

SHANAE JOHNSON

A romantic couple is shown in a lush green field under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The man, on the left, is wearing a light pink t-shirt and light blue distressed jeans, smiling broadly. The woman, on the right, is wearing a dark pink top and has her arms around his waist, kissing him on the cheek. The background features rolling green hills and a small house in the distance.

Soldier's
Triumph

AN HONOR VALLEY ROMANCE

SOLDIER'S TRIUMPH

A SWEET MILITARY ROMANCE

HONOR VALLEY ROMANCES

SHANAE JOHNSON

THOSE JOHNSON GIRLS

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CHAPTER ONE

Liam Montgomery sent a wave to the Uber driver. When the energy efficient car that stank of stale fast-food fries and grease pulled away, he was left looking out at the trim yards and white picket fences of his neighborhood. The small town of Honor Valley held a charm that tugged at his heartstrings, drawing him back to the place he'd left behind months ago. With a deep breath, he straightened his shoulders and adjusted the duffle bag on his shoulder. It was time to face the life he'd left behind.

Liam turned to face the small, unpretentious two-bedroom starter home tucked at the beginning of the cul-de-sac. The house had charmed him from the first look. He'd always appreciated the quiet, the way the trees seemed to shelter the property, giving him a sense of privacy and peace. The house, built with weathered bricks painted a soft beige, blended with the surrounding natural landscape. Its exterior, seasoned by years of exposure to the elements, spoke of resilience and silent endurance, much like Liam himself.

He had just returned from an extensive therapy program for his PTSD on the Purple Heart Ranch, a rehabilitation ranch in Montana for Wounded Warriors like himself. Liam had come a long way since then, healing not only his body but also

his spirit. But he knew there was still one crucial battle left to fight: winning back the love and trust of his wife.

As he approached the front door, he noticed the sun casting a warm glow over the house, making it seem more inviting than ever. He hesitated for a moment before using his key, turning the doorknob, and stepping inside.

“Rachel?” he called out, his voice echoing through the empty hallway.

No answer.

The resounding silence stung. Liam reasoned with himself that they weren't cooling their heels after a fight where she'd shut him out with the cold quiet. She must be at work.

He slowly made his way through the house, noting the changes that had taken place since he'd been gone. The once cluttered living room now appeared neat and organized, with new furniture and freshly painted walls. The absence of their photos together was a painful reminder of their strained relationship.

Liam walked toward the bedroom, his boots echoing softly on the hardwood floor. He paused at the doorway, steeling himself for what lay ahead. The door creaked open, revealing a room that was both familiar and altered. Sunlight streamed through white sheer curtains, casting a warm glow on the walls that had been freshly painted a serene shade of blue.

When he entered the room, his eyes immediately fell upon the bed—their bed. The sheets were different, a soft blue color that he didn't recognize. The old quilt they used to snuggle under had been replaced by crisp white sheets with a subtle pattern of pale flowers. His side of the bed appeared untouched, as though time itself had stopped when he left.

He hesitated before running a hand over Rachel's side of the bed, breathing in her scent that still lingered. The texture of the cool cotton sheets brought back memories of the nights they'd spent tangled together, laughing and sharing secrets. He leaned down, inhaling her scent—a delicate blend of lavender and vanilla that tugged at his heartstrings. His heart ached with longing for her, but it was his determination to be a better husband that fueled his resolve. He wanted to earn back his place in their bed, to rebuild the connection they'd once shared.

Liam considered moving his clothes into the closet, but something held him back. It was as if he'd become a stranger in his own home, unsure of where he belonged. He knew that he needed to prove himself before reclaiming his space.

Hefting his bag higher on his shoulder, Liam left the bedroom and trudged to the guest room. The room was smaller than their master bedroom, painted a neutral beige color with modest furnishings. As he set down his duffle bag on the floor, he took a moment to reflect on the enormity of the task ahead. Winning Rachel back would require more than simply being present. He would need to demonstrate his growth and commitment to their relationship.

Emotions swirled within him—sadness, regret, and determination all vying for attention as he settled into the spare bedroom. But above all, it was his unwavering resolve to win back his wife's love and trust that shone through. With that thought, he began to unpack his belongings, resolute in his mission to rebuild their connection and reclaim the life they'd once shared.

As he settled into the room, Liam began to remember the happy moments they'd once shared. In those days, they had

been inseparable, their love a beacon of the brightest sunshine amidst life's challenges. But now he felt the weight of all the lost time bearing down on him like the darkest night. The darkness threatened to crush the fragile semblance of hope that still flickered within.

Liam found himself standing at the window, staring out into the backyard. There was a small patchwork of grass, not quite perfectly manicured but somehow still welcoming. He remembered their first summer barbecue, surrounded by friends and family, laughter filling the air. It was a bittersweet memory—a reminder of a time when things were simpler and his connection with Rachel was unshakable.

A sudden gust of wind blew through the open window, rustling the curtains and ruffling his hair. Liam took it as a sign from the universe that he needed to take action, to prove to Rachel that he was no longer the man who had walked away from her all those months ago.

As he paced the room, Liam thought about the steps he needed to take to win Rachel's love and trust again. He knew communication was key—something they had both struggled with in the past. He decided that every day, he would make an effort to talk openly with her about his feelings, fears, and hopes for their future. He would begin as soon as she got home from work.

CHAPTER TWO

*R*achel Montgomery stood at the head of the conference table, feeling a surge of confidence as she glanced around the room. She took in the eager faces of her colleagues. The anticipation for her presentation on the company's new product line was palpable, and she felt a sense of satisfaction, knowing that the presentation was going better than she'd hoped.

"All right, everyone, let's continue," Rachel said, clicking to advance the slide on the screen behind her. "As you all know, we've been working tirelessly on this new product line. As you can see, our progress is exceeding expectations."

Rachel guided the team through each point with unwavering poise, driven by her ambition for a promotion and desire for stability and independence. Her voice never wavered. Each time she looked up from her notes, she saw nods of approval and smiles of encouragement from her peers.

"Based on our market research and consumer feedback, we anticipate that these products will not only meet but exceed the expectations of our customers. We're ready to make waves in the industry," she concluded, clicking off the presentation and beaming at the applause that followed.

"Excellent job, Rachel," said her boss.

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson,” she replied, feeling a warmth in her chest at the praise. It had been so long since she’d been appreciated by anyone, especially a man.

After the applause died down, Rachel collected her presentation materials and exited the conference room, her heart still racing from the adrenaline of the successful presentation. As she walked back to her desk, she noticed a sudden hush falling over the office. Heads turned as Mr. Johnson emerged from the conference room.

“Rachel, may I have a word with you?” he asked, his voice smooth and authoritative.

“Of course, Mr. Johnson,” she replied, trying to hide her nerves as they headed toward his office.

Gregory Johnson was more than just a boss; he was a dynamic force in the office, a constant presence that demanded attention. He was a few years Rachel’s senior, his age evident not in physical appearance but in the wisdom and experience that radiated from him. A handsome man, Gregory was tall and well-built, his dark hair peppered with just enough gray to lend him an air of distinguished charm.

Once they were inside his office, Gregory shut the door behind them and leaned against his mahogany desk, his expensive suit perfectly tailored to his frame. “I just wanted to say that your presentation was exceptional. You’ve clearly put in a lot of hard work, and it shows.”

“Thank you, sir,” Rachel said, feeling herself blush.

“Please, call me Greg,” he insisted, his eyes locked on hers. “You know, it’s rare to find someone as dedicated and talented as you are. Keep up the good work, and there’ll certainly be a promotion in your future.”

“Thank you, Greg. That means a lot to me.”

Rachel couldn't be sure, but Greg's praise might have been more than for her stellar job performance. There was a twinkle of awareness in his eye, one Rachel remembered seeing the first time she'd laid eyes on Liam.

