



MR.
GEO'S

Secret Baby

AIMEE BRONSON

Mr. CEO's Secret Baby

A Billionaire Second Chance Romance

Aimee Bronson

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Note from the Author

Just a friendly note that if you aren't familiar with my novels
and steam levels,

my "fun" scenes are fairly hot and descriptive, but I
wouldn't call it erotica. No closed doors here...

With this book, I get right into the action, so be forewarned!

ENJOY!

With my love and appreciation,

Aimee

Prologue

MAYA

Seven years ago

“**B**aby,” I gasped, “I want you inside me.”

I ran my hands over his chiseled arms as his mouth covered mine. We were lost in a lust-filled romp, my legs wrapped around his body and me just wanting him. Wanting him in a primal way. Loving how he was wanting me, too.

He hovered over me, growling in a way that primed my core. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and deepening our kiss, intertwining my hungry tongue with his. I wanted to dissolve into him, for us to be one.

His grunt in response told me he wanted to fulfill my request just as much as I wanted it. I reached down to stroke his dick and god, it was hard, and it was ready. I stroked him a few times, and he closed his eyes, absorbing the pleasure. Lining up his cock with my center, I released him and kissed him again. He pushed into me, causing me to gasp with his width. He filled me in a way that I never had with anyone else, and it drove me wild.

He started thrusting, slowly at first, but soon picking up the pace. Both of us were exhaling with every thrust, which probably made us sound like a tennis match gone wild, but I didn't care. We were both nearing the edge, with him moving inside me, and my hips arching up to deepen his every thrust.

He pulled out, and I whimpered my protest.

“I just want to be sure...” He created a trail of kisses down my chest, pushing my breasts together as his face nuzzled between them, and continued downwards. His hands slid down my sides as he came to rest his face between my legs. His eyes were closed, and he looked like he was enjoying himself even more than I was about to be enjoying myself.

His tongue circled my clit, and I tensed with anticipation.

“Relax”, he whispered. And he continued to suck me like a ripe peach, my juices feeding his lust. His able tongue explored my folds until it thrust inside me over and over. He finally replaced his tongue with his fingers as he continued to dance his tongue over my clit. My breathing quickened, almost gasping, until a wave of absolute ecstasy rode from my core and exploded out the top of my head. I screeched with total pleasure, becoming completely limp, but wanting him to finish inside me so I could feel his fullness again.

“Please,” I begged him. “Get back inside me and fuck me just how you like it. Break my pelvis if you have to.” He smiled and then crawled, army style, back up towards my face and kissed me deeply so that I tasted myself on him. It was so fucking hot and I couldn’t take it any longer. I spread my legs around him and pulled him close so that he plunged back inside me.

“I just wanted to be sure that you were going to have as good of a time as I’m having.” He closed his eyes and his breathing rate increased. “Oh, God, what you do to me,” he whispered. He started to pump me over and over, relentlessly,

until we were almost unable to contain ourselves. Finally, he thrust deep and held himself in me, arched his back with release, until he finally collapsed.

We lay there, panting with exertion and release, almost unable to believe what pleasure we could create between us.

“Fuck, that was good,” he finally said.

“Mm-hmm,” I said, almost dreamily. I kissed his forehead. “Totally perfect.”

He reached over to his nightstand and opened the drawer. He shimmied his body close to mine, facing me. In his hand was a large, shiny blue button that he was flipping in his fingers.

“I don’t have much to give you now, Maya, but just keep this. You never know what our future holds, but I want you to know that you’ll always have a piece of my heart.” I took the button and gave him a deep, accepting, loving kiss. He was everything to me and this button was the most beautiful gesture.

We lay there and fell into a dopey, blissful sleep. When the sun rose the next morning, we untangled ourselves, had a lighter session of morning sex, and then showered to get ready for the day.

He kissed me goodbye as he headed out to work.

Little did I know that would be the last time I would see him.



I sat alone in our empty apartment, staring out the window at the bustling city below. I couldn't believe it had been two months already since he had left me with only a text to say, "I'm so sorry. I have to go." I didn't think it would be forever. I had asked him to call me and talk about it. There hadn't been any signs that he was unhappy. But he didn't answer ever again, and I had to just let him go.

I hadn't been sure I'd survive even one day, yet here I was.

I felt lost and alone without him. I felt overwhelmed by the two pink lines on the pregnancy test sitting on the bathroom counter.

I'd known for weeks, though. At first, I denied the possibility. So what, everyone missed a period now and then? I was under a lot of stress.

But then the morning sickness hit early and hit hard. I could barely even keep my job at the off-campus restaurant.

I could no longer ignore the signs or the truth: I was pregnant. Pregnant and alone.

I would have to do this alone. Because he left.

How can I even think about being a single mother? The panic that rose inside me was wild and if I thought too long, my heart rate would get to an unsustainable level. The bottom line was that I was afraid of being a single mother.

But even greater than my fear of being a single mother was how he would take the news that he was going to be a father. If he didn't want to be a part of my life, maybe he didn't want to be a part of our child's life.

After all, he disappeared and didn't want to talk anymore, and just expected me to accept it.

So I decided not to try to find him.

I steeled myself and in the same energy that gets you in shape after a bad break-up, I would tackle this pregnancy the same way. I was going to conquer it despite everything that was against me. He would regret treating me the way he did. I didn't need him. And besides, any man who would do what he did doesn't deserve to be with me or my unborn child.

He wasn't going to have the opportunity to disappoint me again.

It was going to be ok; I had a brand new degree, I'd get a job, I'd set up a home.

I looked out the window and felt a rush of optimism. That rush was exactly what I needed.

I signed heavily and bent over toward my side table to grab my phone.

Dialling quickly, I waited for a voice to answer my call.

“Mom?”

Chapter 1

JACK

I sat at my desk, staring blankly at the computer screen in front of me. The reports and emails I had to review were forgotten as my mind wandered to memories of my wife, Ava. It had been two years since she passed away, and while the pain had blunted and dimmed just a bit with time, the longing in my heart was still there.

To compensate, I had thrown myself into my work these last couple of years, thrown my energy and my very essence into building what had become one of the most promising tech companies in the world, determined to bury all the feelings that had threatened to consume me.

But today, I couldn't ignore the weight of my grief. My chest tightened, heavy and alive with a mind of its own, and my breathing became shallow as I fought back tears. I didn't want to show any vulnerability, not even to my closest friends, and especially not to my employees.

I knew I had to escape, to be alone with my thoughts and feelings. I called my assistant and instructed her to cancel all

my meetings for the rest of this week and next. I didn't want any distractions or interruptions. I needed some time. I needed some space. I felt unmoored. From experience, I knew this would pass. But I also knew it was easier when I was alone. For everyone.

I was just about to leave the office when the phone on my desk rang. I frowned at the unfamiliar number that popped up on the display and hesitated before picking up the receiver. I considered just letting it go to voicemail but thought some brief contact with the outside world—the real world—might ease the ache in my chest. Or at least distract me for a few all too brief seconds.

“Jack Monroe.”

“Hey Jack, it's Maya...er, Maya Davies. I hope you're doing well.” Maya's voice was clear and bright, even across however many miles through the phone.

And just like that, my unbalanced world was thrown off even more. Like I had the time machine I spent two years so desperately wishing for, I was slammed back into long walks on a tree-lined college campus, late-night conversations, and long, hot kisses. But this time with Maya Davies.

For reasons that only my younger self could explain, I hadn't seen Maya for years, but she had been an important part of my life for many years. Number one, I don't know how she found me and number two, I was beyond curious why she was calling me today.

“Maya Davies,” I repeated, yearning for the days long before I knew about the kind of grief that could rip your soul from your body. “It’s been a while. What can I do for you?”

I couldn’t help the small tug of my lip that threatened a tiny smile.

Maya cleared her throat, maybe sounding a little nervous.

“It sure has been a while, Jack. I’m calling because I’m now a reporter for Mile High Magazine and we’re working on a forty under forty feature. It’s focusing on leaders in Colorado who have made an impact in their sector. And, of course, everyone is under forty years old. It was just as big of a surprise to me as maybe it is to you, but I’ve been assigned to write a profile on you.”

My heart sank like a rock to the pit of my stomach, muscles tied in knots. I was in no place and had no interest in being the subject of a fluffy vanity piece.

I had worked hard to build this company from the ground up, fueled by a passion for technology and how it could be used to make the world better. I didn’t want to be portrayed as just another rich guy.

“Maya, I don’t have time for this. I’m sorry, but I’m not interested,” I said sharply, firmly replacing the receiver on the phone.

As I walked out of the office, storming inwardly. I couldn’t shake the feeling of disappointment. My blood still roared and my head swam with the even stranger turn the day had taken.

But, sighing, I realized I had been a complete asshole. For no reason. Maya was doing a job. She had no way of knowing the shitstorm that was today.

I turned on my heel and headed back to my office. Without giving myself a chance to think, I walked quickly over to my phone and pulled up her number from the ‘recent callers’ list.

“Hello?” Maya’s voice vibrated with annoyance, but I couldn’t blame her.

“Hey, Maya.” I forced a brightness into my tone that was nowhere close to feeling.

“What do you want, Jack?”

I pinched my eyes shut and rubbed the spot between my brows that started to throb.

“I wanted to apologize for hanging up. I was out of line.”

The throbbing in my head continued to beat to the rhythm of my too-fast pulse.

“You think?” Ah, there was the Maya I used to know. Full of sarcasm and not inclined to take anyone’s bullshit.

“I know. I’m sorry.” I sighed deeply, trying to exhale all the weird energy that was whirling through my body. My blood felt like it was spinning through my veins.

“Look, I’m heading out of town for a few days, to my cabin up in Crested Butte. How about you come up and we can do the interview there. You can get photos, videos, whatever you need.”

“You want us to come to your cabin?” Her confidence wavered a bit, her voice pitching up. I smiled, as this was also the Maya I once knew.

“Yep. If you want to do this, that’s what I can do. I’ll be too slammed when I get back to Denver to fit this in.”

I held my breath, unsure if I wanted her to deny or accept my proposal. What would it be like to see Maya again? Especially since so much time has passed?

There was a long pause before she finally said, “Okay. We’ll come up to the cabin, but I’m bringing a few people.”

“Exactly how many are a few?”

“Three, plus me. I need an assistant, photographer, and videographer.”

I sighed again. There went my relaxing time in the cabin.

“That’s too many. Three of you total. I’ll be up there through the rest of this week and next. You can come up on Tuesday or Wednesday.”

I could tell Maya was getting upset because I could hear her teeth grinding through the phone.

“Still as stubborn as ever,” Maya muttered, more to herself than to me, and I had to fight the urge to laugh. “Fine. We’ll be there Tuesday by noon.”

I sank in relief. I had expected her to put up a bigger argument, and I just wasn’t in the mood to fight with anyone. I

gave her my cell number, the address, and a few instructions about how to get to the property.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you next week, Jack. I look forward to seeing you again.”

And with that, Maya hung up the phone. I sat there, staring at the receiver even though the line was dead, suddenly feeling very overwhelmed. I rubbed my chest as my heartbeat picked up the pace to something barely tolerable. Sweat trickled across my hairline and down my back. The walls were crowding around me and I felt suffocated. I threw the phone down and walked out of my office, ripping the buttons of my shirt open, exposing the white T-shirt beneath it.

I couldn’t get any air and I felt like my whole body was ready to explode as I forced myself onto the elevator down to the parking garage. I barely managed a smile and a wave to the guard before I darted off to my car.

As soon as my ass was in the seat, I started the engine and threw it into gear; windows were wide open to let in some goddamn air.

I buckled my seat belt as I took the curves of the parking garage too fast, desperate to get the fuck out of this place. Finally, I was out in the bright, cold sunlight, weaving through traffic, feeling a small sense of relief as I hit the highway and sped away from the city, leaving the congested streets and smoggy air in my rearview.

The mix of anger and feeling of suffocation eased just a fraction and my fists slightly released their death grip on the

steering wheel as I turned south down the smaller four-lane highway that would eventually wind over the mountains and through the vast valley that always helped me feel free before climbing back impossibly high in the sky. Too often, I flew to Crested Butte, the driving time was always long and unpredictable with traffic. But today, the windshield was what I needed most. And on a Thursday late morning, traffic shouldn't be too bad.

I wanted nothing more than to be alone, escape the social obligations of the city, and find solace in the mountains. But I couldn't turn Maya down. She was an old friend, and I knew she meant well.

As I drove, I used Bluetooth on my phone to dial up the cleaning company I hired to maintain my cabin. I had done it a million times before, but I could barely focus when I heard the vaguely familiar voice answer the phone.

My heart raced with anticipation. I was nervous, my palms sweating. I knew that I was getting into a situation I was not entirely prepared for, but I had to make it work.

It took me too long to register that the woman on the other end of the line needed me to *tell* her why I was calling.

“Um, hi. Yes, this is Jack Monroe. I'm unexpectedly heading up to my cabin right now and was wondering if you could squeeze in a light cleaning today and a more thorough cleaning this weekend. I'm having guests next week.”

Guests. I sighed again. That was the theme of this afternoon.

“Mr. Monroe. Absolutely. We had a last-minute cancellation and we can have a crew out there within the hour. Unless anything has changed, we have the codes to get in as well as to disarm the alarm.”

“That’s great. Thank you. And no changes.”

“Wonderful. I hope you travel safely and enjoy your visit.”

Next on my list of responsibilities that I wanted to leave behind was calling my mom back. She had left a message that she just wanted to check in on me. She had the worried tone in her voice that I had come to know all too well over the last two years. After quickly letting her know that I was headed up to the cabin to relax and get some fresh air, she seemed a little more relaxed. She knew how much I loved going up to the cabin and getting lost in the mountains for a little bit. She knew how much it healed my soul.

When I disconnected the call, I took a deep breath, feeling the fresher air rolling off the pine trees in the foothills clear my lungs and dislodge the knot that formed in my throat.

Nothing but quiet for the next few hours.

But that left a lot of time for thinking and my thoughts kept drifting to Maya.

I wouldn’t have even agreed to this stupid interview if I knew my public relations and marketing directors wouldn’t completely lose their shit if I declined. We needed more publicity. We *always* needed more publicity. And what was better publicity than the young CEO and founder of an almost

billion-dollar company featured as one of the leaders of industry in Denver?

But still...Maya.

I hadn't seen Maya in close to seven years. I could be accused of ghosting her, because that's essentially what I did. I have no defense except that I was young and stupid.

College was a great time for us and we enjoyed it to the full. In every way. At that age, I experienced probably what was the closest thing to love I could have experienced. But really, I had no fucking clue. I needed to walk my own walk, make my own rules. We had almost settled into where the sex was good, no great, but I was questioning whether that was it. Maya was a great girl, but I needed to know what else was out there.

So, I did what any stupid, young, arrogant bastard would do and just choose for myself and not allow anything to get in my way. Not even a girl. Especially not a girl.

So I decided: no contact, no check-ins, nothing.

Once upon a time, I would scour social media to find out what she was up to, but she was oddly quiet. I knew she was a writer, working her way up, and had seen her land her gig at Mile High Magazine, but that was completely by accident. One of the few people I tried to date after Ava's death happened to love the magazine. I saw it on her coffee table, flipped through it, and was shocked as hell to see Maya's name and picture.

For no reason at all, I was just relieved she still used the same last name, which I could only hope meant she hadn't gotten married yet. Or wasn't married still?

The painful knot in my throat reappeared as I sped down the highway, memories of Maya and our relationship flooding back. I felt like I was abandoning Ava on her day, but I couldn't help but feel the mix of excitement and apprehension. My heart was pounding in my chest, and my palms were slick with sweat. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing thoughts.

I drove for hours. The scenery gradually changed from pine-filled forests to wide open valleys to winding passes dotted by small towns and outposts along the way. The fresh air and peacefulness of the mountains were a welcome respite from the chaos of the city.

Snowflakes danced across the windshield; soft and quiet. The cold air breezed through the open window, cleansing my system and easing the knots that were tying me up inside.

By the time I arrived at the cabin, I was breathing normally and took a moment to appreciate the surroundings. I was just outside of town, where the mountain loomed over my small plot of snow-covered ground. The dark trees stood in stark contrast to all the white.

I stepped inside and immediately felt at home. This place was far more comfortable for me than my modern, luxury house in the city. The cabin was cozy and warm. It was full of life and memories, having been in my family for generations.

The cabin was small and a bit more on the rustic side. Definitely not one of the larger, much more grand “cabins” in town. But over the years, I had done some updating, adding all the modern amenities anyone could want, and expanded it to add a couple of more bedrooms and a more spacious guest bathroom.

Truth be told, I didn’t invite many guests up here, except for my parents and sometimes extended family. But Ava and I had plans. Plans that had involved a family that required more space.

The furniture was old and worn, slightly faded, but still in good condition. Family photos from throughout the years decorated the walls.

It was clear that the cleaners had come through. Everything was clean and the air smelled fresh. I knew I needed to go to the grocery store in town and stock up for me—and my guests.

But despite the to-do list, I knew I had made the right decision to come here, and I felt my body relax, muscle by muscle. I was ready to take on whatever came my way. I just needed a little time to myself.

I punched out a quick grocery list on my phone before heading to the small store. Like everything around here, it took me a fraction of the time the errand would take in the city.

Later that evening, I sat in front of the warm, crackling fire with a hot bowl of soup and planned out the hiking I would do before Maya arrived. Early winter hiking was my favorite. The

woods were incredibly quiet and still. Very few people were around and it felt like I was the only one on the planet.

Plans made and dinner finished, I couldn't help but think about Maya as I put my bowl in the dishwasher. I only had a handful of days to figure out how I would deal with seeing her again.

I wandered out onto the porch, staring off into the sky above. A billion stars glowed above me, but there was no moon, leaving the woods in front of me dark. Quiet nights like this made me miss Ava the most. It wasn't hard to see that I had shoved my life full of distractions over the last couple of years. But here, sitting out in the cold air, listening to the quiet, I almost felt her sitting with me. A peace I had never known washed over me. Was this what closure felt like?

Everyone told me that the grief would never go away, that it would only change over time. Ava would always be a part of my life and a piece of me would always love her. But was it time for me to move on from what I thought my life would look like and start planning for a life ahead that I could have? Was it possible to move forward while acknowledging that Ava was still in my heart?

Maybe closure didn't mean saying goodbye and closing the book. Maybe it just meant starting a new chapter and living for today despite the pain of yesterday. Could I do that?

I spent the weekend hiking, reading by the fire, and sitting with my thoughts. Turning over the idea again and again, until

it was polished and shining as bright as the North Star in a moonless sky.

Warmth glowed in my heart as I realized I could, and should, move forward. Ava wouldn't want me to stay frozen in grief. She would want me to live. I would never forget her and the years we spent together, but I owed it to her and the memory of her beautiful life to not just give up and give in.

Today, I decided, I would start *truly* living again.

Chapter 2

MAYA

As I hung up the phone with Jack, my heart was pounding in my chest. It had been seven years since we last spoke, and now I just had a perfectly civil, polite conversation with him. Jack Monroe. One of the most successful and wealthiest people in the country.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement mixed with trepidation at the prospect of interviewing him for Mile High Magazine, or MHM as we always called it.

I sat alone in my office, staring out the window at the busy Denver streets below, the sunlight warm through the window despite the freezing air temperature outside. My mind was racing as I thought about the events that had led me here. Earlier that morning, my editor, Emily, had called me into her office and told me the best news I could ever hope for—the promise of a promotion that came with a fairly sizeable pay raise.

I needed the bigger job almost as much as I needed the money. I had been struggling to make ends meet and costs just

kept seeming to mount. I was desperate for a little more financial breathing room. Desperate for a chance to get ahead.

But this story, the story about Jack, was intended to be the tryout for the promotion. Only senior staff writers were typically involved in these high-profile features, and I hated Emily's mind games more than anything in the world. But what choice did I have? I did love my job.

But...when Emily first brought up the idea and told me who the subject was, I remember feeling like a hammer had hit me in the chest. I suddenly felt breathless and heavy thinking about the man who had caused me so much hurt. The last time I saw Jack was in my bed in Boulder when we were both in college. That was where he broke my heart. We lost contact soon after, and I spent years trying to forget Jack Monroe existed.

Emily had a way of pushing, and I realized there was no reasonable excuse as to why I couldn't do the story. "*He was a jerk to me in college,*" didn't fly in the face of adults and professionals. And, God, I wanted to be a professional. I needed—and deserved—this promotion, and this was my chance to get it.

I clutched a hand to my nervous stomach, as it felt like all of my organs were protesting. My heart was racing and my palms were sweating. I dropped the heated skin of my forehead to the cool window and felt sense seep into my body as the temperature turned down.

This interview was just business. It was my *job*, and I needed to keep my emotions in check.

But as much as I tried to convince myself that this was just business, I couldn't help but feel nervous. I had no idea what Jack was going to be like, or how I would react when I saw him again. I was afraid that all the feelings that I had buried deep down inside me would come rushing back, and that I wouldn't be able to control my emotions.

I raised my head from the window and saw a reflection of myself in the glass. My hair was a mess, and there were dark circles under my eyes from the long nights of work and worry. But, there was something else there too. A glimmer of hope, a determination to make things better for myself. I knew that this interview with Jack could change everything.

I took another deep breath and walked back to my desk. I opened up my laptop and started to do some research on Jack. I wanted to know everything about him, to be as prepared as possible for the interview. As I read through his bio, I couldn't help but be impressed by all that he had accomplished. He was a self-made billionaire, with a reputation for being ruthless in business. At the same time, he was incredibly compassionate. Jack was known for his philanthropic work and for his dogged mission to actually try and make the world a better place.

That was the Jack I knew all those years ago. He was always excited about one project or another he was working on and the impact it would have on people.

His company, MonTech, started as a way to help people of all ages learn more about technology and computer science. In barely any time at all, it grew into a behemoth that not only included state-of-the-art education technology solutions but also all sorts of other, more custom products for every business sector. The sheer scale of what Jack had accomplished was just incredible.

And he *still* helped elementary and high school students learn coding and tech skills, at no cost, through his outreach programs. He not only donated a vast amount of money, but an impressive amount of his time leading some of these classes.

I almost reached full-blown fangirl status when I read an article where he talked about avoiding layoffs at MonTech. In a time when tens of thousands of workers were being laid off at tech companies around the country, Jack decided to accept less profit for his company overall, shrunk bonuses for senior executive staff, and cut his salary to keep more people on board while the industry rode out the downturn.

As I delved deeper into my research, I started to feel a sense of excitement building within me. This was my chance to interview one of the most successful and enigmatic men in the world, no matter who he once was to me. I was determined to make the most of this opportunity and write the best story I possibly could.

As I sat there, lost in thought, my phone rang and I rolled my eyes when I saw Emily's name pop up on the screen. Of course, she was checking in already.

“Maya, how did it go?” she asked eagerly, not even trying to hide the excitement in her voice.

“It was good.” I worked to keep my voice steady. “He agreed to the interview. He’s currently at his house in Crested Butte, so I’ll have to drive up there on Tuesday. We’ll get photos and everything.”

“That’s fantastic news!” Emily exclaimed. “I knew you could do it. I have a good feeling about this one, Maya. I think this interview could be a game-changer for both you and the magazine.”

I could feel my heart swelling with pride and relief. Despite not loving Emily’s strategy of using this as an audition for the promotion, this was a huge accomplishment for me, and I knew that it wouldn’t have been possible without Emily’s encouragement and support.

“Thank you, Emily. I really appreciate this opportunity. It means the world to me.”

“I know it does,” Emily replied warmly. “And I’m here for you every step of the way. Whatever you need, just let me know. Use whatever resources you need for the trip. Just remember to be yourself. Because, Maya, you are an amazing reporter and writer and I can’t wait to see what you do with this story.”

We chatted for a few more minutes before hanging up. I sat back in my chair, feeling a sense of peace settle over me. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I had a clear direction and purpose in my life.



Days later, I barged into the frosted glass doors of the private office. My best friend, Brielle, looked up from her desk where she was examining a glossy spread for the next issue.

Despite trying to distract myself with the latest local celebrity gossip for the trashy section of the magazine, I couldn't stop thinking about Jack and what I was getting myself into. I needed to call in reinforcements. Brielle had known me forever, long before Jack and ever since Jack, and I knew I could count on her to talk me through this challenge.

Brielle was one of the few women I knew who could pull off a yellow top in November. She paired it with a gorgeous burgundy blazer and I knew she had on perfectly fitted matching slim pants. Her long dark hair was artfully twisted into a bun on top of her head. She was sunny and classy, which matched her upbeat attitude.

She flashed a sympathetic smile that let me know my eyes probably looked a little too wild. She gestured to the seat in front of her.

“Hey there, Maya. What brings you to my office?”

I took a deep breath and tried to steady my nerves.

“I'm a mess, Brielle. I'm supposed to interview Jack for the magazine, but I don't know if I can handle it. Seeing him again after all these years...I just don't know if I'm ready for that.”

Brielle leaned forward, her expression serious, and she took one of my slightly shaky hands in hers.

“Jack? THE Jack? How the hell did you get that story? We all know he’s the biggest, most gorgeous businessman in the area. Maya, you can do this. You’re a professional, and you’re great at what you do. Just think of him as just a guy you dated briefly in college. That’s all he is. He’s just a guy. A guy who, might I add, you do not need. He is not worth getting tangled up with. In fact, I would rather a little karma come his way.” Her right eyebrow lifted in a knowing look.

She sat back in her chair and gestured to my generally off-kilter vibe.

I rolled my eyes, but Brielle’s words did help to calm me down a bit.

“I know, I know. It’s just...as you might remember, we didn’t exactly end things on the best terms.”

Brielle chuckled, shaking her head, and setting off the delicate gold hoops in her ears.

“And remember,” I continued, “he *has* experienced terrible tragedy, losing his wife a couple of years ago. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“Oh my god, yes. I totally forgot about that.” Brielle put her hands to her mouth in a huge gasp. “Okay, I take back that karma comment. That’s enough suffering for one person for one lifetime, for sure.”

“Yes, and besides that... Now he’s this big-time, super-rich CEO, and I’m just a lowly magazine writer. It’s intimidating.”

“Oh, please. You’re not ‘just’ anything. You’re a talented writer, and you’ve got plenty of spunk and personality. And as for Jack, well, he’s just a guy. A very handsome and successful guy, yes, but still just a guy. You’ve got this, Maya.”

I nodded, feeling a bit more confident.

“Thanks, Brielle. You always know just what to say.”

“Well, of course, I do. That’s why I’m your best friend, right?”

Brielle grinned, and I couldn’t help smiling back at her.

We both laughed, and I felt grateful for her friendship. She had always been my rock, my cheerleader, and my sounding board. I took another deep breath and stood up, smoothing out the skirt of my dress.

“Okay, I can do this. I’m going to rock that interview and show Jack just what I’m capable of, and let’s be honest, what he’s missed out on all these years.”

Brielle stood up too and gave me a high five.

“Hell yeah! Speaking of, what are you planning to wear? You know, I always say when you look good, you feel good.”

At my panicked look, Brielle’s smile faltered.

“Nope, don’t panic, Maya. I’m coming over tonight and we’ll find something in your closet that’s perfect.”

I grinned at her, feeling better than I had all day.

“You’re the best, Brielle. Thank you.”

As I walked back to my own office, I felt a renewed sense of confidence. Brielle was right. I was amazing and I could knock this out of the park...I could handle Jack, and I could write a killer article about him for the magazine. I started to brainstorm some ideas and felt excited about the prospect of seeing him again.

Chapter 3

MAYA

The day of the interview arrived, and I woke up feeling surprisingly calm. After my shower, I wiped the steam from the mirror and stared at my reflection for a minute. I was happy I'd sprung for some golden highlights in my otherwise boring medium brown hair a couple of weeks ago when I got it trimmed. It still looked glossy as it fell to my shoulder blades. I blow-dried it, which took forever and resulted in a sore arm because I had so much hair, and was pleased with how bouncy it looked. I threw my hairspray and a brush into the small bag I was going to take with me.

I went to my closet and pulled out the outfit Brielle and I had chosen a few days ago. In deference to the drive and the interview location, Brielle convinced me to wear a pair of curve-hugging black jeans. I paired them with a royal blue sweater and added my prized diamond stud earrings. They were the nicest thing I owned. I pulled out outfit number two, a cozy one, just in case. A girl always has to be ready.

Besides, the magazine sprung for the crew and me to stay in Crested Butte overnight just in case everything went late, so I had a small bag with some toiletries. I shoved everything into my large brown leather tote bag I hauled with me everywhere. It could fit my laptop, paper and pen, and my voice recorder, and now doubled as my overnight bag.

My hands were clammy on the steering wheel as I navigated the winding roads leading to Jack's cabin. Matt, the cameraman, and his assistant, Alex, rode separately, and I was thankful for the alone time. I couldn't shake the feeling of nervousness that had settled in my stomach since I had agreed to this assignment. Our history was still a sore spot in my mind, seeing as I had never truly moved on from the devastatingly handsome man that rocked my world; that once *was* my world. Even with how callously he had treated me, I had never been able to forget the way he made me feel.

As I pulled up to the cabin, I took a deep breath and tried to steady my nerves, grateful that I at least wouldn't be alone with Jack. Matt and Alex pulled up in their black SUV just behind mine.

I grabbed my long black puffy winter coat from the passenger seat and pulled it on. It was much colder up here than it had been in Denver and there was already snow on the ground. I was thankful I forewent any fancy footwear and wore warm and toasty snow boots.

Matt and Alex were pulling a few camera bags out of the back of the SUV when Jack stepped outside.

Everything went silent when I saw him. The world stood still, and I forgot how to breathe. How was it possible for him to *still* have this effect on me? A warm smile spread across his face and the hem of his thick coat inched up when he raised his hand to wave.

In my research, I found plenty of media photos from over the years. He always looked so chic and polished. Like he was untouchable. But right now, he wore slightly faded, worn jeans, and real boots that had seen many miles and a plain black coat. He could be just any guy in the area. Except, of course, he wasn't. At least to me.

His dark hair was just slightly curled and a little disheveled. He didn't appear to have done his hair with product, and he was about a week past needing a haircut.

In short, this was the Jack I spent long hot summer days hiking with and cold winter nights snuggled up with in bed, creating our own special heat. He was beautiful. He was perfect.

He was standing right in front of me. I hadn't even noticed him walking toward me until I was hit with the full force of his eyes. They were a grayish blue, like storm clouds on a hazy, steamy summer afternoon.

Jack shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and rocked back on his heels, amusement in his eyes like a lightning bolt as he glanced down at my lip. Belatedly, I realized I was chewing on my lower lip. It was a sign that I was nervous, and Jack knew me better than anyone. Or he used to know me.

“Maya.” Oh God, his voice had no right to sound so sexy. Just the right amount of gravel and it sent a hot bolt of light straight to my core. “It’s good to see you again.”

He stretched his hand out toward me and I stared for a second before shoving my gloved hand in his, thankful it wasn’t skin-on-skin contact. I was certain that would send me up in flames right here on this snow-covered mountain.

“Hi, Jack.” My cheeks were heating as I tried to keep my tone neutral. “Thanks for agreeing to the interview.”

“Of course,” Jack said, an odd look flashing in his eyes before he glanced away from me at the sound of shoes on gravel. We got introductions out of the way with Matt and Alex before Jack led us into the cabin.

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting from a billionaire’s cabin. Jack had talked about this place when we were in college, and it had been in his family for a long time. But somehow the brightly lit space didn’t surprise me at all. It all felt like Jack.

It was more rustic than some of the mansion cabins in the area, but still beautiful and artfully crafted. It looked like it had been added on over the years. Modern, high-tech touches were everywhere, like solar panels.

The artwork on the walls was impressive. Jack had clearly been working on his collection. But some photographs looked local and captured the breathtaking scenery. I wanted to ask about them, but Jack was leading us to the kitchen.

“This is the heart of the cabin,” he said, gesturing to the gleaming stainless steel appliances. “I’ve got everything you need to cook up a storm.”

Not like you’d need to, I thought, shaking my head at the gleam of the appliances. The Jack I knew could only do the bare minimum in the kitchen that was necessary for survival, but maybe he had some new tricks up his sleeve.

Though I saw glimpses of old Jack, he was different. Too different, in some ways. Where the old him would have been bubbling with excitement while showing off something this expansive and precious to him, this Jack was so cool and collected that it was getting a bit terrifying.

The cabin was equipped with all the latest technology and modern conveniences, from the generator system that powered the cabin to the satellite TV and high-speed internet. The bedrooms were spacious and comfortable, with downy duvets and plush pillows. I couldn’t help but feel impressed by the attention to detail and care that had gone into the cabin’s design. Not that I hadn’t expected this; he had always been meticulous in planning.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” I said when we had finally settled into the minimalistic but extremely comfortable couches in the living room. The fireplace was alive and flickering, making the room feel warm and cozy.

Matt and Alex got set up. The plan was to record the interview so we could use some soundbites for social media. They were also taking some still images for possible use in the

article, although we were going to schedule an actual photoshoot for later.

I forced myself to switch out of awed mode and become the professional I was. But I was very grateful I had all of my questions typed out on my phone and everything was being recorded, because I could not focus.

My mind kept drifting back to the past, which was a dangerous place to go. Watching Jack's slim fingers move in the air as he spoke, I couldn't help but remember the way Jack's touch had made me feel alive. His moving lips reminded me of the way his kisses had left me breathless.

No. I internally scolded myself. I wasn't here to reminisce about times with Jack. I was here to do my job.

As Jack talked about his company, I made myself listen intently, taking notes and asking questions. I was impressed by his passion for his work and the way he spoke about it with such enthusiasm.

But despite my best efforts, I couldn't stop my gaze from lingering too long at Jack and all the features I had loved most about him. The strong muscles in his chest. The shadow of dark hair on his tanned jaw. The way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he was excited about something. And how he leaned forward when he was talking about something important like he was sharing a secret with you. Jack Monroe had a way of making a person feel like they were the only one in the room. It was both magical and terrifying.

I tried to keep my emotions in check, and I did. I wanted to focus solely on the task at hand. But how could I when he was sitting so close to me? Smelling delicious like the cold air on top of a mountain?

It was impossible, and I was in trouble.



Jack

I decided that I liked seeing Maya in my space.

Ever since she strolled through the front door of the cabin, bringing in the sunshine and warmth, I didn't know how cold and dark this place had been.

She looked stunning. A lot like she used to look, just more...polished. She was a little more grown-up. Her haircut looked more expensive, and those highlights didn't come from a box like they did in college. Maya had real diamonds in her ears and I felt myself fighting jealousy, thinking about whether or not they'd been a gift from someone special.

But when she pulled her shiny brown hair into a ponytail, using a hairband she kept on her wrist, I saw the Maya I knew all those years ago. Wisps of hair brushed her face and my hands itched to move them away, knowing how silky both her hair and her skin would feel under my fingertips.

I barely noticed the two other people in the room as Maya asked me questions. I had anticipated this moment and prepared myself. I was calm and polite, but inside, my thoughts were a random mess.

Maya started with the usual questions. How did I start my company? What motivated me to build a tech company from the ground up? I responded with enthusiasm, talking about how much I loved my work.

As the interview went on, Maya's questions became more personal. How was I coping with the job stress? Did I have any hobbies? I answered each question thoughtfully, but my mind spun with thoughts. *What were Maya's hobbies?*

I suddenly noticed that Maya had been silent for a few moments too long, shifting nervously on the couch and chewing her bottom lip. I felt a knot in my stomach clench, knowing I wouldn't like whatever words pushed past her lips next.

Maya's eyes softened, and I saw a glimmer of something that resembled pity. The knot grew tighter, larger, until a fucking boulder was sitting in the pit of my stomach. I didn't want her pity.

