



MY  
STORY  
OF  
US

GRAYSON

STORY  
OF  
US  
#3

CHRIS BRINKLEY

# MY STORY OF US: GRAYSON

Story of Us Series Book #3

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CHRIS BRINKLEY

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## Chapter One

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It begins with a single thought. Just words put together to create an idea, a message. Harmless until the thought comes alive and stares me in the face as I retreat. I back down and cower in the corner.

Then I feel myself breathing. I make myself breathe. Pull air into my lungs. Push air out of my lungs. Something that just minutes ago, automatic and effortless, becomes strained and confusing. How do I breathe in? How do I breathe out?

The world gets louder, like a television whose remote control has been hacked and someone else, someone cruel and sinister, someone who hates me, is controlling the volume. The noise goes up, splattered and bouncing off the walls around me.

I sweat. From my chest and under my arms. From my forehead and palms. The salty liquid climbs out of my pores desperate to escape me. I feel myself begin to melt, dissolve, slowly becoming a puddle on the ground that will evaporate and vanish forever.

What do I do with my wet, sweaty hands? I don't recognize them anymore. Where do they go? In my pockets? To my sides? Behind me? My fingers don't look like my fingers anymore. Are they mine? Are they supposed to be attached to the ends of my hands, my arms, my shoulders? Or am I just imagining this? Am I real? Where am I? Who am I?

Please turn down the volume. Please! I can't hear myself anymore. I only hear everything else. Everything but me.

Please slow down, this is too fast. I feel nauseous. If I give in and throw up, I will explode. I will shatter into a million pieces and scatter all over the ground. I will be confetti at the end of something once celebrated only to be blown apart and tossed all over, never to be whole again. My body here. My mind there. Fragments of me everywhere.

Stop it. Stop thinking like this! About your breathing and the sweat. What is wrong with you? Why are you doing this to yourself?

I fight myself inside myself. I grab me and shake me, trying to shake the normal back into its place so that it is securely fastened into my core.

But inside I am shaking too. Vibrating like I'm strapped into an out-of-control two-dollar massage chair at the mall. I feel my teeth rattling and my insides breaking.

Except my body is not really moving. I am frozen, paralyzed. Move. Please move. The dissonance is suffocating me.

I rock back and forth. Trying to find a steady rhythm that will put me back into alignment.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

The volume is slowly going down. I can hear myself again.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

I am here. I am back. I am going to be okay.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

I am tired, but I am okay. Whole. Together. I am still me.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

It is over, I survived.

Thank God I survived.

This is how it feels when it happens. This is how you found me, hiding in the storage room at Zach's wedding rehearsal.

Thank you for helping me. Thank you for helping me get through it.



## Chapter Two

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The person you found on the cold tiled floor of the storage room is not who I am. I hope you know that. You saw me in my weakest moment. Below rock bottom. I'm embarrassed. This is not how I want anyone to ever see me. It's not the real me.

It would be much easier to never see your face again. To pretend it never happened. To save me further embarrassment. To avoid your pity.

I was a mess. Shaking. Crying. Weak and crumpled. Rocking back and forth in the dark corner of a cluttered storage room on display for you to find. With no explanation, no reason for my unraveling. No understanding within myself.

If I had been drunk and you had found me on the bathroom floor of some late-night dive slurring my words with my head in a toilet, it would be okay. Or, if you had found me after a car accident, bloody, bruised, and incoherent, it would be okay. You would know that the pitiful person you were seeing was not really me. I would be seen as a person who couldn't control his appetite for alcohol. Or had been texting and run a red light. You would know that I could be fixed if I didn't devour as many whiskey shots on a drunken night. Or carelessly text while driving through city traffic. You would see through my lowest moment and still see me. You would know I was better than that.

When it happens, when I unravel, when it becomes bigger than me, I hide. I can't let anyone see me.

I have been hiding for a long time.

I have hidden in bathroom stalls, in janitor's closets, and on the floorboard of my truck. I have become a master at hiding. When I feel the thoughts begin to take over and I am nearing losing myself, I flee. No one has seen this side of me except you. Not my mom or brother. Not my closest friends.

Thank you for helping me get out of there so I wouldn't have to explain myself to everyone at the rehearsal dinner. Thank you for helping me escape.

When I arrived back at the hotel, I quickly made the room as dark as possible, hid my head under a pillow, and slept for several hours. I awoke unsure of my surroundings and completely unaware of the time. I squinted at the bright red numbers shining from the clock on the bedside table: 10:33 p.m. The events that led me here flooded back into my mind, and I immediately regretted missing Zach's wedding rehearsal.

I couldn't go back to sleep. I needed to move around, do something. I was rooming with Nathan, one of the other groomsmen, but he hadn't gotten back to the room yet. Nathan hadn't even unpacked his suitcase. He is quiet and elusive sometimes. Rooming with him is like being alone.

I took a long shower and tried to clear the frenetic thoughts jumping around in my head. After my shower, I flipped through the channels trying to find something that was interesting enough to take my mind off myself, but there was nothing on television that caught my attention. I settled on baseball. The Mets were playing the Cardinals. Seventh inning. Tie game.

I was drained after what happened. I couldn't focus. Hoping to be distracted by the ball game, instead my mind wandered. I noticed the crooked painting hanging on the wall, the dust in the heating and air-conditioning return vent, and a stain on the wall by the bathroom. The noise from the game began to irritate me. I turned the television off. Then the lights. I closed the outdated polyester hotel curtain tighter with the metal clip from a wooden hanger in the closet and made the room as dark as possible. The only light visible was sneaking through the

top of the curtain and hitting the ceiling in a thin diagonal pattern. Nathan would have to figure out how to navigate a dark room when he got here.

Lying in bed, I thought of ways to avoid you at the wedding. I planned and plotted, but kept hitting dead ends. I searched “ways to avoid people at a wedding.” The suggestions were terrible and all over the place. I was slowly beginning to realize that it would be impossible to avoid you tomorrow. I was performing a song, so I couldn’t bail out. I was also one of the groomsmen and you were a bridesmaid. You were paired with me. We would walk down the aisle together. It would be impossible to not come face-to-face with you. I would have to look you in the eye again.

In the dark hotel room, my phone lit up. A text. I didn’t recognize the number. I thought it was spam or something, then realized it was you. My mind scattered to a dozen different places. How did you get my number? Why were you texting me this late? Why would you text me after finding me broken?

Your text told me you had gotten my number from Zach. You said you were thinking about me and wanted to make sure I was okay.

I felt the smile appear on my face and my breathing slow as I read your words. Having no clue how to reply, I typed *thank you* and stared at my phone, looking for the courage to hit send. A few minutes passed with me sitting in bed staring at my screen. Texting you back tangled me up. What would I say? I wanted you to know that I truly appreciated you helping me. But I also never wanted to see you again because I was embarrassed. How could I say that in a text? I hit send. A simple thank-you. That would have to be enough.

But you deserved more.

So, I was honest. I told you that I had been asleep for the past several hours and was feeling better. I had been thinking about you too, conjuring ways to avoid you because I didn’t have the courage to look you in the eye after what had happened in the storage room. You had seen the worst of me, the part that no

one was ever supposed to witness. I hesitated, my phone in my hand, then hit send again.

That wasn't enough. I had too much to say, to try to explain. I craved your voice again.

So, I called you.

And we talked. For almost two hours.

After I stumbled and stammered for several minutes trying to explain to you what had happened before you found me, my embarrassment began to dissolve. I found comfort in knowing you were with me again. I changed the subject. Asked about you. You told me that you didn't live in Nashville, to which I tried my best to hide my disappointment. You told me about the rehearsal dinner, Thomas's best man speech, a bottle of Dom Pérignon, and a strawberry shortcake dessert that was served in little cast-iron skillets. When you said you struggled at the rehearsal because you were worried about me, I felt a mixture of sadness for being the cause and gratitude for being your focus.

We talked until after midnight. About all kinds of stuff. You made me laugh. You inspired me to think. You helped me relax. I missed being with you the moment we hung up.

This day did not go like I expected. I thought I would spend the night rehearsing my song for the wedding, hang out with friends, and prepare for Zach's big day. None of that happened the way it was supposed to go. I did not hang out with my friends. And I'm definitely not ready for the wedding tomorrow.

But that's okay. Actually, it's wonderful.

Because something better happened.

I met you.

## Chapter Three

---

The first night we knew each other...  
is still a blur to me.

I remember arriving early for the wedding rehearsal, setting up my equipment, and plugging into the house sound. I remember playing my guitar for a few minutes, warming up my hands. I remember the sound of my guitar coming out of the speakers and floating across the room, knowing this place was acoustically solid, no echo, with perfectly placed textured panels on the walls to absorb sound.

I remember warming up my vocal cords as I quietly began to hum. Then turning my microphone on and singing the song I would be performing at the wedding.

I stumbled through the song once, finding my rhythm. I began to sing it again, finding the emotion. I closed my eyes, because sometimes when I sing, blocking out the rest of the world helps me feel the words. I live the song in my head. See it. Get lost in it. The words come to life and reveal themselves to me, unfolding like a movie. I remember connecting to the song. Eyes closed, feeling the emotion, forgetting I was in an empty wedding venue rehearsing for Zach's wedding.

When I finished the run-through, I opened my eyes and scanned the room, struggling to transition from the movie in my head to the world in front of me. Several women I had never seen before stood by the door to my left. An older man and a woman holding a toddler on her hip were standing by the door to my right. The other groomsmen, my friends since

grade school, had come through the main entrance directly in front of me. Everyone stood silent, staring at me.

I felt the heat climb from my stomach to my chest to my face. I felt the walls of the room closing in on me. I felt the need to throw up, or scream, maybe at the same time.

I tossed my guitar to the side and stumbled through the door behind me. I stood in an unfamiliar hallway as my breathing became forced and erratic. The shiny, finished concrete floor beneath me felt slick and dangerous like ice. Finding the first unlocked door that would open, I fell inside of a crowded and disheveled room scattered with disarray. I wedged myself into a corner and pulled my knees into my chest, tucking my body inward. Stacked chairs, tables of all shapes and sizes, and discarded decorations surrounded me. Protected me. I squeezed my eyes so tight they began to water, trying my damndest not to come undone. Not here. Not now.

That was the last thought I remember before I opened my eyes and saw you.

You were calm. You were gentle.

You helped me find the strength to pick myself up off the floor and leave. Go back to the hotel and regroup. Sleep. Stand under the hot shower until the water turned ice cold and rained down on my naked body. As the water began losing its heat, I reached up and adjusted the showerhead to its strongest setting. I stood my ground until the skin on my shoulders began to sting with the force of freezing water pounding down on me.

I lay in bed restless. You texted me. I called you. You rescued me a second time.

## Chapter Four

---

The second night we knew each other...  
will never be a blur.

The night is clear and crisp in my mind. I can still taste you. I can still feel my hand finding you under your dress. I can feel myself coming undone in an exquisite and purposeful way with your arms wrapped around my neck. Our bodies so close together I could feel your heart beating in your chest and the heat of your ragged breath melting into my skin. You opened yourself up to me like a beautiful song. I found your rhythm. I got lost in you.

The dichotomy of how our first two nights knowing each other revealed themselves to us is not lost on me. The nights were diametrically opposed, yet also congruent.