It had been months since she'd last spoken to her estranged husband. Now here was another man treating her with respect and admiration. She wondered if she was finally ready to move on and date someone new now that it was clear that her marriage had failed and there was no hope of reconciliation, with Liam having walked away from her without a word.

“You've got a bright future ahead of you,” Greg was saying. “I'm glad to have you on my team.”

As Rachel left Greg's office, she felt a mix of emotions: excitement at the possibility of a promotion, gratitude for the praise she had received but also a lingering uncertainty about her boss' potential romantic interest in her. She knew she wanted to maintain her independence and focus on her career. But could she do that while still exploring new relationships?

For now, she decided to put those thoughts aside and concentrate on her work. There would be plenty of time later to ponder what her heart truly desired.

The sun was setting as Rachel stepped out onto the bustling sidewalk, the fading light casting an orange glow over the cityscape. She breathed in deeply, feeling the cool air fill her lungs and appreciating the small moment of peace amidst her chaotic thoughts.

“Rachel!” a coworker called, beckoning her to join a group heading to the nearby bar for after-work drinks.

“Not tonight,” she replied with a smile. “I have some work to finish up at home.”

As she walked toward the town trolley, Rachel passed many groups and couples doing the dance of getting closer. She’d once done the same two-step with Liam, inching closer and closer as they got to know each other until they were inseparable. He had once been the center of her world. Now she had no idea where he was.

Their separation had been a painful decision, driven by his PTSD and subsequent withdrawal from her after returning from overseas. She had heard he might be reenlisting. The thought that he would go without telling her hurt. But he didn’t owe her anything now that their relationship was over.

Boarding the trolley, Rachel found herself a seat by the window, watching the city blur past her as they sped along the tracks. Her trendy neighborhood beckoned, promising both comfort and a sense of control over her life that she craved. It wasn’t much, but it was her sanctuary from the world outside.

Her brow furrowed when she came to the front door of her home and noticed the latch hanging open, the door not quite flush against its frame. Panic lanced through her chest, knotting her stomach into tight coils. She knew for certain she had locked it that morning, like every other day. Thoughts of a break-in flooded her mind, leaving her feeling vulnerable and exposed.

She wasn’t one to let fear control her—not in her professional life and certainly not now. Carefully, she pushed the door open with her foot, listening intently for any sounds from within.

With her heart pounding in her ears, Rachel stepped inside, scanning the living room for any signs of disturbance.

Everything appeared to be in its proper place. That thought did little to assuage her unease.

Reaching for the first weapon-like object she could find, Rachel's fingers wrapped around the handle of her sturdy black umbrella, the one she'd received as a gift from her mother years ago. If someone had invaded her sanctuary, they would soon learn they'd picked the wrong woman to mess with.

Her heart raced as she moved cautiously down the hall, the umbrella poised and ready to strike. Each room proved empty, offering no clues as to what had caused her door to be unlocked. As she approached the kitchen, Rachel's inner turmoil grew, torn between relief that her home seemed undisturbed and the nagging anxiety that the invader might still be lurking in the shadows.

With her umbrella raised high, Rachel took a deep breath and stepped into the kitchen, ready to confront the intruder. The sight that greeted her was both unexpected and astonishing.

"Rachel," said the intruder, his lips stretching into a broad grin as he turned to face her.

Liam stood at the stove with a wooden spoon in hand, stirring something that smelled heavenly. His short-cropped brown hair and a new beard framed his handsome face, and despite the months they had spent apart, she couldn't deny that seeing him tugged at her heartstrings.

CHAPTER THREE

Liam stood in the kitchen, his hands coated in a fine layer of flour as he kneaded the pasta dough. The marble countertop before him was dotted with various ingredients: eggs, salt, olive oil, and an assortment of fresh herbs. He had chosen to make pasta from scratch as a symbol of his dedication to rebuilding their relationship, each strand representing the effort and care he was willing to invest in winning back Rachel's love and trust. Liam knew that it would take more than a delicious meal to mend the fractures in their marriage, but it was a start, and he was ready to give it his all.

He'd been thinking about the early days of his courtship when he would surprise Rachel with homemade dinners and picnics in the park. She had always been charmed by his culinary skills, jokingly referring to him as her "personal chef" whenever he cooked for her. Liam longed to see her smile again, that spark of joy in her eyes as she tasted the fruits of his labor.

His heart ached at the memory of Rachel walking away from him after his last PTSD episode, the distance between them growing wider with each passing day. His episodes had brought on bouts of silence where he couldn't bring himself to speak about what was playing out in his head. The disease was infectious, and the silence spread to Rachel.

By the end, the two of them had barely spoken a word between them in days. Might have been weeks. But now, having completed a rehabilitation program and separated from the military, Liam was determined to prove that he was a changed man—one who could be a loving and supportive husband once again.

As Liam stood in the kitchen, his hands coated with flour, he heard the sound of the front door slamming shut. He glanced over just as Rachel burst into the room with an umbrella raised like a weapon. The sight of her made his heart explode like a cannon in his chest. The organ clamored to get out and hit the one and only target it had ever desired. But Liam would need to disarm his wife first.

“Rachel,” he said on a happy sigh. With practiced ease, Liam stepped forward and snagged the umbrella, wrapping one arm around her waist and pulling her close to him.

Rachel’s eyes widened in shock as she registered who was holding her. Her mouth formed a perfect O, and she let out a soft gasp.

“Liam?” she whispered, her chest heaving as she tried to regain her composure. She stepped out of his hold and straightened her spine.

“Hey,” Liam murmured, his voice tender as he looked down at her face. His heart swelled with love for her, and he longed to press his lips against hers in a searingly sweet kiss. But he held back, knowing that now was not the time. They had so much they needed to talk about first.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” Rachel stammered, her initial shock giving way to confusion. She stared up at him, her brown eyes swimming with a mixture of surprise, fear, and

hope as she searched for answers. “Seriously, Liam, what are you doing here?”

Liam felt the sting of her question like a slap to the face. He knew he had to tread carefully if he wanted any chance at a future with her. He swallowed hard, trying to find the right words. “I came back to make things right between us, Rach. I want to be the man you deserve.”

Rachel crossed her arms over her chest, her body language clearly showing that she was not receptive to his explanation. Her brow furrowed in suspicion as she studied him.

“Did you reenlist? Is that why you’re really here?” she asked, her voice wavering slightly.

Liam shook his head, his eyes never leaving hers. “No, I didn’t. I went to a rehabilitation ranch for soldiers. I’ve been working on myself, trying to get better—for me and for you.”

Instead of looking at him, Rachel’s gaze zeroed in on the handmade pasta draped across the kitchen counter. Liam watched her closely, searching for any sign of a connection between them. He had poured his heart into making dinner for them, hoping to rekindle something he feared might be lost.

“Rach,” he began hesitantly, taking a step closer to her. “I know I can’t erase the past, but I can promise you that I’m committed to our future.”

Her eyes flicked up to meet his, a spark of ...something igniting within them. Not love. Maybe hope? Possibly hurt?

“Can you really promise me that, Liam?” Rachel asked, her voice wavering with vulnerability.

“More than anything,” Liam replied earnestly. “I’ve learned from my mistakes, and I want nothing more than to show you that I am worthy of your love.”

Rachel's chest rose and fell with each shallow breath she took. She seemed to be wrestling with her emotions, torn between fear and longing.

Liam's heart ached at the sight of her internal struggle. He so desperately wanted to make things right between them. He wanted to prove that they could overcome their pasts together.

He reached for her. Before his hand could get hold of her cheek and fit it perfectly into his palm as it had since the first moment he'd embraced her, his wife flinched. Liam pulled his hand away. It hung limp at his side.

"Rachel," Liam said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I want you to know that I'll do everything in my power to make this work. To regain your trust and rebuild our love."

"Give me some time, Liam," she said quietly. "I need... I need to think."

