Arlo? Why?"

"Because it's funny watching you moon over him?" Leo deadpanned.

"I do not moon over Ar—him." I was firm. Particularly now that he was out there dating, and I'd fucked up and lost my chance.

Leo snorted. "You moon over him as if it's the mooning freaking Olympics, and you're going for gold in the mooning high jump."

"He works for me," I added and wished I hadn't because that gave things away, and Leo was far too perceptive for his own good.

Leo tutted. "Is that really the lie you're going with, little brother?"

"Fuck you."

"Whatever. You know I'm right."

"In your dreams, Turt."

Leo laughed at the use of the childhood nickname. Leonardo had become Turtle, which became Turt, and even

though I'd used it to insult him, he thought it was funny. Asshole.

"Whatever, Jax-Man," Leo said. My nickname wasn't as impressive or well-thought-out as Turt was, but at least no one in the family called me Annie, the name I'd been given at school, courtesy of my red hair and freckles. "And, all joking aside, promise me you won't wallow in the bad news for now?"

"I won't." I had enough to worry about after messing up with Arlo to worry about something else I had no control over.

"Remember to ask Arlo to dinner."

"I'll be there, and I'll ask Arlo," I said with a resigned sigh, but smiling. Bickering with Leo had pushed aside the disappointment for a moment, and he must have understood that I needed him to pull my head out of my ass. It was another nine days until the dinner, which meant I would have plenty of time to get over Arlo dating.

Arlo ambled over to me, clapping a hand on my shoulder, and offering me a reassuring smile. I wished I felt like smiling back.

"Ask Arlo what?" he said, having caught the tail end of the conversation.

"Dinner at Mama and Papa's place, Sunday of next week."

"Count me in." He patted his belly—his sweet, soft belly.

*Stop thinking about his freaking belly. He's dating. He's going to karaoke, and he's meeting Wilting or Winston or whatever, and his belly is, therefore, off limits to his boss, who shouldn't even be looking in the first place.*

*The hits keep coming.* First the date, and now Zach? I sighed with added drama, and he jumped on that.

"Is everything okay?"

A familiar determination swept through me as I nodded. I could handle Arlo dating, and I had to stay hopeful the Zach thing was just another bump in the road, and that, one day, I'd find him. "Zach's not in Vancouver." I didn't need to say

anything else because Arlo had been here before, seeing hastily rearranged travel or the frustration of a lead that didn't pan out.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry, Jax," he murmured, and I shrugged as if it didn't matter at all. "Do you want to talk about it?" He sounded so hesitant, but then, he'd witnessed a couple of times when frustration had won over patience, and he'd seen me despairing that I'd never finding my twin.

I shook my head, trying to loosen the dread in my chest, attempting to focus on the lighter parts of Leo's call—the teasing about Arlo, the nicknames—and I shrugged. "Nah, talking won't fix it, so tell me how the sign off went."

"Completed paperwork for you." He handed me the signed sheets, taking a seat on the wall and stretching out his long legs and checking his phone before he pocketed it again.

"Is that Wilting?"

"I don't know; I didn't look," he said, "and it's Wilton. Anyway, what's on the schedule for the rest of the day?"

It was two p.m., but while, normally, I might call a meeting to talk about the next project, it was Friday, we were done, and I'd imagined Arlo and I could take the rest of the day off and start our Friday cool-down early. Still, Arlo deserved the rest of the day off. *To get ready for his date.*

I massaged my temples—I was done with today. A cool shower, a cold beer, and chilling in the shade were in my near future. Only with the *date*, it would be me on my own wondering why Zach's lead hadn't panned out, and worse, worrying what Arlo was doing.

"You okay?" Arlo asked, glancing my way, wearing a frown. "You've been poking at your head all day."

"Bad night is all," I explained, taking a deep breath, the scent of Arlo filling my lungs—citrus and wood and warmth. My low-level headache was going to turn into something more if I didn't take some Tylenol soon. "Thinking about the next job, y'know," I lied. "We may as well call it a day, then you can get ready to meet Winston."

“Wilton.”

“Yeah, him.” I tossed him the keys, which he caught deftly, because he did everything without breaking a sweat and looked so damn sexy doing it. “You drive if that’s okay.”

“Sure, boss.”

In silence, we headed through afternoon traffic to my house, where he could swap the company truck for his old Chevy C10. We’d driven to the site together this morning, given it was just sign-off, and as he lived twenty miles out of the city, it was easier for him to drive to me, then we’d share the ride. Irritation curled in my chest, a slight pain that I rubbed, and then, an intense grief washed over me, and I couldn’t pin down what it was caused by—not finding my twin or the fact Arlo had a date. Either way, whatever I was feeling was hard, and frustrating, and I didn’t want to be in the car much longer. Even when we neared the gorgeous Craftsman I’d restored, my pride and joy—my home—the tightness in my chest didn’t here. Arlo passed a large black SUV with tinted windows parked on the road and turned onto my driveway to parallel park his truck. He didn’t get out, instead he turned in his seat toward me.

“Jax?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re really quiet. If you want to talk about Zach...”

“What? You’ll cancel your date with Winston?”

Arlo’s eyes narrowed a fraction, and the compassion I’d seen in his expression slipped away to be replaced by confusion. “Wilton,” he corrected with exaggerated patience as he killed the engine. “Look, if you want to talk about—”

“Karaoke on a first date?”

“No. About Zach.”

“I’m fine.”

However, Arlo Marshall was a perceptive fucker, and he’d somehow become an expert in seeing through my bullshit enough to know it wasn’t just Zach that was worrying me. He

side-eyed me, and I nearly gave in and told him that going on a date was a bad thing and that, maybe, he could go on a date with me instead. Only I didn't, and instead, I was frozen in the passenger seat as he passed me the keys, then climbed out and headed for his battered, but much-loved truck.

"See you Monday, boss," he called over.

I still hadn't gotten out, but when he started the C10's engine, some kind of energy fizzed through me, and I was out of my truck and standing in front of his in an instant. "Wait!" I shouted.

Arlo lowered his window, confused. "Did I forget something?" he asked. So much was in my head, so many words were on the tip of my tongue, but I had nothing. "Jax?"

I froze again, because shit, my head hurt and my chest was tight, and if his offer of being someone to open up to was still open, then yes, it was him I needed to talk to. My sexy Arlo, always in my space, strong but yeah, so sweetly soft in the middle, smart, driven, and creative. He made an architect's design better with intuitive additions and subtractions to what a client wanted. He could build a bespoke kitchen with his bare hands and negotiate with suppliers using his arsenal of stupid jokes and endearing smiles to the point where they'd roll over and give him what he wanted. But above and beyond all that sexy competence, he was temptation wrapped in worn denim and a jade green Byrne Construction T-shirt, and ever since he'd walked into the interview for his position three years ago, I'd tried to resist him.

So, what if I didn't resist him? What if I told him I would take him on a date if he was interested? Or at least attempt to talk him out of going?

An urgent fear compelled me to ask him to stay.

*Don't go!*

"I need to talk," I blurted. "Don't leave yet." Christ, now I sounded desperate.

He stared at me for the longest time, turned off the engine, then stepped out and leaned on the car, looking at me over the

hood. I took a shaky step toward him. *I'm going to fuck this up.* He inclined his head, seemed puzzled—maybe he saw something in my expression? Fear maybe? Or plain stupidity.

*Stop him from dating someone else. Wilton is the wrong person. It's me. Look at me.*

“Jax?” he asked, which covered everything from are you okay to what the fuck is going on. “Jax?” he repeated, his gaze steady. There was nothing passing over Arlo’s face I couldn’t read at first, and he was heading for the pity part of today’s proceedings in which he sympathized over Zach and explained how he was there for me.

I couldn’t do that right now.

I needed to tell him that he couldn’t date.

No, that he *shouldn't* date.

For the first time ever, Zach wasn’t top of my agenda, and it was all about Arlo.

Why hadn’t I told Arlo how I felt about him before?

*Because you thought he'd always be there? Idiot.*

Was I being selfish? Was I jealous? Why did I feel so messed up all of a sudden? So childishly pissed off, then so anxious.

I cleared my throat. “Could you come inside for a bit, so we can clear up an issue with an invoice you filed?” I was a lying liar who lied, and I did it before I could second guess myself. He frowned, which meant he was over-analyzing what I’d said, likely imagining trouble, or a million other details he fretted over.

“Okay, did I do something wrong—”

“Actually no;, fuck, it’s not about that at all; hell, it’s not about work. I just... I need some company for a while, and it’s not work at all, so you don’t have to come in. Sorry. I’m overstepping.” I stepped closer to him, and he didn’t move.

His frown vanished, but before he could make his excuses about the date, I headed for the porch, hoping he’d follow,

relief flooding me when he locked the truck and came after me.

“Jax, wait!” he called, but I kept walking.

This had to be his choice to come in and talk to me—I wasn’t pushing him. I had to do something, I was going to forget Zach, and work, and maybe I should have gotten out of my head and told Arlo how I felt about him. What would he say? He’d laugh and tell me I was being stupid over his date. Or he could get angry with me for being stupid. Or, maybe, he would sit and listen. Anticipation almost forced the headache aside, and a flush of positive feelings cascaded inside me, a generous portion of hope right alongside it. Maybe we could—

I froze, stopped dead, staring at my porch, blinking, and refocusing at the spot where I would normally see a welcome mat.

“Jax?” Arlo almost walked into me, resting a hand on my shoulder to peer at whatever I was staring at. “What’s wrong is there... wait... is that a... what?”

“A baby,” I said, and pointed at the out-of-place object, thing, baby, whatever.

“Why is there a baby on your porch?”

Good fucking question. I glanced around, wondering if one of my idiot siblings was hiding out there, snickering at what they’d done. “You can come out now, Leo?” Nothing. “Reid?” No sign of either of my brothers, and Lorna was in another state, so I could rule her out. “Is this a joke?”

The baby was mewling plaintively, waving chubby fists, fluffy red-blond hair sticking upright.

Hair the same soft red-blond that mine used to be before it darkened to the copper it was now.

Not possible.

Fuck, no.

## Chapter Four

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## Arlo

I MOVED PAST JAX, who'd gone as still as a statue, and tried to take everything in, my stomach in sudden knots. A red-haired baby on his doorstep could only mean one thing; he'd clearly been seeing people without me even knowing. Not that he owed me an explanation, but I hadn't known. So much for years of pining on my part when it was obvious he'd been out there doing his thing.

Jax's breathing was shallow. I wanted to be angry, but instead, compassion flooded me. I knew he was bi. He'd been married and had two daughters, so I knew he was attracted to women, but something had gone wrong given there was the evidence of a sexual encounter on the doorstep. A tiny squirming bundle of freaking joy with the same red hair and pout as Jax.

"Arlo?" He exhaled noisily.

I rested a hand on his shoulder. "Breathe."

"I am... breathing..." he choked out, but he wasn't breathing at all, so I smacked him on the back to startle him out of whatever he *was* doing, which was all about panic and shutting down.

I took a deep breath myself, my mind racing to make sense of the situation. "There has to be an explanation." Always stay positive, whatever the shock or the pain.

"An explanation'?" Jax rounded on me. "Arlo, there's a red-headed baby with my eyes on my doorstep! On. My. Doorstep. What could possibly explain this?"

Sex could explain this, and I sent him a pointed glance.

"No," he blurted. "It's not mine."

I opted for my most soothing, steady voice. "Then, there are a million reasons why a baby would be on your doorstep," I lied. "Maybe it's been left at the wrong address?"

“Who would abandon a baby on any doorstep in the first place!”

I had no answer at all, and I stepped closer, noting two diaper bags set down close to the car seat, and also, the corner of a blue envelope tucked in next to the baby. I reached for the note, trying not to touch anything else—this could be a crime scene, and I was contaminating it, but leaving it there wasn't going to be a thing, not when it could hold all the answers to what the fuck was occurring here. Not to mention, we should get the baby inside.

“Arlo!” Jax snapped. “Don't touch anything!”

I rolled my eyes. “It's not an unexploded bomb.” Jax's eyes widened, and he pressed a hand to his chest. “Let's start by reading the note,” I said in my best soothing tone.

“Wait, there's a note?” Jax asked with another sharp breath.

“There's an envelope at least.” I turned it over in my hand, thinking maybe I'd see another name on the front—Fred, Bob, Ted, whatever—but no, it said *Jaxon Byrne*, and my stomach sank. Shit.

I thrust the note at him. For a moment, it looked as if he wasn't going to take it. So, I shoved it harder until he took it, then dangled it between two fingers.

“No,” he said. “The baby's not mine. I haven't... not with a woman, since...three years... no...” He went scarlet as he met my gaze. I didn't want to think of him with a woman, or a man, or indeed anyone, but clearly, he'd forgotten something in his sex life I didn't want to hear about—if the proof here was to be believed. There was no doubt in my mind that the cute cooing baby was Jax's.

“We should all go in,” I said.

Jax stared at me with wild eyes, and it wasn't hard to see this was him in panic mode. He liked to be in control with everything—and I didn't have to be an expert to know he didn't do well with changes at the best of times. But this wasn't him handing me the task of signing off on a contract,

this was a freaking baby on his doorstep. I took his keys from him, picked up the heavy carrier, and headed into the cool interior of Jax's home.

Jax stayed on the porch, and when I glanced back, he was staring at the envelope, immobile.

"We need to get inside, Jax." I was as firm as I could be without scaring the baby, and he blinked at me, his brain not quite firing all synapses. "Jax. Inside."

He nodded, then after a long pause, he came in and shut the door, keeping to the wall, bypassing the car seat and the increasingly restless baby within. He sat on the third step of the staircase, kind of scrunched up in self-protection mode, pale and shaking, as he rubbed at his chest as if there was pain there. This was more than shock or surprise, it was as if his whole brain was shutting down, and that wasn't like Jax at all. His green eyes were bright with emotion, his lips thin, and I swear he was about to cry.

*Okay, so this is up to me.*

Jax wasn't present in the moment, holding the envelope with shaky hands, staring at it as if the outside could explain everything. So, I scooped out Baby-Jax, blanket and all, and cradled him, or her, against my chest, bouncing them a little and patting the diaper. There was no smell, no fullness to it. The baby was robust and chunky, but I had no idea what I was looking for in a baby, barring a diaper or feeding emergency. I gently rubbed my thumb in downy red hair and touched the softness of a tiny pale blue onesie, Baby-Jax stared up at me. The baby's eyes were blue, and not Jax's forest-green, but that didn't prove anything.

Fuck.

Jax hadn't moved an inch, staring at the envelope as if it were a grenade. He blinked up at me. "It can't be mine... I haven't... I swear, it's not mine." He wasn't telling me, it was more as if he was convincing himself, but given the evidence in my arms, it would take a lot to persuade me this wasn't his child. I'd seen enough photos of India and Iris as babies spread

all over this house, and Baby-Jax was an exact replica of his kids. “Arlo,” he murmured. “What is happening?”

“Read the letter, Jax.”

He stared at it. “Yeah.” He made no move to open it, and I wondered if this would be up to me as well. I could be here for him if that is what he needed.

“You want to take Baby-Jax, and I’ll read it?”

“Fu—fudge! Don’t call the baby that!” His eyes widened, then he shook his head and opened the letter, taking the time to smooth out the paper and checking to see if there was anything else in the envelope—talk about putting off the inevitable. What was he expecting? A gift card? Confetti?

“Dear Jaxon,” he began, then cleared his throat. “The letter is for me.”

*Well duh*, I thought, but I didn’t say a word.

“This is Charlie.” Jax stopped reading and glanced up at me and Baby-Jax, who now had a name.

“Hello, little Charlie,” I whispered to the baby.

“Does he know his name?” Jax asked.

God knows. How old was Charlie? The baby was holding my gaze, but was he super-tiny, just tiny, or slightly-older-than-tiny?

“Well, um, he’s looking at me. I can try again. Charlie? Do you know your name?” Charlie gave no real indication that he understood a damn thing, unless blowing a bubble was a yes, but he, at least, wasn’t screaming because a stranger was holding him. “Keep reading.”

“Okay, this is Charlie; he’s seven months old; his health records are inside the lining of the car seat for safety; but here’s a link so you can find everything electronic that you need.” He blinked up at me. “There’s a link and a password in the letter,” he explained. “Should we try that on a phone?”

“Carry on with the letter,” I poked.

“Uhm, okay, password... So, in the bag is formula, but C also likes baby rice and mashed bananas.” He paused and stared up at me. “See! I hate bananas.”

Was he saying that proved the baby wasn't his? That was some reach. “Go on.”

“Okay, so...” He cleared his throat, wiped at his flushed face, then rolled his shoulders. “... mashed up banana... Shit, I read that bit already. Okay, for reasons I can't go into, Charlie isn't safe with me right now, so I did the next best thing and decided that his Uncle Jaxon would be the best person to look out for him.” He stared up at me. “Wait. He's not mine? I'm Uncle Jaxon? But Leo, Reid, and Lorna haven't... wait...” He sounded as if he couldn't believe what he was reading as he went back to it. He went to the end of the letter, his world shifting as he uttered one word. “Zach. Shit, it's from Zach.”

Long-lost twin Zach? Jax-has-been-searching-Canada-for-any-trace Zach? That Zach?

Was I relieved? Worried? Or just fucking confused?

“Charlie is your twin brother's baby?” I summarized. “That explains the fact he looks like your girls, and with the hair and all...”

I'd never seen emotions slam into Jax so fast, an ecstatic high that his brother was alive after his years of searching and so many near misses, then shock that he was an uncle, plus the abandoned baby—his nephew, Charlie—and finally, faced with the enormity of it all, Jax was slipping into survival mode. He grew even paler, sitting on the stairs, not reaching for the baby, not finishing the letter, definitely in shock.

“What else does it say?” I prompted.

He blinked at me, and I swear there were tears in his eyes. He went back to the letter, his voice thick with emotion. “It says... I wish we could have met some other way before this, maybe in person, but that's not going to happen for a while, and it kills me, but it's important that I can trust you with this part of my heart, and as my brother...” Jax scanned the rest of the letter before finding his place and starting again. “In with

the medical docs are legal papers giving you guardianship in the event of my death...”

Jax made a noise, a cross between a cry and a curse, then leaned over the letter. Hell, this was a metric ton of fuck to lay on someone in one go.

“Jax, stop reading,” I murmured.

He shook his head, swallowed the emotion, and carried on reading. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but please don’t tell anyone you have Charlie, not even the cops.”

A prickle of unease skittered down my spine. “Why? Is there more?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat again, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. “Uhm... okay... It says—I haven’t abandoned Charlie, but he’s safer with you. I wish I could tell you more, but if you have the same freaky twin connection that I do, the one that tells you how I’m feeling, then you’ll know how hard things have been for me this last week...” He glanced up at me, rubbing his chest. “Was that the headache I couldn’t shake? Or this pain in my chest?”

This was the first I’d heard about pain in his chest. “I don’t know. Finish the letter, Jax.”

“... uhm... okay... how hard things have been for me this last week, and I need to know my son is safe. I’m hiding from you, but there’s a reason for that, and I know you’re a good man, and it would mean everything to me if you could please take care of him until I can come for him.” Jax rubbed at his chest again—was this him feeling Zach’s emotions as the letter suggested, or was he having his own crisis? “He’s coming here for him. When?” Jax stared at the letter as if it would give him all the answers, but I got the feeling that Zach or whoever wrote this was being deliberately vague, which got my back up. Maybe I should call 911, whatever the letter said. No one abandons a baby and gets away with it.

Right?

“Is there more?” I asked and jiggled Charlie as he began to cry.

Jax cleared his throat, his voice wavering, and read more. “I need you to make my perfect son part of your life, but you can’t tell anyone what I’ve done. I don’t want to sound dramatic, but you can’t tell anyone apart from your closest family, as long as you trust the ones who are cops. God, I have to have faith they won’t fuck this up, because I’ll lose Charlie, and it will put him and me in danger.” Jax paused, and all I could think was that this was super dramatic, and the unease became a shudder of fear. “Until that day we finally get to meet. Love you always. Zach.”

Jax glanced up at me, tears streaming down his face, shock and grief, and a multitude of other emotions that Jax typically kept inside were escaping from his heart.

“Jax?”

He blinked away the tears, wiping at his face. “Zach is... the baby is... I’m his uncle?” At least, he was at the semi-coherent-trying-to-make-sentences stage, which was a step up from nothing at all.

I needed to do something. “So, we’re not calling the cops, then.”

“The letter says we shouldn’t tell anyone.” His eyes went wide with fear, but I knew him well enough to see indecision there as well.

“The letter said you could tell your other family, by which he means the Byrne family, right? How about your brothers? Leo and Reid are both cops, and you can trust them. I mean I can call them. Or what about your parents?” His expression was unfocused, and his mouth opened to speak, but no words happened. “Okay, I’m calling someone, anyone.” I fumbled for my phone, cradling Charlie, and wondering what the hell I was going to say, and who I was going to say it to. Leo probably—he was level headed and would know what to do.

“Don’t.” Jax held up a hand, although from this distance, with me pacing the hallway, he couldn’t reach me. “Zach’s alive,” he wondered out loud, then sighed. “I need time to process this sh—stuff. Please just give me a moment.”

After a pause, I pushed my phone back into my jeans, willing to give Jax a little more time because baby Charlie seemed healthy and happy aside from the odd whining cry, and if the letter was to be believed, this wasn't a kidnapping.

*Should we believe the letter?*

“Let me take Charlie,” he said.

It surprised me that, somehow, he'd moved from the stairs, and I hadn't seen it, and he was right in front of me, his arms extended.

“You're sure?”

“I've held a baby before, Arlo,” he groused. “I've had two of my own, you know.”

He took his nephew as carefully as if he were made of glass. Only, as soon as he had him cradled close, his hold was firmer, and baby Charlie stopped crying and tried to reach for a length of Jax's long red hair as it spilled over his shoulder after escaping the ever-present tie.

It hit me hard—God, Jax looked good with a baby, a smile playing on his kissable pink lips, laughter lines bracketing his eyes. My heart hurt, my head was a mess, and why did all of this happen *today*?

Instead of staring at everything I couldn't have, I pulled the paperwork mentioned in the letter from the child seat and laid it on the hallway table, then decided I needed to be doing something proactive. “I'm going to get the bags from outside,” I said to no one, given Jax had wandered off into his kitchen, murmuring sweet nothings to baby Charlie. I headed out to the porch for the diaper bags. A glimpse of movement in the hedges next to the garage caught my eye, and I peered into the bright sunshine as someone stepped toward me.

I reacted instantly, dropping both bags, and bending my legs. God knows what I was going to do with those bent legs, but it was instinct. The letter had scared me into seeing bad guys everywhere.

“Who are you?” I demanded. It couldn't be the elusive Zach, unless he and Jax were like Arnie and DeVito in the old



eighties' movie *Twins*. This guy on Jax's property was no more than five-eight, his hair dark, his brown eyes hooded, and his expression cautious.

We locked eyes. He tilted his head in question, then inclined his head toward the house. "Is he agreeing to look after the kid?" he asked.

"Who... what... Yeah, of course—"

"He read the letter?"

"Yes, but—"

The man backed away then, jogged down the path, and I heard a car starting before it roared down the road.

I was stuck on the porch, knees bent, wondering what the hell had just happened with someone who knew Zach, baby Charlie, and probably, Jax.

The fuck?

## Chapter Five

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## Jax

ARLO CAME IN FROM OUTSIDE, the two diaper bags in one hand, and he was flushed. I guessed he was in shock the same as I was—he always had my back over my hunt for Zach, never called me on my obsession, but it was another thing all together to be faced with the proof of my sibling being alive and well.

Oh, and that he'd left me with a baby.

But he shouldn't be here. He should be at his place, getting ready for his date. I should make him go.

“There was a guy...” Arlo began, but Charlie wailed over his talking—like full-on bellowed his distress. We needed to address the immediate situation, and I didn't want to hear about Arlo and stories about any more *guys*.

“He needs something,” I interrupted.

Arlo seemed uncertain and confused at the change in conversation, then he nodded. “Okay, let's do this.” He dropped the bags to the counter, pulled out diapers and formula, and a travel-sized ice box, plus little onesies in a myriad of colors, and also a forest-green blanket and a stuffed dog, which he passed to me. The cloth tag on the plushie had the name *Woof* embroidered on it, and I knew that was probably what the brand was, but I wondered if that was the name my brother had used for it.

“Look, here's Woof,” I said, but that didn't seem to have any effect on little Charlie, who grabbed at an ear, but then released it just as fast. I'd done this before when the twins were babies, I can do this. *Pull yourself the fuck together, man*. “I'll change him, can you make a bottle?”

Arlo glanced up from the pile of things he was creating on the kitchen counter, and it hit me—when he'd taken over parental duties to his two siblings, they'd been teenagers. He'd need talking through the bottle thing as I laid out the forest-

colored blanket on the counter, undoing the pajama and easing Charlie's legs out. Someone needed to know what they were doing here, and from the way Arlo was peering at the back of the can of pre-mixed formula, all wide-eyed and concerned, that someone was me.

“Take one of the bottles and that can of pre-mixed formula. We're going to have to assume the bottles are sterilized.”

“What about this one in the baggie with the word sterilized on it?” Arlo waved a bottle in a bag right under my nose. I glanced at the writing—strong, sure, like mine—Zach's handwriting?

“Okay, yeah, remove the nipple, put it on the...” I looked around, and in the end, I shoved the pile of baby pajamas toward him, “put it on there, that way up, fill the bottle, then replace it.” I took him step-by-step through warming the milk as he rummaged through the bag for anything else in there, and at last he had a bottle warmed. Charlie had a new diaper and was in a clean baby pajama covered in giraffes. It was short-sleeved, but given the coolness of the AC, I added another layer—the tiniest jacket emblazoned with pink hippos. Everything clashed, but at least Charlie wasn't crying, and was instead, tugging on his feet and burbling.

“You think he needs a blanket?” Arlo passed me the bottle, then a blanket.

I took both, plus grabbed a burp cloth, juggling all the things as muscle memory kicked in and I settled into a chair in the garden room. It was second nature, recalling precious moments when my girls were curled in my arms. I missed those days, missed the girls like a limb. I bet they'd be so excited to know they had a cousin, and probably a lot cooler about it than someone like me, who was quietly losing his shit.

Arlo approached, his movements were slow and deliberate, conveying a sense of calm that seemed to permeate the air around him. Even though he'd never made a bottle before, he'd managed this one, but was now hovering, as if he didn't know what to do.

“Hey there, little one,” Arlo murmured, his voice soothing as he stroked Charlie’s hair. “You’re safe now. We’re here to take care of you.”

*We?* What would it be like for the two of us to be together dealing with everything that life threw at us?

*We* sounded good.

Charlie’s cries softened, replaced by tiny sucking sounds as he drew on the milk, and my anxiety eased when batted at the bottle.

“He was hungry,” I whispered.

“Hangry,” Arlo corrected with a sappy smile.

“That too.”

Arlo tapped my arm. “So, there was this guy outside, just now.”

Hope flared inside me. “Zach?”

“No, short, dark-haired, just nodded at me, asked me if you were taking Zach’s kid. I said yes, and he left. I might be wrong, but it was as if he was waiting in case you said no.”

“He knew Zach?” I had so many questions, hope flaring in my chest. “Is Zach coming?”

“He just asked about the baby, then left as if his ass was on fire.” Arlo sat down facing me. “What now?”

“I look after my nephew.”

It was as simple as that—Zach had left Charlie with me, and I wasn’t going to let either of them down. Arlo disappeared again, as if he couldn’t bear to sit still. Everything had collapsed in on me in the space of a few minutes and breathing was difficult as the weight of it all settled inside me. Zach was alive—after all those failed leads and going from place to place trying to track him down, I had proof, and a kernel of hope that one day we’d meet. My eyes filled with tears again—stupid-ass tears—the emotions inside were leaking out, but a soft noise at the door startled me as Arlo came back in.

“Hey,” he whispered, and held up a mug and a plate. “I made coffee and found this cake.”

He eyed my favorite cake, as if the slice was going to leap up and kill him, and it made me smile. He was a sucker for any kind of cake, as long as it didn't have fruit in it, apart from raspberry, but he liked to argue they were mashed up anyway. I loved that I knew this about him—it was an old familiar thing that eased a little more weight from my shoulders. In fact, the heaviness of everything slipped away for a moment because of that smile. I needed him to be here with me. I needed someone to tell me everything was going to be okay.

“Sounds good.”

He tiptoed into the room, which was hella funny for such a big man, and used these exaggerated movements to show me he was trying to be quiet as he placed the mug and cake on the table next to me. The plate clattered a little, and he winced. Both of us checked on Charlie, who by now was sleeping—like the proverbial babe in arms.

“I made a bed thing,” Arlo said, and went back out to fetch whatever this bed thing was. He came back with a drawer, which was ingenious, that he'd lined with soft things—a blanket, a couple of my T-shirts folded up—hiding any glimpse of wood with towels. “I have a crib in my attic, family heirloom, so I'll tidy it up and bring it over for you to borrow, but for now this could work?”

Yeah. Of course. I needed to think about the practicalities.

“I can always ask Reid if he has either of the girls' old cribs in the morning,” I whispered, and wished I hadn't, when Arlo seemed disappointed. “But yeah, I'd love yours, and I'm sure Charlie would too,” I added.

He brightened. “Great, I'll get on it tomorrow.”

“It's the weekend tomorrow,” I reminded him.

“Y'know,” he said with a shrug.

I did know. He never stopped working, but he always smiled.

“You need to leave for your date,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “I cancelled on Wilton. Thought I’d hang around in case you needed me here. Unless you’re calling your family, in which case I can go, but it won’t be to go on a date—”

“I’d like you to stay.” My heart expanded, and relief flooded me—my brother was alive, and Arlo wasn’t going on a date, but was staying by my side.

“I don’t know how long I’ll have Charlie for,” I murmured, placing my nephew in the drawer, as gentle as I could be, hoping he wouldn’t wake up, then half hoping he would so I could check he was okay. Was he breathing? I stared at his chest, watching for the rise, same as I had done with my girls when they were this tiny. “Zach could come back tomorrow.”

“The letter made it sound as if it would be a while,” Arlo warned, but I couldn’t hear that, too wrapped up in this idea that Zach was just around the corner waiting for me to see him.

After all this time and all the searching, I could get to meet my brother, and I couldn’t sit still, because a surge of adrenaline, maybe excitement, rose in me, and I had to move. “I need more coffee, this one’s cold. Do you want some?”

“No thanks.”

“I’m getting some. I’m going for coffee.” I still hadn’t moved. My skin felt tight, my head still hurt, and I wasn’t *really* going for coffee, but I needed to be doing something. After checking on Charlie, I headed out to the kitchen, and Arlo followed.

I poured another coffee, then stared at it before giving up and leaning against the kitchen counter. The crumpled letter was sitting there, the words danced on the page until they were nothing but a blur. Zach had written that letter, knowing where I lived, trusting me to take his son, and I didn’t know what to do with the immensity of my feelings.

Arlo sighed. “We should call your family. I think your brothers and sister should—”

“Leo and Reid are cops!” I regretted my harsh tone as soon as I said it. It wasn’t like me to snap at Arlo, and on the rare occasion I did, he gave me puppy-eyes, the same as he was doing now.

I didn’t imagine for a single minute that he knew what he was doing, but all the guilt balled in my chest. How could I tell my three siblings when they were all law enforcement; Leo and Reid both cops, and my only sister, Lorna, was interning at the DA’s office. I couldn’t risk any of them somehow making me contact family services out of their sense of duty. They wouldn’t do it to be hurtful, it would be wrapped in concern and love and hell, I’d probably end up doing what they suggested because they’d make so much sense. But not now—not tonight.

“Jax?” Arlo pushed.

“I didn’t mean to snap, but I can’t think right now,” I said, stalling for time. “What if we wait until Zach shows up, and then tell them all after the fact.”

Arlo stood across from me, his expression a mixture of concern and shock.

“What?” he asked, his tone low, but urgent, stunned. “You can’t seriously be considering keeping this a secret? It’s your *brother’s* baby we’re talking about. Every time you’ve missed an event to go searching for Zach, your family have loved you and supported you. It’d kill them if they find out, after the fact, that there’s been contact.”

Arlo was making complete sense. I sighed as I tucked the curls, that had escaped the damn tie again, behind my ear. When I glanced up at him, he was staring right at me, waiting for me to do the right thing. Hell, he always wanted me to do the right Goddamn thing.

“But what would Leo do, or Reid, or hell, even Lorna? Would they make me report Charlie? What if Zach is...” I couldn’t get the words out, dragged them from some darkness inside me that wouldn’t leave. “What if he’s a criminal, what if he’s out there hurting people, what if he’s not like me?”



That was the very worst of all thoughts—that one day I might meet Zach, and he wouldn't be the twin I imagined him to be. What if he was a bad guy, a bastard, abandoning his kid, out there doing the most horrible of things?

Arlo shook his head, frustration evident in his expression. “Whatever he is, whoever he turns out to be to you, don't freeze out the family you do have, who all love you unconditionally.”

I frowned, torn between my connection to my absent twin, the fears he would be someone I'd hate, the responsibility that had been thrust upon me, and the loyalty and love my family showed me. Charlie was sound asleep in the drawer, and I wished I could stare at him, and everything would make sense, but I couldn't help my conviction that his life depended on my decisions.

“I'm worried about what my family will say,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “They already imply that Zach is giving me the runaround. They know all about how there's sightings and then, he vanishes. Shi—sugar, they're going to freak out if they find out Zach dropped his kid and disappeared. They'll believe the worst of him, and I won't be able to keep a hold of all the good things I hope for.”

God's sake. That had tumbled out in a mess of nothing. I bet I sounded as if I were losing control, and as if to underscore that, Arlo stepped closer, a reassuring hand on my shoulder to center me. Just that touch was enough to get me to calm down, and I lost myself in his eyes, which were bright with emotion. Why couldn't we go back to when all I had to worry about was telling Arlo not to go on a date?

“I understand that. I do, but you're not alone in this. First off, I'm not going anywhere, and I won't let anyone take Charlie from you unless it's the very last choice possible that you could make. I'll back you whatever you decide but... Jax, are you listening to me?”

I nodded; my eyes unfocused this close to Arlo.

“Okay, your family deserves to know the truth of why you happen to have a baby all of a sudden, because you're not

thinking this through, and they *will* find out. What happens on site? Will you take Charlie with you? Because if you do, then Dan will see, and he'll tell Daisy, who will tell Jason, who will immediately go to Leo. What if your siblings found out that way? You know that even trying to keep this a secret is only going to make things worse."

I gazed down at the letter again, my mind racing, a band of pain squeezing my head. Arlo was right—I couldn't keep such a significant secret from Leo, Reid, and Lorna, no matter how much Zach had asked me to keep the authorities away. And what about Mama and Papa? Taking a deep breath, I looked up at Arlo, determination settling in. He took my hand and gripped it tight, in reassurance.

"I'm sorry, of course you're right," I said, my voice steadier. "First thing in the morning, I'm going to call my family and tell them what's going on."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Arlo's lips. "You won't have to go through telling them alone."

I managed a grateful smile in return, thankful for Arlo's unwavering support—he hadn't run away screaming.

"And I'll stay here tonight," he continued.

He often stayed over on a Friday evening, tucked up in the spare room, when the beers we drank made him sleepy and put him over the limit to drive. He wouldn't have been here tonight though—what if I hadn't asked him to come in to talk, what if he'd driven away? What would I have done without him?

I would have called family.

But I loved that Arlo was here.

"You don't have to stay if you don't want to. I'm okay," I whispered, my voice cracking.

He shrugged. "I know you are." He stepped into my space and held out his arms.

I stepped into one of his patented comfort hugs. He was a head taller than me, wide-shouldered, and broad, and I nestled

into his hold. He was just the right height for me to lean my face against his neck.

“Everything will be fine.”

I laced my hands behind his back as he cradled me close, and I inhaled the scent of him, sunscreen, a working day, the underlying notes of wood and varnish.

Arlo. Safety. Home.

## Chapter Six

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## Arlo

JAX AND CHARLIE had gone to bed, or rather Charlie had fallen asleep in his drawer, and we'd carried it upstairs into Jax's room. He didn't want to leave Charlie, but I couldn't exactly offer to stay in his bedroom as well, so I'd gone back downstairs and cleared away the snack I'd made for us after Jax had gotten over his initial shock.

He'd barely eaten any of the sandwiches, and now I wasn't sure what to do next. I could go home. It wasn't as if we'd had beers and I'd needed to stay, but something compelled me to check all the doors, turn off lights, and head to the spare room.

I even managed to relax, as much as I could after the abandoned-baby-slash-Zach-is-alive thing, in the familiar spare room I used when I stayed. India, one of Jax's daughters, had made a sign for me, coloring in a print Jax had made saying *Arlo's room*. His other daughter, Iris, had added glitter, which flaked off in tiny pieces every time I opened and closed the door. They knew I stayed, but I never did when they were here as well, going home as soon as Friday night dinner was done. What Jax's ex thought of his employee using the spare room I didn't know, but we did it as friends, and friends alone.

Shame, but that was the way it had always been.