Today was the big day. I arrived at the wedding venue three hours earlier than everyone else. It was quiet when I walked into the large, decorated room filled with empty chairs and flowers. My guitar and microphone lay in a corner off to the side. This is not where I had left them. Someone had neatly placed them there. Maybe it was you. In my right mind, I would have never carelessly left my guitar unguarded in a place I wasn't familiar with. But during a panic attack, my only concern is protecting myself. Nothing else matters.

After I gathered my equipment from the corner, I set everything up again and began to rehearse the song. I heard the door to the main entryway open and saw you walk into the room with your bridesmaid dress already on. I could not look

away from the beauty of you. I don't know if you noticed, but I forgot the words to the song for a moment and just played my guitar. I strummed and watched, memorizing every detail of you standing there. Your kind eyes. The dress. The way you casually sucked on your bottom lip.

You waved at me and smiled. I should have put my guitar down, walked to the back of the room, and talked to you. Instead, I sat there with a lovestruck grin on my face and kept playing. I didn't want the moment to end. I wanted you to see me, the real me, confident and sure. I wanted you to see the man, not the panic attack.

Finally, I found the words to the song and my voice again. As I rehearsed, I looked into your eyes and sang the song to you. If other people came into the room, I didn't notice. I only saw you.

When I finished the song, you put your hand over your heart and whispered thank you. I whispered thank you back.

You rescued me the night before. I needed to give you something in return. This song. A piece of me. My voice. My ability to play music. The part of me I was proud of. When your name was called from the hallway, you waved a quick goodbye and slipped out the door to take photos with the other bridesmaids. I immediately felt your absence. I missed you.

While you were getting photos taken with the other girls, I hung out with the guys in the groom's quarters. We played cards, laughed, and had fun. I bowed out of the card game early and went to the corner of the room to rehearse the song a few more times. The guys halted the card game to sit and listen. I told them to keep playing cards and quit looking at me. Alex told me that my singing was better than any card game. Thomas said my voice was as smooth as Michael Jordan's fadeaway jumper. Nathan even gave me a nice compliment, which is extremely rare.

We put on our tuxes and took our photos. Normally, I wouldn't be very excited about wearing a tux, but today I was. Because of you. I wanted to look my best for you.



When the ceremony began, I saw you in that dress again as I walked out with Zach and the groomsmen. I was looking at you when Thomas, walking directly in front of me, suddenly stopped. Something had caught his eye in the crowd. I bumped into him and almost fell down, finding my balance before taking a tumble. I leaned into Thomas and called him a knucklehead under my breath. I did not want to be the star of a viral video anytime soon. At least not for a wedding mishap.

As the unity candle was being lit, I walked over to the mic stand, picked up my guitar, and sang the song Zach had picked out. Midway through the song, I became distracted when I saw Thomas's wife sitting near the back of the room crying. I have known her since kindergarten and seeing her cry threw me off. But when I looked over at you, my focus returned and I found the song again.

After singing, I took my place with the wedding party between Thomas and Alex. I did my best to be a good groomsman, but was totally distracted. Only a few feet separated us. I couldn't take my eyes off you. When you caught me staring and you smiled back at me, I was finished. I wanted the ceremony to end as quickly as possible so that I could talk to you. Be with you. I needed to thank you in person for the compassion you had shown me. And for wearing that dress.

After the "I dos" and traditional kiss, the wedding party began to exit. When it was our turn to pair up and walk down the aisle, I forgot to bend my arm so that you could place your hand on top of my arm. Instead, I reached out and grabbed your hand. The moment our palms came together and your skin touched mine, something inside me shifted. When you moved your hand from mine and laced our fingers together, I swear, I could feel a shift inside of you too. I felt your heart reach out and connect with mine.

As we exited past the attendees, up the aisle, and through the open double doors at the back of the room, you pulled me in the opposite direction of everyone else. You led me down a hallway that led to another hallway that I was all too familiar with. When you opened the door to the storage room where you found me last night, I tried to settle the emotions pulsating

through me. You closed the door and we were in that room again. Where it all began. The place I made a fool of myself. Where you saved me.

You pulled me toward you as you backed yourself against the wall and gently pressed your lips to mine. I had felt an unexplainable connection with you when our hands touched for the first time, but I was in no way prepared for what I felt when your lips touched mine. The rest of the world disappeared. It felt like we were the only man and woman who had ever lived. My entire universe became only you and me. I felt things inside of me that I didn't know existed.

You pulled away from our first kiss first and said, "Our memory of this room will not be what happened last night. It will be what happens tonight."

Then, we rewrote the story of me and you and that cluttered storage room.

This is the memory I will carry with me for the rest of my life when I think of the story of us. This memory will never be a blur.

## Chapter Five

---

I am writing this to you to help me understand this wonderful thing that is happening between us. And maybe it will help you understand me.

Sometimes, it takes me awhile to process things. Writing helps me. It is why I write songs. It helps me to focus my thoughts down to a few words that can clearly express what I am feeling. Hopefully, writing this for you can do the same thing.

I started writing things down when I was a kid in middle school. Some people doodle, draw circles and squiggly lines. I would mindlessly write down words in my notebooks during class. Scatter them all over the page. I would have my notebook open and write down the notes the teacher was giving on the left-hand page. On the right-hand page, I would jot down my feelings. Bored. Confused. Distracted. Tired. Focused. Patient. Sometimes I wrote poems. Sometimes I wrote random words. Sometimes I wrote stories. It helped me stay in my chair and stay focused.

In the seventh grade, while we were taking our weekly pop quiz over the material we had covered that week, my teacher walked by my desk and noticed that I had written random words at the bottom of the page. I did this sometimes when I was trying to find an answer to a question or was searching for the right word. The teacher accused me of cheating and sent me to the principal's office. I spent an entire week in afternoon detention. To this day, I don't understand why it is acceptable to use a scratch piece of paper to work through math problems

on a quiz, but not acceptable to use scratch paper to work through answers that are words and not just numbers. Words are building blocks used to build bigger structures like songs, stories, jokes, and on a test, answers. Words on paper bring me clarity.

I need clarity with you. I want to understand you and what you are doing to me. You saved me at the wedding rehearsal. You also scared me. No one has ever seen me crumble like that. So, I never wanted to see you again. I didn't want to see the look in your eyes when I had to face you. I expected pity and sympathy. But when I saw you, there was none of that. Your eyes were full of energy and hope. Full of life. Full of possibility.

I want to string words together that are about you. Songs. Stories. Random words scattered on a page. Graceful. Seraphic. Magnificent.

I want to write about the possibility of us. The possibility that I am tucked away in your heart as much as you are tucked away in mine. That you are thinking about me right now and trying to figure out what in the world has happened between us in the last forty-eight hours. That you are reliving that moment in the storage room and can still feel the tension and electricity. That you felt what I felt when my body touched yours for the first time. That you want more. Much more, knowing that what happened in that room was a tiny glimpse of what is yet to come.

I am grateful for those moments I have spent with you. But I am not satisfied. I want more. I need more. You are a beautiful mystery to me.

Who are you? What makes your eyes shine like stars on a clear night? What can I do to make you feel like I do right now? How can I do to you what you are doing to me? I want to know your answers to these questions. I want to know you.

I write for clarity. I write to process. I have fallen for you. Hard. I feel like a skydiver hurdling toward you at 120 miles per hour. You are coming at me fast. And I like it. I don't need

or want a parachute. I just want to collide, hard and fast, until we become something new.

## Chapter Six

---

It's Monday and I'm back at work after our weekend together. I am standing in an unfinished hotel room off an interstate exit ramp somewhere in Florida.

Even though the fresh coat of paint on the walls is dry, I feel the faint chemical smell tickle my nose. Sometimes I need to wear a mask if the odor is too much. But not today, which is good because I don't want to wear a mask today. I want my face to be free to smile.

The floors are shiny and the walls are bare. The rooms on this floor are only four hundred square feet, including the bathroom. When I first began this part of my job, it amazed me how small an empty room appears to the eye. I used to think that it was an optical illusion. The human eye is not able to create scale without other objects in the room to give context to its size. That is all true. But there is also another reason. I believe the rooms appear small to me because of their emptiness.

Last night, I rode to Florida with my older brother, Mike. I work for him. I come from a family of carpenters and builders. My dad started building houses soon after high school. Growing up, my brother and I worked with Dad on weekends and summer breaks. Some of my first memories are learning how to use a plumb level and making marks with a flat wooden carpenter's pencil for Dad when he was measuring a two-by-four.

As I got older, working with my dad was fun and I enjoyed making money. But then I found music. First piano, then guitar. I had always loved listening to music and singing the songs I heard on the radio, but being able to make music was something completely different. It was like I had a new place for all the words in my head to go. The piano became my new notebook and pen. The music was a place for my words. I knew immediately that making music was my passion, not building houses. I was much better at building things with words and chords, not nails and boards.

After high school, I spent two semesters at Belmont because it's a music school. College wasn't for me though. I wanted to make music, not do all the other stuff. The other stuff got in the way. I spent several years working an assortment of jobs. I delivered prescription medications to nursing homes. I loaded trucks for a wholesale distributor. I mowed yards, trimmed trees, and worked on a sweet potato farm. I worked hard and earned my pay, but my heart was never in any of it. When I was working, I was thinking about music.

Mike began his own construction business and I began working with him. We started with five employees. Now there are over fifty. My brother's passions are construction and business. He is thriving. He found his calling.

We do contract work for some of the most popular hotel chains in the United States. Our specialties are interior finishing, furniture and equipment, and testing and inspection. My part of the process is hotel wall décor. I am the guy who comes in after the rooms have been painted and adds paintings, photographs, murals, tapestries, wall sculptures, shelves, and televisions. Most of the time it's laid out for me by a team of interior designers hired by the hotel. Same wall hangings in every room on every floor. Rinse and repeat.

My brother wants me to take on a bigger role with the company. He believes we have the potential to run the business together and expand. I have considered it. But my heart isn't in it. I don't want to give up music. Having a less important role in the company allows me to work four days a week most of the time and frees up my weekends so that I can

play music. I have my regular places I play in Nashville and sometimes travel to small gigs in surrounding states.

Today, I went room to room hanging paintings by Mirek Kuzniar that reminded me of you. The painting is called *A Couple in the Park*. It reminds me of our weekend. In the center of the painting, a man is standing next to a woman with his arm around her back. They are surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colorful trees and leaves, covering the sky and reflecting off the ground. A lighted path lies ahead of them, shiny and bright. The painting captures the perfect moment as the couple stands together in the bright and beautiful, surreal surroundings, while looking ahead to the clear path of the optimistic unknown.

Standing in the empty hotel room, I feel like the man in the painting, with my arm around you. You have filled my world with these bright colors. Yet I barely know you. I've just met you. I see the path clearly though, lighted and marked for me to follow. With you. Hand in hand. Into our optimistic unknown.



## Chapter Seven

---

You helped me again last night. Thank you. Not sure I would have made it back without you.

I was headed home after a long week of work in Florida. Mike stayed behind at the hotel site to help us meet our deadline, so I was alone. A late delivery of televisions had put us all behind schedule. I spent the whole day helping our audiovisual guy mount and install 72-inch televisions on the walls of fifty hotel suites scattered throughout the building. I thought I would be on my way back to Tennessee around noon, but I wasn't able to leave until eight that night. I was tired, frustrated, and hungry.