Her eyes shifted to Matt's, and he quietly turned the camera off.

"How are you, Jack? Really. I know it's been a hard couple of years."

I swallowed past the rock that had settled uncomfortably in my throat.

"I'm fine, Maya. Just busy with work. You know how it is."

I tried to keep my voice steady. I forced myself to stay still and not shift in my seat. But every muscle, every cell, of my body was screaming at me to run. To get the fuck out of this situation now.

An impossible tension grew between us, changing the air pressure of the whole goddamn room. I felt like I was on an

airplane suddenly plummeting from the sky, expecting my ears to pop any second. And then she leaned forward and put her hand on mine. I swore I saw a literal spark when our skin touched, heat and pressure in that one spot on my hand.

“You can talk to me, Jack. You don’t have to pretend everything is okay.”

What the hell?

“I know losing your wife must have been extraordinarily painful. How have you managed to cope and still maintain such high levels of success?”

Just when I thought the moment couldn’t get any more intense...everything snapped. I pulled my hand away from Maya so quickly that she jumped back.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” I said, the ice in my voice threatening to put out the fire in the fireplace.

Maya’s face fell, and I could see the hurt in her eyes. But I couldn’t let her in. She didn’t need to know anyway; it was nobody’s business.

“We’re done here, Maya.”

Maya looked up at me, surprised.

“What? Jack, we still have a few more questions.”

“I said we’re done. Feel free to stay to get any work done for your story, but please, leave me alone.”

All of my muscles were vibrating with anger. How could she bring that up? For a fucking magazine story? Just because

we knew each other before didn't give her a carte blanche to ask whatever she wanted.

I stormed out of the room and locked myself in my office. I tried to distract myself with work, but my mind was racing a million miles an hour.

The interview with Maya left me feeling raw and exposed. I couldn't shake off the memory of her touch on my hand, her eyes softening with concern, but I couldn't believe she really cared. It made me angry to admit it to myself, but Maya was probably just like every other reporter and was looking for a story to sell.

I knew I had to focus on work, but every time I tried to read through my emails, my mind wandered back to Maya. I tried to push her out of my thoughts, but the more I tried, the more persistent my memory became.

I heard the sound of a car starting from the other side of the cabin, and I hoped she was finally leaving, but I soon realized that it was only one car that left. The other was still there. Which meant Maya was still here.

With a sigh, I dropped my head to the desk in defeat. I couldn't deal with any of this. I came here to avoid it and now, suddenly, it was just pushed in my face.

But I also couldn't help my curiosity. Why was she still here? Why hadn't she left? Was she waiting for me to come out?

I took a deep breath and walked out of the room. As I made my way toward the living room, I could hear Maya's voice. She was on the phone, her voice hushed and urgent.

I paused for a moment, unsure of what to do. Should I confront her? My mind was racing with possibilities, but before I could decide, Maya hung up the phone and turned toward me.

"Jack," she said, her voice low and hesitant. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

I forced a smile.

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect to see you were still here either, but here we are."

Maya looked uncomfortable, her eyes darting around the room.

"I know and I'm sorry, but I needed to talk to you."

I felt a surge of anger bubble up in me.

"Talk to me about what, Maya?"

Maya's face fell, and I could see the guilt in her eyes. Part of me felt like an asshole for making her feel that way, but part of me was still so furious about the interview. How dare she ask me those questions? In front of complete strangers?

But, still...watching her standing in my living room, twisting the silver ring on one of her fingers and chewing on her bottom lip made her look so vulnerable.

I let out a deep sigh, scrubbing my hand across my face and turning toward the window. It had started snowing, a little harder than they had forecasted, but that certainly wasn't unusual for November around here.

Wordlessly, I walked over to the fireplace to put on another log. I felt Maya watching me and I stared at the wall, collecting myself for five full seconds before turning back to her. Those golden eyes, filled with some unnamed emotion, were staring back at me.

It was like a spell was rooting Maya to that one spot on the carpet. Forcing her against her will to stay here. A full minute passed and suddenly, everything snapped and Maya was moving toward the small dining room and getting her ancient-looking tote bag from the rough-hewn table.

"Maya," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. She didn't acknowledge me, she didn't look at me, she just kept moving toward the door.

Away from me.

And suddenly, my solitude in the mountains just felt like loneliness.

Chapter 4

MAYA

I needed to get out of here. I knew I should have left with Matt and Alex. Since we wrapped earlier than planned, they decided to make the drive back to Denver before the snow started falling.

A glance out the window and could barely see further than his driveway; the snowflakes were falling with an intensity I hadn't seen before. The snow stacking up on the grass told me I didn't have much time to make my escape either.

I wasn't even sure why I'd stayed behind. I guess I did want to talk to Jack and apologize for how the interview went. I touched a nerve with my last question and if I was being honest with myself, I knew I would when the words were forming on my lips. I knew it was crossing a boundary, but part of me *needed* to cross it. I needed to know who Jack was now. Today. Not seven years ago.

I hiked my tote bag on my shoulder and walked toward the door, barely cracking it open, when I felt *him*. He surrounded me as he pushed the door shut, his large hand next to my head.

I just stared at the door. I felt overwhelmed by him and his fresh scent. His lips were right next to my ear, and it wasn't even fair as to how that made me feel.

“Maya, I don't think it's safe for you to leave in this weather. Stay a little longer, at least until visibility is better.” His voice was low and almost toneless, but I risked a glance back at his face and could tell by the look in his eyes that he was genuinely worried.

He lowered his hand and moved back a fraction of an inch. Not nearly enough space for me to regain my sanity. Something between us shifted and his warm breath on my neck was enough to make my traitorous body take notice. I felt a chill run down my spine, but tried to tell myself it was just from the cold draft of the air seeping through the door.

Though there was barely enough space, I turned around, my back touching the cold door. I looked up into Jack's face, emotionless as ever, but with his hands facing me, as if in surrender.

“I don't think that's a good idea,” I rasped. “I really should go home.”

I didn't want to admit it, but I was afraid of what might happen if I stayed. Jack was an enigma, and I didn't know if I could handle being alone with him any longer.

Jack's face remained stoic, but I could see the muscles in his jaw work as he clenched, grinding his molars together. It was obvious he was annoyed. Another emotion that I couldn't quite put my finger on radiated from him like a hot fire.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't stay. With one small nod, I turned, gently bumping him out of the way, and pulled the door open. A gust of wind caught the door and pushed it in, me along with it, but I powered through and walked out into the blustery, snowy cold afternoon. The clouds had darkened the sky, making it feel like night already.

But if I left right now, I could make it close enough to Denver by almost dark. So I stomped in the fresh snow to my car, fighting with the wind to open the door.

As I made my way down Jack's steep, winding driveway, my hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. The snow was coming down harder now, making it difficult to see. I was about halfway down when my car hit a patch of ice hidden under the snow and swerved hard to the right. I took my foot off the gas and kept the steering wheel straight, but it was too late. The car slid nose-first down the embankment next to the pavement for an impossibly long time before slamming into a tree, deploying the airbag, and flattening my back to the seat.

As the airbag deflated, I sat there, stunned, hearing nothing but silence as the snow continued to fall around me. I knew I needed to call for help, but, picking it up, found it didn't have a signal.

Taking a few deep breaths, I tried to calm myself. I looked back but couldn't quite see Jack's cabin from here.

"You're okay. You're okay." I kept chanting to myself.

I tried to open the door, but it was jammed shut.

Panic set in as I realized I was stranded in the middle of nowhere, alone and helpless. The knowledge that Jack probably didn't care if I lived or died at the moment didn't bring any comfort. I leaned my head back against the seat, closing my eyes and taking deep breaths to calm myself down.

After a few minutes—possibly the longest minutes of my life—I heard a gentle tap on the window and shrieked in surprise.



Jack

It had only been a few moments since I'd heard the crash.

A chill had run down my spine as I frantically stuffed my feet into my boots and started running down the hill as fast as the snow and ice would let me.

When I got closer and saw Maya sitting motionless, her head leaned back, panic twisted, hot and painful, in my chest. I practically fell down the embankment trying to get to her.

In my head, a very different scene was unfolding. Screeching tires, breaking glass, crushing metal, and a painful scream. I tried to swallow past the excruciatingly painful lump in my throat, pushing back the hot tears that threatened to fall.

My heart pounded, blood rushing in my ears. I closed my eyes briefly, trying to push away the memory. But all I could see was smoke rising from the wreckage. I could see her lifeless face and body, lying on the ground, having been thrown from the car. I couldn't protect her. It all came rushing back and the crushing weight of guilt reared its ugly head again and landed directly on my chest.

My eyes snapped open, and I realized that I had been holding my breath. Tears streamed down my face, and my body shook with emotion.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself, and forced myself to focus on the present. I couldn't change the past, and

I couldn't bring her back. But I could help Maya.

I tapped on her window and stumbled back slightly in the snow when she shrieked.

Then she looked up and saw me.

She looked dazed and confused, but thankfully, she seemed to be conscious.

"Are you okay?" I asked, breathlessly.

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with fear and confusion. "I—I think so?" Her voice was shaky, and I tried to notice if she was injured or not through the window.

It took a minute to get the door open, but finally, it budged enough so she could squeeze out. Maya didn't seem to have any obvious injuries besides a few scratches, but she was certainly going to be bruised and sore from the seatbelt and airbag.

The snow had picked up, and it was turning into a full-blown blizzard. I knew we wouldn't be able to get her car anywhere until the weather cleared.

"You'll stay with me until the snow clears. Do you have anything to bring up to the cabin?"

I was surprised when Maya didn't argue. She simply nodded and grabbed an overnight bag from her trunk.

We stumbled back up the embankment and toward the cabin.

Inside, I found a blanket for Maya to wrap herself in, made cocoa and we sat in front of the fire. She had stopped shivering, and the color was coming back to her cheeks.

Despite the circumstances, I couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was in the low light of the room. Her eyes glowed, less wild and panicked than they had outside after the accident. Some of the adrenaline was easing out of her body, and she was slowly relaxing. Tendrils of brown hair were escaping her ponytail and framing her face, making me long to reach out and tuck it back in for her.

"How do you feel?" I asked, using the excuse to quickly scan her gorgeous curves. I could practically feel my fingertips digging into her soft hips. It was muscle memory that my dick was all too happy about. I cleared my throat. "Any injuries?"

She sipped her cocoa and gently shook her head.

"No injuries." A laugh escaped her lips. It was husky and shot straight to my low belly. "I'm sure I'll feel it tomorrow, though."

She twisted her head and a red line from the seatbelt peeked out from the collar of her sweater.

"Thank you for letting me stay here," she said, her eyes darting around the room. "It would have been a long hike back to town."

I smiled, a warmth spreading in my chest that I hadn't felt in a long time.

"It's no problem. I'm just glad you're okay."

Maya beamed a smile back at me and I was caught off guard by how good it felt to have her here tonight.

Chapter 5

MAYA

As soon as I closed the door to the guest room Jack had set me up in for the night, I called my parents. I thanked all the gods of the universe for the few bars of service I had here.

“Mom, I need your help,” I said as soon as my mom picked up the phone.

“Maya, is everything okay? Where are you?”

“I know Eli’s with you tonight, but I’m stuck in Crested Butte. I had a small car accident. Everything is fine, I’m fine, no injuries. But can you keep Eli at your house for a few days while I sort this out? I’m not sure how long it will take to get a repair up here.”

“Of course, we’ll take care of him. It’s no problem at all. Are you sure everything is okay with you? Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine. It’s more of an annoying inconvenience than anything. Thank you for taking Eli. I appreciate it. Can I talk

to him?”

“Sure, hold on just a second.”

I heard my mom call out to Eli as I fought back the tears. It wasn't uncommon at all for him to stay with his grandparents—he even had his own room at their house—but it was usually just to give me a break for a day or two while I was still twenty minutes away. I hated being stranded hours away from him.

“Hi, Mom,” he said, and I sighed in relief when I heard his sweet voice.

“Hey, sweetie. Are you having fun with your grandparents?”

“Yeah. Grandma made cookies earlier and let me play computer games.”

I laughed.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“I'm stuck in the mountains for a few days with some car trouble. You're gonna stay with Grandma and Grandpa until I can get back, okay? Grandma will take you back to the house to get anything you need for school.”

“Okay, Mom,” Eli said brightly. “I love you and I'll see you when you get home.”

“I love you, too, bud. Be good for Grandma and Grandpa.”

Eli handed the phone back to my mom, and after talking about some of the logistics for school and activities for the rest

of the week, we hung up. I sat on the bed and stared down at the dark phone, fighting back the tears.

I had no idea how much time passed by when I heard a light tap on the ajar door. Jack gently pushed it open.

“I called the local auto shop to get a tow truck to take your car into town. They can’t get here tonight with the storm, but said they’ll try to get up here first thing in the morning. I know them well, so they’ll do everything they can to get your car up and running as quickly as possible.”

All I could do was nod in response.

“Anyway, why don’t you take a shower or a bath? The warm water might soothe any soreness. I’ve got a pot of soup on the stove if you’re hungry.”

I nodded, grateful for his kindness.

As I stood under the hot water, I felt my body relax. The tension in my muscles melted away, and I felt more at ease. I toweled off and pulled on the warm, soft leggings I had brought with me. They felt so cozy and paired perfectly with my sweatshirt.

I felt a little better as I emerged from my room. I stuttered to a stop when I saw Jack waiting for me in the living room, two bowls of soup on the coffee table. Something about this scene made my entire chest tighten. Years ago, I thought this would be my life. Me and Jack.

And now...

Well, now we were practically strangers. Sure, we knew who we used to be, but I had no idea who Jack was today.

“Thanks,” I said as I sat on the couch with the soup.

“Yeah, you’re welcome.” Jack creaked out his words as he settled into the sofa. “I thought it would be more comfortable in here than in the dining room. I love watching the fire.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, eating soup side by side. I felt a strange comfort in his presence.

“I’m sorry for all of this. I should have paid more attention to the weather and been more careful driving. I should have listened to you.”

Jack shook his head.

“It’s okay. These things happen. It’s not your fault. Anyway, it’s not every day that I get to host a beautiful woman in my cabin.”

Jack winked at me, and my jaw practically hit the floor. It was the first playful moment we’d had since seeing each other today. But we used to have a million of these moments.

I felt the blush spread across my cheeks.

“Well, thank you,” I said, voice a little shaky, suddenly feeling a little shy.

“So, tell me about your son.”

My heart stopped beating at the vague mention of Eli. I almost forgot that I had mentioned my son to Jack earlier

when I needed to try calling my parents and arranging childcare.

“Oh, um. Well, he’s...” I tried grasping for vague things I could tell Jack about Eli. I figured if I kept talking, he wouldn’t ask about things like his specific age. “Eli is amazing. He’s very smart, and kind, and the sweetest little boy. He loves baseball and hiking and begs me for a dog every day.”

I squirmed in my seat, taking a bite of a cracker. Even before we started dating, Jack had been a good friend of mine. I had always been able to trust him with just about anything. But now, I felt uncomfortable and exposed. I had kept my son a secret for so long, and now that Jack was asking about him, it felt like my whole world was being pushed to the brink.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, but it was no use. The distance between us was too close to handle. I could feel his breath on my neck, his body so close to mine. I wanted to lean in and feel his lips on mine, but I knew that would only complicate things even further.

“Eli,” Jack repeated and the sound of Eli’s name coming from Jack’s mouth almost broke me. “That’s a nice name.”

His voice was soft and kind. I could feel Jack’s eyes on me, but I couldn’t look up. I felt like I had just given away a part of me. A part of me that I treasured more than anything and didn’t want to share with anyone.

We sat there for a moment, neither of us speaking. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, and my palms were

sweaty. I was so nervous, but I didn't want to show it. I sat tall, trying to maintain my composure, even though I was falling apart inside.

Finally, Jack broke the silence. "So, how old is your son again?" he asked, his voice low and deep.

Dammit. He asked. "He's six," I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

"And what does he look like?"

I smiled and shrugged, trying to keep my vibe light even though a storm was rolling through me.

"Oh, you know. He's a pretty boy, just like his mom."

There was a loud bang at the front door that made us both jump. Jack left from the couch and went to check it out.

"Just the storm door coming unlatched. It's really windy out there."

He sat back down next to me and I smiled. This time, though, he sat a little bit closer, his knee brushing against mine, bringing my whole body to awareness. I focused on that spot for a moment before looking back at him. He was just staring at me, or more specifically, at my lips. I felt the air between us change-something charged and dangerous stretched between us as he brought his hand to my face, smoothing a lock of hair away. His fingertips pressed lightly, too lightly. I couldn't stop myself from leaning into his touch.

My body was responding, every cell waking up and standing at attention—*waiting* for attention. Waiting for Jack's

touch to continue down my body.

My brain was screaming at me to stand up and go to bed, but it was no use. The attraction between us was too strong.

“Maya, I’m sorry.” I barely registered Jack’s words as he continued to brush my neck with the pad of his thumb.

“What are you sorry for?” I forced myself to ask.

“For leaving you.”

Reluctantly, I turned away from his touch to look at him. His eyes were filled with regret. We both knew what had happened seven years ago.

“I should have never left you like that,” he whispered. “It was a mistake. I have regretted it ever since.”

Time stood still as I felt my heart breaking all over again. It was like he was ripping open an old wound and I didn’t know if I could handle it. But deep down I knew, this was maybe my only opportunity to find out what really happened.



Jack

“Why *did* you leave, Jack?”

I took a deep breath and tried to keep my cool as Maya and I sat together, discussing the events of seven years ago. It was still hard to look her in the eyes, but I knew I had to face the music.

It was made even harder by sitting so close to Maya. My knee and thigh were pressed up against hers and I was barely a breath away from being able to feel her lips on mine. From the uneven cadence of her breath and the rapid pulse I felt in her neck, I was thinking she felt this, too. Maya was *affected* by me and something about that lit a fire even hotter and stronger in my body.

But Maya’s question cut like a knife. It was a fair question. Something we had never talked about. Sure, she knew the broad strokes of what happened by now, but we never actually talked about it together.

“Why did you leave, Jack?” she asked again, her voice laced with anger and pain.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight with emotion.

“Well, I got that job in San Francisco,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“And that was it? You just decided to leave without even talking to me about it?” Maya’s voice rose, her eyes blazing

with righteous anger.

But God, I had been twenty-five years old and an idiot. I had no idea what I was doing with my life, but things were starting to happen fast back then.

“I didn’t want to make you choose between me and your family and friends.” My voice was steady, but the excuse sounded thin in my ears.

Maya snorted.

“So, you just decided to leave without even giving me a choice?”

“I thought it would be easier.” My words were coming out in a rush. “I didn’t want to put you through the stress of having to make that decision.”

Maya’s face twisted with anger, and I could see her fists clenched in her lap.

“You didn’t want to put me through the stress? What about the stress of wondering where the hell you went? Wondering what I did to make you leave?”

I winced at her words, feeling a pang of guilt in my chest. “I know, Maya. I should have talked to you about it. I should have been more honest with you.”

She glared at me, her eyes blazing with anger. “You think?”

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. “I’m sorry, Maya. I am. I have no excuse. Everything that I can say about it sounds stupid to me too, but the reasoning

made sense to me at the time. I should have done things differently.”

Maya shook her head, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Do you have any idea how much you hurt me, Jack? You just left without a word. Without any explanation. I felt so alone, so abandoned.”

“I know,” I said, my voice soft. “And I’m sorry for that. I never meant to hurt you, Maya. I just didn’t know what else to do.”

Maya looked away. “You could have talked to me, Jack. You could have given me a choice. Instead, you just decided for me.”

“I know,” I said again, my voice barely above a whisper. “And I’m sorry for that. I wish I could go back and do things differently.”

Maya shook her head, her eyes still fixed on a spot beyond even the wood walls surrounding us.

“It’s too late for that, Jack. Seven years too late.”

I nodded slowly, feeling the weight of Maya’s words heavy on my shoulders.

“I understand,” I said softly. “I know I can’t change the past, but I want to make things right now.”

Chapter 6

MAYA

I was silent for a long moment. I knew Jack could see the tears glistening in my eyes.

“It’s not that easy, Jack,” I finally whispered. “There’s so much that has happened. So much has changed.”

Jack flinched as I abruptly stood up and walked over to the window, staring at the darkness.

I couldn’t believe Jack dared to apologize. After what he’d done. After all these years. Who was he to open these wounds? The hurt, betrayal, and anger all came rushing back to me.

He left me. He *abandoned* me. For a fucking *job*. A job that I knew he left barely six months later. He snuck back to Colorado and never gave me—or the life we could have had together—a second thought.

A vice sat on my chest, twisting my heart painfully. My throat was dry as sand and my eyes stung with tears that I wasn’t letting myself fully shed.

I blinked out the window, my eyes slowly adjusting to the blackness. The storm raged on and I could hear the wind howling. I caught a glimpse of the ferocious snowflakes in the soft glow of the porch light.

Without another word, I walked to the borrowed bedroom and locked the door behind me. I couldn't talk to Jack anymore tonight, it was just all too much. My heart couldn't take it anymore. The betrayal settled over me like a too-heavy, too-warm blanket, suffocating me.

I curled up on the bed, hugging my knees to my chest, and cried. The sounds of the blizzard outside were muffled by the thick walls, but they provided a comforting backdrop to my sobs. I cried until my eyes were raw, my nose was red and runny, and my throat was sore.

Eventually, exhaustion took over, and I drifted off to sleep, the sounds of the blizzard lulling me into a fitful slumber.

The next day, I woke up feeling like all the emotion and feeling had been squeezed out of me. I knew I couldn't stay in that room forever, so I got up and got dressed. As I made my way to the living room, I saw Jack sitting on the couch, looking pensive and remorseful.

I looked into his eyes and saw the pain and regret etched there. And for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to stay mad at him. My night of crying seemed to release years of pent up anger and hurt. And now I was empty.

Tears filled my eyes as I stood up and walked over to him. Without a word, I sat next to him and threw my arms around

his neck, and we hugged each other tightly.

“I forgive you,” I whispered into his ear, my voice shaking with emotion.

He pulled back, and without warning, he leaned in and kissed me. I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through me as his lips met mine, and I responded eagerly, kissing him back with all the passion and intensity that had been building up inside me for years.

The kiss was like setting sparks to the cabin around us and letting it burn down, taking the anger and hurt and turning them into ash.

We were perfectly in sync. Each movement was perfection, like our bodies remembered each other. Like they yearned for each other. I was completely lost in the sensation. I was lost in Jack and his fresh air smell.

Jack ran a hand down my ponytail, gently pulling my hair tie off and letting the waves of my hair fall freely around my shoulders. His hand firmly gripped the back of my head, holding me to him. With his other skilled hand, he shifted me closer to him as his fingertips dug into my waist.

A soft moan escaped my lips as he tugged on the loose strands of my hair. I took everything Jack had to give, and I poured everything I could into that kiss.

We pulled apart, our foreheads touching, both gasping for breath, hearts beating a mile a minute. I felt the pink on my cheeks and saw the wild spark in Jack’s gray eyes.

It was subconscious instinct that had me climbing into his lap, straddling him and kissing him again. Our bodies were pressed tightly together, but still with too much denim and fabric between us. Still, my hands swept Jack's body, sneaking under the hem of his flannel. My exploring fingers were rewarded with the valleys and hills of his chiseled frame.

I felt the dampness between my legs and the hardness behind Jack's zipper.

Jack pulled back and looked at me, his eyes heavy with desire.

"Maya." My name, a husky whisper on his lips, had me completely lost. There was no turning back now.

Without hesitation, I took his hand and led him to his bedroom. We stood there for a moment, our eyes locked in a fierce gaze, and then I reached up and pulled him into another deep, passionate kiss.

Jack's hands hungrily explored the swell of my breasts through my sweater and the curves of my hips through my jeans. I moaned in pleasure and anticipation.

His hand skated under the hem of my sweater and the skin-on-skin touch sent goosebumps running across my skin. Slowly, he peeled the offending fabric away, leaving me in my pale pink lace bra. The coolness of the room took my body temperature down a notch and brought me back to the brink of sanity.

Until Jack began dropping kisses down my neck, my collarbone, and the top of one breast, as his fingers swept across my nipples through the lace. I moaned loudly and threw my head back at the beautiful feeling of his touch. I missed his touch so much.

He reached around my back and skillfully opened the clasp of my bra, letting the fabric fall to the floor. I arched my back as he took one of my nipples into his mouth, his tongue flicking sweetly against it, sending waves of pleasure through me.

I vaguely heard myself moan his name as one hand slipped beneath the waistband of my jeans and into my underwear. I gasped when his finger trailed over my clit, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

Without a word, he pulled down my jeans and underwear in one move, and I stepped out of them, standing there naked before him. He took a step back and looked at me, his eyes filled with desire.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, his voice thick with need.

And then he was on me, his mouth on mine, his hands exploring every inch of my body. I could feel his hard cock pressing against my thigh, and I reached down to stroke it, feeling it grow even harder beneath my touch.

He moved his hand down, his fingers sliding inside me, and I gasped in pleasure as he began to move, his thumb rubbing against my clit.

I could feel my orgasm building, and I knew I was close, but then he suddenly stopped. I whimpered in protest.

“Not yet.” His voice was low and husky. “I want to taste you.”

He gently pushed me back onto the bed and spread my legs apart, his mouth descending on the exact right spot. I moaned as his tongue flicked against my clit, his fingers slipping inside me, and I writhed beneath him. His tongue was magic and once again, I felt the orgasm build inside of me.

And then...he stopped.

I cried out.

“Not yet,” he gently scolded, nipping my lower lip and grinning at me wickedly.

He climbed onto the bed and positioned himself between my legs, his hard cock pressing against me. And then, with one smooth movement, he pushed inside me, filling me up just like how I remembered him.

I gasped at the invasion as he began to thrust into me, his hips slamming against mine, and I could feel my body responding to him. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him even closer, and he groaned in pleasure.

His movements were hard and fast and I felt him slip one hand between us, touching me exactly where I needed the attention. The orgasm was building again, slow and intense. I dug my nails into his back, urging him on, and he moved with

more intensity, pushing into me more deeply. Jack's breath was coming in short gasps.

Seconds later, I felt myself reach the edge with an intensity that had me almost afraid of the fall. And then the orgasm slammed into me, pulling me under and sending me to the sky all at once. Every muscle in my body was tight and ready to snap. I was vaguely aware of Jack whispering in my ear and kissing my neck, the only connection to the planet.

As I was slowly regaining consciousness, I heard Jack growl as he found his release.

For a few long moments, we lay there gasping for breath. It felt like some broken pieces inside of me had been rearranged and patched.

And then Jack rolled over onto his side and looked at me, his eyes filled with an emotion I couldn't place.

He pulled me close and tucked me into his arms and we didn't leave his bed for the rest of the day...or the next day.



I closed the heavy front door as quietly as I could possibly manage, taking a deep breath of the cold, crystal-clear air.

My heart lurched strangely in my chest when I saw my car parked in the driveway. The shop had called Jack yesterday afternoon—in between our hot sessions in his bed—and told him they'd be delivering it to his house.

The snowstorm was fully cleared, leaving behind a brilliant sun and sparkling, snow-covered trees. Everything glittered, and I blindly shoved my hand in my tote bag, looking for my sunglasses.

The sun was a stark contrast to the dark tornado-filled skies that lingered in my chest.

How could I have been so stupid? I spent too much time with him these last couple of days, both in bed and out, and while I was grateful to him for getting my car fixed and letting me stay, I couldn't help but wonder how a smart person like I hoped I was, could act like such an idiot.

Jack was different from the man I once knew. But in some ways, he was also the same. And that was what was getting my heart into some trouble.

With a glance back at the cabin, I slid into the car and gently shut the door, hoping I wouldn't wake Jack. He had looked so vulnerable and sweet. So I had to leave as soon as I could to avoid my stupid emotions betraying me. I would have ended up running my fingers through his silky hair and waking him up if I had stayed even a second longer.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge—more of a thousand-watt electric bolt—of regret thinking about Jack.

Confused and exhausted, I barely noticed anything during the long, silent drive home. I was still reeling from the events of the last couple of days, and I didn't think I would get any better anytime soon.

I walked into our small house, thoughts about Jack still heavy on my mind. I had been so vulnerable around Jack, and he had shown me a side of himself that I hadn't seen, maybe ever. He had been kind, caring, and attentive. It was everything I had always wanted from him.

But I wasn't sure if this newfound tenderness was just temporary. I wondered if he would be willing to push for a relationship or if he would go back to his old ways once time had passed.

I walked to Eli's room, standing in the doorway and looking at the darkened space. A sob threatened to escape from deep within me. It was only a few days, but he was my everything.

My heart was pounding, my palms were sweaty, and my stomach was tied up in knots.

I couldn't help but feel like I was on the verge of something, but I didn't know what it was. All I knew was that my life was about to change, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for it.

I walked into Eli's room and sat on his bed. I couldn't help but wonder what being with Jack would mean for Eli. Eli had been the center of my world for so long. Everything I did was for Eli or had to consider Eli. Having Jack in the picture seemed like a huge complication with even bigger consequences. But Eli always came first and nothing would change that.

At the same time, I couldn't ignore the way I felt about Jack. From his actions, it was clear that he felt something for

me, too. There had always been something different about him, something that drew me to him like a moth to a flame.

I stood up from the bed and walked to the window, pushing open the curtain. I looked outside and saw the sun shining. There was a lot less snow here than there had been in the mountains, but the dusting still looked magical. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to clear my mind.

In my pocket, my phone buzzed with a voicemail I must have missed while I was driving. It jolted me back to the present and to the real world. I tore myself away from the window with a sigh, pulling my phone out and recognizing the number.

Until Eli was out of school later this afternoon, I had to focus. I had work to do and it wasn't going to get done if I just sulked the entire day.

I went to my small home office and made a call.

Chapter 7

JACK

I sat at the dining room table; the dark, reclaimed wood was scarred with decades upon decades of life. As I traced a line with my thumb, my mind kept wandering to Maya. I tried to ignore my feelings for her, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. I was surprised by these feelings that seemed to invade my entire body and effectively distracted me from my longstanding grief.

I wasn't all that shocked when I woke up and she was already gone, fresh tire tracks in the snow winding down the hill. I knew at some point, reality would set in and she would try to make sense of what happened. I didn't blame her after what I did all those years ago.

But I was finally ready to be happy and share my life with someone. Share someone else's life. Be there for and with each other. And I wanted that person to be Maya.

With that realization, came the fear that she—or anyone else—could be ripped away from me. Just like Ava had been ripped away from me.

I took a deep breath and tried to push the thoughts away, but they kept creeping back. I glanced at my cell phone sitting on the table and grabbed it without a second thought. I pulled on my coat and walked out the door, taking a breath of cold mountain air as I scrolled through my contacts.

Catherine, a therapist specializing in grief, had helped me make it through some of my darkest moments after Ava died. She had been there for me these last couple of years and I would never have made it this far without her guidance and support. I knew this...thing with Maya was a big step and I needed Catherine's perspective.

After three rings, she answered.

"Hi Jack, it's good to hear from you," Catherine said warmly.

"Hey, Catherine." I gulped in some air, trying to soothe my shaky voice. "Thanks for answering. I just really needed to talk to someone."

"Of course. What's going on?"

I took a deep breath before launching into my story.

"I have feelings for a woman. We have a bit of history and dated in college. Recently we...reconnected and now I can't stop thinking about her. But I'm also having some guilt because of, well, Ava. And I'm also terrified that..."

I couldn't finish the sentence. I couldn't say *I'm terrified that I'll lose her.*

Catherine made a sympathetic sound.

“It’s understandable to feel conflicted in this situation. It’s important to remember that your feelings are valid, but you also need to be honest with yourself and those around you.”

“I know,” I replied, feeling defeated. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Have you talked to Maya about how you feel?”

“Not yet,” I admitted. “I don’t even know how to bring it up. She knows what happened, like everyone, but I just don’t know how to talk to her about it. Especially given our history together.”

“I understand. It’s a tough conversation to have. But it’s an important one. And if Maya does care about you too, she’ll want to know how you’re feeling.”

I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. I felt tears burning the back of my eyes, threatening to fall.

“It’s understandable to want to avoid pain, but sometimes we have to make difficult choices for our happiness,” Catherine continued.

I sighed, feeling the tears pool in my eyes, but I blinked them away.

“I know, but I can’t help feeling like I’m betraying Ava by being with someone else. I want to be happy and live a life with someone else, but I’m scared that it will just be taken away from me again.”

My voice was barely a whisper.

“It’s understandable that you’re scared, Jack. But you can’t let that fear control you. You have to take risks. You *deserve* to be happy. And, like we’ve talked about, Ava would *want* you to be happy and to find a way to live the rest of your life to its fullest.”

I wiped the tears away.

“I know,” I finally said.

“And I’ll be here for you every step of the way.”

We talked for a few more minutes before I hung up, feeling a bit better. Catherine had a way of making me feel heard and understood. I knew that I had to take a step forward if I wanted to be happy. I just had to find the courage to take that step.

It was too bad courage was in short supply.

Thinking about my conversation with Catherine and what I could do next, I started packing my things to head home.

I knew I needed to talk to Maya and figure out what was happening between us. I also needed to be honest with Maya about my feelings. It wouldn’t be easy, but it was the right thing to do. I needed to give this second chance at a relationship the best chance to grow and not fuck up like I did years ago.

As I drove home, I couldn’t help but think about Maya and how easily we fell back together and how quickly our bodies remembered each other. Overall, it was incredible to realize how much I still cared for her. It was scary to open up to someone again after losing my wife, but I knew I couldn’t

keep my feelings bottled up forever. I needed to take a chance on love, even if it meant risking getting hurt again.



Maya

I loved my job and work rarely felt like a slog. But today, I couldn't concentrate. Whenever I tried, whenever I had a quiet moment, my mind kept wandering back to the cabin with Jack.

To say I was confused about the situation was an understatement. I was surprised by how quickly we turned from cold and awkward to hot and very, *very* familiar.

I figured I just needed someone to talk to about the whole thing. And who was better to talk to than Brielle?

Brielle was always positive. She was always peppy. Sometimes it was annoying, but sometimes it was exactly what I needed. Like today.

I dropped into a chair in her office, and she flashed her signature bright smile. Wearing a bright pink sweater dress, she practically glowed.

"Hey, Maya! What's up?" Her face was so open, making it always easy to confide in her.

I shook my head and sighed.

"I can't concentrate." My voice was heavy and full of frustration. One corner of Brielle's lip threatened to pull down in a frown, but she quickly recovered.

Brielle cocked her head to the side and gave me a knowing look.

“It’s Jack, isn’t it?”

My brain stuttered at her acknowledgment of Jack. Had I been that obvious?

I nodded, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“Yep. It’s Jack.” I drummed my fingers on her desk and looked down at my feet. “So, we may have slept together,” I admitted, looking sheepishly up at her, steadying myself for her reaction.

“You what?” She squealed, her voice so loud that I shrunk into the chair, afraid a coworker would see me with her through the frosted glass doors. I watched as she internally processed and gathered her composure in the space of ten seconds.

“Okay,” she finally said slowly. Dragging each syllable out impossibly long. “Is that a problem?”

I hesitated. I didn’t even know where to begin about what a problem this was.

“I don’t know,” I finally answered honestly. “It’s been so long and so much has happened. He’s different—very different—and I’m different. I’m afraid we just fell back on what was comfortable but in the end, it was all a huge mistake.”

Brielle tilted her head to the side, considering.

“I get it. Have you talked to him?”

I shook my head.

“Well, that’s probably a good place to start. If you want to. And if you don’t want a relationship moving forward, you should probably tell him that, too.”

I nodded, apparently losing my entire ability to speak. I took a few deep, long breaths. Brielle was right. No matter what, I did owe Jack a conversation. At least to tell him I wasn’t interested in pursuing anything and the time at the cabin was just a fun—and enjoyable—trip down memory lane.