Liam nodded, his heart heavy with the knowledge that he couldn't simply erase the pain between them with a few heartfelt words. He stepped aside, giving her space where he wanted to eliminate any inch between them.

Rachel turned and walked away from him, leaving him alone in the kitchen once more. As her footsteps receded down the hallway, Liam's mind raced with thoughts of what lay ahead. He knew the road to reconciliation wouldn't be easy, but he was determined to fight for the love they had once shared. And even as the weight of doubt threatened to crush him, he held on to that spark of hope—the hope that one day, they would find their way back to each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

*R*achel stood in her immaculate kitchen, gazing out the window at the colorful autumn leaves that adorned the trees in her backyard. The peaceful scene before her belied the turmoil roiling inside her heart. The counters were sparkling. The sink was empty. All the dishes were put away. It was as though Liam had never even been here.

Three months had passed since Rachel had last seen her husband. Their separation had not been easy on her, but she'd persevered. She'd taken the time for self-reflection and had come out the other end stronger. She had a clear vision of what she wanted for her life: advancement in her career, a tight circle of friends she could hang out with after work and on the weekends, maybe in a few months to a year, she might even start dating.

Except now, her husband opened the guest bedroom door and stepped back into her life.

Liam greeted her as he crossed into the kitchen. Rachel watched as he took out Tupperware from the fridge and went about emptying the contents into a pan. It was the pasta from last night. He served the warm dish on a plate and set it on the dining table. The rich tomato sauce glistened beneath freshly grated Parmesan cheese. The aroma wafted through the air,

making Rachel feel lightheaded and momentarily distracting her from the situation at hand.

“Is that my favorite pasta dish?” Rachel asked, trying to sound nonchalant but failing as her voice wavered with the memories that the meal brought back.

“Guilty as charged,” Liam said. “I hoped it might bring back some happy memories for us.”

The pasta represented more than just a delicious meal; it was a symbol of their shared history. Despite her initial rejection of Liam’s return, she couldn’t deny the effect he still had on her. But she needed to remind herself that they were separated and would soon start the official process of getting a divorce. She’d even had papers drawn up a few weeks ago. They sat at a table near the door waiting for a forwarding address for him.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I’ve been on a strict diet for the last three months,” she said, striving for a tone of indifference. “I can’t afford to indulge right now.”

“Diet? What for? You’re perfect.”

At his compliment, Rachel felt a warmth spread across her cheeks, betraying the sudden surge of emotion that welled up within her. A flutter in her stomach reminded her of the first time they had met, when he had swept her off her feet with his charm and wit. She blinked rapidly, trying to push away the memories that threatened to weaken her resolve.

Despite that resolve, Rachel found it difficult to ignore the sincerity in Liam’s voice. She wanted to believe him, but she also knew she couldn’t let her guard down. It was a delicate dance between wanting to trust him and needing to protect herself.

As Rachel looked at the pasta again, she realized it wasn't just a meal—it was an olive branch, a symbol of Liam's determination to make amends. She felt torn, unsure whether to accept his offering or continue to guard her heart.

“Thank you, Liam,” she said softly, taking a deep breath to steady herself. “But it's not just about how I look. I'm trying to make healthier choices for myself.”

“I get it, but you don't have to deprive yourself of something you enjoy. Besides, I made this pasta especially for you, to remind you of our trip to Italy.”

Rachel couldn't help but smile at the memory of their romantic getaway before everything fell apart. The cobblestone streets of Rome, the breathtaking views of the Amalfi Coast, and the delicious food they had shared together—it all came flooding back to her, making her heart ache with longing.

“All right, maybe just one bite,” she conceded, reaching for the fork that Liam held out to her.

As the rich flavors of the tomato sauce and Parmesan cheese enveloped her taste buds, Rachel closed her eyes, momentarily lost in the pleasure of the meal. It was more than just a plate of pasta; it was a part of their history together, a reminder of happier times.

“See? It's not so bad to indulge every once in a while.”

Rachel opened her eyes and looked at him, unable to deny the pull she still felt. She knew she needed to be cautious, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the warmth that his presence brought to her.

“Maybe you're right,” she admitted quietly, her voice wavering with uncertainty. “But it's going to take more than a

plate of pasta to convince me that you've truly changed."

Before Liam could answer, Rachel's phone began to ring. The familiar melody of her boss' ringtone filled the room like an unwelcome intruder. Rachel hesitated, torn between her duty to her career and the man who had once been her everything. She glanced at the phone, then back at Liam, and shook her head.

Could she really allow herself to trust him again? To open her heart to the possibility of reconciliation? It was a dangerous gamble, and part of her screamed to resist, to maintain her independence and focus on her career.

But another part of her, buried deep beneath the hurt and betrayal, still yearned for the man she'd fallen in love with.

"I have to get to work."

Liam reached for her. Rachel jerked her hand back before he could touch her. Liam stared, dumbfounded at her reaction. Rachel felt a tinge of shame at her rejection of the man who had once owned her heart.

"I've been going to therapy and working on myself. I want to be the man you deserve, Rachel. The man you fell in love with."

Rachel's eyes welled up with tears. She wiped them away quickly, trying to regain her composure. At the same time, she felt a mix of hope and fear battling within her, both vying for control. Could she really trust him again? Was it worth the risk?

"I know I can't erase the past, but I'll do everything in my power to make things right again. I'm committed to healing and becoming a better person."

Rachel bit her lip, her heart aching with indecision. Part of her wanted to believe him, to trust that he truly had changed and that their love was worth fighting for. But another part of her feared the pain of being betrayed again, the humiliation of having her trust shattered by the very person she'd given her heart to. The silence Liam could fling at her hurt more than any foul curse ever could.

“Please, just give me a chance to prove myself,” he pleaded, his voice cracking with emotion.

Her breath caught in her throat at the sincerity in his tone, and for a moment, she allowed herself to imagine a future where they could be happy together once more. For a moment, she was transported back to a time when laughter and love filled their days together. But then reality slammed into her like a tidal wave, and she remembered the hurt that had driven them apart. The lingering doubts still gnawed at her, and she knew she couldn't simply throw caution to the wind.

“This is still your home,” she said. “But I'm no longer your wife.”

And with that, Rachel picked up her phone and headed out the door for work. Liam didn't call out for her as she walked away. He said nothing as she opened and closed the door, shutting him out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Liam's eyes shot open, a guttural gasp escaping his lips as he wrestled with the disorienting remnants of the dream. His heart pounded in his chest, threatening to break free from its cage, and sweat clung to his brow like an unwanted shadow. He could still hear the distant echoes of gunfire and the screams of his fallen comrades, a cacophony that refused to be silenced.

Another night terror. He swallowed hard as he tried to regain control of the tremors racking his body. Liam knew this was just another symptom of his PTSD, but understanding it didn't make it any easier to endure.

Forcing himself to take slow, deep breaths, he focused on the faint sound of his own heartbeat, willing it to return to a normal rhythm. As his breathing steadied, he became aware of another presence in the room. His gaze darted toward the open door of the guest bedroom.

Rachel stood there, her delicate features etched with concern as she watched him. Her soft brown eyes held a mix of emotions, mostly fear and worry.

Liam found himself hesitating before finally admitting, "I had a nightmare."

"Is there anything I can do?" Rachel asked.

“Stay,” Liam whispered.

It had been a long time since they had shared a space this intimate, and the vulnerability that hung between them felt almost tangible.

She hesitated in the doorway. The blood drained from her fingers as she gripped the edges of the door, as though forcing herself to stay back.

After she'd left for work, Liam had spent the day in the backyard. He'd worked on the patches of grass that were bare. He'd looked for more repairs around the house; a loose floorboard, a buzzing light fixture, a window that didn't close properly. When Rachel got home from work, he'd made himself scarce, not wanting to pressure her. Not sure how to talk to her without making her turn away. But he knew his silence couldn't last.