I had to call and cancel a spot I had playing guitar with a band at the Nashville Palace tonight because there was no way I would make it back in time. I found another guitar player to fill in for me.

I also had a solo gig Saturday afternoon at an upscale hotel lounge in downtown Nashville. I needed to be at my best for a solo performance, those don't come around very often. Singing in a hotel lounge is not glamorous and doesn't pay a lot unless you have a few good tippers in the audience. I still take those opportunities seriously. One, it helps me become a better performer in an intimate setting, and two, you never know who is going to be in the audience. Adele, Ed Sheeran, and Taylor Swift all got big breaks in their careers after singing at small venues. And Taylor was in Nashville. I go into

every performance thinking that the most important person I might ever meet might be in that room.

After a couple hours on the road thinking about my show tomorrow and the playlist, I needed to stop and get some food. I also needed to give my mind a break from being fixated on the idea that I would be too tired to do well.

Going to a restaurant after ten at night can be sketchy, so I decided to stop at a large convenience store that prides itself on a variety of snack foods and clean restrooms. The store was extremely busy, even at that late hour. The lights were bright. Employees and customers were bustling around and bouncing from aisle to aisle. A small boy was sitting on the floor having a meltdown in front of the soda fountain machine.

I felt it happening. The boy's cries for attention got louder. The fluorescent lights above me became brighter. Why was I here instead of in my bed getting rest for tomorrow's show? The aisles began to close in on me, forming a perimeter without an exit. A man stood beside me, studying the potato chips. He said something to me, jibberish. He was standing too close.

I got out of there, feeling a wave of new air hit me as soon as I walked out the door. I needed outside air to fill my lungs so I could breathe again. I needed to reset my senses. But the air outside smelled like gas fumes. The sound of trucks began to shake my eardrums. The headlights from cars pulling into the parking lot hit my tired eyes like trained spotlights with laser beam precision. I should be home in bed, not here with all these people.

If I could get to my truck, I would be okay.

Where did I park? Was I in my personal truck or the company truck? Was I parked in the lot or at a gas pump? Why the hell was I here in the first place?

When I calmed myself down and found my truck, I climbed in and slammed the door shut, closing off the rest of the world. I pulled my hat over my eyes and began to breathe slowly. I put my AirPods in and started the playlist I listen to when I sleep. Don Williams, Eva Cassidy, Ray LaMontagne, S.G. Goodman.

My phone began to vibrate. You. You were calling me.

For the next hour, I lay back in the seat of my truck in the middle of a noisy parking lot off the interstate and listened to your sweet voice. You told me about your day and the things you had done. We talked about the books you like to read and your favorite movies. We discussed music and family and food. When we talked about us and the magic that happened in the storage room after the wedding, I could hear the smile in your voice. I could also hear your thirst for more. I needed to hear that. Because I'm thirsty too.

You were still with me in my ears when I drove across the street to a fast-food drive-thru to get some coffee and something to eat. You, caffeine, and a little bit of food got me back to Tennessee in one piece. One happy, smiling piece.

You are doing something to me that I have never felt before. I have always been a person who doesn't need to be around other people. A seven-hour drive in my truck coming home from a long week of work for the weekend is relaxing. I can roll the window down and drive for hours, or I can crank up the music and sing along with some of the greatest songs of all time. I don't need the constant jabbering of talk radio or the latest podcast. Me, my truck, and the open road. I am perfectly content.

But the moment we hung up, I missed you. My truck felt empty. You had to get up early the next morning and needed to sleep. I imagined you were asleep next to me in the passenger's seat. I wanted to glance over and see you there, curled up in the blanket I keep in the back. Just the two of us in this tiny space with the steady hum of the road beneath us. The sweet sound of Eva Cassidy's *Songbird* album coming out of my speakers, filling up the space between us as we floated down the interstate at eighty miles an hour. Simultaneously still and moving. I wanted you there with me. Or better, I wanted to be with you. In your bed, snuggled up behind you, feeling the rise and fall of your chest as you drifted off to sleep.

I wanted us.

Together.

## Chapter Eight

---

I slept until late Saturday afternoon, then got stuck in Nashville traffic on the way to the hotel. While my truck sat at a complete standstill, Mike called to vent about the fifty televisions I had hung on the hotel walls the day before. His problem wasn't with me, it was with the guys who lazily left the cables from the TVs to the routers exposed. I would have caught the mistake if I had gone back and looked through all the rooms one last time. But I didn't. That's on me.

There I sat, in horrendous traffic, running late for my show, with my brother's irritated voice blasting out of my speakers. When he finally finished and hung up, I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror and cringed at the tired face staring back at me. I wanted to turn around and go back home. Skip today, climb back in my bed, and start over tomorrow.

Then you called. A quick

*Hello,*

*I'm thinking about you,*

*Wish I was there,*

*Show all those people in the audience what I see in you.*

Less than two minutes with your voice and you turned my whole day around.

The performance went incredibly well. I took requests, sang acoustic covers to classics everyone knows, and performed several songs I wrote. I got a standing ovation after I

performed a new song I am still working on. That is a big deal to me.

Singing original music in a setting like that is a slippery slope. People want to hear songs they know. This is why I get extremely nervous singing songs I wrote right after I have performed some of the most popular songs ever written. There is an old showbiz adage that says never follow a performance by a kid or an animal on stage. If you do, you'll only disappoint the audience. The music version of that saying is to never sing one of your own songs after a Beatles song, a Whitney Houston song, or a song people can easily sing along with. You'll only disappoint the audience.

A married couple visiting Nashville came up to me after the show and wanted to know how they could purchase my music or stream it online. I saw the lady scrolling on her phone during the performance and assumed she was bored with me and my music. That's what I get for trying to get in someone else's head. I was completely wrong. She was looking for my website. My music. She was looking for the new song I wrote that I had just performed.

The couple was extremely disappointed when I told them I didn't have a website or online presence and my music wasn't available online. I only performed live. The woman told me that it was one of the best songs she has ever heard because it perfectly described her love for her husband of twenty-five years. The man told me that he felt like the song had been written about them. He said the trip to Tennessee from their home in Australia was worth every penny, because they got to hear my song. It had touched his heart in ways I could never understand. And if I ever came to Australia, he would buy me a drink and tell me their story, because their story was my song, and my song was their story. We exchanged phone numbers and email addresses. I promised them that if I ever recorded the song, they would be the first to know. And, someday, I would travel to Australia just to have that drink and hear their story.

Moments like that inspire me to write more. It is affirmation from the universe letting me know that I am doing what I am

supposed to be doing with my life. I love music and I love performing. But most of all, I love writing music and creating my own songs.

I'm telling you what happened today to thank you for calling me. Your two-minute phone call, your encouraging words, your voice, helped me focus on giving the best performance I had in me. And because of that, I met two wonderful people from Australia who gave back to me with kind words I will never forget.

I often think about the ripple effect, how a simple action can have profound impacts on others. The ripple effect doesn't favor positive results over negative results. It just is. But I hope in my life that the ripple effects I create always have a positive impact on others. I'll never find a cure for cancer or a solution for world hunger, but I can make people smile with my music. I can make their vacations better when they visit a hotel room that I helped create. I can do my little part in this big world and always do my best to create a positive ripple effect. Like you did today. You indirectly positively impacted a man and woman from Australia by positively impacting me with a simple phone call.

And, full disclosure, the song that touched their hearts is a song still in progress, as yet untitled, that I began writing a few days ago. You are the reason I am writing the song. Another ripple effect you created. It is for you, about you, about us. Someday soon, I will sing it for you.

This ripple effect that you are creating in my life is profoundly changing who I am. I never would have imagined one of the worst things in my life, a panic attack, that I hide from everyone I know, would lead me to you, the best thing in my life. Maybe life happens for us and not to us. It's just difficult to see the "for us" when it is happening "to us."

I clearly see the positive impact you are having in my life, and I will do my best to always have a positive and lasting impact in your life too.

With love, support, encouragement, and everything you will ever need.

## Chapter Nine

---

The Nashville music scene is a happening thing. There's live music being performed almost every hour of every day. Most people have heard of the Grand Ole Opry, the Bluebird Cafe, and the Ryman in Nashville. These are the music venues singers and players dream about. I have never played any of those places, but maybe someday.

I do play the Station Inn though. It's legendary, but not quite as formal as some of the other historic spots in Nashville. Dolly Parton, Sting, James Taylor, and hundreds of music legends have played on that stage. Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music, was a regular on Tuesday nights before he passed away.

There's a bluegrass jam at the Station Inn every Sunday night that starts at seven o'clock and goes until late in the night. Bluegrass isn't really my specialty, but music is music. I'm there every Sunday I'm in town.

Having the courage to show up and play on Sundays has been good for my soul. It is a wonderful way to meet people, play with the best artists in Nashville, and improve my craft. Musicians just walk in, pull a chair up to the circle of players, and start jamming along. The first dozen times I went to the Station Inn on a Sunday night, I just sat and listened. I didn't have the confidence to play my guitar with the other more seasoned players. But I still felt at home. Sitting there and absorbing the energy in the room was where I was supposed to be. I had found my tribe of people. After a few weeks, I started



hanging out after the jam session was over and listened to all the stories filling up that room.

I got to know a few of the regulars. A couple years ago, I finally brought my guitar. I mustered up the grit to sit in that circle of musicians and pretend like I belonged. For the first few songs, I was a nervous wreck, strumming my guitar as softly as I could so that no one could hear me. Slowly, I quit thinking and just played, getting lost in the music.

Sunday nights at the Station Inn were my master class in the Nashville music scene. I met people. I got invited to play small gigs around town. I became a much better guitar player. And I found a little piece of myself.

When I was a kid, my grandfather made me a giant wooden puzzle. He was a carpenter and made the puzzle out of scraps of wood. The pieces were smooth and shiny and had been stained and finished to create this shiny glow that was magical. They were all shapes and sizes and would fit together to make a perfect square that I loved to put together.

I see myself like that puzzle. There are all these pieces of me that exist in the world that are waiting to be found. Once I find them, it's my responsibility to take care of them and make them shine. It's my responsibility to find their full potential. Each piece fits together to create something bigger and whole. To create me.

Music is definitely one of the pieces to my puzzle. Being a builder is a puzzle piece too, following in the footsteps of my father and his side of the family.

And now you. I feel whole when I am with you, like something that was missing clicked into place.

You are definitely part of my puzzle.

## Chapter Ten

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We spent an amazing five days together in the Smoky Mountains this past week. I was filling in to play guitar for a group that has a residency at Dollywood. I was thrilled when you agreed to join me. The two shows I performed each day were afternoon shows, meaning you and I would have the mornings and nights all to ourselves.

You thought we would be spending the week in the hotel at Dollywood, but I surprised you with our own private chalet overlooking the Little Pigeon River. The chalet was nicely decorated, intimate, and cozy. The view from the screened porch proved spectacular, spotlighting the river and mountains. We also had a hot tub and a huge bathroom with a Jacuzzi bath and shower spa.

I arrived a day earlier than you, placing a bouquet of fresh flowers in each room. Sunflowers in the living room, daisies in the kitchen, lilies in the bathroom by the shower spa, and red roses in the bedroom.