There were too many complications.

I looked up to find Brielle leaning closer, a conspiratorial look on her face.

“But, seriously, Maya. Jack is gorgeous, successful, and incredibly wealthy. I vote that you get to know him now that you’re both full-fledged adults.”

I rolled my eyes, feeling a headache start to form.

“I doubt he’d even be interested in me, Brielle. A guy like Jack can have any woman he wants.”

Brielle waved her hand dismissively.

“Nah, I don’t believe that. Maya, you’re a hottie and successful in your own right. Jack would be an idiot not to pursue things with you. I mean, he was an idiot way back then, too. But he’s surely grown up, right?”

I shook my head, laughing. It was a nice thought, but too many things had passed. Too much went unsaid.

But Brielle always knew how to make me feel better and I already felt a little lighter.

“Okay, I will take your first piece of advice and at least talk to Jack. I’ll nip this all in the bud so I can stop thinking about him.”

“Well, that’s less than ideal, but a good idea all the same. You go get ‘em, girl.”

I stood up and chuckled to myself as I walked back to my office, determined to figure out how I’d talk to Jack.

Chapter 8

JACK

A few days after getting back home to Denver, I could no longer resist the overwhelming *need* to be near Maya. I missed her. I missed her warmth and I missed the light she brought to my life up at the cabin.

Through some light sleuthing—it had been too easy—my assistant managed to find her home address. I had thought about going to see her at work, but that felt weird since she was working on the story. I was looking to express my feelings for her, not get her in trouble.

I was a little surprised to learn that she lived in the same suburban town she had grown up in and, if I wasn't mistaken from the address, didn't live far from her parents. Part of me had thought she'd carved some glamorous downtown city life for herself. But it also seemed right. Maya liked the quiet.

After clearing my schedule for the afternoon, I was in my car in the building's parking garage, throwing it into gear. If I stopped to think about things too long, I was afraid I'd chicken out.

Buildings flew past, and it was way too soon that I was pulling off at her highway exit. I made my way down the main road, palms slick with sweat against the leather of the steering wheel. My stomach was filled with a swarm of butterflies.

I was nervous, excited, and afraid all at the same time, but I knew deep down that I had to follow through with my plan.

My GPS told me I had arrived at Maya's house and I pulled over. It was a small dark-blue two-story house with a tidy lawn in front that seemed to have a garden that I was sure bloomed brilliantly in the warmer months. A cold breeze shook the bare branches of a large tree in the yard.

The neighborhood and house were quiet and I started to doubt my timing but I forced myself out of the car and walked up to the front door, immediately ringing the doorbell.

My heart was pounding faster and faster as I waited for a response. Then, the door swung open, and there she was. Maya stood before me, looking more beautiful than ever. Her long, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore jeans and a simple cobalt blue long-sleeve T-shirt that hugged her curves in all the right places.

For a second, she looked stunned, before recovering and letting a smile spread across her face and her eyes light up.

"Jack," she said, shaking her head in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

I swallowed hard.

"Maya," I rasped, clearing my throat. "Can we talk?"

She gazed at me briefly, her eyes scanning mine, before moving to the side and gesturing for me to enter.

Beyond the small entry was the living room, and it was bursting with everything Maya. It was warm and cozy, but filled with brightness and color.

Maya gestured to the couch, and I sank into it, glad to have something support my weight as I contemplated my words.

“What’s going on, Jack?” Maya sat in the chair opposite the couch.

I took a deep breath and looked into her confused, golden eyes.

“Maya. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. Truthfully, I never thought I could ever feel like this about anyone again, but here you are. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. I can’t focus at work. All I can think about, Maya, is you. All I see are your golden brown eyes. My skin still remembers the feel of your fingertips. And my brain yells at me every day for how I treated you all those years ago.”

My breaths were coming quickly, in short pants.

“With you at the cabin...you woke something in me, Maya. You brought a piece of me back to life. I had been numb for too long, but with you, I felt everything. I *want* to feel everything. I want you.”



Maya

Why was I letting myself get drawn in by Jack's pretty words? Why was I moving to the couch? Why was I sitting so close to him?

My body and mind were at war. I knew this was a mistake. A huge mistake. It was a mistake at the cabin and an even better mistake here, at my house, in real life.

But...my body yearned for him. I craved his touch like a drug.

Jack had always been a master of seduction. He knew exactly what to say and do to make me weak in the knees. And this afternoon was no different. His lips were on mine, hot and urgent, as he pressed me up against the arm of the couch. My heart was pounding so loudly that I could barely hear myself think. I was torn between giving in to my desires and stopping him before things went too far.

But then his hands were on my hips, pulling me closer to him, and all rational thought flew out of my head. I could feel the heat of his body against mine, and my own body responded in kind. My nipples hardened as they brushed against his chest, and I felt a wetness between my legs that I couldn't ignore.

Jack seemed to sense my surrender, and his kisses became more urgent, more demanding. His hands moved from my hips

to my breasts, squeezing and kneading them through my shirt. I moaned into his mouth, and he took that as a sign to go further.

His fingers found the hem of my shirt and began to inch it up, exposing my stomach inch by inch. I shivered at the cool air on my skin, but then his mouth was there, warm and wet, and the shivers turned into goosebumps. His tongue traced patterns on my skin, making me arch my back in pleasure.

And then he was tugging my shirt over my head, revealing my lacy bra to his hungry gaze. He looked at me for a moment, taking in the sight of my half-naked body, before he lowered his head and nibbled and kissed me down my neck, pushing the straps down and over my shoulders. With one quick movement of his hand on my back, my bra fell, and I was bare in front of him.

He placed one breast in his mouth and the smooth wetness from his tongue over my hardened nipples made me gasp and I felt my knees go weak. I clung to him for support as he continued to suck and lick my breasts, driving me closer and closer to the edge. And then his hand was on my waistband, tugging my jeans down my hips. I kicked them off until I was just in my panties.

He leaned back, surveying me with an appreciative eye.

“Maya, you are so incredibly beautiful.” His voice sounded reverent, his eyes were full of awe. How was I supposed to get away from this?

But then his mouth was on mine again, and I forgot all about my insecurities. We stood up and stumbled toward my bedroom, still locked in each other's embrace, until we fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

My heart raced as I gazed deeply into Jack's eyes, my fingers entwined with his. It wasn't until this moment that I finally understood I had been waiting for this to happen for what seemed like an eternity, and now, finally, we were alone, with nothing but the sound of our breathing filling the room.

I had always thought that Jack was the one for me. We had a connection that went beyond words, a bond that transcended time and space. And now, here he was, in front of me with his strong arms wrapped around my waist, his breath hot against my neck.

I leaned into him, feeling his body heat as he pressed his lips to my ear. I shivered with anticipation as he whispered sweet nothings into my ear, his voice low and husky.

"Thank you, Maya," he murmured in my ear. I had no idea what he was thanking me for, but my body was very appreciative of his gratitude.

I felt the heat of Jack's hands on my skin as he gently ran them up and down my back. I closed my eyes and let out a soft sigh, feeling the warmth of his body on mine as his lips moved against my neck. His soft kisses sent a wave of pleasure through my body, and I melted into his embrace.

I could feel his heart beating against my chest as my fingers moved through his dark hair. He felt so perfect in my arms,

and I wanted to stay like this forever. His hands moved lower, exploring my curves as he kissed me tenderly.

I let out a low moan as his hands moved even lower, his fingertips tracing a path of fire down my spine. Jack's touch was firm yet so gentle and his kisses so passionate. I felt like I was in another world.

Jack's hands were everywhere, exploring every inch of my body. I moaned and arched my back as he kissed his way down my neck, his fingers trailing down my stomach toward my light blue lace panties. He hooked his fingers into the waistband and pulled them down, revealing my wetness to him.

He looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire.

"You're so ready for me," he said, and I nodded, unable to form words.

His lowered his mouth to my navel and started his downward trail of kisses. I felt my desire for him growing with each one. I leaned into him, wanting to be as close to him as possible, and he eagerly responded.

I felt a wave of pleasure as Jack moved lower, his tongue against my clit. I gasped and arched my back as his tongue moved in perfect circles, pleasure radiating through my body. I felt like I was going to explode with pleasure, and I tangled my fingers in Jack's hair as he continued the torture. His expert movements explored me like I was a new found treasure and he was savoring every moment.

My breathing grew heavier as Jack moved back up my body, his hands exploring my curves as he kissed me deeply. I felt completely safe in his embrace and I ran my hands down his back, wanting to be as close to him as possible. I could feel his desire for me radiating through his body, and it made me feel even more special.

As our kiss ended, I looked into Jack's eyes and smiled. I wanted to show him how much I wanted him, and I kissed him again, this time with even more passion. I wanted to make him feel as special as he made me feel, and I felt a warmth spreading through my body as I held him in my arms.

He answered my kiss with plunging himself into my wetness. We both gasped at the contact and then continued the desperate tongue movements that grew ever more hungry for each other. He thrust deeply into me, over and over, with a rhythm that was taking my breath away. I felt alive and free, and I felt my desire for him growing with each movement. He got to his knees and lifted my legs and pounded his dick in and out with such delicious vigor, I thought my head was going to blow off.

Our passionate haze of love-making continued until our climax where my pulsing walls grabbed his dick over and over again as we cried out with a pleasure I hadn't felt in a very long time.

When it was all over, we lay there together, my head resting on Jack's chest. A slight sheen of sweat covered his skin, and we were both struggling to catch our breath.

“God,” he panted as he swallowed, trying to wet his throat again. “Fuck me.”

I giggled, hearing his total surrender.

I hadn't felt this relaxed and content for a very long time.

We lay there for a moment, tangled in each other's embrace, our breathing slowly returning to normal. And then Jack propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at me.

“I know we still have a lot of baggage between us,” he said, his voice serious. “But I can't help how I feel about you, Maya. I hope you can give me a chance to prove to you how much I've changed.”

My heart skipped a beat at his words, and my stomach dropped like an anchor. Why did I do this? How can this really work out? Why can't I resist him?

“I don't know...” I said, searching my brain for anything rational and reasonable to say. I was chewing my bottom lip and tasted blood. Jack's face fell.

“I understand,” he said, taking my cheek in his hand. “We have a lot to work through. Let's just see what happens.”

He kissed me again and my brain stopped working...again. Thankfully, it caught up with me, and I gently disentangled myself from Jack.

At his disappointed look, I dropped one more chaste kiss on his lips.

“You caught me in the middle of some work,” I said, thankful that my brain found an explanation. “I have some things I need to finish up before a deadline.”

Jack caught my lips in one more searing kiss and we both managed to break apart to get dressed. We were throwing flirty, sexy glances at each other the whole time.

Part of me knew that my life had just changed forever. The physical attraction between us was as strong as ever. The afternoon had been so...intense.

But a glance at the clock told me that it was almost time for the horse and carriage to turn back into a pumpkin. Eli would be home any minute. Reality quickly set in.

I knew that we would have to face the outside world and that the consequences of our actions could be far-reaching.

Chapter 9

JACK

I decided to go back to the office after Maya had gently kicked me out. Despite the sooner-than-wanted departure, I couldn't stop the grin from spreading across my face. I felt like I was on top of the world. I had never felt this happy in my life. It was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and I was finally free to be myself and live my life again.

I exhaled deeply, letting out all the oxygen from my lungs. As I sat for a moment in the parking garage, I said a quiet "thank you" to Ava for allowing me to let go and move forward.

When I arrived at the office, I could tell that something was different. Everyone seemed to be buzzing with excitement, and I could hear them whispering and giggling as I walked through the open space. It was puzzling, to say the least.

As I started to walk into my office, I could hear everyone whispering behind my back as they got ready to leave for the day. Normally, like any sane person, I would have been self-conscious and uncomfortable, but today I didn't care. I was

too happy to let anyone else's opinions bring me down. Unless I had my shirt poking out of my fly. But then again, I was still too blissed-out to really care.

All I could gather from the whispered chatter is that people caught on to the fact that the boss might have a new girlfriend. Rather than be embarrassed, I found it thoroughly amusing as a group of women was huddled around a cube, throwing secretive glances my way.

An even wider grin threatened to rip my face in two as I sat down behind my desk. I couldn't stop thinking about Maya and how amazing it was to reconnect. I was still so elated by our time together that it was hard to focus on anything else. Every time I thought about her, my heart would skip a beat, and a warm feeling would spread through my chest.

My body was reacting to my emotions in ways I had not experienced in a long time. My palms were sweaty, and my heart was beating faster than usual. Even my stomach was fluttering with excitement. I felt like a teenager experiencing his first crush all over again. Giddy.

For some reason, I liked being out of control. I had felt so out of control of my life for the last couple of years, mired in grief and pain. But this was...happy. Joyful. Like each day could bring a new, wonderful surprise. It was the complete opposite, and my heart felt lighter.

I decided to take a walk to get a late coffee, bypassing the machine in my office. The gossip continued, and I just shook my head and laughed to myself. I had always encouraged a

friendlier work environment where everyone felt free to connect. It was sort of backfiring on me now. But still, I didn't have anything to prove to anyone, and who cared if I was dating again? Everyone would move on from the rumors soon enough. Besides, I was happy, and that was all that mattered in the end for me.

And anyway, the looks that people were giving me were far from judgmental. They looked...happy for me. Genuinely. It made me wonder how they'd thought of me the last couple of years.

I walked into the large breakroom with the high-end coffee machine. There were some things in this world that were just worth doing right, and that included coffee.

Focused on my mission, I didn't even notice the group at first. But as I fumbled with the coffee machine, I suddenly realized that the room had grown very quiet. I quickly checked my fly. Nope. That was ok.

"Hey, everyone," I said slowly, cautiously.

One of my very talented, and very forward, vice presidents waved.

"Hey, Jack," she said, glancing back down at the glass of water she was holding. "We were just wondering if we could meet your girlfriend sometime. You should bring her around. We'll be nice, I swear." She held up the fingers of the Girl Scouts and I couldn't stop the bark of a laugh that escaped my lips.

“Oh, yes, Denise. I’m sure you’d be nice. That’s what you’re known for around here.”

She winked, in on the joke. Denise was a lot of things. She was an amazingly talented programmer and businessperson, a very good friend, and had been with the company since its first days. But she was famously known around this building for being judgmental and, quite frankly, sometimes a bit of a bitch. Something she’d say about herself in a heartbeat.

But then I remembered how happy Maya had made me, and I felt a surge of confidence. She could match up to Denise, no problem.

“But, sure,” I said, grinning. “I’ll bring her by sometime.”

Denise pumped her fist like she’d won a battle and I shook my head, laughing, amazed at just how much my life had changed in a couple of weeks.



Maya

I yawned as I stepped off the elevator at MHM. The previous night, I had been spent tossing and turning. My smartwatch had been all too quick to admonish me for the stormy night's sleep.

Clutching my coffee cup, I rolled my eyes as I saw Brielle waiting for me at the reception desk. She was on-brand this morning dressed like a Skittle in an orange turtleneck sweater and dark gray pants.

She immediately pulled me into a hug, threatening the contents of my travel mug.

“Maya. Emily was looking for you a few minutes ago and wants to see you in her office. I told her I'd be happy to let you know. She seemed happy.”

Brielle pulled my arm and dragged me toward Emily's office. I guess I wasn't even going to get to take my coat off this morning before the race started.

“It *has* to be good news,” Brielle continued. “I've never seen Emily this happy. She was *humming* this morning. Humming, Maya.”

“Oh wow, humming, huh? Stop the presses.” I rolled my eyes, but it was lost on Brielle as she was deep in her excitement.

Brielle turned to me, beaming, and placed both hands on my shoulders.

“I know, right? Anyway, I’ll leave you here now. Do not mess this up, babe.” She looked stern yet comical in the way she stared down at me. She was a kind and lovely person, but her height was a little amazonian.

I gave her a halfhearted salute with a smile. Satisfied, Brielle walked away, and I was suddenly alone.

And very, very nervous.

I took a deep breath and tried to ready myself, but nothing worked. I couldn’t help but feel nervous as I stood before Emily’s closed office door. She was my editor, and I always wanted to impress her. If I couldn’t even satisfy her, how would I satisfy the public?

I mustered up my courage and knocked. When I entered her office at the sound of her voice, Emily looked up from her computer screen and beamed at me.

“Maya, I’m so glad you’re here. Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” I sat in the leather chair in front of her desk. “I came over as soon as I could. Is there something wrong with my article?”

“Oh, no.” Emily quickly shook her head. “Quite the opposite. I just finished reading your draft, and it’s flawless. You’re a natural at this, Maya.” She stared at me in a way that had me squirming in my chair.

I felt a surge of pride and relief wash over me. I had worked hard on that story, even with everything between Jack and me, and it was amazing to hear that it had paid off.

“Thank you so much, Emily. I’m really happy to hear that.” I tried to hide the trembling in my voice.

“There’s just one more thing before this goes to print. We need to schedule the photoshoot. It completely slipped my mind. We were going to schedule Jack with the rest of the features, but apparently, he was missed in that process. Unfortunately, it has to be tomorrow to meet the deadline. The photo team is on standby to make whatever time Jack is available to work.”

My heart sank at the thought of organizing a photo shoot on such short notice. I knew I could do it, but I knew for a guy as busy as Jack, it would seem disrespectful of his time.

“Okay, I’ll get started on it right away.” I tried my hardest to sound confident, but the effort failed in my ears.

As I stepped out of Emily’s office, my mind was already racing with ideas for the photo shoot. I knew I wanted something unique and eye-catching, enough to show the hunk of a man Jack is, but I wasn’t quite sure how to achieve it.

I dialed Jack’s number, my heart beating a little faster as the phone rang.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Jack’s voice was warm and full of an emotion I couldn’t place. Something about it made me bite back a giggle. I felt myself relaxing a little.

“Hi, Jack,” I said, trying to keep my voice casual, even if the picture in my mind had my legs around his neck while he was... OMG! Pull it together! I cleared my throat. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good, Maya. Great, even. How about you?”

“I’m good too.” I forced myself to use my business tone. “Listen, I was wondering if you might be free for a photo shoot for the story in the magazine.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and I held my breath. I was crossing my fingers and toes that Jack would say yes and overlook the last minute timing.

“Sure, Maya,” Jack said finally. “I’d be happy to do it. When were you thinking?”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“So, unfortunately, time is not on our side. Long story short, this was meant to be scheduled sooner, but now we’re up against the deadline and it needs to be tomorrow. Noon? We can come to you if that makes things easier.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you came, but the others? They can stay where they are.” His voice was normal, but it sounded like he was smiling. I smiled too because I knew what was coming.

“We’ll do it here, then. In our studio,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“That sounds perfect,” Jack said, with a chuckle. “I’ll be there.”

I felt a rush of relief and happiness. Jack had been a great interview subject, and I knew the photos would make the piece come alive.

“That’s great, Jack,” Maya said. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem, Maya,” Jack said. “I’m happy to do it. See you tomorrow.”

“See you then.” I hung up the phone, letting out a deep breath.

For a moment, I just stood there, staring at my phone. Like every interaction with Jack, the consequence was pure guilt knotting up my stomach. I liked flirting with him and being in his company. But, deep down, part of me wondered if I was really ready to let him into my life or whether I was just eager to work on the story because I was in line for a promotion.

If he knew...No, I had to push that thought aside. I couldn’t let Jack get that close to me again.

My chest tightened as I thought about it while I walked to my office. Guilt settled in the pit of my stomach, and I could feel my heart racing. I wanted to justify my actions, to convince myself that everything I had done was for the right reasons. Most of the time, I believed in myself. But now...now I was wondering if any of it was true.

I tried to distract myself from my thoughts by focusing on something else. I started trying to do research for my next story, but everything was blurring together and I couldn’t concentrate.

I sighed and put my head on my desk.

Jack was a good person. I might not have believed that when he left me for San Francisco, but getting to know him now, there was no doubt that he was truly good. It was complicating the situation and everything would have been easier if he was just an asshole. I had no idea what to do now.

Regret and guilt rose up like bile, and I thought I was going to be sick. Blindly, I grabbed my water bottle and took a deep sip through the straw, not bothering to lift my head.

I had no idea what I was going to do. But the photo shoot tomorrow had to be the last time I saw Jack. Because if we kept this up, my life would be seriously changed. And I wasn't convinced that was for the best.

Chapter 10

JACK

I stepped out of the car in front of MHM and took a deep breath. Daniel, my best friend, slapped me on the back.

“Ready to be a star?” He laughed. I wasn’t sure why I brought him, except I felt like I needed moral support. My assistant, Becky, followed us with her nose buried in her phone, typing furiously. Without Becky, I’m sure my day to day activities would be a mess.

We were greeted at the reception desk—not by Maya, which was disappointing—and led to the photo studio where several people were setting up the equipment and adjusting the lights to get the perfect shot. The sound of the camera shutter clicking furiously echoed through the room as they tested it out.

I was dressed in my favorite outfit, a sharp black suit that made me feel powerful and confident. I could feel the soft fabric of my shirt against my skin and the weight of my watch on my wrist. Daniel, on the other hand, was dressed more

casually, but his laid-back attitude made him look cool and collected and somehow helped balance me.

As we walked toward the set, I noticed Daniel already flirting with one of the women in the room. He was always the charmer and had a way of making people feel at ease. But as we approached Maya, I saw Daniel turn on the charm even more. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as I watched him talk to her.

Maya was always well put together, but this time she looked stunning in her elegant blue sweater dress, and her hair was clipped back effortlessly, and gorgeously messy. Her makeup was flawless, and I could see the excitement in her eyes as she looked at me. I knew that this interview was going to be a big deal for both of us, no matter how nonchalant I chose to act.

As I posed for the camera and listened to the directions yelled out at me, I tried to push the feeling of jealousy aside and focus on the shoot. I could feel the heat of the lights on my face, and the clicking of the camera filled the room. I tried to keep my body relaxed, but I couldn't help but feel tense as I watched Maya and Daniel talking.

As the rich playboy that he was, Daniel found it easy to be around people. Male, female, rich, young, old, it didn't matter. Everyone liked him in the end.

I felt myself grow increasingly annoyed when it looked like he was singling Maya out, probably just to spite me.

My lack of control over my angry facial expressions didn't go unnoticed, and the director called for a ten-minute break. I

could feel the sweat on my forehead as I tried to calm myself down. I knew I had to get a grip on my emotions before I ruined the shoot.

I took a deep breath and walked over to Maya, trying to ignore the way Daniel was still hovering around her.

“How’s everything going?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

Maya smiled at me.

“Great, Jack. The camera loves you. You know that, right?”

I felt a sense of relief wash over me as I realized that Maya was impressed with my performance. I smiled back at her, feeling my confidence grow.

But then I saw Daniel put his hand on Maya’s arm with a wink to me, and my heart sank. I couldn’t help but feel angry and frustrated. I wanted Maya’s attention all to myself, but I knew I couldn’t act on those feelings.

If I did, my so-called friend would probably lose an arm, and I would go to jail. Deep breaths.

As we prepared to start the shoot again, I could feel my body tensing up. I tried to keep my focus on the camera, but my mind was distracted by Daniel’s constant presence near Maya.

The director shouted things out, and I tried to follow them, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of jealousy that was consuming me. I could feel my face becoming tense, my blood rushing to my temples and my heart rate racing. My emotions were affecting the shoot.

After a few more shots, the director called for another break. I could see the frustration in his eyes, and I knew that I needed to get myself under control before I ruined everything.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to relax my body. I could feel the tension slowly leaving my muscles, and I knew that I was ready to try again.

As we started the shoot once more, I focused all of my attention on the camera. I could feel the way my body moved with each pose, and I could see the way the lights hit my face perfectly. I could feel my confidence growing with each shot.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Daniel whisper something in Maya's ear, and my anger flared up again. I tried to ignore it, but I could feel myself losing control. I could feel my body getting hotter as I struggled to keep my emotions in check.

I took a deep breath and tried to push the feeling of jealousy aside. It wasn't like me to allow my emotions to get the best of me and these feelings were confusing me as well as contributing to further rage within me. Dammit! I just needed to focus on the shoot and give Maya the best photos possible.

As we continued, I tried my best to ignore Daniel's presence. I cursed the fact that I had even brought him along. A few more shutter clicks and my eyes wandered over to Maya again. When I saw Daniel put his arm around her, my heart felt like it was lava-hot, filled with undeniable anger. It was pushing the anger-laced blood through my body, and I couldn't stop it.

I asked the director for a ten-minute break, and he was about to refuse, but one look from me shot it down.

I didn't even look toward Maya and Daniel as I hurried to the hallway.

As the noise from the equipment and people outside subsided, I heaved a sigh of relief as I found myself in the corridor leading to the restrooms. I looked around, trying to catch my breath and figure out my next move when I saw her standing there. She had followed me out and was just watching. Maya looked stunning. It had only been one day, but I missed her already.

Her voice, her touch, her kiss...

Before she could say anything, I stepped forward and pinned her against the wall. I could feel the heat emanating from her body, and I knew right then and there, that I had to have her and make her mine.

I pressed my lips against hers, claiming her possessively. Her lips were soft and yielding, and I could feel her responding to my touch. My hands wandered over her body, exploring every curve and contour as I deepened the kiss.

My emotions were a mix of desire, lust, and possessiveness. I needed her, and I knew she wanted me just as much. I wanted to consume her, to leave my mark on her body and make her mine.

The kiss was rough, almost bruising, as our tongues battled for dominance. I could taste the sweetness of her mouth, and I

knew I was addicted. I couldn't get enough of her, and I knew she felt the same.

Her lips were soft and inviting, and I couldn't help myself from pressing into her. I felt the smile she gave as her lips parted slightly, inviting me in for a deeper, drowning kiss.

My hands moved down her back, exploring her curves. I could feel her quivering beneath my touch, and I smiled into her lips as I gave her thigh a slight squeeze. I could feel the tension building between us as our bodies pressed together, the heat and desire almost suffocating. I was so lost in the moment that I barely noticed the small moan that escaped her lips.

I pulled away, looking into her eyes, wanting to see the desire and need that I felt mirrored back at me. And it was there, in her gaze, the same hunger and lust that I felt burning inside me.

I leaned back in, kissing her harder this time, my hands exploring every inch of her body. I could feel her shudder against me as I pulled her even closer, and I knew I was driving her wild with desire.

As the kiss deepened, I could feel my own body responding to her, my desire building to a fever pitch. I wanted to take her right there in the hallway, to show her just how much I needed her.

Finally, we pulled away from each other, both of us gasping for breath. I looked into her eyes and saw that same hunger, that same need that I felt burning inside me.

I knew the words I was about to growl sounded overly possessive, but I couldn't stop myself.

“You have me. I'm all you need, Maya. You're mine.”



Maya

At first, I didn't understand what just happened, until it clicked. I shoved him away from me.

I stood there fuming, my fists clenched at my sides as I glared at Jack. How could he? How could he even suggest that I was his property? I am not anyone's property, and I won't let anyone treat me that way.

"Are you fucking crazy?" I yelled, poking his chest with one finger. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm your man."

He looked so cocky, so self-assured, that my blood turned to lava and I had to fight the urge to slug him in the face. It was bad enough that he was giving Daniel, his – so-called friend – and I death glares throughout the photo shoot, and now he thinks he can lay a primitive claim on me? *Dream on.*

An angry wave of emotion crashed over me, and I felt my heart racing in my chest. I was so frustrated, so furious, that I wanted to scream. Mostly that he had turned a passionate, amazing moment into a stupid possessive weirdo moment. Instead of laying into him, I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down.

"Jack," I said, my voice low and shaking with anger. "I am *not* your property. I am not *anyone's* property."

Jack looked taken aback, clearly surprised by my outburst. But I didn't care. I had to make him understand.

"I can't believe the possessiveness, the feeling that I'm being hunted as if I'm a trophy," I continued. "I just spent all that time during the photo shoot fending off your so-called friend, Daniel, who kept asking me out. The way he looked at me made me feel like a piece of meat... and now I have to deal with someone who thinks I'm a piece of property?"

Jack looked even more surprised now. "Daniel asked you out?" he said, his voice tinged with disbelief.

I nodded, my eyes blazing. "Yes, he did. But, I shut him down. And now you come here and act like I'm some kind of prize that you've won? That's not how it works, Jack. I'm not something to be won or owned. I'm my own person, with my own thoughts and feelings and desires."

I could feel the rage boiling inside me, and I struggled to control it. But Jack was pushing all the wrong buttons, and I couldn't help but lash out.

"And besides," I spat out. "You left me once for a career. How do you think that makes me feel? I have worked hard to feel like I'm worthy just for being me. I don't need to be fought over or possessed. I'm fine on my own and don't need you to take care of me or save me. I had to save myself from you, and I'm not letting you call the shots anymore. Ever."

With that, I turned on my heel and stormed off, my heart pounding in my chest. I was so angry that I couldn't even look at Jack anymore, couldn't stand to be in the same room as him.

For the rest of the photo shoot, I ignored him completely. I didn't even acknowledge his presence, didn't even look at him. I was cold and distant, determined to make him see that he couldn't just waltz back into my life and act like nothing had happened.

But even as I tried to push him away, a small part of me couldn't help but wonder if I was making a mistake. Jack had been my best friend once, and I had loved him with all my heart. But he had made choices that left me to pick up the pieces of my broken heart.

Now he was back, and I didn't know what to do. I was angry and hurt, but I still loved him. And I couldn't help but wonder if he still loved me, too. If somehow, we could make everything that had happened right again.

As I sat alone at home that night, I couldn't stop thinking about Jack. My anger had dissipated, replaced by a deep sense of sadness and longing. I missed him so much, missed the way we used to talk and laugh and share our dreams.

But I also couldn't shake the feeling that something was different now. Jack had hurt me, and I didn't know if I could trust him again. Could I risk my heart on him once more, knowing that he might leave me again if his career called for it?

I decided to sleep on it, hoping that a good night's rest would clear my mind. But even as I drifted off to sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about Jack and the way he had made me feel.

Chapter 11

JACK

The shoot was over and Maya had just left. After leaving with Daniel and Becky, I gathered my things at the office and decided I needed to make things right. Maya deserved more than this and definitely deserved some explanation. So, I drove to her house before I could talk myself out of it.

I stood still, fighting the stiffness of my muscles as I contemplated the merits of being here. Was this the right thing to do? Shaking my head. Of course it was.

I knew how I behaved was wrong, but the thought of Daniel being anywhere around Maya still made my blood boil. My reaction was excessive, though, which is why I wasn't surprised when Maya stopped replying to my texts and picking up my calls.

I took a deep breath before knocking on Maya's door. I needed to apologize for what happened. It wasn't like me to lash out like that, but the mere thought of losing her made me see red. For some reason, I couldn't let her go, not after

everything we'd been through, not when she was just making her way into my life again.

She answered the door, looking tired and unresponsive. My heart sank. I'd hoped she'd have calmed down enough to even be around me, but that wasn't the case.

"Maya," I said softly, afraid to even raise my voice for fear that she would slam the door in my face. "Can I come in? Can we talk?"

She hesitated for a moment, glancing behind her into the house. Her gaze made me nervous, to my surprise, but she just nodded and gestured for me to follow. I followed her into the living room, my heart pounding in my chest. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, and stood aside while Maya sat down on the couch, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm sorry," I said, the words coming out in a rush. "I shouldn't have reacted like that. I was just annoyed, Maya. I know Daniel's reputation with women, and I overreacted. I was selfish and didn't take into account that you're your own person and can take care of yourself. Please..."

She remained silent, her eyes fixed on the floor. My heart sank. This wasn't going well at all. I needed to try something else.

"I brought you these," I said, pulling out the bouquet I had been holding behind me. They were calla lilies, her favorite, and I had to drive all over town before I could even find any florist who had the flowers in stock.

“I know it’s not much, but I wanted to show you how sorry I am.”

Maya looked up at me, her expression icy and green eyes stormy.

“Are you trying to buy me back, Jack?” she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

My heart sank. That was the last thing I wanted her to think about.

“No, of course not,” I said quickly. “I just wanted to show you I care about you.”

Maya just looked at me, her expression unreadable, like there was a wall blocking her thoughts and emotions from showing. One thing I was able to pick up though, even with my thick-headed maleness, was that Maya was angry. I felt like I was losing her, and it was killing me. I had to try something else.

“Maya, please,” I said, my voice cracking. “I care about you. You know that, right?”

She looked away, her face flushing, and when she looked back at me, her eyes flashed in anger, turning the bright green into a dark, murky green.

“Do you?” she said, her voice low. “Because it seems like you only care about yourself. I’m not a toy, Jack. I’m not your property and you can’t dictate my actions.”

I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. Maya had always been the one person who understood me, who saw past my

exterior to the real me. And now she was looking at me like I was a stranger.

I guess I was, even to myself. Seven years isn't seven months after all.

"Maya, I do care about you," I said, my voice softening. "More than anything in the world."

She just looked at me, her eyes cold.

"Then why did you react like that?" she asked. "Why did you assume the worst?"

I felt a knot forming in my stomach.

"I don't know," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I guess I was just scared."

"You know, Jack," she said, her voice taking on a passive-aggressive tone, "it's almost like you don't trust me."

I felt my jaw clench as anger bubbled up inside me.

"What are you talking about?" My voice was tight, and my jaw barely moved.

"I mean, you freak out over a simple conversation," she said, her eyes narrowing. "It's almost like you think I'm going to cheat on you or something. But hey, it's not like we're together, anyway."

"That's not it at all," I said, my voice rising. Her words hurt, but I was picking one battle at a time, so I ignored the comment about us not being together. "I trust you, Maya. I just don't trust other guys."

She scoffed. “And why is that? Because you’re the big alpha male who thinks he can just mark his territory and no one else can touch it?”

I felt a wave of frustration wash over me. Why was she making this so difficult?

“That’s not it,” I said, my voice low. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

“We aren’t together, Jack. When would you get the fact into your thick skull?!” Maya yelled.

I tried to reply, but her words came in a rush, and suddenly we were at each other’s necks. Maya’s hair flew around her face in a bright brown mass of curls, and I couldn’t help but think about how beautiful she was. Even if, at that moment, I was struggling to keep my anger in check.

In the back of my mind, I was stunned at how quickly things had gone from zero to a hundred. We had been arguing about something trivial, but it had escalated quickly into a full-blown argument. I could feel my heart racing as I tried to keep my cool, but then something happened that completely derailed me.

As my voice matched Maya’s tempo for tempo, a little boy walked down the stairs. I stopped at first, unwilling to argue in front of the child who I assumed was Maya’s son. Her son whom she barely ever talked about with me. Another piece of her life she was guarding.

Maya noticed that I had stopped replying and when she saw the reason why, all the blood drained out of her face.

I was worried for her, but when I took a closer look at Eli, all thoughts in my brain evaporated.

No... It couldn't be...

He was a tall, lanky little boy, and with his dark, wavy hair and gray eyes, it was like looking in a mirror. Granted, the mirror was off by about twenty-five years, give or take, but he looked just like me. His age likely matched the last time I saw Maya before we lost contact, and everything suddenly clicked into place.

Eli was my son.

I felt like a boulder in my heart had just sunk to my gut and I was speechless. I could hear Maya whispering loudly to Eli in the background, but I couldn't make out any words. My mind was a racing, muddled mess as I tried to process the revelation. How could she not have told me? Why would she keep this a secret for so long?

I have a son, I thought, staring straight at Eli with my insides starting to shake. My heart started to race.

I have a son, I have a son, I have a son.

My body was tense as I struggled to control my emotions.

I didn't say anything to Maya. I couldn't. There was nothing I could do, so I simply turned on my heel and left the house. I needed time to think, to process what had just happened. As I walked down the street, where I parked so Maya wouldn't hear

the engine, my mind was in turmoil. I couldn't believe that Maya had kept such a huge secret from me.