At some point, I woke with a start, pale moonlight seeped through a familiar gap in the drapes, casting dim shadows across the room, and my phone showed it was two a.m. I hadn't fallen asleep until one, so yay for little sleep. I fixed my gaze on the ceiling, the events of the past day replaying in my mind like a broken record—signing off on the kitchen, on a high, the big date reveal in the hope Jax would sweep me into his arms, the dramatic arrival of Charlie and the note.

I'd even agreed to that stupid date with Wilton, who wasn't pissed I'd cancelled and said he had a backup guy to ask.

A backup, fuck's sake.

My life had always been about responsibilities. Ever since my parents passed away when I was only nineteen and I'd chosen to raise my two younger brothers, I'd carried out the roles of caregiver and provider—working a heap of jobs at first, keeping the family together—and hadn't regretted a single day. But as the years had gone by, my responsibilities had shifted from my little brothers. I wasn't needed by Trace, who was in his final year at U-Dub in Seattle majoring in Actuarial Science, or Sutton, who'd left in the summer, heading to Illinois State on a partial football scholarship. That left me alone. The Marshall family home was emptier than ever with them gone. I'd heard people describe silence as deafening, and I'd never understood it until now, when loneliness had begun to creep into everything I did. It was that solitude that meant I stayed so often at Jax's place, wanting friendship and love.

No wait, not love... I wasn't in love with Jax. Right?

I more than liked him and hoped that he *more than liked* me back.

"Now I'm lying to myself," I muttered. "Idiot."

The first day I'd met Jax, he'd stolen my breath, and over the three years we'd worked together, he'd stolen my heart as well. He had no idea I wanted him, or that every time he talked to me, or we met each other's gaze, a part of my heart had to expand a tiny bit more to contain all the extra love I felt.

I was a freaking idiot. Clueless.

I wanted what my parents had had—that sense of forever, a feeling of linked hearts that could never be torn apart. I might have been looking at what they'd had through rose-tinted glasses, but they'd lived their love for their children to see, and they'd died together, and in my head, they'd never be parted.

And that was the problem—I didn't need my counselor to explain that I had unrealistic expectations of the kind of love out there for me. I knew that, and that I was pushing those feelings onto Jax. Not that I saw a counselor anymore, that was from a long time ago when I'd left college at nineteen and

become dad to Trace, who was only eleven, and Sutton, only eight.

Something had shifted today, before the baby-on-the-doorstep thing when Jax said I shouldn't settle for the wrong kind of date. I'd been hopeful he'd turn around and ask me out instead, despite the fact that, as far as he was concerned, we were good friends. I was the quiet, gentle, somewhat unsure, Arlo Marshall, who was a little soft in the middle and prematurely gray, and since my brothers had left for college, ever so slightly lost and rootless. Whereas, Jax was focused on his girls, both of whom I loved to bits, his company, and finding his twin.

Still, it wasn't pining for Jax keeping me awake now—I just couldn't shake the feeling that Jax needed me. I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and pushed myself up, stretching tall and pulling a T-shirt on over my jersey boxers. The soft carpet muffled my footsteps as I padded down the hallway and headed downstairs, hesitating for a moment outside the living room door before pushing it open.

And there, bathed in the gentle glow of a dimmed table light, was a sight that tugged at my heartstrings. Jax on the couch, his long hair loose and curling around his face, touching his shoulders, cradling Charlie, feeding him a bottle. Charlie's eyes were closed, but his tiny fingers flexed in Jax's hair as he fed, and my damn stupid eyes got all teary.

Fuck's sake.

Was I really getting emotional because Jax looked at peace? What was that even about? My head told me to get dressed and leave before I did or said something stupid, but my heart was in Jax's hands, as it had been since the day we met. There was no competition, so I stayed where I was.

“Hey, you,” Jax whispered, then covered a yawn with his hand before offering me a tired smile. “Did we wake you?”

*Act natural. Crack a joke. Smile. It's okay.*

I shook my head. “Nope. Mind if I join the two-a.m. party?”

Jax chuckled, then glanced at the second sofa, which held the temporary crib and a pile of blankets, before wriggling along to one side of the other sofa he'd taken without disturbing Charlie, so there was room for me to sit. I didn't tell him that I'd move the crib and blankets—in fact I'd take anything I got—and I eased down onto the couch beside him, our thighs brushing. I tried to ignore the warmth of Jax's bare leg against mine and, instead, focused on Charlie's eyes as they opened, stared, and then closed again. He had the longest lashes fanning his rounded cheeks, just the same as his uncle's, only Jax's face was chiseled and dusted with a day's growth of beard that would feel wonderful if I touched it...

*Stop thinking about him.*

Jax moved his legs to rock his nephew, bumping mine, and I should've moved. But I didn't.

“I couldn't sleep,” he began. “So, I was lying in bed, watching Charlie as I used to do the girls, and he woke up, so I was just there straight away, you know? He didn't even have to cry.”

“And he's drinking it all?” I knew that was a thing people asked when it came to babies, and I gestured at the near empty bottle Charlie was nursing.

“Yeah. And I've been talking to him about constructing a summer house, but I'm pretty sure he was just tolerating me, and you're the only one other than me in the house who'd understand how we use Pythagorean theory in construction.”

I stifled a laugh. “You're giving a baby a speech about angles?”

Jax shrugged and sent me a sheepish glance. “He's a captive audience.”

I couldn't help but laugh then, and I settled back on the sofa, forcing myself into the corner so no part of my body touched Jax. If he noticed that I'd squeezed myself away, he didn't say anything or ask me awkward questions about why I was trying to fold my big body into a tiny corner. It occurred to me that I really *should* have taken a seat on the other sofa,



but then, I wouldn't be close enough to see Charlie properly, and Jax *had* moved so there was space for me to sit next to him, right?

He probably just wanted me to be able to see the baby.

“Don't stop talking angles on my account,” I said when my heart stopped racing at his touch. “I'll stay here to check you're explaining it the right way.”

As Jax rambled on about buildings, hypotenuses, Pythagoras, cosines, and plumb lines, Charlie closed his eyes, only stirring a little when Jax placed him against his chest to burp him, and through all of it, I stole glances at Jax. The soft illumination of the single lamp in his tousled red hair, and his focused expression as he stared down at Charlie was something I wasn't sure I'd ever forget. He might've been struggling with uncertainty and shock over Charlie's arrival, but Zach had been right to leave his son here with Jax.

“When will you call your family?” I asked.

He sighed, but then nodded. “I'll start with Leo first thing in the morning, then maybe he can tell Reid and Lorna, but my parents? What will they think?”

“Maybe, that you're a good son and brother?”

“Mama will see right through me to all my worries with her freaky Mama powers, and then, she'll get upset over Zach leaving Charlie, and I'll end up defending Zach and, probably, getting all up in my head that I'm a huge disappointment.”

I elbowed him, gently though. “That won't happen.”

“You think?” Jax sounded so desperate for me to comfort him.

“I'm sure of it.”

Charlie's fingers relaxed their grip on Jax's shirt, and I reached over to brush a fingertip against Charlie's soft cheek.

“He's something else, isn't he?” I mused.

Jax nodded, his eyes meeting mine. “Yeah, he is.”

I felt a rush of emotion that left me momentarily speechless. The way Jax looked at me, with such vulnerability in his expression, I felt as if I wanted to reach out and pull him into another hug the same as the one in the kitchen.

I just had to ignore the impulse to kiss him.

Because blurring the lines between friend and lover wouldn't end well.

# Chapter Seven

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## Jax

I WAS UP AGAIN at six, a burbling Charlie pulling me out of a dream featuring Arlo and me, and a discussion over lubrication and door hinges. I couldn't even begin to start to unravel that one. I fed Charlie, who'd woken in the same happy excitable mood as he'd arrived yesterday, then bathed him in a sink after covering the faucet with a towel. He splashed with his fists, grinned, burbled more nonsense, and attempted to grab my hair so often that I gave up and let him twist his tiny fingers into the curls.

“Get used to curls, because you're heading that way,” I told him as I wrapped him in a fluffy towel and hurried to the bed where I'd laid down yet more towels, and got him into a diaper before I had a repeat of the two-a.m. change in which he only narrowly missed peeing in my eye. Sue me, but I'd had two daughters, and I never expected wee to travel quite that far. With Charlie diapered up and in a tiny baby romper, I made a nest of the towels, and washed up as best I could without doing the whole shower thing. I was nervous about the big reveal to my family, worried there would be something wrong with Charlie, and worse, that Leo wouldn't agree with what I'd done. I had that little brother anxiety going on where Leo was concerned, fearing he'd judge me, and worse, judge Zach. All of that and I haven't even contacted him yet. More concerned about making sure Charlie was secure in my arms than where Arlo might be in the house, I never even noticed him stepping out of the guest bathroom, a faint cloud of steam still curling around him. My heart skipped a beat as I couldn't help but appreciate how sexy he looked, water droplets glistening on his skin like diamonds. The towel around his waist clung to him in all the right places, leaving very little to the imagination. And God, there was the softness of his belly, and the faint trace of hair around his nipples, and fuck, the treasure trail.

The sight of him sent a shiver down my spine, and I couldn't help but feel a rush of desire. His hair was spiky, darker gray from the water, and his gray eyes darkened as he caught me watching him. A cautious smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and I couldn't help but return the gesture.

I inhaled deeply, savoring the intoxicating scent that clung to him, a mix of the shower gel and deodorant, and it drew me closer, making me want to wrap my arms around him and never let go. I could step forward, I could touch...

"I'll be down in a bit, coffee's already on," he blurted, then dashed around me to get to the spare room.

In my arms, Charlie encouraged me to move with a string of 'bahs'. I pushed aside the image of Arlo in just a towel and followed my nose to the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee as it wafted through the air. First the smell of Arlo, and now coffee? I was having the best, and most confusing, morning ever.

"Coffee!" I exclaimed as I turned the corner into the kitchen, the rich, earthy scent of the coffee beans filled my senses, and Charlie bounced in my hold, gripping my hair. "One day, you'll be surviving on this stuff," I explained and extricated my hair from his grip, and then, held him to my chest to assess whether coffee was possible.

Not happening—hot coffee and wriggly baby was a match made in hell. Instead I made him a bottle and hummed under my breath as I danced him around the kitchen. I could get used to this, Charlie smiling at me, coffee, Arlo in a towel...

*We really need to talk.*

"Hey," he said, heading straight for the coffee and pouring us two cups, mine black, his with cream and sugar. "How did Charlie sleep?"

My chest puffed up with pride as if I was solely responsible for Charlie sleeping well and not causing a fuss, but also because my nephew was a pretty awesome baby. "He did good."

Arlo leaned over and pressed a kiss to Charlie's nose, peering up at me and giving me a smile that made me want to grab him and kiss his nose, and his lips, and then...

"I'll take him, and you can get some coffee." He cradled Charlie.

I fell on my mug with unbridled enthusiasm, glancing over at Arlo, his back to me, and Charlie peeking over his shoulder. Where was my camera? Or my phone?

He was in a cut-off T-shirt, white, and the way he looked at Charlie, then up at me.

It was everything.

"I'll fix breakfast when you're fully caffeinated," Arlo interrupted my thoughts on whether I should tell him he smelled so good or try to kiss him. "See, Charlie, your Uncle Jax is a grumpy bear before he's had caffeine."

I stared at him. "I'm not the bear in this," I said before I could stop myself, and his mouth fell open. Too on the nose, right? Yes, he probably fit the definition of a bear, but we'd never talked about it, and wasn't that yet another step in me messing up?

He ignored me, lifting Charlie, bussing his cheeks, and he chuckled when Charlie batted him away. "As I was saying, your uncle is Grumpy McGrumperson, but it won't be long, and he'll be all smiles," he kissed Charlie's nose again, which was impossibly sweet, "same as usual," he added, and winked at me. Ass.

"I'll have you know I'm all sunshine and rainbows, even before coffee," I lied.

Arlo did his usual skeptical lift of an eyebrow. I loved that he was here, that he was teasing me, and talking to Charlie. I elbowed him gently, and he leaned into me and smiled. With a sudden clarity, everything I wanted to say was right there, and my mouth overtook my brain.

"Arlo, we should probably talk, and—"

“Bah!” Charlie exclaimed, and that was the perfect excuse for Arlo to ignore my segue into talking.

Given how little coffee I’d had, it was probably a good idea.

# Chapter Eight

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## Arlo

JAX CALLED Leo from the kitchen while I held Charlie. I could have taken him into the sunroom, but I got the feeling Jax wanted the reassurance of company, and when he sent me a grateful smile, I knew I had been right to stay.

He wanted to talk to me, and if the way he looked at me when we'd met on the landing was any indication, it was going to be an awkward chat.

I shouldn't have walked out half naked.; I shouldn't have flexed or met his steady stare with any kind of challenge. I was sending out all these signals, and if he wasn't interested, then my job could be finished. Being friends was one thing, but us crossing the line was something else altogether. He put the call on speaker, and slumped onto a stool, nursing his coffee. I'd hoped he might go for his parents first, but when he explained that he needed a test subject, and he had an idea about Leo's doctor friend coming with him, I had to concede it was right for him to put Leo at the top of the list.

"Jax-Man, what's up?" Leo sounded out of breath, and his voice echoed.

"I need you to visit," Jax demanded without preamble, catching my gaze, and staring on me as if he needed something to focus on.

"Sure, this weekend? I need—"

"No. Now? Can you come now? This morning. Like now. And bring your friend Sean? Is he working?"

Sean was the doctor friend, and he and Leo had once shared a house. I'd met him a couple of times at various Byrne family events, the last was at Papa Byrne's sixtieth birthday only a few weeks ago. We didn't talk much, but he'd been with his partner and their daughter Mia, so he clearly knew his way around children's health. Right?

“Huh?” Leo sounded confused. Jax rubbed his eyes, and when no one said anything, I jumped in.

“Doctor Sean,” I interrupted.

Leo snorted a laugh. “Oh, hey, Arlo.”

“Hey, Leo, I—”

“Leo, can you get Sean here?” Jax interrupted.

“Why do you need me to... wait... is everything okay? Hang on, I’m taking you into the break room...” We could hear movement and rustling. “I’m back; we were just beating down the B shift at the hoops.”

“In your dreams, Byrne!” someone shouted.

The noise was loud enough to startle Charlie. I began to pace the kitchen in case he started to cry.

“Losers,” Leo muttered, then focused back on the conversation. “What’s wrong? Why do you need Sean?”

“Is he around? Can you find out if he’s available?”

“Jeez, look, I happen to know Sean’s off duty right now, we’re supposed to be working on a project for Ash later today, and—”

“So, stop talking and get yourself and Sean here. But don’t tell the rest of the family for now?”

Leo was quiet. “Did you catch an STD? Shit, don’t you remember Dad’s lecture about condoms? I know I do because he did that thing with—”

“Promise me, no one else.”

Leo paused. “Jax? You’re freaking me out. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He glanced at me, then at Charlie. “Everything.”

“Okay, I’ll call Sean. We’ll get there as soon as we can.”

“Can you get him to bring his medical bag?”

“The fuck—”

Jax dropped the call and caught me on my next circuit of the island, taking Charlie from my arms, then staring at me with a lost expression.

“It’s okay if you want to go,” he said. Was it wishful thinking I could hear reluctance for me to leave in his voice? I wanted to stay, so whatever I picked up on, I went with the flow, and thought, I’d do the one thing I could help with. Cook.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll do us some breakfast, yeah?”

I couldn’t miss how relieved he looked, and I got the sense that he did need me here, and maybe the familiar was what would calm the whole situation down. My presence in his kitchen over the last few Saturdays—flipping pancakes, cooking bacon—had become a routine, and I secretly loved every moment of being in Jax’s house, as if this cozy space he’d created with his girls in mind was more of a home than my empty place. Being here and cooking breakfast had become as much a part of my Saturday routine as the scent of coffee in the morning.

Since Sutton had headed off to college, the ties to my parents’ home had loosened, and the big old house was a sad, quiet place, but I never told Jax that was the reason I stayed over at his. In fact, I justified using his spare room by spouting nonsense about the inconvenience of me living so far away from the jobs we worked. By now, I didn’t even need to use a Friday excuse, and one day, after a few beers, maybe I’d blurt out that I’d never intended to go on that stupid karaoke date. I’d explain that I was lonely at home and wasn’t it freaking weird that thinking about Jax kept the loneliness at bay, and that I might have fallen for him, and that I wanted to be with Jax in every way possible.

One day, I’d be honest about how I felt.

Yeah, and, one day, pigs might fly.

The more I stayed over, on the weekends he didn’t have his girls staying, the more Jax had changed things to make things easier—a bigger bed in the spare room down the hall from the twins’ room, with a fancy lamp next to the bed. It

was the little things. Of course, there were the extra groceries as well—piled higher than necessary in the pantry and refrigerator in case I stayed, and the fact he'd done that wasn't missed. He had my favorite snacks, and he always made sure his refrigerator had all the makings of breakfast. I'd once tried to give him money for the groceries, but he'd pointed out that I was the one cooking, and we called it a win/win. I never asked again because he threatened me with bodily harm if I did—which was funny, given I was taller, wider, and five years younger.

We didn't acknowledge how often I stayed over after our Friday night chilling. Never talked about it.

It just *was*.

We were friends.

I doubt either of us got more than a couple of hours sleep, and that was being generous. Jax closed his eyes as he rocked Charlie, humming "*Oops!...I Did It Again*," and I knew how to make him smile.

"Do you really want your nephew to grow up scarred?" I teased, and he opened one eye. "Britney?"

He smirked then, even though he was bleary-eyed, and covered Charlie's ears.

"Don't listen, Charlie, your Uncle Arlo thinks the Beatles is good music."

"Me and millions of others."

"Is now the time I point out the many platinum records given to Britney, Gaga, and Kylie?"

It was a long-running and heated debate. I preferred music from the sixties, plus a smattering of country; he was all about the Pop Divas. Of course, I never told him I loved hearing him hum the diva songs. That would've been crossing a line and admitting I enjoyed them in the first place.

I waved a spatula under his nose when he smiled. "Pancakes done for us. Smashed up banana for baby C. You want me to sit down with him for a bit?"

I slid crispy bacon onto the plate piled high with pancakes, then swapped the plate for Charlie, and handed over the maple syrup. Jax didn't eat much of it, spending more time pushing puddles of syrup around his plate than eating as I tried to feed Charlie some banana. Most of the squishy creamy mess ended up smeared around Charlie's chubby face, but he stared up at me in adoration, and I could feel my heart strings being tugged by his tiny fingers.

"Eat your pancakes, Byrne," I admonished Jax.

He caught my gaze, then dipped the piece of pancake back to the plate, making a concerted effort to pick up pancake, bacon, and syrup.

"Also, you should get a high chair," I added.

"We need a lot of stuff," Jax added. "High chair first though, and other stuff ... we need a list of things we need for however long we have Charlie."

I loved the sound of *we but* focused on the timeframe instead.

"I wonder how long it will be."

All Jax could do was shrug.

## Chapter Nine

## Jax

THE LOCK RATTLED in my hallway, and then, the front door was opened with attitude and the bang of wood on the wall. For a second, terror gripped me. Was this someone coming to take Charlie? Was it Zach? Was it the strange man who'd left him?

Relief flooded me when Leo stalked in, with Reid right behind him, both of them acting like cops and scanning the hallway. I should have known Leo would call Reid; all the Byrne siblings were way too much into each other's business. I guess I was lucky Lorna was out of town. My only concern was that there was no sign of Leo's friend, Sean.

"Where's Sean?"

"Well hello to you too," Leo snarked. "He's five minutes behind us. I don't see blood. Where's the emergency." Even as he asked, Charlie took that moment to let out a burbling hiccupping giggle kind of sound in Arlo's arms.

Leo came to a dead stop, Reid tripping over him.

"The fuck, Turt," Reid snapped at Leo, then went quiet. The two of them stared at Charlie, then me, at Arlo, and back to Charlie as if it was some crazy tennis match. I swear, if this wasn't so serious, it would have been comical to watch.

"That's a baby," Reid said.

"Ding-ding, ten points to Reid," I deadpanned and took Charlie from Arlo, cradling him close and pressing a kiss to his forehead.

"With red hair," Reid added, as his gaze flicked to my hair and the bluster went out of him. "Oh, Jax, you have another baby?" Reid asked, his expression softening.

"He what now?" asked Leo, slow on the uptake about the red-headed similarity. "When?"

“Charlie isn’t Jax’s baby,” Arlo murmured into the silence.

I cleared my throat. “Guys, this is Charlie. And he’s not mine—”

“He could be,” Leo blurted. “You’re bi, and if you haven’t done a DNA test—”

I pressed a finger to Leo’s lips to stop him. “He’s not my son because a) I’ve been exclusively with guys for...” I glanced at Arlo. “Well yeah, just guys.” I couldn’t explain that I hadn’t been with anyone for a long time, not since all the feelings I had about Arlo had started to coalesce into this knot of frustration and lust inside me. “And b) there was a note with all kinds of information.”

“Information about what? Does someone want to explain?” Leo asked, and he had that accusing-but-I’m-your-friend tone that I was sure made all the criminals he arrested cry and spill their secrets.

“How about you both sit down,” Arlo answered for me, and I was grateful that he was taking over when I didn’t have usable headspace. “And read this.” He passed them the note.

Reid got there first, with Leo leaning in to read over his shoulder. They were quiet when they finished, Leo swallowing hard, Reid flying directly to anger without passing go.

“Your brother abandoned his baby,” Reid accused with heat.

Arlo eased the letter from Reid’s hand, smoothing it on the counter. “You read the letter. He clearly had his reasons,” he said in an even tone, and I was grateful for the backup.

Reid held up a hand to stop Arlo. “No, this is serious; shit, we need to call the cops.”

I blinked at my brother and gestured to him and Leo. “You *are* the cops.”

Silence, as I watched Reid and Leo side-eye each other, probably weighing up what to say next.

“I think Reid means the *real* cops,” Arlo deadpanned.



I couldn't help my snort of laughter, which made Charlie jump. Reid gave Arlo the finger, which was even funnier, but then, I had to yank myself back to what was happening.

"There's no cops, nothing to put this on the radar, okay? You read that I have legal guardianship of Charlie Stone—"

"Is Stone your brother's last name?" Leo asked.

"I guess," I began, realizing I'd not even contemplated whether Stone was my real last name. Jaxon Stone sounded wrong in my head when I'd been Jaxon Byrne forever. "Anyway, the papers are in my office if you want to see them. We need to look at this as if I'm babysitting."

"'Babysitting' isn't some asshole brother dumping a baby on you," Reid snapped, and even though he wasn't trying to hurt me, I saw red.

"I knew you'd come in like this, you know; if I'd had my way, I wouldn't have told any of you."

The wind left my sails when Reid swallowed and looked as if I'd shoved him into a wall. And when Leo pressed a hand to his chest, I felt shit for saying anything. The Byrnes took family very seriously, and I'd hurt my brothers.

"Sorry," I slumped to the nearest stool.

Leo elbowed Reid, who frowned, but then nodded at me. "Sorry," he said. Then, he ruined everything. "But he did abandon—"

"I get it," Leo said.

Reid was working up a head of steam, but thankfully, a knock on the door derailed everything. A full-on Byrne sibling row could be the worst kind. Reid up in my face, me shouting back, Leo doing his usual mediation, and all in front of the baby and Arlo.

"I'll get it," Arlo offered when no one else moved, and when he came back in, it was with Leo's best friend Sean in tow.

"Leo said something was wrong?" I heard him say as they walked toward the kitchen. And then, he stopped in the

doorway.

“That’s a baby,” Sean said, and pointed at Charlie in my arms.

“You can have my ten points,” Reid murmured.

To me that was hilarious, and I was manic. I snorted another laugh. Everyone stared at me as if I were losing my mind, which I probably was.

“Charlie is my nephew,” I began.

Reid huffed. “Jax’s idiot twin abandoned his freaking baby on Jax’s porch.”

“He did what now?” Sean did a double take at Leo. “His twin? What? You found your twin? You found Zach?”

I had this strong impulse to defend my brother. “He didn’t abandon him—”

“But what if you weren’t coming home?” Reid pointed out in full-on cop mode. “Think about the consequences if you were away? What if you hadn’t come home—how long would Charlie have been sitting outside?”

“Reid has a point,” Leo said with reluctance.

“Exactly,” Reid continued, buoyed by Leo’s cautious support of the point he was making. “Anything could have happened. He could—”

“There was a man watching him, okay!” Arlo raised his voice to stop Reid, snap Leo back to being rational, and to get them all to listen. All of which caused Charlie to flex in my hold at the noise.

“Sorry, Charlie,” I apologized in the best baby-whisperer voice I could manage.

“What man?” Reid asked. “It’s child abandonment. I’m sorry, Jax, but whatever it says in the letter, your brother can’t just leave his son to your care, say there’s danger, and then run, without there being concern. What if he’s some kind of criminal?”

“Zach is not a criminal,” I said, loyal to the idea of what my twin should be, if he was anything like me, even though I didn’t know if that was true at all.

Reid huffed. “Well, he must be if he—”

Arlo moved between me and my brothers in the blink of an eye, looming over Reid, startling him enough for him to take a step back into Leo, who shoved him away.

“If you’d let me talk, there was a man with Charlie, connected to Jax’s brother somehow, watching from the bushes, short, dark hair, checking everything was okay, and no I didn’t get a name, and yes I imagine he doesn’t want to be found for whatever reason.” His voice held a note of threat, and my heart skipped, and I felt as if I had a wall protecting me and my nephew.

It was the best feeling. My hero.

“Also, Reid,” Arlo continued in a lower tone. “If you’re going to lose your cool, don’t do it with Charlie in the room, and stop cursing, okay?”

Reid backed down straight away, “Sorry. My bad.”

Sean cleared his throat, and everyone stared at him.

“Let me have a look at little Charlie.” He’d interrupted the standoff by taking Charlie, then went through to the living room and sat on the side of the sofa, with me, my brothers, and Arlo trailing behind. Sean was chatting all the time to Charlie about everything and nothing as he eased off Charlie’s tiny baby romper and pulled a stethoscope from his bag, rubbing it to warm the metal.

My heart was racing, with fear, with worry. Arlo stopped next to me with a reassuring touch to my lower back. I was desperate to lean into him, for him to hug me as he’d done last night, when he made everything feel okay.

“It will be okay,” he murmured.

I just hoped that was true.

# Chapter Ten

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## Jax

“NICE AND STRONG,” Sean approved, and then, blew a raspberry on Charlie’s tummy, which made Charlie wave his legs and arms. It was so adorable I could have died from cuteness overload.

“He came with records,” Arlo pulled out the pack of healthcare documents that had arrived with my nephew... with Charlie. I’d forgotten all about those, and, yet again, Arlo had saved the day.

Sean took the pages and scanned them, a thoughtful nod here, a soft smile when he found a sonogram, and then, he went back to checking all the things I’d seen doctors check with the twins, replacing Charlie’s romper when he was done. Charlie loved the attention, cooing and burbling nonsense up at Leo’s friend, blowing bubbles, and in general having the time of his little baby life.

Sean tapped Charlie’s kneecap with his finger and the baby’s leg kicked out sharply, then his foot, and the toes curled, and the heel jerked. “Normal reflexes, temperature is fine, his heart is strong. He’s up-to-date with all of his necessary immunizations. His mom went to term, but her name is missing.” He frowned, glancing up at me as if I had all the answers.

All I could do was shrug. “I don’t know,” I added, in case he thought I was holding back. I had no idea why a mom’s name wouldn’t be on the medical records, and I didn’t want to think too hard on it in case I started to spiral over who the mom was, and why Zach was in potential danger, and why he’d left Charlie with me in the first place.

“Okay, well, there’s no health issues marked on the records, although I wouldn’t expect too much detail on the mom unless Charlie was a difficult birth, or a preemie. I’m not a pediatrician, but I know that much.” He gathered Charlie

into his arms and smiled down at him. “Charlie is a perfectly healthy baby and no worse the wear for being left on your porch, Jax.” If he sent me a subtle glance at the use of the word *left* that wasn’t an exact implication of abandonment, but did hold accusation for my missing brother’s actions, I didn’t acknowledge it—the letter said it all, and I had to believe Zach had no choice.

I didn’t expect anyone else to agree with my way of thinking.

Sean wrapped Charlie in the blanket, then passed him back to me. I was happier having him back in my arms, and I rocked him gently, knowing that all eyes were on me. Arlo had moved to stand just behind me, my wingman, probably ready to leap in if Leo and Reid had anything to say. Given Leo had opened his home to an ex-con/hero and his daughter, then had fallen in love with said ex-con/hero, he didn’t have a leg to stand on.

I tilted my chin.

“What now?” Leo asked, “What do you want us to do?”

“I just wanted you to bring Sean, then I guess, next is to tell Mama and Papa.”

Leo’s expression was flooded with compassion. “They’ll love him,” he reassured me, and I wanted to believe that—after all Mama and Papa Byrne had adopted four kids and knew all about family.

“This is where he’ll be, and I’ll take care of him.” I was firm. “Until Zach comes to get him.”

Reid seemed confused and unsure at first, but then, he exchanged a glance with Leo, who nodded. “You know we’ve always got your back,” he said, and I relaxed a little. “But...” He paused, I tensed, Leo frowned, and Arlo scrubbed his eyes, probably sensing imminent issues. “Purely from a legal point of view, what if his dad is a criminal on the run or something? If he’s arrested, you’ll be left holding the baby.”

“And what did he mean about being in danger? This is stupid. What if someone comes and tries to take Charlie?” Leo

added.

Those thoughts had crossed my mind. That maybe, for some reason, Zach wouldn't be able to come home, and I would be dad in all ways to Charlie, or that nebulous bad guys were out there waiting for me to lower my guard. "I'm his uncle. I'm his legal guardian, and if anyone thinks they can get him taken away from me for any reason, they won't." I met their gazes with determination and waited for them to come up with reasons why I couldn't keep him, or worry about me, or any of the million things I imagined they wanted to do.

"Jesus, Jax, we wouldn't let anyone take him away from you," Leo reacted sharply and sounded hurt again. "Reid's just thinking out of the box."

"Well, tell him not to."

Leo elbowed Reid.

"Sorry," Reid apologized, "I didn't mean to imply it would be us causing issues. We love you, and we'll always have your back." Reid side-hugged me, then it was Leo's turn, and they both fussed over with Charlie for a while, taking it in turns to hold him.

"He sure looks like you," Leo murmured as he held out his hands for another hug with Charlie.

I gave him straight over and watched Leo fuss over and jiggle him, and then it was Reid's turn again, and I could see the very moment they had hearts in their eyes.

"Life sure has a way of surprising you," Leo murmured, as Reid handed Charlie over to me. I hadn't realized how I didn't want him being out of my arms until I had him back. I settled him against my chest, and he burbled away without a care in the world.

God, was this kid ever unhappy?

Reid sighed. "So, a lost baby, a letter, a mysterious vanished twin? Is it just me who feels we're in the middle of the storyline in a soap opera?"

He wasn't wrong.

“But with no script to follow,” Leo added as he stroked Charlie’s soft hair. “Okay then, Charlie is moving in until some point in the future, and we cross bridges when we get to them.” Leo was attempting to sum up the entire situation. “I can stay today to help—”

“It’s okay, I’m staying,” Arlo said, and then went scarlet, as if he thought it wasn’t his place to say that. I couldn’t wish for anything better than to have Arlo here for a few hours at least, with his calming influence.

“It’s okay, Turt, Arlo’s here, and we have work to get through on our next projects,” I said. “You go back to your families.”

“But you’ll tell us if anything happens?” Reid said.

“Of course.”

There was muttering and concern, and advice, but in the end, I said my goodbyes to Sean, thanked him, and swore him to silence, which he confirmed was part and parcel of patient confidentiality. He could’ve been bullshitting me, but he and Leo had been friends for a long time, and I trusted the guy. Reid headed off soon after to take his kids to soccer, which left Leo chatting to Arlo on the subject of the dark-haired guy. I had to believe it was a friend of Zach’s, and that he had Charlie’s best interest to heart. Leaving them to it, I headed to the comfy seat by the window, staring out at the yard, cradling Charlie in my arms. The late morning sunlight filtered through the blinds, casting ribbons of light across the wooden floors, as I sat, lost in thought.

Where was Zach? Why had he been forced to leave Charlie with me? Was he in real danger? Was he out there breaking the law, or was he one of the good guys?

I stared down at my nephew, at his tiny face. A mixture of wonder, awe, and pure love filled my heart, and I was reminded of the quiet moments when I’d held my new baby daughters, when everything seemed possible. Charlie’s fingers curled around one of mine, his grip strong for someone so small. His cheeks were round and rosy, and his eyelashes cast



delicate shadows on his cheeks as he blinked up at me, his dark blue eyes filled with curiosity.

They weren't green like mine, and it made me wonder if my twin had my green eyes or was he very different to me? The only photo I had is the one sent to me of the two of us, that had to be thirty years old—both of us in a buggy, him a little bigger than me, both of us with red hair, but I couldn't make out eye color. The ancestry test I'd signed up for, in hope of finding Zach, backed up my Irish/Welsh heritage which explained my hair, freckled skin, and eye color, and I'd always assumed my twin brother would be a replica of me. Maybe we were fraternal twins? That was a thing, right?

Anyway, didn't a baby's eye color change? Maybe Charlie would have green eyes one day?

As I gently rocked him, and his soft breaths syncing with the rhythm of my heartbeat, I felt a profound sense of responsibility settle over me, followed close on its heels by a rush of love so intense it stole my breath. Just the same as India and Iris, I knew I would do anything for Charlie. Something eased in my chest, but I wondered if it was my emotions, or part of the twin thing Zach had talked about. He was out there, forced to give up his child, doing God knows what, and all I could hope was that he was safe. I'd worry about the rest later.

“Your son will be okay. I've got him now,” I murmured to my twin. I didn't know what I expected to feel in return, but some of the tightness in my chest eased, and I closed my eyes.

I thought about all the moments I could share with Charlie, and with Zach if he did make it here. Maybe he'd tell me about where he'd been, and why he'd never tried to contact me, even though it was obvious he knew where I lived. The letter left with Charlie indicated that he had reasons he couldn't share, but what could they be?

I pressed a gentle kiss to Charlie's downy hair, inhaling the baby-sweet, innocent scent as I rocked him. I found myself humming a song from Madonna that I'd heard on the radio only this morning.

“And that, Charlie, is ‘Like A Virgin’ by Madonna,” I said when I was done. “And this is just stage one in pulling you to the dark side of pop dance and disco.”

He blew a raspberry at me, and I couldn’t help but think that this might have been Arlo’s response as well. As I met Charlie’s curious gaze, he smiled at me, blinking, and making tiny baby noises.

“More? You want more? How about some Gaga.” I began to hum “Poker Face,” as I imagined the eye roll Arlo would give me, and the shake of his head because I wasn’t humming something more educational. “Gaga rocks, right?”

“Gah,” was all I got in return, but it was enough.

“Yep, gah-gah.” He reached for a lock of my hair, attempting to grip it, and I bowed my head so he could reach. “Bet you can’t wait to see your daddy again.”

“Gah.”

“Do you think I’m your daddy?” I asked, and he didn’t even answer this time, yawning the cutest tiny yawn with his eyelids finally drooping. “I bet I look just the same as him,” I mused.

“Ugly as sin?” Leo teased from the doorway, and I glanced up to see my brother leaning there, legs crossed at the ankles, with that wide-ass grin his guy, Jason, thought was so sexy. Jason was a good guy, but how he thought my idiot brother was sexy was another thing altogether.

I showed him a middle finger.

He pretend-wincing and clutched his chest. “Ouch, and there was me trying to make you smile.”

I knew that was what he was doing, but, I didn’t have it in me to smile. All I had was fear for my twin brother, who was out there doing something dangerous—heroic or criminal—and for the tiny baby in my arms.

“What do I do now?” I asked Leo, a little desperately.

He gave a slow shrug. “You need to look after Charlie and wait. That’s all I have right now from an official point of view,

because if you ever get to the point where you need me or Reid to look into this, I don't know what we'll unravel."

I understood that. "What do you think you'd find?"

Leo sighed and uncrossed his arms, forcing his hands into his pockets. "I don't know."

"Zach *is* one of the good guys," I said in fierce defense. "I know that for sure."

"You do?" Leo asked. Out of my siblings, I was closest to Leo, and I couldn't lie to him even if I tried.

"I hope so," I admitted after a pause, and Leo nodded. Curiosity about Zach was a constant companion, as were the shared emotions that flared in my chest since Charlie arrived. "I'll call Lorna, then I guess, I'll have to get Mama and Papa over here, but no one else, apart from Jason, of course, I wouldn't expect you to keep secrets from Jason, or for Reid not to tell Abigail. She'd know something was up anyway because he can't keep a secret from his wife to save his life."

"Sure." Leo considered me for a moment. "And keep me on speed dial, yeah?"

"Always."

He turned to leave, but stopped at the last moment. "We love you, Jax. We always will, and by extension, your nephew, *and* his dad. You know that, right?"

Of course, I did. My family had my back, and it was my turn to smile.

"Back at ya, Turt."

"But you know you need to tell Mama right now, at this very moment? Not leave it another day?"

"I thought maybe you'd do it for me?" I sort of pleaded.

He huffed a laugh. "I value my life." Then, he sketched a wave, and I heard soft murmurs in the kitchen as he chatted to Arlo, then he was gone.