I stocked the fridge with fruit, snacks, chocolate, drinks, and breakfast food so that I could serve you breakfast in bed every morning. I wanted you to feel like a queen.

I also arranged for us to have an in-room couples massage, which was magnificent. When I stopped by the spa in Gatlinburg to make the arrangements, I had planned on getting a massage only for you. But, they convinced me to get a couples massage for two in our chalet. It's the first massage I've ever had. I probably would've enjoyed it more if I could

have relaxed, but I couldn't let myself let go and enjoy. I was focused on the technique of the massage, learning, memorizing every movement so that I could give you massages using the same techniques. We had the couples massage our first day at the chalet. Then, I gave you a massage each day after that.

I know that I am not yet a trained and experienced masseuse. But, if you let me, I will become one for you. Have you heard of the ten-thousand-hour rule? If you do something for ten thousand hours with deliberate focus, you will master the art of that practice. Well, I want to master the art of giving you a massage. I currently have about four hours under my belt, with 9,996 hours to go. I will get very adept at giving you a massage when we hit ten thousand hours because deliberate focus is not a problem when my hands are on your body. You might have to wear shorts and a T-shirt some days though, to help me keep my focus on all the parts of your beautiful body and not just the ones that seem to constantly distract me.

We made so many great memories. I will never forget the look on your face when we went upside down on the Tennessee Tornado roller coaster at Dollywood. Or taking you to the Friday night jam session at the old schoolhouse in Walland, Tennessee. I will always treasure the sight of you skinny-dipping with me in the river. But the morning we got up early and watched the sunrise over the mountains is a memory that I will relive in my mind every time I see the sun rise.

With sleep still in our eyes, we didn't speak, just watched as the color of the sun began to emerge in the mist of the mountain. The blank canvas of the sky filled with a kaleidoscope of colors as I pulled you closer to me. Each minute a new painting revealed itself to us, more beautiful than the last. If that sunrise was a song, it would have to be performed by a symphony, rich with layers and depth building with each singular note.

I saw our future in that sunrise. I saw possibility. I saw hope. I felt the overwhelming vastness of the universe. Instead of feeling small and insignificant, I felt connection, as if the universe had conspired to bring us together in the unlikeliest

of ways. And in that moment, watching a sunrise in the mountains of Tennessee, I knew the universe had again conspired to show us our potential.

This spot in the universe would forever be ours.

## Chapter Eleven

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Thousands of songs have been written about the magic that can happen when two people meet each other for the first time. Taylor Swift has “Love Story.” The Beatles have “I Saw Her Standing There.” Frank Sinatra, Carrie Underwood, and Prince have songs about the moment that changed everything for someone. Roberta Flack’s “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” is one of my favorites. It’s sweet and sexy, loaded with a roomful of subdued emotion. I play those songs in my solo gigs. But as much as I love those songs, I never believed them.

I thought those kinds of songs were for Disney movies and fairy tales. Seeing someone for the first time and having a deep connection made no sense. It’s not how love works. It’s physical attraction that turns into something else. Love at first sight is revisionist history, the story that gets told after love truly blossoms.

Then I looked into your eyes. I saw you for the first time.

Coming undone on the cold floor of a storage room at a wedding venue, I looked up as you crouched down in front of me and looked directly into your eyes. I didn’t see your face or your body or the clothes you were wearing. I didn’t hear your voice or know your touch. Only your eyes. Looking into my eyes. You put me back together in that simple moment. The connection was real. My world aligned.

Looking into your eyes wasn’t a fairy tale or a Taylor Swift song or lust or a Disney movie. It is not revisionist history

either. It was the truth of you and me. I knew in that fraction of a second. I didn't understand, but I knew. Knowing and understanding are two very different things.

After the panic attack, I tried to suppress and deny what had happened when I looked into your eyes. Embarrassed, I let the pride inside of me surface to cover the vulnerability. You had seen me broken, and I never want anyone to see me broken. It is not who I am.

Then you texted me. I called you. I held your hand at the wedding. I knew. When my lips touched yours and my body touched yours, I knew. I began to understand the undeniable truth of us. It felt like I had known you for a lifetime.

I'm slow to trust people, to let my guard down and just be me. It's easier to be alone.

I don't know what to say when I'm around most people. I don't know how to act. I get lost in my head and stay quiet in the back of the room. Or just walk away and leave.

I feel like people think I keep my mouth shut because I don't have anything to say. That is not it though. I have too much to say to know what to say. I think too much. Paralysis by analysis.

With you, I don't have to think. I can just be. You're different than the rest of the world.

A week in the mountains with you has shown me how easy and natural being with the person you are meant to be with can be.

I've changed my mind about love-at-first-sight songs. I now know they are true.

## Chapter Twelve

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I've spent the week at a new hotel we're building in Georgia.  
I've also spent the week missing you.

Our getaway together in the mountains revitalized my passion for living. It helped me realize that I have been going through the motions of life for a while now, sleepwalking through each day. I'm not stuck, but I'm not moving forward either. I'm treading water, which gradually wears you down.

My days with you were much different than the days in my regular life. I woke up with joy and anticipation. I was excited about what was in store for us. I want to be that person every day. That is the Grayson I am meant to be, not the person I've become.

Watching the sunrise with you on the back deck of our mountain chalet was one of the best mornings of my life. Something wonderful stirred in my soul. Maybe it was because I was with you. Maybe it was because sunrises truly are amazing. Maybe it was because somewhere along the way, I lost my joy for life and didn't even realize it.

Life is short.

Life deserves joy.

And curiosity.

And passion.

And desire.

You've brought all that back in me.

I don't want to go through the motions every day. I don't want to just exist. I want to live.

I haven't been the best version of myself in a long time. I want to be better. You deserve the best in me. I want to be the best partner you could ever imagine. I also want to be a better songwriter, musician, and performer. A better son. A better brother. A better friend.

I get excited about the possibility of you and me creating a life together. I feel like I can accomplish anything with you in my life.

And you? The sky is the limit with you! You are intelligent, beautiful, caring, funny, perceptive, quirky, and dozens of other amazing qualities that I am more than a little smitten over. But, most of all, I love your heart. Your heart connected with mine the moment we met. I adore your heart.

Today for the first time, I heard the saying "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I realized that I was ready. And the teacher appeared.

While I was unpacking a pallet of paintings to hang on the newly painted hotel walls, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Thomas, one of my best friends, had called to check on me. We've been close my entire life. He was worried something was up with me when he saw me bolt out of the wedding venue the night I had the panic attack. I spent the day with him at the wedding, but he didn't want to bring it up in front of the other guys. I didn't see Thomas at the wedding reception because he and his wife left early, before you and I joined the others after our escapade in the storage room. It had been bothering him ever since, so he called.

I told him the truth about the panic attack. I told him about occasionally having these episodes. It was refreshing to be totally honest and not worry about embarrassment or judgement. Your compassion has convinced me that there is no shame in being honest about what is going on.

Thomas was understanding. He's a basketball coach and has dealt with several players who have overcome issues with panic attacks and anxiety. He gave me the name of a person he



thought could help me, a sports psychologist turned life coach. I chuckled when he used the term “life coach.” Who doesn’t know how to live? You breathe, you eat, you sleep. Then you do it again the next day.

Thomas ignored my dismissal of the term “life coach” and asked a question that hit me to the core.

Are you living your best life?

No. I knew the answer immediately.

No.

The closest I had come to living my best life was my time in the mountains with you.

I wrote three songs that week. I sang in the shower like I used to. I smiled when no one was looking. I focused on possibilities, not problems. I watched a sunrise that stirred my soul. I allowed my heart to love and I allowed my heart to receive love. That was me living my best life.

I told Thomas every single bit of this. I didn’t hold back.

Thomas asked me if I thought I could live like that every day. My answer was yes, if I only knew how. To which he replied, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

He gave me the number of the sports psychologist turned life coach, Courtney Johnson. My first session with her is next week. I’m giving it a shot. If she helps me with the panic attacks, it will definitely be worth it.

I’m going in with an open mind.

The student is ready.

## Chapter Thirteen

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I spent Saturday afternoon at Mike's house celebrating my niece's birthday with the family. She turned ten. Double digits. Sadie is an incredibly curious and precocious little girl who can light up a room with her charisma. Talking to her is like talking to an adult.

After we all ate cake and ice cream, she asked me a hundred questions about the music business. She is at that age when you discover your own taste in music. She loves Chris Stapleton and Taylor Swift. Sadie told me her favorite Taylor Swift song is "Anti-Hero" and her favorite Chris Stapleton song is "The Star Spangled Banner." I cracked up and told her that I couldn't pick just one Taylor song because there were too many. And I love the national anthem too, but it's not really a Chris Stapleton song. Sadie said that nobody has ever performed the national anthem as well as he did at the Super Bowl, so now it's his song.

After Sadie opened presents, which included a very cool karaoke machine with a microphone, speaker, and lights, we all gathered in the living room and had a little family concert. I had to put my fingers in my ears when my brother attempted to sing "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey. He's definitely a builder, not a singer. Sadie, on the other hand, has real potential. Her timing and musical instinct is spot on. It's obvious that she spends a lot of time listening to music. When she sang her favorite songs, she never once had to look at the lyrics. She knew them by heart.

I asked Sadie if she could sing the national anthem as well as Chris Stapleton did at the Super Bowl. She said she could if she had music to go along with it. The song catalog for the karaoke machine had a version of the national anthem, but it was a traditional version, not the one Chris sang. Sadie was extremely disappointed.

I ran to the truck and grabbed my guitar. I played the national anthem a lot when I was learning to play the guitar. I played the Jimi Hendrix version. Sadie and I watched Chris's version a few times on my phone and I quickly figured out how to play it for her. I played and Sadie sang. She nailed it. My ten-year-old niece belted out a heartfelt and soulful rendition of a song that is not at all easy to perform. She sang it several times while I played, and she got better each time. My entire family is convinced she could sing it before a ball game and bring the house down. Before leaving the party, I recorded myself playing guitar for her so that she could practice.

I wish you could have been there. I wish you could have heard Sadie sing. I love my family and the bond we have. I want you to be a part of that too. Being in a family business can sometimes put a strain on the relationships of everyone involved. But, with my family, I think it's brought us closer. My brother and I are tight. The only issue we have is him wanting me to do more in the company. Which, in a way, is a compliment. If he didn't believe in me, he wouldn't constantly encourage me to do more.

I hope you can be at our next family get-together. I want you right in the middle of everything. I see Mike with his wife and two kids and my heart beats a little steadier. I want that life someday. My brother is settled, he loves and is devoted to his wife and kids, and he is passionate about his business. His life is full and fulfilled.

I want that someday.

Do you know how happy it would make me to get to spend every day with you? You are my best friend and my lover. Our connection is deeper than anything I have ever experienced. I never would have imagined after the way we met, that our relationship would blossom so fast and furious. And real. I feel

like the vulnerability at the surface of that first interaction between us cut through all of the back-and-forth that happens at the beginning of most relationships. We skipped the awkward beginning and uncertainty that usually exists when two people meet and jumped headfirst into authenticity.

My walls are down. I love you.

I want to grow as a person with you and for you.