This new knowledge had stopped me in my tracks. My life was suddenly upside down. I had a child—a boy who looked just like me. And yet, I had missed out on his entire life. I had no idea who he was or what he liked. I had no memories of his first steps, his first words, or his first day of school.

Tears prickled at the corners of my eyes as I thought about all the years that I had missed. All the birthdays and holidays that I had missed. I felt like I had been robbed of something precious and irreplaceable.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even notice when it started to snow. The flakes were cold and heavy. Warmed by my body heat, they melted and chilled me as they soaked through my layers. I was shivering, but I didn't care. All I could think about was Eli, my son.

I was in a daze, even as I drove home. I continued in this state for hours, spending a restless night but pushing forward as I cleaned up and headed back to the office the next morning.

All I was able to do was sign a few papers, all because I kept spacing out. As I sat in my chair, staring into space, my mind started to drift back in time to when Ava and I were together. I could see her smile in the back of my mind, sunny and radiant, just like she was. I remembered how happy we were together. For a moment, it was like I was back in those days, reliving the memories of our love.

I remembered the way Ava's smile lit up the room and the way her laughter made my heart skip a beat. I remembered the way her hair smelled like strawberries and how she loved to dance in the rain. We were young and in love, and nothing else seemed to matter.

Ava would never have done this to me.

I tried to push the memories of Ava aside and focus on the present, but the guilt lingered. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was somehow betraying Maya and *our son* by even thinking about Ava.

I couldn't do this anymore. I needed air. I couldn't breathe in my office, and it felt like the walls were closing in.

I sprang to my feet, the first rushed movement I had made all day, rushing past startled people and even more startled security guards until I burst out of the building and let my feet lead.

As I walked, I could feel my body tense up. My fists clenched at my sides, and my breathing became shallow and uneven. I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even notice where I was going.

Suddenly, I found myself standing outside the old bookstore where Ava and I used to spend hours getting lost on the shelves. The sign above the door creaked in the wind, and the windows were smudged with fingerprints, just as I remembered it. I hadn't been here since her death.

I hesitated for a moment before pushing open the door. The familiar smell of old books and coffee greeted me, and I felt a pang of nostalgia. It was like nothing had changed since the last time Ava and I had been here together.

As I walked past old Mr. Wei, he gave me a sad smile and ushered me through the aisles. I couldn't give him a smile in return, so I just nodded and let myself get lost in the world of books.

My fingers brushed over the spines of the books, and I remembered the countless hours Ava and I had spent here. We would find a cozy corner and read to each other, lost in the worlds of the stories we were sharing.

The memories flooded back, and I couldn't help but smile. But the guilt was still there, gnawing at me. So much guilt, and with this new news, it just seemed to be getting worse.

Chapter 12

MAYA

I walked into the yoga studio with Eli at my side, nervous and unsure. It was my first time doing yoga, and I didn't know what to expect. But I knew I needed to do something to put myself back together after everything that had happened. This was a neighborhood studio that offered childcare, so I thought it was a great time to try it.

I needed something to transfer all that negative energy out of my mind and body, and after talking to Brielle (obviously), yoga seemed like a good fit.

That's when I saw her—a lanky woman with beautiful black locks, kind eyes, and a gentle smile, sitting behind a table with sign-up sheets for the class. I approached her, trying to hide my nerves.

“Hi, is this where I sign up?” I asked.

“Absolutely. Welcome to the studio. I'm Catherine,” she replied, her smile growing even wider.

“I’m Maya and I’m probably the very last person on this planet who has never tried yoga before.” Catherine laughed.

“Don’t you worry. You are definitely not the last person. There might be a couple of people in the remote Amazonian forest that still haven’t tried it,” she teased. I laughed and Catherine handed me a form to fill out. As I filled in my details, I couldn’t help but notice how at ease Catherine seemed. It was almost as if she had a calm aura around her, and just being around her made me relax.

“Are you a regular here?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m actually an instructor here. Well, whenever I can spare some time away from my day job.” Her smile was so genuine.

As we spoke, it turned out that we had a lot in common. She was a single mother, and we both had sons who were six years old.

When she took me to the childcare area, we quickly found that our sons were already good friends. They went to the same school and so Eli went into the childcare room with zero hesitation. Catherine’s son, Hudson, rushed to play with Eli and pulled him towards the sandpit as they both dissolved in giggles. Hudson ran back to where we were standing.

“Mom, can we have a play date with Eli?” he asked.

Catherine and I looked at each other, both feeling a sense of relief that we had found someone we could connect with.

“Absolutely,” Catherine said, smiling at me. “Why don’t we exchange numbers and set something up?”

As we swapped phone numbers, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for this chance encounter. It was like the universe had brought Catherine into my life just when I needed her most.

We dropped off the boys together in the childcare room and hightailed it to the studio.

As we walked into the studio together, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for this unexpected connection. Catherine seemed to sense my nervousness and offered to guide me through the poses.

I politely declined. I knew I could do this. Yoga wasn’t like fast-paced skilled movements, anyway.

That was a mistake.

It was supposed to be a beginner’s class, but as soon as I saw everyone else in the room contorting their bodies in ways I didn’t know were possible, I knew I was in over my head. But I was determined to try.

As I lay on my mat, trying to imitate the poses the instructor was demonstrating, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see a smiling Catherine.

“You need help with anything?”

I smiled gratefully at her.

“Actually, yes. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Catherine chuckled.

“Don’t worry, we all start somewhere. I’ll guide you through the poses if you want.”

I nodded eagerly, feeling relieved that I had someone to help me. As Catherine walked me through the poses, I felt myself relaxing for the first time in weeks. It was amazing how much better I felt just by moving my body and focusing on my breath.

We started with beginner yoga poses, and by the third pose, I wanted to either laugh or cry. Looking at the way our bodies contorted on the full wall mirror made me chuckle more. Catherine shushed me, but she was laughing too.

I had never felt so out of place before, and my body felt alien to me. It was hard to relax and concentrate on the poses when I felt like a fool, so I laughed to ease the tension.

The first pose was easy, and I could manage it without any issues. The second pose was a little trickier, but I managed to balance myself. The third pose, however, was a whole different story.

Catherine demonstrated the pose, and I tried to copy her. My body refused to cooperate, and I almost toppled over. I managed to catch myself, but it was too late. My laughter escaped me, and I couldn’t stop. I tried to stifle it, but it was like trying to hold back a sneeze.

Catherine looked at me with disapproval, but then she, too, burst into laughter. The class turned to look at us, and we both turned beet red. But the laughter was contagious, and soon the entire class was chuckling along.

The pose was a simple one, or so I thought. We were supposed to stand on one leg and lift the other leg behind us while holding it with our hands. Sounded easy, right? But my leg wouldn't stay up, and I was constantly swaying back and forth.

As I attempted the pose, I couldn't help but feel like a flamingo. Catherine had no problem with it, and her body looked graceful in the mirror. I, on the other hand, looked like a penguin trying to fly.

Catherine whispered to me to focus, but it was impossible. I was too busy giggling, and my body was shaking from the effort. I tried to compose myself, but every time I looked in the mirror, I started laughing again.

The class continued, and we moved on to more complex poses. But for me, the damage was done. Every time I looked at Catherine, we both started laughing. It was like we were schoolchildren, trying not to get caught by the teacher.

At first, I still felt clumsy and awkward as I attempted to contort my body into various positions. But after a while, Catherine's patient guidance helped me find my balance and ease into the movements. I was surprised at how quickly my body responded to the poses, and how calming it felt to focus on my breath.

As the class went on, Catherine and I exchanged knowing glances and nods of encouragement. It was as if we were in this together, supporting each other through our individual struggles.

As I lay on my yoga mat, I took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. The yoga class had been intense, but now, as I cooled down, I felt a sense of calm wash over me.

Brielle said yoga always had a way of centering her, and now I understood. I felt a deep sense of comfort and for once, felt like I was standing on solid ground. Meeting Catherine was also a bonus of the day; I felt like I could tell her anything.

And so I did. “Hey, Catherine. Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure! What’s up?”

It was a simple question, but for some reason, it was all I needed to open up. I started talking about Eli. Lately, he hadn’t been speaking to me much, and I knew that I had done something wrong.

I told Catherine about how I had kept the truth about his father from him for all these years, and now that he suspected something was up, maybe he was upset about that. I was terrified that he would never forgive me.

As I spoke, I could feel my emotions getting the better of me. My voice shook and tears welled up in my eyes. Catherine put a comforting arm around my shoulder and led me to a nearby bench. We sat down, and I continued to spill my fears and feelings.

I talked about how much Eli meant to me, and how I couldn’t bear the thought of losing him. I was so afraid that

this man, his father, would take him away from me. I didn't trust him, and I didn't want to share my son with anyone else.

As I spoke, Catherine listened intently. She didn't interrupt or judge me, she just listened. It was exactly what I needed.

When I finally finished, I took a deep breath and wiped away my tears. Catherine looked at me with a gentle smile and said, "Maya, it's okay to feel afraid. You love your son, and you want what's best for him. But you have to remember that he's his own person. He's going to make his own decisions, and you have to respect that. Children have a deeper wisdom than we give them credit for."

Somehow this felt a little like *déjà vu*. Just like I had wanted Jack to realize that I'm my own person, here I was faced with the same conflict. I thought I knew what was best for Eli, but he was his own person. I felt an empathy for Jack at that moment, knowing that he was acting out because he genuinely thought he knew what was best for me at that moment.

Catherine continued, "And as for Eli not speaking to you, give him time. It's perfectly normal for him to be mad right now, but that doesn't mean he'll never forgive you. Just be patient and understanding with him. Show him that you're still there for him and that you love him no matter what. As for your feelings about his dad, you know that everyone deserves a dad. This might be something that you have to let happen and just be there for Eli as it unfolds."

I took another deep breath and felt a sense of relief wash over me. Catherine was right. I had to give Eli space and time,

but also show him that I was there for him while he got to know his dad. I owed him that.

As we stood up to leave, Catherine put her arm around my shoulder again and said, “Maya, you can always call me if you need a friend or just someone to talk to. Don’t hesitate to reach out.”

As Eli and I walked out of the studio, I felt a renewed sense of energy and purpose. Talking to Catherine had been exactly what I needed to clear my head and put things into perspective. Yoga helped me to connect with my emotions and release the tension that had been building up inside of me. And besides, after having everything thrown at you, sometimes you just need to have a good laugh.

Chapter 13

JACK

Driving on the highway, feeling the wind in my hair and the sun on my face, was one of the simplest yet most enjoyable pleasures of life. Even with all the money and power, there was nothing better. It was an opportunity to escape the hustle and bustle of my monotonous everyday life, and the freedom it provided was unmatched.

I was riding in the car with Ava. The sun was shining, and I was singing along to the songs on the radio. Describing my noises as “singing” was generous, Ava teased. As she looked over at me, my heart swelled at the sight of her smile. God, life was good.

We both looked forward to the trip to the lake because we definitely both needed to unwind. We were well on our way to doing so, with Ava in a flowing tank top that brought out the blonde highlights in her chestnut brown hair. Conversely, I looked comically pale in my T-shirt and shorts.

Our trip to unwind turned into a nightmare in a split second.

The sound of the oncoming car swerving dangerously on the wrong side of the road shattered the serenity of the moment. I gripped the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turned white and tried to pull over to the side. My blood rushed to my face when I heard Ava's high-pitched, blood-curdling scream. I desperately tried to avoid the collision, but it was too late. The car collided into ours with a loud bang, and everything went into a spin. Suddenly, everything was moving in slow motion.

The sound of the windshield breaking was like a window shattered by a gunshot. My senses were overwhelmed by the smell of burning rubber and the crunch of metal as we were tossed and turned as the car flipped over and over. I looked over at Ava; her smile now replaced with wide-eyed terror as she tried to brace herself. Shards of glass were flying everywhere. But it was too late, and I had to watch in agonizing slow motion as her body was propelled through the windshield, screaming out for the help that never came.

I woke up frantic, my bedsheets soaked in sweat.

In my recurring dream, I kept reliving that same moment, over and over again. It was as if my mind was stuck on a loop, unable to break free from the memory of the accident. Each time, I saw Ava's body flying out of the windshield, and I heard her screams echoing in my ears. I tried to reach out to her, but I couldn't move. I was paralyzed for a few seconds, or minutes, or days; it always felt longer each time.

The nightmare was so vivid that I could feel the heat of the flames as I struggled to move, to get to her, and the weight of

the guilt bearing down on my chest. I managed to crawl out of the wreckage just to see Ava's broken body on the pavement. I had stumbled forward on unsteady feet that day, and had fallen by her side in a heap, numb to the screams of bystanders and emergency responders that echoed in my ears.

The dream haunted me every night for about six months after the accident, leaving me a sobbing mess with a racing heart and clothes drenched in sweat. Sometimes, I couldn't go back to sleep afterwards. Other times, I fell back into the nightmare and relived the tragedy over and over again. Night after night.

I hadn't had the dream for a long time, and the fact that it was back, scared me. The dream was so real that it felt like it was happening all over again. It was always vivid, down to the last detail. I could feel the heat of the flames licking at my skin, and the smoke filling my lungs. I could see Ava's body lying on the pavement, motionless and broken, and I couldn't do anything to help her.

I felt like I was drowning in a sea of pain, unable to find my way back to reality.

But then, in the nightmare this time around, something changed. When I fell to my knees, all I saw was Maya's body instead of Ava's.

My heart was pounding in my chest. In the dream, I had lost Maya in place of Ava. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had lost more than just Maya in that dream. I had lost myself.

I decided to go for a morning run through the busy paths of the urban park close by. I thought the exercise would help clear the cotton balls from my head so I could think.

I tried my best to keep my mind empty as I prepared for the run, but it was no use. While I washed my face in the bathroom, I kept seeing Ava laying on the ground, her face twisted in pain, every time I closed my eyes. At one point, every time I blinked, the image changed from Ava to Maya, from Maya to Ava.

Maya. Ava. Maya. Ava.

I felt like drowning myself in my bathroom sink, but I just dried my face with a towel and grabbed my sneakers and sweatshirt.

As I stepped outside, the cold breeze hit my face, and I felt my lungs fill with fresh air. It was a welcome change from the stale air in my house.

As I started running, my thoughts began to race about how I used to run with Maya while we were in college, and how she would always push me to be better. She was my rock, my anchor, and without her for a while, I was lost at sea. But now, as I ran alone, I realized that I had lost more than just Maya. The dream was right. I had lost myself.

I had lost a chance to know my son.

The weight of that realization sunk deep into the pit of my stomach. Ultimately, it was on Maya for not telling me and her

deep betrayal cut me like few other things in life. But if I hadn't left her like that...

If I had let her make the choice to stay...

If I had called her when I came back to Colorado...

Maybe she wouldn't have kept Eli from me. Maybe things would have been different.

Even if Maya and I hadn't worked out, even if I still married Ava, at least I could have known my *son*.

The emotions were overwhelming. I could feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. My chest tightened, and my breathing became shallow. I wanted to scream, to let out all the frustration and anger, but I couldn't. All I could do was keep running.

The park was busy, and I weaved in and out of people, trying to keep my mind off the thoughts that were threatening to consume me. The sound of my shoes hitting the pavement echoed in my ears, and I felt the rhythm of my body syncing with the beat of the city. It was a strange feeling, but it was comforting in its way.

Suddenly, my foot hit a pothole, and I lost the rhythm, stumbling and nearly falling to the ground. I cursed under my breath and slowed my pace, trying to catch my breath. As I stood there panting, the crowd flowed around me.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to center myself. When I opened them again, I saw the surrounding setting in a new light. The dried brown grass and bare trees.

The thick patch of pine trees. A peak of the buildings beyond. I could hear honking horns and sirens beyond the boundaries of the park.

I felt a sudden surge of energy, and I started running again.

This time, I ran with purpose. And I noticed everything.

The smell of fresh coffee from a nearby cafe, the strumming sound of a street performer playing the guitar, and the feel of the rough pavement under my feet. As I ran, I felt a sense of liberation, like I was shedding my old skin and becoming someone new.

The more I ran, the more I began to feel the stress melting away. The tightness in my chest began to ease, and my breathing became more regular. It was like the act of running was pushing out all the negative thoughts and emotions, leaving me with a sense of clarity.

As I turned a corner, I saw a young boy playing with a ball. He reminded me of Eli and myself. I had missed so much of his life, and I knew that I could never make up for it. But I could try. I could try to be a father to him, to be there for him in the ways that I wasn't before.

I made a vow to myself as I ran. I would make it up to Eli for not having a father while he was so young. I would be there for him, and I would try my best to make him happy. It was a small gesture, but it was a start.

The rest of the run passed in a blur. I was lost in my thoughts, but they were different now. They were more

positive, more hopeful. By the time I arrived back home, I was exhausted, but I felt better than I had in weeks.

I just had to find a way to get Maya to let me into their lives. I knew I had every right to be a father to Eli, and I'd fight her if I had to. But I hoped, prayed, begged inside, that she would just open up and let me be there for Eli.

Chapter 14

MAYA

I knew it was coming. The confrontation. I knew it was only a matter of time before he confronted me about Eli. But even though I knew it was coming, it still didn't make it any easier.

When Jack first asked me about Eli, my initial instinct was to deny everything. But when I saw the look on his face, I knew I couldn't lie to him anymore. The truth spilled out of me in a jumbled mess of words, and I watched as Jack's expression changed from confusion to anger to something that looked an awful lot like disgust.

"I'm sorry," I breathed, my voice a thin whisper. "I know 'sorry' doesn't even begin to cut it. But I *am* sorry. I should have told you about Eli earlier. But I was scared, Jack. I was young, barely twenty-five years old, and you were in California, and I was terrified that you could take Eli away from me. There was no question you had more resources than me. Even with my parents' help, I was barely getting by with my job at the time. I was just...scared."

Jack wiped his hand against his forehead, letting out a deep breath and turning away from me. When he looked at me, his eyes were darker than I'd ever seen, cloudy with anger and sadness. He took a step closer to me and instinct wanted to step back, keeping my distance. But I forced myself to stay put in my living room.

“Are you seriously blaming me, Maya?” Jack’s voice was deadly low. “Because I was in California—which guessing by the timeline, I wasn’t actually in California anymore—I didn’t deserve to know that I had a fucking *child*. God, Maya. How could you do this to me? And to Eli? He deserves to know he has a father. What did you even tell him about that? Never mind, I don’t want to know right now. I just...”

He paced away from me.

“Fuck!” Jack laid a fist on the wall. “I went all of these years without knowing I had a child, Maya. All of those years are gone. I will never get them back. Eli will never get that back.”

“I know,” I said, my voice trembling. “And I’m sorry. But you have to understand, I was scared. I didn’t know how you would react.”

“What the hell, Maya? Did you think I was some kind of monster? How could you not know how I would react?”

“I know,” I said again, my throat tightening with emotion. “And I should have told you sooner. But please, Jack, you had just left me without a word. In hindsight, what I did was wrong, but I did what I thought was best at the time.”

Jack's eyes bore into mine, and I could see the anger and hurt in them. I felt my body tense up, and I took a step back from him, trying to give myself some space.

“You did it on purpose, didn't you? You didn't even contact me as revenge, right?” His face was tight in a grimace, and I felt my anger rise. His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I knew I had hurt him, and I knew I had a lot of work to do to earn back his trust.

But at the same time, I couldn't help feeling angry. I was angry that Jack couldn't see I was just trying to protect Eli from someone who had left me, who didn't want me.

He was gone! What was I supposed to do? He left me. Just up and vanished one morning, so how could he expect that I would call him about this if I couldn't contact him? *He* was the one who ghosted *me*.

But still, deep down, looking at Jack now, I knew I made the wrong choice back then. Seeing Jack in this much pain, I wished I could go back and make the right choice.

“Jack, please,” I said, my voice shaking with emotion. “I know I messed up. I know I should have told you sooner. I just didn't want...”



Jack

“I don’t care, Maya. But this isn’t about you or me, anyway. This is about Eli. He’s the most important thing here.”

“... You weren’t here, Jack. You had left me. What was I supposed to do?”

My eyes narrowed, and I could tell she too was getting more agitated by the second because she was biting her lip so hard I figured she would draw blood.

“Yes. You already reminded me about that part, Maya. But you had a lot of chances—seven years of chances. And you said nothing.” I rubbed my eyes and ran the same hand through my hair as I paced in front of Maya’s couch. “Don’t you dare try to turn this around on me. You lied to me, Maya. You kept my son from me. How can I trust you?”

“I didn’t lie, I just said nothing.”

“It’s the same fucking thing, Maya. You are not a stupid person.”

I felt like I was going to explode. How could she not see that Eli was the most important thing in all of this? How could she be so focused on her hurt and anger at me, that she couldn’t see that we needed to focus on Eli?

“Maya, listen to me,” I said, my voice rising in frustration. “Yes, I left you. And yes, that was wrong. What you did was... also wrong. There is so much that you took away with your

choice. Unfortunately, I'm familiar with grief. And that is what this is. I have to grieve the loss of the first years with Eli. But what's done is done. We can't change the past. What we can do is focus on the future. And right now, the most important thing is that I get to know my son."

Maya's eyes widened, and she couldn't make a sound. I didn't stop though. I kept speaking.

"I want to know Eli," I rasped, voice thick with emotion. "And so help me God, I will fight you on that, Maya. I hope you will make the right choice this time and let me know my son. But if you don't, I will fight you in court."

Maya was speechless as she sat down on the couch, dropping her head in her hands. She looked sad, angry, and broken. But I couldn't care less. I watched as her back racked with a silent sob, and knew I had to get out of there.

"Call me when you decide what you want to do, Maya. But I'm not going to wait patiently for very long."

I stormed out of her house, slamming the door. In the cold air outside, I took a deep breath, but the anger refused to subside. I was feeling so good after my run and thought I could have handled that conversation a little better. I was a little ashamed that I let my emotions get the best of me, but it was what it was.

I knew I had to talk to someone, and I knew who that someone should be.

I picked up my phone and called Catherine. She answered on the third ring, her voice calm and reassuring.

“Hey, Jack. How are you doing?” She always asked this, even though I usually only called when I wasn’t doing well.

I hesitated for a moment, trying to find the words to explain the turmoil that was roiling inside me. Finally, I took a deep breath and plunged in.

“Catherine, I need to talk to you about something. I have no idea how to deal with any of this.”

“Of course, Jack. What’s going on?”

I hesitated again, feeling the lump in my throat growing bigger.

“I just found out that I have a son.” Saying those words out loud still felt strange. It was such a big realization in just a few words. “He’s six years old, and I never even knew he existed.”

Catherine’s silence on the other end of the line was palpable, and I felt my stomach drop. Had I made a mistake in telling her? Was she judging me?

“Jack, that’s a lot to take in,” she said finally. “Have you talked to the mother? Do you know what you want to do?”

I shook my head, even though she couldn’t see me.

“Yes, I’ve talked to her. I know that I want to get to know him and *be* his father. I know that I will fight for that right. But I don’t know how I’m going to do any of that.” I took a deep breath. “I just can’t stop thinking about all the ‘what ifs’. What

kind of life he's had, what kind of life he could have had... with me."

A tear streamed down my cheek, warming my chilled skin.

Catherine's tone softened. "Jack, it's natural to feel that way. But before you start thinking about solutions, you need to take the time to accept what's happening and calm your mind. This is a huge shock, and you need to give yourself the space to process it."

I nodded.

"I know. I just feel like I'm drowning, you know? Like everything I thought I knew about my life has been turned on its head."

Catherine's voice was soothing. "It's okay, Jack. You don't have to figure it out right now. The most important thing is to take care of yourself and give yourself some time. This is a huge shock, and you're allowed to have your feelings."

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the racing thoughts in my mind. "You're right. I just...I don't know where to start."

"Well, let's start with what you do know," Catherine said. "You said you found out you have a son. How did you find out?"

I told her about seeing him, about my surprise when I saw him. I told her about the shock and disbelief I had felt, and seeing the guilt on Maya's face which made me snap.

Catherine listened patiently, asking questions and offering reassurance. "It's natural to feel overwhelmed," she said. "But

you're not alone in this. There are resources available to help you navigate this situation, and we can work together to figure out what steps to take next."

I felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe I didn't have to face this alone. Maybe Catherine could help me make sense of the jumbled mess in my head.

"Thank you, Catherine," I said. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You don't have to do anything alone," she said firmly. "I'm here for you, whatever you need. But right now, the most important thing is for you to take care of yourself. Do something that makes you feel good. Take a walk, watch a movie, or read a book. Just give yourself some space to breathe."

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief. "Okay. I'll try."

"That's all I can ask," Catherine said. "Remember, Jack. You're not alone. I have a feeling that you're going to get through this with Maya and Eli just fine."

I hung up the phone, feeling a sense of gratitude for Catherine that I couldn't put into words. All I needed to do now was to spend time with Eli, so I needed to convince Maya to let me see him. Wait, I was so careful not to mention names with Catherine. How did she know?

Chapter 15

MAYA

The fight with Jack had left me shaken and upset. I paced around the living room, my heart racing, mind spinning.

I tried to focus on my breathing, but my chest felt tight like I was being squeezed by a vice. I knew I needed to calm down, to find a way to make things right with Jack. But how?

I stopped pacing and sat down on the couch, resting my head in my hands. My phone lay on the coffee table in front of me, silent and still. I picked it up, willing it to ring, to vibrate with a message from Jack, but it remained stubbornly silent.

I took a deep breath and tried to think, dropping my head into my hands. A deep sob ripped from my chest.

What was I thinking pulling a stunt like that on Jack?

He was right. I should have told him about Eli years ago. Before Eli was even born, but certainly at the very least, after he was born. Jack had a right to know he was a *father*. He had a right to *be* a father if he wanted to be one.

Jack would have been amazing with Eli when he was younger.

I closed my eyes and pictured the scene. I could so easily see Jack with Eli at the park. Jack tossed Eli gently in the air. Jack holding Eli in his arms for the first time...

My chest burned, and acid churned in my stomach.

I pressed my hand to my stomach and saw another picture of Jack: Pure anger on his face as he stormed away from me.

The damage was done. And it was a lot of damage. Both of our lives were torn apart like a tornado ripped through us, and shrapnel lay all around us. I had no idea how to even begin rebuilding.

Every idea that came to me seemed weak and uninspired.

I caused this.

These were *my* choices.

There was the acid again.

Dinner, gifts, grand gestures, they all seemed so... meaningless.

And what if he didn't want to see me or talk to me ever again? Could I blame him?

There was only one way to find out, and that was to text him.

So I tried, and twenty minutes later, there was nothing. No call, no return text, just a booming silence. He usually responded to my texts fairly quickly.

I glanced at the clock on the oven. It was already past midnight. A whole lifetime had passed since Jack left this afternoon. Eli had come home. We'd had dinner, and he'd gone to bed.

I took out my phone and tried to call him, but it went straight to voicemail and I decided not to leave a message.

I hung up and sat down on the couch, my head in my hands. Tears streamed down my face, my body wracked with sobs. I felt so alone, so lost, so helpless. How could I fix this?

I spent the rest of the night pacing around the house, wondering what I could do to make things right.

I tried to distract myself with TV shows, but my mind kept wandering back to Jack. I couldn't stop thinking about him and all the pain he must be feeling.

As the night started to wear into the morning, I felt physically exhausted. My eyes were heavy with the accumulated stress of the day, and my body ached from all the pacing. I decided to try to get some rest for a couple of hours, hoping that things would be clearer in the morning.

I dragged myself to my bedroom, feeling like a zombie. Collapsing onto my bed, still fully clothed, I closed my eyes. My mind was still racing, but slowly, ever so slowly, I started to drift off to sleep.



Full-on morning came way too soon. I woke up feeling like the same jumbled mess that went to sleep. Only with even less energy now.

The knot in my stomach refused to go away.

I had to work, but I couldn't focus on anything and my writing was especially sloppy.

I tried to push through the anxiety and focus, but it was no use. My hands were shaking, and my heart was racing. It was like I was in a constant state of fight or flight. I kept making so many mistakes in my writing that I had to start over, which only made my anxiety worse. I was in the middle of the worst of vicious cycles.

Around lunchtime, Brielle forced me to eat something, which was good since I hadn't eaten since the day before. She was uncharacteristically quiet as we sat in my office with our sandwiches. I hadn't told her what happened—shame mixed with confusion and sadness, I supposed—but she clearly knew something was up. I always had been terrible at hiding my emotions. But she always seemed to know what to do and say, and today, the best thing was to do and say nothing.

After the brief respite that was lunch, I was back to the constant anxiety. I tried breathing exercises, a walk around the building, and a meditation app. But I kept forgetting to count my breaths, the streets were too noisy, and the voice from the app was annoying me.

Then it was time to pick up Eli from school. My heart sank at the thought of facing the other parents in the parking lot.

They would be happy and smiling, and I couldn't bear the thought of trying to make cheerful small talk. For a brief moment, I considered asking my mom to pick him up. But she already picked him up several days this past month, and I knew that asking her today would only make things worse.

I packed up my laptop and a few notes so I could work when I got home and made my way to the train station.

As I walked, I couldn't stop replaying all of my mistakes in my head. I felt like such a failure. My nerves were getting the best of me, and I could feel my palms getting sweaty.

The train ride felt like it went by too quickly, and I was in my car at the park-and-ride before I knew it. As I drove to the school, I tried to calm myself down. I took deep breaths and reminded myself that Eli was happy and healthy. That was all that mattered.

When I arrived at the school, there were probably fifty other parents waiting in the parking lot. I parked my car and got out, trying to blend in with the crowd. I felt like all eyes were on me, and I could feel my face turning red.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned.

“Catherine!” She was a sight for sore eyes.

“Hi Maya! Fancy seeing you here. I don't normally pick up, but I had a free afternoon so thought I would surprise Hudson.”

“Oh, that's so nice for you.” As much as I wanted to be happy for her, I don't think it really came out as I intended.

“Is something wrong?” Catherine asked. The warmth that emanated from her took me right back to the fun we had at the yoga studio.

I sighed. “Just a tough day. I had an argument with Eli’s father and I feel terrible. It’s like the past has all flooded back in and it’s swallowed me up whole.”

“Oh, Maya, I’m so sorry about that. I’m sure Eli’s father is just as confused about this whole situation as you are. It’s going to take some time to work through everything. Time truly is a healer.”

I nodded, looking down and trying not to cry and make a scene.

“Hey, why don’t you and Eli come to the park to play with me and Hudson? I just have to run and pick up something from a client, but I can meet you there in about an hour? It’ll be fun and while the boys are playing, maybe we can have a chat.”

God, that was so nice of her and part of me felt like it was exactly what I needed. I agreed. She hugged me. “Okay,” she said, “Let’s get our rugrats and then see you soon.”

We parted ways to get our boys. Eli finally came walking out of the school with his backpack slung over his shoulder. He looked so happy and carefree—a stark contrast to how I was feeling. I couldn’t wait to give him a big hug and forget about my worries for a little while.

As he approached me, I knelt down to his level and opened my arms. He ran into them, and I held him tight. His little arms wrapped around my neck, and I felt his warmth against my skin. It was the best feeling in the world. He had felt so distant the last few days. Since he witnessed my and Jack's first argument.

"I've got great news for you, Eli. I was talking to Hudson's mom and we're having a playdate together in about an hour. Doesn't that sound like fun?" Eli cheered and started dancing around.

"Yay! Yay! Yay! We never do playdates! I love Hudson!" I couldn't help but smile at his happiness. He's right. We should do this more often.

We got into the car, and I started driving home. Eli chattered away about his day, and I listened with a smile on my face. He told me about his friends, his teacher, and the games they played at recess. I was so happy to see him happy.

When we got home, we unloaded his backpack and reloaded with a few drinks and snacks for the playground. In anticipation for my chat with Catherine, I went into my jewellery box to fetch something. I think I was looking more forward to this playdate than Hudson was.

However, just one question shattered my fragile bubble of happiness.

I never thought I'd have to explain to my six-year-old son that the man who I had been yelling with a few days ago was

his father. I could tell he already suspected it, and he just wanted me to confirm it.

I dodged the question until we got to the playground near our house. We were a little early, so we sat side-by-side on the swings. A few dried leaves blew past us. The sun was weak, close to the horizon. A squirrel ran past us on the mulched ground.

I knew I'd always remember every detail from that moment.

“Mommy, who was that man the other day? Why was he yelling at you?” Eli asked, his voice filled with concern.

I took the deepest breath my lungs would allow.

“His name is Jack,” I said, searching quickly for the right words. I turned to Eli, who was already staring at me. “And, Eli, I have something to tell you about Jack. Jack is... your father.” There. I said it.

“My father?” Eli repeated, looking at me with confusion.

“Yes, Jack is your dad,” I confirmed.

Eli's eyes widened as he took in the news.

“But why was he yelling at you?”

Oh boy. Another deep breath.

“Jack and I were together a long time ago—before you were born. Things didn't quite work out between us. We get angry sometimes when we see each other because of that.”

“But he's my dad?” Eli asked, almost to himself.

“Yes, he is,” I said softly, staring at the ground now.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. I could feel my emotions swirling inside me, a mixture of anger, hurt, confusion, and maybe jealousy for what might be coming. It hurt to see the confusion on my son's face as he tried to process the news. I knew that telling him about Jack was the right thing to do, but it didn't make it any easier.

"I want to know what it feels like to have a father," Eli said suddenly, breaking the silence.

My heart constricted in my chest.

"What do you mean, honey?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Can I meet Jack?" Eli asked, his voice filled with a yearning that made my heart ache.

I knew I couldn't deny my son's desire to know his father, but the thought of sharing him with Jack, of watching him grow closer to someone who had hurt me so deeply, was almost unbearable. My body tensed at the thought of Eli wanting to spend more time with Jack, not me.

"I want to meet Jack," Eli said again with more conviction. "Please, Mom?" He could sense my hesitation.

I tried to hide the hurt in my voice as I answered him.

"Of course, Eli. You can meet Jack."

"I just want to know what it feels like to have a dad," Eli said softly.

I turned to look at him, taking in the sadness in his eyes.

“I know, honey. And you deserve to have that,” I said, reaching out to take his hand.

But even as I said the words, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was losing my son. That no matter how hard I tried, I would never be able to give him what he needed. That my hurt and anger could always stand in the way of his happiness.

As we sat there on the swings, I felt a tear slip down my cheek. I knew I needed to be strong for Eli, to support him as he explored his relationship with Jack. But the thought of it filled me with a sense of loss that was almost unbearable.

At that moment, I knew that I needed to find a way to come to terms with my own emotions. To find a way to heal from the hurt that Jack had caused me so that I could be the mother that Eli deserved. But just as I took a deep breath and turned to Eli, we heard voices.

“Eli!” Hudson’s voice rang out as he ran over the hill towards us. Catherine had brought a small cooler with her and seemingly had the same ideas of refreshments that I had.

“Hudson!” Eli sprung up, his face instantly turning to happiness.

They hugged, causing Catherine and I to laugh. “Mom,” Eli said with excitement, “Can Hudson and I go to the monkey bars?”

“If it’s ok with Hudson’s mom, it’s ok with me!” Catherine laughed and shoed them off and the boys laughed and shouted all the way to the other side of the playground.

“It’s so nice to get out sometimes and let the boys run. I don’t do this enough,” I confessed.

“I don’t either, so this is definitely a treat for me, too.” Catherine replied. We sat on a park bench on the edge of the playground, laughed at each other’s similar juice boxes and settled in.

“So,” Catherine started. “You were saying about Eli’s dad?”

I explained to her what had happened the last few days and that I had just told Eli. Catherine, as before, allowed me to talk without any interruption, judgement or solution-finding. It felt freeing to just get things off my chest.