What now?

Next were my parents. Next was facing the rest of this day with Charlie in my arms. Next was wondering what Zach was out there doing that meant he had to leave his child with me.

Selfishly, I hoped that whatever happened next could happen with Arlo at my side.

Talk of the devil... “Hey,” Arlo said from the doorway. “You want to go see your mom and dad? I’ll drive, then you can call Lorna from the car.”

Yeah. Right by my side.

# Chapter Eleven

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## Arlo

I GRIPPED the steering wheel as I navigated the bumpy winding road to Jax's parents' house up in Spring Valley. The journey, since Jax had connected with Lorna, had been quiet. Hearing him explain what had happened sounded as if it were a story made up for entertainment, but unlike her brothers, she was instantly supportive and said she couldn't imagine any twin of Jax's being a bad guy. She promised to visit as soon as she was home, demanded photos, and ,when the call ended, Jax stared out of the window and went super quiet. Charlie was sleeping in the car seat he'd arrived in, which had taken Jax only moments to fit in after I'd stared at it for a good ten minutes, and hadn't stirred even when we hit the potholes. How would Jax's parents react to Charlie's arrival? Mama and Papa Byrne were all about family, creating their own by adopting all four of their kids, and their house was chaos and laughter and warmth.

"They're not going to understand Zach for this," Jax murmured.

"You need to stop worrying."

"I can't stop worrying." Jax turned to look at me, and I caught the movement in my peripheral vision, still not taking my eyes off the bumpy narrow road. "I already missed so many special occasions trying to find Zach—last year's Christmas when I was in Alaska, and Thanksgiving the year before that, and..." He scrubbed his eyes, and the tension in him was palpable. "They'll think that Zach is the kind of guy who abandons his son and wasn't worth me losing time with the family I did have."

"Okay, so let me get this right. You believe Charlie was abandoned, and that Zach is the bad guy here?"

"What? No!" he exclaimed.

“Exactly.” I was firm. “You feel that Zach had reasons, and that Charlie is safe and will be happy with you for however long it takes for Zach to come home. You said so yourself. And your parents are good people who believe the best in everyone.”

“I know, but what if this time...”

“They won’t change who they are for no reason.”

Jax relaxed a little, and I took a quick moment to reach over and squeeze his hand, which he squeezed back. “It will all be okay,” I reassured him. I never wanted to let go of his hand. I wanted to be next to him, able to reassure him all the time.

I wanted to make things easier just by being there for him.

He laced his fingers with mine, then settled in his seat, the tension easing, and we were quiet again. In my heart, I knew there was nothing that would make Mama and Papa Byrne feel less than empathy for the stranger who’d had no choice but to leave his child. They’d been nothing but kind to me since I’d started working for Jax, and maybe he needed reminding. He was so quiet, and I decided I was changing the subject.

“Hey, do you remember the Rowan kitchen project we did, way back?”

“The oak one? Yeah? Why?”

“It was maybe the second project I worked for you on, and I remember your mama turned up at the worksite with cannoli, and she told you off for not bringing me over to introduce me.”

Jax chuckled. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Nothing stops Mama Byrne, and I was mid-cannoli, mouth full of crunch and cream, and she said she expected to see me at the annual Byrne family tree-trimming. I was trying to chew, think, and speak all at the same time, and she just patted my chest and told me to bring my family.”

“That’s what she does,” Jax murmured.

“Trace was in college, so it was just Sutton and me.”

“I remember.”

Jax’s mama, the matriarch of the Byrne family, was the heart and soul of the festivities. Her warmth radiated through every corner of the house, making it impossible not to feel part of the vibrant world of Jax’s Italian-American family.

The food, oh God, the food. Plates upon plate of delicious homemade dishes covered every available surface, along with a huge dish of poutine, which was a nod to the fact that Jax was born in Canada before being adopted in Cali. It had been amazing what I’d found out about Jax from spending those hours at his parents’ house, given that at work he was all focus and didn’t talk much. I found out lasagna was his favorite, but cannoli came a close second, and it was probably the day I’d started seeing my boss in a different light.

I’d never experienced a holiday feast as big as that, and the tree-trimming itself was what I could only describe as organized chaos. The main decorating was undertaken by the kids of the family—the brothers, Jax, Reid, and Leo, all had kids—but then, it was about the four Byrne siblings, with Lorna there as well, adding the angel to the top of the tree in some elaborate ceremony that they all took seriously.

It involved a dramatic passing of the angel from Leo, who’d been the first adopted, to Reid, then Jax, and last of all Lorna, whom Leo hoisted up to position the crystal and silk angel at the top. Then, all four of them hugged, and pulled me and Sutton in, and the kids, and the spouses and finally Mama and Papa Byrne.

“The moment we walked through their front door, it was laughter and, hugs, and your papa handed me a drink, and your mama kept welcoming me to the family, even though Sutton and I were strangers. So why would it be any different for Charlie?”

I’d fallen in love with Jax’s family that day. It was the day I’d seen Jax as different to the man who was my boss—as he bickered with Reid, and roughoused with his daughters and their cousins, and showed me a side I hadn’t seen on a



construction site—open, happy, not stressed over deadlines, not worrying about profit margins or deliveries.

I'd already respected him for his dedication to work, but that day was the day I'd started to fall for him hard.

And his family.

"I know. I just don't want anyone to think anything bad about Zach, but then, I don't know my own twin, so how can I say they'd be wrong if they thought bad of him? How can I defend him?" His fingers flexed in my hold, but I didn't want to let him tug free.

"That Christmas, your mama knew Sutt and I were overwhelmed by all of you, and when we went quiet, and sad..."

"I know." Now it was his turn to reassure me with a squeeze, then, he untangled our fingers and placed his hand on my knee, where it rested warm and heavy. I cleared my throat, and mourned the loss of the heat when he moved his hand back in his lap.

"She took us into her kitchen to help with desserts, and she sat us on stools, then left us alone. She'd given us space to chat about our parents, and Christmases past, and I loved her for it. She'd known just what I needed, hadn't reassured us that grief had a time limit, hadn't pushed for us to be anything different than what we were. There's a lot of love in your childhood home, and it won't be any different for Charlie."

What had struck me most in the Byrne house was the love between Jax's parents, reminding me of the depth of love between my own mom and dad.

They moved together in a well-choreographed dance, and I guess that was a testament to the years they'd spent building a life. Mama Byrne was in charge, but Papa Byrne was the oil that kept the family working, intervening in squabbles, and his huge belly laugh when he told stupid jokes was a sight to see. They'd glanced at each other across the room, sharing secret smiles and unspoken understanding, and just loving every part of their kids and their grandchildren.

As I pulled into the driveway of their home, I reached for his hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked, as I anticipated him moving away from me. Instead, he turned his hand and laced our fingers as he stared at the house. I could’ve sat there forever, holding Jax’s hand, feeling the warmth of his skin, and I hoped I was reassuring him that I would always be there for him. I took a deep breath, trying to summon the same sense of family and belonging I’d felt last Christmas. Jax’s parents had been nothing but kind to me, and I hoped they would find it in their hearts to understand Charlie’s arrival and not judge Jax’s brother too harshly, because Jax didn’t need that.

“I’m good,” he said, then turned in his seat. “Thank you, Arlo.”

“Any time.”

“No, this means something,” he said with fierce determination. “You didn’t need to cancel your date; you didn’t need to sleep over; you didn’t need to have my back, but you did.”

“Anything for you,” I admitted, and hoped it came over as buddies having each other’s back and not me suggesting otherwise.

“You’re my best friend, Arlo,” he half-whispered.

My chest tightened. “And you’re mine.” *And I love you.* Although I didn’t add that.

“Thank you.”

“You already said that.”

He blinked at me, the tip of his tongue tracing his lower lip. “Well, it bears repeating,” he murmured and smiled.

“Ready?” I asked as I smiled back.

“Sure,” Jax murmured, but made no move to get out of the truck.

“Do you want me to stay out here?” I asked. Despite the urge to have his back, I’d pretty much do anything to make

Jax's life easier, and if that meant sitting out here, then I would.

He turned to stare at me with comically wide eyes. "God, no."

With that no in mind, I stepped out of the truck, unbuckling Charlie from the car seat, scooping him into my arms and getting in a quick cuddle before handing him over to Jax.

"Okay," Jax began. "Worst case scenario, they love Charlie, because who wouldn't love Charlie, but they talk my ear off about how Zach should never have left him. There might be disappointment. I hate it when they're disappointed, and I know it wouldn't be for me, but it would feel as if it was, because it's about Zach and..."

I squeezed his shoulder as he ran out of steam. "They won't be."

We let ourselves in, the scent of fresh sauce filled the hallway and drew us down to the cozy kitchen where Mama Byrne was dancing and cooking all at the same time. We stood in the doorway to the kitchen, where Sinatra sang about ants and rubber plants, baby Charlie cradled in Jax's arms, and me hovering behind.

"Mama?" Jax said over the music.

She turned and lowered the volume on the radio. "Jax! Arlo! What a wonderful surprise!" She even took a couple of steps toward us before she froze, her eyes widened, and she gasped.

She backed away from us, pivoted and went to the back door. "Ed! Get in here."

I heard Papa Byrne's voice from the garden, where he was always tinkering and puttering around with his greenhouse. "I'm with my tomatoes!"

"Come. In. Here." That was Mama Byrne's patented get-shit-done tone.

Papa Byrne was at the back door in a second, taking off gardening gloves, his skin pink from the sun. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Mama Byrne glanced at Jax and I, and Papa Byrne grinned. “Thought I heard a truck, how are—”

“Un bambino!” Mama Byrne interrupted.

“A baby?” Papa Byrne repeated.

“Jax?” Mama Byrne wiped her hands on a tea towel and held out her arms for Charlie. “You have another baby?”

“No, he’s not mine, Mama. This is Zach’s son. This is Charlie.”

Mama Byrne’s eyes widened, but she held Charlie close. Papa Byrne didn’t know what to say, as he leaned over to look at Charlie, who was burbling away, happy as anything for more snuggles. Mama Byrne took a seat, lifting Charlie away from her so she could get her fill of him.

“He’s gorgeous. He looks like you. Oh, Jax, he’s so beautiful. Just look at this red hair.” Then, she glanced up at us. “Where is Zach? Is he here? Did you find him? He *can* come inside you know.”

Jax tensed, and I placed a hand on the small of his back, reassuring him. He shot me a grateful smile. Then, shoulders back, he took the seat opposite his mama, and explained everything.

Mama listened, Papa paced, and we all sat around the old table until the story was done.

“Oh, Jax,” Mama Byrne said, her eyes bright with emotion. “He must be heartbroken to be apart from his son.” I knew she’d be this way. I knew she’d love without condition and open her family to anyone who needed it.

Jax’s eyes grew bright, and he reached for his mom to hug her.

“Charlie is safe with us,” she said. Then, she kissed Charlie and snuggled him again, and he curled into her as if he

was supposed to be there. “Our family has just grown bigger. Welcome to the family, little one.”

By the time we left, we were weighed down with spare clothes that she’d kept from when Reid’s son was little, plus blankets, a portable crib, a sterilizing unit, and of course, a container with half a dozen cannoli oozing with cream and chocolate.

Oh, and kisses and hugs and promises of love, and no criticism of Zach leaving the baby at all.

Juggling everything, we made it back into the house, and with Charlie tucked into the temporary crib set up in Jax’s room, I had no more reason to stay. I headed down the stairs first, helping Jax set up a monitor his mom had added to the box, and then, it was time for me to go.

Jax walked me to the door. “Thank you,” he said with feeling, pulling me in for a bro-hug with added back-slapping. Only, I changed it, ducked the bro part, and tugged him in for a proper hug. I felt him relax against me, and my heart melted a little as we held each other for the longest time, and I didn’t want to let go. He was warm in my arms, lax, as if he had relaxed in my hold. I smoothed circles on his back, until my thoughts turned to more touching, and a kiss, and I knew I had to pull away.

“Always,” I said as I released him, then stepped back. “I’ve got the work covered this week—we only have the sketches I said I’d do, and starting on the summer house for Ian Bevan. Dan and I will handle that and message you everything as it happens.”

He blinked at me as if it’d only just occurred to him that, yes, Charlie being here made Jax attending building sites awkward.

“Sure,” he sounded dazed.

I squeezed his shoulder. “You’ve got this.”

“I’ll be okay,” he said.

“I can stay.” *Please ask me to stay.* He shook his head, and I tried not to feel too disappointed. “I need to go home and

find that crib.” He closed his eyes for a moment as if he was overwhelmed. “Jax? Look at me.”

He opened his eyes, which were wet.

I reached out as if I was going to touch his face, but let my hand fall. “I can stay if you need me to,” I said. “I get it’s overwhelming.”

“No,” he murmured. “I’ll be okay.”

This close to him, I could see the flecks of olive in his green eyes, dark at the center, and the emotion swimming in them. I could cradle his face, tell him I’d stay, that I wanted him, I wanted *us*. Now was the perfect time. God, I was on fire with wanting him, but my skin was tight, and my heart beat fast, and he hadn’t asked me to stay.

I headed out to the truck, waved at him and Charlie as if I were okay.

“Shit,” I told my steering wheel, then turned up the volume on a Dolly Parton retrospective and tried to sing my way home. I only got a mile from Jax’s place when Dolly seemed too bright, happy, and loud, and I flicked the music off.

God dammit.

I wish he’d asked me to stay.

## Chapter Twelve

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## Arlo

RETURNING HOME DIDN'T LIFT my spirits.

I should have stayed with Jax, but the sudden flood of emotion was too much. I wanted him to ask me to stay, and I wanted to tell him I'd stay, and after all that, I'd just left.

My place was too lonely and quiet—too much time for thinking. Living in this place was overwhelming because there was so much room, way more than I needed as a man living on my own. Yes, my brothers came home from college on occasion, but it was just me now—well... me and next door's cat, Panda, who spent way more time in my place than was probably right, and to be honest, with my brothers gone, I enjoyed the feline company.

Yep, it was that sad.

I needed to go up to the attic for the crib.

It was rare for me to go up there, aside from dragging down Christmas decorations, because it was filled with forgotten things and was a time capsule of memories Trace, Sutton, and I weren't ready to face or sort through. But that was where the crib was.

"Panda?" I made some noises, and at last, Panda emerged one paw at a time from under an old oak bureau that had held four generations of Marshall family correspondence. He padded over to me, allowed me to pet him, and then, hotfooted it into the kitchen. "You hungry?"

"Miaow," Panda confirmed.

"Hmm, how are you today?" I asked him, and his sad sorry look was heartbreaking, or at least it would've been if I didn't know what a scrounging monkey he was.

"Miaow." He'd moved on to mewling with attitude to inform me he was dying from hunger.



I gave him a couple of treats, in his special bowl, and he delicately picked them out one by one before scattering them across the kitchen floor and pouncing on them before crunching them with relish. I was sure there was method to his madness, and I'd once tried putting them on the mat next to the bowl, y'know, cutting out the middleman. Panda sulked as only a cat could do, and I never did it that way again, just wiped and mopped and cleared up any mess he made.

Still, routine was good, however weird it was, and I let him out when he was finished.

With that done, I considered going up and finding the crib.

My phone vibrated when I was halfway up the stairs, and I stopped to answer the face call when I saw it—Sutton, way too close to the screen and cross-eyed. It scared the shit out of me as he chuckled.

“Bro!” he shouted.

I moved the cell away so it wasn't right in my face. “Hey, Sutt, what's wrong?”

Sutton faked shock that I'd even ask him that. “Does something have to be wrong for a brother to call?”

“You forget I can see right through you.”

“Money's a bit tight, and I don't get paid until the weekend. I wouldn't call, but can I borrow fifty?”

“You can always call.” *I wish you would call more.* It used to be that I'd get messages about homework and deadlines and stupid jokes, but since he'd gone to college he'd stopped sending them as much, same as how, all of a sudden, Trace had stopped sending me things too. “And yeah, I'll send it over.”

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

“You owe me fifty,” I reminded him with a raised eyebrow, and he ducked his head.

He chuckled. “Well, don't tell Trace, but you're my favorite brother.”

We laughed, his grin was infectious, and he looked so much like Mom my heart hurt, so I changed the subject. “How’re lectures?”

“Remind me why we need math?” he whined.

“Do you really want me to explain how math helps in football again?” I said.

He grimaced at me. “No. It’s going okay, aside from math, and there’s so much coursework!”

“It’s college, Sutt; studying is what you do.”

“And bad news on the Thanksgiving front,” he added. “It’s going to be tight getting home.”

My heart sank. “I understand.” I really did get it, he was way up in Illinois, and that was some journey back to San Diego just for a few days.

“I’ll try though.”

“Okay.”

“But you’ll be with Jax, right?”

“Sure,” I lied.

“How did it go with the fake date?”

“It didn’t happen.”

“You didn’t do it? Shit, Arlo, that was our plan.”

“I arranged it all, and I told him, but he didn’t react how you said he might, and... look, it’s a long story.”

“Okay, if lying didn’t work, then you need to be honest and ask Jax for a date. Tell him how you feel.”

I thought about Charlie, and Zach, and how blindsided Jax had been, and how he’d said I didn’t need to stay. What part of that made it easy for me to tell him how I felt? He needed a friend, and I could be that friend.

Shouting caught Sutton’s attention, and he turned his head. “I gotta go. I don’t want to be late!”

“Go! I’ll send the money.”

“Love you, Arls.”

“Love you too, Sutt.” I was talking to a blank screen; he was already gone, but I was left with the feeling it could just be me and Trace for Thanksgiving.

I pushed the melancholy aside and made my way up to the attic. My anticipation grew with every minute at getting the crib down and tidied up for Charlie. I knew the Marshall heirloom was hidden away somewhere amidst the attic’s collection of forgotten treasures. I could even picture the intricate designs my great-grandfather had carved into the wood, and the designs my grandpa, then Dad, had added, and something that felt akin to inspiration tingled in my fingers when I imagined what I could do to the crib as well.

The last time I’d visited the attic was when I’d spent a rainy afternoon up there with Sutton and Trace—the three of us still reeling from Mom and Dad dying—choosing, and then storing away, some of our parents’ things because tangible reminders of our loss were too painful to see. We promised we’d all go back up and remember them through their belongings, but it hadn’t happened yet—not in eleven years—but maybe one day soon, when we weren’t grieving losing our parents so young. The three of us had somehow learned a life without Mom and Dad, but not one of us had said we wanted to search through the things we’d stored.

That day hadn’t happened yet, and I wasn’t sure it would ever happen now that my brothers had left home. I would be left with the attic to organize when we put the place on the market. I pushed open the door, a gust of stale air, heavy with the scent of old things and dust swept over me, and I entered the space frozen in time.

There was a solitary cobweb-covered window, and faint light struggled to penetrate the thick layers of dust hanging in the air, casting long, eerie lines across the uneven wooden floor. I pulled the cord for the central light, half expecting it not to work, surprised and somewhat relieved when it did. There were way too many ghosts up here from my parents’ lives to be searching by the light of my cell phone. The light filled the corners, but it showed the marked boxes, each

holding pieces of my parents' unfinished story. I didn't want to check inside a box marked *photos*, or the one that had *misc* written on the side, or search any other fragments of their story—I wanted to find a family heirloom that I knew was up here somewhere. I began to sift through the cloths laid over random piles, sneezing as the dust was churned up.

Pushing aside layers of dusty sheets and moth-eaten blankets, I unearthed the crib, hidden beneath Christmas decorations, which I should probably bring down as well, given it was only a couple of weeks until Thanksgiving, and a pile of old suitcases holding long-forgotten items. I eased the crib out from behind the boxes of decorations, and tugged it into the space under the lightbulb.

This crib was a labor of love, handcrafted by my great-grandfather for his new baby boy—my grandad—many years ago. Trace, Sutton, and I had used it as well, and despite the passage of time, it was still solid with small scars of wear and tear. Two of its slender bars were cracked, but I could fix that when I sanded and smoothed the old wood. I imagined carving a design next to the tiny teddy bears that were already there—maybe a moon and some stars.

Charlie would like that.

And Jax might too.

And I could visit without even being asked.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## Jax

SATURDAY MERGED into Sunday and had become a whirlwind of diapers, baby formula, and sleeplessness. I'd managed an online order for everything I needed, plus extra groceries for me, but the rest of it was a mess I navigated one thing at a time. Having a baby to care for wasn't new—I'd been present in my girls' lives when they were babies—still married, through toddling, first words, sleepless nights. In theory, I knew all about childcare, however, in practice, I'd forgotten a lot, particularly just how much mess one small baby can create. I'd always been a creature of habit, running my construction business, managing the projects, and enjoying a predictable routine in my organized house with its pristine office and organized paperwork. But with Charlie in my life, predictability was going to become a distant memory, and so was going to work on the projects we had running.

I *could* ask my parents for help, but Mama had a part-time job at a dentist's office that she loved, and Papa was still a teacher, and I couldn't, in good conscience, leave them to look after a baby when, in my heart, I'd not only accepted the responsibility from Zach, but I already loved Charlie as if he were my own.

My cell vibrated, and all I could think was that Arlo was checking in on me, and maybe, he was saying he was coming back.

It wasn't him, and the disappointment was real.

Leo: How's it going?

I tapped the screen and attempted to type one handed as I carefully fed Charlie his mashed banana.

Jax: Okay

Leo: Jason wants to visit, so does Daisy, can we come over after school on Monday?

Jax: Sure

Leo: Can we bring anything?

Jax: No. We're all good 😊

Charlie pushed a fist into his mouth, then flicked his fingers, banana landing on my phone. I attempted to wipe it off.

Jax: giuubfbqwoi[b hdyuegn

Leo: Huh?

Jax: Bandana screed

Jax: \*Banana

Jax: \*Screen

Leo: 😂😂😂😂

Jax: FU

Leo: Still laughing

I refused to rise to Leo's idiocy, made a mental note of when he was visiting, then attempted to finish feeding the banana to Charlie, who was more intent on flicking it at me than eating it.

The phone rang, and I put it on speaker—Leo. "How's it going for real?" He was using his serious voice.

"It's all good."

"Is Arlo there?"

"Why would Arlo be here?"

I could hear his dramatic sigh. “Don’t tell me, you still haven’t told him how you feel about him?” he said, needling me.

“He had to go home.”

“Did you ask him to stay?”

“No—”

“He would have stayed, if you asked him to.”

“I can’t—”

“Jeez, what are you waiting for?”

“Nothing,” I snapped, then mellowed because Leo knew me. “Everything.” The feelings inside me were undeniable; I *did* need to tell him.

“What are you waiting for then? You love him; he loves you; go after him.”

“He doesn’t love me,” I muttered. “He’s on an app.”

“A what?”

“For sex. And on Friday, he was going on a date.”

“Oh.”

“We’re friends is all.”

“He’s probably fed up with waiting on you!”

“No—”

Leo chuckled. “If you could see the way he looks at you when he knows you can’t see, it’s pretty obvious he has it bad for you. And as for the date? Do you think, maybe, he was doing that to get your attention?”

No. I hadn’t thought that. It was ridiculous.

Right?

“I can’t think about that now,” I said, as yet another splat of banana hit my cheek. I rolled my eyes at Charlie, who grinned at me, the little brat. The *cute* little brat.



“You need to think about it before he does date and finds someone he falls for, Jax. Okay?”

I muttered a curse, low so Charlie couldn't hear, and Leo chuckled; the asshole.

“Later,” he said. “See you Monday.”

Leo's call was unsettling. I picked up my phone to call Arlo, but something stopped me—he didn't need me calling him at every bump in the road—and I carried on dealing with banana Armageddon.

“Little nibbling, you are one messy eater,” I said, and made airplane noises for the last bit. He gave me his widest mouth and took the spoonful, and this time, it stayed inside and didn't end up all over me. “Must get that from your dad.” Or his mom, I guess. I wondered who she was, and what she meant to Zach? Had she given him responsibility for the baby? Was she a surrogate? A wife? Had she vanished from Charlie's life as easily as my mom had from Zach's and my life? Too many questions and not enough answers. Such as, where was Zach? And who was the other man who'd spoken to Arlo outside, the one on the dark SUV. He'd left Charlie in my care, promising it would only be temporary, but would he come back, or was this my life now? My phone remained silent after the Leo exchange, devoid of messages or calls from anyone who might be him. Worry about Zach clashed with pride that Charlie had almost managed all of his food.

As I cleaned up the mess Charlie had made, wiping banana off his tiny face, and wondering how a human so small could create so much chaos, I thought about Zach's decision. He'd trusted me with his son without much explanation or consideration for the impact on my life, asking me to take it on faith that he needed me. It was both frustrating and confusing, and made me swell with pride all at the same time; on the one hand, I would always be there for Charlie, and for the brother I hadn't seen since I was a baby, but on the other, I felt scared and unsure, and yeah, worried to hell.

Maybe I needed a nanny? Childcare of some sort?

Because, otherwise, my construction business could suffer too, and I couldn't rely completely on Arlo because that wasn't fair. I'd delegate the tasks I could, but I might have to cancel projects to accommodate being here with Charlie. It would be a juggling act, and how soon would it be before I was dropping more balls than I was keeping in the air?

But in all of that, as I put him down for a nap, I could at least see the silver lining that was Charlie with his laughter, his curious gaze, and the way he'd grip my finger with his tiny hand. I was Uncle Jax and Charlie was my family now, and I'd do whatever it took to give him the love he deserved.

I closed the drapes, and the soft glow of a nightlight illuminated Charlie's peaceful face as he slept soundly in the travel crib. It was a rare moment of tranquility, since he'd been awake and lively and demanding my attention for the last three hours. I tiptoed out of the room, and gently closed the door behind me. In the dim hallway, I checked my watch—a little after eight, and all I could think was that I wanted to call Arlo. Was it too late to call him, and anyway, what excuse would I use to need to talk?

*I miss you. I need to hear your voice. I wish you were here.* Nope, that was way too honest. Work. I'll call him about work. I dialed Arlo's number, and it rang twice before he picked up.

"Jax? Is everything okay?" Arlo sounded worried.

"Yeah. All good," I whispered into the phone, not wanting to disturb the silence of the house.

"How's our little guy?"

"He's asleep," I replied, leaning against the hallway wall. "He's been awake for ages, playing with that stuffed octopus Mama loaned me, but he's down now for however long that lasts."

A soft chuckle came through the phone. "Must be all the excitement of Uncle Jax's construction stories."

I couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, something like that." There was a long pause because I didn't know what to say, and

I needed to find an actual reason for the call. “I was just calling about work for tomorrow?” *Liar.*

Arlo let out a chuckle, and I could picture him smiling and, maybe, rolling his beautiful gray eyes. “I told you, I’ve got it for tomorrow and the rest of the week. I’ve been working through your specs, and we’re okay.”

“I was thinking I could come to the site and bring Charlie, just stand near the structure, where it’s safe?”

“Now that’s a definite health and safety code violation,” Arlo murmured.

“What if we got him a teeny tiny hardhat and hazard clothing? Wait, does anyone even sell teeny hardhats?”

Arlo full-on laughed at that. “You mean you haven’t looked?”

“I’m checking now.”

“On your phone?”

“Yep.”

“What did you type in?”

“Teeny tiny hardhats,” I said, with an implied *duh* at the end. “Oh, never mind; that just shows miniature safety helmets for a kids construction party.”

“Yeah, maybe try children’s hardhat instead.”

I loved that Arlo was taking this so seriously, and I tried the new search, but neither that, nor baby hardhats, filled me with confidence, and I sighed with disappointment. “Let’s face it, I won’t be bringing Charlie on site.”

Arlo laughed. “And I told you that you won’t need to. We’ve got you covered for the next few days.”

“Yeah, but what about after that? What happens if Zach is away for a long time?” Or never comes back. I heard him sigh, but I forged ahead. “I probably need a nanny, or maybe a manny. That’s a thing, right? A male nanny, maybe a sexy one?”

Arlo was quiet. “Sure,” he said after a pause. “A nanny is a thing.”

“Not that I want a sexy nanny, or a nanny. I promised I’d keep Charlie safe.”

“Well, that’s one of those bridges we can cross when we get to it. Don’t worry for now, okay? I got you, and we can work this out.” I heard movement and the sound of a door closing, wondering where he was in his big old house. I knew he spent most of his time in the study, where there were sofas and bookshelves, but the door closing meant he was moving about. “You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to know something?” His voice echoed as if he were in a bigger emptier room, and I could picture the huge dining room that didn’t have furniture in it at all. It had been where their mom painted and had done all her crafting, and they’d emptied it and closed it off. I wondered what he was doing in there, but I didn’t ask. “I miss... Charlie,” Arlo admitted, his voice soft now, and filled with longing. “I liked holding him.”

“I liked you holding him,” I blurted as my mouth worked faster than my brain. I had that clear mental image of Arlo, in his white T-shirt, glancing over his shoulder at me, his bright eyes filled with emotion, a soft smile on his face and baby Charlie peeking over. I wished I’d taken a photo because that one image had been perfect, and if I had it, I could call it up on my phone and just stare. Arlo would make a good dad to babies of his own, and the idea of us being dads together made my heart hurt with wanting.

Fuck. I changed the subject before Arlo’s silence became *more*.

“Anyway, back to work. How’s the project looking without me? Any major hiccups you’re worried about if I’m not there?”

Arlo took the conversational baton and ran with it, launched into a detailed description of the construction project,

his passion for our work evident in his voice. "... listed all the parts, so it's all good, and Dan has said he's cool with overtime, which I approved as long as that's okay?" I made a sound of agreement and Arlo forged on. "I have an electrician on standby, and for the drainage issue, we have Kyle. Remember him from the city project?"

"Yeah, good guy."

"So, between me and Dan, we can handle work for as long as you need. We have this."

Listening to him talk about it made me realize that, yes, he really *did* have this. As we continued our whispered conversation about steel beams, concrete foundations, and project timelines, it struck me how much I craved listening to Arlo speak, and as exhaustion stole over me, I closed my eyes and drifted away to the sound of his voice.

"... and then Sutt said he might not make it back."

I blinked back to the conversation—it was apparent that I'd missed a lot because, Sutton was Arlo's brother, and nothing to do with construction. "Huh?"

"Sutt said he might not make it for Thanksgiving."

"That's shit. They should make you a priority." What made me say that?

Arlo chuckled. "They're kids in college, why would they want to connect with their boring-ass big brother?"

*Maybe as a thank you for the fact you stopped your life and looked after them?*

"Kids," I agreed because I didn't know what else to say.

"They need to fly. They don't need me," Arlo finished, and I knew that was the end of that part of the conversation, even if I wanted to dig deeper and talk out the worries Arlo carried, or the loneliness. Still, I pushed, because fuck it, I couldn't see Arlo's disappointed expression, but I could hear it in his voice.

"I'm glad Trace will be there. I don't want you lonely in your big old house."

“‘Lonely’? I have Panda visiting and looking out for me,” he joked, although I wasn’t sure it was a real joke and thought it might be more a commentary of what he was feeling. I let it drop because he sounded restless, and I didn’t want to chase him away, because I might have Charlie for however long he was with me, but I needed Arlo on the end of the phone.

*I want Arlo.*

“Talking of brothers, have you heard anything today about Zach? Did Leo and Reid say if they found anything?”

“I asked them not to look.”

“So, you’re left with more questions than answers.”

“Yeah.” First up was how could he just drop his own child off like this, without any warning or preparation? And how could he expect me to keep Charlie safe when I didn’t know if Zach was in danger too. Why would he separate himself from his own child if he wasn’t facing some kind of threat? It was all so baffling, and a familiar knot of anxiety tightened in my chest.

I knew I had to do everything in my power to protect Charlie. But at the same time, I couldn’t help but worry about Zach’s safety. Had he gotten himself into a dangerous situation? Was he trying to protect us, or was he running away from his responsibilities? Was he running away from Charlie? And who was the other man, the one Arlo had seen?

Mixed emotions swirled within me, but one thing was clear: I had a precious baby to care for now, and I would do whatever it took to keep him safe.

“I hope that Zach comes back soon and gives us some answers.” I couldn’t imagine him not coming back for Charlie—we were twins, and hell, I’d *feel* it if Zach was a criminal. I’d know through the twin thing if he was a bad person. Right?

“I’m sure Zach loves his son, Jax. After all, he left him with the best person for the job.”

Arlo’s word made me feel warm, and my tension eased.

An hour had passed as we talked about work, and all the serious Charlie stuff in between. It was a stark contrast to our usual banter, but Arlo staying on Friday, helping out with Charlie, sitting next to me on the sofa had created a connection that was one more step in my falling for him, and yet, I was still not brave enough to say a damn thing to his face.

What would it be like to have this conversation snuggled on the sofa, him with his arms around me, holding me close to his broad chest, making everything seem right in my world? What would it be like if he wanted that back?

Eventually, the conversation wound down, and Arlo yawned on the other end of the line. “I should let you get some rest. But, thanks for your help on Friday, with Charlie I mean, and then taking me to my parents’ place.”

“Anytime,” he replied, his voice softening. “Go Team Byrne Construction!”

I stared at my cell a long time after we exchanged goodnights, watching until the screen went black as it powered down into sleep mode, then made my way to the kitchen. I contemplated food, but instead of the real stuff that Arlo would’ve made me, I grabbed a tub of Ben & Jerry’s Cookie Dough, then headed back up to the bedroom with a spoon and my Kindle loaded with the latest construction magazines.

Time to watch Charlie sleep, lose myself in bricks and mortar, sidings and soffits, yard work and drainage, and not think about Zach and what he might be doing, and what danger he might be in, and how long I would have Charlie, and whether it would ever be long enough to be with him.

I wasn’t going to think about Arlo.

But it was Arlo’s smile and the confusion that was me wanting him here, and the fact he was out there looking to date, and I still hadn’t told him how I felt that kept me awake far longer than I wanted. In fact, I’d barely fallen asleep when Charlie woke for a feeding.

Ah, the life of a single, frustrated and confused, uncle.

## Chapter Fourteen

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## Arlo

THE PHONE CALL with Jax unsettled me, and I was also confused and muddled. I placed my phone face down on the cushion of the sofa and poked at the chicken salad I'd made for dinner. It was a perfectly fine salad, lots of chicken, even some homemade croutons, and a splash of homemade dressing, but I didn't have an appetite. I knew Jax hadn't meant to poke the bear inside me that was missing my brothers, but that was what had happened.

I didn't have long to wait until I saw them both—seventeen days until they were both supposed to be here for Thanksgiving—and it saddened me that Sutt might not make it. I'd handled Trace going to college a lot better because Sutton had still been at home. I still felt needed, validated, but with Sutton gone as well now, I was just freaking sad, and Jax was right, I *was* lonely. I had way too much time on my hands to think about all the things I should be doing with my life.

I'd given up studying architecture to become a dad to my brothers. I'd gone into construction because I had a knack for carpentry and it was as close to architecture as I could get, and I didn't regret either of those things. Should I use this chance with them both gone to go back to college? California State University in Sacramento had a reasonable architecture program, and I had all the application forms printed and laid out on my desk—I'd even spoken to the department administrator. They'd take my single year at Cornell, and they'd give me some credit, plus it looked good that I'd worked construction. I could get a place, and with the life insurance money all three of us had squirreled away to pay for some of our college tuition, I didn't have to worry too much about scholarships or loans.

Not to mention, if we sold this house, we'd probably have a good amount for each of us to buy our own

properties/places/homes. The one thing anchoring me here was how I felt about Jax, and...

He hadn't reacted the right way to me telling him about the date.

God, I wished I had an excuse to go over to Jax's and sleep there. We'd talk, laugh, and I could hold Charlie, and maybe, I could even work up the courage to tell Jax it wasn't all about loneliness that meant I stayed with him, or wanted to be with him, and that I hadn't wanted to date Wilton at all.

It was something more, something I fought for so long, which was now front and center in my life.

Not love, not yet, but need and desire and want all rolled into the urge to kiss Jax and find out if what I imagined could be real. But... what if we kissed and it was nothing?

We'd kiss, realize it was awful, things would get awkward, and then, that would be it, friendship over. "Jesus, my head hurts."

Panda woke up, rolled onto his back for belly tickles, then clambered down, playing with his toy mouse.

My gaze fixed on the old family photo hanging above the fireplace—a memory frozen in time, a reminder of the parents we'd lost too soon.

I loved the photo, one of those trendy photos from ages ago that was all about the kids climbing all over our parents, nothing formal. Mom was lying on the floor, her head in her hands, dark waves loose around her shoulders, and Dad was sitting cross-legged next to her, a hand in Mom's hair. I remember he did that, played with her hair as they sat and watched television, twirling it around his fingers and letting the layers drape over his wrist. Mom was so beautiful, happy, a wide grin reaching her eyes, and Dad was so like me it was as if I were seeing my reflection. He'd started to go gray at fourteen, or so he'd warned us, and in this photo with him only in his thirties, he was as gray as I was. Somehow those genes hadn't passed to Sutton and Trace, both dark-haired like Mom.

In the photo, I was twelve, Trace was four, and Sutton was only eighteen months and toddling hard. The three of us were all sitting on Mom's back—Sutton and Trace were so young, and the gap between us so obvious when I was posing all serious, with a hand on Dad's shoulder. Even back then, I'd been responsible, wrangling Sutton and Trace for the photo, and loved that my dad had been so proud.