“It's not easy for me to talk to you about what happened over there. I've never wanted that ugliness to touch you. But it did anyway, didn't it?”

She swallowed, but her grip on the door loosened.

Liam took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his vulnerability settle heavily on his shoulders. “I'm trying so hard to control the memories, my feelings, but sometimes it just feels like it's controlling me instead.”

His words tumbled out in a rush, as if he'd been holding them in for far too long.

“Every time I close my eyes, I'm back there—in the heat of battle, surrounded by chaos and destruction. It's like I can never truly escape it,” he continued, his voice cracking under the strain of his emotions. “I don't want to burden you with this...with me.”

Rachel took a step into the room. It was just one step, but Liam let it become his lifeline. He reached for the single thread and willed her to come to him.

“You were never a burden,” she said. “You were never alone.”

As their gazes locked, Liam felt an overwhelming desire to pull Rachel into his arms, to bridge the emotional distance that had grown between them over the years. Slowly, almost tentatively, he began to reach for her, his heart pounding in his chest.

As though she sensed his intentions, Rachel moved back to stand in the doorway, placing a small but insurmountable distance between them. “I’m still here for you, Liam. I will always be your friend.”

He swallowed hard, trying to rein in the disappointment that threatened to overwhelm him. “Friends,” he repeated, testing the word on his tongue.

It wasn’t exactly what he wanted, but it was far better than losing her completely.

“Friends,” Rachel confirmed, offering him a tentative smile. “After all, we’ve been through so much together. It would be a shame to throw that away entirely.”

His heart thundered in his ears as he took in her words. He knew she meant it, and that knowledge simultaneously soothed and stung him. They were still connected, even if it wasn’t quite in the way he longed for.

“Thanks for coming to check on me,” he finally managed to say, his voice low.

Rachel looked at him with a mix of surprise and genuine concern. “Liam, I could never just ignore your pain. Not after

everything we've been through.”

She took another backward step, now entirely out of the guest bedroom. As she moved, Liam couldn't help but notice the graceful sway of her long, wavy hair and the curve of her hip as she turned to look back at him. His chest tightened with longing, and he found himself momentarily lost in the memory of when they were the perfect team, both in love and life.

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face, and he became acutely aware of the scent of fear and anxiety permeating the room. It was a stark reminder of the nightmare he'd just escaped and the battle he continued to fight within himself. Yet Rachel's presence seemed to act as a balm, easing some of the rawness that had taken root in the darkest corners of his soul.

“Can I get you anything?” she asked softly. “Water? A blanket?”

He wanted to say that all he needed was her. “No, I'm okay.”

“Get some rest, Liam,” she said gently. “I'll be here if you need me.”

“Thank you, Rachel,” he replied.

As she slipped out of the room, leaving him in the dim glow of the bedside lamp, Liam closed his eyes and focused on the lingering scent she'd left behind. Friends—it wasn't everything he wanted, but it was something, a spark of hope in the darkness that he refused to let go. And as he slowly drifted back to sleep, he clung to that hope like a lifeline, determined to keep moving forward on the path to healing and, perhaps one day, love and forgiveness.

CHAPTER SIX

Morning sunlight streamed through the curtains, casting a warm glow on Rachel's face as she woke up. She blinked against the brightness and stretched, her body still heavy with sleep. The events from the previous night played through her mind, leaving her feeling conflicted about her feelings toward Liam.

On one hand, the way he'd opened up to her was incredibly touching. But on the other, she couldn't help but feel cautious about letting him back into her life.

Getting out of bed, she dressed for work. It was an important day. She had a big meeting with potential clients. She was certain that her boss would conclude that she was the one who deserved a promotion after she brought these clients onboard.

"Rachel," Liam's voice echoed softly from the doorway, pulling her out of her thoughts, "I made breakfast for you. I hope you don't mind."

She turned to see him standing there, an apron wrapped around his waist, a plate of fluffy pancakes in his hands. His eyes sparkled with warmth, and for a moment, she allowed herself to bask in the tenderness of his gaze.

"Wow, Liam. Thank you."

He disappeared down the hall toward the kitchen, and Rachel followed. She was unsure if she was led by the smell of warm pastry or by that natural swagger in his step. No man could make the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other look as sexy as Liam.

He turned then, and Rachel averted her gaze. She was sure her pink cheeks gave her away. But Liam only smiled and set the plate down on the small dining table. Looking at the counter, she found that her lunch was laid out in a container. The kitchen was spotless. Liam had clearly put a lot of effort into making her morning easier, and she couldn't help but appreciate it.

As she ate, she watched Liam as he diligently wiped down the countertops. The early morning sun streamed through the windows, casting a warm glow on his broad shoulders and highlighting the flecks of gold in his brown hair. She couldn't help but marvel at the way he had transformed overnight—from a battle-hardened ex-Marine to a gentle, nurturing partner.

“I notice you seemed a bit preoccupied this morning,” Liam said as he wrung out the dish sponge and placed it in the drying rack. “Is there something going on at work that you want to talk about?”

“I have a big meeting today with some potential clients,” she admitted, her voice wavering slightly. “I'm just...nervous, I guess.”

“Is there anything I can do to help you prepare? Maybe run through your pitch or help you organize your notes?”

“That would actually be really helpful. But I'd rather hear more about your time at the rehabilitation ranch.”

It was a bit of a test, she had to admit. Liam hated to talk about anything having to do with his service. The small bit he'd opened up to her about last night had been surprising. Rachel wondered if it was a one-time-only deal.

Liam, usually reticent when asked to talk, seemed to relax at her question. His gaze dropped to his hands before he nodded. "The Purple Heart Ranch is a place of healing. It's exclusively for soldiers who served at any time. We all come there carrying our burdens, and with the work we do there, it all starts to lighten. I've never experienced anything like it."

Rachel saw a spark ignite in Liam's eyes, a spark she'd seldom seen before. He was passionate about this, she realized. It was a change from the man she knew, the man burdened by his past, withdrawn from the world.

"They provide therapy, both individual and group," Liam continued. "There's equine therapy too. There's something about caring for a horse, understanding its pains and fears, that brings clarity to your own."

As he spoke, Rachel felt a pang of emotion stir within her. It was so different, hearing him talk about helping others, about empathy and compassion. It was as if he'd found a way to channel his own struggles into something that helped others.

"I think"—Liam paused, choosing his words carefully—"helping others has been a form of therapy for me, too. When I help someone else navigate their trauma, it... it helps me understand my own, makes it easier to bear."

As Liam's words filled the room, a wave of longing washed over Rachel. She found herself yearning for the intimacy that used to exist between them. The more he spoke about the healing he had found at the ranch, the more she wished they could find that same healing in their relationship.

“Why didn’t you talk to me about it, Liam?” Rachel finally asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Her eyes welled up with unshed tears, the hurt from the past resurfacing. “Why did you choose to go away, to face it all alone?”

“I... I thought I was protecting you, Rachel. I was wrong... I realize that now.”

A lump formed in Rachel’s throat as she tried to process his words. All these years, she had believed that their relationship wasn’t enough for him, that she wasn’t enough. But here he was, admitting that he had been wrong, that he wished he had done things differently.

Rachel took a deep breath, steadying herself. “I wish... I wish we had mattered enough for you to stay, to talk,” she said, her voice breaking. “I wish we could heal... together.”

Liam reached out, his hand enveloping hers in a warm embrace. His gaze held hers, a silent promise gleaming in his eyes. “It’s not too late, Rach,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “If you’re willing, I’d like to ask you for one more chance. Let’s go on a date tonight, just like old times. Give the new me a try. I swear I’ll talk your ear off about whatever you want to know.”

Rachel hesitated, torn between the man she had once loved so deeply and the fear of being hurt all over again. She looked down at their intertwined fingers, her mind racing with conflicting thoughts.