“I know that everything is blown up and now we have so much more to navigate.” I confessed.

“Do you still love Eli’s dad?”

After a brief pause, I replied, “You know. I think I do.”

I reached into my pocket for what I had brought from my jewellery box. It was a big blue button, now a little scratched with age and being jostled among my silver rings.

“There’s something I wanted to show you that I’ve never shown anyone else. Eli’s dad gave this to me, years ago, just before he disappeared. He put it in my hand and said something like, ‘I don’t have much to give you now, but just keep this. You never know what our future holds, but you’ll always have a piece of my heart.’ I clung to the hope that this button gave me when he was gone and when things were hard when I was raising Eli. But, I don’t know if he remembers it or

whether I'm just living in la-la land." I turned the button over and over in my hand.

"That is so special." Catherine replied, after taking it all in. "Who knows? Maybe you'll be surprised. Whatever happens, it's a lovely memory that you'll always have."

I felt so much better speaking to Catherine. We laughed watching the boys play together and were able to talk about lighter subjects. And, maybe she was right. Just keep it as a memory.

Eli and I left Catherine and Hudson at the playground after about an hour and a half at the park. Hudson just wanted one more time on the slide. We waved our happy goodbyes and headed home.

As I unpacked our bag of refreshments, Eli got washed up to help get supper ready. I put my hand in my pocket to pull out the button to put back in my jewellery box.

It was empty.

It must have fallen out when Catherine and I decided to try the swings. Dammit! I felt tears well up in my eyes, but breathed them away. It would be impossible to find it in all that sand.

Catherine was right after all. Now it was just going to be a beautiful memory.

Chapter 16

MAYA

I didn't hear from Jack for a few days even though the day after speaking to Catherine, I had written him a simple email telling him that Eli would like to get to know him.

But I finally received a text. My hands were shaking as I opened it, not sure what to expect. The text was short and impersonal, but it said that he also wanted to meet Eli and get to know him. He apologized for making Eli wait so long and promised to make it up to him.

I felt a mix of emotions as I read the text. Part of me was relieved that he had responded, but another part of me was boiling like a teapot that he had waited so long to reply and didn't reference me at all. I tried to put those feelings aside and focus on Eli. I knew that this was what he wanted, and I didn't want to disappoint him.

I called Jack later that morning and arranged a meeting at a local park. It was a beautiful Saturday, meaning Eli and I were free for the day.

It was a cloudless day with only a few snow flurries on the ground, and when I told Eli, he was excited to finally meet his dad. As we approached the park, I could see Jack waiting for us. I could tell he was nervous from the way he kept swallowing, and his eyes darted around the open space. It took nothing away from how handsome he was though, in his simple black jacket and jeans. He had no gloves on, so he stuck his hands in his pocket while his breath curled lazily above his head in a barely-there wisp. His eyes widened in surprise, but then the corners of his lips rose in a disarming smile when he saw we were walking up to him. His eyes were focused solely on Eli, and I couldn't deny that stung.

“Hi Eli,” Jack said gently, quietly, kneeling to Eli's height. “I'm Jack. It's nice to meet you.”

“You're my dad, right?” Eli's bright voice nearly shattered my heart. Jack simply nodded and nearly fell over when Eli launched himself into a hug.

Eli had always been the most loving, warm, and sweet boy. I wasn't surprised that he wanted to hug Jack or get to know him.

“Should I call you ‘Dad’?” Eli asked, still in bear-hug mode.

Jack raised a hand and ruffled his hair.

“You can call me whatever you'd like. If it helps to call me Jack, you can do that for now and we can go from there. If you want to call me Dad, that's okay, too.”

How was Jack so perfect? I felt a tear slip down my cheek and almost freeze.

“Okay,” Eli said thoughtfully, pulling away. “I’ll call you Jack for now.”

“Sounds good.” Jack raised his hand for a high-five and Eli happily accepted with a giggle. I suddenly started to feel like an intruder and wandered over unnoticed to a bench in the far corner of the playground to give them some space.

I watched as they played on the structure before starting a very fast game of tag. Eli’s giggles and Jack’s booming laugh cut through the cold air and landed like a punch to the face for me.

I tried to be happy for them, that they got to have this time, playing together and getting to know each other. But as I watched them talk on the swing set, a rope of jealousy and fear wound tightly around my heart.

What did all of this mean? Was Jack going to try and take Eli away from me?

It had been me and Eli for so long, I couldn’t imagine not having him home every day.

For now, I forced myself to push those thoughts aside.

As the pale winter sun began to set, Eli and Jack said goodbye. Jack said nothing to me again and it hurt.

While we walked the few blocks from the park to my home, Eli was quiet and I could tell he had so many thoughts spinning in his head. He was bouncing as he tried to process

everything that had happened that day. I reached over and held his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. He looked up at me and smiled.

“Thank you, Mom,” he said. “I had so much fun today. He likes the same things I like, too.”

I smiled back at him, feeling grateful that I had been able to give him this experience.

“I’m glad, sweetie,” I said. “I’m so happy that you got to meet your dad.”

Eli nodded, but then his expression turned serious.

“Mom,” he said, “I want to see him again. Can we? Dad and I have so much to do together.”

I hesitated for a moment, but then I looked at Eli, with his innocent eyes and his hopeful smile, and I knew that I couldn’t say no.

“Of course, honey,” I said, turning away and blinking back tears that threatened to spill down my cheeks. “You’ll see him again. I promise.”

Unfortunately for my poor heart, all it seemed Jack wanted right now was his son. But a woman could only hope.



Jack

I sat across from Maya in the coffee shop, the steam from our cups wafting up between us. Maya's face was grave but determined.

Her whole appearance seemed...down. Her hair was usually bouncy and full of life but hung limply in a low ponytail. Her eyes usually sparkled but were completely dull.

"Thanks for meeting me, Jack," Maya said into her cup. "Eli wants to see you again and I haven't known what to tell him. He was a little bummed not to see you over the Thanksgiving break, and I didn't know when you wanted to see him again. I want you two to bond and spend time together. I really do, I just think Eli needs a little more structure. I do, too."

Maya's tone made something in my stomach curl. She seemed to be trying to play the victim here, but I had only known I'd even had a son for a couple of weeks, and now she was acting like I was an absent father who didn't care.

But I swallowed the biting tone and the cruel response that threatened to spill past my lips. I took a deep breath instead and tried to respond rationally.

"I know I've been a bit preoccupied with work. It's been a busy time. And I apologize about Thanksgiving. I already had plans to visit my parents in Durango. I also don't want to

overwhelm Eli. I'm kind of trying to follow your lead here, Maya."

She finally looked up at me for a split second before focusing on the door behind me.

"I know." The words came out more like a sigh. "I don't really know what to do here, Jack. But I do think it would be good for the two of you to spend time together. One-on-one. To get to know each other."

I took a sip of my coffee, thinking over her words. I knew that Maya was right. But the idea of spending time alone with Eli made me nervous. What if I messed it up? What if I said the wrong thing or made him upset? I mean, the park felt easy. Maya was there if anything went wrong.

Maya must have noticed my hesitation, because she reached across the table and placed a hand on mine.

"Jack, I know this is all hard for you and scary, and everything is coming all at once." She winced, likely realizing why it was all coming at once. "But you're going to be great at this. Eli adores you already. The only way you can let Eli down at this point is to disappear. All he wants is a chance to get to know you."

I was surprised by how her support made me feel. I was... grateful?

"Thanks, Maya," I said with a small smile. "I'll do my best."

“You’ll be great.” She pulled out her phone and started scrolling, briefly showing me the screen before I could read any of the words. “Anyway, to get things started, I made a quick cheat sheet of the things Eli likes to do. They’re pretty simple. Mostly, he likes baseball, which is hard since it’s winter. But he loves the science museum, bugs, riding his bike, climbing, hiking, and just generally exploring. The usual stuff. I flagged a few events and local museums and attractions that you can use as a starting point. I’m not trying to be overly controlling, I just wanted to make things easier for you in the beginning, because, well, I’m just throwing you into this parenting thing. Eli is not shy, so you’ll know all of these things about him in no time, and you’ll have your own list of things to do with him before you know it.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as Maya texted me the list.

“This is great, Maya,” I said as I scrolled through the notes. “Thank you. I appreciate it. How about I plan to take him to the science museum on Saturday? And maybe lunch and the park, too? Or is that too much?”

“I’m pretty sure you just described one of Eli’s favorite days. That sounds great. Just let me know when you’ll pick him up and I’ll make sure he’s ready.”

We chatted for a few more minutes, but it felt strained and awkward. As hard as I tried, I just couldn’t shake the anger and resentment I was feeling toward Maya.

I was beyond thankful that Catherine had time in her schedule for more sessions because she was earning a lot of

money from me helping me through these problems.



Saturday came quickly, and I found myself, once again, on Maya's doorstep ringing the bell. It was so different from the first time when I was just desperate to see her again.

I internally breathed a sigh of relief when Eli answered the door.

"Hey, bud," I said brightly, offering a high five. He seemed to love those and then surprised me with a hug. I couldn't get over how affectionate Eli was, just like Maya used to be way back in the day. His hugs were warm and sincere.

"Hey, Jack. I'm excited about the science museum."

"Awesome, me too." I rocked back on my heels, stuffing my hands in my pocket. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yep," he said brightly, shrugging a coat on and grabbing a backpack. "Bye, Mom," he shouted behind him into the house. I heard Maya's voice but couldn't make out her response. Eli must have understood her because he shouted back, telling her he loved her before we walked to my car.

Eli was a ball of energy. He talked non-stop on the car ride into the city and all throughout the museum, awestruck by nearly every exhibit. He was very interested in science because he had lots and lots of stories to share.

I let him pick what he wanted to eat for lunch, and he didn't even hesitate before asking for tacos. So, we went to my favorite taco spot in Denver. After lunch, we went to the park near his house and sat on the swing set, still talking.

In an afternoon, Eli had touched on every item on Maya's list. He was so open and bright; he shined like the sun.

As the sun started to set, it was time for him to go home. My heart lurched, wanting to spend more time with him. Wanting his home to be with me. I left my car at the park and we walked the few blocks to Maya's house.

When Eli opened the door, Maya came bouncing over to him and wrapped him in a giant hug, picking him up off the floor.

"I had the best day, Mom," Eli squealed.

Maya gave him a noisy kiss on the top of his head. Another clench of my heart but it was for something I couldn't quite explain.

"I can not wait to hear all about it," she said into the top of his head. "But why don't you go upstairs and get cleaned up?"

Eli gave me one last big bear hug before saying goodbye and running upstairs, leaving me and Maya alone.

I started to wave and walk out the door when Maya spoke.

"I'm glad you and Eli got to spend the day together. I have to admit, I feel a little jealous when I think about you two having a good time without me."

Something about that statement froze all the blood in my veins. How did she think I felt thinking about the last six years without me?

“That’s ridiculous, Maya.”

She nodded. “I know it’s silly, but I can’t help it. I just don’t want to miss out on any of the good moments with him.”

“Maya. All you’ve had are the good moments with him. I haven’t had a chance to have any of those yet. I’ve just had a few great hours with Eli.”

She nodded again and looked away, swiping a tear from beneath her eyes.

“I know,” she whispered.

I was still so angry. She had no right to keep Eli from me.

But...

It also broke my heart a little to think I had caused her so much pain in the past that she didn’t feel like she could fully trust me. Even now.

But I was determined to prove her wrong. I would be there for Eli, no matter what.



The holidays were fast approaching and Maya had an unexpected story that was going to take her out of town for a few days. I had planned on staying in town, so we agreed—probably reluctantly on Maya’s part—that Eli would stay with

me while she was out of town in the week leading up to Christmas.

I picked him up from school on the last day before the break, and we headed back to my house. He was bouncing with excitement, chatting away about all the things he wanted to do.

“I want to build a snowman,” he exclaimed as flurries danced across the windshield.

I chuckled.

“It hasn’t snowed enough yet, buddy. But maybe we can find something else to do.”

Over the next few days, Eli helped me decorate my Christmas tree, we rode our bikes, drove up to the mountains where we could build a snowman, and made terrible cookies.

I was a pretty decent cook, but completely hopeless when it came to baking. Eli didn’t seem to mind though, and he frosted them even though we weren’t sure they were edible.

We were both having a blast, and I was feeling sad on our last night together. Maya had texted me, confirming that she was on her way home and Eli would go back to her house in the morning.

But we had fun playing basketball in the park that afternoon. The sun was shining, and it was surprisingly warm. We were both sweating by the time we were finished, but we didn’t care.

“Dad, can we watch a movie tonight?” Eli asked on our walk back home. At some point, he had started calling me Dad, and I refused to let myself take it for granted. Even once.

“Of course. What did you have in mind?”

“Can we watch ‘Home Alone’?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” I said, smiling. “That’s one of my favorites.”

We ordered pizza and snuggled up on the couch, the lights from the Christmas tree casting a warm glow on the room. As we watched the movie, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for this moment. My heart was uncomfortably full as the weight of Eli’s head grew heavier and heavier on my chest, where he was almost certainly asleep.

After the movie, I gently lifted Eli and tucked him into the bed in the room that we set up together. I wanted him to feel like he had a space here and as he snuggled deeper beneath the covers, I could sense the contentment and comfort he had. I felt it, too.

With one last look back, I switched on the star night light he picked out at Target and closed the door.

I let out a deep breath when I realized the week had been a success. More than success. It had been... *fun*. It was just us on our own and I managed not to screw everything up.

The next morning, we ate pancakes, and then I helped Eli pack up his things.

There was a tugging at my heart the whole drive to Maya’s. I wanted more time like this with Eli.

As soon as he walked in the door, he was running to Maya, hugging her tightly.

“I missed you, Mommy!” he exclaimed.

Maya hugged him back, tears in her eyes. “I missed you too, baby.”

I said goodbye to Eli and waved awkwardly to Maya before leaving the house.

Despite the hurt and anger, I hoped that Maya would see that I was here to stay with Eli. I had done something right this week and I could feel it in my bones.

Hope blossomed cautiously when Maya called me the next day.

“Eli had a lot of fun with you, Jack.” I could sense the jealousy behind her words. “Anyway, I’m calling because Eli said he has just one single Christmas wish.”

I could also sense the eye roll on Maya’s end. I couldn’t stop myself either. Eli had a flair for the dramatics sometimes.

“He understands that we won’t spend Christmas together, but he wants us to all spend New Year’s Eve together,” she continued, her words rushed and hesitant. “He said it would be a great way to start the next year. With us all together as a family.”

Family.

What was that feeling in my heart when Maya said that word?

Did the idea of us being a *family* make me happy?

Was that excitement?

I had always wanted a family. But I'd assumed it was going to be with Ava. We were going to build a family.

I thought that hope was lost when she died.

But did I have another chance?

Did I want another chance?

Did I want another chance with *Maya*?

I cleared my throat when I realized I'd been silent for too long.

"I know you probably already have some sort of exciting rich person's party to go to," she rushed, filling in my silence. "It'll be quiet. Just me and Eli. And Eli never makes it to midnight. If we're lucky, we celebrate East Coast New Year's around here at ten."

"No, I don't have plans. Even if I did have plans, I'd still cancel them because I'd love to come," I heard myself saying.

"Okay, great." Maya's voice was too bright. Forced. This was going to be awkward. "We'll see you on New Year's Eve, then. Come over for dinner? Our tradition in lasagna because, well, there's no great reason except that we love it."

"That sounds wonderful. I'll bring dessert. But you can assure Eli that I won't make it myself."

"Sure." Maya sounded confused and maybe a little sad that Eli and I had our inside jokes already. "Have a Merry

Christmas, Jack.”

“Merry Christmas, Maya.”

As I set my phone down, I let out the breath I had been holding. Something that felt suspiciously like hope wound itself through my heart.

But what was I hoping for?

Chapter 17

MAYA

“Ow, shit,” I swore as I ran my thumb under cold water.

“That’s a bad word, Mom,” Eli said from his chair at the kitchen counter.

“You’re right, it is a bad word. Sorry. I just burned my thumb on the lasagna pan. How’s the salad coming?”

“Why do we have to eat salad?”

“It’s good luck for the new year.”

Eli rolled his eyes, clearly not believing my standard New Year’s Eve line anymore.

“When is Dad getting here?”

There went my heart again with that ‘dad’ word.

“Um, he should be here any minute, I think.”

And just like that, the doorbell rang and Eli launched himself off the stool to go let Jack inside. I followed closely behind and nearly stumbled over nothing when I saw him. I

hadn't *seen* him in a week, and his appearance hit me like a ton of bricks.

The sun had set and snow had started to lightly fall. He was framed perfectly in the doorway and lit up like a spotlight from the porch light. The snowflakes dusted his dark jacket—wool this time, not his usual parka—and his dark hair.

“Happy New Year!” Eli screamed.

“Whoa, buddy, let's take it down a notch. Save some excitement for later,” I said, rubbing his head. “And let Jack come in from the cold.”

Eli bounced into the living room as Jack stepped inside.

“I can take your jacket,” I offered, getting drunk off his woodsy scent. God, I hadn't been close enough to smell him in ages.

I flushed slightly, thinking about the last time I had been close enough to him. Right here in this room.

“Thank you,” Jack said quietly. “I brought this for you.”

He handed me a very expensive-looking bottle of red wine. I knew I'd need it to get through the night.

“And for Eli, I brought this.”

Eli practically gushed at the sparkling apple cider.

“For everyone, I brought a cheesecake. There's this amazing bakery down the street from me that makes the best cheesecakes. I know it doesn't seem fancy. But really, it's

delicious. I thought it'd be a good way to finish the year and start the new."

He offered the bag, and I couldn't help but swoon inside at his sheepish smile. There were so many times that Jack just seemed like the man I used to know. Despite all the money and success he had now, he was still...Jack.

"Yay! Yay! Yay!" Eli was bouncing off the walls. New Year's was also one of his favorite holidays.

"Thank you, Jack. That was all very thoughtful. Let's see, the lasagna is cooling down, Eli is finishing the salad, and I was about to pop the garlic bread in the oven." I led everyone to the kitchen where Eli hopped back on his stool and Jack washed his hands.

"That sounds great. Put me to work."

"You can set the table," I said, gesturing to the cabinet with the dishes.

After putting the bread in the oven, I looked at the scene in my kitchen and had to take a deep breath. Jack was effortlessly setting dishes on our small table while Eli talked a mile a minute as he carefully cut a cucumber.

It was all too much, and I turned back to the sink and the window with the blackness beyond.



Jack

“Happy New Year,” Eli said with suspicious sleepiness in his voice, a lopsided smile on his face. True to Maya’s word, it was only ten o’clock and Eli seemed happy as a clam to celebrate two hours early with the rest of the east coast.

I chuckled.

“Happy New Year, Eli.”

He hugged Maya first and then came over to me, more falling into me than actually hugging me.

Maya softly laughed as Eli’s head grew heavier on my shoulder.

“What should I do?” I mouthed to Maya over his head. She gestured upstairs, which I took to mean I should take him to bed.

I carefully carried him up the stairs into his room and tucked him in. He was out like a light as I quietly slipped out, gently closing the door behind me.

“He’s quite the party animal,” I said as I rejoined Maya on the couch.

“He goes a little too hard too early,” she laughed. “He needs to learn how to pace himself.”

She took a sip of the wine I’d brought, enjoyment flitting across her face.

“Thanks for coming tonight, Jack. You have no idea how much it meant to Eli. He loves this holiday more than anything.”

“I can see that. I’m happy I came tonight, too. I want to be a part of his life. I want to know all these things about him for myself.”

Maya stared into her glass and I silently kicked myself for bringing this up again.

“I know. And you have no idea how sorry I am for that, Jack. Really.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I said nothing for a few minutes. We sat in silence, staring at the fire in the fireplace, and the celebrations on the television turned low. It was all scenes of happy people hugging, kissing, and just enjoying being with either their special people or just their special people for the night.

“I’m trying to move forward, Maya. The only thing we change is the future, right? And that’s the mindset I’m trying to take into the new year.”

Maya nodded, gaze still fixated on the fire dancing in front of her.

“Besides,” I heard myself continuing. I hadn’t meant to keep talking or to share anything more. “I’ve been thinking lately about how hard regret is. It’s easy to say that I regret leaving you and not knowing Eli. But if that didn’t happen, I wouldn’t have met Ava. And I loved her. A part of me still

does and always will. But I thought any hope I had at having a family died with her. And you come back into my life out of the clear blue sky one day and pretty soon I have a son I never knew. It's weird how life happens sometimes. Maybe it's Ava looking out for me, knowing my deepest desires. Even though life doesn't always turn out the way we think it will, there's still a lot to be thankful for and a lot of surprises to be had."

Maya was silent for a few long beats. I glanced over and saw a single tear streaming down her cheek.

"That's beautiful, Jack. I love that and I think that's an amazing thought to end the year."

We sat in silence, considering our struggles, as we watched the parties and celebrations on television. At midnight, we shared a hug and I could feel that somehow, it was going to be a good year.

Chapter 18

JACK

The more time I spent with Eli, the more I could see both our similarities and differences. We had a lot of the same interests, but he had so much of Maya in him.

And I loved every moment I got to spend with him.

Since New Year's Eve, I had been able to spend at least some time with him every week. I picked him up from school sometimes and spent a few weekend days with him, and we had a blast making memories. I started to work shorter than normal hours, hopping out happily to pick Eli up at school. I was still leading the charge at the office, but my priorities had clearly changed. I was lucky to have the leadership team that I had and this was a great opportunity for them to step up to the plate. They weren't letting me down.

Maya kept her distance and let Eli and me spend time alone, which was probably for the best. Spending New Year's Eve with them was nice, but I was still feeling a spiderweb of complicated emotions that even Catherine wasn't able to help me work through quickly.

When I was near Maya or caught glimpses of her when I was picking up or dropping off Eli, it was easy to forget the pain and betrayal.

It was easy to forget that she called me, came to my cabin, and had sex with me, knowing what she was keeping from me.

But when I was alone, I couldn't ignore all of those choices she made. Hours and hours of sessions with Catherine were getting me to a place of acceptance, but forgiveness...felt like a distant goal.

Today, though, none of that mattered, as Eli and I stared at the vastness of the frozen lake in front of us.

Bundled up in the best, warmest winter gear money could buy, Eli had been all too excited to go on this snow-covered, alpine adventure with me in the national park. He was surprisingly adept at keeping up on his brand-new snowshoes, considering I doubted he'd ever tried them before, and he stared through his goggles, a goofy grin lighting up his face as the bluebird sky made the frozen snowfield sparkle.

Eli took a step toward the ice, but I gently pulled him back.

"We're not walking on the ice today, buddy. How about we have a snack? Then we can hike down and I'll take you somewhere where you can play in the snow."

"Yeah! Snacks!"

I chuckled as I brushed away the top foot or so of snow from a couple of big rocks before we sat down in our snow pants. I dished out lunch and Eli was surprisingly quiet. Too

quiet. Suddenly, I worried he wasn't having as much fun as I'd hoped.

"This is awesome, Dad. I've never been here in the winter," Eli said around a big mouthful of a bite of a turkey sandwich.

My heart sighed in relief.

"Winter is my favorite time up here. It's so quiet and it's like a completely different world. The snow changes everything and makes it all seem just a little magical."

We sat side-by-side quietly eating our sandwiches and taking everything in until it felt like it was getting a little too cold. I figured it was time to go before our fingers started to ache from the cold.

"What do you say we hike back to the car? There's a great place we can go sledding before heading home."

"I love sledding!" Eli exclaimed, jumping up from his rock and scrambling to strap his snowshoes on again.

I laughed again. I found myself laughing a lot around Eli. He was just so full of energy and light, it was hard not to get caught up in it all.

We trudged back down to the car, Eli wanting to know all about the hibernating bears. He seemed a little skeptical of the whole premise, but didn't look too worried.

I couldn't help but flash back to the hikes I did with my father growing up near Durango. As I did just then with Eli, he would try and settle my nerves while also instilling in me a deep respect for nature and the mountain's true residents.

We got back to the car and out of our heaviest layers before heading off to the sledding hill.

Eli's eyes lit up like the plastic saucer I'd bought to fly down the hill. Although looking at it again, it seemed much taller and much steeper than I had initially thought. I tried to keep the worry out of my eyes and voice as Eli boarded the sled in front of me.

"Okay, you ready?" I asked tentatively, almost more to myself than to Eli.

"Yeah!"

"Alright, hold on. One...two..."

"Three!" Eli finished the countdown, and I pushed us off the flat top and we soared down the hill.

The cold wind rushed into my lungs and past my ears, drowning out any sound. I couldn't tell if Eli was panicked or having fun. I couldn't tell if *I* was panicked or having fun.

About halfway down the hill, we hit a small bump in the snow I hadn't seen and Eli tumbled off the sled, quickly rolling before coming to a stop on the side of the hill.

"Eli!" I yelled, full-on panic now taking over. I bailed from the sled myself and rolled to a stop before launching myself into a run uphill.

"Eli! Eli! Eli!"

I was breathless by the time I reached him, my heart nearly beating out of my body, and all the blood in my veins turned

cold. When I reached him, I gently rolled him over to find tears streaming down his face and quiet laughter puffing out from his lips.

I let out the deepest exhale and sat back on my heels.

“That was so much fun, Dad! Can we go again?”

Eli couldn't stop laughing, and reluctantly, I let him slide a few more times before we headed back to the car to go home.

His wide smile as we drove down from the national park into the town below, eased the tension in my muscles from the sledding mishap. Since I had found out about Eli, it was the most like a *dad* I'd ever felt.

Did parents ever stop worrying about their kids?

We made one more stop before going back to Maya's house: the bookstore.

Eli could barely contain his excitement—and didn't, as he let out a squeal looking at all the shelves stuffed full of books to be read.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, I thought, as he ran to the first table of brightly colored kids' books he saw. I chuckled as Eli turned each book over, carefully studying the back.

“You can pick out whatever you want. It's my treat.”

Eli gasped.

“Really? Mom usually only lets me get books from the library.”

I chuckled.

“Libraries are amazing and I go to the one near my house for books all the time, too. But having my library full of books that I really, truly love is...well, it’s something that I want you to be able to have, too. To be able to pick up a favorite book and reread it anytime, and spend some time with the characters who become your friends, it’s an amazing experience. So, yeah, pick out a few books that you would like to have in your library. I’m going to head over to the fiction section for a minute.”

Eli nodded, still enchanted by the stacks of books. I shook my head, chuckling. I winked at the woman who was staffing the cash register in the kids’ section and told her I’d be right back.

I wandered over to the fiction section, pulling out a few titles I had on my list. On a whim, I picked out the newest one from an author Maya had mentioned enjoying. Maya talked about her when we spent those couple of days in bed in my cabin and...

No.

I couldn’t let myself go back to that place. Still, I put the book on top of my pile and set off to find Eli.

I found him with four books in his small hands.

“Find some good stuff?” I asked him as he showed each title to me.

“I’ve already read these two. They’re my favorite, but the library doesn’t always have them,” he said, showing off two books about dinosaurs. “And these two look like fun.”

“They sure do. Want anything else?”

Eli shook his head, and we started for the bank of cash registers at the front. A few steps later, Eli put his small, warm hand in mine and there was that twist in my heart again. I squeezed gently and looked down at him to find him smiling.

“Today was the best, Dad.”

“It sure was.” I was surprised to find my voice hoarse and my eyes burning a little from unshed tears. I cleared my throat as we reached the register and could barely say anything to the cashier. I just swiped my card when instructed, and Eli and I walked out to the car hand-in-hand.

We arrived at Maya’s house way too soon and Eli gave her the biggest hug when we walked inside. He was already pouring out information about snowshoeing, sledding, and the bookstore, and Maya’s eyes were shining with emotion.

I handed Maya the book I bought for her and she gave me a tentative hug as thanks before I walked out and left them to their cozy night.

As I drove home, I couldn’t help but reflect on the day.

I realized I felt truly happy, which was surprising to me. It had been years since I’d felt that way and it was all because of Eli. It seemed like there was some hole in my broken heart that he was helping to fill. Taking up an important space that had

been left empty and hollow by the grief and sadness I'd been experiencing.

Eli and I were truly bonding and creating our memories. His laughter brought me joy and whenever I experienced his tears, I knew they'd bring me immense sadness, too.

And the more I looked, the more I saw myself in Eli, too. His love of the outdoors, books, and, most surprisingly, his preference for order and neatness.

Growing up, I was an only child and always felt a little alone. I loved my parents, and they loved me and spent time with me. But there had always been something missing. And I had struggled to connect with my classmates in a way no one else did.

With Maya in college and grad school, and even with Ava, sometimes I always felt like there was just a slight disconnect. Like they didn't fully get me. But with Eli, I saw that I wasn't alone after all. And that realization came with a sense of peace that settled over me.

As I pulled into my garage, I realized that nothing could compare to the feeling I had when I was with Eli.

I had let work be a poor substitute for too long, but signing deals and mountains of profit would never give me this feeling. Sure, money was nice—I wasn't stupid, money certainly made life easier—but even the numbers in my bank account couldn't give me this feeling of fullness.

This happiness was a feeling I would cherish forever.

Over the next few weeks, I made an effort to spend more time with Eli. We ran around at the park; the snow crunching beneath our feet. We played board games at home, laughing and joking as we tried to outsmart each other.

I found myself paying closer attention to Eli, really listening to what he had to say and taking an interest in his passions. I was surprised by his depth of knowledge and his eagerness to share it with me. For a little boy, he sure knew a lot. Maya put no limits on what he could read, and for that I was grateful.

As we spent more time together, I realized just how much I had been missing out on. Eli was a smart, funny, and talented kid, and I was proud to be his father. I watched him grow and learn, amazed at the person he was becoming.

One evening, as we watched a movie together in the living room when Maya was working late, Eli turned to me with a smile.

“Thanks for spending time with me, Dad,” he said. “I know we haven’t always been together, but I’m happy we are now.”

I swallowed past the hard, painful lump in my throat.

“Me too, Eli,” I said. “Me too.”

We sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the only sound the crackle of the fire in the fireplace. And in that moment, I knew that my relationship with my son had changed forever. We had created happy memories together, found common ground, and built a bond that would only grow stronger with time.

As the winter wore on, and the snow began to melt, Eli and I continued to spend time together. We went for hikes in the woods, exploring the new growth that sprouted up from beneath the melting snow. We sat together in the backyard, watching the first signs of spring appear in the garden.

And as I watched Eli grow and change, I realized that I had grown and changed too. I was no longer the distant, disconnected person that I had been before to him. I was someone who was present and engaged in my son's life, someone who cared about what he cared about.

But the more time I spent with Eli, the more I couldn't ignore another large fracture in my heart: Maya.

Our only communication was on behalf of Eli—when to pick him up, where we were going, and other logistics. And it was starting to leave a hollow feeling.

Months later, the relationship I was now building with Eli was starting to ease some of the pain and grief of what I'd lost with him for years.

And I was shocked to realize that maybe, just maybe, I was ready to approach forgiving Maya. I was starting to understand that the way I had left her so suddenly all those years ago would have made it difficult for her to trust me with something so profound.

I had been young and stupid, but had the privilege of being young and stupid. While I was bouncing between California and Colorado, carefree, chasing jobs and money, Maya had

been forced to grow up and set up a stable environment for a newborn baby.

She'd done it on her own. She'd felt she *had* to do it on her own. I hadn't been someone she could rely on, and that cut me to know I had caused her so much pain.

I had accused her of stealing all the good times with Eli but I knew from the tiredness I had at the end of the day, that it wasn't all fun. I had no experience with babies, but I knew enough to know that it was a lot harder and energy sapping than all the playing and talking I was able to do with Eli now. It's all because of Maya's parenting that Eli was the amazing little boy he was today. I knew that I had to be thankful for all that Maya had done. I was sorry for all the accusations and pain that I caused her.

I tried telling myself that it didn't matter. We could never work anyway and were better off finding a way to co-parent and move on separately.

But it did matter. Maya mattered.



Maya

As I watched Jack drive away with Eli in the backseat on an adventure to find a waterfall, I felt a now familiar mixture of emotions swirling around inside of me.

I was so happy for Eli. I was happy that he'd formed this bond with Jack and they were having fun and connecting in a way I never really thought possible.

I was happy for Jack. I was happy that he was stepping into this role he didn't know existed for him and was an amazing father. I'd always hoped it would happen, but never believed it would be possible.

But I couldn't help feeling sad for myself. I knew it was irrational, but it felt like they didn't seem to need me anymore.

Jack hardly ever spoke more than two words to me when he was either picking up or dropping off Eli. And I thought it was best to keep my distance. I wanted to let them have this time.

I tried my best not to let my feelings show each time Jack picked Eli up and brought him back home. I put on a brave face and smiled, waving goodbye to them both as they drove off down the street. But inside, I felt a knot of longing and loneliness in my stomach. It was as if a part of me was missing, like a puzzle piece that had been taken away.

A couple of times, after our New Year's Eve spent together, I'd mustered the courage to invite Jack over for dinner. But he

refused, giving flimsy excuses.

Instead, he would just hug Eli goodbye and walk back to his car, leaving me standing on the porch feeling disappointed and alone.

I tried to distract myself from all these feelings by focusing on work and crushing it after my new promotion. I also focused on Eli, marveling at how fast he was growing up, especially now that Jack was in the picture. I knew Jack was more adventurous than me, and took Eli up into the mountains and on more hikes than I could get the energy to do. I was grateful. Eli was thriving, and that was what really mattered.

But for the first time in years, I found myself with a little more free time than usual and I had no idea what to do with that time. Aside from Brielle, I didn't have friends. And I could only go have dinner with my parents so many times.

I started writing a novel that I had thought about for years, but once the excitement of starting wore off, it didn't hold my interest all that long.

No friends. No romantic prospects. Nothing exciting going on at all.

I was starting to feel a little pathetic.

I tried dating apps, but I couldn't stand the idea of going on a date with any face that popped up on the screen. No one held any appeal.

Except for Jack.

Ugh. Mental facepalm.

I *needed* to stop thinking about Jack in any sort of romantic way. He was making it crystal clear that the bridge had been burned. At best, we could be friendly co-parents who worked together for the sake of Eli. And I didn't want to disrupt that balance.

The fear of Jack wanting to make a more formal arrangement in court hung over me like a cloud every day. He had a lot of money and could probably do a lot of damage to my life. So, no rocking the boat, I kept reminding myself.

Surprisingly, the afternoon without Eli flew by, but all I had to show for it was a ruthlessly clean house and chicken tacos in the slow cooker, all fueled by anxiety and sadness.

As usual, Eli burst through the door and launched himself at me. I caught him in a big hug and swung him around, kissing the top of his head. Also, as usual, Jack hung in the entryway, looking awkward and like he wanted to bolt as soon as humanly possible.

"Thanks for a great afternoon, buddy," he said to Eli with a small wave. Eli hopped out of my arms and ran back to Jack.

"I had a lot of fun, Dad." He wrapped Jack in a big Eli-hug.

"Why don't you go put your backpack away?" I asked Eli, who gave Jack one last squeeze and bounded for his room.

"You could stay for dinner if you want," I said to Jack hesitantly. "It's nothing fancy, but I made plenty."

Jack shifted his weight on his foot and I felt the rejection before he even opened his mouth.

“It’d be nice to have you around. For Eli, I mean,” I added in a rush, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

Jack glanced out the door, and my heart sank.

“I don’t want to overstep my bounds,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t want to make things awkward or confuse Eli. Since, you know, we aren’t together or anything.”

Oh boy, those words stung like a hive of bees. The lump in my throat threatened to stop me from breathing.

“It doesn’t have to be awkward,” I whispered. “I just thought it would be nice for Eli to have us all together. It’s just a meal. Even if we aren’t together, we’re still a family. Because of Eli.”