## Chapter Fourteen

---

I had my first session with Courtney today, the sports psychologist turned life coach. I Zoomed with her on my laptop during my lunch break sitting in an unfinished hotel bathroom. I borrowed a folding chair from one of the other guys on the crew, set my laptop on the marble vanity between the two sinks, and poured my heart out to a woman I had just met. The student was ready. The teacher appeared.

It had been a scattered morning. The last thing on my mind was this meeting. Early that morning, I discovered we had received a mixed batch of paint and the crew on the third floor was using a different shade of white than the crew on the fourth floor. I spent an hour trying to figure out which shade was the right shade and the best way to redo the rooms that had already been painted. In the middle of this, a shipment of bathroom mirrors arrived damaged. Several were chipped around the edges, many were cracked and broken. And the floor crew was down two men this week, so their entire schedule was off. We worked like an assembly line. If one gear in the system wasn't on schedule, all the gears were affected. When noon rolled around, I was frazzled. The last thing I wanted to do was virtually meet with a life coach and talk about feelings.

After introductions, Courtney asked me about my morning. I unloaded. Words poured out of me for several minutes. I told her about my job, about being in the family business with my brother, about the long days, and travel. I talked to her about meeting deadlines and being good at what I do. I told her

about hanging pictures and paintings and mirrors on the walls, over and over again. Then over and over again. Next room. Next floor. Next hotel. Rinse and repeat.

When the last word of my hotel construction manifesto came out of my mouth, I looked away from the computer screen and caught a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror hanging above the vanity. I was stunned at what I saw. I looked tired. I looked weary. The man looking back at me in that mirror was not me. I squirmed in my seat and became uncomfortable. I was on a Zoom call with someone I had just met and she was seeing this person. Not me.

Courtney's voice pulled my attention back to the computer screen. She told me she noticed an interesting word kept surfacing as I described my day, my work, my life. She asked me if I knew what word she was talking about.

*Hotel? Mirror? Travel?*

It was none of those words. When she revealed the word, I was as caught off guard as I was when I saw my reflection in the mirror moments earlier.

The word was *trapped*. I had used the word trapped while describing my life. Repeatedly.

*Trapped?*

I'm a songwriter. Words matter to me. Trapped is a big and heavy word. Nobody wants to be trapped.

When my brother's business began to grow, I got *trapped* in it. I spend most of the day, *trapped* in unfinished hotel rooms. With all the travel, I spend my nights *trapped* in hotel rooms we didn't build. It's a good job, but sometimes I feel *trapped* in an endless loop of hotels.

Courtney asked me what my biggest fear is. When I paused to think and did not respond for an uncomfortably long time, she asked me if it's being trapped. "No," I immediately responded. "It's not being trapped. My biggest fear is living a life where I'm not fulfilling my purpose." Which is what's happening right now.

*Because I am trapped.*

Our call ended soon after that. I had to get back to work. The paint waited. The broken mirrors waited. The floor crew waited. Our thirty-minute session went by fast. We scheduled another session. I needed a lot of sessions.

I feel like Courtney shined a light on something I wasn't able to see in myself. There is a part of me that does feel trapped. I don't know if it's the cause of the panic attacks, but it definitely weighs me down.

I know when I don't feel trapped. When I am with you.

I feel like we can go anywhere. Do anything.

I am free and alive.

Not trapped.

## Chapter Fifteen

---

I spent the day thinking about my words to Courtney. Why did I say trapped so often? Am I trapped? If it's the reason I have panic attacks, I need to figure out why I feel this way. The night at the wedding rehearsal, I trapped myself by going into that storage room and hiding in a corner behind chairs and tables. The panic attack began when I was in a large open room with plenty of doors. I usually escape panic attacks by going into smaller spaces and hiding. Closets. Bathrooms. My truck.

I have only been trapped one time in my life and it was not a bad experience. I was with my friends, the groomsmen from Zach's wedding. We were locked in a wine cellar for an entire night and I smile every time I think about it. My friends and I call our yearly get-together "Infinite Adolescence." We began the annual tradition a couple years after we all graduated from high school. We've gotten together every year since then. The wine cellar fiasco is one of the many great memories we've made over the years.

Five of us were playing laser tag in a huge house we had rented. Nathan had gone to bed early because he wasn't feeling well. His room was the only place in the house off-limits. Zach and Thomas had stumbled upon a wine cellar in the basement and somehow unlocked the door. They thought it would be funny if they caught us by surprise and scared us during our game of laser tag. I found them first. Or they found me. I'm not sure. I screamed like a hyena being ambushed by a lion. Jackson stumbled in next and expelled a string of curse



words that I had never heard put in that order before. Alex was the last to find the secret room. We scared the Jell-O pudding out of him. While we were trying to figure out where the pudding came from and how we were going to clean it up, the door to the wine cellar slammed shut. We were locked in. All night. For twelve hours.

We sang. We picked on each other. We played games and talked. We argued with each other and quickly got over it. I felt like a kid again spending the night with friends in a backyard fort. Nathan rescued us the next morning. We celebrated like we had won the lottery. I'll never forget how alive I felt walking out of there. Infinite Adolescence rejuvenates me. We get to be kids again. We get to act like our twelve-year-old selves. In a fun way. No drinking. No cussing. No strip clubs. Just boys being boys. We play Risk and Wiffle ball and basketball. We joke around with each other.

Our first year of Infinite Adolescence came at a time when I really needed it. I had given up on getting a music degree from Belmont and decided college wasn't for me. My goal was to work just enough to make money to live. Then, make music with the rest of my time. Entering the real work world was not a difficult transition for me, but I missed hanging out with people my age. I was a nineteen-year-old kid learning to grow up fast. My parents told me that if I wasn't going to college, I had to support myself. I had to work. Like my brother was doing. I couldn't spend all day playing guitar in my room or spend my nights jamming 'til the sun came up with some garage band.

Somewhere along the way, boys become men, which is a good thing. We mature and grow up. But it comes with a sacrifice. We can't smile as much. We don't laugh. We're not supposed to cry. We can't be vulnerable. We can't have fun. We have to be tough and responsible. We have to be men. The day my mom and dad helped me move into the dorm at Belmont, my mom and I were alone in the room pulling clothes out of boxes. I felt like a man. I would be independent of my family for the first time in my life. Mom told me that she was proud of the person I was becoming. But, she also missed the little boy I used to be. Her words confused me. I was done being a

boy. I was beginning college. I was the self-reliant man they taught me to be.

A year later, when I decided that college wasn't for me, I thought my parents would be disappointed. I knew I would have to move home for a few months, get a job, and make enough money to get a place of my own. Mom's words came back to me. She would have her little boy back. I was coming back home. I wasn't as self-reliant as I thought.

As I write this, I'm processing. I think I understand what she meant. When I saw my reflection in the mirror today, I saw a tired man much older than his age. Just like Mom, I miss the little boy I used to be. I miss his smile and hopefulness. I miss his belief that anything is possible. I miss not feeling trapped. Ever.

Spending that night locked in a wine cellar was an absolute disaster. It was also wonderful. We laughed, we cried, we bonded. We were the men we had become. We also weren't afraid to still be those little boys.

The only time in my life I was actually trapped, I didn't feel trapped. I was alive. We were locked in a room that was less than thirty square feet and extremely cold. Alex got mad at Zach and Thomas for getting us locked in there. Zach got mad at Thomas for reading his diary. Jackson's claustrophobia got the best of him.

But I...

I loved it. I was with my friends. I smiled. I laughed. I was that free-spirited boy that still lives deep inside of me.

The night I was trapped, I felt free.

## Chapter Sixteen

---

I now know what it's like to squeeze as many wonderful things out of time as you possible can. We laughed, we loved each other, we celebrated.

I had a rare Friday night off from music and finally got to visit you and experience your world. Your home is exactly what I expected, a reflection of everything I see in you. Warm. Welcoming. Smart. Creative. I wanted to cook with you in the kitchen. Curl up on your couch with you and binge-watch your favorite show.

Then, I felt my body stir when you showed me your bedroom. When I followed you in and saw your bed, my mind pictured you lying there talking to me on the phone late into the night like we had almost every night since we met. With each conversation, your sweet voice comforted my soul, stirred my needs, caused me to fall deeper in love with you. My body immediately reacted, knowing that tonight, we would be in your bed together. So many times, during our late-night calls, I wanted to reach through my phone and put my arms around you. Lean in and feel the softness of your lips against mine. Stop talking and show you how much I love and adore you. Tonight, we could do those things.

We ate lunch at your favorite restaurant. You showed me where you work. We walked in the park. I was able to finally see and experience so many things in your life you've described to me. You had so much planned for me to see. I felt

like I was at the museum of you, with the best tour guide ever, getting a glimpse into your daily life. And I loved it.

My phone rang a couple of times and I totally ignored it. Thomas called early afternoon, probably to check on my first session with Courtney. Mike called a little later, about work I'm sure. I wasn't going to miss a minute of our short time together, so I didn't answer.

The third call that came was a nice surprise. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and saw the call was from the Station Inn, my favorite music venue in Nashville. The talent coordinator was calling because the artist scheduled for Tuesday night had to cancel. He wanted to know if I could fill in and do a solo show. I was the first choice.

It was almost too much to handle at once. I was standing in the park next to you. I was being offered my first solo performance at the world-famous Station Inn. I felt like everything in my life had perfectly aligned in that moment.

The Station Inn! Solo performance! I'll be featured on their website and social media announcements. I'll get a chance to perform my own songs, not just cover music. This could lead to so much more. I immediately agreed to everything, even though I wasn't sure how I was going to break the news to my brother that I would need to miss a few days of work. I would deal with that later. Right now, I needed to put a little band together, keyboards and drums. We needed to rehearse.

Standing in the park, stammering and stuttering as I told you the news, I could see and feel your genuine happiness for me. For us. You were as excited as I was. I can't tell you how much it means to me to know how much you believe in me. Maybe more than I believe in myself. And not just my ability to sing and play music. Not just my songwriting. You believe in *me*. I feel like a tiny seed with the potential to grow into something bigger than I ever imagined. You are my sunshine and water. With you by my side, I feel like I can do anything. I can grow and become that person I am meant to be.

And you. I believe in you with all my heart. You are everything I admire in another person. I want to be your

oxygen and nutrients. I want to do everything in my power to lift you up and help you get everything you want out of life.

Want to go to the moon? I'll build you a rocket ship. Want to sail across the world? I will handle the sails. Want to sit quietly and watch the sunrise? I'll bring the blanket. Whatever you want to do, I'll be there to help.

After our wonderful afternoon, we celebrated by cooking dinner at home. Then we curled up on your couch and watched one of your favorite movies. We talked late into the night. We loved each other. We talked more. I practiced my massage technique. We loved each other more.

When it came time to leave, I was sad, but incredibly grateful. Twenty-four hours with you is like a little piece of heaven to me.

Thank you for showing me your world.

## Chapter Seventeen

---

Sadie had a softball game tonight. She sang the national anthem and I played my guitar. Or rather, we sang the national anthem together and I played my guitar.