Sometimes the weight of loss hung heavy in the air, even when I tried my hardest not to let it, because when I was halfway between nineteen and twenty, at college, Alice and Oscar Marshall had died. They'd been celebrating an anniversary. I'd come home from college to watch my siblings, and the bickering game had been on point when a voicemail pinged on my phone, which I ignored because playing *Call of Duty* was more important. I don't know to this day how much time passed between that voicemail and a knock, then the doorbell ringing, because it was all a blur.

I remember feeling irritable that someone knocked and used the bell.

I'd answered the door, and fuck, I'd wished I'd checked my phone first.

It was Janice from next door, Mom's friend, and her face was white.

Had I checked the news? That was all she said before the tears started, and before my life imploded. A plane crash. Two hundred and twenty-three souls lost. News of the accident was everywhere. The news flooded in, a plane had gone down, my parents had died, and it was only later that night, when I thought to check my voicemail.

Mom, her voice nervous, banging and rattling in the background, telling me she didn't think they were going to make it home, but that she loved us. Dad saying he loved us, and he was sorry. Both of them saying they weren't scared.

*Look after your brothers. Look after each other. We love you all so much.*

Grief gripped me as I stared at the photo, loneliness washing over me as it had done since Sutton and Trace had left.

*ALL OF US were in our suits for the funeral, everyone had left the wake, and Trace, with his dark curls and soulful eyes, leaned his head against my shoulder, seeking comfort. Sutton, broken and crying, held my hand and gripped it so hard I was numb.*

*“Arlo.” Sutton was the first to break the silence as we stared at the photo on the wall. “What are we going to do now? Do we have to leave school? What about my friends?”*

*Heart heavy with grief, I hugged them close. “We’re going to take things one step at a time. We’ll get through this together.”*

*Trace sniffed with tears flowing. “I want to stay here, where Mom and Dad were.”*

*“Me too.”*

I SIGHED—WHY was I sitting here losing myself in all those memories when I had work to do? I took the specs to the table and worked out a new schedule for the summer house project, but Panda coming back in the house distracted me enough that I stopped working. Restless, I didn’t know what to do with myself, and it was only nine, and I wasn’t tired. I petted with the cat, and he rolled onto his back exposing the snow-white of his belly, but I knew it was a trap. One pet too many, and his claws would dig into my hands—I’d learned that the hard way.

“You should be with your family,” I told him.

“Meow,” he responded, then gave a little chirrup of a purr before jumping down from the table and heading to the kitchen. I let him out, then sent a message to the chat group with Sutton and Trace—just a simple hey, that got a hey with a #IHatestudying from Sutton—and nothing at all from Trace.

That was okay—they were going to come out of college with degrees, make their mark on the world, and everything would go back to normal after that.

Maybe they'd get jobs close to here in San Diego, and we could be together again.

And I could stop fancying myself in love with a man who didn't need me.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Jax

THE PICTURE WAS SHARP, the connection perfect, and I was seeing my girls' faces for the first time since they'd left for Paris. We'd spoken, messaged, but actual FaceTime with the twins had been hit or miss, more due to them traveling around than anything else. I searched their faces for all the things that might have changed in the last week, and I only did that because so much had changed for me. What if, maybe, grown overnight, and I'd missed some great step forward in their lives? I didn't want to miss a single minute.

"Daddy!" India exclaimed and waved at me, her red hair in pigtails, one higher than the other, which made me think it hadn't been Paula who'd done her hair. Had it been Johan? He might be a good guy, and Paula and I might have split amicably, but that didn't mean I could stop the feelings of jealousy. No pigtails I ever did would be so haphazard. I felt kind of smug about that, and if being a father was measured solely on level pigtails then I was the best freaking dad in the entire world.

"Daddy!" Iris added, her hair loose and long past her shoulders. They were only six, but their personalities were so different, despite being twins. India was all sass and confidence, boisterous and forever happy. Iris was quieter, preferred books to playing in the yard, and loved music. I wondered if Zach was out there as different to me as my girls were to each other. I wondered what he liked to do. Did he read? Did he enjoy building things? Was he a big Madonna fan?

"There are my girls! Are you having fun?"?"

"We went on the Peter Pan ride! And we met Mickey!"

"And Belle! I love Belle, and she said it's cool to love books!"

"And then I got a sick feeling—"

“I want to get a dress the same as Belle—”

“We had hotdogs!” India got louder to talk over her sister, then leaned into the iPad. “They were yuck!”

“Can I get a Belle dress, Daddy?”

“I’m sure you can, Iris, add it to your Christmas list,” I tried to say over the excitement, and made a quick entry into my notepad. I imagined Paula and Johan would be getting Iris a princess dress, if they hadn’t already, but I could take any inspiration. Maybe, I could build her a bookcase similar to the one out of the movie? Of course, I’d need to watch the movie again, for the hundredth time, and make sketches, but given I love it as much as Iris did, it wasn’t a big issue. “And, India, why didn’t you like the hotdogs?”

“Onions,” she moaned and made a yuck face. “Then, I was sick.”

“Oh no, are you okay now?”

India shook her head. “It went in my hair, and Mom had to take me to the bathroom and wash it off.”

Iris wrinkled her nose. “It smelled so bad!”

I chuckled and gave my best sympathetic dad look. “I’m sorry, India; how about you tell me about the rides?”

They chatted on about their fairytale visit, and I asked them all the right questions, but it was Charlie waking up and burbling some nonsensical sound that reminded me he was there, and why it was so vital I talk to the girls today—much to Paula’s irritation, as *apparently*, they’d had plans.

“Hey, girls, is your mom there?”

Iris frowned—Paula wasn’t usually part of our chats—but India yelled for her mom, and all too soon, my ex-wife was between my daughters, and I had a ready smile. She might have been irritable about me getting in the way of whatever amazing thing Johan had arranged, but she loved me as a friend, and them, and we were solid.

“Paula, hi,” I began, but she was frowning the same as Iris.



“Hi?” Her tone left me certain she was asking me what was wrong at the same time as the hello—never let it be said my ex wasn’t economical with her words, probably due to having to get a word in edgeways with an excitable India and Iris.

“I have some news,” I announced with added drama, and reached over to lift Charlie out of the nest of blankets I’d created for him on the sofa, holding him as if I was Mufasa and he was baby Simba. “Girls, I want you to meet your cousin, Charlie.” Paula gasped. “India, Iris, Paula, meet my brother Zach’s son.”

The twins made all the right noises, not understanding the Zach perspective, but cooing over Cousin Charlie, who did his chubby best to coo right back, a trickle of drool landing on my keyboard. It was Paula’s shocked expression I zeroed in on. Her mouth was open, and I subtly shook my head—now was not the time to bring up past hurts in my continual need to track down Zach—she could berate me later, in private, and after a pause, she nodded.

“Is Zach with you? Did you find him? What happened?” she asked over the heads of the girls as they discussed which of their toys they were going to give Charlie.

“It’s a long story,” I said. “I’ll send you a message later; I just wanted you all to know that I’m looking after Charlie for a while, and he’s so excited to see you all over Thanksgiving.” It was my turn to have the girls, Paula—and Johan—had them for Christmas this year. I missed them both so much I wasn’t sure I’d ever let them out of a hug as soon as they arrived.

“Charlie could dress up as Chip the cup!” India said to Iris. “Chip was a baby, too.”

“Yes! Mom! Mom! Can we get a Chip costume for Charlie?”

“Of course,” Paula said, with a raised eyebrow.

We covered a few more graphic explanations of how sick India had been, and how Iris wanted to go to a castle and meet a broken tea cup and a beast, and they kept poking at the

screen to attract Charlie's attention, and at one point, Charlie tried to grab the image of his cousins, which was so damn cute. Then, we said our goodbyes and promised to catch up again soon, and I blew kisses, then took Charlie's fingers, and made him blow a kiss too. He burred and bounced, and everything felt so perfect.

As soon as I'd fed and changed him, I carried him around my backyard pointing out flowers, and when he grew dozy, I sat down and typed out the story, one-handed, to Paula, who sent me back a smile emoji. She'd seen everything about Zach during our short marriage;—me trying to find him, almost obsessed with him at times—and even though I'd tried to explain the other half of me was missing, it had been another downward step in a marriage that had started too fast and finished with us being friends. We'd married because of the twins; but we'd parted because of *us*.

I was glad she had Johan now. For her at least.

A small part of me didn't want to like wealthy, successful, handsome Johan being in my daughters' lives, but he'd never shown interest in cutting me out, and if the girls were happy, so was I.

And he was a good guy, and I did like him.

"They're happy," I told Charlie, who blinked at me, his rosebud mouth open, his eyelids heavy. "I hope you're as happy," I murmured and carried him indoors, tucking him into his crib and getting the fastest shower on record so he wasn't left alone. I even showered with the bathroom door wide open so I could see him... in case.

Whatever made my brother scared enough to drop his son with me could be out there, and there was no way in hell they were coming anywhere near Charlie.

"And what are you going to do naked?" I asked my reflection. "Hit them with a shampoo bottle?"

When I sat on the side of the bed in a towel, I took a couple of photos of Charlie and sent them to the family chat, to which my mom replied that she and Dad were visiting. Leo

added a reminder that he was coming over, too; plus, Lorna typed that she hadn't met Charlie yet, but knew all about him from the family chat and couldn't wait to meet him. I smiled, waiting for Reid to chime in, *and me*, he typed.

Gotta love family.

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THE WEEK that followed on from that Sunday had flown and had been one learning experience after another. I hadn't managed to go out on site at all, not that I was really needed as we had a lull before the next project started on Monday. Arlo carried the weight, with help from Dan, and every day, he would message me with various updates.

He understood I'd want to know, and from the serious—in his opinion, the Johnson family extension was at least a third of a degree from plumb—to the annoying—the pale pink paint we'd ordered came in as turquoise—he kept me in touch with everything.

He also visited every single night, straight from the site—hot, tired, and sweaty, his company T-shirts showing evidence of what he'd been working on. Today was no different.

“Thank God, it's Friday,” he said, and relaxed into the garden chair, stretching his legs out in front of him and picking at the rose-tinted paint on his arm.

I handed him a beer, assuming that, maybe, he'd want to stay the night, AKA hoping he'd stay. “Tell me everything.”

He took a deep swallow, and I wasn't staring at him, until he glanced up and caught the fact I was, in fact, staring.

“The painting is done. The trade suppliers agreed to a refund on the turquoise, even though we'd opened the first tin, but not before I had a heated debate with them over how we were unlikely to ever use that color and, no, we wouldn't take the fall for their mistake and the mislabeling. They grumbled, a lot.”

“What about the Johnson house?”

“Fixed—it was a bracket inside the roof. We tied it off.”

“And the Acton’s summer house starting Monday?”

“No more work. Let me have a Charlie cuddle.” He put the beer on the table and held out his hands. I eyed the dried paint splashes on his arms,, and he must have noticed. “I changed my T-shirt,” he said, and I passed Charlie over, and Arlo sat him on his lap so they faced each other. “Hey, you,” he said, and made faces to encourage a smile. No one had to do much to make Charlie smile. He was just one of those babies who seemed happy to be here. “Has your Uncle Jax been good?”

“Bah,” Charlie answered.

“I was afraid of that,” Arlo replied, as if they were having a serious discussion. “I bet he’s been all worried about the summer house contract.”

“Bah.”

“Yeah, you’re right; he does worry over nothing.”

“No, I don’t,” I lied. “It’s just that if we do it well, it could get featured on the Acton’s home improvement channel and...” He sent me a pointed stare, and I crumbled. “Yeah, I’ve been worrying.”

“See?” Arlo asked Charlie and booped his nose. “Told you he’d been worrying.” Then, he turned to meet my gaze. “I explained that we’d need a couple of extra days. They were cool, said they’d extend their Maldives trip, lucky fu—fudgers.”

“You didn’t need to do that. What if they think we’re slacking and—”

“Stop!” he commanded, and I did. “I told them we needed the extra time for ensuring it was the best product.” He smiled at me.

I took the seat next to him and picked up my own beer. “What if we don’t?”

“Don’t what?” he said, bouncing Charlie.

“What if we don’t delay, what if I come back on site on Monday?”

“And how’s that gonna work?” Arlo was confused, but I’d been thinking about this.

“I’ll fix things.”

“Get your mama to watch Charlie?”

“She could maybe do a couple of hours, and I could come and do my bit.”

“Cool. But you know Dan and I can handle it on our own, right?”

In all my world of doubts, that was one I didn’t have—Arlo could run this company himself if he wanted to, and a familiar nagging thought rose to the surface. I’d gone back and forth over my attraction to him versus my desire to get him to be a partner in the company. We worked well together, and I’d thought long and hard about how to broach it. I even had the words in my head, over whether he’d consider buying in, or not buying in. I didn’t care how he became part owner of Byrne Construction, but the thought of it being Byrne-Marshall Construction made my heart happy. But I never said them because I also wanted him in my personal life, and was I admitting that would never happen and trying to keep him close in other ways?

*Oh God, my head hurt.*

I needed to man up and tell him I was attracted to him. Hell, I should tell him I wanted to kiss him so badly that it hurt, and I wanted him to be a full partner in the company.

I wanted him to not leave. Ever.

“Here’s Woofy, coming to eat ya,” Arlo teased, wagging the stuffed dog in front of Charlie.

Watching the two play with his stuffed dog was a moment of pure joy. Seeing Charlie’s chubby fingers reach out to hold Woofy and Arlo made my heart swell with emotion. Soft coos and almost giggles escaped his tiny lips, and I was tearful

because Arlo was here, and I'd been at home with Charlie, and Zach wasn't here to see it and, fuck, so many things.

I wanted Zach to see each little thing Charlie did, because every movement and sound was a miracle. I'd sent the family chat group so many photos this week they couldn't keep up, and I'd copied Arlo in on so many he had to think I was crazy. I'd had visits from everyone. Mama had been over every day for one reason or another, but I wished Zach was there.

And I wished Arlo had stayed over every night this week. With Arlo there, I felt as if I could achieve anything.

"You think he looks the same as you?" Arlo's question snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Charlie?"

"No, Zach. I mean, you're twins right, and Charlie looks so much like India and Iris as babies, does that mean that you and Zach were identical?"

I wish I knew for sure what Zach looked like now. Was Zach's hair long the same as mine? Did it wave and curl and defy product? Or was it cut ruthlessly short? Was he military? Was he an ex-con? Did he have tattoos? I didn't have any tattoos, but I'd always wanted one.

"The only photo I have is one of us as babies, toddlers, whatever; I guess we were eighteen months or so? We look alike. Anyway, when he comes to get Charlie, we'll find out."

"What if you don't want to give Charlie back?" Arlo asked with caution.

"Of course, I'll give him back. I'm just looking after him for now."

"What if Zach is a bad guy?"

I tilted my chin, stubborn in my support. "He isn't."

"Cool." Arlo took my words at face value and went back to playing with Charlie.

"You want to eat here? I have more beer?" I changed the subject and threw my normal Friday night line at him.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, I want the company, if you want to stay.”

“Did you want me to make us something?”

“How about you let me look after you for once?” I felt the heat on my face. I’d more or less just implied that Arlo was looking after me by cooking, which was true, but I never said it. My repertoire was limited, but I managed to feed myself when Arlo wasn’t around. “I have uhm... pasta?”

Arlo smiled, grinned, his eyes lighting up. He picked up the beer and saluted me. “I won’t say no, and Charlie and I can stay right here. Go do your chef stuff.”

I could see the two of them from the kitchen window—Arlo walking the patio when Charlie was restless, singing what was probably a Beatles song to him until Charlie fell asleep in his arms. By the time I heated sauce and threw together a salad, then tossed fresh pasta into boiling water and opened a bottle of red wine, Charlie was in a nest of blankets, Woofers curled up next to him, and Arlo had long since vanished for a shower.

Never let it be said I was the fastest cook in the world.

I eyed the table in the corner of my kitchen, wondering if Arlo would enjoy sitting down to eat. Normally, we’d be outside, but I didn’t want to be away from Charlie, and I could even use mats, and cutlery, and...

Was a candle overkill? Probably. I set the table and stood back to examine it with a critical eye.

“Wow, fancy,” Arlo teased, and I whirled to find him watching me from the doorway. His hair was damp and spiky, his face clean of paint, and I tracked to his chest and saw he’d taken off the T-shirt he’d changed into and was in one of the shirts he left here—this one was bright orange with a yellow smiley face. He’d changed into navy board shorts that ended below his knee, and he wasn’t wearing anything on his feet. He looked so damn good as I followed the line back up to his face. “Thought I’d make an effort,” he announced and held out his arms to his sides. “Ta-da!”

I could smell the scent of his shower gel, the body spray, the everything that was Arlo, and with only a few feet between us, I could see the sparkle in the gray eyes that pulled me in.

“Looking good, Marshall,” I blurted, “clean I meant. You look clean.” Shit. Shit. Shit. I turned to the stove to retrieve everything we needed, trying to will down an inappropriate erection and slow my fast-beating heart. Then, when I thought I’d be okay, I laid everything on the table and encouraged him to sit, adding the bottle of red wine. I wouldn’t be drinking, but maybe Arlo needed it after he’d had such a busy week. He was so big on my stupid small chairs, but he didn’t seem uncomfortable. He poured wine and smiled at me.

He forked up some of the pasta onto his plate, then smothered it with red sauce. Then, he nodded as he chewed. “You’re good at this pasta game.”

“I also cook pasta with white sauce,” I deadpanned.

He snorted a laugh. We ate and talked about work and Charlie, and it was the easiest conversation ever. After dinner, he cleaned up while I fed Charlie, then we both played with him. I found a movie but I don’t remember too much about it, sitting close on the sofa, him with the remainder of his one glass of red wine. Then with one final feeding Charlie was down for the night, and this was where we would separate to our own rooms.

I don’t know what came over me. Was it the smile? Or the way he smelled? Or his gorgeous eyes? Or his broad shoulders? Or the way he held Charlie? Or just because it was Friday. Was I exhausted and overwhelmed and needing him to know how I felt? Or was I being selfish?

I stopped him outside his room, ready to say goodnight, and for the longest time, we stared at each other. “How is the app going?” I asked.

He blinked at me. “What app?”

“Dating, Wilton, Karaoke.”

He shrugged. “I deleted the app—it wasn’t really my thing.”



“But what about dating?”

“What about it?”

“You said you needed...” I waved in the general direction of his groin, and he chuckled, and the sound made me feel lighter.

“I never wanted to...” he began. “Look, can we talk?”

Oh God. What was he going to say? Was this it? He was going to find a different way to hook up. Once was enough, I shouldn't let him do this until I'd had a chance to talk to him—to be honest with him.

“Sure,” I murmured.

“About the dating thing...” He ran a hand through his hair and it stuck up in adorable grey tufts.

I wanted to follow his fingers and grasp his hair and hold him close. “Don't,” I said.

“Don't what?” He sounded about as confused as I felt.

“Don't go on dates,” I finished in a soft voice, and my gaze dipped to his lips and back up to his eyes.

Something passed between us, a heat or a spark of awareness, a connection I couldn't deny any longer. Madness consumed me, and I placed my hand on his chin as he stared at me, confused, then I pressed my lips to his. He was frozen, and I eased back a little, fear gripped me that I'd fucked up.

“What was that for?” he asked and blinked at me, wide-eyed and shocked.

“You said my pasta was good,” I blurted because I was an idiot.

“And I got a kiss for that?” he mused and bopped my nose as he'd done with Charlie. It made me smile because it told me I hadn't completely fucked things up, but then again, it wasn't him falling to his knees and professing undying love. It was cute, but it wasn't love.

But there was heat in his eyes.

“You know,” he whispered as he reached for my T-shirt and tugged me to him. “I think the sauce deserves a kiss as well,” he murmured after a pause, and moved that bit closer. “Spicy.”

Arlo was standing right there, his tall and imposing figure casting a shadow over me, and all I wanted was for him to tug me into his strong arms and hold me as he kissed me back. Our eyes locked, and time seemed to stand still. I could see the intensity in his gaze, and it made me want to fall to my knees and beg.

“Arlo? We should—”

“Tell me you want me to kiss you,” he demanded. “Don’t tell me I’m wrong here.”

“I want you to kiss me,” I murmured.

Anticipation hung heavy in the air, and our breathing synchronized as we leaned closer. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my lips as our faces drew nearer. His large hand cradled the side of my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. My heart raced even faster, and I closed my eyes, savoring the seconds before our lips met.

When they did, electricity coursed through me. The sensation of Arlo’s kiss sent shivers down my spine. His strength and gentleness combined in a way that made my knees go weak. It was a kiss filled with desire and tenderness, and in that moment, I felt more of a connection than any words I could use.

This time, it was him kissing me, lingering a little longer than I had, the tip of his tongue licked at the seam of my lips. I couldn’t help matching the touch, swaying closer, and sighing as our tongues tangled lazily, as if we had nothing to hurry for. It was everything I wanted... all that I needed. He kissed me. He reached behind me, pulled the tie, and let my hair loose, carding his fingers through the curls as he tilted his head to deepen the taste. I wanted to touch him, but I was off-balance, the only thing holding me upright were my palms flat on the wall, and instead, I let him guide the embrace that I’d initiated. He tugged me closer, so I could steady myself, and I let him

hold my weight as I melted into him. With one of Arlo's hands firmly anchored in my hair, I felt the touch of the other on my shoulder, my arm, then my waist, but he didn't pull me in to grind against me. He wasn't taking anything, he was giving me himself, and I needed it more than air.

We parted and stared at each other. In that brief, intense moment, I'd seen the feelings I had for him reciprocated. It was a connection, and something that meant we could have more. It meant both of us taking a step into the unknown, the possibility of heartbreak if things didn't work out. I could lose my best friend.

I could lose Arlo.

"Wow," he murmured, and twisted some curls around his finger, burying his face in my neck and not moving.

"I thought it was just me," I confessed in a whisper.

The silence that followed felt like an eternity, but then, a smile tugged at the corners of Arlo's lips.

"I want this." The world stopped as his words sank in, the heavy weight of uncertainty lifting from my shoulders.

"Please don't date anyone else," I urged.

He chuckled, then turned us so I had my back against the wall, and he was caging me there. He kissed me again, crowded me, slid his hands down my spine, maddeningly slow, and then, he gripped my ass and lifted me, my legs wrapped around him. He held me so strong and steady, the kisses more frantic. I could feel his cock hard against me, and I wanted that, I wanted *him*. Someone groaned; me? He released me enough that he could awkwardly slip a hand into my sweats, smoothing his fingertips along my cock, and stifling my moan of want with another kiss. I tried to reach him, I wanted my hands on him, but he laughed and twisted away.

"I want to see you come," he whispered. "Lose control. I've got you. I'm here." It could have been minutes, but maybe only seconds, and I was coming into his hand, my whole weight resting between the wall and him. He thrust up against

me, deepening the kisses, until he stiffened, and the kisses gentled. I'd never had a lover who held me so tight, who never let me fall, and I wanted more. I wanted him inside me. I wanted inside him. Hell, we hadn't even had that conversation, but I was vers, and I needed to know what—

“Why did we wait so long?” he asked, interrupting my train of thought.

“I don't know.”

“I wasn't going to date Winston,” he murmured.

“Wilton,” I corrected.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I mean, karaoke, am I right?”

We grinned at each other, but before I could take his hand and tug him into my room, he let me down, straightened my shirt, and held up his hand. “I need a shower.”

I smiled because I thought, maybe, he was suggesting *we* had a shower, but then, he pressed a kiss to my nose.

“We'll talk in the morning,” he said.

“Do you want to...” have a shower with me, sleep in my bed with me?

“Night, Jax,” he said with another kiss.

“Okay, night.” I felt confused, but was still riding the high of what we'd done. Arlo wanted me. I wanted Arlo. It was simple.

But he left me in the hallway, going into the spare room and shutting the door.

Hope flared in my chest that, at least, we'd talk tomorrow.

But, when I woke up in the morning with a heart full of possibilities, he was gone.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Arlo

IT'S funny how something so perfect can turn a man into a complete coward. That kiss had been something out of a dream, the kind that lingered in your mind long after it was over. Holding Jax against the wall, supporting the weight of him, having his trust, getting my hands on him at last, and tasting his kisses. I was baffled why my brain told me I needed to leave.

Maybe it was self-preservation, maybe I saw how tired he was, maybe I'd taken advantage of a man who was kind of exhausted and messed up all at the same time.

I didn't know if I regretted that kiss, or whether it was the whirlwind of emotions it stirred up in me that had me running scared. Maybe I should have stayed, faced the music, and talked things out with Jax, but in the heat of the moment, my impulse was to escape. To stay and maybe end up talking, might mean I compromised and agreed it should be a one-time thing, and I was done losing my dreams. After everything I'd given up—albeit willingly—didn't I deserve to follow the path I'd always imagined for myself?

Maybe I should have called Jax, *just* to hear his voice, to ease this knot in my chest. Or maybe I should have gone all out and gone back to his house, laid it all on the table, and seen where we stand. But doubts crept in. What if I made things worse? What if Jax didn't want to see me again? What if the kiss was him being tired and bored.

*Why did we wait so long?* My words echoed in my thoughts, and I was alternating between embarrassment and conviction.

I was left with more questions than answers because what we'd done had been everything, and I couldn't help but second-guess every move I was making, let alone adding this

to the heap. Nowhere in my future was revealing I was in love with Jax, or hell, kissing him some more.

So, busy work was where it was at. So far, I'd emptied and cleaned out two cupboards, reorganized photos on the kitchen pin board, and run two loads of laundry. The drier beeped at me, and I emptied the contents—comfortable and soft work T-shirts.

I fluffed and folded, and headed out through to the hall, finding Panda hanging precariously from the top shelf of a bookcase, one half of him in a shoe box, the other half kinda sprawled this way and that.

“You gonna help put this away with me?” I asked him as he blinked at me, then stretched out a single paw, showing me his pale pink toe beans, which could change into murder mittens in an instant. He made no move to follow me. “Guess not, then.”

Only, as soon as I neared my bedroom with my arms full of laundry, Panda sprinted up the stairs, spotted the attic door, which I'd not shut properly, darted through it, and vanished. I dumped the basket inside my bedroom door, then followed him, because Panda was the kind of idiot cat that would get stuck among the boxes and detritus of three generations of the same family. It wasn't much of a wait to spot him jumping from one corner of the attic to another, pouncing on shadows on the old wooden floor.

“Panda, get your furry butt out of here.”

As if he'd heard me, and in his usual cat way had chosen to ignore me, he pounced on a drop cloth, then ventured deeper into the attic. I watched him leap on some old boxes as he explored a far corner. With a curious sniff, he mauled at a box, sending plumes of dust and cobwebs into the air, disappearing into the cobweb-covered space. Yowling, he backed away, up on his back paws, then darted back down past me with a tangle of webs and dust clinging to his black face, which I knew would end up somewhere it shouldn't.

Like right in my clean laundry.

I took the steps two at a time, sliding to a stop, but I was too late—Panda was right in with my clean shirts, circling, and pawing at them. I eased him out of the impromptu nest and carried him at arm's length downstairs, shooing him out of the back door, ignoring the baleful stare he threw at me.

“In my clean washing. For real?” I called out to him, and he did the cat alternative to rolling his eyes by turning his back on me. I had almost made it back upstairs when my cell vibrated. I yanked it out, hoping it was Jax.

Actually, hoping it wasn't Jax. I would stumble over everything and fuck everything up because I didn't have my thoughts in order.

Thank God, it was Trace, and I answered before he rang off, which he often did if he didn't get an answer straight away—he had a typical early twenties attention span, but give him a page of random statistics, and he would spend hours staring at them, obsessed, and attempting to find patterns—hence his degree in actuarial science. However, talking on the phone? Nope, wasn't happening. I didn't enjoy talking on the phone either, but it was the one way I got to hear my brother's voice, so that was what I did. I should've felt honored when he didn't ring off, and I actually got him talking to me.

“Trace, hi,” I said and reached the top of the stairs, pushing the attic door shut and trying the handle a few times—the lock was loose, which was why it wasn't shutting, and I sighed to myself—something else to fix. “Trace?” I asked again because it was super quiet from my brother's end.

“Sorry! Here!” he announced, and I sat on the top stair and smiled. “Guess what?” he asked.

Given I had no idea whatsoever what it could be, I threw out a few guesses. “The 5<sup>th</sup> dentist caved, and now they all recommend Trident? You ran out of change for the drier? You tripped down the stairs in class? You lost another pair of glasses?” So far, he was three for three on glasses versus sidewalk, which weren't the cheapest accidents on earth.

“Nope,” he answered, using his practiced smug tone. “I still have my... shit... where are they... oh wait... yep, I have



my glasses.”

“Idiot.”

“Pot, kettle, black—given how often you mislay your keys,” he replied.

“It’s a big house.”

“You’ll never guess who got the work placement they applied for?”

“I have no idea. Who?” I pretended, even as I fist-pumped, because Trace deserved every success he had worked so hard for.

“You’re an ass, Arlo. Me. I applied; I did math; I conquered. I start in a week!”

My chest swelled with pride. I knew he was one of thirty or more final year students wanting this, and the fact that Trace—my little brother, Trace—had risen to the top was fantastic. “That’s amazing news. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you, we’re so excited, and when I say *we*, that’s my other news. I wanted to tell you about Isabella, my girlfriend; she’s a second year pre-med at the house two doors down, fiery, Italian, long dark hair, a real temper. I’m in love, and I’m going to marry her.”

The hell? “What? Trace—”

“I’m joking about the marrying. Oh my God! Anyway, I think I’m joking, but you know Mom and Dad fell in love at first sight, so maybe it’s in the genes. I can’t wait for you to meet her!”

Trace’s excitement was palpable. I could even imagine his face, so like my own, with a broad grin, and something else settled in my chest alongside the pride, a warmth from knowing he was happy. I was sure I’d love Isabella—Trace was the sensible brother, the one who weighed all the risks in life and took careful steps whenever he could.

“Well, I can’t wait to meet her,” I began, but Trace rolled over me.

“There’s one major problem with the internship, but I’m sure you won’t mind,” Trace said, and the pride and warmth shrunk to let in worries about whatever he was going to tell me.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s all good. It’s just, I’m really sorry, but I won’t be able to make it back home for Thanksgiving. The partners at the firm have this thing they do, and it’s kind of expected that I’ll be there as part of the networking. I don’t want to miss Thanksgiving with you and Sutt, but I don’t really have a choice. Well, I do have a choice, not everyone is going, but I really want to make this work, and you never know, if I do this and impress them, I could graduate and walk straight into a job.”

“Of course, I don’t mind.” Why didn’t I tell him Sutton might not make it? Probably because I hoped he would. “We’ll muddle through and send you photos of the board.” Thanksgiving Monopoly was a very real thing, and something the Marshall brothers were very serious about—the only ritual we’d carried on from when Mom and Dad were alive. Sutton cheated, Trace worked the odds, and I was the banker who couldn’t win my way out of a paper bag. It was the three of us together, and it meant everything to me. “There’s always Christmas,” I added.

“I could try to get back for your birthday?” Trace said.

*2nd December. Please.* “You don’t have to.”

“Maybe not then, but definitely later, maybe I could bring Isabella?”

“Sure, I’d love to meet her. I’ll even use the fancy sheets in your room. But you know what, Trace? I’m thinking I should pack away your Transformer collection.”

“Ass.”

I laughed.

“Oh, and guess what, Izzy has a brother, and he’s gay, so I could bring him, too.”

I knew Trace was joking, and any other day, I would have joked back, but last night with Jax was too raw, the emotions breaking me up inside.

“I’m not on the market,” I murmured, which was the same as throwing chum in the ocean.

“Oh, you met someone?” he asked, intrigued.

“No.”

“Don’t tell me you finally pulled your head out of your ass and jumped Jaxon Byrne.”

“What? No!” I lied.

“Whatever,” Trace laughed. “I have to go. I have finals to study for, but I wanted you to be the first to know about the internship.”

“Thank you, and congrats little brother.”

“Thanks. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” I said to thin air as he’d already ended the call.

Disquieted, I headed downstairs. Panda was at the back door meowing pitifully and so damn cute. I let him in, gave him a treat while lecturing him on not sitting on clean washing, then sat on my sofa where he jumped onto my lap.

So, I wouldn’t see Trace for Thanksgiving—that was okay, he was happy and thriving as well, and I shouldn’t feel let down. Irrational thoughts about being alone and lonely flooded me, and then, somehow, they circled right back around to Jax.

He’d kissed me first, and it was amazing, but I couldn’t just lean in and kiss him, couldn’t just tell him how I felt, or be in a friendship I couldn’t bear to lose. Loving Jax was a secret I’d buried deep, where I could pretend it didn’t even exist, and some days, when we worked together, and he was frowning at me, or laughing at a stupid joke, or worrying over some minor detail, I couldn’t help but wonder what this feeling really was.

Maybe it was just loneliness?

After all, I saw him every working day, and often at the weekend when we worked extra hours, and our friendship had grown out of our love for building and renovating. He'd lent an ear when I needed to vent; we'd drunk beers on his patio when life became too heavy for either of us. Jax had been a constant in my world, and I couldn't deny that him being in my life was a good thing. Comfortable. Happy.

Friend.

His smile made my heart skip a beat and made me feel lighter.

But, the last thing I wanted was to jeopardize the friend part of what we had. What if I confessed my real feelings, only to find that he didn't feel anything back? What if I ruined everything?

"I'm just not going to say a thing," I told Panda, who didn't stop cleaning himself, which was about the best I'd get in response.

I loved Jax, even if I couldn't bring myself to say the words out loud, but I worried too much about the future and being there for family to think about myself.

"Stop feeling so fucking sorry for yourself," I warned, and this time, Panda glanced at me with an all-knowing stare, and I couldn't help but snort a laugh. "Bet I wouldn't have these issues if I were a cat," I told the empty house.

Maybe someday, the answer to the question of whether I was in love would become clear, and maybe, on that day, I'd do something about how I was feeling.

Tell him and try to make something of what we could be.

Or not.

"Now what?" I asked.

I sat next to Panda, pulled out a sketch book, and spent an hour doodling ideas for a spice rack in the Bramham kitchen, which Jax had penciled in for February. I was happy to give him some ideas—creating beautiful, but functional spaces was what I was good at—but I wasn't feeling work. I didn't want

to read, or watch television, even scrolling YouTube was a loss.

“I should go visit Jax. What do you think?” I asked Panda, who ignored me. “We don’t have to talk about what happened. I could just see if he needs anything, maybe I could take the crib over today, in a special visit, rather than wait until it’s just a work thing?”

Panda opened an eye and gave a long, sharp-toothed yawn, then padded to the kitchen, meowing with intent until I let him out to go back to his place. It was only four. I could make it to Jax’s with the crib, visit with Charlie, and be home in a couple of hours. Was I brave enough to go over there and face what we’d done? Was I brave enough to tell him I couldn’t start anything that wasn’t going to be forever? Maybe, if I focused on making Jax dinner, then we wouldn’t have to talk.

*I don't want to talk; I want another kiss. I want to throw him on a bed and kiss him from his nose to his thighs and right back up again.*

Visiting Jax was the best idea ever.

THIS WAS *NOT* the best idea ever.

Parking my truck next to Jax’s with its Byrne Construction logo was a stark reminder that he was my boss, and that, yes, we were friends—good friends—but what we’d shared had been mutual comfort and probably wouldn’t go any further. I’d asked why we’d waited so long, told him I’d thought it was just me.

But I’d still left.

Coward.

I turned off the engine, peered up at the house, but nothing indicated whether he was home or not, but I’d come all this way. I couldn’t chicken out now.

Hefting the heavy crib took all my strength before I got the balance of it, and I had to use my head to shut the trunk, which

—ouch—but then, I headed up the path and the two small steps to the porch.

Fuck. No hands. I kicked the door a couple of times, and when no one answered, I used my nose on the doorbell, or at least I tried to use my nose, but all that happened was that I was bent awkwardly, scrunching up my face, and that was how Jax found me when he opened the door.

“Arlo,” he sounded surprised.

I bet he’d been counting on me avoiding him all weekend.

Things best avoided? Kissing and coming against each other as workmates and friends.

“I brought the crib over,” I explained.

He nodded. “So, I see.”

My arms strained to hold the weight of it, given I was off-balance after leaning into the doorbell.

“Do you still want it?” I asked, and yes, I sounded a little stressed—sue me.

“Of course. I’ll help you.” He took one end, and when I managed to balance myself, we took it inside as easy as anything, and straight up the stairs to his room. “He just woke up,” Jax whispered, indicating with a side nod toward the yawning bundle of cute who made a *bah* noise and batted at the Winnie the Pooh mobile above his head. He couldn’t reach it, but one day he’d turn over, then he’d be up on his knees, then he’d be able to get to it. Too soon.

“Hey, Charlie,” I said, and he turned his head and smiled up at us.

We maneuvered the crib to where Jax wanted it, having to move the temporary one a little to fit the wooden behemoth that was the Marshall family treasure into place. Jax scooped Charlie up and hugged him, wrinkling his nose and stepping toward the changing table he’d set up on an old bureau. I had this wild thought that I could make a changing station for him, with drawers, and doors, a new treasure that, maybe, he could hand down to his kids for their babies.

“You’ll need to get a mattress and bedding.”