Jack hesitated for a moment, then sighed. “Maybe another time, okay? Tonight just doesn’t feel...right.”

All I could do was nod at his back as he retreated to his car.

But still...he didn’t say no. Not really. And I felt a stupid, foolish surge of hope in my heart. With that teeny tiny sliver of a window he left open, maybe there was a chance.

At least, maybe Jack and I could put aside our differences and be civil to each other, for the sake of our son.

Maybe he could forgive you and we could even get back together, said the stupid tiny voice in the back of my head. I tried to push that thought away. It was a little too much to hope for.

But as the days went on, nothing changed. Jack still dropped Eli off and picked him up, but he never stayed for dinner. It was as if he had forgotten about our conversation entirely. And each time he left, I felt the same sense of sadness and disappointment.

It wasn't just about having Jack around, though. It was about feeling like a part of something bigger than me.

Being a single mom was hard. I'd been fortunate to have a supportive family, but there was still a loneliness that I could never shake. I never really had someone to truly share the burden of parenting or life with, to talk to at the end of the day. I never had someone to joke or laugh with until the late hours of the night.

Once upon a time, I'd had that with Jack. And since Eli had come along not too long after he left, I never really got to experience that with anyone else.

I missed him.

I missed what we had.

But as much as I longed for that connection, I knew that I couldn't force it. Jack had his own life now, and I had mine, as singularly focused as it was.

I had made the decision to stay away for a reason in the first place, and even though a large part of me wishes I could change that choice, it wasn't possible. I had to live with the distance I created from Jack.

Chapter 19

JACK

I tossed and turned in bed, but my mind was miles away. I was reliving the accident, but this time it was Eli who was taken from me. The sound of metal screeching and glass breaking was deafening, and my body shook with fear and helplessness. I was paralyzed, unable to move or even scream as I saw Eli's face.

The stench of burning rubber filled my nostrils as I tried to reach out to him, but my limbs felt heavy and unresponsive. It felt like an eternity as I watched the scene play out again and again, reversing until I breathed in relief. But it started all over again; each time feeling more vivid and terrifying than the last.

The sight of Eli's lifeless body was unbearable, and I felt a deep, gut-wrenching sadness wash over me. I cried and pleaded, trying to crawl over to him with all the strength I could muster. My heart pounded in my chest, and sweat dripped down my face as I struggled to break free from the sudden stillness that took over my body. It felt like I was trapped in my mind, reliving the same horror like a movie on

repeat, seeing it happen over and over and over again until I wanted to scream.

Finally, I woke with a start, my body drenched in sweat and my heart racing. It took me a few moments to realize it was just a nightmare, but my heart still beat like a war drum long after the nightmare had ended.

I lay there in bed, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath. The darkness of the room felt suffocating, and I could still feel the weight of the nightmare pressing down on me. It was as if the dream had a life of its own, seeping into my mind and refusing to let go.

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing, focusing on the sound of my heartbeat. Slowly, the fear began to fade.

I sat up in bed and reached for the glass of water on the nightstand. The cool liquid felt soothing as it washed over my dry throat, and I took a few deep gulps before setting the glass back down. I rubbed my eyes and tried to clear my head, but the images of the nightmare still lingered.

I knew I couldn't go back to sleep, not after that. So I got out of bed and made my way to the living room, hoping that the television would chase away the shadows in my mind.

The soft glow of the television did little to ease my mind, and I found myself lost in thought. For some reason, memories of Ava, Maya, and Eli flooded my mind back to back, each one more vivid than the last. I remembered the sound of Ava's laughter, Maya's smile, and the way Eli's eyes lit up when he

saw me. I remembered the warmth of their embraces and the way their voices sounded when they said my name.

But alongside those happy memories came a deep sense of grief and loss. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had failed Ava, that I had been unable to protect her from the dangers of the world, and that I could fail Eli, too. I knew that I had to get to a different place with Maya, but in many ways, I had failed her already. The nightmare had been a stark reminder of how easily life could be snatched away, leaving only heartache and regret in its wake.

As the hours ticked by, I found myself lost in thought, unable to shake the feeling of dread that had settled over me. It was as if the nightmare had left a mark on my soul, a reminder that life was fragile and could end any second and that I had to cherish every moment.

Eventually, the first light of dawn began to filter through the windows, casting a warm glow across the room. I knew I couldn't stay there forever, lost in my thoughts and memories. I had to face the day, no matter how difficult it might be.

And it was going to be a difficult day, I was certain of that much.

I got off the couch and made my way over to the kitchen with a heavy heart. As the aroma of coffee permeated the room, I poured myself a cup and then sat down at the table. I attempted to find some sense of calm as I sipped the hot beverage and a means to get rid of the nightmare and the memories that had been bothering me.

But it wasn't easy. When my ghosts come to visit, it's never easy.

In a fog, I got ready for work and called my driver to take me to the office. Somehow hours went by, and I knew I'd had back-to-back meetings with finance people, lawyers, and team leads giving updates on our latest projects, but, at the end of the day, I had no idea what had been said or decided.

Alone in my office, I wandered to the window and looked down. The sun was still shining, later now that spring was wearing on, and people seemed to be enjoying the warmer temperatures. But I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't think about anything.

After a few minutes, I gave up on trying to force my brain into submission and pulled up Catherine's number on my phone, hoping she had time for a last-minute session.

"Hi, Jack. What's up?"

The warmth in her voice made the tightness in my chest loosen, and the feeling of loneliness eased just a bit.

"Hey, Catherine." I raked my fingers through my hair. "It's just been a tough day, and I wanted to check in and see if you have any time to talk."

"Of course. How about we meet for dinner? Getting out of the office might help you clear your head."

I hesitated for a moment, but then I realized that she was right. Maybe a change of scenery was just what I needed to shake off this funk.

“Sure,” I said. “Where do you want to go?”

“There’s this new Italian restaurant that just opened up downtown,” Catherine said. “I heard the food is amazing. How does that sound?”

“Sounds perfect,” I said, feeling a small smile tug at the corners of my mouth.

The restaurant was located in an old brick building, with a rustic charm that was accentuated by the warm glow of the lamps on the walls. The scent of garlic and tomato sauce wafted through the air, making my stomach growl in anticipation.

Catherine and I were led to a cozy table by the window, and I couldn’t help but feel grateful for the change of pace. As we looked over the menu, I found myself feeling more relaxed than I had in days.

The food was incredible. We started with a plate of bruschetta, the crispy bread topped with fresh tomatoes and basil, and followed it up with a bowl of spaghetti carbonara that was so rich and creamy, and I wanted to lick the plate clean.

As we ate, Catherine and I chatted about everything and nothing, catching up on each other’s lives. She did come clean about knowing Maya and Eli. That part was a surprise, but it explained the questions in my mind. Part of me was happy that she actually knew the people I was talking about.

It wasn't until we were halfway through our main course that I finally opened up to her about the nightmares.

"It's weird," I said, poking at my lasagna with my fork. "I keep having these dreams about the accident. But instead of Ava's face, all I see are Maya and Eli's faces."

Catherine reached out and placed a hand on my arm.

"It's okay, Jack," she said gently. "It's normal to have nightmares like that after a traumatic experience, especially when your fears are getting triggered again. On the bright side, it means you're healing enough to care about someone again."

"I know," I said, looking down at my plate. "But it just feels like I can't shake off this fear. Like something bad is going to happen again."

Catherine leaned back in her chair and studied me for a moment.

"Jack, you have to let go of that final kernel of fear in your heart," she said. "The accident was...tragic. But it was just that, an accident. I know we've talked about it before, but you didn't let Ava down. But you have a second chance now, so you should work on your happiness. You have a child. It's so easy to be terrified when you have that level of responsibility, but let's see if we can help you take control of that fear a little bit more. Instead of letting it take control of you. Let's try to turn that fear into hope."

I knew she was right, but it was hard to accept. The accident left me with a deep sense of guilt and regret, and it was hard to

shake off those feelings.

But I had Eli now. And Maya, too, in some ways. They were the most important things to me now, and I owed it to myself and them to work through my fear and not let it hold me back.

“Hey,” Catherine continued, pulling out her purse, “I have something to give you, that maybe you can deliver for me.”

She pulled out a large blue button and handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Take a close look and see if anything comes to you.”

I held it in my hands and took a closer look. Flipping it around in my fingers, feeling the edges, seeing the aged scratches. Then, suddenly, just how all the dreams that come about Ava, I had scenes of my life with Maya flashing and whirling through my brain. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my head in my hands.

“Maya...” was all I could squeak out. Catherine’s hand held my forearm as I tried to catch my breath, my heart racing to catch up with the memories. “Catherine, I remember.”

We sat wordlessly for a few minutes. I was trying to regain my composure and she was just there for me.

I was finally able to sit back and breathe deeply, still holding the button in my hands.

“Maybe this can be the little piece of hope you can cling to,” Catherine quietly said. She explained to me that she found

it in the sand after a playdate she had with Maya and Eli some time ago. She hadn't been able to return it to Maya since. Her ultimate wish was to return it to Maya since it meant so much to her, but now that she could see it meant so much to me, she decided to leave it in my capable hands. I promised her that Maya would receive it, one way or another.

"Thanks, Catherine," I said with a hug as we stood on the street after dinner. "You always know how to make me feel better."

"Hey, that's what friends are for," she said with a smile.

"You're an expensive friend, Catherine."

She laughed out into the night.

"I'm worth every penny, Jack."

I chuckled.

"That you are, Catherine. Hey, say hi to Hudson for me, yeah? Once the weather is warmer and school's out, you're more than welcome to use the pool whenever you want. The gate code is the same as last year."

"Thanks, Jack. I'll say hi and let him know. He'll be so excited."

With one last hug, Catherine turned and walked toward her car. I watched her walk down the street and get into the small SUV before turning and heading my way home.

I didn't want to face the empty house, not just yet. So I stopped in a familiar bar for a drink. It was a cozy bar with

low ceilings and warm wood. I dropped down on a stool and ordered a beer.

Further, down the bar, a group of twenty-something women were laughing at something one of the bartenders said.

As I sat there, sipping my beer, I felt a sense of contentment settle over me. It wasn't going to be easy, but maybe everything would be okay after all. I reached into my pocket for the button, flipping it in my fingers as I enjoyed my beer.

Maybe I could let go of my fear and start living my life again.

Because Catherine helped me realize that what was holding me back from Maya *was* fear. I had made peace with the fact that it was time to move forward after Ava. That Ava would *want* me to move forward. But I hadn't addressed this deep fear that I could lose everything in a heartbeat. Catherine was right. The only way to release the fear was to slowly move it toward hope. Hope for better times. Hope for a new start.

I paid the tab and walked back to the office. I called the driver to pull around to take me back home and got him to let me out a few blocks away as the night air would do me some good.

As I walked the last few blocks home, my mind was filled with possibilities and potential. Maybe my dreams would start to change, reflecting the new direction my life was taking. Maybe I would finally be able to let go of my past and embrace the future.

I had a second chance now, and I would be a fool to waste it. I wanted to work on my happiness and Maya could be that happiness. I knew it wouldn't be easy. We had tried before, and it didn't work out because of me. But maybe now, with Eli in the picture, things could be different. Maybe we could be a family. Maybe enough pain had been caused by each of us that it could cancel out and we could start again. Two negatives make a positive, right?

The thought made my heart race. *Me, Eli, Maya.*

I thought about Maya. I remembered the way she used to laugh, the way her eyes would light up when she saw me. All of that came to me when I first held that button. I remembered the way it felt to hold her, the way she fit perfectly into my arms. That part gave me hope.

But I also remembered the fights, the misunderstandings, and the way we pushed each other away. It wasn't all sunshine and roses. We had our problems, just like any couple.

But maybe we could work through those problems now. Maybe we're both different people than we were before. Maybe we had both grown, matured, and learned from our mistakes. Maybe we could make it work.

The thought filled me with a mix of excitement and dread. What if it doesn't work out again? What if we hurt each other all over again? What if Eli gets caught in the crossfire? I didn't want to mess things up for him. He deserved better than that.

Eli deserved a happy family.

The thought of Maya made my heart race. I could feel a knot of anxiety in my stomach, but also a flutter of excitement. I realized I wanted this. I wanted to be with her, to make it work, to be a family with Eli.

I walked up to my driveway, so many thoughts causing my heart to pound in my chest. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, to steady my nerves.

This was it. This was the moment of truth. I had to make a decision.

Instead of feeling excess stress, I was suddenly hit with clarity. I was going to try to make it work with Maya, if she would have me. I was going to try to be the family that Eli needed. I was letting go, and it was time to find happiness; to find hope. Maybe by holding on so tight to my what-ifs, I was actually holding out the happiness.

It was a new beginning, a fresh start, a second chance.

And I was going to take it.

Chapter 20

MAYA

I had always been close to my parents, but after Eli and Jack started spending time together, I started spending more and more time with them. They were always there for me, never judging, never pushing, just quietly supportive. I cherished every moment I spent with them, especially when we did things together, like the day we built that 3D puzzle of a steamship.

It was a massive puzzle, with close to three thousand pieces, but we worked together. My father, a retired engineer, took the lead, carefully studying the instructions and sorting the pieces by shape and color. My mother and I followed his lead, finding the right pieces and fitting them together.

As we worked, I felt a sense of calm wash over me. It was as if the puzzle had become a meditative practice, and each piece we fit together was a moment of mindfulness. I felt my body relax, my breath slowing down, my muscles releasing tension.

The ship puzzle was a marvel of engineering, with intricate details and delicate parts. We had to be careful not to break anything as we worked, or else my dad would have our heads, and we took our time, savoring each moment. The ship took shape before our eyes, and we marveled at its beauty and complexity.

Finally, after many, many hours of work, we finished the puzzle. The ship stood before us, a proud testament to our teamwork and patience. My father beamed with pride, and my mother smiled warmly. I felt a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, as if we had made something significant together.

As we admired the ship, my father suggested we display it on the mantel. We carefully carried it to the living room and placed it on the shelf, where it sparkled in the light. It was a work of art, and we were all stupidly proud of it.

“Why don’t we head to the farmer’s market,” my mom asked me as we turned from the mantel. “We’ll get some stuff for dinner.”

“That’s a great idea. If we can find some interesting looking things, I might even be able to get Eli to eat a vegetable or two.”

Mom laughed.

“I wouldn’t put any money on it.”

We drove to the market, chatting about nothing in particular. The sun was warm on my skin, and the breeze was cool and

refreshing. We walked through the rows of stalls, admiring the fresh produce and the other handmade goods they sold. My mother knew many of the vendors by name, and she greeted them warmly.

We picked out the vegetables and fruits we needed, selecting the freshest and most flavorful ones. My mother carefully inspected each item, making sure it was of the highest quality. I helped her carry the bags, feeling useful and content.

As we walked back to the car, my mother asked me how I was doing. I gave her a one-sentence answer, but I knew she wasn't going to let it go. Mother always knew when something was bothering me. It was a superpower of hers, unfortunately for me, because it just meant she would continue to bug me until I caved.

“So, how's everything with Jack? He's been spending so much time with Eli these days. Do you two get any time to talk?” my mom asked as we put the groceries in the back of the car.

I forced a smile, hoping to avoid the topic.

“It's good. We're good.”

But she wasn't one to be deterred so easily.

“I remember when you were younger, you used to tell me everything. What's going on, Maya?”

I sighed as we got into the car.

“I don’t know. I just feel like I’ve messed everything up. I *know* I’ve messed everything up. You know, by not telling him about Eli earlier.”

Mom reached over and squeezed my hand.

“I know this is hard. Have you talked to Jack about it? Have you told him this?”

I nod.

“Yeah, I have. He’s hurt, understandably.”

“Just give him time. He needs to get to know Eli and sort all of this out for himself. You can’t rush it.”

I nodded again, letting my head fall back on the headrest. A tear threatened to fall from my eyes.

“You and Dad warned me about not telling Jack, about what could happen. But I was too hurt and scared to listen.”

My mother nods sympathetically.

“I know, Maya. But it’s not too late to make things right. You’re taking a good first step in encouraging Jack and Eli to have a relationship.”

Her words hit me hard, and I couldn’t help the tears that started to well up in my eyes. A sob escaped from deep within my chest.

“I just don’t know what to do, Mom. I don’t know how to fix this.”

She reached over and hugged me, letting me cry on her shoulder.

“It’s okay, sweetheart. You’ll figure this out.”

We sat like that for a few minutes, with my mother rubbing my back and soothing me with her words. Finally, I pulled away and started the car.

“You’re right, Mom. I should talk to Jack again. It’s been months since we’ve talked about anything meaningful.”

My mother nodded and squeezed my hand one last time.

We continued the drive home in silence, but the weight on my shoulders felt a little lighter after talking to Mom. I knew that talking to Jack wouldn’t be easy, but it was a step in the right direction.

When we arrived home, my mother helped me carry in the bags from the farmer’s market. As we were putting away the vegetables and fruits, my phone buzzed with a message from Jack.

[Jack 2:33 PM]

Hey. Can we talk later?

I took a deep breath, trying to restart my heart before responding. Talk about putting things out to the universe and it responds.

[Maya 2:44 PM]

Yes, when?

[Jack 2:44 PM]

Later this afternoon when I drop Eli off?

[Maya 2:45 PM]

Sure. Come for dinner at my parents' house and we'll talk after.

Text bubbles popped up, and then Jack sent a gif that makes me laugh out loud. I ignored my mother's perplexed look and texted back.

[Maya 2:46 PM]

I promise they'll be on their best behavior. They'd like to see you again, too.

Jack agreed, and I felt more confident than I had in weeks.

With my mother's words ringing in my ears, I started to mentally prepare for the conversation that could change everything.

As the day dragged on, I found myself getting more and more nervous. I tried to keep myself busy, but I couldn't shake the feeling of dread that settled in my stomach.

We spent the rest of the afternoon cooking together, chopping vegetables, and seasoning meat. We laughed and talked, enjoying each other's company, and I heard all the recent news about my extended family.

As we prepared a large dinner, my parents updated me on the whereabouts of my cousins. We had all grown up together, and they were almost like siblings. Most of them were accomplished; either with profession, marriages, and/or children. I couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy. I was the only one in the family who was still single, and I couldn't help but wonder if there was something wrong with me. My body

tensed up, and I felt a knot form in my stomach. I tried to hide my emotions, but I knew my parents could sense my unease. They tried to change the subject, and I knew that feeling jealous of someone else's success was kind of juvenile, but it was hard not to question my whole life and the path that I had taken.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the present moment. We were all together, everyone was healthy, and that was all that mattered. I helped my mom set the table while my dad tended to the food on the stove. The smell of roasting chicken filled the air, and my mouth watered in anticipation. Cooking with my parents was always one of my favorite things to do. It was a way for us to bond and forget about our worries for a while.

By the time six o'clock rolled around, I was a bundle of nerves. I took a deep breath and opened the door to find Jack standing on the other side, looking just as nervous as I felt, with Eli in hand.

“Hey,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Hello to you too. Please, come in.”

I stepped aside and Eli was the first to run in. He hugged me and ran toward his grandparents.

Jack, meanwhile, was sweating profusely. When I looked back, though, I understood why.

My father was staring daggers at him, an annoyed glint in his eyes.

I took him aside and called out over my shoulder for Jack to make himself comfortable in the living room while I talked to my father in the kitchen.

“Papa, come on. What was that?”

My father sighed, running his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry. I’ll play nice, but I just thought about everything you had to go through in the hands of that man and I couldn’t control myself.”

I sighed and patted his hands, pulling him into a hug.

“I know. But I didn’t tell him and so I wasn’t exactly kind to Jack, either. Remember? Also, don’t forget, this is all for Eli.”

He agreed, and walked away. I took a moment to calm myself before going to face Jack.

This was going to be a long night.

Chapter 21

JACK

As we sat down to a delicious dinner at Maya's parents' house, I couldn't help but feel a little nervous. When we dated, I'd met them and seen them a few times. But that was a long time ago and, based on her dad's glare, I thought maybe that bridge had been burned.

But Sam and Jill Davies were nothing but kind to me, after the initial stern glare from Sam when I arrived.

Maya's parents had gone all out, cooking all their best dishes. I was blown away by how amazing everything tasted. But what surprised me was how much Maya made an effort to include me in the conversation. She would make little jokes, causing us all to laugh together.

It was a welcome change from our usual time together where we struggled to hold entire conversations without choking or using Eli as a buffer. But it wasn't just the conversation that was making me feel giddy. It was the way Maya was looking at me.

Her eyes sparkled with genuine interest and curiosity as we talked, and I couldn't help but feel like I was finally making a connection with her. It was a feeling I had been craving for so long, and it was like a weight had been lifted off my chest.

After dinner, Maya and I took on the task of washing the dishes together. Eli went off to play with his grandparents in the living room, and it was just the two of us in the kitchen. We worked in comfortable silence, she washed, and I dried. It felt nice.

Maya's hand brushed mine a few times, and I felt the sparks dance on my skin and shoot through my body. Close enough to get a hint of her familiar smell which made my body light up with awareness.

Maya shot me a small smile as she handed me the last plate to dry.

"Wanna go for a walk?" She bit her lower lip, undermining the casual tone in her voice.

"Sure, that sounds great."

I grabbed our jackets and waited by the front door while Maya made sure Eli was doing okay with his grandparents.

Maya blew out a long breath as we made our way down the darkening street. The air was cooler now, with a slight breeze that made Maya's hair dance, and I wished I could reach out and run my fingers through the soft strands.

We made some small talk. Maya asked about the time I spent with Eli. I realized how far the relationship I had with

Eli had come. I knew his favorite ice cream (bubble gum), his favorite color (blue), and the sound of his giggles when we wrestled together.

We walked until we got to a park overlooking the river valley below and decided to sit on a park bench. We spent a few quiet moments just taking in the view when I heard Maya shift and take a deep breath.

“Jack, I just want to say the obvious. I’m sorry. That feels so weak, but I just don’t know what else to say. Seeing you with Eli...I just—I don’t—I’m just so sorry.”

“I can’t say it’s okay, Maya. Of course, I wish I’d had the last six years with Eli. But I also kind of get it. I gave you no reason to trust that I’d be there for you after I took off. I get it. How were you supposed to find me and tell me this huge news when I didn’t even have the decency to close down our relationship the right way?” I looked at her and her eyes carried an element of surprise, like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “And believe me, it’s not lost on me that you and your parents went through some hard times raising a baby. I’m sure it’s not exactly what any of you were expecting you would have to do at that point in your lives. I have to be thankful that your parents supported you. So let’s just say we’ll work together to move forward?”

Maya looked up at me, her eyes shimmering. She was beautiful, there was no doubt about that, from the way her eyes twinkled and her plump lips parted, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

We were sitting close, our bodies barely inches apart. Every cell in mine felt drawn to Maya. My heart picked up speed and my fingers tingled with the need to touch her. There was nothing I could do. I was hopeless. I *craved* her.

As she looked at me, I stopped thinking, leaned in, and kissed her. It was a soft, gentle kiss and I could feel the surprise on her lips. But it felt like an explosion inside of me. An explosion that when the pieces fell to the ground, they were laid out perfectly and just fit together.

Everything felt perfect, calm, and beautiful. The world made sense when my lips were pressed against Maya's and she lifted her arms to wrap them around my neck. The heat from her body radiated through mine, feeling like the perfect weight blanket on a cool night.

I swept my tongue into her mouth, exploring her and tasting her. Finally, I let my hands comb through her hair the way they'd been longing to do.

I could feel the intensity of the moment, and I wanted nothing more than to stay in this blissful state forever.

My hands began to wander down her neck, and I could feel her heart racing in time with mine. She shivered as my fingertips grazed her skin, and I felt my entire body harden as she touched me in return. I pulled her closer, wanting to be as close to her as possible. I wanted to take this further, please her until she was a writhing mess under me.

I had no idea I had wanted this as much as I did until today.

I felt like a man dying of thirst in the desert who just had the first sweet drops of water from an oasis.

With the greatest effort ever recorded in the history of the world, I pulled away from Maya. I reminded myself that we were in a public park, barely a few blocks away from her parents' house. I had to get my shit together.

"I've missed you, Maya. What if we go away together? As a family. You, me, and Eli? We can go back to my cabin for the long weekend coming up. I'm sure Eli would love it up there."

Maya's eyes darkened at the mention of my cabin. Maybe she was remembering our time spent there in as much vivid detail as I was remembering.

Great, there went my attempt to get my body under control.

"I'd love that," she finally said, a little breathlessly. "And I know Eli would love that."

"Perfect. Then it's a plan."

I took her hand and softly kissed her knuckles, feeling a sense of anticipation, excitement, and happiness for what was to come.

For the rest of the night, we acted like nothing had happened. But there was a new energy between us, a giddy feeling that we couldn't shake.

As we said our goodbyes and headed out into the cool night air, I couldn't stop smiling. Maya and I had agreed to try to salvage our relationship, and I felt like we were finally on the right track.

I knew that there would be bumps along the way, but I was ready to face them with Maya by my side. And as I drove them both home, with Eli sleeping soundly in the backseat, I couldn't help but feel like we were on the brink of something amazing.

Chapter 22

MAYA

It wasn't until we were sitting on the tarmac of the small metropolitan airport in a private plane that I realized Jack Monroe lived a very different life now. This was *his* private plane. *One* of his private planes. This was the smaller one, he explained, that he used for regional trips, like to his cabin. His company had a larger plane that flew in and out of Denver International Airport.

What the fuck? Who had two planes?

It had been easy to dismiss Jack's wealth and success because most of the time he just seemed like...well, he seemed like Jack. Sure, his clothes were always new-looking and well-tailored. I was sure they were much more expensive than I assumed. And he drove a nice SUV, but he also biked around the city a lot. Maybe the fact that he had a driver was another thing that should have twigged me onto this "different life". His house was big and in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in Denver, but I figured he liked the proximity to his office.

But now we were sitting on *one* of his private planes.

The cabin was spacious. We were sitting in an area that was set up like a restaurant table between two booths. But, in this case, the booth was two individual first class airline chairs sitting across from two others. There was a lot of space for the staff to move around as well as a couch and TV on the far end of the cabin. Eli was bouncing in the seat next to me and across the table, Jack gave me a sheepish smile, clearly seeing that I was just registering his new tax status.

He reached across the table and gave my hand a squeeze, which brought me back to reality...just a bit.

Then we took off, and I had another realization: small planes were fucking terrifying. Thankfully, the flight was short, and we were landing at the Gunnison-Crested Butte Airport in no time.

Jack had arranged a car to pick us up and we were quickly off to the cabin to enjoy a couple of days of downtime and quality time as a family.

We got started immediately, setting off for a hike as soon as we dropped off our bags.

Eli kept trying to run up ahead of us on the trail, but Jack kept pulling him back to stay with us, reminding him that the bears were coming out of hibernation now. That definitely had me looking around a bit more carefully.

The weather was cooler than in Denver but also fresher with some snow still on the ground.

I couldn't help but feel grateful for this moment. Here we were, almost a family, together and happy, enjoying a weekend trip. It was everything I had wanted for so long.

When we got back to the cabin, we made an easy dinner and Jack tried to teach Eli how to play cribbage until he gave up and we watched a movie. Eli snuggled between me and Jack on the large, comfortable sofa and my heart twisted hard at this perfect feeling.

Jack looked at me over the top of Eli's head and smiled. And I was completely lost.

Admittedly a little disappointed with the sleeping arrangements—all of us in separate rooms—I was also grateful for the moment to be alone and process the day. I tried to think, but my brain wouldn't stick to any one thought for too long. I just kept seeing Jack's smile over and over again until I fell into a blissful, deep sleep.



“The men made breakfast,” Jack announced loudly in a fake-deep booming voice as he and Eli marched into my room, presenting me with a tray of eggs and toast. Eli was in a fit of giggles next to him.

“I made the toast all by myself, Mama!”

“Oh, boy. This is amazing.” Jack started to settle the tray on the bed.

“How about I come out there with you two instead?” I lifted the tray, and we shuffled out to the dining room where plates for Jack and Eli waited.

I took a deep sip of coffee and closed my eyes as the warm liquid seeped into my bones.

“So today, I was going to take Eli on a super top-secret mission.” Jack pressed his finger to his lips and winked at Eli. “While we’re out, you, Maya, have an appointment at the spa in town for the works. Scrub, facial, massage, manicure, pedicure, everything. I don’t expect to see you until you are a puddle of relaxed goo.”

I laughed at Jack’s mock-serious expression and Eli’s giggles. Eli jumped up and down yelling, “Goo! Goo! Goo!”

“Okay, okay. You guys are too crazy.” I said, skeptical of what these two were up to.

“I’ll need my car for the mission, but I’ve arranged a driver for you. He’ll be here in an hour.”

Jack winked at me before taking a bite of toast and putting his forehead against Eli’s, whispering conspiratorially. Everything in me glowed at the sight. There was no way I could feel more relaxed or peaceful than right here at the breakfast table with these two.

But breakfast ended, and we cleared the dishes. I showered, got dressed, and walked out to find Jack and Eli dressed in typical clothes. They said goodbye and a minute later, the driver pulled up.

Soon, I was sitting in an exquisitely comfortable robe getting the royal treatment at the spa. Jack was right. I was a relaxed puddle of goo when I left.

I got back into the car, but instead of taking me to the cabin, the driver took me to some nondescript back door.

“Mr. Monroe asked me to bring you here next,” the driver simply said, opening the car door before running ahead to open the metal door for me.

Very hesitantly, I stepped inside and found myself situated in a warmly lit boutique.

“Ms. Davies, we’ve been expecting you.” I was greeted by the most elegant, chic woman I could have expected to be in this mountain town. “We have already pulled some suggestions for you in the dressing room.”

Beyond confused, I was helpless to do anything but follow her. I stepped into the dressing room and was greeted by a selection of five gorgeous, expensive dresses.

“Let me know if you need any help. There’s a mirror right outside.”

“Thank you...?” I couldn’t keep the confusion out of my voice.

“Oh, and Mr. Monroe asked me to remind you that he fully intends to spoil you today so he would greatly appreciate if you would let him.”

I laughed at that, and the woman smiled.

I turned to the beautiful dresses and tried them on. They were a variety of jewel tones and I fell in love with a gorgeous royal blue dress. It was cocktail dress length and fitted in all the right places with a simple v-neck and delicate, see-through, floaty sleeves.

The woman helped me choose a pair of shoes and suddenly, there were a couple of hair and make-up people who started working on me. What they did to me was nothing short of a miracle.

When I was finally done, the driver helped me back in the car and on to the next location; which was a beautiful restaurant overlooking the mountains.

I stepped inside where I was immediately greeted by Jack.

“Jack! What is this all about?” He gathered me in a hug, gently kissing my rarely painted lips.

“You look stunning. I was hoping you’d choose that dress.”

I could do nothing but beam at him until I looked around.

“Where’s Eli?”

“He’ll be here in a minute. Come with me.”

He led me to a gorgeous window-filled room that caught the beginning of the sunset against the mountains. Jack handed me a glass of white wine, taking one for himself, too.

“So, I just want to preface this by saying this is not a proposal. When I propose to you, I’ll knock your socks off. This is just the warm-up.”

I barked out a laugh, completely at a loss as to what was going on right now.

“But Maya, I do want to say something to you. And I want to ask you something.”

He hesitated and took a sip of his wine before setting the glass down and taking my hand. I quickly took my gulp before also putting my glass down on the table.

“I don’t know if this is all too soon or not. I feel like normal timelines don’t exist for us anymore. The past is the past, but the future is now and all I know is how I feel when I’m with you. And what I feel is...perfect. I don’t use that word lightly. I know that we’ll have our challenges and we’ll have our bad days. But Maya, you feel like my family. You always will be my family. You and Eli are the best things in my life at the moment, and I don’t want to lose you. Ever. I can promise you exactly one thing in this life: and that is, I’ll never walk away from you again. So, Maya, I’m asking you—in probably an over-the-top way that I hope you find charming and not terrifying—if you will take this next step with me. I would like to ask you to start a new relationship. A real, grown-up relationship based on the truth, communication, and a promise to work through the hard stuff.”

I didn’t even notice a tear had fallen from my eyes until Jack gently lifted his thumb to swipe it away.

“Yes, Jack,” I whispered, and his face split into a beaming grin.

“I was hoping you’d say that. As I said, this isn’t a proposal. I’m not trying to belabor the point, I just want you to know that if and when a proposal is something that happens, it will be much more surprising than this. But I did want to mark the occasion with something.”

Jack slid a small box from his pocket and handed it to me. I gently undid the ribbon and pulled the top open. Inside was the most beautiful—and huge—pair of square-cut diamond earrings.

“Oh my God, Jack. These are gorgeous.”

“Not as gorgeous as you,” he murmured as I slipped them on, feeling truly like royalty.

Suddenly Jack whistled, startling me. I dropped the empty box. Jack chuckled as Eli bounded into the room.

“I asked him to stand back in case this didn’t go well,” Jack whispered in my ear and I hugged him, so appreciative of his thoughtfulness.

“Mama, you look like a princess!” Eli’s eyes lit up as I scooped him into a hug.

Jack led us to a table, and we shared a much fancier meal as our first official family dinner. We talked, laughed, and reminded Eli about table manners until the sun fully set and Eli was practically asleep on the table.

Jack drove us back to his cabin and gently tucked Eli into his bed.

When he came back to the living room, he silently took my hand and led me to his bedroom.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” he whispered in my ear, the warm breath setting goosebumps off everywhere. “I just really wanted to be alone with you for a minute.”

I moved my head a fraction and caught his lips in a kiss, gentle at first, but it quickly turned heated. All of our longing was poured out in that kiss. It was filled with promises of our new beginning.

We pulled away, breathless, foreheads touching, eyes locked in a moment of quiet understanding. Jack’s hands rested gently on my hips.

I knew this wasn’t going to be easy, that there would be bumps in the road and obstacles to overcome, but at that moment, I felt like nothing could ever come between us again.

Jack dipped his head again and kissed me more deeply, full of passion. His hand slowly traveled to the zipper on the back of my dress. He kept me enthralled in a kiss as he slowly lowered the zipper. He slipped one side of the dress off my shoulder and followed with his mouth. He left a trail of hot desire across my collarbone and shoulder. Slowly, so slowly, he slipped the other one down and looked into my eyes for confirmation to continue.

All I could do was nod.

That was all it took. Jack’s hands fully lowered the zipper, and the dress slipped off my body and pooled on the floor.

I broke the moment to quickly snatch it up to hang it in the closet.

Jack's eyebrow quirked with silent teasing as I walked back, wearing only my undergarments and black strappy stilettos I'd picked out in the boutique.

"It's a gorgeous dress. There's no need for wrinkles," I explained.

"I'll buy you a thousand gorgeous dresses," Jack growled before tugging me against his body.

It felt strange only wearing a lace black strapless bra and barely there underwear while he was still fully clothed in his tailored black suit. The fabric felt illicit as it ran against my naked, heated skin.

Jack guided me down gently on the bed, his eyes never leaving mine. He slowly unbuttoned his jacket and lifted it with one finger, deliberately throwing it on the ground, with a teasing smile. Next was the soft white shirt and then his beautifully tailored pants. He stood there in his boxer briefs, an impressive erection already straining the front.

He joined me on the bed and pulled me close, a look of wonder in his eyes, and without a word, our lips met. The kiss was slow and passionate, both of us taking our time. I knew I was exposing my need through the intensity of my kisses, of my hands roaming over every inch of skin I could reach. My hands moved down his body, exploring the angles and ripples that made Jack the beautiful man he was, savoring the feel of

the muscles of his toned abs, and then cupping his face in my hands.

Jack's hands were wandering too and leaving trails of sparks and desire everywhere he touched. It seemed impossible my body could be lit up so brightly and still want more.