Mike arranged for me to be off a couple days to prepare for my performance at the Station Inn. I felt bad for needing the time off. I almost canceled the show. The hotel we are wrapping up is scheduled to open soon. There's a grand opening celebration planned around an annual festival that occurs in the small town where the hotel is being built. The owners are putting enormous pressure on us to finish on time. The last thing we needed was for me to miss work. My brother called in outside help from a contractor he knows and found a way for me to have the days off. I will get back there the day after the Tuesday night show and will work twenty-hour days the rest of the week if necessary.

When I told Mike I owed him for helping me out, he said he knew how I could make it up to him. Sadie had been practicing singing the national anthem with the recording I made at her birthday party of me playing the guitar. She wanted to sing it before one of her softball games, but would only do it if I accompanied her on guitar. My response was immediate. Deal! Of course! It would be an honor.

Her next game was Monday night. I went over to their house Sunday afternoon and Sadie and I rehearsed for over two hours. I could quickly tell that she had been practicing a lot. She sang it just like Chris Stapleton. Her timing was perfect.

Her soulful delivery was beyond her years. I ran home and got my sound system because I wanted her voice and the guitar to blend perfectly. I could control the levels from the field if I used my own sound system. We rehearsed another hour using the microphone and speakers.

When I arrived to the field early Monday night to set up my sound system, I was disappointed in the crowd. I realize it's youth league softball, but I thought more people would be there. Sadie deserved a hundred people in the audience, not a few dozen.

Sadie hung out with me instead of warming up with her team. She said she didn't want to get her uniform dirty. She was extremely quiet and fidgety. I could tell she was nervous. I asked her if she wanted to go somewhere and practice the song a few times, but she shook her head no. I was beginning to wonder if we were ready to do this.

After the umpire's meeting with the coaches at home plate, they signaled for us to make our way onto the field. I had my speaker set up and the microphone on a stand for Sadie. We took our positions between the pitcher's mound and home plate. I plugged my guitar into the sound system and watched as Sadie stood in front of the mic. I counted down from three, just like we had rehearsed. I strummed the intro chord like Chris Stapleton did at the Super Bowl, her signal to begin singing. But no words came out of her mouth. I smiled at the crowd and counted down again, strummed the chord again, but she didn't move. Sadie stood frozen, eyes staring at the chain-link fence behind home plate. This was not the confident little girl I had rehearsed the song with the day before.

I wasn't sure what to do. My mind raced to find ways to make this right. Play the song on my guitar and give the crowd an instrumental version? Raise the mic and sing it myself? Keep playing the intro chord until she began singing? Walk off the field and regroup?

Instinct took over and I crouched down on one knee beside my terrified niece. She looked over at me as realization kicked in. Sadie's dilated pupils stared into mine, pleading for help. I looked into her wide eyes and said, "We've got this, Sadie.

Let's show these people how Chris Stapleton sings the national anthem.”

I braced the guitar on my raised knee, pulled the microphone between us, and counted down from three. I strummed the intro chord and began singing. Sadie joined in with “the rocket’s red glare.” Even though we hadn’t rehearsed the song together, it felt like we had. Our voices blended and created perfect harmony. I’m not sure if God was looking down on us or if family harmony really does exist. I got chill bumps when I heard our voices seamlessly blend. I leaned back and listened as Sadie sang the last two lines of the song before I came back in at the end. We hit the word “brave” with perfect pitch and harmony. The crowd loved it, standing and clapping until we got back to the dugout. Her nervousness forgotten, Sadie gave me a high five as soon as we got off the field. So did her coaches and teammates.

Chris Stapleton would have been proud. Heck, Francis Scott Key would have been proud.

I wish you could have been there. I wish I could share more of my world with you. Hopefully soon, our worlds will come together more often. We won’t have to tell each other about our days. We will experience our days together.



## Chapter Eighteen

---

What an incredible day. You. The Station Inn.

My morning began with a Zoom call with Courtney. The session was scheduled for thirty minutes, but we talked for over an hour. We discussed my anxiety attacks. We talked about feeling trapped. I told her about the wine cellar incident during Infinite Adolescence. I told her about you.

A lot came to the surface in my conversation with Courtney. It's hard to see the picture when you're in the frame. Courtney helped me see the picture today.

I do feel trapped. I feel stuck in a world I don't want to be in. My passion is music, not my brother's construction company. I'm living his dream, not mine. It's always seemed like the logical thing to do. He pays me well, more than I deserve. He's good to me. I trust him. I've helped grow the company and am proud of its tremendous success.

But my heart is not in it. My heart is in my music. My heart is in loving you.

My dream is to record a studio album, not build another hotel. I want to spend my weeknights cooking dinner with you, not eating at another out-of-town restaurant with my brother, tediously going over the next day's work schedule.

After my session with Courtney, I picked up my guitar and went through the entire setlist for my solo show. The music poured from me. It was like a door had been opened somewhere inside my soul. I felt free. I had admitted to

Courtney something that I hadn't admitted to myself. I've been following someone else's dream, not my own. Simply saying the words aloud eased the tug-of-war always droning inside me.

Early afternoon, the band and I set up and rehearsed on the old wooden stage at the Station Inn. For the first time ever, I left my phone in the truck on purpose. Mike had called and texted me several times during the day with questions about the hotel. He wasn't trying to interrupt my life, he was just trying to live his. But each call and text *was* an interruption. I didn't want any distractions today. He'd have to wait until tomorrow.

Alone in the cramped dressing room before the show, I soaked everything in. In a few short years, I had gone from sitting in the audience and watching an array of talent perform on this stage to headlining my own show. I'd worked hard. I'd paid my dues. I had put in my ten thousand hours. I deserved to be here. This was an opportunity of a lifetime and I was going to knock it out of the park.

A knock on the dressing room door pulled me from my little inner pep talk. The gentleman working the snack bar told me I had a call on the house phone.

Who would call me now, right before the show? Was something wrong?

When I picked up the old phone receiver tethered to the wall mount by a coiled cord, I immediately heard the sound of my brother's voice on the other end of the line. I felt the emotional tug-of-war begin to rise inside me. He said something about the replacement mirrors being the wrong size. The voice of a woman ordering food at the bar suddenly got louder. I could hear the popcorn kernels bursting open in the popper behind me. It was happening. My world was closing in on me. I wanted to rip the phone from its cord and bail.

"Grayson." I heard my brother call my name through the phone. "Grayson, are you there?"

No. I wasn't there. I was here at the Station Inn. Set to go on stage and give the performance of my life.

In an instant, I made a decision to shut down the tug-of-war beginning its battle inside me. I would control my situation, not the other way around. Mike would have to wait until tomorrow. My whole life had led me to this moment and nothing was going to stop me from getting it right. Not mirrors. Not hotels. Not my brother.

I hung up the phone without saying a word and went back to the dressing room. Looking at myself in the crooked mirror hanging on the wall, I was proud of the man looking back at me. I grinned until I saw a smile reach my eyes.

The show was amazing. I felt the excitement in the room the moment I walked onto the stage. I'm not sure if it was my energy or the energy of the crowd. Probably both. We fed off each other. The second song built on the first and I could feel a connection with the audience that usually doesn't happen until midway through a set.

I lost focus only one time during the show. After the second song, my eyes finally adjusted to the bright lights pointed toward the stage and I could see the faces of the people looking back at me. I quickly scanned the room to get a better feel for the audience. I felt you before I saw you. Sitting at a table near the back, there you were. I leaned forward and squinted to make sure my eyes weren't deceiving me. When I called your name, you raised your hand and gave me the sweetest little wave. I could not believe you were there with me in that room. I felt your love in that moment. I felt your support. I felt the harmony of our hearts.

Later in the show, when I introduced you to the audience and performed an original song I'd written for you, we got a standing ovation. The audience turned around and faced you as they applauded your song. The bartender rang the bell that hangs in front of the counter, which is a tradition at the Station Inn when something amazing happens.

After two encores and another standing ovation, we hung out and visited with people. As much as I loved the interaction with others, I just wanted to talk to you. I wanted to hug you and kiss you and thank you for being here. The best part of the show was you.

Back at my place, we talked late into the night. I had to leave early the next morning to get to the hotel site. Sleep would have to wait. You told me you wished I could have experienced the show like you had. You described the energy in the room and the connection I had made with the crowd.

We dreamed big as we talked. Big tour. Big venues. Music festivals. I think you believe in me more than I believe in myself. But I'm getting there. I trust your instinct.

I know that with you by my side, anything is possible.

## Chapter Nineteen

---

I dreaded going back to work this week after the amazing few days I've just experienced. Spending time with you, the solo show, and Sadie's softball game were memories I'll never forget. Now, life is tossing me back into my world of hotels, project meetings, and deadlines.

When I arrived at the building site, it was obvious Mike was overwhelmed. I felt guilty for bailing on him the past few days, knowing my absence had added to the multiple delays. I wanted to tell my brother about Sadie's performance at her softball game. I wanted to tell him about the Station Inn. I wanted to tell him about you. But there was no time for that. It was back to work immediately. We had a lot to do.

As I installed another set of motorized blinds and shades to cover a large fourth-floor hotel window, I looked outside and realized the sun was going down. I hadn't eaten lunch or dinner. I needed food. I was sure my brother was hungry too. I found him down the hall and talked him into taking a break to grab a bite to eat at a local dive across the street.

Once we ordered our food, I began telling him about Sadie's softball game and our rendition of the national anthem. He was listening, but I could tell he still had work on his mind. It saddened me to realize that he'd missed an unforgettable night in his daughter's life. Not only was he absent when it happened, he didn't even realize what he had missed.

Mike had created a life that I had once desired. He owned a successful business, he had a large home, and he was wealthy.

He also deserved every bit of success that had come his way. Nothing was handed to him. My brother had earned his success through a relentless work ethic, grit, and perseverance. He had sacrificed so much to get to where he was today. I had done the same. But I didn't want to make those sacrifices anymore. I didn't want the life he was living.

As we waited for our food, a surge of courage built inside of me. Maybe it was the hunger and exhaustion. Maybe it was the vast difference between this day and the past few. Maybe it was his detachment from my story about Sadie. I wanted out and I was going to break the news to him now.

Just as the words were coming out of my mouth, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I fished it out to see if you were calling me, but my display showed a number from New York. I don't get a lot of calls from New York, so I answered.

The jovial man on the other end called me by my name and said that the Station Inn had given him my number. He was a producer from the *Today* show and wanted to know if I was available to recreate my performance next week at Rockefeller Center. I was speechless.

A thousand questions raced through my mind. How did he know who I was? Was he at my solo show Tuesday night? Which of the songs did he want me to recreate? Was it a song I wrote? Was this for real?

I sat there, stunned, staring at my brother who was now scrolling through his phone.

"You there?" the voice asked.

I finally managed to say, "Yes. Which song?"

He wanted me to perform the national anthem. With Sadie.

He then explained that a *Today* show intern had stumbled across the video of our performance on social media. Someone in the stands had recorded us singing and shared it. The producer loved the way I rescued a nervous Sadie by singing the song with her. He also was impressed by how well we sang the song together. My name was mentioned in the video's description and a quick online search led them to my recent

solo performance at the Station Inn. The call to them resulted in my number.

His questions came at me fast. Was Sadie my niece? Was I related to her mom or dad? How old was she? Did I think she was capable of performing it again on live television? How long had I been singing and playing? Did I have an album out?