“Please,” Liam pleaded, his eyes searching hers for any sign of hope. “I know I can’t promise that everything will be perfect, but I can promise you this—I will do everything in my power to make you happy and regain your trust.”

Rachel sighed, feeling the sincerity behind Liam's words. Despite her reservations, she couldn't deny that there was still a part of her that wanted to believe in him, in them.

"All right," she said, her heart beating wildly in her chest. "One date."

He didn't gloat. He didn't fist-pump the air. He simply gave her hand a squeeze and then released it.

Rachel had to curl her fingers into a fist in order to not reach out for his touch again.

"Good luck at your meeting today," Liam said. "You're going to do great."

At work, Rachel struggled to concentrate on her tasks. Her fingers trembled as she tried to type up notes for the meeting, her thoughts constantly drifting back to Liam and their conversation. What if he really had changed? But she couldn't forget the pain of the past, and fear gripped her heart, making it difficult to breathe.

"Rachel, are these the correct figures?" her coworker Susan asked, holding up the report Rachel had just handed her.

"Um, yes... I think so," Rachel replied uncertainly, her mind still preoccupied. She looked down at the report again and realized she had made several glaring errors. "No, wait! Let me fix that."

"Are you all right?" Susan asked, concern etched on her face. "You seem really distracted today."

Rachel sighed, pressing her fingertips to her temples. "I'm sorry. I've just got a lot on my mind. I'll be more careful from now on."

“Take a deep breath, Rachel. We all have off days,” Susan reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Thank you, Susan,” Rachel replied, offering a weak smile before returning to her work. But as she tried to correct her mistakes and focus on her tasks, her thoughts continued to swirl around Liam and the possibility of giving their love a second chance.

She couldn't help but wonder if they could find a way to rebuild their relationship, or if the wounds of the past were simply too deep to heal. As much as she wanted to believe in Liam's sincerity, there was a part of her that remained guarded, fearful of being hurt once more. But as she sat at her desk, her heart heavy with uncertainty, Rachel knew that she needed to confront these feelings head-on and make a decision about where she stood with Liam—for both of their sakes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Liam stood in the middle of his freshly cleaned house, the scent of lemon-scented cleaner still lingering in the air. Sunlight streamed through the open windows, casting a warm glow on the polished wooden floors. The couch cushions were arranged neatly, devoid of the usual clutter that had accumulated over the weeks. Even the bookshelf gleamed with a renewed sense of order.

The house was in order. His relationship with his wife was a work in progress. All that was left to do was for Liam to determine what work he would undertake to keep himself in order.

Working for the military base at the edge of town was the logical choice. Though Liam thought maybe a true separation from the military was in the cards. He wanted to work outside with his hands. Maybe with animals.

Liam grabbed his keys and wallet and stepped toward the door. But before he reached for the handle, he spied Rachel's bagged lunch sitting on the counter. She'd forgotten to take it with her.

Logically, Liam knew the woman could survive without it. She'd been going to work without him making her a packed lunch for months. It was his emotions that guided him to pick

up the bag and turn right down the street instead of left. Turning right would take him on the route to Rachel's job and let him see her in the middle of the day, something he couldn't deny his aching heart.

Bypassing the town trolley, Liam decided to take the long walk to Rachel's workplace. As he did, his mind was filled with thoughts of their past happier times together. He remembered the softness of her laughter, the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled. Liam knew deep down that he needed to show her that he was still the man she'd fallen in love with—determined, caring, and supportive.

He realized he'd missed the turn. She'd gotten the job shortly before the trouble in their marriage had begun. He'd never even been inside the building.

He found himself standing outside the glass doors, clutching her lunch bag tightly. With a deep breath, he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The moment Liam stepped into the modern, sleek lobby of Rachel's corporate building, he felt out of place. His gaze roamed the expansive space, with its open floor plan, floor-to-ceiling windows, and minimalist furniture, unsure of where to go.

"May I help you?" a receptionist behind the sleek marble counter called out, giving him a polite smile.

"I'm looking for Rachel Thompson," Liam said, meeting the receptionist's gaze. He could see the slight surprise in her eyes before she looked down, swiftly typing on her keyboard.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, her brow furrowing in confusion. "We don't have a Rachel Thompson working here. Could it be Rachel Harris you're looking for?"

Liam's heart froze at the mention of Rachel's maiden name. It was a sucker punch to his gut, and he felt like he was gasping for breath. The thought of Rachel dropping his name hit him like a brick.

"Rachel Harris," he echoed, trying to keep his emotions in check. "Yes, that's her."

"Are you a client?" the receptionist asked, oblivious to the turmoil raging inside him.

"I'm... I'm her husband," he finally managed to say. His voice sounded foreign to his ears.

The receptionist's eyes widened, her lips parting in surprise. "I... I didn't know Rachel had a husband," she stammered.

The surprise in her voice echoed in Liam's ears, another blow to his already fragile state. The words replayed in his mind: *Rachel had a husband*. It sounded like a thing of the past, a forgotten memory. As he stood there, in the vast lobby of his wife's workplace, Liam felt more lost than he had ever felt before.

As the receptionist led him down the pristine, white-walled corridor, Liam's mind was a whirl of thoughts. The revelation that Rachel was using her maiden name felt like a weight pressing down on his chest, each step making it harder to breathe.

They stopped in front of an office, its door slightly ajar. The receptionist gestured toward it, indicating that it was Rachel's. Through the gap, Liam could see Rachel sitting at her desk, focused intently on her computer screen. She was talking to a man who was leaning casually against her desk,

his eyes on her with an unmistakable interest that twisted Liam's gut with a jolt of pain.

Liam couldn't tell if Rachel was oblivious to his gaze or not. Her attention was concentrated on her work, her eyes darting back and forth on the screen as she explained something to the man. Then she looked up at him, her eyes seeking his approval. Liam's heart ached as he watched the man smile, nodding in affirmation, and Rachel's face brightening in response.

A knot tightened in Liam's stomach. He had come here with the intention of bridging the gap that had grown between them, to show her that he was willing to fight for their relationship. But what he saw shattered his resolve. He felt an acute sense of loss, like he was watching his world crumble before his eyes.

The bitter sting of jealousy surged through his veins, a gnawing emptiness threatening to swallow him whole. He wanted to scream, to storm into the room and rip Rachel away from the man's gaze. He wanted to claim his place by her side, to remind her and everyone else that she was his wife. But he didn't.

He knew better than to let his emotions rule him. His therapy had taught him about control, about managing his feelings rather than allowing them to control him. He knew, more than anyone else, the damage his silence had done to his relationship with Rachel. His inability to express his fears, his feelings, had pushed her away, had led them to the brink of separation.

But as much as he wanted to step into that office and voice his feelings, he knew it wasn't the right time. The tension in his body was a clear sign that he was not ready to handle this

situation calmly. He needed time to process what he had seen, to understand what it meant, and how he should respond.

When the man leaned in closer and Rachel didn't pull away, Liam had seen enough. With a heavy heart, Liam turned away. He didn't walk into the office. He didn't interrupt their moment to hand her the lunch he had brought. He didn't even announce his presence. Instead, he walked away, leaving behind the sight of his wife speaking intimately with a man who was not her husband.

He walked down the long corridor, each step a reminder of the distance that had grown between them. His mind was a whirl of thoughts, his heart aching with a pain that was all too familiar. Walking away was the hardest thing he had ever done, but he knew it was the best decision at that moment.

He needed to regroup, to gather his thoughts and emotions. He needed to find the words to express his feelings, to break the silence that had once pushed Rachel away. Only then could he confront her, could he fight for the love that he was desperately holding on to.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*R*achel stood in front of the mirror, smoothing down her skirt and adjusting her blouse. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. Today was the day she had been working toward for months—the presentation that could potentially secure her a promotion and bring more stability to her life. Her boss had just looked over her notes and praised her hard work.

As she walked into the conference room, she felt a familiar thrill course through her veins. This was her element—the place where she shone. She had this!