He cupped one breast over the lace and gently swept his thumb across my peaked nipple. I cried out and arched my back at the sensation.

I wanted more. I *needed* more.

He kissed my neck, and another breathy moan escaped my lips. The pleasure snaking its way under my skin threatened to undo everything, to undo me.

“Maya, you truly are beautiful,” Jack whispered in my ear.

While I was still reeling from his words, he leaned in to kiss me and slipped his fingers beneath my underwear, finding me wet, needy, and ready for him.

He slowly circled his fingers around the tight bud of nerves that threatened to set my body on fire.

As he continued to kiss me, he slipped one finger inside of me, completely overwhelming my senses. My back arched and my legs shook as my body searched for release.

His finger swirled over my clit again, too light to set off the orgasm but firmly enough that my body writhed. I felt his erection hot and heavy on my thigh, even through his briefs, and it just amped up the excitement even more. I let my hand travel down to his dick and gently rubbed and stroked him,

making him moan into our kisses. He lowered his face toward my breast.

I moaned in a combination of both pain and pleasure as he gently bit my nipple through the lace while stroking my core.

It was all too much. His movements were firmer now, and I wasn't sure I'd survive the climax. I was almost there when he backed off, a whimper escaping my lips. But then, in a flash of motion, my panties were off, and his head was between my thighs, legs over his shoulders.

"I need to taste you," he murmured, as he replaced his skilled fingers with his *very* skilled mouth. Before I knew it, I was flying back toward the peak, and this time Jack didn't let up, staying with me through the impossibly violent waves of pleasure that racked through my body, leaving me boneless.

He moved back up my body, his lips skimming all the skin he could touch as I writhed, not quite being able to fully process what I just felt. He slipped off his boxers as he growled and murmured into my neck.

Jack looked deep into my eyes, lids heavy from pleasure as he positioned himself between my legs.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, urging me closer.

"I need you, Jack. Please fuck me."

"Oh, god, don't say that, it drives me wild." Before he was finished the sentence, he began to sink into me and there was no better feeling in the world. I exhaled slowly, eyes closed, bathing in the feeling of just being full.

He raised my legs to his shoulders for more access, then thrust with deep, powerful strokes, and I felt a scream build in my throat as he increased his pace. I dug my fingers as I held tightly onto his legs, holding on for dear life.

He slipped out of me, but before I could protest, he was tugging me off the bed and bending me over, standing behind me. With one swat on my ass, he was pushing himself in again.

Jack moved faster, hitting every special spot in my body with each stroke. I wanted to scream, but nothing came out of my mouth. My world narrowed to the spot where Jack and I were connected.

He spanked me again, and it sent me flying off into a soul-sucking orgasm. He groaned and I could feel him grow even more hard. My body shook with pleasure as he came. He collapsed onto me, his breathing heavy. As his breathing slowed, he pulled me up to rest fully on the bed and spooned me, murmuring sweet nothings into my hair.

As we lay together, unable to understand what just passed between us, Jack wrapped me up against his warm body. I was exhausted but content, and I knew this was just the beginning of our journey.

We'd have to go home tomorrow, and then really start our lives together. But fuck me, this was a good start.

Chapter 23

JACK

I couldn't get comfortable in the large seats of the limo. I wanted to relax, but I was too high-strung to do anything other than make calls constantly to make sure everything was going as planned.

It was a big night for me and my company, so I brought Maya along. This was her chance to see everything we stood for up close, and I needed her support.

When we pulled up in front of the large downtown hotel, the valet line was so full of luxury cars and limos that there was barely any space to move. My stomach turned at the high turnout.

As we strode into the grand ballroom, I felt a sense of pride and excitement. After almost a year of preparation and hard work, my team and I were finally ready to unveil our latest innovation in wearable tech to the world. I was confident that our product would revolutionize the industry.

There were so many people already in the room, even though we still had an hour before the main event. The hanging chandelier sparkled in the lights, bouncing rainbow rays off diamond necklaces and glasses of champagne. The air was filled with voices, the scrape of chairs against the smooth tiles as they were moved, and soothing classical music in the background.

It was all grand, and the women were beautiful, but none were as beautiful to me as the woman on my arm. Unlike the vast majority of women who wore black or blue dresses, Maya looked stunning in her red satin dress, the fabric hugging her curves in all the right places. I couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude and love for her as she walked by my side, her arm interlaced in mine. I welcomed the support, and as always, she was there to give it to me.

The banquet hall was buzzing with activity. Businessmen and women from all over the country that I had handpicked were gathered here tonight, dressed in their finest attire, ready to network and make connections. As we made our way to our table, I scanned the room, taking in the grandeur of the chandeliers and the elegant decor.

I had been to my fair share of these types of events before, but this one felt different. This time, I was the host, and I had Maya by my side, which made all the difference.

I led Maya around the room, introducing her to everyone I could, and telling everyone who cared to listen that she was mine.

The wine was delicious, and the conversation flowed smoothly. When I introduced Maya to some of my key employees who gathered at the head table, she easily charmed them with her wit and intelligence.

As we took our seats an hour later, Maya sat right beside me. I couldn't help but feel nervous. This was a make-or-break moment for my company, and I didn't want to mess it up. I fidgeted with my tie and took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

Maya noticed my unease and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. Her touch was like magic, and I felt my anxiety melt away.

I stood up to give my speech. Maya looked up at me, a proud smile on her lips, and I felt a surge of confidence.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us tonight,” I began, my voice steady. “I am thrilled to introduce you to our latest innovation in wearable tech.”



Maya

I stood at Jack's side all night, my heart swelling with pride. Jack was in his element, gliding through the room like he had wheels for feet, and taking me with him. He was the CEO of his company, a man of immense power and influence, and yet he wanted me with him, wanted to show me off to the world. I had nothing to offer him other than myself, but he didn't seem to care. And that made me feel so special.

The banquet dinner was a grand affair, with tables stretching as far as the eye could see. There were glittering chandeliers overhead, beautiful music in the background, and gorgeous people all around us. Jack had spared no expense in making sure everything was perfect, and I could see the admiration in the eyes of those around us. They looked at us and saw a powerful couple, one that had everything going for them.

Finally, Jack got on stage to start his presentation, and I reluctantly let him go. As much as I needed him around me, I knew he had to do this. It was what the whole evening was for, anyway. As he spoke, I watched him with a mixture of pride and awe. He was such an amazing speaker, commanding the attention of everyone in the room. And he was mine.

But not everyone was happy for us, or that Jack was with me.

As I sat aside, watching Jack wow the crowd with the watch which promised to replace conventional trackers for phones

and cars, and could also double as a GPS device pinging the location of its wearer to the police in case of an emergency, I heard the whispers behind me. They were coming from a group of women, all gorgeous and dressed impeccably, who were eyeing me with open disdain. I could hear them wondering out loud how Jack could ever want to be with someone like me.

“Ugh, just look at her dress.” I squirmed in my seat when the nasally high voice entered my ears. “It screams desperate new money. I wonder what games she played to get Jack to take her in.”

I turned slightly and met the eyes of a gorgeous redhead. I remembered her from Jack’s circuit through the room; she was the daughter of a rich politician. She scoffed, looking me up and down, and turned to the person who she had been talking to.

“The bitch is staring. No class, at all.”

The other person, a plain-looking girl with a splatter of freckles across her nose, laughed. “I don’t know why she’s looking so pale.” I turned away, blinking back tears. “We all know it’s just a phase. Jack never stays too long with anyone, not after the accident...”

I clambered to my feet, hearing their whispered laughter at the flush in my cheeks, and pressed my lips together as I rushed out of the hall with my shoulders slumped. I just needed fresh air for a few seconds, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to get it there.

I had no idea what twists and turns I followed, but after a few minutes, I was in a lonely hallway. I took a deep breath, rested my back on the wall, and slid down until I was sitting on the ground.

I took deep breaths until the tightness in my heart dissipated. I could do this. Even though this was a new world and everyone in the room probably had more in their pocket than I had in my bank account, I deserved to be here. I could face those girls and anyone else who felt like I was so easy to bully. Anyway, Jack was the only one that mattered.

I tried to will myself into believing what I was telling myself. I tried to steel my spine so I could handle whatever they threw at me. But it was hard when I didn't even believe in myself.

Sticks and stones...

The saying is wrong though. So wrong. I thought, as I tracked the glow from the single light bulb in the hallway, marking where it fell and the patterns it made on the soft oriental carpet. Their words hurt more than I could ever bring myself to admit.

I picked myself up and made my way back to the banquet hall, giving a smile to a pretty couple who walked in just before me, and I caught the tail end of Jack's presentation. The crowd was eating it up, and I could see a few exchange nods.

When he finished, there was thunderous applause, and I cheered along with everyone else. I could see Jack looking out at the crowd, his eyes scanning the faces, and I knew he was

looking for me. When he finally found me, he smiled, walking towards me, and I felt my heart swell with love.

“How did I do?” he whispered in my ear as he hugged me.

“You were amazing,” I whispered back, patting his cheek when he pulled away from me. “They loved you. You had them all spellbound.”

Jack laughed, nudging me with his hip as he took me in his hand again and led me to the table.

“If you’re right, then they’ll give me all their money and I can start production soon.”

He stopped in front of a few people, accepting their congratulations and promising to contact them, and then he pulled out my chair for me.

I sat, smiling at him, but my smile dropped when the same redhead from earlier started whispering with her friend again. I felt like pulling out my hair. *Why are they being so mean?! It’s not like I stole her boyfriend or something.*

For a moment, I felt a pang of self-doubt. Maybe they were right. Maybe I wasn’t good enough for him. But then I felt Jack’s hand on mine, squeezing it gently, and I knew that he didn’t care about any of that. He liked me for who I was, not for what I looked like or what I could offer him.

We sat down to eat, and Jack introduced me to a final couple who I had noticed walking to our table when I had returned from the hallway, Ben and Christine Dwayne. Christine was a beautiful woman, dressed in a stunning black

cocktail dress, and I felt a pang of envy as I looked at her. She was everything I wasn't: confident, beautiful, and poised.

But then she spoke to me, and all of that envy vanished. She complimented me on my dress, telling me how beautiful I looked, and I felt a warmth spreading through me. I was comfortable around her and she spoke to me like I was a human being, not like the other women at the party who had whispered behind my back. With the way we spoke, she saw me for who I was, not for what I looked like, and that made me feel so special.

All through dinner, I felt Jack's hand on my thigh, rubbing it gently, and I knew that he was proud to have me by his side.

Jack's assistant sidled up to our side midway through the second course, and Jack had to slip out to answer an urgent call. I wasn't bothered though, because I was having a blast with Christine. She ran a high-class boutique very close to the hotel, and she asked me to come over sometime to get a full closet overhaul anytime I wanted.

I agreed and was digging into a delicious chocolate soufflé when Jack returned without his assistant.

"I have one sealed deal already," he whispered as he took his seat beside me, beaming.

I gave him an encouraging smile. "That's wonderful. Who..."

"Excuse me, Mr. Monroe?" We were suddenly interrupted by a deep voice: Ben Dwayne.

Jack excused himself and I waved him off. He turned to Ben, and soon they walked off to somewhere quieter so they could talk. When they returned, Jack was beaming yet again.

“Make that two deals. Looks like you’re my lucky charm, after all.”

I smiled, rolling my eyes. Jack gave me a peck on the cheek as he settled into his seat, and when I glanced at Christine Dwayne, she winked at me and placed a hand on her lips.

Lucky indeed, I thought, as Jack’s arm settled around my shoulders.

Chapter 24

JACK

As spring turned brighter and hotter into summer, Maya, Eli, and I settled into a routine.

Since Maya and I were both working so much, we carved out weekends to all spend together. We'd switch off with dinner and game nights at either mine or Maya's house. They were full of laughter and bickering as I learned that both Maya and Eli—and maybe myself—were fiercely competitive.

We'd spend lazy days at my pool or sometimes go to the lake and take out the jet skis that had once felt like a foolish purchase.

Maya and I were trying to take things slowly and build a solid foundation for our relationship. The last thing we wanted to do was jump headfirst and have it not work out and crush Eli.

So even by August, we had no talks about moving in together or taking things to another level. For the most part, our arrangement was working.

We also both started seeing Catherine a couple of times a month. Finding out that Catherine knew us both so well made the conversations easy. We all knew we were committed to figuring our unique situation out.

Maya and I still had our ups and downs and were both as hot-headed as ever. But Catherine taught us how to take a minute and give each other space to cool down before we said anything hurtful. Those “minutes” really saved the day, many times.

It felt like we were really building something real. Something that would last.

And as I watched Eli setting up the evening’s board game in my living room while Maya got snacks from the kitchen, everything felt really comfortable and purposeful. This is what my life was supposed to look like.

Maya brought the cheese and crackers, while I got the drinks and we sat around the coffee table and started the game.

Eli was already trash-talking us like a pro. Maya and I were laughing, and when she swept her hair over her shoulder, I held my breath, feeling my body stir. Maya looked up at me from under her lashes, clearly noticing my discomfort, and I felt a sudden urge to reach across the table and take her hand.

I did it before I could think again, and then I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I was reading the signals right, but then Maya squeezed my hand back. I could feel my whole body relax at the contact, and I knew that I wanted more.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Eli declared victory. After a quick bedtime snack, he walked sleepily off to bed. Maya and I were left alone on the couch, and I felt lightheaded, even though my heart was pounding in my chest and pushing gallons of blood through my veins.

“I had fun tonight,” Maya said, breaking the silence.

“Me too,” I replied, my voice barely above a whisper.

We sat there for a moment, just looking at each other. I could see the hesitation in Maya’s eyes, but I also saw something else. Something that told me she was feeling the same way I was.

Without thinking, I closed the distance between us and kissed her. It was soft and gentle at first, but then Maya responded, and everything else faded away. We were lost in the moment, our bodies pressed together as we explored each other’s mouths.

I could feel the heat building between us, rising higher and higher until I felt like we were about to combust, and I knew we needed to satisfy the urge. I stood up and pulled Maya to her feet, never breaking the kiss. I led her to my room and closed the door behind us. We collapsed onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and lips.

When we pulled apart, we were both breathing hard, and I could feel the electricity in the air. Maya was straddling me now, her hands in my hair as she lowered herself again and we continued to kiss. I reached down and grabbed her hips, pulling her closer to me, and moaned into the kiss when her

wetness pressed against my cock, soaking through her thin shorts.

It felt like we had been building up to this moment for weeks, and now that we were here, I didn't want it to end.

Thankfully, neither did she.

Chapter 25

MAYA

School was going to start again for Eli soon, so Jack and I decided to take a family vacation to the beach. It had been a while since I had been to the beach and Eli had never been there, so we were all very excited.

We decided on San Diego and Jack insisted on renting a ridiculously nice house for the week. It seemed over-the-top to me, but Jack reminded me with a wink that it was totally ok.

It was the thing about Jack I kept trying to ignore, for some reason.

We flew commercial to San Diego, but of course, first class. I was worried that Eli was getting spoiled as I watched him drape the hot towel over his face and made a mental note to have a conversation about all of this luxury at home. I wouldn't ruin our fun time right now.

As we arrived at our beachfront home, I was taken aback by how beautiful it was. The view was breathtaking, and the house was even more stunning in person. As we started to

explore the area, my unease returned. Everywhere we went, Jack was quick to pull out his credit card and buy anything Eli wanted. Ice cream, souvenirs, you name it.

I knew I should be grateful for Jack's generosity, but there was a part of me that felt like he was trying to one-up me, to prove that he could provide for our son better than I ever could. And the worst part was that he seemed to be enjoying it as if it were some kind of game. I could feel the tension building up inside of me, but I didn't know how to confront him without causing a scene.

It wasn't until later on the second day that things came to a head. We were walking along the beach when Jack spotted a vendor renting out four-wheelers. Before I could even say anything, Jack had rented one for Eli.

I was stunned; we had never even talked about four-wheeling before. But Jack just brushed off my concerns, telling me that Eli would love it and that it was just a small price to pay for his happiness.

I could feel my anger rising.

"What's the matter, Maya?" Jack teased, his voice dripping with what I interpreted as smugness. "Don't you want our son to have the best of everything?"

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, using some of the tools I'd practiced with Catherine.

"Of course I want him to have the best," I said, my voice shaking with frustration. "But that doesn't mean we have to

spend money on everything he wants. We need to teach him the value of money, not just give him whatever he asks for.”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“Oh, come on, Maya. It’s just a four-wheeler for the day. It’s not like we’re buying him a sports car or something.”

I could feel my face turning red with anger.

“That’s not the point, Jack,” I said, my voice rising. “The point is that we need to teach our son responsibility, and that means not giving him everything he wants just because you can afford it.”

Jack just laughed, as if my words were some kind of joke.

“Don’t be such a killjoy, Maya,” he said, shaking his head. “Lighten up a little bit. Eli is having the time of his life, and that’s all that matters.”

I knew I wasn’t going to win in an argument with Jack, so I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down.

“Fine,” I said, my voice quieter now. “But I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

Jack shrugged.

“Don’t worry about it, Maya,” he said, putting his arm around me. “We’re on vacation, remember? Let’s just enjoy ourselves.”

I didn’t say anything else, but the tension between us lingered for the rest of the day.

Jack apologized later that night, in more ways than one.



The next day, while Eli and I were playing in the sand, we bumped into Christine and Ben Dwayne, who also happened to be on vacation. I thought it was a little weird that we randomly met them here in San Diego, but Jack swore up and down it had nothing to do with business and that they just happened to be here.

I let it go because they had a son about the same age as Eli and they latched on to each other. And Christine was so friendly and kind, it was nice to talk to her.

Jack invited them over for lunch but got it catered instead of us scrambling to make something. Okay, so maybe there's part of him having money that I truly didn't mind.

It was fun, and the kids played together in the sand of the private beach while we sat on the patio under the umbrella.

But pretty soon, Jack and Ben were talking business. Jack was showing off a bit for the Dwaynes but I could tell he was enjoying himself. It just bugged me how he had a way of making a lot of things about his business. While I admired his dedication, it still annoyed me a bit. It was one of the very few things that frustrated me about him.

After lunch, we all went for a walk along the beach. The sun was shining, and the waves were crashing against the shore. I could feel myself relaxing even more as I walked with my family and our new friends. It was such a beautiful day.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of fun and relaxation. We went swimming, played beach volleyball, and watched the sunset. It was one of the best days of my life.

Still, I felt a chill in my bones, like this was just the calm before the storm. Nothing could be perfect like this forever. Something was coming. Something big.

Chapter 26

JACK

I woke up to the sound of my phone buzzing incessantly on the nightstand. I groggily reached for it, half-expecting it to be a simple early morning work emergency since no one ever disturbed me when I was at home. But what I saw shocked me awake faster than a thousand cups of coffee ever could.

Missed calls, voicemails, texts, and emails—all from my employees, board members, and business partners.

I felt a chill run down my spine and through my limbs, turning my stomach to lead.

Something's wrong. Something's wrong.

I looked down at Maya, still sound asleep with her head resting on my chest. I hated to wake her up, but I had to go. She stirred slightly as I tried to slip out of her embrace, her lips spread in a cute yawn that made her nose scrunch up. I chuckled, the dread in my bones easing a little, kissing her

gently on the forehead, and whispered, “I’ll be back soon, love. Emergency at the company...”

As I rushed to get dressed, I tried to calm my racing heart and slow my frantic thoughts but it was almost impossible. Whatever this emergency was, I hoped and prayed that I could handle it. I’ve faced countless challenges in my career as a tech entrepreneur—this couldn’t be any worse than those.

I hoped.

All the other problems I have faced have never had this level of panic and fear involved though.

As I stepped into my car and started the long drive toward the office from Maya’s house, I felt a sense of dread creeping up inside me, leaving a sour taste in the back of my throat. It was not just any emergency—it was something big. Something that threatened everything I’ve worked for.

When I strode out of the elevator on my office floor, I could immediately tell that something was off. My assistant, Becky, who was usually calm and collected, looked pale and nervous, pacing back and forth in front of my office with a tablet in her arms.

“Becky, I’m here.”

She spun to face me, and her face looked like it had been drained of blood.

“Sir, we have a problem,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“There’s an article out—a news outlet is claiming that our company is involved in a major financial scandal. They say that we stole millions of dollars from our customers using bank information that we obtained through the ZeePay app. It’s all over social media, and people are already calling for your head.”

She passed the tablet to me, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

It can’t be true. It’s not true. But the way my assistant was looking at me—with pity and disbelief—and the headline told me otherwise.

“MonTech’s Secret to Success,” I scoffed. *Really?*

“Reports from our correspondents say the fintech app from MonTech, ZeePay, has had a particularly disturbing trend. The company’s high profits over the last fiscal year can be attributed to the fact that it siphons innocent people’s money into dummy accounts...” I trailed off, my blood boiling. Looking away from the tablet, I handed it back to Becky and stormed into my office.

The first thing I did was check the stocks, and what I saw was not encouraging in the least. The prices were dropping like flies in an oven.

I sank into my chair, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

This couldn’t be happening. I had built this company from scratch and poured my heart and soul into it for years. And

now, because of some false accusations, it was all falling apart.

Rumor or not, this wasn't the sort of thing companies easily bounced back from.

My body felt full, flooded with emotions—anger, despair, fear. I could feel my heart beating faster than ever before, so I used some deep breathing techniques to try to slow it down. I wanted to scream, to punch something, to run away and never come back.

But I knew I couldn't. I had to face this head on, with everything I had. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing thoughts, and picked up the inter-office phone.

“Becky, send a meeting invitation out. I want all senior leadership in the conference room. Now,” I said, my voice low and firm.

After gathering my thoughts, I walked out of my office and to the conference room on the same floor.

In a matter of minutes, my top executives were gathered around the table, all looking as stunned as I felt. I could see the worry and doubt in their eyes, and it only made me feel worse.

When they were all seated, I stood and addressed them all.

“I know you've all seen the news. I want to make one thing clear—these accusations are false. Our company has never engaged in any illegal or unethical behavior, but now that the rumors are out there, it seems that the responsibility to prove we are innocent is squarely on our shoulders. We will have to

prove it beyond a doubt. But we need to act fast and decisively. Let's set plans in motion to launch an investigation, gather evidence, and fight back with everything we've got. Are you with me?"

There was a moment of hesitation, and then one by one, they nodded their heads, murmuring words of support and encouragement.

We spent the next several hours pouring over our financial records, and when those were inconclusive, we called in our top tech gurus. They went through the email and app data with us, trying to find any evidence that could refute the accusations. It was grueling work, but I was determined to do whatever it took.

Hours later, after I dismissed the meeting and walked back into my office, I felt exhausted already. When I entered my private bathroom, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the wall. My eyes were bloodshot, my hair disheveled, and my face looked haggard and tired. It had already been a long day, and it was barely past noon. I knew there were going to be many more days like this ahead if I didn't find a way to absolve the company.

Just when I thought the worst of the morning was over, the canceled deals started pouring in.

Maya

As I stood in my kitchen, making Eli's lunch for school, I watched the news on TV with one eye. But when I saw the headline about Jack's company embezzling money from private accounts, my heart sank. I knew instantly that Eli's father would never condone that kind of fraud. He was a good person, and I could feel my body tensing up with worry.

I picked up my phone and dialed Jack's number. He answered on the second ring, and I could tell he was overwhelmed, even though he told me he had it under control. I offered my support without thinking and told him that I would help him clear his name.

He had me, for life. Whether he knew it or not, he had me.

And I wasn't going to sit aside and watch him fall.

"I'm ready to help, but I'll need all the public records on ZeePay that I can get from you."

"That isn't a problem. We're going to be working on it around the clock here. It would be good to have some help. Thank you, Maya."

"I don't mind. But I've got to go now. Gotta get Eli to school."

"Of course." Jack sighed, and I could hear papers rustling in the background. "Talk to you later."

After hanging up, I turned to the lunch box and the sandwich that I was preparing for Eli. But my mind was elsewhere, and I couldn't focus on the task at hand. I knew I had to do something to help Jack, and that's when I decided to gather evidence to prove his innocence.

When I saw the name of the first news outlet that published the news, I almost exploded in anger.

It just had to be TRA news. They were a company that competed bitterly with MHM for as long as I could remember, and they were usually ready to do anything to get what they wanted.

I wasn't much of an investigative journalist, but I knew I had to start somewhere. So I called Brielle, who had notably better sleuthing skills than I did. She agreed to help me, and after I dropped Eli off at school, we met up in her office. Together, we hunted down the sources of the fake news the paper published, but it turned out the names were all aliases and the phone numbers were all disconnected.

Despite this setback, I refused to give up. I knew that there had to be a way to clear Jack's name, and I was determined to find it. I spent hours gathering information, talking to people, and following leads. For the next week, I would wake up early and work late into the night, fueled by my desire to help Jack and the knowledge that he was innocent.

I felt a mix of emotions: frustration, enough to make me want to pull out a nail, exhaustion, and anxiety. But I also felt

a sense of purpose that kept me going. I knew that Jack was counting on me, and I couldn't let him down.

One day, Brielle called me with some promising news. She had found a lead on one of the sources. I dropped off Eli with my parents so that they could take him to school and Brielle and I could get to work.

As we were sitting in my kitchen, reading over everything, I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

This could be it, I thought. This could be the breakthrough we need.

Brielle had the address of the source, and we decided to visit them. As we drove there, I could feel my nerves getting the better of me. I had never done anything like this before, and I wasn't sure what to expect. But I knew that I had to be brave and keep going.

When we arrived at the address, I found myself in front of a small apartment complex in Aurora. I knocked on the door of the unit that Brielle had noted, and a man opened it. He looked surprised to see me, but I introduced ourselves and explained why we were there.

He didn't let me in, but he listened patiently as I spoke, and then he told me that he had no idea what I was talking about. He said that he had never heard of MonTech or the embezzlement allegations, and though he was a ZeePay customer, had never had a problem with the app. I felt deflated, but I thanked him for his time and left.

Brielle and I parted ways to work on our own and as I drove home, I couldn't help but feel discouraged. We had hit a dead end, and I wasn't sure where to go from here. But then I remembered something that Jack had said to me on the phone when I first called him: "I didn't do it, Maya. You know me. You know I wouldn't do something like that."

I realized then that Jack's innocence wasn't just a matter of gathering evidence or following leads. It was about believing in him and standing by him no matter what. And I knew that's what I had to do. I couldn't give up on Jack just because we hit a dead end. I had to keep going, keep searching, and keep believing.

Chapter 27

MAYA

I dragged myself into the MHM office, exhausted but determined to clear Jack's name. It had been days since I'd slept properly, but I couldn't rest until I found concrete evidence to prove that he was innocent. As soon as I reached my desk, I buried my head in my hands, trying to muster the energy to go on.

My boss, even higher up than Emily, David Thompson, walked up to me, looking concerned.

"Maya, are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Just tired."

"I understand that you're working on a big story, but you need to take care of yourself," he said. "I can't have my employees collapsing on the job."

"I know, I know," I said, waving him off with a smile. "I'll take a break soon."

But I knew that wasn't true. I couldn't rest until I found something to clear Jack's name. I spent long hours sifting

through files and talking to people, trying to find any leads. I argued with David when he suggested that we hold off on going public until we had solid proof.

“It’s not fair to Jack,” I said, my voice shaking with anger. “He’s already suffered enough because of those false accusations. We need to clear his name as soon as possible.”

“But we need to be careful,” David said. “If we go public without enough evidence, we could be sued for defamation.”

“I understand the risks,” I said, gritting my teeth. “But we can’t wait any longer. Jack’s reputation is on the line.”

I kept pushing, but his answer was always a no.

Despite my exhaustion, my determination kept me going. Every time I found a new piece of evidence, I felt a rush of adrenaline. But my excitement was short-lived when I hit dead end after dead end. Fake witnesses and destroyed evidence. My heart sank as I realized that I was back to square one.

I collapsed into my chair, feeling defeated. All my hard work had led me nowhere. But then, a thought occurred to me. What if the people who accused Jack were paid to do so? What if there was someone behind this who wanted to ruin his reputation?

My mind raced as I tried to think of ways to prove my theory. I spent hours poring over financial records and looking for connections between Jack’s accusers and any potential culprits. It was grueling work, but I couldn’t give up now.

As the days passed, my relationship with Jack became strained. We both spent so much time working and trying to fix his issue that we only came together when we had to be there for Eli. Our conversations were short and tense, filled with frustration and exhaustion. I missed the way things used to be between us, but I knew that what was pulling us apart was really something we needed to get over to move forward.

I couldn't shake off the feeling that I wasn't going to be able to help Jack. That I couldn't do this or be who he needed right now.

I was scared that now that we were both under a lot of stress and the cracks were showing and they wouldn't stop until we were completely broken.

Later that night, after dinner, Jack said he was going to sleep at his house so he could get an early start without disrupting us.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady my nerves.

"I know that you've been working hard lately, and I appreciate everything you're doing for your company. But I've been feeling a little neglected, and I just wanted to make sure that everything is okay between us."

Jack walked over to me and took my hand.

"Maya, you do know I care about you more than anything in this world. I know that I've been busy, but it's because of this issue with the company. I just have a lot on my plate right now. But I promise that I'll make it up to you."

“When?” I asked, winking at him to diffuse the tension.

Jack kissed me on the forehead.

“As soon as I possibly can.”

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. I knew that I needed to trust Jack, and hearing him say those words made me feel like everything was going to be okay.

Chapter 28

JACK

Everything was a nightmare.

As the leaves started to change color, the rumors turned into a federal fraud investigation.

And Maya was still working hard to try and clear my name from her end, but part of me wasn't that hopeful. I had all my resources working on my end, and as much as I appreciated her help, I couldn't shake the feeling of that it wasn't going to help. But I also didn't want to tell her that, so the guilt of all the time she was spending on me was weighing heavily on my chest.

Meanwhile, I was stuck spending all of my time with the federal auditing team, working with them and hoping they didn't find anything incriminating. I was positive they wouldn't, but on the other hand, with such a large company, it's possible that the inner workings get away from you. The whole exercise left me feeling drained and anxious. I couldn't imagine how Maya was feeling, juggling all of this while taking care of our young son.

Despite our best efforts, our relationship was becoming increasingly strained. We argued more often, and our once-loving bond had been replaced with tension and frustration. Maya was angry that I wasn't doing more to help myself, and I was angry—mostly at myself—that I was causing her so much stress.

One evening, after a particularly stressful day, Maya and I found ourselves arguing once again. I could feel my heart racing as she accused me of not doing enough to clear my name.

“I’m doing the best I can,” I protested, my spine going ramrod straight and with my arms crossed. “But there’s a procedure we need to follow now. I can’t just say ‘Hey, everyone. I didn’t do anything.’”

“But it’s not enough,” she shot back, her bright eyes blazing with anger. “You need to do more. You need to take responsibility for what’s happened. It seems to me like you’ve stopped trying!”

“I *am* taking responsibility,” I replied, my frustration mounting. “I’m working with the federal government every day, and every day that they don’t find something incriminating is a good day. But it’s a tall order to hope that they’ll definitively clear my name. There is a lot to go through.”

“But you’re not doing anything,” Maya countered. “You’re just trying to cover your tracks.”

I could feel my anger rising.

“I’m doing what I have to do to protect myself and our company. What do you want me to do, Maya? Confess to something I didn’t do?”

Maya’s eyes narrowed as she glared at me.

“I want you to show some initiative. I want you to take action instead of just responding.”

“I don’t know what else I can do,” I admitted, running my hands through my hair. “I’m doing everything I can think of to prove my innocence.”

Maya’s expression softened slightly as she looked at me.

“I know you’re trying, Jack. But it feels like you’re not doing enough. I’m exhausted from trying to clear your name while also taking care of our son. I need you to do more.”

I could feel the weight of her words crushing me.

“I’m sorry, Maya. I really don’t know what else I can do.”

We sat in silence for a few moments, both of us lost in our thoughts. I could feel the tension between us, thick and suffocating.

“I just don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Maya finally said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I know,” I replied softly, reaching out to take her hand. “I’m sorry. I wish things were different.”

Maya sighed heavily, leaning her head against my shoulder. “I wish they were too.”

We sat there in silence for a few moments longer, holding onto each other as we tried to find some solace in our shared pain.

It wasn't the first argument we had, and it definitely wouldn't be the last.

Every time we argued, I felt my frustration building up inside me. My chest felt tight, my heart racing with the rush of adrenaline. I could feel my palms getting sweaty and my breathing becoming shallow. I knew I should have been listening to her, but all I could focus on was how impossible it all felt. How could I possibly give them more time when I was already stretched so thin?

Maya's words still stung, and I could feel my anger boiling up inside me. I tried to keep my voice steady, but it was getting harder and harder to control myself. I knew I shouldn't snap at her, but the pressure was mounting, and I could feel myself losing my grip.

I wanted to scream, to lash out, and to make her see how hard I was working. But I knew that wouldn't help anything. Instead, I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, savoring the warmth of her body in my arms. I knew I needed to find a way to make things work, to balance my work and my family. But it all felt so overwhelming.

As we talked, I could feel my mind racing. Trying to come up with a solution, trying to find a way to make everything work. But it all seemed impossible. I felt like I was drowning like I couldn't catch a break.

My body was tense, my muscles tight as I struggled to keep control. I could feel the sweat trickling down my back, my heart pounding in my chest. It was like I was trapped in my own body, unable to break free.

I wished I could be a better partner and father. I wished I could give Maya and Eli all the time they deserve. But it wasn't as simple as that. I had a responsibility to my company, employees, and shareholders, to make sure everything was running smoothly.

It was a delicate balance, and I felt like I was always teetering on the edge, especially now.

As Maya and I made our way to bed, I could feel the weight of it all settling back onto my shoulders. I knew I had to find a way to make this work, to find a way to keep everyone happy. But for now, all I could do was take a deep breath, square my shoulders, and get back to work.



Maya

As I sat at my desk, pouring over legal documents and news articles, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed. It seemed like no matter how much I worked, I was no closer to clearing Jack's name. And to make matters worse, our relationship had become even more strained.

Jack had become withdrawn, barely speaking to me except to express his guilt and helplessness. I understood that he was going through a lot of stress, but I couldn't help feeling frustrated that he wasn't doing more to help himself. It should be going faster. He should know more about the inner workings of the company to find out where it wasn't working. He had tons of people working for him!

Our arguments had become more frequent, and the tension between us was palpable. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach, a tight knot that refused to loosen no matter how much I tried to relax.

But I knew that if we could find a way to make it through this time, we could make it through anything. This was a huge test for our new, present-day relationship and there was work to be done.

Deep down, I did know Jack was doing what needed to be done. He was under investigation now and had to follow procedures and protocols and just keep hoping they didn't find

anything. Keep hoping that no one in the company fucked up somewhere.

I had the freedom to hunt down leads and try to actively prove his innocence, even though it was feeling like a futile effort.

But I was determined. We'd win this battle and then we'd live happily ever after.

Chapter 29

JACK

Maya's voice startled me out of my sleep early one morning. I groggily rubbed my eyes, trying to shake off the drowsiness. I had stayed up late the night before, trying to piece together the many puzzle pieces that all seemed to be making a different picture. My eyes flickered to the alarm clock beside the bed, and I saw that it was only six a.m. What could be so important at this hour?

"I've got it! I know who set you up," Maya exclaimed, her voice laced with urgency. I immediately sat up, my heart racing with anticipation. She looked frantic, bent over the laptop and typing away furiously, but when she turned to me, she had a glimmer of a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes.

"We can fix everything! Jack, we can save your company."

I could feel the weight of the world lifting off my shoulders. For months, I had been hounded by allegations of embezzlement and fraud. I had denied the charges, but they stuck, and our reputation had taken a massive hit. Our

investors had pulled out, and if things continued like this, we would soon be on the verge of bankruptcy.