“Online orders are saving me.” He offered a smile.

“Yeah, well, you can have it as long as you need. I mean, until Zach’s back to take Charlie?”

His lips thinned, and I could see he wanted to say something about Zach, but didn’t. It would be hard to connect with Zach, then for him to take Charlie, even after this short time, and I knew that.

Dressed in soft, bright red shorts and a lime green T-shirt, Charlie was finally ready to meet the world, aka a bottle, but Jax took a moment to examine and admire the crib, the same as he did with any of my work.

Well, more than a moment.

“It’s stunning. Did you do the carving?” He traced the moon and stars, and a tiny leaping cow, with his free hand and turned Charlie so he could see. “Look, Charlie, the cow is jumping over the moon.”

“I did the moon and that, but my great-grandad built it originally, and he did the teddies, and my grandad added birds, and Dad added the cat and the fiddle, it’s four generations of Marshall work now.”

“You’re so talented, and I’m so honored you’re lending it to me. It’s a precious thing you’ve done for me, Arlo.” He stared at me as he said that, and my cheeks were hot under his gaze.

“It’s a shame for it to be hidden in the attic,” I think I said, but I mumbled and turned to leave. “See you Monday.” I’d almost made it to the door when he called my name. *Please don’t say we need to talk. Please don’t say we need to talk.*

“Don’t go,” he said.

I faced him. “I should—”

“We should talk about what happened.”

“It was all me. I’m sorry. These things happen,” I said quickly, almost harshly, but not loud enough to startle Charlie,

who was playing with Jax's hair.

*I want to play with Jax's hair.*

Jax blinked at me and raised a single eyebrow. "Wait. Me wanting you to kiss me was all your fault?"

"Well, it doesn't have to happen again."

He smiled at me then, but didn't carry on the conversation in the way I'd been expecting.

"I was going to say that I have this chicken, and I don't know what to do with it." He was going for innocent, but I could see through his expression, the devious shit.

"You want me to cook dinner?"

"You could," he said, as if that wasn't what he'd been asking for at all. "I have beer."

Beer implied staying the night.

*Beer means staying the night.*

Words froze in my throat, and I couldn't move as he took the three steps toward me, then pressed his free hand to my face. *Please kiss me.* He went up on tiptoes, or I leaned down, or something, but all I know is that he pressed the sweetest kiss to my lips, and it tingled. I loved it and whatever the consequences, I wanted more.

"I wanted it as much as you, Arlo. There was no fault, there was just fire."

"Okay."

"Chicken Parm?" Jax asked with a smile and pressed his finger to my lip, tracing the shape of it, then tapping my chin.

All I could do was nod, feeling the earth fall away from under my feet. "Chicken parm."



# Chapter Seventeen

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## Jax

THE WARMTH of the kitchen meant we had the patio doors open, the scent of marinara and baked cheese lingering in the air as we settled in to eat. Arlo was sitting by my side, Charlie between us in his high chair, and every time I glanced over at Arlo, his expression was a mixture of warmth and hesitance, mirroring my own. After a moment, the corners of his mouth twitched upwards, a cautious smile that I returned. This was new, this could be something, and we were both navigating this thing between us. I didn't know where this was heading, only that I wanted him in my arms, and that I'd do anything to make this work and to keep him in my heart as well.

"Thanks for cooking," I murmured, my voice little more than a whisper in the comfortable silence that had settled between us. I meant it more deeply than perhaps he realized. My life had been a whirlwind since Charlie had come into it, a storm of chaos and worry leaving me at a loss for what to do next. Having Arlo here, in my space, was exactly what I needed. Charlie babbled something, but his eyelids were heavy and kept closing. Sleep wasn't far off for him. I gently moved the banana chunks out of the way and propped him up and that way at least if he did fall asleep he wouldn't faceplant. I didn't want to put him to bed because he needed his last feeding and a diaper change and, anyway, I kinda loved watching the way his head bobbed with tiredness, and the babbling he threw our way as if he was trying to have a chat with us.

"It's nothing," he replied. "I like cooking. I miss it with my brothers gone." I caught the flare of sadness in his expression as he went to pick up his glass of water.

I reached over and took his free hand, and he curled his fingers in mine, then we had this whole unspoken conversation where I told him that I was there for him, and he told me that he was happy to be here for me.

At least, I thought that was what was happening.

We mostly ate in silence, save for the clinking of cutlery against plates. It was a comfortable quiet, filled with the unsaid words and unexplored emotions I couldn't put a name to. Every so often, our knees brushed beneath the table, a spark shooting through me each time. It was accidental, but with each gentle touch, something in me leaned more toward the warmth that was Arlo Marshall.

Charlie had succumbed and was peacefully asleep in his high chair, his little chest rising and falling. I felt a surge of affection for my nephew, and it hit me that Zach was out there somewhere, missing out on all these moments.

"I wonder where Zach is?" I blurted, the end result of my internal thought process that should have made no sense to Arlo.

He shrugged and seemed to understand. "One day we'll find out."

"And then he'll take Charlie." As he should. After all, Charlie was his son, not mine. "It makes me think about what it would be like to have a child of my own, y'know, adopting or surrogacy." I focused back on my dinner, knowing I'd overstepped by talking about kids when what Arlo and I had was the teasing flirting, first of everything, stage.

"Would you want more kids?" he asked after a pause.

I rested my fork on my plate—I'd been eating one-handed since taking Arlo's hand, neither of us letting go. "Sure, one day."

"Me too."

"Even though you've done it before with Sutton and Trace?"

He smiled at me. "Trace was eleven, Sutton eight, and they're my brothers. It's a different dynamic, but I loved caring for them, and... yeah... being a dad one day is on my list, but then, I have a lot of things on my list."

"Such as?"

"Maybe going back to college?"

“How long were you there before...?”

“Nearly a year.”

I realized I’d never asked him about studying. I just assumed he’d chosen the same route as me, to work with his hands. I’d never even read his application for the job, not when he’d handled the supplier so well, in fact I didn’t even remember seeing it. “What did you want to study?”

He huffed a laugh. “Pipe dreams, about being an architect.”

“Wow, for real? That explains a lot.”

He glanced at me. “It does?”

“Well, your carpentry for one, and the way you can judge a structure and make it better. Why didn’t I know you wanted to be an architect?” I asked.

“It was never important,” Arlo murmured.

“Of course it’s important. You’re important. You put ... your brothers first, then working with me, and all this time, you were giving up what you really wanted to do.”

Arlo winced and stopped eating. *Giving up* were emotive words to throw at him, and I felt immediate guilt. Of course, he’d sacrificed for other people, but that was all about love, and nothing to do with giving up.

“I didn’t give up,” he said, and the guilt grew.

“No, I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry. I just meant... don’t you want to go back?”

He hummed under his breath, then squeezed my hand.

“My passion for architecture wasn’t only about designing buildings; it was about creating spaces that told stories, that held memories, and that could impact people’s lives. And that is exactly what I’m doing with you.”

“But you could be designing beach houses and skyscrapers.”

“Yeah, no,” he said with a modest smile. “I didn’t want to do that kind of stuff. Look, when I was a kid, I spent hours sketching cubes upon cubes to make homes, adding in curves, and color, which I, then, attempted to build using LEGO. Of course, with my brothers being younger than me, when I was old enough to build anything impressive, they would typically tear it down and build a yellow and red car, or something equally as monstrous. My creativity wasn’t appreciated by Trace and Sutton, just the fact that I wasn’t sharing the LEGO as much as they’d hoped.” He chuckled, and it made me smile right along with him. The love in his expression when he talked about his brothers was heartwarming, and I bet I looked the same way when I spoke about Reid, Leo, or Lorna.

“They wanted all the LEGO,” I summarized.

“Yeah, so I started building things they *did* want to see—castles, or fire houses, or things from the books they read. That was my happy place, and I spent hours creating, drafting designs of palaces for dragons, or towering skyscrapers, making scrapbooks of inspiration, and I did a year at Cornell.”

“Wow.”

He smiled down at his plate, lost in memories, and I realized I wanted him to talk again because I could listen to him all day.

“There was this rundown house at the end of our street. I had a view over the yard, and a gnarly wild crape myrtle tree, and... you probably don’t want to hear this.”

“I do. Tell me. I want to know everything about you.”

He smiled; I smiled, then I leaned over, awkwardly, to steal a kiss.

“I could see a big house with a lot of windows, but back then, in my head, it was a Disney castle that needed saving. There was peeling paint, broken windows, and a sagging roof that I drew into my notebook from all kinds of directions. I was going to make a LEGO version, maybe the same as the castle in *Sleeping Beauty*, which was my idea of heaven.” He paused a moment. “I’m rambling.”

“I love your rambling.”

He dipped his gaze and sent me a shy smile, and I kissed him again.

“People in the neighborhood called it the ghost house, only because it had been neglected and was this crumbling ruin, with a garden so tangled that it was as if it had been cursed, the same as *Sleeping Beauty*, you know, when they all slept.”

“Yeah.”

“Kids started using it as a dare to prove how brave you were, or not brave, and some of them threw stones at the windows. I remember Dad getting mad when he saw it once, calling over and scaring the kids for about ten minutes, but of course, they came back as soon as he left. So, you know what he did?” He grinned, and I wanted to know more. “You know in *Home Alone* when the kid in the house makes cutouts of figures?”

“Yeah.”

“Dad dug up this old cutout from an old birthday party—this clown, which, fuck, that was some scary shit. Who even thinks clowns are a cool thing for a kid’s party?”

“Not me for sure.” I pressed a kiss to a sleeping Charlie’s head. “Your Uncle Jax wouldn’t bring clowns to your party,” I promised. “I can’t say the same for your daddy though, who knows what he’d do.”

There it was again—that uncertainty about what Zach was out there doing right now.

“If he’s your twin, then we know he’s a good guy,” Arlo said. “Stop worrying.”

“I’m trying. So, ghost house, cutout clowns.”

“Yeah, no kids ever went to the house again because it had turned from being a kind of ghost house, to a house actually haunted by a clown. My dad was a genius.”

“So the fake-haunted house made you want to be an architect?”

“I guess so, yeah. One day, when I was around fourteen, I was sitting in my room sketching it, and it hit me, that if I moved one part to the east side, and another to the west, and fixed the roof, and... yeah, that was the moment. I researched everything about the house, the area, the bylaws, design, I was a super-architect-nerd in the making.”

“I bet you were cute.”

“Tell that to my parents, who had to watch me obsess.” He winced, aware of what he’d just said. He shrugged and even though the smile dipped, his expression was fond. “Anyway, I decided to apply to study architecture in college, found the best place, worked damned hard to get a place, and at the start, it was so I could go back home at the end and buy the old ghost house and renovate it.”

“But you didn’t get to finish college.”

“No, Mom and Dad died just as I was finishing my first year. I never went back to Cornell. Someone needed to be there for Trace and Sutton, and I wanted it to be me. There was no way we were being split up—no way that I was going to lose my brothers—and that was the end of that.”

“What about the house?”

“Huh?”

“The ghost house?”

“Oh, someone beat me to it, bought it up, renovated—badly, I hasten to add—made it into this McMansion with pillars and everything, and this really nice family moved in.”

My heart twisted for Arlo and everything that had happened to him. “So, you lost all your dreams at the same time.”

“God no. I just got new dreams. More important ones. The idea of creating something wasn’t just about physical structures anymore. My thoughts turned to keeping a home for the three of us, where my brothers could heal and thrive, despite the circumstances. A useable space where I could experiment to my heart’s content. And then, I took construction jobs, worked with wood on more than a few

construction sites, and finally I saw your job, and that was the end of it.”

I tugged his hand, then bent and pressed kisses to his knuckles. “Or the start,” I murmured.

As we finished eating, Arlo and I began the familiar dance of cleaning up. Our movements around the kitchen were hesitant at first, both of us aware of the other’s presence. As I handed him dishes to rinse before placing them in the dishwasher, our fingers brushed, our smiles locked, and the anticipation grew. The touch was electric, a current running up my arm, and I found myself lingering in it, savoring the sensation of his skin against mine.

Charlie stirred as we finished, his soft grumbles disrupting the moment. Together, we went to the baby, our hands almost touching as we worked in silent tandem to unbuckle the harness and lift him out.

“Hey there, grumpy,” I cooed as Charlie’s face scrunched up, his cries a soft protest against his rude awakening. But soon, his tiny fist wrapped around my finger, and his cries gave way to bubbly coos, his mood brightening.

We fed Charlie together; Arlo’s deep chuckles and Charlie’s happy gurgles made me smile. Everything here was natural, so right, that I couldn’t help but steal glances at Arlo. He seemed to fit in this weird part of my life without effort, as though he was always meant to be here.

Changing Charlie’s diaper was a test in getting him to stop wriggling, and as his eyelids began to droop once more, we bundled him up and stepped into a warm autumn breeze in the yard, Charlie in Arlo’s arms. Dusk painted the sky orange and pink, the departing sun casting long shadows. We walked from one end of the yard to the other and back again, silent, but I couldn’t help but lean into Arlo as we walked, each touch sending another shiver down my spine, filling me with something I wasn’t brave enough to voice just yet.

*I love you.*



The world was quiet and the possibility of there being an us hung in the balance because what would happen if I messed this up or pushed Arlo into something he didn't want? He deserved to go to college and become the architect he'd wanted to be. If I offered him the partnership, then he might feel obliged to take it, and then we'd be stuck together before we even figured out what was happening between us. There was a conversation there, one that needed to happen, with steps forward, but for now, with Charlie, they could wait. When we settled Charlie into the beautiful, handcrafted crib, with the softest of sheets and blankets piled up under him given we were waiting on the mattress—plus the mobile that played the same song over and over, I stared down at his little chest rising and falling in the rhythm of peaceful sleep, and we stepped back together.

“Zach is missing all of this,” I murmured, as Arlo's hand found mine, his fingers intertwining with my own in a gentle grip.

“He'll come back soon.” Arlo sounded so sure.

“I know.” I had to believe that.

Silence. Was it on me to say something? Or would Arlo be the first to talk? I didn't know what to say.

“What happens now, Jax? What about this thing with us?”

Turning to face him, I searched his expression, finding hope, and the same confusion that coursed through me. There would be no turning back from this, from the terrifying leap that was falling for Arlo, because if he stayed the night, we wouldn't be having sex.

We'd be making love.

And as his other hand rose, hesitating only a moment before cupping my cheek, I realized I didn't want to turn back.

“Will you stay?” I asked. It was different from the times I'd asked when he'd had a beer. This wasn't just friendship, it was more, and I needed to give him the chance to back out now.

“Well,” he began, and tapped his lower lip. “Now you’ve asked,” he mused, and then grinned, and in a smooth motion, he pulled me to him and tucked my face into his neck. “Of course, I’m staying,” he said, and then he pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “But not in this bed to start, right? There is no way I want Charlie hearing anything.” He chuckled and I kissed his throat, then snuggled in, and held him tight.

We were doing this.

“Let’s go to your room.”

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Arlo

THE DIM LIGHT of the moon seeped between the drapes, casting a silver glow across the bedroom. The room was quiet, save for our shared breaths, slow and synchronizing as the night deepened. I loved him so much it hurt.

I knew how I felt about him. I knew I'd never felt the same way about another man before him, and it had been Jax I wanted since we'd grown closer, and it had been Jax ever since. Was that love at first sight? Maybe not. But what if it was just a different start to love I'd found, where friendship turned to attraction and, then, to love? That counted, right? Jax, with his smile, and his eyes, and his *everything*, had created a space within my heart I hadn't known existed, then filled it with all kinds of moments that made me love him.

I tried to find a memory of a shared moment when it had happened, but there was no one single time when I fell in love, it had just happened without my realizing, and it might well have started the first time we met. How had I missed the signs? How had I not seen that I was falling for him; that he'd become the one thing to me that I had promised I wouldn't have—a partner? My heart raced as I pictured his face, the laughter in his green eyes, the emotions he barely kept in check, the fierce need to protect and nurture; and I recalled the countless times he'd made me laugh, even on the dark days when I felt lost. All the late-night Friday conversations had drawn us closer than I'd ever dared to think, and as each of these realizations played like a movie in my thoughts, the truth settled in—I was completely and totally in love with Jaxon Byrne.

*Stop thinking about this, and get your head in the game.*

“Do you have anything?” I blurted because, if this was real and we were going to... hell, we needed condoms, and lube, and... stuff... Jesus, it had been so long since I'd had any kind of sex without just my right hand for company, and if it was as

explosive as it had been against the wall, then it was going to get out of hand quickly.

I was nervous, hands trembling even as they found Jax's, our fingers laced. His thumb stroked my skin.

"Yeah." Jax's voice was a low rumble.

He squeezed my hand, the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile. That smile never failed to spread warmth through me, soothing the chilly fingers of self-doubt that gripped me. I *could* remember how to do this, the cobwebs might not have been real, but I'd lifted him up, I'd gotten him off—I *could* do this.

"We should make sure we have it all," I replied and took a step closer, closing the small distance between us. We were in our own little world, away from the complexities of our everyday lives—Charlie, Zach, and the fact I'd been wanting this forever.

He tugged his hand free, darted into his room, then tiptoed back out and into the spare room, closing the door only enough that it seemed as if we had privacy. "He didn't see me," Jax said, in all seriousness, then chuckled. "I know," he said before I could remind him that Charlie was a baby.

"How do we? I mean... look..." He smiled up at me, and I cradled his face as he tossed the condoms and lube on the wide bed. "I'm tested, negative. I haven't been with anyone since..." I closed my eyes. "Not since I came home from college, and not much before. I'm just warning you that I might not be so good at this."

He placed his hands over mine. "You kissed me, held me against a wall, and pretty much demanded I come in your hand. I think you'll do all right." I felt hot and hard and needy all at the same time. "But the sensible part, tested, negative, PrEP. I haven't been with anyone since a tall guy with gorgeous gray eyes, and salt and pepper hair, turned up at a job interview."

"You don't have to say that to make me feel better," I said, and he turned his face to kiss my palm. "I know I'm not cut

the same as you, all model-hard—”

“Stop right there!” He pressed a hand to my stomach—my soft belly that was testament to my sweet tooth. I was strong and happy, but I was under no illusions that I was as hard and chiseled as Jax.

“I love this; hell, do you know how often I look at you when your T-shirt rides up, when I see your happy trail, when I see the softness? Fuck, Arlo, I love the soft parts of you.” Then He slipped a hand into my sweats and circled my cock, and he smirked. “And the hard bits.”

“That’s the worst joke you’ve ever made,” I said, kind of preening that he said he liked my body, and that he’d been checking me out. I never thought he was the type of man who would want to look. Not at me anyway. Turned out I was wrong about a lot of things.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” he asked.

It was the kind of question I’d dismissed—hadn’t Trace told me he’d fallen in love with his new girlfriend when they first met, and wasn’t that what my parents said had happened to them?

“Maybe,” I said hesitantly.

There was no way he felt the way I felt about him.

No way.

“I love you,” Jax blurted, then scrubbed his eyes, and took a breath as my world tipped upside down. “I need you to know that I love you, and maybe not the first day, or the moment you smiled at me, or the moment we laughed, or you stayed for the end-of-the-week beers. I love you, and not just as a friend, but as someone who makes me happy and fits together all the pieces in me.”

“Jax...”

“I know. I sound like an idiot.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I just—”

I stopped him talking with a kiss, and from the moment our lips met, it was as if the world stopped, all the thoughts about what I felt and who I was slipped away in the heat of tasting Jax. Ripples of sensation radiated from that one point, goosebumps across my skin, my heartbeat was thunder in my ears. This wasn't only a kiss, it was more than words, it was a promise and a reassurance, and it was everything.

*Everything.*

One of us moved. Or maybe we both did. The back of my thighs hit the bed, and I tangled my hands in his T-shirt and pulled him with me as I sat on the mattress so he straddled my lap, his hands in my hair, then behind my neck, locking there and holding me close.

I was so hard, so needy, and the thought of getting to touch him again, to lift him and wring out every moment of pleasure was heady and consumed me as our tongues tangled, and then, as he kissed my neck and my chin, wanting to mark every inch of me.

I'd never felt so open and vulnerable, but so damn confident at the same time, scared to ask for what I wanted, yet so damn bold in the way I held him where I wanted him. He whined low in his throat and wriggled. I broke the kiss and slipped my hands up and under his T-shirt, lifting it over his head, then easing out his arms. I'd seen him without a shirt before, on hot days when we'd finished on site and took the time to sit and stare at what we'd done. I'd watched him move, knew his red hair curled darker on his chest, and chestnut down in an intriguing treasure trail. I hadn't seen below the belt when we'd used the wall in the gloom of the hallway, but now I wanted to look. I eased him off me and laid him on the bed, reaching to flick the bedside lamp switch, which of course turned on the Christmas lights.

A rainbow of color painted Jax's skin, and I eased down his sweats and briefs—and he wriggled to help me—until he was finally, gloriously, naked right where I could see him.

“You have freckles here,” I murmured, kissing his belly, the sharpness of his hipbones, the V pointing down to his

uncut cock and the dark chestnut of his hair. There were freckles everywhere, and I needed to kiss each one.

It was imperative.

“You need to... gah... Arlo... fuck...”

I loved that I could make Jax lose his words in such a tumble of need, and I smiled as I nibbled at his hip bone and pressed a hand to his thigh to stop him moving. He seemed to relish me holding him, and I could get with that plan. He drew a ragged breath as I pressed harder and, at the same time, closed my lips around the tip of his cock. He tried to arch up, and whimpered, and spoke nonsense about me being naked as well.

“Please, stay still,” I pleaded, taking his hands, and placing them above his head. “Let me look at you.”

“Arlo...”

“Wait,” I murmured, then sat up to take off my T-shirt, then everything else until I was as naked as him. His eyes widened; he moved an inch. I placed a hand on his hip in warning. “Let me,” I whispered. It had been too long since I’d been with a man, too long since I’d felt everything inside me begin to unravel, and I wanted him to feel the same. Out of control, losing his mind bit by bit. I caged him in, kissed him, tugging at his lower lip, then soothing the hurt with my tongue, and he gasped into the taste of it.

“Arlo...”

“Tell me,” I pleaded, as I relaxed my stance a little and my erection brushed his. “Tell me this is okay.”

“Arlo...” he repeated, and then, he moved. He gripped my shoulders and levered up to kiss me so damn hard. He twisted, then pushed, and it was him on top of me, and it was bliss as he blanketed me and I carded my hands in his hair.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured, gripping his curls, and holding him for a kiss as we rutted against each other.

This wasn’t a slow burn; this was a match to kindling. He sat up as I chased for a kiss. He grabbed the lube and placed it



on my belly before nestling his face there and kissing the soft bits he said he liked so much.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, and he smiled. “I’m vers; you?”

“I don’t know,” I said with all the honesty I could find. My experience—my sad experience—was hand and blow jobs. Exciting at the time, but then I’d gone back home.

“How about...” He slid down me, pulled out a condom, and bent over my cock, slipping it on with the concentration of a man wanting perfection. He was touching me, kissing my belly, to my balls, back up to my chest, nibbling at my nipple, and then, he took my hand, squirted lube on that and his own, and tugged mine to his ass. “We’ll do this together.” Our fingers tangled and bumped, and when the tip of my index finger found his, and we pushed and stretched, I had to stop, if only to get my orgasm to back off.

The touch of us there, together, stretching his hole for me, was incredible. I whimpered, I know I did, because he chuckled and kissed it away, then groaned when I pushed deeper into him. I didn’t know what I was doing, but he seemed to know that, guiding my hand—moving himself so that I found his prostate because he arched up and shouted, undulating on my fingers—and then, he eased off and my fingers slipped free. In a daze, I waited as he lined himself up.

“Slow,” I warned him. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

The tip of my cock breached his hole, and he stiffened, and then, there was the smile again.

He leaned until his mouth was near my ear. “You could never hurt me,” he whispered, and with his lips moving to mine, he eased down, and I tilted my hips, and we were joined in every way possible.

He stopped for a moment, his breathing ragged. Then, he lifted and eased back down.

“I love you,” he whispered, the glow of the lights on his face as he moved again.

And again.

And again.

I gripped his hips, held him above me, so close that if he sank down again, I'd lose it. I wanted him to come first. I wanted to watch his beautiful eyes widen and hear him gasp as he had done in the hall. There, in the changing lights, he told me what he needed by taking my hand, wrapping it around his cock, and as I curved my fingers and pulled on the length of him—my thumb collecting the pre-cum—he arched and shouted my name. His cum was hot and wet in my fingers, his skin so pale, and when he pushed down one more time, my orgasm stole my breath, and I grabbed him and held him, and I thought I could never let him go. The connection was textbook. I was riding the high. I was his; he was mine; and we were laughing and hugging, and it was messy and awkward and perfect.

When I eased out, he was the one who padded to the bathroom and came back with a washcloth.

“That’s my job,” I murmured, even though exhaustion was stealing my thoughts.

“Next time,” he said as he wiped us down and followed each swipe with a kiss. “Let’s go into my room. Sleep with me? Watch over Charlie with me?”

We pulled on our sweats and held hands as we tiptoed into his room—both of us checking on Charlie—then we climbed into his bed, and he curled into my side, tucked under my arm.

I pressed my nose into his curls, the scent of baby and *him* filled my senses, and that was the very last step I needed to take as I held him close.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you, too,” he murmured.

And then we slept.

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Jax

I HADN'T SEEN MUCH of Arlo the past two days, given it had been a mess of sleepless nights and work. Charlie had decided sleep was for wimps, and at the same time, I was juggling admin and accounts to at least keep up my end of the company up. Two nights ago, Arlo hadn't even left the site until nine, and when he'd gotten here, we'd kissed, hugged, and then slumped in front of the television.

Same as last night.

So, tonight was going to be different. I had plans for dinner, or something, and sleeping, and sex, and Arlo, but when I rolled out of bed, I was tired and out of sorts, and it threw me back to when the twins were the same age as Charlie. How did Paula and I ever handle twins who didn't sleep, when a few short years later, it seemed I couldn't even handle one baby?

And Charlie wasn't even grumpy, unlike me, who was restless and messing things up, such as putting salt on my cereal. I mean, who the hell did that? Me; that was who.

Arlo was working extra hours to keep ahead, although Dan, one of our other carpenters, was holding his own and putting in a ton of overtime. I didn't have to be the guy who did the company books to see that profits would be cut into every day I couldn't get out there and work.

So yeah, sleep-deprived, anxious over stupid things, missing Arlo, and feeling as if we needed time together—it was that Jax that my mom found in the kitchen staring at the salt and wondering how my life had gotten so upside down.

“Sleep.” She shoved me out of the kitchen.

“But—”

“I'm here. Now, sleep.”

“Keep the doors locked, keep...” I stopped talking when she threw me *that* expression that warned me not to argue, and I blinked when Leo sauntered into the kitchen as if he didn’t have a care in the world, Daisy and Jason trailing him.

“We’re here as well,” he said, and hell, I wasn’t going to argue—no one argued with Mama Byrne. Also, she was backed up by a cop, even if that cop was the same Leo who’d broken two of my G.I. Joes doing God knows what with them. I went upstairs and was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, waking early afternoon when my growling stomach reminded me that I hadn’t eaten since yesterday lunch. I took a shower, with the door shut for the first time since Charlie had arrived, then after getting dressed, I wandered downstairs.

There was no sign of Mama, or Charlie, and it was only Leo in the kitchen creating a mammoth pile of sandwiches. “In the garden,” he said before I could ask.

“Cool.” I grabbed a PB&J and inhaled it. Whatever he’d done to my G.I. Joes, or indeed the awful atrocities he’d carried out on my Game Boy, he’d grown up to become a sandwich hero.

“We’ve got this. You don’t need to stay.”

“Huh?” Maybe I hadn’t woken up properly, but Leo wasn’t making sense.

“Sleep all caught up?” he asked, which again, I wasn’t following.

“Some.”

“Go to site, check in on Arlo, settle your worries.”

“I’m not worried,” I defended.

He pointed to the plans and paperwork on my counter, the ones with all the red question marks. “Go and see that Arlo is doing absolutely fine. We’re all good here.”

I glanced past Leo to the garden, watching Jason lift Daisy and swing her around. I should stay, I should make sure Charlie is okay, but then, why wouldn’t he be okay?

“You’re staying. With Charlie?”

Leo nodded. “Until you come back, and there’s no rush; we’re good.”

So, I did what I knew I needed to do—what I wanted to do—I went to site to see Arlo, and to stop worrying, and to get my head out of my ass.

Mostly to see Arlo.

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“WHAT THE HELL, JAX?” Arlo called down when he spotted me.

For a while, I’d hidden behind a tree in the long driveway, observing, because *clearly* that was what idiots in love did. All I wanted was to stare at the summer house he and Dan were working on, only to make sure everything was on track.

Purely for work purposes.

But Arlo was up there, looking all sexy, perched on the roof structure, chatting with Dan and hefting wood as if it were matchsticks. A bit like how he lifted me.

Yep, another reason for hiding behind a tree—a hard-on that wouldn’t freaking quit.

But I was out from there now, standing by the table where plans were laid out, and I didn’t have to call up because Arlo was staring right down at me.

“Where’s Charlie?” he asked, a little worried and a lot loud, as he started to descend the ladder. Heat flooded me that he was coming to check on Charlie and me, and what I wouldn’t give for him to stride over and kiss me.

“Stay up there; it’s okay, Mama has him, and Leo is there with Jason and Daisy.”

He nodded, and I shielded my eyes to peer up at him as the sun beat down on the huge backyard. From this angle, he was a blur in the heat, and I wiped sweat from my face as a gust of wind caught the blueprint spread out on the makeshift table,

and I turned my attention to fighting the breeze to keep everything contained.

“So, it’s good you’re here,” Arlo called again. “I had this idea.”

I heard Dan’s string of curse words, and thanked the heavens that the owners of this sprawling McMansion weren’t home.

“What?” I didn’t need to ask. I already knew that Arlo was up there, probably messing with the architects’ plans, which would end up making my burgeoning headache worse. I cursed as another Santa Ana gust caught the corner of the plans and whipped them out from under the weights at the bottom left corner. Did no one think to properly weigh them down?

*Shit, I’m micromanaging.*

Still, we were at a critical stage for the build, and the last thing I needed was to lose track of where we were, or deal with Arlo changing things when my head was all messed up, however much I loved him. I tugged the decorated stone closer to the corner and moved Arlo’s backpack, so it gave the specs some shelter.

“We should shift A-twenty-seven over,” Arlo called down.

I blinked up at him because it didn’t make any sense given that my brain was still mush.

“We’re shifting what now?” Dan challenged from where he was perched and ended the question with another curse. Our second carpenter was the most laid-back guy I knew, but he was always suspicious of Arlo’s ideas, and I didn’t blame him given how out of left field they sometimes were.

“Beam A-twenty-seven,” Arlo expanded, which made more sense. I glanced back at the plans to see if Arlo had a point.

“Checking!” I said.

“No need. Look!” Arlo called, and it was too late for me to figure out the change in the specs when he was already up

there doing whatever he wanted.

“If we move A-twenty-six over, and then put twenty-seven across this way...” Arlo heaved the wood as if it were nothing, and slid it into different position, Dan scrambling to catch the other side, and I sighed to myself. I’d been so careful when I costed out and we’d cut timber for this construction project, and there was Arlo—brilliant, creative wannabe-architect—up there messing with the layout.

What if the roof tiles won’t fit then? I worried. “What about the roof tiles?” I shouted the same thing up to Arlo, so I at least had my say. For what it was worth.

“Agreed,” Dan grumbled.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Arlo said and continued with his rearranging. “They will,” he said with absolute confidence. “Then, we have an overhang that aligns with the porch. Look!”

I didn’t even have to look, but I did, and he was right, and even Dan gave a low whistle of approval.

I checked back at the plans. “Okay then. Do we need to adjust the number of—”

“Nope,” Arlo replied.

“What about the—”

“Nope.”

Dan chuckled, and I rolled my eyes at him—there he went disrespecting his boss and siding with Arlo. The two of them had been working on this for three days, wanting to break the back of a summer house construction that was going to be the centerpiece of this sprawling showpiece property. It was late afternoon, and a very big part of me wanted to point out that I’d allocated man hours and supplies for this with great thought, but I’d be lying. I’d mostly let Arlo have free rein from the start of this, way back when we’d first been approached to do the work. It was supposed to be my segue into asking him to be partner, and he was proving himself more than capable, but did us falling in love change things too much? It was lucky that we hadn’t changed enough to warrant



resubmission of approvals, but we needed to be sure that we could convince the people who mattered that it worked better his way. Could I tell him that as his boss, but still want to jump his bones as his lover?

I adjusted my sunglasses and nodded up to Dan, who shrugged and went back to assisting the great beam shuffle. Dan held the wood as Arlo measured and sanded in situ with an ease that only comes from his particular brand of confidence.

“Arlo, do we have enough crossbeams if you—”

“Yep.” Arlo shot me a quick grin, his hands never slowing down as he lifted the final piece in place, and Dan slid out of the way.

I knew better than to check—Arlo’s ability to work from a mental schematic was insane. He had an uncanny knack of being able to envisage the final product long before the last nail was hammered in—a gift that saved us time and mistakes, allowing any team he was with to work seamlessly together. As Arlo positioned the crossbeams where they needed to go, I took a moment from the fluttering specification to admire the craftsmanship of what we were building, and to check Arlo out as well.

I was only human.

“You okay up there?” I asked them both.

Arlo flipped a plank of wood. His muscles bunched, the sun glinting in his hair, his expression locked into intense concentration, and he looked so damn sexy doing it.

“Yeah,” Dan shouted down.

“What Dan said,” Arlo announced as he examined the last crossbeam and nudged it into place with that remarkable sixth sense that guided his every move on site.

I pulled out my calculator and busied myself with checking the new measurements and ensuring everything aligned, costing up any changes, and miraculously finding no more costs to eat into profit. This project was important, the latest in a long line of luxury outbuildings Byrne Construction had

become known for, and I was determined for it to be flawless, while also being profitable. After all, the money to pay Arlo and Dan had to come from somewhere.

My cell buzzed, and I pulled it out to see messages from Leo. I overreacted and nearly dropped the phone. What was wrong? Was Charlie okay? I grabbed the cell and, after three attempts, managed to unlock it, given it wouldn't recognize my scrunched-up-with-worry face. It was photos of Charlie.

Photoshopped.

Propped up in a barbecue. Sliding down a stair rail. Riding a lion. Floating away with a balloon.

I hated Leo.

I told him so, and all he did was send back a hundred ROFL images and one of Charlie drinking a beer.

Ass.

“Jax,” Arlo called down, snapping me out of my thoughts. “We’re done.”

Dan clambered down from the structure, removing his cap and unhooking himself from the safety rope. “Looks good from up there, boss,” he announced.

I nodded and walked around the summer house so I could check from all angles, satisfied with the progress, and ignoring the push to get up there and measure those angles to see if they were okay—Arlo knew what he was doing.

“You didn’t need to check on us,” Dan said. “We were doing okay.”

I glanced at Arlo, who wasn’t looking at me. “I wasn’t checking on your work,” I lied. Then, I tugged at Arlo and pulled him toward me, seeing his eyes widen as I stole a kiss. “Hey.”

Dan snorted his water, then coughed, and laughed all at the same time.

“Oh, right,” he said and shot a wry smile at us both. “About time.”

Arlo wrinkled his nose, was adorable, and I poked his belly. “You messing up the plans, Marshall?”

“Always, Byrne,” he deadpanned, then grinned at me. “But now, we need to get those roof panels up and secure. We’re on the home stretch, and it’s a Friday, so back to Charlie after this, and dinner, yeah?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I have beer.” The code word for staying over made his grin even wider.

He took his turn to steal a kiss, our hard hats knocking, and then, he was off, back up the ladder.

Dan passed up roofing panels, with my help, which Arlo attached. The structure was coming together beautifully, a blend of Arlo’s intuitive craftsmanship, along with careful planning and costing on my part, and Dan’s ability to understand both of us. We worked in sync, communicating through nods and gestures, understanding each other without needing a word spoken.

Once the roofing was in place, Arlo made some last-minute adjustments, and I felt a surge of accomplishment that pushed aside all thoughts of missing Charlie and worrying about Zach. This project was more than just a summer house; it was a showpiece demonstrating what Byrne Construction could achieve, and the couple we were building it for—an interior design team, who was going to be fitting the place out for an episode of their show—could get our name out there. Arlo shimmied down and landed as soft as a cat, fist-bumped a waiting Dan, then crossed over to me, casting a quick eye over the blueprints.

“It’s worked better with that angle,” he pointed out, and glanced at me. “Agreed?” He sounded a little anxious, as if he imagined I’d turn around and tell him he was wrong.

He was never wrong, not with his eye for detail and his ability to picture the finished result of anything before he’d even started.

“Yeah, good call.”

The three of us took a moment to admire our work in the late afternoon sun.

“Think the Gibsons will love it enough to promote it?” Arlo asked, wiping sweat from his face with his discarded T-shirt, as he waited for me to answer before tucking it into the waistband of his worn jeans.

I didn’t check out his chest, or the sheen of sweat, or the way his muscles bunched when he moved, or the way he smiled at me.

I did, but not so anyone would notice though.

Instead, I grinned at the building, proud of what we’d built. “Yeah, they will.”