I told the producer I was having dinner with Sadie's dad as we spoke. Let me have a quick conversation with him and I'd call back. I quickly disconnected the call and told my brother I needed his full concentration.

For the first time since I'd seen him that day, Mike's focus veered away from work. As I told him about the call from the *Today* show producer and recounted the night of the game again, he was beaming from ear to ear. He called home and got the entire family on speakerphone. I delivered the good news. I don't think Sadie really understood what the *Today* show was, but she knew it was a big deal and was thrilled about flying to New York.

As soon as we ended that call, I phoned the producer back and told him to make arrangements. We were all in! I also requested arrangements for an extra person who might be joining me on the journey.

My next call was to you. I could tell I was throwing a lot at you in a short amount of time. New York? Flying out tomorrow? I also heard the excitement in your voice and the genuine happiness for Sadie and me. When you told me you would go with us, I knew everything would be great.

We're going to New York.

Sadie and I are performing on the *Today* show.

I'm spending the entire week with you.

I have a feeling that life is going to be very different after this trip. We better buckle our seat belts.

## Chapter Twenty

---

So much has happened in the last few days. I feel like everything is coming together at the right time. The universe is showing me my path.

My brother called in more reinforcements from another construction crew to help with the completion of the hotel. Partly to help me, allowing me time to go back home and practice the song with Sadie. But he also did it for himself. I'm happy to say that he is excited about going to New York with us. He will not take a chance missing when his daughter sings on national television.

Friday morning, the *Today* show aired the social media video of Sadie and me singing at the softball game and told the audience we would be performing live at Rockefeller Center the following week. My phone blew up. I got calls and texts from people I haven't spoken to in years.

After the video aired, we hit two million views online. Other videos of me performing have begun popping up online too. You are in one of them! Someone posted a video of me performing the song I dedicated to you at the Station Inn. It's closing in on a million views.

Am I nervous about performing on live television? Of course, I am. Have I forgotten that I sometimes have panic attacks? Nope. Am I aware that Sadie's nerves got the best of her the only other time we performed in front of a live audience? Yep.

I also know that Sadie's nerves led us to this amazing opportunity. If we had performed the song without a hitch, the



*Today* show intern would have probably thought the video was cute, but not worth national attention. Instead, our video is an example of overcoming fear. Watching Sadie transform from a scared little girl to a confident little singer with a voice beyond her years is a triumphant story. If a ten-year-old can overcome the anxiety she felt in that moment, anyone can. Including me.

In the video, it's clear that I wasn't scared. I kept my cool as I knelt down beside Sadie and began singing the song.

My attention was on Sadie, not myself. My focus was on the solution, not the problem. Lesson learned.

I've had two sessions with Courtney the past two days. I'm growing with every one of our conversations, beginning to take ownership of my life. I'm focusing on the things I want in life, not the things I don't want.

Courtney and I have spent a lot of time talking about the anxiety attacks and my career. I think the two are intertwined. I believe the attacks are related to the constant tug-of-war going on inside of me. I've been afraid of becoming too successful with my music. If things go too well, I'll have to make a choice between my brother and my passion. I don't want to let him down, but I want to do what is best for me. I have a lot to think about. I need to have a conversation with Mike. I need clarity with my career path.

RIGHT NOW, there is one area in my life where I feel total clarity.

With you.

You're the best thing that has ever happened to me. Your love. Your support.

You.

When we're together, I feel like anything is possible. When we are apart, I still hear your encouraging voice inside my head.

With you by my side, I'm not worried about panic attacks. If it happens, it happens. We'll get through it. We'll figure it out.

My only worry I will allow myself is making sure I help you achieve everything you've ever dreamed of in life. I will worry about that every minute of every day.

You deserve nothing less.

## Chapter Twenty-One

---

We set our alarms for three thirty in the morning. Ouch.

The producers from the *Today* show arranged for a car to pick us up at the hotel at four thirty. When the phone alarm began buzzing in the early morning hour, I felt you snuggle up next to me. I began my day with a smile.

Showering and getting dressed with you in the morning is very difficult. You are one big, wonderful distraction. I had trouble staying focused on the task at hand. If this is our life someday, we'll need two bathrooms or I'll never get anywhere on time.

Before leaving the room, I grabbed my guitar case and did a quick inventory check.

Guitar. Check.

Strap. Check.

Tuner. Check.

Picks. Check.

Engagement ring. Check.

The morning was a whirlwind of extraordinary activity. I had no idea so many behind-the-scenes people were involved in the production of a live television show. The bustle of activity was four straight hours of organized chaos. The set is smaller than it appears on TV, the outside audience on the plaza is bigger than it appears on TV, and Al Roker is the coolest person I have ever met.

Sadie and I performed on the plaza during the first hour of the *Today* show. I held Sadie's hand as we watched a prerecorded segment featuring us on the monitor before our introduction. I knew she was calm and ready when she squeezed my hand and smiled up at me. We were both ready for our moment in the spotlight.

When the video ended, and we were introduced to the live audience, I crouched down on one knee and began the intro to the national anthem. Sadie and I were in perfect sync from the first word. Our harmony was the best it has ever been. We had rehearsed the song hundreds of times, but this was our finest performance to date. We had seized the moment.

Sadie charmed the crew and audience with her on-camera interview with Al Roker after the song. When it came time for Al to talk to me, the two of us walked over to where you were standing. The producers had helped me plan this unforgettable moment. For the second time in the past five minutes, I crouched down on one knee. As I pulled the ring from my pocket, my eyes locked on yours with the intensity I felt looking into them the first time I saw you.

I have never felt as calm as I did when I asked you if you would marry me. I knew with complete certainty I was in the right place, at the right time, with the right person, asking the right question.

When I heard the word "yes" come out of your mouth, time stood still. I knew our lives would never be the same. I knew we were beginning a journey that would last a lifetime. I knew our future together was limitless.

There are a lot of great places to get engaged in New York City. The Empire State Building. Central Park. Madison Square Garden. But the best place is definitely on the plaza during a live performance television appearance at Rockefeller Center.

You and I appeared on television again during the fourth hour of the *Today* show with Hoda and Jenna. We talked about the proposal and I sang an acoustic version of the song I wrote for you called "My Story of Us."

After we got back to the hotel, Mike pulled me aside and asked to talk to me. He said that he would never tell me what to do, but...I should focus on my music career. He said if I treated music like a hobby, it would always be a hobby. He saw my potential and would do whatever was necessary to help me succeed. His advice was to step away from the family business for a couple of years and put all my time and energy into my music. If in two years, things haven't worked out, I could pick back up with him right where I left off.

My brother is right. I have enough money saved up to focus on music for a few years. The money will be there. Since our *Today* show appearance earlier this morning, I've been messaged by the manager of a successful up-and-coming singer who asked if I would consider joining his tour as an opening act. I have a feeling this is just the beginning.

A path is showing its way to us. Doors are opening. Life is good.

As I write this now, I glance up and see you lost in a book you're reading. You're as beautiful as ever. We're sitting in Central Park waiting for the sunset.

We're in love. We're getting married soon. Our future is wide open.

And I can't wait to begin this journey with you.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

---

Tonight, I caught a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror. I stopped, looked at my reflection, and smiled. My face was smudged with dirt from hauling boxes around, I had an undeniable case of hat hair, and I desperately needed to shave. My body ached from spending half of the day in a moving van and the other half hauling bulky boxes into our soon-to-be home. And I was smiling.

I haven't smiled at myself in the mirror in years. I haven't even really stopped and looked at myself because I didn't like the person looking back at me. You helped change that. You helped me find me. I see a man with possibility. I see a man I am proud of. I see a man in love with a woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with. I see us.

Most love stories have a chapter where love goes wrong. Where the couple needs time apart to appreciate their time together. I don't need that with you. I don't want that. You had me from the first moment I saw you. And you always will.

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Maybe it's the same with love. When the heart is open, love will appear. You unlocked my heart.

Our wedding is two weeks away. I can't wait to live this story of us.

When I was younger and helped my dad build things, I hated working with oak lumber. It's a strong wood for building backyard decks, but it's not easy to use. I wasn't strong enough to drive the nails into the wood.

The hidden power of an oak tree is in its unforgiving strength. Starting out as a tiny acorn, it grows and gets stronger with each new layer. The outside bark protects the tree. Beneath the bark, more layers simultaneously grow inward and outward, creating more strength that allows the tree to quickly heal if it is damaged. More hidden layers transport water and nutrients within the tree. With each season the tree grows new layers as it becomes more resilient.

Like the oak tree, I trust that our love will deepen and strengthen with each passing season. Our love will grow inward and outward. I'll show you every day how amazing you are and how much I appreciate you. I'll do whatever it takes to keep our love growing, and I pledge to take care of myself so I can always give you my all.

You came into my life when I least expected it. You came into my life when I needed you the most.

When you found me, I was hiding from the world. Now, I can't imagine my world without you. I love you with all my heart.

I always will.



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*Sneak Peek of Love in Due Time by L.B. Dunbar*

[Naomi]

I'm going to be forty.

Someday.

*Soon-ish.*

And I'm thinking these things as I stand in the baking aisle of the Piggly Wiggly late at night, while the world is out partying, and I'm grocery shopping. Alone. At ten-fifteen.

*Sigh.*

Okay, maybe not the world. Just Green Valley, Tennessee. It's Friday night and most of Green Valley is attending the weekly jam session, a night of musical talent and good things to eat, at the community center. I don't attend for several reasons.

I used to go, though.

When I was a teen, I was a wild child. *Naomi, God put a spirit in you, girl*, my mother would say.

It wasn't a god, though, at least not one I readily believed in. The spirit wasn't something placed in me, but something I was born with—something I tried to contain. Daughter of a preacher and a woman who thought she wanted to be a nun, my home was ultraconservative growing up.

Don't drink. Don't smoke. Don't dance.

As soon as I was told not to do those things as a teen, it's exactly what I wanted to do. Then I turned twenty-one. Recollection of that night pulls my heart in opposing directions, like a tug-of-war within my chest.

I reach for a box of brownie mix to chase away the memories. Chocolatey squares of heaven solve everything. Truthfully, I could make these from scratch. I have a great recipe and guilt gnaws at me as I consider the boxed mix. I volunteered to bring a dessert to a luncheon hosted at the library. I could always order something premade from Donner Bakery or grab something from the pre-packaged goods section here at the grocer, but where's the fun in that? Adding water, oil, and an



egg to the dry mix will make me feel as if I've accomplished something.

Julianne MacIntyre can probably sniff out a box-made dessert, and my holistic approach to life prefers I remain all natural. My beliefs are different from the norm. I'm a Wiccan. I celebrate nature, purity, and most importantly, the spirit of women. Mother Nature is my guide. She's the Goddess Supreme, or rather the Triple Goddess is my ruler. Local rumor is I'm a witch, but my story is nothing fantastical. I'm a librarian at the Green Valley Public Library.

I look left and right, make certain no one notices me, and add the brownie mix to my handheld basket. *Sometimes, you just need to break the rules.* Tonight, I need quick and easy, I console my conscience as I head for the checkout lane. Ten items or less. I always want to take a red pen to the sign. It's ten items or fewer. At this time of night, I don't see how many items a person carries would matter. I'm the only one in here except for Sara Stokes.