“Who is it?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

“It turns out that this man,” she turned the laptop toward me, “Senator John Summer is responsible for the story about your company embezzling customers’ money. He paid off the execs of TRA news and the fake witnesses. But why...?”

My blood ran cold when I heard the name, and I felt a tingle in my hands when I saw the asshole’s face. I knew John Summer. He was a powerful senator, with connections that reached the White House. He had been a thorn in my side for years, trying to muscle in on my company’s assets. He was a thorn, but also one that I had to work with to lobby the government for favorable tax breaks as we were developing new products. He would always try to get some kickbacks for help, especially in the beginning, but that’s not how I work.

“It’s been a feud for years. He’s bitter about some things that happened back when I was starting up MonTech. It’s all so far in the past, I can’t believe he’d come at us *now*. But, that’s also his style. He never forgets anything and he just lies in the weeds and waits for an opportunity to strike.”

“How did you find out?” I asked Maya.

“I maybe shouldn’t tell you. It’s not quite on the up and up. Brielle knows a hacker,” Maya replied, shrugging her shoulders. “She managed to get access to the senator’s emails and found a trail of payments to the TRA executives.”

I sat back down on the bed, feeling numb. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together. But what could we do? John Summer was a powerful man, and he had friends in high places. I could feel the anger boil over. The audacity of the man!

I puffed with disbelief, then chuckled silently to myself as I shook my head.

Maya looked confused. “What? What are you laughing about?”

“It’s just ironic. I invite him to everything, am nice to him whenever I can, but it’s really the devil you know. Like the company gala, I invited him and his entire family. He just brought his daughter – you might have seen her. Quite a striking redhead, but I get the feeling she’s as spoiled as they come.”

Something clicked in Maya’s eyes, like she had a realization.

Now I felt it was my turn to ask her what was up. “Something changed in your eyes. What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just that I did see her and now this kind of makes sense. I would say that your feeling about her is very correct.”

“Well, honestly, I can hardly believe this. Part of me just wants to rip him apart. But I know that’s not going to help anything.

Maya could see the rage in my eyes, and she tried to calm me down.

“Jack, please don’t do anything rash. We need to think this through carefully.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. She was right. We needed to be smart about this. I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. I needed to plan my next move carefully.

“I won’t do anything rash,” I said finally. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t get someone to tank his campaign, this time with real evidence of wrongdoing.”

Maya looked at me, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Are you serious? You’re going to take on a senator? Do you know how risky that is?”

I smiled at her.

“Risk has always been a part of our business, Maya. And I won’t be doing this alone. I’ll gather all the evidence I can and present it to the right people. We’ll make sure he pays for what he’s done to our company.”

Maya nodded, looking both impressed and worried.

“Okay, but you need to be careful. We don’t want to make any missteps.”

“I know. I’ll be careful,” I promised, standing up from the bed. “I’m going to start gathering everything I need. I’m going to take down the honorable John Summer.” I did air quotes when I said, “honorable”.

Maya stood too.

“I’m going to start working on the article. I’ll need buy-in on the top for this one. You be careful.”

I drew Maya in for a kiss.

“Oh, I will.”

Chapter 30

Maya

I sat nervously in the conference room on the top floor of the TRA news building, my hands clasped tightly together in my lap. I took deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart as I waited for the meeting to start. It had taken me weeks of hard work, long hours of research, and investigation to finally gather enough evidence to clear Jack's name. I had poured over legal documents, interviewed witnesses, and followed leads that led me to the truth. And now, I was about to present all of it to the news outlet that had accused Jack of a crime he didn't commit.

As I waited, my mind raced with doubts and fears. What if the evidence wasn't enough? What if they didn't believe me? What if Jack still left me, now that his problems were over? I couldn't shake the feeling that I was doing all of this for nothing, that it wouldn't make a difference in the end. But I knew that I had to try, for Jack's sake and my own peace of mind.

Finally, the door opened, and the editor walked in, followed by a few other people who I assumed to be reporters. I stood up to greet them, feeling a sudden surge of adrenaline as I prepared to make my case.

"Ms. Davies, thank you for coming," the editor said, shaking my hand. "We're eager to hear what you've discovered."

“Thank you,” I said. Even though I felt nervous, my voice rang clearly. “Before we start, for the sake of transparency, the objective of this meeting is to allow your company to be the first to admit you were wrong. If you choose not to believe me, the very second I leave this room, I will have an article up—with evidence—that you collaborated with someone to undermine MonTech in your article.”

The editor, a tall man who looked to be about forty years old scoffed.

“You have no evidence of any wrongdoing on our part.”

“We’ll see. Just listen to what I have to say before you make your conclusion.”

I took a deep breath and began to present my evidence. I laid out the timeline of events, the witness statements that contradicted the accusations, and the legal documents that proved Jack’s innocence. As I spoke, I could feel my confidence growing, my words becoming more forceful and passionate. I knew that what I had found was the truth, and I was determined to make sure that everyone knew it.

I finished with, “I look forward to seeing the public retraction and apology to Mr. Monroe on tonight’s 6pm news. If it is not there, I will be issuing my article the moment the broadcast is over.” There was a long moment of silence as the journalists processed what I had said. Then, the editor spoke up.

“Ms. Davies, we appreciate the work you’ve done on this case. It’s clear that you’ve put in a lot of effort to gather this

evidence, and we take your accusations seriously. We'll be retracting our previous statements and issuing an apology to Mr. Monroe, immediately. It will be published and reported as soon as possible and we will include it in tonight's primetime broadcast."

There were murmurs and the editor started doling out tasks to the people present.

I felt a sudden wave of relief wash over me. I had done it. I had cleared Jack's name and proven his innocence. I couldn't help but smile, feeling a sense of accomplishment and pride in myself. But I couldn't show it. Yet.

As everyone began to file out of the room, I turned to the editor.

"Thank you," I said, my voice as confident as I had ever heard it. "Thank you for listening to me and for giving me the chance to clear Mr. Monroe's name."

The editor nodded, a small smile on his face.

"You did good work, Ms. Davies," he said. "I hope this brings some closure to you and Mr. Monroe. You've given us a way out that won't damage the company or the man we won't name, and for that, I'm grateful. If you ever find yourself needing employment, please look me up." He handed me his business card.

I gratefully accepted the compliment, took his cards and shook his hand. As I turned to collect my belongings, I felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes. Jack didn't deserve the

accusations that had been thrown at him. But even as I felt a sense of triumph, I couldn't help but feel a lingering sense of doubt and fear. What if this wasn't enough to make things right? What if Jack still didn't trust me, still didn't want to be with me after I had helped him clear his name and reputation? Matters of the heart were far different than just doing nice things for other people. That was something I knew.

As I walked out of the TRA building, my mind was filled with questions and doubts. I didn't know what the future held for Jack and me, but I knew that I had done all I could to make things right.

I settled myself into my car and allowed myself a moment. All the tension had built up and taken its toll. I closed my eyes and just allowed my heart to return to its normal pace. The past few weeks, or had it been months, I don't know, they all blurred into one. We had fallen into a vortex of fear, confusion and it felt like the world was on our shoulders. Now, for the very first time in a long time, everything was sliding off.

It felt so good.



When I got home, I found Jack at the kitchen table, working on his computer. As soon as he saw me, he stood up and walked over, his eyes searching my face.

“Did it work?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nodded, tears threatening to spill over.

“Yes, it worked. They’re retracting their accusations and issuing an apology.”

Jack’s face broke into a huge smile, relief flooding his features.

“Thank God,” he said, pulling me into a tight embrace. “I don’t know how to thank you, Maya. You saved the company and my reputation. I’m forever thankful.”

I felt myself relax into the hug, feeling a sense of warmth and comfort in Jack’s embrace. But even as I felt his arms around me, I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling of doubt and fear that still lingered in my mind.

“Jack,” I said, pulling away from him slightly. “What happens now?”

Jack looked at me, confusion written on his face.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, now that the accusations have been retracted, what happens to us? Are we okay? Can we trust each other again?”

Jack’s smile faltered slightly, and he looked down at his feet. I could see the pain and regret in his eyes, and my heart broke for him.

“I love you, Maya. I always will.”

I felt a tear slide down my cheek as I looked into Jack’s eyes, seeing the sincerity and love in his gaze. I knew that I still had doubts and fears, but I also knew that I loved Jack

more than anything in the world. And I wanted to believe him, to trust that he meant what he said.

“I love you too, Jack,” I said, taking his hand in mine. “I think we have a lot of work rebuilding ahead of us, but be patient with me and I know we’ll get there.”

Jack nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. “I’ll be patient, and I’ll work with you. Please do the same for me. We’ll get there together.”

As we sat together on the couch, holding hands and watching the news, for the first time in a long time, I felt like everything was going to be okay.

Chapter 31

JACK

I almost couldn't believe it. Maya loved me. After all we had been through, the hurt we had caused each other, we finally admitted our feelings. It was like a weight had been lifted off my chest.

As Maya and I sat on the couch, our hands intertwined, I couldn't help but feel a wave of happiness wash over me. I looked over at her, taking in her beauty. Her eyes sparkled in the dim light, and her smile was contagious.

"I'm sorry for everything that happened between us, Jack," Maya said, breaking the silence. "I never meant to hurt you."

I squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry too, Maya. It's all in the past now, though. You're stuck with me."

We sat in silence for a few moments, basking in the relief of finally admitting our love for each other. It was a feeling I never wanted to end.

Maya stood up, pulling me with her.

“This was a big day, Jack. Eli is with my parents tonight and so we should go out and celebrate.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“But,” she continued, “I want to make sure TRA makes good on their promise.” She pulled out her phone to look up the TRA website. We stood shoulder to shoulder to take a look. There it was: “MonTech Cleared of All Wrongdoing”, detailing how TRA apologized for compromised reporting practices. A second article, “TRA Apologizes to MonTech CEO, Jack Monroe.”

With tears in her eyes, she exclaimed, “Well, there it is... all wrapped up in a nice bow.”

While Maya went to get dressed, we put the 6pm news on and enjoyed listening to the segment repeating the same apologies to MonTech. In the meantime, I made a few phone calls and planned a perfect night.

I picked a restaurant that was owned by a friend of mine, so it wasn’t an issue getting him to arrange the things I wanted.

There was only one catch; I asked Maya to wear jeans, and I did too.

As I helped her put on her coat, I couldn’t help but feel nervous. My pocket felt heavier than it was supposed to, but I said nothing and led her to the car.

After a short, silent drive, we were there, and when Maya’s eyes widened at the name, I knew I did well.

“Yoon’s Place,” she whispered. I laughed when she started to panic about what we were wearing, and I told her not to worry.

“I needed you in jeans so I could keep staring at your ass,” I said, and she swatted my arm.

As we walked into the restaurant, I couldn’t help but notice the stares we were getting. Maya looked stunning, as always, but we were both dressed casually, a contrast to the other diners, who were all dressed up in suits and dresses. But it didn’t matter. Maya was here with me, and that was all I cared about.

The restaurant was beautiful, with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and a grand piano in the corner. We were shown to our table, which was right in the middle of the restaurant. As we sat down, I could feel my heart racing. This was an important night for me. I didn’t want to mess it up.

The waiter came over and handed us the menu, but I didn’t need to look at it. I had already ordered Maya’s favorite dish, and I knew she would love it. As we waited for our food, we talked about taking Eli out to celebrate the next day, and how I was going to handle John Summer and everything he had done.

Maya wanted me to expose him in the media, but I wanted to let sleeping dogs lie. There was no need, especially seeing as the company’s stock price was going higher and higher, already doubled in just a few hours. Even though it had a ways to go, it was a great start and showed the confidence that the

market had in our company and even, if I could be so bold to extrapolate, in me.

When our food arrived, Maya's eyes lit up. "How did you know this was my favorite?" she asked, taking a bite of the pasta.

"I did my research," I joked, happy to see her enjoying herself.

After we finished our meal, the waiter brought over a bottle of wine. I poured us each a glass, and we toasted to the perfect night. As we sipped our wine, the piano player started playing a slow song, and I knew it was my chance to ask Maya to dance.

"Would you like to dance?" I asked, holding out my hand.

Maya hesitated for a moment, but then she took my hand, and we made our way to the dance floor. As we swayed to the music, I could feel how her body perfectly fit into mine, and I knew that I never wanted to let her go.

All the while, I had something I wanted to tell her, but I decided not to. We had the whole night anyway, and I knew she wasn't much of a public person. I didn't want to ruin the perfect moment by saying or doing the wrong thing.

As the night wore on, we danced to song after song, and I could hear Catherine's voice in my head telling me to just let go. Let go and allow myself to feel how it feels to be in love. Maya was perfect in every way, and I knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

Hours later, we found ourselves back at Maya's house. She led me to her bedroom, and we both managed to get into our pajamas before we collapsed on the bed, exhausted from our night out.

Lying there next to her, I couldn't help but feel grateful for everything that had brought us to this moment. All the pain and heartache we had gone through, separately and together, had led us here, to this moment of pure happiness.

I turned to Maya, taking in her beauty once again. "Maya, I love you. I can't imagine my life without you in it."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked back at me. "I love you too, Jack. I never want to lose you."

I sat up, reaching for something in my pocket. Maya looked at me curiously as I took out a small box.

"Maya, will you marry me?" I asked, holding out the box.

Her eyes widened dramatically as she opened the box. Inside the velvet ring box wasn't a ring. In place of a ring was a blue button.

Maya gasped.

"Jack! How did you get this? I thought I lost it!"

"Let's just say, someone who cares about both of us, gave it to me and said she'd really like me to return it, but at a time that worked for me." I paused. "You were somehow always going to be in my future, Maya. We just didn't know how or when, but I'm so grateful for every day we have from now on. You, me and Eli. I'm the luckiest man in the world."

“Oh, Jack!” as she caught me a kiss.

I broke the kiss, laughing, “So? Don’t keep me in suspense! Will you marry me?”

“Yes, Jack!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around me. “Of course, I will!”

We wrapped each other up in our arms and passionately kissed, sinking into each other and feeling like this was the most right thing to happen in our lives.

“Okay...so then I should really give you this.” I leaned and grabbed another little box from the nightstand.

She gasped again when she saw the glittering, vintage-inspired diamond ring.

“Jack!” she said in wonderment. “This is too much.”

“Nothing is too much for you, Maya.”

As we lay there in each other’s arms, Maya admiring the shining diamond and holding the button tight, I knew that this was the start of something amazing. We could regret all the pain we experienced in the past, but, at the same time, we had both grown and learned so much from our past mistakes, and we were ready to move forward together.

“See, no socks,” I whispered, tickling her bare foot with mine. “I told you back in Crested Butte that I’d knock your socks off when I proposed.”

Maya cracked up laughing but sobered when I kissed her.

I think she knew where this was going because she wrapped her legs around me and deepened the kiss.



Maya

I couldn't believe what just happened. The button. The ring. It was too much. So now it was time for me to show him that this was it. This was so right. I put the button on my bedside table and turned to dreamily look into Jack's eyes. God, he was so fucking gorgeous. Inside and out. But right now, I wanted us to create some magic on the outside.

I pulled Jack in as close as I could, and without another word between us, our lips met. The kiss was slow and passionate, both of us taking our time, light touches were the only indicators of the passion that flowed beneath the surface. His hands moved down my body, exploring the curves of my breasts through the fabric of my pajamas, then cupping my butt in his hands. He gave them a playful squeeze, and I gasped into the kiss, nipping on his lips.

He pulled his lips from mine just to bite me on the neck.

"That wasn't fair," I laughed, my laugh changing to a moan the next second when his tongue soothed the pain in my neck.

Jack smiled at me, a cocky little grin. "Who says I want it to be fair?"

When he eased his hands beneath my top and fondled one breast, the feel of his warm skin against my skin made me moan loudly into his mouth, which was open and ready for mine. He continued to explore and I felt my heart beat faster. I

wanted to give him as much happiness as he had given me tonight, even if it was only for a moment. I tried pulling away, moving my hands to the waistband of his pants, but he kept me in place.

“No, you’re not doing anything yet. I haven’t said a proper thank you for agreeing to marry me.”

He kissed my neck again, and a huge sigh escaped my lips before I could stop myself. Then he took his time stripping away every layer of clothing until I was naked before him. I wasn’t just naked, I was bare to him, my breasts heaving with the force of my breaths. I felt like air couldn’t enter my lungs fast enough, and with the way he looked at me like he was a little kid who got what he wanted for Christmas, I wanted him to take everything he wanted.

I was willing to give him everything. I had always been willing.

I shivered as his hands moved, exploring my body. His touch was light and teasing, sending waves of pleasure through me. I felt my entire body tingle with pleasure as he teased me with his mouth, playing with my ears, licking the sweet spot just under my ear lobe, running his lips down the column of my neck, but his hands never strayed to the one place I needed them the most.

I could feel my nipples harden, transmitting a combination of pain and pleasure to my center. I could feel my muscles tensing and my breath quickening, and I knew I was getting lost in the moment.

If he didn't touch me properly, I was going to take matters into my own hands.

He moved away from me, just to strip down till he was as bare as I was and I felt a wave of desire wash through me.

Jack was always a beautiful man. That was one thing I was sure of, but the man that stood before me was breathtaking.

He was mine, I thought, licking my lips as he got on the bed and hovered over me. *He was all mine*.

He showed me he was mine with every kiss, with every caress that came next.

He showed me he was mine with how he told—no, *ordered*—me to stay quiet and let him do what he wants.

Right before he went down on me like the sunset.

He weaved his arms under my legs, scooting my bottom toward him while licking my wetness until I was a quivering mess. I moaned, feeling his tongue and teeth nip and suck until I was lost in the orgasm that swept through me in huge, uncontrollable waves.

After I brought my head back from the clouds, I asked him to lay back and let me do my thing too.

His eyes were heavy-lidded in pleasure as he did what I asked. He gave me a naughty grin and slapped my ass, and I thought he was the most beautiful man on the planet at that moment.

I positioned myself between his thighs and began to take his considerable length into my mouth. He wrapped his fingers gently into my hair and started pulsing his hips upward and into my lips. I licked my hot, swollen lips to keep them completely slick and then bent farther over him.

I glanced up for a second to see his face, and it was slack with the passion that raced through him.

Jack groaned as I gently, but dangerously, raked my teeth over his sensitive skin. He lay back completely and put his muscular arms behind his head, relaxing his body for what he knew was to come. I knew the way he liked it, so I ignored my gag reflex and took him deep into my throat, over and over. Jack shuddered and groaned, wrapping his fingers with thick locks of my hair and holding me down on him. When he hit the back of my throat, he shook and shuddered. He gasped, “Baby, I’m coming!”, and he whipped me around and plunged into me. The next thing I knew, he was releasing wave after wave of sticky pleasure, collapsing on me, as we both collapsed onto the bed. When he was panting with the release, I twisted my body and kissed him gently as his ragged breaths slowed.

But it wasn’t over. His body continued to press against mine. His hardness had returned with surprising speed; my body trembled with anticipation. He started to grind me from behind and I heard his breath start to deepen and quicken. My body responded in kind and I started to get tingles and desire started to take root yet again. When he moved on top of me, hot and as ready for me as I was for him, I wrapped my legs

around his waist. Jack entered me slowly, his movements steady and deliberate. I looked into his eyes and saw the raw emotion there, and I knew he was feeling the same thing I felt.

He claimed me, took me in every way he possibly could, and then some, and while the tingling sensation in my center turned into a massive wave, I could feel him getting closer and closer to the edge.

With every breath I took, even as he filled me up and I felt my heart swell, with every moment I called his name and he called mine, I claimed him as he marked me.

And when he tipped me over the edge and plunged right after, I knew I was his.

Time seemed to stand still as we lay there together, lost in each other. I felt like I was in a dream, and I never wanted it to end. Eventually, though, he pulled away, kissing me too chaste for what we just did, and looked into my eyes.

And the openness I saw there made me cry.

He kissed the tears away, too.

Epilogue

JACK

I was at the edge of the beach, the saltwater wind brushing through my hair. The sun was setting in a kaleidoscope of colors that reflected off the ocean waves. I sat on a blanket, watching Eli play in the water. I couldn't help but smile as I watched my son splash around in the waves, his laughter echoing through the beach. It was moments like this that made me realize how lucky I was to have a family like mine.

As I gazed out at the endless blue expanse of the ocean, my thoughts drifted back to my wedding day. Maya and I had tied the knot in a small ceremony at our Tampa beach house, with only our families in attendance. Besides sealing the deal, my big win had been the teasing look in Maya's dad's eye as he gave me Maya's hand. We had grown closer over the past few months and it really felt that he fully accepted me now. It had been a beautiful day, filled with love and laughter.

It was hard to believe that after our months of feeling despair and hopelessness, everything had changed. I had quietly given the old senator his dues. The fact that he wasn't

seeking re-election after our “friendly” discussion was enough for me. To be rid of such corruption was really a benefit to everyone. Although I said nothing to Maya, I think she knew though. The woman knew everything.

Perks of having an ex-journalist as a wife.

Maya was happier now and had started a freelance writing business after quitting her job. She had told me that even though I was a billionaire and could easily provide everything for her and Eli, she still had things she wanted to do. I didn’t argue because I knew that happiness was more than money. All I wanted was for Maya and Eli to be happy.

As I watched Eli, a wave of love and gratitude washed over me. I was so lucky to have such a wonderful wife and son. And now, we were going to have another child. A daughter. Maya was five months along, and the news filled me with a sense of joy and wonder.

As I sat there on the blanket, my heart felt like it would burst with the pressure of so many positive emotions, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Maya standing beside me, her eyes looking particularly radiant in the light of the sun, and she had a small smile on her face.

“Hey, you,” she said softly, sitting down next to me on the blanket. “What are you thinking about?”

I smiled at her, taking her hand in mine. “Just how lucky I am,” I said. “To have you and Eli and now, a second one on the way.”

Maya's face lit up, and she leaned in to kiss me. "I feel the same way," she said. "I never thought I could be this happy."

We sat there for a while longer, watching Eli play in the water and enjoying each other's company. I felt a sense of peace settle over me, knowing that no matter what the future held, I had my family by my side.

As the sun began to set, we packed up our things and headed back to our beach house. Maya cooked a delicious dinner, and we sat down to eat as a family. I felt a sense of contentment wash over me as I watched Maya and Eli interact, their laughter filling the room.

After dinner, Maya put Eli to bed, and I waited for her in the living room. When she came back, she sat down next to me on the couch, her hand resting on her growing belly.

"I can't wait to meet her," I said, rubbing my hand over her stomach. "I already love her so much."

Maya smiled, leaning her head on my shoulder. "I know," she said. "And I love you for that."

We sat there in silence for a few moments, enjoying the quiet of the house. I was finally at peace for the first time in a long while, knowing that I had finally healed from the ghosts of my past and was looking forward to the future with my family.

As we got ready for bed, I held Maya close, feeling the warmth of her body against mine. I knew that no matter what

the future held, as long as I had her and our children, I would be happy.

I knew that I had found what I had been searching for my entire life.

A family of my own.



If you loved this book, make sure you've read the other books in the Billionaire Keepers series! But I know that you'll also love Aimee's recent Grumpy Boss Series. Why not start with the first book in that series, Nanny for the Grumpy CEO. Read the first chapter now!

Nanny for the Grumpy CEO

Never fall for a rich, grumpy billionaire.

No, literally, we collided in the park, and I fell right into his sculpted biceps.

I've never been so turned on by someone so arrogant.

Yet, there I am falling for the city's most eligible single dad.

To make this story even more cliché, he asked me to be his new nanny.

I know... cute submissive nanny falls for hot billionaire with abs.

I thought it was stupid too, but I have a mother with health issues and money doesn't fall from trees.

That's ok, I can totally keep it professional.

Even when he walks through the hall shirtless.

Even when his hand accidentally brushes against mine.

Self-control is my middle name.

Until I see him swinging around his little girl.

Tending to her every need.

Well, sh\$t, stick a fork in my heart 'cause I'm done.

Keep it together, girl. Your mother needs you.

But wait, his company does medical research?

Nanny for the Grumpy CEO

CHAPTER 1 - TROY

Pavement, grass, or a cobblestoned path of broken hearts, it didn't matter what the ground beneath my feet was; I conquered the obstacle and made it to the top. The echo of the beat from Imagine Dragons', "On Top of the World", kept time against my eardrums through the tiny speakers in my ears. The rhythm was fuel for my fire: I was at the top of my game, and it felt fucking good.

I didn't need the reminder. I knew who I was. I knew what I was.

But as the wind floated across my skin and my feet moved across the concrete, keeping pace with my steady breaths, I knew I was untouchable. There was no one on my heels, no one who could keep up—I had nothing more to contend with than my shadow and the air I cut through.

Running was my way of escaping from the troubles I couldn't see and helped bring me back to what was important. Blazing through paths on lonesome hour-long jogs was an

escape like no other. I was beyond capture, by anything or anyone.

To blend in, I wore black; black athletic tank, black shorts, black hat—the one concession to my need to stand apart from the crowd was the pair of red running shoes that softly landed on the ground with each stride.

A movement caught my eye just to my left, a hand waving in my direction. I silently cursed, thinking I had been recognized. I knew this hat wasn't enough to completely shield my face. I saw a couple of young women standing next to a bench, talking animatedly with each other. My face softened, and I chuckled quietly as I took in their excitement. I had half a mind to stop for a moment, the woman on the left with the jet-black hair capturing my attention. The three or so buttons undone on her shirt left little to imagination about her chest despite the red jacket she wore.

I was a beat away from slowing my run when I suddenly crashed into an unknown body. We both went tumbling off the path and onto the grass.

“What the hell?” I snapped, pulling out my earbuds, completely caught off guard by being taken down so easily.

“Hey!” a distinctively feminine voice shouted in my direction. I looked over and large, brown, very unhappy eyes were burning in my direction. She snapped her gaze away as she smoothed her hand over her long, brown ponytail before getting up and starting to walk away.

“What’s wrong with you?” I yelled, standing up and shaking away the stunned feeling. “Couldn’t you watch where you were going?” Anger and upset were clear in my voice and part of me expected her to just keep going and avoid fighting with a stranger in the middle of the park.

But she surprised me—again—and whipped back around, her ponytail catching in the breeze the force of her movement created.

“What’s wrong with *me*?” she shot back, and I could feel the sparks of anger from her eyes shooting between the small distance between us. “What’s wrong with *you*? You ran right into me because you weren’t looking. Who runs like that in the middle of a busy park? You’re not the only one here, you know.”

“Are you serious right now?” I couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped my lips, and it was clearly the exact wrong thing to do, because her posture hardened and her scowl somehow deepened. Still, I couldn’t ignore how beautiful her face was, even if she was losing her shit. And to be honest, it was a rare occurrence these days for someone to be outwardly angry at me.

“Do I look like I think this is funny? Would I find it funny to be bowled over in the middle of the park by some self-absorbed asshole as I’m just minding my own business?” She looked at her elbow and brushed something away. I tried to do a quick scan to see if she was hurt, but every inch of her

visible skin in her shorts and sleeveless top looked perfect. “I could have been hurt.”

“That’s what you wanted though, right? I’m only sorry your plan failed.” I shook my head, realizing that this was what she wanted the whole time.

“Excuse me?” she bit out, her voice full of venom.

“Run into me and make claims, get me on the hook for some silly shit?”

Her face contorted, “What?”

“You heard me? Is this some paparazzi stunt?”

The woman scoffed again, shock in her eyes at the incredulity.

“Unbelievable,” she brushed herself off, pulled herself together and walked past me, almost brushing my shoulder.

I turned, about to call her out for bolting, only to hold my tongue as she hurried toward a little blonde boy who got up from the grass. She went to a squat to be face level with the boy and the kid smiled as she brushed his cheek and then his hair with her hand. I swallowed the words trapped in my throat.

I looked past the young woman and the boy and turned back toward the direction I was running. The woman who had initially caught my attention and essentially caused the crash and unfortunate situation, was now joined by a man. As they hugged and shared a more-than-friendly kiss, a fluster rose on my face, realizing the last five minutes was in vain. I put my

earbuds back in and continued my run, glancing back only once in the direction of the pony-tailed woman and boy. I couldn't get her fiery eyes out of my mind.

Perhaps it was the hat, but I couldn't really blame the accessory for doing what I wore it for. Attention was great and truthfully, I basked in people's praise and adoration. But I preferred to be able to control the attention and only get it when I wanted it. It was one of the perks of being on top—having eyes recognize me anywhere. It wasn't the sole reason why I loved being at the top, but I couldn't deny the fact that it felt strange to realize an encounter with me was insignificant for a woman. It was an unusual experience for me these days.

I didn't know what was throwing me off my game more—the utter disinterest of the woman or the fact that I hadn't been the subject of attention in that short moment. Either way, I found myself lingering by a bench just a few yards away from the spot of the collision less than thirty minutes ago. I placed my right leg on the bench, lacing back up my loose shoe and gazed across the park. It was a nice day and a lot of people were taking the opportunity to soak up some sun, but the only people I noticed were her and the boy.

He giggled as she clapped softly while pushing him on the swing. He threw back his blonde hair as the swing lifted him into the air. The little boy clearly enjoyed that feeling of flying and let out a long, high-pitched laugh every time the petite woman with the beautiful brown eyes nudged the swing.

Even from this distance and the brief encounter, it was clear that this little boy loved this woman more than anything in the world. He trusted her to keep him safe while he enjoyed the feeling of freedom and weightlessness in the swing. And for her part, she seemed fascinated by his laughter and there was obvious love and care in the protective way she scanned around them, making sure she kept up her end of the safety bargain.

Not for the first time, I wished I could find that kind of love for my Stella. She deserved more than just me.

I felt my phone buzz against my thigh in my pocket, startling me back to attention. I turned around to look away from the woman and boy and unzipped the pocket, pulling it up to my ear.

“Yes?”

“Where are you?”

“Out for air. What’s up?”

I answered to the voice of my best friend on the other end of the line. His voice was calm but cautious and I dropped my leg from the bench, knowing my moment alone was over.

“You need to get back to the house.”

“Why, what is it?”

“You’re on the news again.”

I scoffed, “When am I not on the news, Bing?”

“Just get back here, Troy.”

I ended the call, glanced once more at the object of my attention. The swing slowed and the woman stopped it but the smile on the child's face had clearly not been affected and the image would stay with me as I turned away and continued my jog.



“There had better be some good reason why you interrupted my routine, Bing,” I said as I walked to the refrigerator, pulled out the pitcher of cold water and poured it into the glass waiting on the counter. I took a long gulp, waiting for Bing to tell me what was going on.

The jaw on his angular face was set hard, and his mouth formed a tight line. It wasn't completely unusual for Bing. He typically looked intimidating; it was his brand. Letting out a sigh, he ran a hand through his black buzz cut and walked over, sliding the tablet he was holding across the stone countertop.

“What?”

“I have no idea how they keep doing it,” Bing said, his worried expression pulling his dark brows close together. “But they seem to be *very* good at their job.”

My jaw flexed as I scanned the headline. My eyes caught on images of myself and several other women, and the meaningless content. I scoffed as I pushed the tablet away.

“They could have asked for a better photo. I really don’t like that one.”

“Seriously?” Bing’s dark eyes shot daggers through me, frustrated that I was missing the point.

“What?” I asked, feigning nonchalance. This really was getting annoying.

Bing shook his head as he grabbed a glass from the cabinet and poured from the water pitcher I had left on the counter. I was trying to show patience but was slowly losing it—I really wanted Bing’s thoughts.

“What?” I repeated, my voice snapping, impatience thinly veiled this time.

“What?” Bing mocked. I was really tiring of this word. “Are you really going to pretend you don’t see how that article doesn’t do you any favors?” He waved in the general direction of the tablet, clearly frustrated with me now.

I glanced at the tablet and kept my grimace hidden.

“So some tabloid’s spewing about me for clicks. Again. Am I supposed to get riled by every little piece of gossip about me?”

“Considering the fact that this is the third one in the last week, I would say it’s more than enough reason for you to take it seriously, Troy.”

“Exactly—it’s the third one in the last week, and there’s a chance some other blog’s going to post something else about me before the day’s over. I’m not worrying myself about this,

Bing, and frankly, I don't think you should either. If anything, it's even more publicity and we all know there's no such thing as bad publicity."

Bing calmly took a sip of water, clearly trying to think over his next words.

"No," he finally said, a little quietly but gathered strength. "No. No. This kind of noise is getting way too distracting, Troy. There was a time when it might have been cool and frankly it would've been another star on your shoulder, but this is not some hot twenty-something bachelor exploring his options. You're older now. They're dissecting your trysts with all these women and saying you're merely taking advantage—"

"Oh, come on. That's bullshit and everyone knows it. It's not as if I did anything wrong with any of them—we had fun, and it didn't work out. But it was completely consensual, and everyone had a good time."

"Maybe, but I bet what's going to draw attention for everyone that reads that article is the fact that you can't seem to keep a woman—which is the clickbait."

"And since when am I supposed to care what the fuck they think of my personal life?"

"Since you still have a career, Troy. Believe it or not, this is not as entertaining as you think. It's not a great look and could end up doing more harm than good."

I put my glass in the sink as I walked away, "I'm not going to let some idiots who only want clicks determine how I'm

going to live my life, Bing. Haven't done that before and I don't plan on starting now."

Bing sat his half-empty glass on the counter as he turned to follow me, sighing, "You're not going to listen, are you?"

"There's nothing there, Bing. Frankly I'm disappointed that this is why you had me cut my run short. A freaking tabloid post?"

Bing stared at me, and we both glanced at the stairs as my mom, Tessa, gently made her way down, her granddaughter in her arms.

"At the very least can you try to be a little more discrete from now on?"

"Why?"

"Jesus," Bing scrubbed his face in frustration.

"Am I supposed to just disappear into a cave now? I wanted to get this far so I could live my life exactly as I chose."

Bing put his hands up in surrender.

"I'm just suggesting that you not try to make things so difficult."

"I still don't get why I should care what anyone says."

I smiled as I turned away from Bing, lowering myself to pick up Stella.

"Hey sweetheart," I said as she barreled into me. Stella hugged fiercely and it only made me wish she had more people in her life.

“Hi, Daddy,” she said into my shoulder, her arms squeezing around my neck.

“Did you have fun with Grandma?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding enthusiastically with a big smile on her face. I kissed her on the cheek and she giggled as I gently tickled her. She kissed my nose before hurrying away from me toward the couch where my mom had put a cartoon on the big screen.

“For one, you can think about her,” my mother said softly, clearly wanting to add her opinion to the mix.

“What are you talking about?” I asked incredulously.

“If you don’t care about yourself and feel like you have all the time in the world to fool around, think about that baby.”

I scoffed, “Like there’s ever a time I don’t think about her.”

“Then show it, because it doesn’t quite seem like you are.”

“I’m not talking to you about this, Mom.”

She looked over toward the child who was settled into the couch, laughing at the show on TV, totally oblivious to anything around her.

“You need to find a woman, Troy. A true partner. You need to settle down, if not for yourself, for her,” she said, angling her head toward the couch. “Stella needs that. She needs that stability in her life. As a mother, I know that more than anyone else.”

“I don’t have to get married to get my daughter stability, Mother.”

“Maybe, but you don’t know what it means to a young girl that –”

“Mom, please,” I interrupted. “My kid is fine. I’m fine. We’re fine the way we are,” I said, looking from my mother to my daughter and then back at Mom. “I’m not going to let anyone decide for me how to live my life. I know you love me but please. It’s not happening.”

I glanced at Bing. “We’re done talking about this. I need to wash up,” he said as I stepped away.

“Is there a chance he’s going to change his mind?” I heard Bing ask as I walked up the stairs.

“Not on his own,” my mom softly replied.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to release the tension.



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xo