“We rock,” Dan said.

“Yep we do. Let’s call it a day,” I announced.

Dan left as if his tail was on fire, eager to get home to his girlfriend and daughter, which I didn’t begrudge at all.

“We could use the same technique on the Lassiter project,” Arlo mused, hands on his hips, staring up at the roofline of a building that was a twentieth the size of the Lassiter house. Lassiter was the biggest project I’d taken on so far, less a summer house and more a full-grown studio space with kitchen, bathroom, and gym. I’d had sleepless nights over what team I pulled into it, itemizing each length of wood and brick we’d need.

It was a given that Arlo would second me, watching over all the contractors we’d signed up, but what if he took on the load of a partner, what if I halved my worries and doubled my love life, and...

“You okay?” He nudged me.

“Drink?” I passed him a bottle of water from the cooler.

He drank half of it without stopping, water spilling past his lips and trailing down his neck. He tipped the remainder over his head, running the fingers of his free hand through his short hair, making it stand on end.

Now, I was staring, and I didn't even hide it, as water trickled down his chest, tracing a cold path down to his soft belly before soaking into his jeans.

How many times had I wished I was any water that got the chance to travel down his body? God, and now I could lick every part the water touched.

“Jax?”

I snapped back to see him staring at me as I stared at his groin.

“I'm good. It's all good.” I rummaged in his backpack “Here, put this on before I jump you.” I tossed him his spare Byrne Construction T-shirt.

He caught it, took off his ball cap, and shrugged the shirt on over his chest, smoothing it down, a hint of pride in his expression as he traced the name of the company.

“Can't have the house owners coming down and finding me half naked.”

“Maybe if they found you half naked, they'd order more work.” I winked at him.

He dipped his head and pretended to be very interested in the pile of wood offcuts we needed to remove.

“We'd get more if it was *you* naked,” he said and patted his tummy.

Something shifted inside me. He looked so damn... gorgeous. I stepped into his space, and he didn't move back, and I cradled his face because he deserved for me to say it again, and again.

“I love how sexy you are,” I whispered and kissed him, feeling the heat in his face. When we parted, he was lost for words.

He gathered up tools as I rolled up the specs and threaded them into the tube as he loaded his truck. I took a moment to shoot some photos of what we'd achieved for our social media.

“Good call on the changes today,” I said, as we headed home.

He shot me one of his proud smiles. “Thank you.”

And I was as certain as before we started this whole relationship thing, I wanted to add his name to my company and make him a partner.

I just needed to word it the right way.

## Chapter Twenty

## Arlo

THE ROOM WAS BATHED in the soft glow of the television screen as we both sat on the smaller of the two sofas, since Charlie was sprawled in the center of the larger one. A bucket of popcorn was the only thing separating us, and Jax had taken charge of the remote after we'd wrestled for it, and I'd let him win.

“What do you want to watch?” he asked, scrolling through movies.

“Something easy,” I said because I knew I didn't have the brainpower to follow something complicated. Not to mention me wanting to drag him to bed. I kept my gaze fixed on Charlie, watching the rise and fall of his chest, wishing he was awake because, then, we'd have something to distract us. He was due to wake up soon for his ten o'clock feeding, and once that was done, and we'd cuddled and played with him, it was unspoken that we'd be heading up to my room. But Charlie showed no sign of waking up. Why had I agreed to stay and watch a movie when that meant I'd be sitting next to Jax and trying not to think about getting him into bed as soon as I could?

“How about a sad movie to kill time?” he deadpanned, knowing how much I hated them.

“How about not.” I liked my happy endings. I *really* wanted him to straddle my lap so we could kiss, and I patted my knee. “How about you sit here, and we make out until Charlie wakes up.”

He shot me an amused glance. “And how will that end?”

*With one of us on our knees probably.*

I sighed, hating that he was right. “Jeez, okay,” I grumbled without heat, then smirked as I kissed him and sat back. “Choose a movie already, Byrne.”



He channel surfed but didn't stay on one long enough to make an informed decision, and in the end, he reversed direction and landed on a rerun of an old gameshow. It was nothing more than white noise; the fake clapping and dramatic lighting was good enough to take the edge off the silence we had going on.

"Help yourself," Jax murmured and indicated the popcorn.

I slid down a little, making myself comfortable, then sitting up again when my T-shirt tightened over my belly. I didn't carry a load of extra weight—my job was too physical for that—but I wasn't toned and model-muscled, and drawing attention to the soft bits of me was a big fat no, even if Jax said it was perfect. What he'd said that about me pulling in clients if I kept my shirt off? I'd wanted to argue, but then he'd kissed me, and hell if I know how, but he'd made me feel beautiful. I wriggled again, letting go of the T-shirt, but it was a very small sofa, and Jax placed a hand on my thigh,

Right there.

On. My. Thigh.

"Stop wriggling."

I stared at his hand, which he hadn't moved, and then, sat as still as I could. If I didn't move, maybe he'd leave his hand where it was, and then, maybe he'd walk his fingers up to my—

"Eat your popcorn," he said, squeezed my knee, and removed his hand, despite the fact that I was hard and verging on desperate. I reached for the buttery goodness, my shoulder brushing his, a fleeting touch of fingers as he went for the popcorn at the same time. I pulled my handful back as fast as I could, dropping half of it in my lap. Two of the pieces stuck to my T-shirt, right on the curve of my belly, and I nearly died when Jax reached out to tidy them up.

I jumped when his fingers grazed the shirt, feeling his touch all the way from my lips to my cock, and fuck, this was hell. I wanted a kiss. The shirt was long enough to cover that

up, but he wasn't moving his hand again; he'd placed it on my belly, and then, he stroked.

There was a definite stroke.

"You said we couldn't do anything until Charlie was—"

"I love this bit of you," he murmured, and I heard an embarrassingly small whimper that I'm afraid had come from me.

"I'm too... uhm... my belly is..." *Words. I have no freaking words.*

With a sigh, Jax relaxed into the sofa, his legs up on the table, then leaned his head against my shoulder, his palm still flat on my belly, mere inches from the tip of my cock, which was entirely on board with whatever was happening here. The world outside meant nothing—it was him touching me, and I didn't understand what he was doing by teasing me, and teasing himself, if the tent in his sweats was anything to go by.

"We should get a tree soon," Jax pondered and waved a hand to the sunroom. He loved Christmas, and I'd already spotted a tiny desk tree in his kitchen, complete with twinkly white lights. "A real one." I nodded, because he'd used *we* again, and I was warm from my head to my toes. "Then, we can put Charlie's gifts under it, all different color paper."

"Good idea."

He sighed. "That's if Charlie is still here."

I hummed at his comment, not sure whether to reassure him or not.

"Arlo?"

"Hmm?"

"Is it wrong to wonder if seeing Zach is great, but losing Charlie would make things awful?"

I elbowed him gently. "Not at all. Charlie is... he's your nephew, and he's something special."

"But Zach is his dad, and my brother, and..."

I tugged him closer, carding my hand through his hair. “Things will work out.”

The game show’s laughter became a distant hum, overshadowed by the silence in my head as Jax leaned in and kissed my cheek, a feather-light caress that sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

“Maybe just one kiss?” he asked.

I turned my head to meet his steady gaze. Time stood still, everything else fading aside from that one connection between us.

With a groan, and lithe as a teenager, he straddled my lap. I felt the first brush of his lips against mine. I chased for another kiss, and we shared a smile that spoke volumes, an acknowledgment that, somehow, we were doing this until the moment Charlie was awake. Jax wriggled, settling deeper into my embrace, and we made out like horny teenagers until Charlie woke up, and by the time we were back in Jax’s bed, having made love in my room, I was exhausted and happy to have him curl into my side.

I WOKE JUST AFTER FOUR; Jax not in bed beside me and the crib empty. Padding down the stairs, I followed the sound of Jax’s voice and wandered into the living room to find him walking and bobbing Charlie, and I placed a finger on my lips to show I’d stay quiet. Charlie was sleeping on Jax’s shoulder, so peaceful, and stayed asleep when Jax placed him with care on the second sofa where he’d been earlier.

“I found a good movie,” Jax murmured. “If you’re awake now?”

I clutched his hand and tumbled us both back to the sofa, Jax curling in next to me.

“I’m awake,” I lied.

We fell asleep in each other’s arms.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## Jax

SOMETHING WET DRIPPED on my face and, half asleep, I imagined we had a water leak, which in my mind's way led to swimming, and then, me being naked with Arlo and swimming. I snuggled into his hold, and then, there was another drip, and I blinked awake. Leo was standing a few feet in front of me, a bottle of water in his hand, just about to flick water at me again, with Reid standing next to him holding a wide-awake Charlie.

“The fu—Leo? Reid?” I managed, and dragged a hand down my face, wincing, my voice thick with sleep.

Leo froze, caught in the act. “Morning, little brother,” he said, and next to him Reid snorted.

I rubbed my eyes, my jaw cracking in a wide yawn. Beside me, Arlo began to stir as well, groaning and muttering something about being too old for this shit.

“What are you staring at us for?” I asked and pointed at Leo, “and why are you flicking water at me?”

Leo smirked, the fucker. “Brotherly love,” he deadpanned. “Reid wanted me to use a Sharpie and draw a mustache.”

“I never said that,” Reid defended, but his lips twitched. I swear having these two made me wonder about the good side of having yet another brother in my life if Zach ever turned up.

“I totally mind read you,” Leo told Reid with all seriousness.

I held up a hand—it was way too early for the Leo/Reid brothers-united-against-me show. “You’re a... you’re both.”

“I fed Charlie,” Leo said with a grin. “Who’s the best brother now?”

Reid huffed. “Given I was on diaper duty, that would be me.”

Arlo yawned and stretched—his gaze landing on my brothers—and stiffened. “What’s going on?”

I glanced at Arlo and looked away before turning my attention back to Leo and Reid who were grinning at us, Reid’s phone up to take a photo of me and Arlo on the sofa.

He snapped the shot, a teasing grin on his lips. “We couldn’t resist. You two looked so *adorable*.” He even added a little kid’s voice to that single word, which meant he was so dead, as soon as I unwrapped myself from Arlo. “This is going in the family chat.”

“About time you two got your act together,” Leo muttered, then flicked water at both of us for good measure.

“Leo...” I warned, but next to me, Arlo was chuckling, and God, I loved it when he chuckled because it would grow, and then, he’d be shaking with laughter, and that, was *everything*.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Arlo made his excuses, standing and stretching tall, his back to Leo, his morning wood outlined in his thin sweats. Brothers were just mobile cock blockers. Assholes.

“You don’t have to leave,” I said, this side of desperate.

“I’m just getting a shower,” he told me, then bent and dropped a brief kiss on my lips before sidling past my brothers, his hand over his groin. If my brothers said anything, or sniggered, or... I’d kill them. “Then, I’ll do breakfast,” Arlo threw back at me as he left the room.

“Make it for four!” Leo called after him and indicated me sitting there in sweats probably looking like shit. “You need a shower,” he said with a wrinkled nose. “You’d best go help Arlo. You have thirty minutes. Go!”

He was teasing, and I gave him the middle finger, but I kissed Charlie good morning on the top of his head, then hustled up to the bathroom as fast as I could.

I had thirty minutes and didn’t waste a second, following the sound of water, darting into the guest room, and locking the bathroom door behind me. Arlo, humming under the spray,

wasn't expecting me, but he didn't even start when I stepped inside.

He didn't say a word when I went to my knees; and when it was me—pressed against the wall of the shower, him holding me as if I weighed nothing at all, getting himself off, kissing me deep and long—all he said was one possessive growly word.

“Mine.”

WE MADE it downstairs a few minutes over our thirty, ignoring the smirks. I settled at the small table in the kitchen watching Arlo make breakfast and bouncing Charlie on my knee.

“Are you awake yet?” Leo asked, and took the chair kitty-corner, nursing a coffee.

“Why, what's wrong.”

“I got this,” Reid said, and placed a piece of paper in front of me, a simple email with only a few lines.

I read the words, then read them again out loud, as if that would make any difference to my understanding. “Zach's okay. Kai.” Who wrote a stupid-ass message like that, as if it meant something? I glanced up at Reid. “Is Kai the other man who Arlo talked to on the porch? How did you get this? You really think this is for me? Is this about my Zach?”

Reid pulled over a stool and perched on it, looking ridiculous all the way up there compared to the level of our chairs. From his lofty position, he made it worse by crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay, so listen to this weird shit. I checked my email after shift ended, midnight or so, and there it was in the secure inbox—the one the team uses for internal mailing, confidential stuff, encrypted, all that.”

“And you think it's about Zach?”

“Well, it's pretty fu—fudging cryptic, but your name in the subject line makes me think it is.” Reid shrugged as if to indicate how puzzling it was. “There's no trace back to who sent it, and I had my friend in cybercrimes team check deeper

than I could, which didn't go down well given I called her at two in the morning. Still, she looked, and we owe her one."

"Okay, and?"

"She suggested it might have come through the dark web."

My stomach churned, and I stared at the tiny Christmas tree on the table that kept me focused for a moment. Wasn't the dark web corrupt? The kind of space where bad people did dreadful things, or arranged horrific things, or...

I couldn't say what I thought, because suggesting Zach was indeed a bad guy meant all the feelings bottled inside me were wrong. I felt a fierce tug of protection toward Charlie, and for the first time, a sliver of doubt pierced my conviction that Zach was a good guy doing heroic deeds out there.

"We don't know if it's him for sure," Leo said. "But if this is the guy who was with Zach, he hasn't given anything away, no date, or place, or time, or even person. What if he's not a dark web hacker, but a white hat hacker?"

I glanced up at Leo with hope—that sounded like a good thing. "He could be."

"If he's anything like you, Zach couldn't do a bad thing to save his life," Reid murmured and reached out a hand, same as he used to when we were kids. I laid mine on top, then Leo, and it was enough to know I had them in my corner.

And maybe out there, Zach was thinking of Charlie and me, and everything would work out.

"Mel said she'd do some more digging for us," Reid murmured.

"Mel is your cybercrime contact?"

He nodded. "Yeah. She'll let us know."

"Are you okay?" Leo asked.

I exchanged a glance with Arlo, who sent me a reassuring half smile.

"Yeah. At least we know he's out there."



At least we know he's alive.

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I HEARD nothing more about Zach in the next week, but whatever I wanted to hear about him, was pushed to one side with Thanksgiving approaching, when I would get to see my girls for the first time in four weeks. Of course, I reread the note over and over, wondered who Kai was, and thought about Zach, but there was nothing else I could do except wait for whatever Mel came up with through Reid, and so far, there was nothing. I'd FaceTimed with my girls, but there was no replacement for hugs from India and Iris. I knew they'd landed last night, and I'd already had excited messages about meeting at their grandparents.

This was probably why I was up at five, and showered and ready by six, with another four hours to go until I even had to leave for the afternoon. I rummaged in the spare room that the twins used and pulled out all the decorations for the tree just for something to do, taking a photo for my girls with the assurance we'd go tree shopping soon, before piling them all in the sunroom.

Then, I killed more time checking up on jobs, organizing my office, and roaming around the house showing Charlie things he might not have seen.

I was pushing it when I ended up showing him where I stored dish cloths, but he didn't seem to care. Then, it was bath time for him. Charlie gave me a good-natured burble as I opened up the snaps on his Thanksgiving pajama, waved his chubby fists, and seemed to like being dressed like a pumpkin. I guess it was meant for Halloween, but oh my God, it was perfect for Thanksgiving. I mean, he didn't really care what I dressed him in, but he was the perfect pumpkin size, all round and soft and smiley, and the pajama was a mustard color with the image of a cute, non-scary face on the front. The finishing touch was a soft cap with a swirly felt stalk, and when I sat him in his car seat, he was the perfect baby/pumpkin. I knew

Arlo was busy with his brothers, but I couldn't resist sending him a photo.

His answer was immediate as he gushed about how cute Charlie was, and I realized how much I missed him. He was spending Thanksgiving with his brothers, and hell, I hadn't seen Sutton and Trace since last Christmas, and somehow, I circled around to how, if I left an hour earlier, I could swing by his house and surprise him, and also let him see just how cute Charlie was.

Yep. Totally about Charlie.

When I arrived at Arlo's sprawling home, I headed straight for the front door with Charlie in my arms and knocked, all ready with a grin. When Arlo answered the door, I waved a single jazz hand. "Surprise!"

"Jax, what are you doing here?"

He sounded off, not even looking at Charlie, and then, I took in what he was wearing—familiar worn sweats and a Muse T-shirt. That didn't seem like a Thanksgiving kind of getup for him, and I went on tiptoes to peer over his shoulder, seeing nothing beyond him.

"Hey," he said and attempted to step outside and shut the door behind him. I poked him back, and he couldn't argue given I had Charlie, who was waving a tiny fist and reaching for Arlo.

The house was quiet.

"Where are your brothers?" I asked.

He cleared his throat. "Um...Well, Sutton is doing this sports rally thing, and Trace is interning."

I blinked at him, not entirely sure how to play this. "And you're alone. On Thanksgiving."

"I'm fine."

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't want to presume that—"

I placed a finger on his lips to stop him talking as I counted back from five, feeling perturbed by the fact he was here on his own. “You’re alone, and you’re going upstairs, getting a shower, getting dressed, and you’re coming with me for the Byrne Thanksgiving.”

“You don’t have to—”

I cut him off with a quick kiss. “My *boyfriend* is coming to dinner with my *family*, and he has five minutes to get ready.”

“I don’t want to intrude—”

I kissed him again.

And again when he was going to say something else.

Until he got the idea.

In the end, he backed down, but I could see his smile when he took the stairs three at a time.

We made it out in ten, and the journey was quiet until we were far enough away from his house for him not to jump out and walk back.

“If I’d known you were here without your family, I would have said something,” I muttered at him, keeping my voice low. I was angry with myself for not asking him what he was doing for Turkey Day, and just assuming he’d be okay. “I should have realized.”

“How? I should have told you, but part of me thought, maybe, at least Sutton would make it, and I didn’t want to worry you,” he said. Typical Arlo making others feel better about themselves. He placed a hand on my thigh, and I covered it. “Thank you,” he added.

“You’re my boyfriend.”

He paused a moment. “I like that. And thank you for checking on me.”

“I had an ulterior motive—Charlie wanted you to see him dressed in his pumpkin suit, and I also need a good linebacker for family football.”

“I knew it.”

“One more thing though.”

I glanced at him, and he was staring at me with a soft smile. “Yeah?”

“Love you, Arlo.”

The smiled widened. “Love you, too.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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## Arlo

I DIDN'T HAVE much to say in the car over; I didn't really want to be grumpy that I wasn't seeing Sutton and Trace, or that I hadn't heard from them yet, but it was hard.

Then, the first message from my brothers came as we were only ten minutes from the Byrne house—Trace in a suit and tie grimacing, with the message he was ready to go into the tiger's den to get brownie points for his career. It made me feel all the guilt I'd had imagining him having fun away from me with another family. He signed it off that he loved me, and I was quick to send a message back explaining that I was spending Thanksgiving with the Byrnes, as if that had been the plan all along.

Sutton's message followed not long after, a picture of him grinning, his face painted in team colors, followed by a sad face, and a simple message that he wished he could be home because he missed me and Trace.

I was honest and said I'd wanted him here too, but I added details about what I was doing, and sent him good luck wishes for his game, which I promised I'd follow on social media.

Then, I sent a smiling selfie to both of my brothers, and it was a genuine smile. I was okay with their lives moving in directions away from me because it meant I'd somehow done my job right after taking over from Mom and Dad. I was proud of them both.

“Okay?” Jax asked.

I glanced at him with a smile. “Yeah.”

“You've forgiven me for kidnapping you?”

Of course, I had. “I'll never forgive you,” I deadpanned.

He chuckled and reached over and grasped my hand. “You know you loved it.”

“Whatever.” My grin was so wide it hurt.

We drove on for a little longer, his hand still clasping mine, and then, without warning, he released my hand, pulled off the road, and killed the engine, turning in his seat to face me.

“Before we get there, I want to talk about kissing you,” he announced.

I was one hundred percent behind this, but had the nagging feeling that the statement was more than just a demand for sexy times.

“Okay, I’ll keep off the PDAs. I get it.”

“No, I mean, I want to kiss you in front of everyone, yeah? Or maybe not kiss, but I want them all to know how I feel.” He tugged me closer and stole a kiss that left me breathless. “Even my girls.”

I’d forgotten—this was the first time his daughters would be seeing him since their grand adventure to France, plus their first time meeting their cousin.

I felt warm with love, and important people knowing about us made me smile. “I’d like that.”

“There will be questions.”

“I can handle that.”

“And Mama will start to make wedding plans.”

I blinked at Jax. I knew he was joking, but the idea of being with Jax forever made my heart swell. Then, it hit me—I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, and if marriage was what happened, then I’d be one hundred percent up for it. Maybe even kids of our own? “I’m cool with that, too.”

He stared at me.

I stared back.

Then, he placed a hand on my cheek and kissed me. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too.” The words were so easy to say, and heavy with everything I was feeling. We separated after another kiss,

and then, Jax sent me a goofy grin.

He started to drive again, and I opened up the Marshall Brothers chat group. “I’m going to tell my brothers.”

“Good call.”

“I’m not sure what to say.”

“Tell them we’re a thing.”

“As easy as that?”

He shot me a smile. “As easy as that.”

Arlo: Just a heads up that me and Jax are a thing, and we’re telling his family today, although they probably know. Love you both.

Sutton: We know!

Trace: About time!

Sutton: Can I be best man?

I STARED AT THE PHONE. I’d never mentioned marriage, but like Jax’s mom, it seemed that was on my brothers’ minds as well. I stayed out of it as they bickered.

Trace: I’m the oldest.

Sutton: I’m the cutest

Trace: Again, I’m the oldest

Sutton: Car and Junior Prom...

Trace: 😡 Don’t you dare



Sutton: There's everything at stake here

Trace: That bush jumped out at me

Sutton: Says you

I DECIDED TO BUTT IN.

Arlo: Both of you can be best men

What did I just do?

Arlo: Not that marrying is even on the table

Trace: I bet you have Jax on the table ☐

Sutton: See! He lowers the tone. I'd be the BEST best man

Trace: You want me to tell Arlo about the chicken you put in the tree house.

Sutton: 🤔

I watched them with so much love my heart was going to burst. Both of them loved Jax, and yes, I'd have both of them as best men.

If we ever... yeah...

Trace: Seriously, this is ducking awesome, big brother.

Trace: Ducking

Trace: Ducking

Trace: FFS F u c k i n g

Sutton: So ☐ing awesome

Trace: I said it first.

Sutton: Asshole.

Trace: Happy for Jax, too.

I needed to draw an end to this as I realized how close we were to the Byrne house.

Arlo: Bye guys, love you x

Trace: xx

Sutton: xxxx

Sutton: Beat you at that too 😊

I couldn't help laughing, being part of this banter, plus sitting next to Jax, made everything good.

“Are they okay about it?” Jax asked, although me laughing had probably given their reactions away.

“They said they knew already.”

Jax chuckled as he guided the truck around a parked car.

“I have to warn you that Thanksgiving will be even louder than the last time you came because the kids are older now.”

Love and loudness. Add in the best food ever, and it was one of my favorite days of the year, even if chaos was on the menu alongside the turkey. “I can't wait.”

We arrived at the same time as Paula and her boyfriend arrived with the girls. I held Charlie as Jax went to his knees and hugged them so tight I couldn't see space between them. India and Iris were cute as buttons, both redheads like their dad, and he picked both of them up, one in each arm. They chattered and smiled, and he was peppered with kisses as the three of them reconnected.

The girls scampered into the house, Johan and Paula going back to the car, but Johan headed back to catch us as if he'd

forgotten something.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked Jax and didn’t seem at all worried when Jax tucked his hand in my arm and leaned against me. He was making it clear to everyone that we were together, and that made me feel...

Good.

Loved.

Wanted.

*Happy.*

“Sure,” Jax said.

I jiggled Charlie, who burbled his happiness. There was no animosity between Jax and Johan, and Jax smiled.

“I’ve already...” Johan shot a quick glance at the car where Paula was on the phone. “I want to ask Paula to marry me.”

Jax’s ready smile slipped, and instead, he became thoughtful. “You don’t need my permission,” he said.

“I’m not asking for... well I am... but I’m asking her anyway, so if you say no, it wouldn’t stop that, but...” He put his shoulders back. “Financially, I can support the girls alongside you and Paula, trusts, that kind of thing, you know that.” Jax nodded—Johan wasn’t short of cash, and Jax once said he was happy Paula wouldn’t be struggling, if it were serious.

I guess though, he’d never contemplated an actual marriage proposal or Johan asking for his blessing.

“Okay—”

“Also, I will never try and take over being a dad to India and Iris. I won’t try to change any arrangements you have. I want to be a good step-dad, and husband, and I—”

“Okay,” Jax interrupted. “Do the girls know?”

Johan’s eyes widened. “No. I asked you first.”

That sealed the deal. “You have my blessing.”

Johan beamed at us, shook our hands, and then, went back to the car, and we watched them drive away.

“Wow,” Jax said, then tugged me in for a soft kiss. “Wow,” he repeated.

“Daddy!” Iris yelled. “India has my bracelet!”

Jax chuckled. “And so it starts.”

The hustle and bustle of the kitchen was a symphony of clanking pots and pans, chopping veggies, and the occasional shout for someone to pass things. Mama Byrne, head chef, of course, was a whirlwind of activity, making incredible things for us to eat, ably assisted by Lorna’s boyfriend Ian.

As we all gathered in the living room, the noise level went up several decibels, and it was like a comedy club in there. Papa Byrne, armed with his arsenal of dad jokes, was making the kids laugh, which meant the other adults got to chat, as the nibblings sat enraptured.

“What does a turkey eat for Thanksgiving?” he asked, and a couple of the older kids, having already heard this joke, snickered. “Peach Gobbler!” he announced.

I took a moment to take Charlie out for a diaper check—at least that was my excuse. I didn’t know why, but I felt edgy, and it had started when Johan talked about marrying, and what with Jax mentioning the idea of his forever, I was tense, and wondering how in hell my world had changed so much.

The nibblings, with their boundless energy, added a whole new dimension to the chaos, which had expanded from Papa Byrne’s jokes, and now included them racing around the house, crashing into things, but always managing to get back up with a giggle.

“Football?” Jax asked from behind me as I fastened the snaps on the cute pumpkin onesie.

Football at Thanksgiving was a tradition that the Byrne family took very seriously, and while I didn’t watch every game as Reid did, if I had to choose a team to support it would be the Chargers just for proximity. Still, I knew how to play the game after years at school, and this was three on three, and

I was big enough to fend off even the sneakiest of hits from Jax and his brothers.

I was flanked by Leo's other half, Jason, and ten-year-old Adam, Reid's oldest son, who was a fast and sneaky player, ready to take on the Byrne brothers on the other side—Jax, Reid, and Leo.

The game started with an air of competition, but as we played, it became clear their team was dominating. The Byrne brothers were outplaying us at every turn, and as the touchdowns piled up, the smiles on their faces grew wider.

Jason, always the quick one, darted past Jax and threw a perfect pass to me. I caught the ball with ease and lumbered toward the end zone, shrugging off Reid's attempted tackle as if he were a mosquito. Touchdown.

Jason high-fived me, and Adam did a victory dance as we got one back. But then, something changed. We could see it in the eyes of the Byrne brothers; they weren't just playing to win anymore. They were playing for something else.

Leo attempted to intercept one of my passes, but he let it slip through his fingers. We exchanged confused glances. Reid followed suit on another pass, allowing us to score another touchdown.

"What's going on, guys?" I asked, jogging up to Jax, who was grinning.

Jax laughed and faux-whispered. "We thought it was high time Adam got his moment of glory."

The mood of the game had shifted from competitive to friendly, and it was clear our team was in on it, too. We decided to give Adam the chance to get that touchdown.

With a wink and a nod, we launched the ball to Adam, who ran as fast as he could. Reid and Jax chased him half-heartedly, but they made sure not to catch him. Adam crossed into the end zone, stumbling a little, and raised his arms in triumph, beaming with happiness.

We all cheered and gathered around Adam, hoisting him onto our shoulders like a champion. The laughter and banter

were infectious, and for a brief moment, it felt as if the entire world was filled with happiness.

Even better when Jax kissed me as we whooped and hollered.

As the game drew to a close, all the other kids joined in, which for some reason meant I ended up on the ground with Jax, being swarmed by his nibblings, and the whole thing turned into a big tickle fight.

Dinner was just around the corner, and I couldn't wait to join the Byrne family at their table. But as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden hue over the backyard, I took a moment to close my eyes and think about my mom and dad, and how much I missed them, and I couldn't help but feel thankful for this day, for being invited into the Byrne family's celebration, and I wished my brothers were here as well. I sent them photos of the game; Sutton came back with a reply.

Sutton: I've started practicing my best man speech.

Trace: Fuck off.

And all was right in my world.

DINNER WAS everything I never knew I needed—people, laughing, chaos, Charlie on my knee eating mashed banana, and Jax holding my hand when he could. The family took turns to talk about the things they were grateful for.

Then, it was Jax's turn.

“I'm thankful for my girls. India, and Iris, I love you both. I'm grateful I'm an uncle, and that Charlie has come into my life. I'm grateful I might get to meet my twin one day.” He hesitated, and everyone watched him. “And as for Arlo?” I tensed—his entire family had seen the way he touched me, and kissed me, and hugged me, but this was him trying to put everything in words. “I'm thankful for the day Arlo Marshall

walked into my office, and I love him.” He stared right at me.  
“I love you, Arlo.”

My heart was so full. “I love you too.” I would keep on saying it until the end of days, for as long as he’d have me, and on my knee Charlie burred as people talked, and then, he added his thoughts.

“Gah.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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## Jax

I WAS ALWAYS AN EARLY RISER, a habit ingrained from years of leading construction projects, but today was special. I hadn't woken up to work, but because it was Arlo's birthday. I turned my head and watched the beautiful man who'd stepped into my world and twisted everything around. He looked so peaceful, his short salt and pepper hair soft against the pillow, and the gentle light of a barely there dawn gave me enough to watch his chest rise and fall as he breathed.

Careful not to wake him, I scooted closer, draping an arm around his waist and lying there for the longest time. We'd been exhausted the night before, falling into bed with little ceremony after a long day, and a later night, and even though I wanted to kiss him, I decided against it, allowing Arlo these peaceful moments of rest before the chaos of Charlie waking up.

After several more minutes of battling the urge to pepper Arlo's face with kisses, I extricated myself from the bed and padded across the room to check on Charlie, sound asleep in the crib, a picture of innocence with his chubby cheeks and soft, rhythmic breathing.

I padded to the bathroom and tried to do everything as quietly as I could, but the sound of the toothbrush tapping against the edge of the sink seemed way too loud in the silence. I should've felt guilty, but instead, I found myself smiling into the mirror at the thought of Arlo waking up.

Once downstairs, I made coffee, popped bread into the toaster, and gathered butter, jelly, and cutlery, and then, determined, I went to my office and picked up the sealed envelope with the legal documents that had been burning a hole in my thoughts for months.

Today was the day.

We'd pulled our heads out of our asses; we'd told each other how we felt; and we were a team. It was time.

With the toast ready and the coffee poured, I picked up the envelope along with the breakfast tray, and the climb back up the stairs had never seemed so quick. Back in the bedroom, I set the tray on the nightstand and couldn't help but smile as I saw that Arlo had shifted, one arm outstretched toward my side of the bed, seeking the warmth I'd left behind. The scent of coffee worked its magic, and Arlo's nose twitched just before his eyes fluttered open, a little confused and hazy from sleep.

"Happy birthday," I whispered.

Arlo grumbled something incoherent, making me chuckle as I watched him clumsy and yawning when he stumbled toward the bathroom. Those moments of raw, unrefined Arlo were some of my favorites, and something I'd seen a lot more of now that he was spending nearly every night here.

When Arlo returned, there was more clarity in his eyes, and his hair was damp from splashing water on his face. He crawled back into bed, and we met in a minty kiss that started slow, then deepened, but didn't go anywhere else.

Pulling back, breathless, I handed him coffee, and we pretended we wanted toast between kisses, but then, I reached down the side of the bed and handed Arlo the envelope. The weight of the moment settled around us, as he frowned at the official label and his full name typed on the front.

"This is for you. Happy Birthday. At least, I think you can call this a birthday present, only, maybe you wanted something else... shit... just open it?"

Charlie mumbled in his crib, and for a moment, I was distracted, until Arlo pulled out the paperwork. He read the cover letter, frowning, and then, he glanced up at me, and I hurried to explain before the questions appearing in Arlo's eyes could be voiced.

"I've had this legal paperwork since March," I began, my voice steady, but filled with emotion. "It never seemed like the

right moment to bring it up, because I had all these feelings for you that weren't business, and I didn't want to wreck our friendship, and I got in my own head, and ended up nearly ruining it all. But... today, on your birthday, I wanted to give us both something that means something."

I paused, reaching out to hold Arlo's hand, and for a moment, he didn't move, and then, he laced our fingers.

"You want me as a partner in Byrne Construction?"

"Marshall-Byrne Construction," I corrected. "The lawyer said there's some investment you'd need to make, but I thought we could use whatever you invest into a new truck, and I know you were looking for something to do when you sell the house, and then you said about buying another house, but what if we got something together. Or is that too soon?" I was rambling, then I caught a breath. "You'd be entitled to a cut of the profits, but then, I know you'd lose the constant income but, the Gibsons loved the summer house project, and they emailed me yesterday to say they wanted to feature our construction on their Home Network show, and that could mean more work. Then , we'd be set, and anyway, we have projects lined up through next year. I had to be sure the company was stable, that this was a sensible step financially for you before I asked you. And I tried the other way for the company name, Byrne-Marshall, but it doesn't sound right. I want you to become my business partner, Arlo, and this paperwork makes it legal if you sign." I breathed out after that huge run-on info-dump.

Arlo's eyes were wide and bright with unspoken emotion as I talked at him for the longest time, tripping over what I really wanted to say, and I searched them for any hint of what he thought. Had I made him angry? Had I overstepped? Did he even want to sign himself up for a commitment to a company that was growing, but that still had months when the profit margins were so slim?

"It's a fifty-fifty split," I continued, my thumb rubbing circles on the back of Arlo's hand. "Full partnership. Because you make us better, and there's no one I trust more, and no one

else I'd want by my side, in all things. So, what do you say?" With my heart in my throat, I waited for Arlo's answer.

"In all things?" he repeated as a question.

My breath hitched. "We could start with the business, the house, and then, if you—"

He kissed me, and I melted into his hold, and we stayed that way for the longest time, until at last he eased back after Charlie squawked his hello to the day.

"Yes."

"You should get your family lawyer to look it over—"

"I will."

I kissed him deep, partly in celebration, mostly because I could, and somewhat because it was his birthday.

Charlie burbled, and we knew it was time to stop, but that was okay.

We had the rest of the day.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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## Arlo

JAX WAS in charge of breakfast this morning, telling me to sit down, and that he'd take care of everything. I wasn't good with sitting still, but—thank God—I felt phone vibrate in my pocket, signaling an incoming call. Glancing at the screen, I saw Trace's name. "Trace," I murmured with a soft chuckle, and Jax nodded.

"Hey," I greeted, heading over to the chair at the table, nudging the tiny Christmas tree out of the way as Charlie attempted to reach it.

"Happy birthday, big bro! How does thirty-one feel?"

"No different to thirty," I replied, leaning back, and smiling at Charlie, who was cross-eyed focusing on picking up a random spill of baby rice. "It's just a quiet morning here. Jax is making bacon. Charlie is playing with his breakfast."

We chatted for a bit about this and that, and it felt good, as always, to catch up with him. I hadn't seen him since August, and that was way too long. The Christmas tree lights cycled through the rainbow, and this birthday felt special.

But as the conversation began to wind down, Trace's tone shifted. "Listen, Arlo... I wanted to talk to you about something."

I sat up, sensing the seriousness. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it back for Thanksgiving," he began, his voice thick with emotion. "And the thing is, I have an opportunity come up, and it's looking as if I might not be back for Christmas either."

I let out a long breath, understanding, but still feeling the sting of the news. "It's okay, Trace. We all have our commitments." I met Jax's concerned gaze and shrugged. "I'll miss you, but it's all good."

“I miss you too, big bro. And Sutton, and everyone,” Trace said. “The recruiters want to see me work the room, y’know, get my face in front of people.”

“Okay.”

“Arlo?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not sure it’s what I want.”

“You don’t want to work Christmas?”

Trace sighed. “No, it’s more... never mind. We’ll talk when I get back, just... remember if I don’t make Christmas, I’m always there in spirit, okay?”

“Always,” I replied, my voice firm. “Love you, Trace.”

“Love you, too.”

I refused to be disappointed over something that *might* happen, when he could still make it back for Christmas. Trace had his own life, and I wasn’t his dad—he didn’t have that pull toward coming home for family.

I got that.

The call ended, and Jax didn’t say anything, probably reading the room as I took a moment to compose myself, staring at the patterns of tree lights. My phone buzzed again, and a stupid rush of hope filled me that Trace was calling to say he’d changed his mind. It wasn’t him, this time, it was Sutton.