Her slides were polished and professional, filled with charts and graphs that illustrated her points perfectly. As she began her presentation, she felt a surge of excitement. This was the culmination of all her hard work and dedication, and it would end with her earning recognition and a promotion.

“Today, I will be presenting my proposal on how we can innovate your marketing strategies to increase customer engagement and drive sales,” Rachel said, launching into her well-rehearsed spiel.

She expertly navigated through her slides, presenting her research and findings with clarity and conviction. Rachel was doing what she did best—selling her ideas and proving her

worth in the corporate world. And as she spoke, she couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in her accomplishments.

“By implementing these new strategies, I believe we can see a significant increase in revenue and overall growth for your company,” Rachel concluded, looking directly at the clients seated across the table for their reaction.

“Thank you, Ms. Harris,” the CEO said, nodding appreciatively.

Rachel gave a start at her maiden name. She'd started going by it shortly after Liam left. Now that her husband was back in her life and making clear strides like talking to her and sharing his emotions and thoughts with her, she felt a tinge of betrayal.

“Your presentation was very impressive. You've obviously put a great deal of thought into this.”

“Thank you, ma'am. I'm confident that my ideas will yield positive results for your business,” Rachel responded, her voice steady and self-assured.

“I knew from the moment we met that you were the right person for the job,” the CEO said, her enthusiasm contagious. “I'm looking forward to a bright future for my company, thanks to your expertise.”

As they exchanged a few more words, Rachel's boss approached them, a broad smile plastered across his face. Greg placed a hand on Rachel's shoulder, drawing her attention away from the conversation.

“Rachel, outstanding work today,” he complimented, his voice brimming with genuine admiration. “You continue to impress me with your commitment and creativity. I think it's time we discussed a well-deserved promotion for you.”

“Really?” Rachel asked, her eyes widening in surprise and delight. “Thank you, Mr. Johnson—I mean Greg,” Rachel corrected herself before he could correct her. “I appreciate the opportunity to grow within the company.”

“Your hard work is paying off,” Greg assured her, giving her shoulder another reassuring squeeze. “We’ll talk more about the details later, but for now, go celebrate your success.”

She had not only secured an exclusive partnership with an important client but also had a promotion on the horizon. And the only person she wanted to share the news with was Liam. She had to admit she’d missed him, not just her husband, but her friend.

Liam had been the person she’d shared all of her hopes and dreams with. He had been the one telling her she could do anything she wanted. Beyond that, he’d been the one to make her believe that she could.

Rachel stared down at the name plate on her desk. When the promotion came down, she would not only change her title, she would also change her name. She had every intention of still taking things slowly with Liam. Only now, she thought she might walk slowly with him into forever.

“Rachel, can I have a word?” Greg called out from the open door of her office.

“Of course,” she replied, setting down her name plate.

His smile seemed genuine, but there was something in his eyes that made her feel uneasy. When he shut the door behind him, the uneasiness grew.

“Congratulations again on your presentation,” he said, his voice smooth as honey. “You really knocked it out of the park.”

“Thank you, Greg.” She tried her best to maintain her professionalism, despite the strange vibe she was picking up from him.

He leaned in closer, his hand resting on her shoulder once more. “You know, it’s not just your work ethic that’s impressive. You’re quite the package, Rachel. Beautiful, smart, talented... no wonder our client was so taken with you.”

Rachel didn’t mention that the client they just left was a happily married woman who was married to a man. Instead, her cheeks flushed, and she felt a knot forming in her stomach. She shifted uncomfortably under Greg’s touch, unnerved by his sudden change in demeanor.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew how much we value you here. And maybe, once you get that promotion, we could celebrate together... outside the office?”

The knot in her stomach tightened, and Rachel knew she couldn’t let this behavior slide. “Gregory, I appreciate the opportunity for growth you’ve offered me, but I want to make it clear that my relationship with you is strictly professional. I’m not interested in anything beyond that.”

He studied her for a moment, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. Then, with a forced chuckle, he replied, “Of course, Rachel. My apologies if I made you uncomfortable. Let’s just focus on your bright future here.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking a deep breath as she watched him walk away. Her hands trembled slightly, but she felt a sense of empowerment coursing through her veins. She had faced down an uncomfortable situation and stood her ground, refusing to be intimidated or harassed. She gathered her things

and prepared to leave the office for the day. She had exciting news to share with her husband.

CHAPTER NINE

“*F*our... five... six...” Liam’s breath came in short gasps as he forced himself to count, his knuckles white as he clenched his fists. Each number felt like a lifeline, pulling him back from the brink of losing control.

The soothing sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline did little to pacify the storm raging within him. His feet sank into the cold, wet sand as he walked aimlessly along the beach, his heart heavy with the images of Rachel and that man in her office. The echoes of their laughter, the ease of their camaraderie, gnawed at his insides, threatening to drown him in a sea of despair.

“Seven... eight... nine...”

His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, the tension in his body mirroring the turmoil in his mind. Each crashing wave brought fresh images of Rachel, her eyes sparkling with admiration as she looked up at the man, their laughter resonating in his ears. It was a torture he hadn’t expected, a pain that gnawed at his very soul.

“Ten,” he whispered, finally letting out the breath he’d been holding. The fog began to clear from his mind.

As the last of the sun’s rays disappeared beyond the horizon, Liam’s pace slowed. His gaze was drawn to the

darkening waves, their hypnotic rhythm a reminder of the life he'd once had, the life he had lost. His heart ached with the loss, the emptiness threatening to consume him.

It wasn't until the moon had replaced the sun and the stars twinkled in the night sky that Liam found his way back home. The door to his home opened with an unexpected ease, revealing a worried-looking Rachel standing in the warm glow of the living room light. She visibly relaxed at seeing him, her eyes scanning him up and down as though ensuring he was okay.

"Liam, where have you been? I've been worried sick about you," she said, the relief in her voice overshadowed by concern. "I didn't even have your number to check up on you."

"I don't have a cell phone."

"We were supposed to go on a date tonight," Rachel reminded him gently, her voice laced with a hurt he couldn't bear.

The mention of their planned date felt like a blow, stirring up emotions he was struggling to contain. "I wasn't sure if that was what you wanted. I assumed you'd want to spend more time with your coworkers."

Rachel looked at him, confusion evident on her face, but Liam fell silent. His throat felt tight, his heart pounding, the hurtful words he had wanted to say dying on his lips. He didn't want to push her away, didn't want to let his emotions get the best of him.

"So you know?" Rachel said, a tentative smile spreading across her face.

"I saw."

“You saw my presentation today? You know I got the client and the promotion?”

“You got a promotion?” he said, stepping in to her. His arms came around her without hesitation. And with no hesitation of her own, Rachel not only allowed him to embrace her, she hugged him back.

Rachel’s announcement of her promotion filled Liam with a rush of warmth and delight that momentarily pushed aside his uneasiness. Her body fit perfectly against his, as if it had been molded just for him. He inhaled her scent, a familiar mix of floral and vanilla that always reminded him of home. The feeling of her in his arms felt so right, so achingly perfect that it bordered on painful. He had missed this—the simple, comforting familiarity of holding her.

As she wrapped her arms around him, returning his hug with equal fervor, he closed his eyes, savoring the moment. He never wanted to let her go. He never wanted to break this connection that felt as vital to him as breathing.

But as much as he wanted to stay locked in that embrace, he knew they needed to address the elephant that had turned up in her office. The sight of that man, the way he had looked at her, the way she had responded—it was something they couldn’t ignore.

“Rachel,” he began, his voice a low, serious murmur. “We need to talk.”

For them to move forward, to rebuild their relationship, they had to confront all the ghosts of their past and present. It was time to break the silence. He knew he had to talk to her about what he had seen, about the pain he was feeling. But he also knew he needed to do it calmly, without letting his emotions fuel his words.