"How's it going, Ms. Winters?" Sara Stokes has the misfortune of once being married to Deveron Stokes, the dry cleaner. He was not a good man and his ex-wife suffered the repercussions of reproducing with him. He was a child support dodger to the nth degree, thus her job working the night shift at the Piggly Wiggly. As a woman roughly my age, it was strange she called me Ms. Winters, but then again, all the mommas were used to formally addressing me in front of their children.

"Just fine, Sara, and yourself?" I'm only half listening to her response as I place my plastic basket on the conveyor, preparing to set my items on the belt when I feel a presence next to me. Someone tall, solid, burly. The scent alone signals he's all spicy male, and without thought, my head turns. Then my breathing halts.

Nathan Ryder.

Standing six plus, double my size, and with a chest covered by a leather jacket, he peers down at me with silver-colored eyes I'll never forget. He nods in greeting but I don't respond. My

tongue swells three times larger. *My tongue*. The same one that tangled with his and licked his—*oh my*. My gaze drifts down to the very spot I shouldn't be remembering, a place on him I shouldn't be imagining.

My hand comes to the collar of my linen peasant blouse, and I tug.

*Is it warm in here?* Why is the heat on in September? Am I experiencing hot flashes already?

Still drawn to him, my eyes climb up his mountain height and fall again on the unusual spark in his eyes. His hair—more chrome than ink—matches the metallic stitching in the black leather of his jacket. His hair isn't as long as I remember, being cropped close to his head, almost military in style.

“Ms. Winters?” Sara says, interrupting my perusal of this hunk of man and calling attention to the fact that my basket sits on the belt, but I haven't unloaded the items, keeping the handle looped over my arm, and fighting the tug of the conveyor. I look ridiculous.

Shaky fingers come to my long white and gray streaked hair, and nervously comb back the strands. My appearance adds to the witch rumors—wild curls of premature gray, clothing made of natural fabrics, and black lace-up boots. A finger catches in my hoop earring and I struggle for a second with myself. A sharp tug and the silver circle releases, flinging from my sensitive earlobe and flicking Nathan in the chest.

*Ow*. My eyes sting with the release but I notice he catches the jewelry as it ricochets off the hard plains of his pecs under the soft-gray Henley he wears. He holds my earring out in between thick fingers I instantly recall tweaking my nipples once. Maybe twice.

With noticeably trembling fingers, I reach for the hoop.

“Sorry about that,” I mutter, as if I did it on purpose. Right? Who would purposefully stick her fingers in her own nest of hair, get said finger hooked on her dime-store earring, and flip it at a burly man dressed like he's in a motorcycle club?

I'm a hot mess.

*Did I mention how warm it is in the Piggly Wiggly?*

I lower my eyes, willing myself to look away from him when I notice he holds only one item.

Is that a box of condoms?

*Sweet Goddess, grant me strength.*

My eyes flick to his zipper region again, and then I turn away. My cheeks flood with heat, undoubtedly matching the maroon swirls in my ankle-length skirt. I'm fifty shades of red and then some.

"You only have the one item?" I question, no longer able to look in his direction as he taps the box on the metal edge of the counter. I tug my basket upward and step back. "Why don't you go ahead of me?"

There isn't enough space between the checkout counter and the rack of candy behind me for the two of us, yet he shifts his large body to face mine and steps forward, pinning my back to the bars of chocolate and bags of trail mix behind me.

His eyes catch mine for a moment, widening in surprise before narrowing in question. He doesn't appear to recognize me and why would he? It's been a long time. He gives his head a shake, more like a twitch, and straightens. A mischievous curve appears at the corner of his lips and leaning toward me just the slightest bit, he says, "You sure you don't want to go first?" And just like that I'm propelled back in time to a night I've told myself to forget, and yet, never have. The deep timbre of his voice melts over me like drizzled caramel, suggestively hinting at something I know he doesn't mean. A pulse beats at the cookie crunch in my center while I stare back at him, swollen tongue and all.

"Thanks, sweetheart," he adds when I don't respond. His rough tone drips like nougat and fills my mind with candy-coated metaphors. My head shakes to dismiss his gratitude and he slides forward. And I mean slides, allowing his body to glide across mine in a leisurely drag. His firm upper body narrowly misses my face, but his lower area does not escape my belly, which does its own roundoff back handsprings as the

awkwardness of something other than a candy bar—yet strong and yummy—swipes over me. The pressure lasts no more than a few seconds, but I'm like a champagne fountain come to life without a single glass to collect the bubbly drink.

*What has come over me?*

A thick hand comes to my upper arm as Nathan twists away from me and warmth seeps through my body. Then my blouse continues moving with him. My mouth pops open to say something, warn him, as my shirt opens wider at the neck, exposing my nude bra as my blouse follows the twist of his body.

*I'm stuck on him.*

“Um ...” I hold up a finger, and he turns to glance down at me. I freeze. All thought escapes me as his eyes dip lower and heat rises up my neck. I lick my lips. Another second and I'm certain I'll be frothing at the mouth despite my embarrassment. I'd like to say I understand my reaction when he looks at me like he is—silver eyes glistening. But I don't. I'm a thirty-nine-year-old sexually-repressed librarian who practices self-love in hopes of reviving her inner goddess.

I'm still waiting for divine inspiration to spring forth.

With that thought, the fabric springs free of his protruding belt buckle and his hand releases my arm.

*Thank you, Mother Earth.*

I risk a quick glance up at him to see if he noticed our attached clothing, but it appears as if he missed everything. Instead, he looks like a god with his broody-edged jaw layered in white with a smattering of lion-brown in the mix, not to mention his hulking body. While Wiccan practices remind me life is about balance, it also teaches me I don't need a man on the other side of my seesaw. At least, the way I celebrate my religion.

I blink. I blink again. Then I reach for my shirt, tugging the hem forward to notice a small hole caused by our caught clothing. How appropriate considering the hole he left inside me. And just like the time before, he doesn't even notice what

he's done to me. He doesn't look back at me, like he didn't look back then.

Rough fingers with short nails like they'd been bitten come to his belt buckle and absentmindedly press at the metal confine. He straightens it against his waist, leaving his callused digit on the tip a bit longer than necessary. Then he smooths his hand down the front of his zipper.

My mouth falls open. *Swollen tongue*. Then it snaps shut.

Nathan chuckles softly to himself and glances up at Sara who is slack-jawed and wide-eyed, watching us with interest. I don't imagine the night shift offers much entertainment, and right now, the sexual tension vibrating off me is higher than a Passionflix rating of five heats.

"It's your turn," I say, nodding toward the clerk, and he turns his body, giving me his back as he steps forward. Harley Davidson, I read across his broad back and take in the symbol underneath. Is he a member of a motorcycle club? Not versed in the who's who of area bikers, I know enough of the Iron Wraiths, the local MC presided over by the incarcerated Razor Dennings, to make me shiver.

Nathan's box of condoms swipes over the scanner and Sara lowers the package for a bag.

"Oh, I won't need a bag. Keep the environment safe and all that." His eyes drift to the carrier over my shoulder, the one I use to collect my groceries. Environmentally friendly, women in Africa make these bags as a way to raise money for an education which could lift them from oppression. My heart leaps in my chest. He cares about the environment. "Not to mention, I'll be opening the package soon enough."

*Or not.*

He turns to Sara and winks. Fingers come to her pinkened cheeks while her other hand reaches for the twenty he offers for his purchase.

Quickly understanding his meaning, I begin removing items from my basket, setting them on the belt with more force than

necessary. *Why would I care that he's going to use a condom soon?*

Brownie mix. Rice cakes. Tampons.

I look over at the magazine rack to my left and reach for a novel from the ten bestsellers at the top of the display. I don't even read the title. I simply grab the book with the cover of a bare-chested man ripping the bodice of a woman in a floor-length gown and drop it down on the belt with the remainder of my things.

"Looks like an interesting night," Nathan says, eyeing my stuff as he holds out his hand for his change. Sara seems to be taking her sweet time doling out the bills and pressing coins in his palm.

*Did she just stroke his fingertips?*

My brain mutters a litany of profanity, but my mouth tweaks up in a false smile.

"Well, we can't all be as interesting as you." My brows tip up as my eyes flip to the box in his hand.

*What the ... Nice retort. Am I in high school?*

Nathan leans toward me, his head lowered, and his voice deepens. "Plan on it being very interesting. Want to join me?" He smirks—*literally*—with a rough chuckle. A raised brow matches mine and that damn corner of his lip creeps upward again. *Is that a dimple?* Sara's eyes flick between him and me, her mouth clamping in a grimace as her head tips just the littlest of bits, almost encouraging me to follow him.

"No thanks," I mumble, sweat trickling down the center of my back, coating my spine. You're lying, my brain taps my forehead.

Deny. Deny. *Deny.*

His eyes focus on my breasts for a moment. *Maybe I'm imagining it?* Then he tips his chin upward like he's a movie star and I'm lingering paparazzi. "Okay then, Naomi."

It takes a moment to register he said my name. I've seen Nathan a few times in the last year, but he hasn't

acknowledged me. I assumed he forgot me, like he must have forgotten my phone number. I, however, have never forgotten him. My chest clenches—a sensation like my ribs are caving inward—and I want the tile floor to open and swallow me whole.

Sara watches me as she scans each of my items slowly, her expression stoic but I sense the question churning inside her. *Him? You?* Her eyes shift once again to Nathan's retreating back as he exits the store and then to me. I remain focused, following the swipe of each item before they are placed in my environmentally friendly bag. My toes wiggle in my leather boots and my fingers twitch, tapping a crisp twenty on the raised counter waiting to pay as I refuse to watch Nathan's departure. My entire body flickers with a flame I haven't felt in a long time.

*I will not live my life in the past.*

Sara reaches for the impulse purchase, scans the back, and then holds the book up to face me, as if waiting for an explanation.

Tonight is not going to be an evening of stellar, stimulating, quality literature like we host at the library. No, tonight will be a late night of unadulterated smut and self-soothing pleasure.

“You tell anyone, and I'll never let you check out the *9 ½ Weeks* DVD from the library again.”

Sara slams the book into my bag and winks.

Interesting evening indeed.

*Keep reading 'Love in Due Time' [Here!](#)*

*Or take a gander at the entire Green Valley Library series [Here!](#)*

## About the Author

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Chris Brinkley is a narrator, voice actor, writer, producer, NCAA Division I broadcaster, radio personality, and emcee. Brinkley penned the recently released *My Story of Us* book and audio series. He is also known as the voice of Penny Reid's Winston Brothers Series, narrating and voicing all six brothers in the popular audiobook collection. Brinkley narrates Reid's Handcrafted Mystery Series and the Smartypants Romance Green Valley Chronicles. Chris portrays Eliot in the critically acclaimed Audible Original *Sweet Talk*. He is currently one of the top narrators on Kevin Costner's HearHere travel app and is heard weekly on the Curio audio journalism app. As the voice of several documentaries seen on the History Channel (D-Day in HD) and PBS, he brings a trustworthiness and credibility to his delivery that captures the essence of the filmmaker's vision. He co-produced, wrote, and hosted two nationally syndicated radio shows heard on stations throughout the US. With a varied communications background and extensive vocal repertoire, Chris possesses unparalleled experience and unique, vocal versatility.

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