“Happy birthday, big guy!” Sutton’s vibrant voice filled the air, lifting my spirits.

“Thanks, Sutt,” I replied, smiling. “How’s everything on your end?”

“Busy as ever,” Sutton replied. “But hey, wanted to make sure I was one of the first to wish you. Can’t let Trace hog all the limelight!”

“Yeah, he beat you to it,” I said, and Sutton did this huge dramatic put upon sigh.

“But I’m best man, right?”

“You both would be.” I laughed and caught Jax’s smile as he eased Charlie from his high chair and began to wipe everything down.

“Sooooooo, there *is* going to be a wedding then?”

“Oh my God, we haven’t been dating long.”

“But you’ve been together for three years.”

He wasn’t wrong. It was always the same with Sutton—light and breezy, always making sure to bring a smile to my face. Jax was smirking now, and I took the call out into the hallway.

“So, about your gift,” Sutton began, and I guessed it was probably going to arrive in a few days, never let it be said that Sutton was organized. “It says it’s arriving Wednesday.”

“Thank you.”

“I promise, I’ll get your Christmas present up to you earlier.”

My chest tightened. “You can bring it yourself.”

Sutton hesitated. “Sure, sure. Anyway, what are you up to today?”

That was classic avoidance by Sutton, but I didn’t press because I got the feeling he wouldn’t be making it back for Christmas either. *That’s okay. I’ll have Jax, and his family.* So why did my eyes feel sore, and why did my throat hurt?

And why did Jax’s expression seem so full of sympathy?

*Maybe I should just say fuck it and visit both of them one after the other.*

*Only, they have their own lives now, and that is a good thing.*

*Our parents wouldn’t expect to see us all the time.*

*So why should I?*

“I’m spending the day with Jax.”



“Have fun, don’t eat all your chocolates at once. Shit! Ignore I said that. Be surprised when they arrive. Yeah?”

“Always.”

For the longest time, I remained still, staring at the phone with its ended call. I missed him so bad; I missed Trace. They weren’t calling me as much; they weren’t sharing their news; they were growing up, and moving on, and...

What about me?

I wallowed for as long as it took me to get myself together, then I headed back to the kitchen.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. That was Sutton.”

Jax seemed as if he wanted to say something else, but after a pause he nodded. “Okay then, I’ll make coffee, then you can decide what you want to do today.”

I nodded, walking Charlie around the kitchen as Jax tidied up, then filled the machine.

“Sure you’re okay?” he asked again after a while.

I broke from my stare into the yard, and focused on Jax. “Yep. Just navel-gazing at heading toward forty.”

“You look good for nearly forty,” he deadpanned, and I fake-punched his arm.

Jax took our coffees and gestured for us to head into the garden room. I followed him, then propped Charlie on my lap as Jax played peekaboo. The coffee was within reach of me, not Charlie, the sofa was warm, Jax was smiling and smoothing a hand on my knee, and some of the knots unraveled.

“I was thinking about my parents, about how they’d be so proud that all three of us were moving on, and then, I thought, hey that’s me, I’m the one that Sutton and Trace are moving on from.” My voice hitched. For fuck’s sake, what was wrong with me?

“Arlo, I’m sorry,” Jax offered and leaned into me.

“If they can’t make it home, it’s just one Christmas, but I want them to meet Charlie, and I want them to see us together after all the time; they wanted that, and...” I scrubbed at my eyes. “I miss them, and when I don’t have them with me, sometimes, I remember Mom and Dad and it hurts; and I’m alone; and it doesn’t matter that I have you because this is stupid.”

Jax huffed. “It’s not stupid. I know Mama and Papa missed me every time I wasn’t at a family celebration, when I was out there trying to find Zach.”

“But they’re your *parents*. I’m just the big brother.”

Jax shuffled closer, linked his hand through my arm, happy to rest his head on my shoulder, and more of my tension slipped away.

“You took over being both mom *and* dad to Sutton and Trace,” Jax insisted.

“Not a dad, no.”

“Did you juggle multiple jobs to pay bills?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Did you make sure they got to practice and games on time?? Or that they did class projects even though they didn’t want to? Did you set curfews, and rules, and make sure they grew up right?”

“As their big brother.” I didn’t know where this was going.

“In reality, you were their mom and dad all rolled into one,” he murmured and pressed a soft kiss to the tip of my nose.

“We’ll agree to disagree,” I sniffed, and Jax chuckled.

Charlie reached out for Jax, who took him and settled him on his chest, and for a moment, I watched as Charlie played with Jax’s long hair. He’d left it down today, curled from where he’d left it to dry without product or brushing of any kind. I reached over myself to copy Charlie, curled a lock around my finger and tugged it gently.

“I love your hair,” I murmured, aware I was going off course with my thought process but wanting to change the subject away from talking about my mom and dad. “I wonder if Charlie’s hair will be the same as yours.” I tucked Jax’s wayward red curls behind his ear, the softness of them spiraling around my fingers.

Jax shook his head a little.

“Don’t change the subject, Mr. Marshall.”

“I wasn’t.” I slid a little deeper into the sofa, and hated the focus being on me.

Jax snuggled into me, Charlie between us now, staring at his hands as if he’d only just discovered them. “What did you do if Sutton cried? Or if Trace acted out because the grief was too much?”

“We handled it as a team.”

“You hugged them and told them it would all be okay.”

“Of course.”

Jax paused. “But did they hug *you* and tell *you* everything would be okay?”

“We hugged,” I said, defensively, carding my fingers in Jax’s hair to pull him down for a kiss. I didn’t enjoy talking about the grief, because it knotted in my chest, and it mingled with the loneliness. Sometimes, it cut so deep I could have sobbed like a freaking baby. Today was my birthday, and I was in love, and I was going to be partner in a business, and I was moving forward to sell my parents’ home, and I wasn’t broken about it at all. The kiss was lazy, and long enough that the lump in my chest eased, but then, Jax broke away. He settled Charlie on his colorful mat on the floor and touched the mobile above him so it spun in slow circles. He played with him for a few minutes, until Charlie got fed up with raspberries on his tummy and focused, instead, on the animals circling above him. Then, in a smooth move Jax was back. He straddled my lap, burrowed his face in my neck, and dug his hands around me until they were linked behind my back. He wriggled some more, and I enjoyed the direction this was

going. Maybe sexy times on my birthday would shove aside the shadows of loneliness I had going on.

Then, Jax sighed and wriggled one last time.

“This is a hug for all the times you didn’t get one from Trace and Sutton,” he whispered against my skin. “I know you call yourself just their brother, and I know for sure that family takes care of each other, no matter what.” I sensed there was a *but*, and I was right. “But you need a hug, and you need to know it’s okay to be sad they’ve left home, and that you have all this space now to grieve.”

“But I have you. I should be happy.” My heart cracked, my throat tight with emotion. I laced my hands on his back, tugging him close until he smothered me like a heavy blanket. My choices had never been driven by obligation. I’d wanted Trace and Sutton to have a chance at the future Mom and Dad had envisioned for them, even if it meant sacrificing some of my own dreams along the way. I’d made that decision.

Tears gathered in my eyes, and I slid my hands up to anchor in Jax’s hair. It was so impossibly soft, and I lost myself in the grief for a moment, simply because Jax gave me the space to do that. He didn’t tell me to cheer up; he didn’t try to fix anything; he just let me cry on my birthday; and he held me, and didn’t say a word.

And I loved him for that.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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## Jax

IT HAD BEEN a week since Arlo's birthday, and the conversation we'd had about grief had been another step in our journey to this relationship we were creating. The part about being lonely was a sadness, the grief was overwhelming, but in the next few days, we'd fallen into a routine where we hugged, kissed, made love, and talked about everything. I didn't have an answer to his feelings of loneliness, but I gave him space to be lonely if he needed it. I couldn't seem to get him to see it was okay to feel loss, but as the days passed, he brightened, and I hoped my gentle insistence that every feeling he had was valid meant something to him.

He didn't even pretend he needed to go home at night, and the only reason he visited every so often, was for Panda, who *apparently* missed him. Actually, it was less about Panda, and more about clean clothes, his Kindle, his favorite paring knife, and his fluffiest towels. The day I found his T-shirts mixed in with mine was a perfect shining moment that meant absolutely everything, which I knew was weird, but hell, I was tumbling free fall into love, so I didn't care.

This weekend was my turn to have the girls, and Arlo had decided he was staying away for most of the day—*visiting Panda*—even though I said it wasn't necessary. He just winked and kissed me goodbye, and reassured us he was coming back in time to go tree shopping.

Today had been all about the girls and Charlie, who seemed to be fascinated by each other. India and Iris both on the mat, staring up at the mobile and sharing picture books. Of course, I was down there as well, doing stupid voices, and enjoying every second of it, but there was something missing, and his name was Arlo.

“Can we get the biggerest hugemist tree in the whole place?” India asked, clutching her copy of *Hairy Maclary*.

“We need to get one that fits inside the house,” I explained, but they were way too excited to comprehend the limits of space.

“We could have one that is hundreds and hundreds tall and tall,” Iris agreed with her sister. Given I wasn’t sure whether they understood how big that was, I wisely decided to stay silent, and hoped they’d compromise on something around six feet that wouldn’t consume all the space in the sunroom.

“We could climb it to the giant!” India pointed out.

Yep, staying silent was a good thing.

THE SUN WAS SETTING across the Christmas tree farm as I walked hand in hand with Arlo among the evergreens. Iris and India giggled as they ran among the trees, their laughter mixing with the distant sound of festive music. San Diego might not have offered a white Christmas, but with the snow machine working its magic, albeit with flakes that disappeared fast, it felt close to the real thing. The girls were ecstatic, dancing around in the icy snow, their cheeks flushed with excitement.

Charlie, snuggled against my chest in a baby carrier, had wide eyes taking in the movement and lights around him, and a big part of me ached that his dad wasn’t here to see Charlie’s first Christmas tree, although Arlo took photos and video he’d be able to see when he came back.

*If he comes back.*

Arlo squeezed my hand, his eyes sparkling brighter than the lights strung around the farm. It still amazed me how he’d seamlessly become a component of every part of my family chaos, and his smile was so damn wide.

Not a single sign of grief in his gray eyes that I could see.

“Dad! Dad! They have hot chocolate!” India pointed at a stall adorned with twinkling fairy lights and staffed by teenagers dressed as elves. We headed toward it, ordered drinks, then sat on a wooden bench. The girls were

whispering, and at the point I was about to carry out my fatherly duty to explain that whispering was rude, they synchronized, fixing their gaze on Arlo.

“Are you Daddy’s boyfriend?” Iris asked with a straightforwardness only a child could manage.

Arlo’s smile didn’t falter. “Yes, I am. If that is okay with you?”

They nodded, almost adult-like in their acceptance. But then India tilted her head, mischief in her eyes. “As Daddy’s boyfriend, what are you getting us for Christmas?”

I chuckled at their antics.

Arlo laughed. “That’s a surprise.” He winked.

They grinned at him and ran off to the fake ice rink, which they refused to try, but they loved to watch the skaters.

Charlie was dozing on and off, and after much deliberation, we headed out to select a tree—not too big, not too small—perfect for us. Getting it home was an adventure, with the girls chattering non-stop, guessing Arlo’s surprise gifts, while Charlie babbled in his waking moments, probably adding his own guesses.

We started decorating soon after we got home, the girls bringing out last year’s handmade decorations. They had odd shapes, uneven glitter, and sparkles, but they were perfect hanging between strings of popcorn.

Then came the star, the honor of the night. I lifted India. Arlo lifted Iris in one arm—strong and sure—and then, Charlie in his other. Together, my daughters placed the star at the top, making sure that Charlie got to touch it as well.

As we settled, amidst the laughter of my children and by the lights, Arlo caught my eye. He mouthed “I love you,” across the room, over the heads of my mingled family.

My heart swelled, a warmth spreading through me that had nothing to do with twinkling lights. I mouthed “I love you” back, knowing those simple words carried the weight of all the moments like this I wanted to have.



He'd told me he didn't think it was right to stay over, but then, somehow the girls assumed he was staying, *same as Johan did with Mommy*. I got him to stay, and I slept in his arms, tucked into his side, dozing to him playing with my hair, my hand on his belly, and woke to the girls jumping on us, plus Charlie yammering and burbling from his crib. The five of us spent Sunday together—a walk, lunch out, games in the afternoon—and a little after six, Paula and Johan picked them up. I hated when my girls left because it had been the perfect weekend, and somehow, the melancholy didn't want to leave me, and I understood keenly how Arlo must have felt every time he said goodbye to his brothers.

Cocoa in hand, next to the tree and staring out of the window, I was lost in thought. There were moments like this, where the weight of certain thoughts grew heavy, pressing down on my shoulders. Zach missing kept gnawing at me, especially since Leo and Reid had no news, and Mel's attempts to unravel the mystery of that damned email had led to nothing. I pushed down the frustration over my missing brother, reminding myself there were forces at work I couldn't control. Still, the lack of answers was disconcerting and, somehow, they were all wound up with the girls leaving, and as soon as I waved goodbye to India and Iris, my head hurt. This always happened, and I dealt with everything one emotion at a time, sure I would get my head straight at the end.

But it wasn't just the girls going back with their mom. It was Zach. It was flashes of what Arlo and I had talked about last weekend, in particular about his brothers and how he missed them. My heart hurt for Arlo missing his brothers and with both of them possibly not making Christmas. I worked through the girls, then Zach, and then, I obsessed on cycling through solutions to Arlo and his brothers. Something I could maybe fix. I couldn't leave San Diego, in case Zach came back, but Arlo could go to one brother and, then, on to the next. I'd miss him, but maybe I could make it work.

I waited until Arlo left for work in the morning, then started a new chat with Sutton and Trace.

Jax: Hi

There was nothing, and I busied myself with Charlie, then approving bids, and then, a couple of hours into my morning, it was Sutton who responded.

Sutton: Hi back. If this is about a Christmas present for Arlo, you can't go wrong with cake 🍰  
😊

Jax: I know about the cake, but this isn't about a present. Can we talk face to face?

Charlie fussed in my arms as I walked the length of the yard, stopping by any bright and colorful flower, spotting a hummingbird, and explaining what it was with added raspberries to his cheek. I waited for Sutton to respond, wondered if Trace had even gotten the message, then my phone vibrated with an incoming call between me, Sutton, *and* Trace.

“What’s wrong?” Trace asked as soon as I answered. “Is Arlo okay?”

*Shit.* “I didn’t mean to worry you, everything is okay.”

Trace relaxed. “Okay then, so—”

“If this is you calling to make sure we’re okay with you and Arlo, you have to know we are,” Sutton interrupted.

“It’s not that either.”

“Then...?” Sutton prompted.

“I want to talk to you about Christmas.”

“Wait, so this *is* about a present?” Sutton sounded confused.

“No, this is about you not coming home, and he doesn’t expect you to come home, but you’re not calling him as much, and you only seem to contact him a couple of times a month, or on his birthday, and he won’t say anything, but I see his expression, and I know he wants to see you.” I swallowed before the hard part. “I feel as if you’re forgetting everything he did for you, and he deserves you to be there in his life, not for Christmas, I get that is difficult, and it’s just one day, but

call him more, okay? Message him.” Wow. That had spilled out of me like water from a broken dam.

“What? No.” Trace was shocked, Sutton was quiet, and he turned away from the camera as if he couldn’t meet my gaze. Trace carried on, defensive. “It’s not easy to stay away—we love Arlo. Tell him, Sutt.”

Sutton cleared his throat. “Shit, Jax, you don’t know anything about it.”

“I do,” I said. “I see him sad when he doesn’t hear from you.”

Trace shook his head. “No. You don’t see it all. You don’t see us.” Trace sounded anguished, and again Sutton wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“I could try if you explained,” I suggested.

“Arlo gave up so much, when our parents died, to raise us.” Trace sounded as if the words were being ripped from him. “He deserves a life of his own. He had to deal with our pain. He sacrificed his dreams and his own personal life to ensure we had the love and support we needed. He came back from college and stayed, just so we wouldn’t crumble after Mom and Dad died. He took all the responsibility, handled all the grief, and we know it had a toll. He deserves a chance to have his own life, to pursue his own dreams and passions. We don’t want to be the reason he never gets to live the life he deserves.”

Trace deflated, and his eyes flicked upward to where I guessed Sutton was on his screen. I saw Sutton do the same, and somehow, everything Trace said took the wind out of me.

I sat on a bench, Charlie now dead to the world in my arms, and I took a deep breath as the weight of their words sank in.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’ve stayed away from messaging him, or seeing him, to give him space? To do what exactly?”

Trace huffed as if it was obvious.

“To fall in love with you,” Sutton offered after a pause.

“To get his own life,” Trace added. “Forcing him out there to have friends, and love, and not to think he has to be there for us all the time, to fix our problems.”

“We don’t want him to regret what he did for us because he loses love,” Sutton said, and Trace sighed, as if Sutton had just summarized everything.

“I get it,” I began, choosing my words with care. “Arlo’s the most selfless person I know. The sacrifices he’s made for you both are amazing. But the way I see it, he doesn’t regret any of it. You two are his world.”

Trace sniffed as if he was about to cry. “We know, but we’re grown up now, and we can look after ourselves, and we want him to see that. We can’t keep holding him back.”

“What Trace said,” Sutton added, and I wanted to reach through the screen and hug them. Then, Sutton looked at the floor, guilt evident in his expression. “We never wanted him to give up everything for us. We never asked him to, but he was there every day, through all the tears, and the grief, and...”

My heart hurt with this. I smoothed circles on Charlie’s back as he dozed in my arms.

“But that’s the thing about love,” I replied. “You don’t *need* to ask. Arlo did what he felt was right, and he’d do it all over again.”

The chat fell silent for a moment, the weight of our conversation heavy in the air.

It was Trace who broke the silence. “We just want him to be happy, and he’s found that happiness with you. We were right to push him to date, or at least get him to threaten you that he was going to date, otherwise you’d still be pretending to only be friends.”

“That’s why you did it?” I smiled at their ingenuity.

Sutton huffed. “Well, *you* weren’t going to do anything about it.”

“And neither was Arlo,” Trace pointed out.

“He misses you,” I said, not sure what else I could add.

More silence, and then, Sutton disappeared, his phone bobbing, and then, he was back. “I’ll be home on the twenty-third,” he said.

Trace sighed. “I’ll try my hardest, but this internship...” Then, he sat upright, “isn’t even that important. Not as important as Arlo is. I can make the twenty-third work.”

“No, I meant you should phone him more, and I thought maybe he could come and visit you at Christmas somehow. If we coordinate—”

“No, I want to come home,” Sutton said.

“Me too,” Trace agreed.

Excitement curled inside me. Was it possible that between the three of us, we could give my boyfriend the best present of all?

“Okay then, this is what we’ll do...”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

## Arlo

IT WAS ONLY two days to Christmas, and the announcement that I was spending Christmas with the Byrne family and needed something Christmassy to wear was the excuse I needed to head home.

Not that I wanted to be at home, but because Jax was on edge, and he *really* wanted me to wear that blue shirt his mama had bought me last Christmas. Well, what he really said was: “*Arlo, I just need an hour or two. Get the blue shirt. I’m wrapping presents, okay? Go home, get your fancy clothes, and come back.*”

I opened the case on the bed, stared at the empty interior, and realized this was the moment I was all-in. I didn’t have much left in my closet, most of my work things had already moved over to Jax’s place, and now, I was taking over the clothes I wore on special occasions—the pale blue shirt—plus some photos, and even the things I’d kept of Dad’s in a small wooden box we’d made together the summer I turned nine. We’d burned our names into it, my *Arlo* was scrappy as I didn’t have complete control of the heat gun, but next to it was simply—*Dad*. He’d burned the date there as well, and inside were some cufflinks, a tie, and his and Mom’s obituary that the funeral home had arranged to have in the paper.

Panda had followed me in, and was sitting of my bed. “You know, I’m not sure people get their deaths written up in papers anymore.” He stared at me in that witchy cat way, then rolled on his back and asked for belly rubs with a soft chirrup. I rubbed him as instructed, removed my hand before he got fed up with me, and opened the box, the scent of cedar a sense memory that made me smile. I hadn’t been able to get the hinges right at first, but Dad had been so patient, and then, Mom had helped me line it with cherry red material.

I touched the cufflinks, read the obituary, and closed the lid, placing it in the suitcase.

“Meow,” Panda purred and curled against the pillows of the bed I hadn’t slept in for a few weeks now. “Meow!” Panda was insistent now, as if he was telling me something.

“Thank you for reminding me,” I said and crossed to the lowest drawer of the right bedside cabinet where I’d been hiding Jax’s present. I’d been working on it since September, way before my secret that I loved Jax was out, and I held the box up, seeing light filtering through the delicate filigree carving.

It was another box, this time red alder, made with over twenty years of experience in every tiny cut, with hidden hinges, and carved curls that reminded me of Jax’s red hair, and for a moment, I hugged the box to me. I’d imagined writing something and putting it inside, maybe even a suggestion that we date, but now, what I really wanted to put inside was a thirty-page essay about how happy I was.

Because it was too early for a ring.

Right?

Panda stretched, his furry butt in the air, then he sat and his ears twitched before he belted out of the room as if his tail was on fire.

So much for missing me.

Bang! Then, the doorbell, and I was so startled I nearly dropped the box, hurrying down the same way as Panda, who’d jumped out of the small window in the hall judging by the broken ornament on the floor. The doorbell rang again, but I couldn’t make out who was there from the shadows. Maybe carolers, maybe Jax?

I opened the door and blinked, my brain struggling to process the sight in front of me. Trace, grinning ear to ear with the familiar twinkle in his eye, clutching Panda, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Sutton, on the other hand, was almost obscured by a towering Christmas tree, its branches brushing the doorway and sprinkling the porch with needles.

“Surprise!” they chorused.



My heart lurched in my chest, a jumble of emotions swirling within me. Relief, joy, surprise, and a love so deep, it nearly brought tears to my eyes. “What the...” was all I managed to say, my voice shaky.

Trace stepped in first, releasing the purring Panda onto the living room rug, while Sutton, with a grunt, maneuvered the tree inside. “Jax said you’re mostly at his place.”

“I am.”

“But he said you’d be here.”

“He did? When—”

“And we guessed you didn’t have a tree here, figured we’d bring some Christmas spirit,” Trace said.

I pulled both of them into a tight embrace, laughter bubbling up from deep within. “God, I’ve missed you both.”

Trace hugged me harder, babbling on about flights and delays and trees.

Sutton ruffled my hair with affection, since when had he grown taller than me? It had only been four months. “Missed you too, big bro. Now, let’s get this place decorated, shall we?”

The next hour was a whirlwind of activity. We climbed up to the attic, sifting through boxes of old decorations, sharing stories. Every ornament held a memory, and with each one we hung, the room seemed to grow warmer, filled with the love and bond that is family. It would never be the same as the Christmases with our parents, but it was the Christmas we’d learned to love since they’d gone.

As we placed the star on top of the tree, Sutton reached into his bag, pulling out a container of cookies. “Special delivery from Jax’s mama,” he announced with a smirk.

I laughed, recognizing the familiar aroma of her signature Christmas cookies. “Wait. So, Jax knew about all of this?”

Trace waved a hand. “We might’ve had a little chat.”

Sutton rolled his eyes. “If chatting is making us see that we were fucking up.”

I checked both their expressions. Trace wouldn’t meet my gaze, but Sutton had a fire in his eyes that made no sense. “I don’t understand.”

“Sit down,” Sutton ordered, and when I didn’t move, he shoved me just enough so I fell in a heap on the sofa. My brothers took up spaces on the facing sofa, and Trace elbowed Sutton, which I assumed meant he wanted Sutton to explain. Confidence ran deep in the youngest of us.

“We decided when I went to college that we needed to give you space so you could have your own life,” Sutton began.

I stiffened. “What?”

The atmosphere was suddenly tense, and Sutton, with his dark hair and eyes, so much like Dad’s, was anxious, while Trace, always the more composed one, tried to hide whatever he was feeling behind a neutral expression.

“Okay,” I began, hesitant. “What’s going on?”

Sutton glanced at Trace before he started. “We had reasons for not calling you as much, and for not coming back for Christmas, and yeah, they look stupid now, but yeah... reasons.”

Trace nodded. “Yes, we didn’t want to worry you about anything, and we gave you space, and it was because of *us*.” Trace was trying to explain something, and I frowned, trying to decipher his convoluted statement.

“I’m not following.”

Sutton sighed, running a hand through his hair. “You gave up everything, Arlo. For us. And we stayed away these past months, and didn’t worry you about anything, because... we thought you needed space. To restart your own life.”

Ah. So that was what this was about. I raised an eyebrow. Not this again—and from my brothers this time. “And you think what? That my life is better for not knowing what’s going on with either of you at all?”

Sutton looked down, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. “It’s just... you were so young when you stepped in and took care of us. We never wanted you to give up on your dreams because of us. But you did, you never went back to college, and then, you were here all alone, and...” Sutton glanced at Trace.

Trace added: “So when we were both away, we thought it would be good to not hassle you, just hoping you’d find time for yourself, Arlo. To, you know, live your life. So, when you and Jax, y’know...” Trace made a gesture with his fingers as if he were sword fighting. “We thought we’d just give you more time with him. Just to be happy.”

“Happiness isn’t just about doing things for myself,” I explained, hoping my words would ease their minds. “Seeing you two grow up, get through school, become these amazing individuals... that’s made me happy in ways I can’t even describe.” I couldn’t help but smile. I guessed they were trying to parent me now, in their own way. “I appreciate it. I really do. But I hadn’t been just putting my life on pause, guys. Sure, I never dated, but in the last few years it was always Jax anyway.”

“Awww,” Trace said, then went scarlet—having a girlfriend was making him a sappy mess.

“Really dude?” Sutton deadpanned, which caused Trace to punch his arm, and Sutton to pretend to be injured.

Idiots. Still, seeing them taking charge of their concern for me, I felt an odd mix of pride and reassurance.

I took a deep breath, processing their words. “Okay, I’m going to say this once, and then, we’re going to move on from this, and I’d better get messages with grades, and stupid jokes, and pictures on a daily, if not hourly, basis.”

They nodded. Their expressions were serious, a mix of concern and something resembling determination. It threw me, and I took a moment to get my thoughts in order.

“Firstly, it was my choice to stay here for you two. You’re my family. I don’t regret a single day of coming home, of it

being the three of us against the world.” I leaned forward, making sure I had their full attention. “Yes, everything changed when Mom and Dad died, and yes, I stepped up to keep us together. But you two mean everything to me. And while I might not have had the ‘typical’ young adult life, I don’t have any regrets. Every success you had, every soccer practice, every school play, every good grade, every moment we were together was worth it.” I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. “Secondly, you messaging me with news and jokes and shit, could never derail the fact Jax and I are forever.”

Trace’s chin dropped, but all Sutton did was smirk. “I knew it!” he exclaimed. “That’s perfect.”

The two of them leaped up and dived at me, and we hugged so hard I could barely breathe.

“I love you both.”

Trace reared back. “What? Even Sutton?”

Sutton poked his brother, Trace shoved, and all too soon, the two of them were rolling on the floor laughing and shouting, and only stopped when I sat on them both.

“Idiots,” I declared.

After hugging and everything spilling out from Sutton about how he hated college so far, and when was it going to get better, we made drinks and settled beside each other in front of Mom and Dad’s photo. We drank cocoa, devoured the cookies, and reminisced about past Christmases. I didn’t get back to Jax’s house that night, but we did chat when I got a spare minute in my room, and I told him, point-blank, that I loved him so much it hurt.

In that moment, surrounded by love, laughter, and the glow of twinkling lights Sutton insisted I had to hang in my room, I felt truly at peace.

THE THREE OF US were spending Christmas Day with the Byrne family. We left before nine to give us time to detour to

the cemetery to visit Mom and Dad.

The early sunshine took the edge off the misty morning as we entered El Camino Memorial. It was a serene place, with manicured lawns and rows of trees offering shade to anyone grieving. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves, and everything was quiet, calm, and peaceful. The chirping of birds filled the air, but there was a hushed stillness.

Trace, Sutton, and I had flowers we'd located in the jungle that had once been Mom's garden, and as we neared our parents' resting place, I took a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. "Eleven years," I whispered, almost to myself. The inscription on their gravestone read: *Together in life, together in eternity.*

"I can't believe it's been that long," Sutton said, placing the cheerful flowers onto the grass, and staying in a crouch. Trace placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, and I stepped closer, just to be there for them both.

Around us, other families gathered, some huddled together in tight-knit groups, others sitting alone, lost in their thoughts. There was a shared sense of loss, a collective mourning, made worse because it was Christmas, which was supposed to be a time of joy. But there was happiness too, a small child ran in and out of the headstones, not understanding where they were, or even why, but high on the excitement of Christmas. The parents tried to apologize, but I waved it away and smiled, because Charlie would be walking one day, and if there was even the slightest chance my parents were looking down, I would want them to see his same unbridled joy.

"I'll go first," Sutton's voice was soft, but steady. "Hi, Mom, hi, Dad. I've started college; I wish you could see it. I mean I'm not loving it, but I've joined a couple of societies, including one for graphic art, which is so cool. Maybe that is what I want to do, maybe animation, although, I don't know yet." He shot me a glance, and I smiled. He was a talented artist, saw things in life that most of us would never see, and maybe art and animation, was where he'd end up. He had the confidence to talk his way into anything he wanted.

“Me next,” Trace said. “I’m graduating soon. Got a job lined up too. I think you’d be proud. Actuarial science, which is hard, but I love numbers, and I’m good at it.”

They both glanced at me in expectation. Of course, I had news about work now that I was heading to be a partner in Marshall-Byrne Construction, but that wasn’t the most important thing. I smiled, tears in my eyes, thinking of Jax and the love and support he brought into my life. “Hi, Mom, hi, Dad. So, I’ve finally found the nerve to be with Jax, and he gets who I am, and it’s new, but I think it’s forever. No. I *know* it’s forever.”

We stood in silence for a while, taking in the moment, lost in memories, and the love that still bound the three of us together. Despite the pain and the grief, we’d found strength in each other, and whatever Sutton and Trace thought, they supported me, as much as I did them.

“We probably need to talk about the house again,” I murmured, and met Trace’s knowing gaze and Sutton’s frown.

“About selling it?” Sutton asked. As the youngest, maybe he’d changed his mind, moving away and not having a home might mean he wouldn’t want to sell, maybe it was still a home he wanted to live in.

“Mom and Dad left us money for most things, but the house... it’s too big for me. I don’t want to live there, and if we sold, we could release the money tied in it and... I can invest with Jax, and you two could buy a place each, or the three of us could get something together, or... It’s a big house,” I ended.

Sutton and Trace exchanged glances. “Okay,” Sutton said with a cautious tone.

“But we have to do it together, not just two of us, or one of us. It’s our house. It’s home.”

Trace shrugged, and Sutton tugged both of us into a hug. “Home is whenever I’m with the two of you,” he said, and tears collected in my eyes. “Love you.”

We hugged and hugged, and the three of us were complete idiots right by our parents' grave.

But I think Mom and Dad would have understood.

As we turned to leave, Trace squeezed my shoulder. "Look at us now. We made it through."

Sutton smiled. "They'd be so proud."

And as we walked out, still hugging and exchanging memories of Mom and Dad, I couldn't help but feel a warmth in my heart, knowing that while they might not be with us physically, our parents would always be with each of us.

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the Byrne house, we were swallowed by heated discussions over football, and jokes, and laughter, but the best bit was when I found Jax in the kitchen with the kids, and the way he grinned when he first saw me before proceeding to tug me under some mistletoe in front of his entire family.

And how, when I waved my brothers off at the airport the day after Christmas, he was right by my side—Charlie in his stroller—and he held my hand so tight I could never forget he was there.

I needed to tell him everything, and for some reason, it needed to be now, when my brothers were gone. I stopped him dead, the person behind us close to barreling into us and cursing about being late even though I apologized.

"So, we've decided we're selling the house." I hadn't told Jax about the cemetery conversation, nor about how much I loved that he'd gotten me and my brothers talking.

"You are?" Jax didn't sound surprised.

"Trace and Sutt are coming back in February, and we're going to tackle the attic and tidy up the yard, and then, put it on the market. We own it outright, so anything we make they can invest or buy a property each or whatever, and what I make, I can put into the business, or whatever."

He tugged me to one side of the access and held out a hand, which I grasped. “Make it official and move in with me. Not when it sells, but now.”

I thought about the things I’d been squirreling away in his spare room and cradled his face. “You’re sure?”

“As sure as I know Charlie is going to wake up at any second.”

I kissed him to seal the deal. “Yes.”

Someone else tutted, but it was added on the end of a slur. Fuck that noise. I was with Jax and I loved him, and he loved me, and I wasn’t letting him go for anything. With my hand laced in his, and him pushing Charlie with the other, we headed back to the truck.

“Thank you for talking to my brothers,” I murmured as we waited for the elevator to the top floor.

“I didn’t do much.” Jax dipped his head and stray curls fell over his face, which I tucked back behind his ear.

“You did everything,” I whispered into the kiss.

He touched my cheek and smiled. “Anything for you. Any time.”



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## Jax

A FEW DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, Arlo officially moved in, and we threw a housewarming party for family—my brothers and their partners, plus various kids, Mama, and Papa, plus Lorna back from New York, visiting with them just to catch up on everything. Lorna took one look at Charlie and burst into tears.

Leo and Reid were flustered, but I saw something in the tears, and I thought it was happiness.

“I’m pregnant,” she announced.

Silence.

Reid gasped. “What the fuck, Lorna? Who do we need to kill?” He winced when Leo elbowed him, then shushed him.

“You’re not killing anyone. His name is Ian, and he’s asked me to marry him, and we’re having a baby, and for some stupid reason, I can’t stop crying.”

The three of us blinked at her, not knowing what to say, but it was Arlo who saved the day, ushering her and Charlie away from us, and glaring at Reid.

“Reid, you’re an idiot,” Leo hissed, and Reid even opened his mouth to argue, but I placed my hand over it.

“Shh,” I warned, hearing voices in the kitchen, as Papa went in there first, and then, Arlo was gesturing for us to go into the kitchen. I caught the tail end of I love yous, and I miss yous, and then, we were all crowded around a laptop, and there was a man who stared back at us.

“Hi,” he said with a small wave, which he quickly dropped. “I’m Ian. I’m Lorna’s... boyfriend, until she...” He stopped, and we probably glared, and then, she glanced up at us, and with a huff, she pulled a small velvet box out of the purse on the table. When she opened it, a diamond sparkled.

“Ask me again, Ian,” she said.

Ian swallowed; nerves evident. “Lorna Byrne, will you make me the happiest man on Earth by marrying me?” He sounded so emotional, and my chest tightened.

Lorna smiled, then the tears dried up. “Yes, Ian, I will.”

Mama cried; Papa was so damn proud.

Reid bristled and would probably be thinking of doing a background check, but at least he feigned immediate happiness well enough for me and Leo not to sit on him.

When it was my turn, I gave my congratulations, but I also went to a half crouch and hugged Lorna. “You’ll make a wonderful mom,” I whispered and kissed her cheek.

“I’m gonna practice on Charlie.”

Charlie, who was scrunching up his face, which could only mean one thing.

“Starting from now?” I asked, as she caught a whiff of the smell. She handed him to me, grimacing.

“Starting from when I don’t feel sick all the time.”

IT WAS weird going from all that chaos to a quiet house again, and Charlie was so exhausted from all the attention, he slept through the night.

The first time since he’d arrived here.

“And then there’s this.” Arlo held up a baby building set, with a toy hammer and a pile of bricks.

We’d woken up early, and after feeding Charlie and watching him play for an hour on the floor, we were taking advantage of his quick nap to sort through the piles of Christmas gifts he’d received.

“That was from me.” I smirked.

“Of course, it was.” He dutifully added it to the list that one day I hoped to give to Zach as a memory of his son’s Christmas.

“And this bear who looks like a Village People reject?” I waved it at him.

“Hey, that’s a construction bear,” he defended, and snorted a laugh. “If we added a teeny tiny leather harness...”

“We are not doing that to my nephew’s teddy bear.” I leaned over to kiss him.

His belly growled, and I patted it, then lifted his shirt to kiss all his soft bits, but when his belly made that noise again, I knew it was time for lunch, or at least a snack.

“My bear is hungry,” I deadpanned.

He rolled his eyes. “Your bear needs to head to the grocery store for milk and bread.”

“You want to make it a family affair?” I asked and pointed upwards to our bedroom where Charlie was napping.

“Nah, I’ll be five minutes.” He kissed me goodbye, then headed out, and I watched him leave. I was so staring at his ass.

He was everything to me—my best friend, my business partner all bar signing the contract, and my lover —, and after yesterday’s proposal between my sister and Ian, I had this insane urge to fall to my knees and beg him to never leave and let me put a ring on it.

It hadn’t been much more than a month of being together, but I knew.

Three years, we’d been circling this, me just stubborn, him confused, and now according to my nephews, we were JaxLo, and that was it, really.

Jax and Arlo. Forever.

The front door slammed open, startling me from my deep thoughts, wondering what Arlo was doing. But I scrambled to stand when someone called my name, who was *not* Arlo. I was face-to-face with a man who looked... like me. It was like staring into a mirror, but seeing a reflection that was worn out, tired, and bloodied. His weight was supported by another man who seemed equally worn, but more collected.