“I came by your office today to drop off your lunch,” he started, his voice steady despite the rapid beating of his heart. “And I... I saw you with a man.”

“You were there? You saw us?”

Rachel’s eyes widened in surprise, but Liam continued, holding her gaze. “He looked interested in you. And you looked... you looked interested in him.”

For a moment, there was silence as Rachel processed his words. “You watched as my boss put his hand on my shoulder, squeezed it, and made an advance at me, and you didn’t barge in?”

“He what? I didn’t see any of that when I came in this morning.”

“You were there in the morning? Not after lunch when it happened?”

Anger boiled within Liam, a rage so potent that he momentarily lost his breath. The thought of that man touching Rachel, propositioning her inappropriately... it ignited a protective fury he had rarely felt.

“I’m going to kill him,” Liam growled, making a move to leave. But Rachel quickly grasped his arm, holding him back.

“No, Liam,” she said firmly, her eyes meeting his. “I took care of it. I handled it myself.”

As the storm of anger roared within Liam, Rachel placed her hands gently on his face, drawing his attention back to her. He turned to face her, his eyes dark with protective rage, yet vulnerable, pleading silently for her assurance.

“That’s when I realized I didn’t want to date anyone else. I just want you.”

Her words struck him like a lightning bolt, quieting the storm within him and holding him still enough for a small ripple of waves to knock him down. Liam watched, entranced, as Rachel's gaze fell to his lips before rising back to meet his eyes, a silent promise hanging in the air between them.

And then she was pulling him down to her, closing the distance between them. His world narrowed down to the sensation of her lips on his, soft yet insistent. It was a kiss of reassurance, of longing, of forgiveness. It was a kiss that spoke of second chances and new beginnings.

Every fiber of Liam's being responded to her. His arms wrapped around her instinctively, pulling her closer. He kissed her back with equal fervor, his hands cupping her face as if she was the most precious thing in the world. Because to him, she was. Everything else faded into insignificance—the pain, the misunderstandings, the separation, the silence. All that mattered was her, was them.

Liam's heart soared with relief and elation as he deepened the kiss. His fingers threaded through Rachel's hair. He could taste her commitment in the kiss. The promise of a future he had thought was lost. The realization filled him with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and love, grounding him at the moment.

As they pulled away, Liam rested his forehead against hers, his breaths coming out in short pants. Looking into her eyes, he whispered, "I want you too, Rach. Only you."

After the kiss, a profound peace washed over Liam, like the calming after a fierce storm. His heart was still racing, but it was no longer from anger or fear, but from love. Liam savored the closeness, the intimacy that they had reclaimed after so long.

He took a deep breath, ready to address the last hurdle standing in their path. His eyes met hers, a seriousness shadowing his previously peaceful expression.

“Rach,” he began, “you need to quit your job.”

CHAPTER TEN

*R*achel sat in her office, the dim light of her desk lamp casting shadows on the walls. She looked around at the space she had worked so hard for, feeling a knot forming in her stomach. There had been a time when all she wanted was to climb the corporate ladder, to prove that she could be successful and independent. But now, everything seemed tainted, and she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that had settled over her.

Her promotion at work had been an exciting prospect, one that would give her more autonomy and responsibility. But it came with a price. Rachel shuddered as she recalled her boss' unwanted advances. The way he had looked at her, touched her arm, and made inappropriate comments left her feeling disgusted and violated. Her respect for him had evaporated, replaced by a deep sense of betrayal.

An image of Liam flickered in her mind, and Rachel felt her heart constrict. Despite the pain they had caused each other, his PTSD episodes, their time apart, and her relentless pursuit of her career, the love she still had for him could not be extinguished. It lingered inside her like a flame, struggling to reignite as she had desperately sought to find an existence that didn't rely on him. It burned within her like a beacon, guiding her back to him even when she tried to forge her own path.

Sitting alone in her office, Rachel stared blankly at the closed door, her mind churning with thoughts. The usually soothing hum of the computer, the soft glow of the desk lamp, and the faint sounds of the city below her high-rise office all faded into the background.

Liam's words echoed in her mind, a relentless loop. *You need to quit your job.*

A sigh escaped her lips as she pinched the bridge of her nose, her head throbbing with the weight of her thoughts. Her career had been her sanctuary during the difficult times with Liam. She had poured herself into her work, climbing up the corporate ladder with dogged determination. And now it was being threatened on both sides.

Rachel glanced at the stack of files on her desk, the work she had painstakingly carried out, the projects she had successfully executed. All of it was a testament to her hard work and dedication. But was it worth it if it cost her peace, her dignity?

Her phone beeped on the side of her desk. She didn't need to look down to see that it was another text message from Liam. They hadn't argued after he'd made his demand last night. She'd walked away from him in anger. When he'd knocked at her bedroom door, she hadn't responded. She'd skipped out before breakfast, but she'd seen his shadow in the guest room doorway. A few hours into her workday, the texts had begun.

Liam had purchased a cell phone. He'd written her a message every hour. She hadn't responded to a single one.

She felt stuck, torn between the love of her life and her life's work. The thought of giving up on either was devastating. But she knew she had to make a decision. She

couldn't keep walking this tightrope, balancing her personal and professional life on a thin, fraying line.

Rachel tensed as the office door swung open and Mr. Johnson walked in. She gripped the edge of her desk, her heart hammering in her chest in anticipation of another unwanted advance. But his casual nonchalance betrayed no hint of the previous encounter.

“Rachel,” he began, his tone businesslike, “I wanted to ask about the Weiss account.”

The Weiss account was the company whose business she'd won the other day after her stellar presentation, which had been the result of countless hours of hard work.

“What about it?” she managed, trying to keep her voice steady.

“I just need a few details,” Mr. Johnson replied, his gaze focused on a random point on her desk, not meeting her eyes. “I'm planning on handing it off to Rick Hunter. Thought he could use a little boost.”

Rachel sat stunned, the suddenness of his decision sending a fresh wave of shock through her. “But I brought them in,” she protested.

Mr. Johnson merely shrugged, his nonchalance echoing his earlier disregard for her. “You did. And you did a great job. But it's time to share the wealth, don't you think?”

Rick Hunter? The colleague who'd joined months after Rachel and had yet to land a major account?

“Is this because I rejected your advances the other day?”

Mr. Johnson's gaze flicked anxiously over his shoulder. The hall outside was empty. Most people had left for the day.

Satisfied they were alone, his attention settled back on her. His voice dropped to a threatening whisper. “Be careful with your words, Rachel. Accusations like that can ruin careers.”

Rachel swallowed hard. Her heart pounded with a mixture of fear and defiance.

“I’m not threatening you, Rachel. I’m merely suggesting. If you want to keep the Weiss account, and perhaps consider that promotion on the horizon, maybe you could reconsider your stance on... dating me.”

Rachel felt the temperature in her office drop as she locked eyes with Mr. Johnson. His gaze hardened, and he offered her a twisted smile.

As Mr. Johnson delivered his threatening ultimatum, Rachel’s phone buzzed loudly on her desk. She glanced at the screen to see Liam’s name flashing across it. For a moment, she found herself wishing he was here to face Mr. Johnson. With a swift movement, she snatched up the phone.

“Who are you calling?” Mr. Johnson asked, his face twisting into a wary expression as he watched her scroll through her contacts.

“Human Resources,” Rachel stated clearly, meeting Mr. Johnson’s shocked gaze with a determined one of her own.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“*R*achel,” Liam called out as he heard the key turn in the door.

It had been hell staying still most of the day when all he wanted to do was go down to her job and stand guard at her office door. He wanted to come face to face with her boss and punch him in the nose.

But violence was not the answer. He knew that for certain. Silence wasn't working out so well, either. He'd sent Rachel ten text messages; one for every hour that they were apart that day.