“We need a bed for him!” the stranger holding up my doppelgänger barked at me. That was when it hit me—my twin was here.

*Zach was here.*

“Kai, stop shouting,” Zach managed, sounding weak.

Kai muttered something under his breath, then stared at me pointedly. “Bed?” he asked, but then ignored me and headed for the stairs. Zach wasn’t a small man, but Kai waved away my help and supported Zach’s weight up the stairs.

I guided them to the spare room. “Stay the fuck here!” Kai ordered, although the way he helped Zach to the bed was at odds with the angry, barking orders. “Do not fucking leave this fucking house!” he added. Then, he slapped a large bumpy envelope onto the bedside table and left before I could ask him anything, the sound of the front door slamming punctuated his exit.

He’d left me alone with Zach.

Silence settled for a moment as I sized him up, laying there with his left eye shut and swollen, his right half closed. It was uncanny how similar we were. His hair was shorter and neater, but he was slim like me, albeit with more defined muscles, and there was a thin scar running from his ear to his Adam’s apple. I shuddered to think what might have left that mark. The darkness under Zach’s eyes spoke volumes. His right arm was in a crude sling, and his expression was a mask of pain.

Worse, there was blood on his shirt and jacket.

The world around me had narrowed to a still, silent point when I’d entered the bedroom where he lay. Zach was a living reflection of myself, sprawled on the bed with his face contorted in pain, his breathing labored. A pang of empathy tightened in my chest and a cold shiver traveled down my spine. It wasn’t exactly the same as staring into a mirror, but I could almost imagine that I was the one lying on that bed, hurt and vulnerable.

“Zach?” My voice sounded foreign to my ears, thick with emotion as I approached him with caution, as though me

moving any faster might make him vanish.

His eyes—my eyes—fluttered open, clouded with pain before focusing on me. Recognition, mixed with confusion, flickered in his gaze. “Charlie? Do you have him?” he whispered; his voice hoarse.

I nodded, swallowing hard against the lump forming in my throat. “He’s here; he’s safe.”

Zach slumped, and all the fight seemed to leave him in a rush.

“Thank you,” he rasped.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, afraid the truth behind his current state would somehow prove some of the bad things that slipped into my thoughts.

“I... I don’t...” He winced, closing his eyes for a moment as if to gather the scattered pieces of his thoughts. “It’s all a blur,” he admitted, a shadow crossing his features. “But I knew Kai would...”

“Kai is the man who was with you.”

“Kai,” Zach repeated and coughed.

I edged back, weighing up whether I could manage to get to the kitchen and back, and for him to be here when I returned. He coughed again, and I sprinted downstairs, collected a bottle of water, and then, took the stairs three at a time, rounding the corner and somehow expecting the bed to be empty.

He was still there.

I unscrewed the lid, held out the bottle, then realized it was impossible for him to drink flat on his back.

What did I do?

Okay, this is just the same as when one of the girls is ill. *I can do this.*

I sat on the edge of the bed with care, and scooted up so I could help him sit, leaning against me. He smelled of blood

and bleach and sweat, and his short curly hair, the same color as mine, was plastered to his head. In worn jeans and the bloodied torn green T-shirt, he didn't look the picture of health, and as I helped him take a few sips, I could feel a lump under his shirt that had to be bandages.

“What happened, Zach?”

“Hazard... job.” He attempted to laugh, but it was a weak rumble and he curled in on himself.

“Take it easy,” I soothed, easing him back onto the pillows. “You're safe here.” The padded envelope had dumped was resting unopened on the bedside table and I presumed it held answers, or explanations that I wasn't sure I was ready for. When I tore it open, all it contained was medication with dosages on the labels that I assumed was for Zach, plus a piece of paper. I unfolded the note, as Zach attempted to keep his eyes open.

*He needs his meds, look after the fucking idiot, don't call a doc, no hospitals, and don't ask questions he can't answer. He won't stay. Don't panic when he leaves. K.*

So much for answers about what had happened to him. I tipped out the correct dosage of one medication, and then the other, and wondered if he was going to be able to take them. He answered my unspoken question, holding out a shaky hand and grasping the pills, throwing them into his mouth, and allowing me to help him swallow some water. He seemed hot to the touch, and as soon as he'd swallowed the pills, he attempted to grasp my hand.

“Charlie,” he asked again.

“I have him, he's okay,” I repeated.

“No... see him...”

“I'll get him.” I went to my bedroom and scooped up a sleeping Charlie, heading back to Zach, I sat on the edge of the bed in which he was lying, and showed my twin his son. Zach's eyes filled with tears as he reached out and touched one of Charlie's hands, his eyes sparkling with emotion.

“Tell me.”

Tell him what? “About Charlie?” Zach nodded. “He’s putting on weight. He’s so happy all the time, although we’ve had a few sleepless nights. He loves mashed up zucchini now, and of course, bananas, and he’s funny and sweet. Last week, he did this thing where he was clapping his hands at Arlo, and Arlo leaned too far forward, and Charlie caught Arlo’s nose, and... I guess I should explain that Arlo is my boyfriend.”

Zach smiled and shut his eye, wincing, then attempted to relax. “Tell me about him,” he said.

“Uhm, Arlo is a big guy, you’ll love him, a good brother, and he loves Charlie, and more importantly, for some weird reason, he loves me. He walks with Charlie around the yard, and they talk nonsense together about flowers and...”

I could see Zach was sleeping, probably the best thing.

“What the...?” Arlo’s voice was soft from the door, and he was still holding the paper bag with groceries in it. I stood, then tugged Arlo out of the room with me and Charlie.

“Zach’s here,” I explained.

He made that face that implied *doh*, but then, he grew serious. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m guessing we’re not calling anyone?”

I handed Arlo the note, and he read it with a creased brow. “Okay, then.” Charlie stirred in my arms, and he wriggled, and I got the sense nap time was over.

Well then, seems as if Charlie’s dad was home.

My -long—lost twin.

How had life turned upside down in such a short time?

Arlo and I spent the rest of the day alternating between playing with Charlie, holding Charlie, checking in with a still sleeping Zach, and stealing whispered worries when we could. Why we whispered, I don’t know, maybe because my house wasn’t private anymore with Zach, who despite being my twin, was a complete stranger. When Arlo said he’d



understand if I wanted him to go back to his house to give me and Zach space, I clung to him like a limpet and refused to let him leave.

He growled. “Wasn’t leaving anyway. Just thought it might be what you wanted.”

I’d only just found him; I wasn’t letting him go.

Zach slept on and off the rest of the day, and Arlo left snacks next to the bed, which were being eaten, along with water and orange juice. We debated coffee but weren’t sure if caffeine would be contraindicated with his meds, so we held off on that.

A little after six the next morning, as I wandered past the room to check on him, with a wide-awake, fed and changed Charlie in my arms, Zach was awake enough to shuffle upright in bed, and call me in.

“Hey, you,” he cooed to Charlie and held out his good arm. I felt torn, which was ridiculous, but I was freaking jealous of the fact he was Zach’s son and not mine. How had I gotten to feeling like that?

“I didn’t even know his mom was pregnant,” Zach murmured as he inhaled the scent of Charlie and fussed with him. For Charlie, it must have been confusing to see two of us, but hell, he was dealing with it like a champ. There again, he dealt with everything life threw at him, so why did I think this would be any different? “I found out when they called me to the hospital. She never even got to meet him.”

Jeez, and there was me dealing with stupid petty jealousy.

“She passed away?”

“An hour after he was born. She’d been...” Tears collected in his eyes and slipped unheeded down his cheeks. “I thought I could protect them both. I gave it all up to be a dad, and it followed me.”

I sat on the end of the bed; aware I was only being given tiny bits of information. “What followed you, Zach?”

“My job.”

“You’re one of the good guys, right?” I asked, tensing as I waited for him to answer.

He blanched, but then nodded. “Depends on who’s in power at the time, but yes, I promise you, I’m one of the good guys.”

“Kai as well?”

“And Kai.”

“What’s next?”

He snuggled Charlie, who burbled and tugged at his dad’s hair. “It’s not done yet. But the person who ki—hurt Charlie’s mom? Gone.” He glanced up, but he knew I would have caught that slip. There was a bigger story here that I thought I might never hear. Charlie leaned against his dad, and it felt right seeing him there.

Odd, but right.

“I have to go back,” he said after another pause.

“You’re not well enough to go anywhere.”

“Will you care for Charlie for me?”

“Always. You never have to ask.”

He huffed a laugh, but it was filled with pain. “I never had someone who’d unconditionally be there in my corner, even Kai has his limits, and he’s my partner. Not in life, I mean, at work.” Something about that last bit made me think Kai was more to my twin than he thought, but I didn’t push.

“What about your family?” I thought about my parents, Leo, Reid, Lorna, and all the nibblings, and I couldn’t imagine a moment when they weren’t all in my corner.

“I didn’t have one,” he said, and I must have frowned because he shook his head. “But I’m glad you got so lucky, little brother.”

“What happened to you?”

The light in his eyes dimmed a little. “Too much to explain, but I never knew about you, not until I left the Navy

and was recruited, and when they did background, there you were.”

“You were in the Navy? Next thing you’ll tell me is you were a SEAL.” He dipped his head, brushing back Charlie’s hair, but he didn’t answer. “The fu—fudge? You were a SEAL?”

He glanced up and smirked. “I can neither confirm, nor deny.”

“Confirm or deny what?” Arlo asked from the door, carrying a tray with three drinks and a plate of cookies.

I pointed at Zach. “Navy SEAL,” I exclaimed.

Arlo settled the tray on the table and placed the cocoa next to Zach. He peered at it, then checked out mine and Arlo’s coffee, his expression hopeful, and I just felt what he wanted, or needed. I switched it out for my coffee and settled Charlie between his knees so he could lean over the table and sip the caffeine. Zach let out such a deep sigh of thanks that it made Arlo grin.

What did Arlo see when he saw my twin? Did he feel anything weird? Did he—

Arlo kissed me, cutting off my thoughts. “I love *you*,” he said with fierce determination. “Stop thinking so hard!”

Zach chuckled, and he was smiling, but he also had shadows under his eyes. “I probably need to sleep a while more,” he said, and it was Arlo who picked up Charlie and bounced him.

AFTER BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING, when I checked on my twin, he was gone, with his meds and clothes from my closet.

A scribbled note was all he left.

*Hey little brother, sorry to go; don’t worry about me. Tell Charlie all about me. See you soon. Z.*

# Epilogue

## Jax

### One year later, Christmas Eve

“SUTTON IS LANDING AT TWELVE, Trace at three, so I said we’d all hang around for Trace, get coffees or something.”

“Sure,” I agreed. The last year had been a roller coaster of family reconnecting and learning a new life. The big house had been sold, the funds dispersed—Arlo had put his into our company, and into this house, and everything was truly fifty-fifty. I couldn’t wait to see Sutton and Trace, nor the rest of my family, who were all ending up at my parents’ place tomorrow.

“Also, ta-da! You got another letter,” Arlo announced, and dropped it onto my desk next to the plans I was working on. I was a starving dog on a bone, and ripped it open, Arlo taking the seat facing me.

“Dear JaxLo.” I snorted a laugh. We had an address we could send snail mail to; a generic PO Box in Albany, New York, and Zach and I exchanged letters every month through the agency who used to send me updates, which was a front for something mysterious. Apparently, they’d sent me to all the different places where they hoped I would get to meet Zach, but it never quite happened, and of course, now the updates had ended—no point in subterfuge anymore. We also uploaded photos to an encrypted storage area: Charlie turning one, his first steps, sleeping with his construction bear, holding a sign with his first word—dada—climbing the guard we had to put around the Christmas tree because, boy, did Charlie love the shiny.

Zach had managed to visit three times over the last year, and one of those times, it had been for an entire weekend. He promised me he’d be done soon, but to keep Charlie safe, he wanted people to think that he was my son.

Charlie called me Papa, and Arlo, Daddy. My letters to my twin ran on for pages, his were always short and to the point, but at least, I knew he was out there alive.

I continued reading. “Things here are good. Kai and I are on assignment tomorrow, can’t say where, but y’know, snow. Charlie has grown so fast, love the photos, keep them coming. I really hope I can make it back to him and you for longer because we have a lot of catching up to do. Soon, I hope. Sending you love at Christmas, little brother. Love Zach (and Kai who is currently scowling at me at the thought of snow #SouthernBoy).” Then, I stopped, because the next bit was just for me. *Oh, and have you proposed yet? And if not, why not. Kai says you should. #SappySouthernBoy.* I swallowed my smile and folded the letter into the drawer, pulling out the small velvet box I’d been hiding behind a stack of envelopes.

Arlo leaned over the desk, then slid his fingers into my curls and tilted my head so he could kiss me, and I even had my hand on his belt when—

“Daddy! Papa! Yuck!”

I glanced past Arlo at Charlie, who was standing in the doorway, covered in melted chocolate, Construction-Bear, or CB as we called him, wet and dripping water on the floor.

Arlo didn’t even turn around. “He climbed the gate to get the Christmas chocolates on the tree, right?”

I bit my lip. “You’re not wrong.”

With a long-suffering sigh, given it was his turn to deal with whatever our chaos monster had come up with now, the love of my life picked Charlie up and went into the kitchen. I heard laughing, and some of Arlo explaining why, even though chocolate was the best thing ever, the decorations needed to stay on the tree for one more day. Also, that dunking CB in water wouldn’t clean off chocolate. I pushed the box into my jeans pocket and went to find my boys.

I’d find the right time to ask him.

Charlie was clean enough, CB was sitting on the sink a hundred kinds of forlorn and damp, and there were chocolate

and tiny marshmallows everywhere.

*Everywhere.*

And standing in the middle of it was Arlo, grinning. I approached him with caution, wondering if he was losing his shit.

“What’s up?”

Arlo pulled me close, then picked me up off the floor—he picked me up—and swung me in a circle. “I love this. I love chocolate everywhere, and tiny marshmallows sticking to my socks, and Charlie laughing, and CB all sad and wet.” He dropped me, steadying me until I was upright.

This was the *imperfectly* perfect moment for me to get my act together, and I picked up Charlie, then dug awkwardly in my pocket. I thrust out my hand, thinking I should be on my knees, but that didn’t seem right. I opened my palm to reveal the small box, and one-handed, I flicked it open. I always knew I’d ask when I had Charlie in my arms, and I’d been practicing.

Arlo gaped at me. We’d talked about future-us, and it included a nebulous idea of a wedding, but we’d been so busy with Lorna having her baby and marrying Ian, and then work, plus whatever Zach was out there doing, it had always been pushed to one side.

“Jax?” Arlo said. Was he encouraging me? Or asking me what the hell was happening?

I cleared my throat. “I thought maybe, Valentine’s Day, me, Charlie, all of our families, sunset, the beach, maybe even get Zach to swim his SEAL-type stuff up to the shore. Arlo, I’d love to marry you. Do you want to make all this kissing and loving official?”

He grabbed us into a hug, and he didn’t let either of us go, even when Charlie batted at our faces with his sticky hands.

“That’s a big fat yes,” Arlo said, and all was right with my world. One fake date on an app, four years of wanting him permanently in my life, and I knew that Arlo was my forever.

We kissed to seal the deal, and Charlie bounced and patted us both with sticky, chubby fingers, and there was chocolate everywhere.

Perfect.

**THE END**

READ ZACH and Kai's story in *How Much For A Life of Lies?* Book 3 in the Shadow Team series, coming 2024.



# Shadow Team

*Action, adventure, and love in the face of death.*

1. [How Much For The Whole Night](#) - Out Now
2. How Much For A Broken Heart – Summer 2024
3. How Much For A Life Of Lies - Summer 2024

## What's next for RJ Scott

## Coming soon...

Spring Rains (Wyoming 3) - *coming 15 March 2024*

How Much For A Broken Heart? (Shadow Team 2)

How Much For A Life of Lies (Shadow Team 3)

Into the Fall (Wyoming 4)

Rainbow (Single Dads, 8)

## Co-authored titles coming soon

Zenith (Prophet 3) - *coming 19 January 2024*

Caleb (Boyfriend for Hire, 6)

Second (LA Storm, 2) - *coming 16 February 2024*

Shield (LA Storm, 3) - *coming 19 June 2024*

Dance On Ice (Chesterford Coyotes, 3) - *coming 26 April 2024*

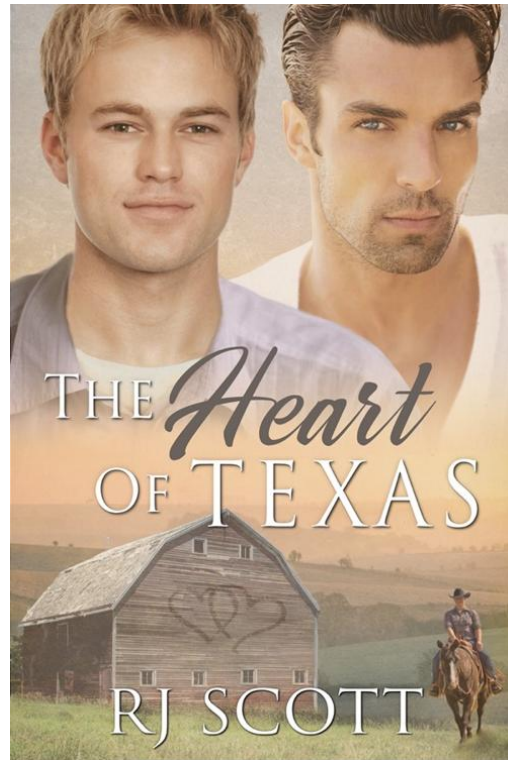
# Texas & Legacy

# Texas (Cowboy, Rancher, Millionaire, Family)

[The Heart of Texas](#) | [Texas Winter](#) | [Texas Heat](#) | [Texas Family](#) | [Texas Christmas](#) |  
[Texas Fall](#) | [Texas Wedding](#) | [Texas Gift](#) | [Home For Christmas](#)

Legacy (spin-off from Texas series)

[Kyle](#) | [Gabriel](#) | [Daniel](#)



# The Heart Of Texas (Texas 1)

*Bachelor Riley is looking forward to two things: running his father's successful company and staying single forever. But when suddenly he's required to marry in order to receive his inheritance, Riley convinces rival Jack into marrying him for one year...*

Riley Hayes, the playboy of the Hayes family, is a young man who seems to have it all: money, a career he loves, and his pick of beautiful women. His father, CEO of HayesOil, passes control of the corporation to his two sons; but a stipulation is attached to Riley's portion. Concerned about Riley's lack of maturity, his father requires that Riley 'marry and stay married for one year to someone he loves'.

Angered by the requirement, Riley seeks a means of bypassing his father's stipulation. Blackmailing Jack Campbell into marrying him "for love" suits Riley's purpose. There is no mention in his father's documents that the marriage had to be with a woman and Jack Campbell is the son of Riley Senior's arch-rival. Win-win.

Riley marries Jack and abruptly his entire world is turned inside out. Riley hadn't counted on the fact that Jack Campbell, quiet and unassuming rancher, is a force of nature in his own right.

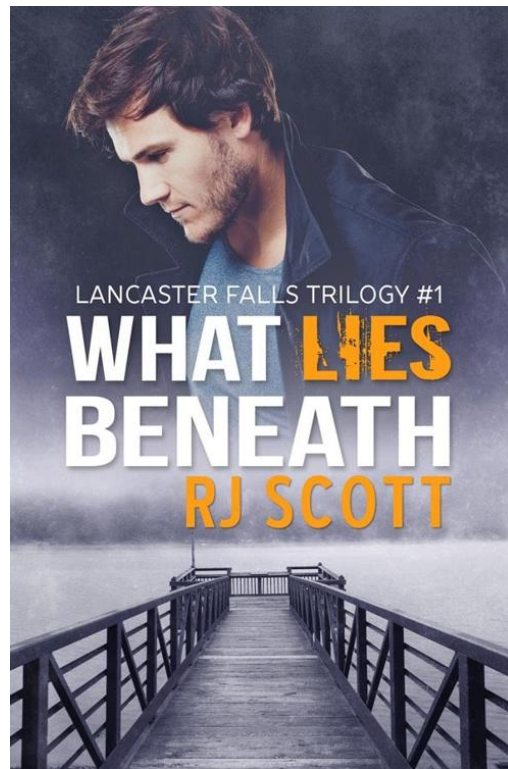
This is a story of murder, deceit, the struggle for power, lust and love, the sprawling life of a rancher and the whirlwind existence of a playboy. But under and through it all, as Riley learns over the months, this is a tale about family and everything that that word means.

**The Heart of Texas**



## Lancaster Falls (Romantic Suspense)

1. [What Lies Beneath](#)
2. [Without a Trace](#)
3. [All That Remains](#)



# What Lies Beneath (Lancaster Falls 1)

In the hottest summer on record, Iron Lake reservoir is emptying, revealing secrets that were intended to stay hidden beneath the water. The tragic story of a missing man is a media sensation, and abruptly the writer and the cop falling in love is just a postscript to horrors neither could have imagined.

Best Selling Horror writer Chris Lassiter struggles for inspiration and he's close to never writing again. His life has become an endless loop of nothing but empty pages, personal appearances, and a marketing machine that is systematically destroying his muse. In a desperate attempt to force Chris to complete unfinished manuscripts his agent buys a remote cabin. All Chris has to do is hide away and write, but he's lost his muse, and not even he can make stories appear from thin air.

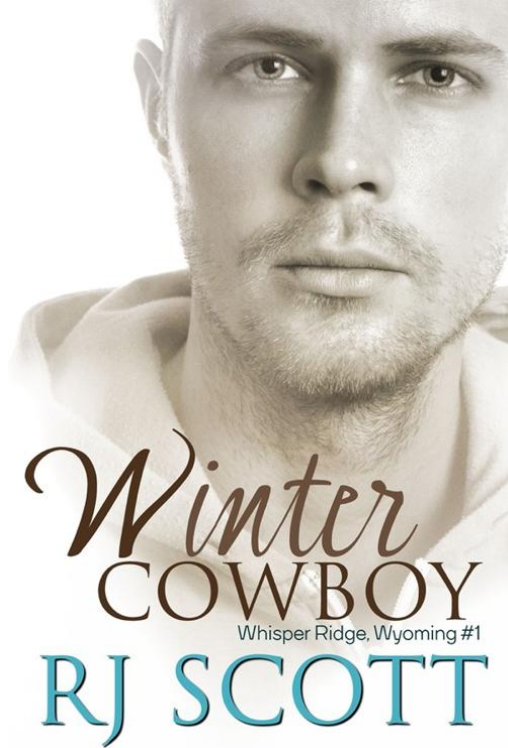
Sawyer Wiseman left town for Chicago, chasing the excitement and potential of being a big city cop, rising the ranks, and making his mark. A case gone horribly wrong draws him back to Lancaster Falls. Working for the tiny police department in the town he'd been running from, digging into cold cases and police corruption, he spends his day's healing, and his nights hoping the nightmares of his last case leave him alone.

**[What Lies Beneath](#)**

# Whisper Ridge, Wyoming (Cowboys)

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[Winter Cowboy](#) | [Summer Drifter](#) | *Spring Rains (15 March 2024)* | *Into the Fall*



# Winter Cowboy (Wyoming 1)

*Micah and Daniel loved each other; until a devastating tragedy tore them apart. But when they both return to Whisper Ridge, they gain a chance to heal old wounds if hate turns to love... an intense and emotional romance.*

Micah Lennox left Whisper Ridge after promising the man he loved that he would never return. But the only way he knows to keep his pregnant sister and nephew safe is to go home. Spending winter in Wyoming opens too many old wounds, but he's on the run from justice which can't be far behind, and this is his last chance at redemption.

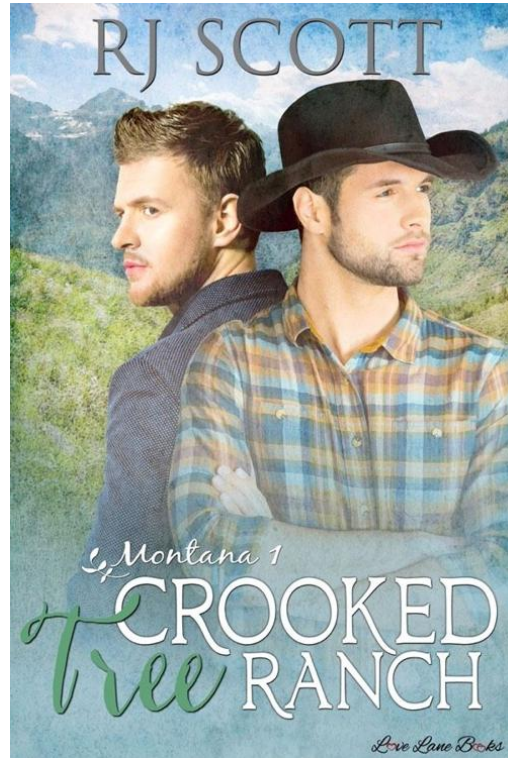
After a hostage situation leaves Doctor Daniel Sheridan struggling with PTSD, he returns to Whisper Ridge. Joining his dad in family practice is a balm to soothe his exhausted soul, and somehow, he finds a peace he can live with. That is until he meets Micah in a frozen graveyard, and the years of anger and feelings of betrayal boiling inside him, erupt.

Micah and Daniel have a past that was destroyed by lies and tragedy, and even if hate could turn to love, will Micah stay at Whisper Ridge?

# Montana

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[Crooked Tree Ranch](#) | [The Rancher's Son](#) | [A Cowboy's Home](#) | [Snow In Montana](#) |  
[Second Chance Ranch](#) | [Montana Sky](#)



# Crooked Tree Ranch (Montana 1)

**The cowboy, the man from the city, and the ranch where hate turns to love, and family is everything.**

Amidst the chaos of his crumbling life, Jay seizes the opportunity to apply for a marketing role at a dude ranch in Montana. Leaving New York behind, he embarks on a fresh start at Crooked Tree Ranch. However, the infuriating cowboy who constantly challenges him begins to stir up more than just frustration. Falling for the gruff cowboy shocks Jay, but when kisses turn to more, could love be possible?

Nate, a former rodeo star and the ranch's foreman, has been shouldering the responsibility for five years after his mentor fell ill. Encouraged by his brothers and determined to keep the ranch thriving, Nate realizes the necessity of bringing in an expert to propel the business forward. Yet, when the new arrival arrives with a troubled family, Nate is caught off guard by the magnitude of the challenges they bring. As he and Jay work together to transform the ranch, Nate finds himself unexpectedly drawn to the charming city guy.

Against the backdrop of the Montana mountains and in saving Crooked Tree Ranch, Nate and Jay fall in love, one kiss at a time.

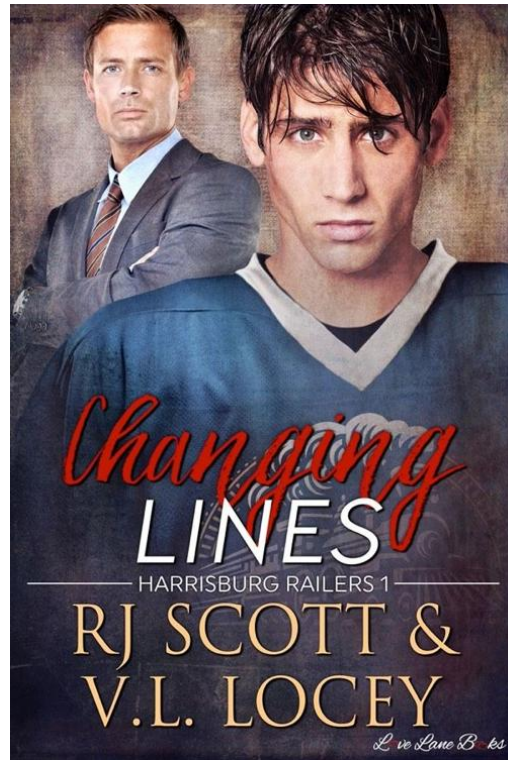
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[Crooked Tree Ranch](#) | [The Rancher's Son](#) | [A Cowboy's Home](#) | [Snow In Montana](#) | [Second Chance Ranch](#) | [Montana Sky](#)

## Hockey from RJ Scott & VL Locey

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*When hockey wunderkind Tennant Rowe meets his new coach, he knows he's in trouble. Jared Madsen is nine years older than Tennant, impossibly attractive, and — worst of all — his brother's off-limits best friend. Is their chemistry worth the risk?*



## Changing Lines (Railers 1)

Can Tennant show Jared that age is just a number, and that love is all that matters?

The Rowe Brothers are famous hockey hotshots, but as the youngest of the trio, Tennant has always had to play against his brothers' reputations. To get out of their shadows, and against their advice, he accepts a trade to the Harrisburg Railers, where he runs into Jared Madsen. Mads is an old family friend and his brother's one-time teammate. Mads is Tennant's new coach. And Mads is the sexiest thing he's ever laid eyes on.

Jared Madsen's hockey career was cut short by a fault in his heart, but coaching keeps him close to the game. When Ten is traded to the team, his carefully organized world is thrown into chaos. Nine years his junior and his best friend's brother, he knows Ten is strictly off-limits, but as soon as he sees Ten's moves, on and off the ice, he knows that his heart could get him into trouble again.

**Changing Lines**

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All hockey romance from RJ Scott & VL  
Locey

## Harrisburg Railers (Hockey Romance)

[Changing Lines](#) | [First Season](#) | [Deep Edge](#) | [Poke Check](#) | [Last Defense](#) | [Goal Line](#)  
| [Neutral Zone](#) | [Hat Trick](#) | [Save The Date](#) | [Baby Makes Three](#) | [Rivals](#) | [Perfect  
Gifts](#) | [Family First](#)

[Railers Volume 1](#) | [Railers Volume 2](#) | [Railers Volume 3](#) | [Railers Volume 4](#)

# Owatonna U Hockey (Hockey Romance)

[Ryker](#) | [Scott](#) | [Benoit](#) | [Christmas Lights](#) | Valentine's Hearts | [Desert Dreams](#)

# Arizona Raptors (Hockey Romance)

[Coast To Coast](#) | [Across the Pond](#) | [Shadow and Light](#) | [Sugar and Ice](#) | [School and Rock](#)

# Boston Rebels

[Lost In Boston \(Free Novella\)](#) | [Top Shelf](#) | [Back Check](#) | [Snowed](#) | [Royal Lines](#) |  
[Blade](#) | Rental

# LA Storm

[Script](#) | *Second* | *Shield*

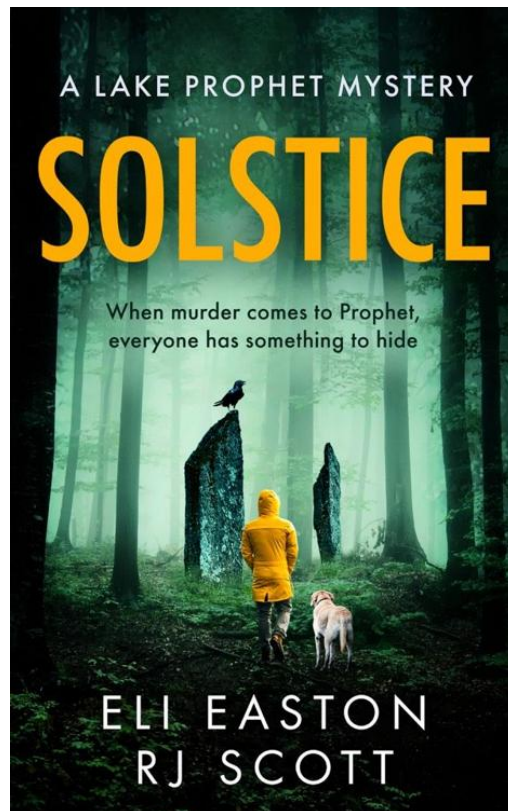
# Chesterford Coyotes

[Off The Ice](#) | [On Thin Ice](#) | *Dance on Ice*

# The Lake Prophet Mysteries (Romantic Suspense)

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1. [Solstice](#)
2. [Equinox](#)
3. *Zenith (January 2024)*



## **Solstice (A Lake Prophet Mystery)**

*The Lake Prophet Mysteries, book 1*

**From the dramatic peaks of the Olympic mountain range to the small town of Prophet, murder is only a footstep away.**

Gabriel is a former undercover cop haunted by the things he's seen and done. He returns to his small hometown of Prophet, taking on the role of sheriff, hoping to mend his fractured relationship with his estranged brother and rebuild his life. But when a chilling murder occurs at Sentinel Rocks, a sacred Makah site on Lake Prophet, Gabriel's dreams of peace and reconciliation are shattered.

Gabriel navigates a web of intrigue, where suspects abound; from local tribal elders to fervent Solstice worshippers and even those hunting the elusive Big Foot. When the brutal murder leaves Duke, a loyal Labrador retriever, as the sole witness, Gabriel stumbles upon an unexpected ally—a local animal behaviorist named Tiber.

Tiber, a newcomer to Prophet, seeks refuge in this remote haven, attempting to escape his own inner demons. Armed with his extraordinary ability to communicate

with animals, he offers his expertise through video consultations, helping pet owners with their beloved companions. While he attributes his skill to his academic background, his intuition and flashes of insight owe as much to his Navajo heritage as to science.

With the relentless rain washing away sins and good intentions alike, Gabriel and Tiber must begin to confront their own vulnerabilities and unravel the truth.

### **What Lies Beneath**



# Christmas stories

[The Wishing Tree](#) - Small Town Romance, silken kink

[Stop the Wedding](#) - Best friends to lovers, stop the wedding

[Cupcakes and Christmas](#) - Reality TV, opposites attract

[Love Happens Anyway](#) - Fake boyfriend for Christmas

[The Christmas Throwaway](#) - A young man thrown out of his home before Christmas for being gay

[Christmas Prince](#) - A prince, a castle, and the magic of Christmas

[Dallas Christmas](#) - Hockey Romance, closeted, second chance

[Jesse's Christmas](#) - Grinch ends up in the best ever Christmas town

[New York Christmas](#) - Second chance romance in New York

[The Road to Frosty Hollow](#) - Road trip, best friends brother

[Angel in a Book Shop](#) - Magical, book store, love across the centuries, waiting for love

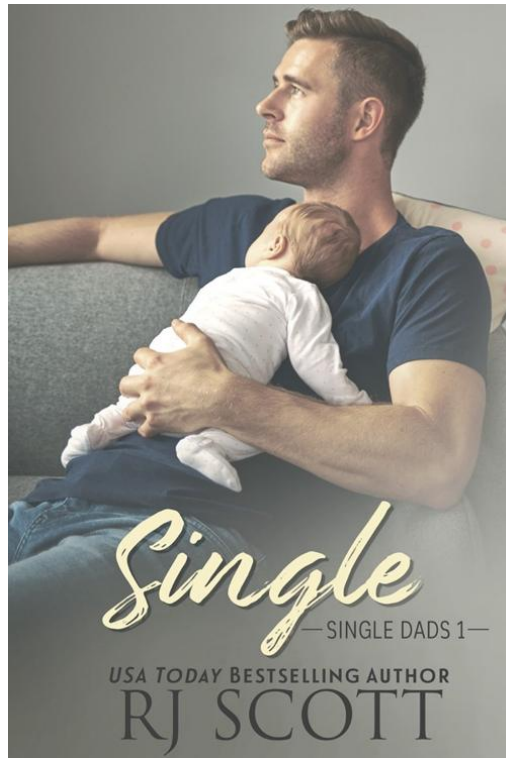
[Seth & Casey](#) - teacher/firefighter, trapped in snowstorm - less Christmas and more snow!

# Single Dads

# The Single Dads Series

[Single](#) | [Today](#) | [Promise](#) | [Always](#)

[Listen](#) | [Pride](#) | [Miracle](#)



# Single (Single Dads 1)

Reeling from the painful rejection of a man he thought he loved, Asher is left holding the baby.

Ash wants a family and is determined to continue with a surrogacy he'd begun with his ex. Bringing baby Mia home, he vows that he will be the best father he can be.

Nothing in this world matters more to him than caring for his daughter, not even accidentally falling in lust with the doctor next door. Challenged by his growing attraction to Sean, and confronted by painful memories of his family, Ash has to learn that love is all that matters.

When ER doctor Sean moves in with his friends next door to sexy single father Ash, he falls so quickly it takes his breath away. The sex they have is hot, but Ash is adamant his heart is too full with love for his daughter to let anyone else in. Why is Sean the only one who sees how scared Ash is, and how can he prove to his new lover that he desperately wants the three of them to become a family?

<http://rjscott.co.uk/read-single>

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# Single Dads Series

The Single Dads Series can be read as standalone, but some characters will appear in other stories :)

[Single](#) | [Today](#) | [Promise](#) | [Always](#)

[Listen](#) | [Pride](#) | [Miracle](#)

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## FREE READS

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# Meet RJ Scott

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RJ discovered romance in books at a very young age and realized that if there wasn't romance on the page, she could create it in her head. With over one hundred and fifty books published, she is a full time author of gay romance.

She lives and works out of her home in the beautiful English countryside, spends her spare time reading, watching films, and enjoying time with her family.

The last time she had a week's break from writing she didn't like it one little bit and has yet to meet a box of chocolates she couldn't defeat.

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