The *read* popped up a moment after each one he sent. So he knew she was getting them. Those notifications were one of the only reasons he'd held still all day. Though pacing a hole in the carpet wasn't truly holding still.

Liam had needed space to deal with his own demands. He'd used silence to try to protect the woman he'd loved. But it hadn't worked then, and it wasn't working now. So when Rachel walked in the door, Liam was on her.

He rushed toward her, pulling her into his arms despite her reluctance. Only there was no reluctance. Rachel burrowed into his embrace just as she would on cold winter nights. She turned her face into his chest, finding that space on the right

side of his heartbeat that she had long ago claimed as hers and hers alone.

Liam swung from wanting to hold her closer, tighter, to wanting to look her over for any sign of hurt. If that boss of hers had made another attempt, if there was even a hair out of place on his wife, he would forget all that therapy had taught him and teach that poor excuse for a man a lesson of his own.

It was Rachel that pulled away first. With great reluctance, Liam let her go. But not far. He kept a deceptively loose hold on her forearms as he gazed down at her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, checking for any visible signs of distress.

Liam took in Rachel’s tired eyes, her slumped shoulders, her forced smile. In his embrace, he’d felt the tension in her, the weight of the day’s events bearing down on her. It pained him to see her like this, but he knew that she was strong, that she could face any challenge thrown at her. It was one of the many reasons he loved her.

Rachel nestled back into his arms, her body relaxing bit by bit as he held her. He kissed the top of her head and held her close, waiting for her to tell him what she needed from him.

“I’m not quitting,” she said.

Liam took a deep breath and held it a moment before letting it out slowly. He’d planned to apply for a job at a horse ranch on the other side of the valley, but he just might have to scratch that plan and apply for a desk job. The desk would be at Rachel’s office, somewhere between her and her boss.

“Mr. Johnson is the one that will likely be quitting,” she continued. “Or potentially getting fired.”

In the soft light of their living room, Liam studied Rachel's face as she relayed the events of her day. His brow furrowed in concern as she spoke of the uncomfortable encounter with Mr. Johnson, his fists clenching involuntarily at the mention of the man's name.

"I went to Human Resources," Rachel said, her voice steady despite the tremor Liam could see in her hands. "I told them about Mr. Johnson's behavior. And Liam..." She paused, looking up at him. "They said I'm not the first to complain. There have been other anonymous complaints about him."

Liam let out a sigh of relief, grateful that Rachel's courage had opened a path for action. "So they're going to do something?"

"They're launching an investigation. If they find evidence to support the complaints, they may terminate him."

Liam's chest tightened with pride for Rachel. Her bravery was not only paving the way for justice for herself but potentially for others as well who had been too afraid to speak up. Her actions were a stark reminder of why he'd fallen in love with her in the first place—her strength, her courage, and her willingness to stand up for what was right, no matter the cost.

Liam took a step back, looking at Rachel in a new light. She stood there in the soft glow of the living room, a picture of resilience. Her strength astounded him, but it always had. However, in that moment, it also served as a stark contrast to his own actions. Or rather his inaction during the darkest phase of their relationship.

"You fought for what you believed in," he said.

“I did. I worked too hard to have it all taken away from me based on that man’s whims.”

“When things got tough, you didn’t keep silent. You held on to your beliefs, stood up for yourself...and others.”

Rachel looked at him, her eyes wide and searching. Liam knew she was trying to gauge his reaction, wondering what was going on in his mind. He let his hand travel up to her face, his thumb tracing the line of her cheek.

“I didn’t do that,” he confessed. “When we were going through our problems... I walked away. I kept silent when I should’ve talked. I left when I should’ve stayed.”

“You’re talking to me now.” Rachel held up her phone with a grin. “Sometimes more than I’m ready to hear.”

“I just didn’t want to hurt you, and I thought what was going on in my head would.”

“Nothing you can say would scare me away from you. I love you.”

“Saying I love you isn’t enough.” Liam’s eyes stung. He pulled his wife, his world, tightly against him, vowing to never let her go again. “I’m going to show you. Will you give me the chance, Rachel? Can we fight for us... together?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Can we ever truly move past everything that’s happened, Liam? Can we erase the pain and start anew?” Rachel questioned, her eyes searching his for answers.

“Maybe we can’t erase the pain,” Liam admitted. “But we can learn from it, grow stronger because of it, and build something new together.”

She took a deep breath, weighing the options before her. She felt the weight of her choice like an anchor on her soul; the future of their relationship rested on her decision.

“Rachel,” Liam breathed, his voice thick with emotion, “I promise you, I’ll do everything in my power to make us work. To heal what’s broken and create something beautiful together.”

Rachel swallowed hard, her heart aching with love for this man who had fought so hard for their marriage. And suddenly, she knew what she had to do. The decision was hers, and she would not let fear or doubt dictate her future any longer.

Leaving his hold, Rachel went to a side table and pulled open the drawer. She drew out the unsigned divorce papers she’d had prepared weeks ago with trembling a hand. She stared at the black and white legalese scrawled across the page with a mix of emotions.

Once Liam caught sight of the heading on the documents, he recoiled.

Rachel hesitated, her grip tightening on the papers. The weight of her decision felt heavier than ever, and she knew she had to make a choice. She looked up at Liam, her eyes searching his face for any sign of the man she had fallen in love with years ago.

And there he was, in the warmth of his brown eyes, the curve of his beard-framed smile, and the gentle strength that radiated from him despite his vulnerability.

She found herself reaching for a lighter, her hand steady despite the tumult within. Liam's expression shifted to a mixture of sadness and understanding. He took a step closer, his eyes never leaving the papers. Rachel set the corner of the divorce papers alight, watching as the flames consumed them.

The crackling sound of the burning paper filled the room, accompanied by an acrid smell of smoke and burning ink. Rachel tossed the papers in the fireplace, watching as they disintegrated into ashes, the remnants of their past relationship vanishing before her eyes. She felt a sense of relief and release wash over her, as if the flames were cleansing them both of their pain and hurt.

"I love you," Liam said as the embers died down. "I never stopped for a single second."

"I know."

"I'm going to tell you that every day for the rest of your life. Until you tell me to shut up."

"That's never going to happen. I'm never going to ask for your silence."

"I'm never going to leave your side."

The room felt strangely quiet and still after the fire had consumed the divorce papers. The smell of smoke lingered in the air, a reminder of the decision Rachel had just made. With her heart pounding, she glanced at Liam, searching his face for any sign of what he was feeling. Liam approached Rachel slowly, his footsteps nearly silent on the hardwood floor. He placed a warm hand on her trembling shoulder, steadying her with a firm yet gentle touch.

As the last wisps of smoke dissipated into the air, Rachel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. A small smile adorned her lips as she took in Liam's hopeful expression. In that moment, she knew that despite the challenges they would undoubtedly face, they were stronger now.

Liam squeezed her hand gently, his thumb brushing against her knuckles in a comforting motion. "I never stopped believing in us, Rachel," he confessed, his eyes shining with a renewed flame after the fire was doused. "I knew we could find our way back to each other if we were both willing to try."

"Let's make a promise," she suggested, her voice growing stronger. "From now on, we'll face everything together, as a team. No more hiding our struggles or pretending that everything is fine when it's not."

Liam nodded, his expression resolute. "I promise, Rachel. We'll be honest with each other, and we'll work through everything life throws at us, one step at a time."

"Okay," she agreed, reaching for his other hand. "Let's start with a step toward our bedroom."

Rachel watched as a slow, teasing smile tugged at Liam's lips. The heavy weight of their emotional conversation

suddenly seemed to lift as his eyes twinkled with desire. His spirit visibly lifted, along with his grin.

“Bedroom, huh?” Liam echoed, his eyebrows playfully wagging in a manner that sent a rush of fondness through her. He leaned in closer, his lips barely grazing her ear as he spoke in a low, playful whisper. “I thought we’d start with something simpler, like deciding who gets control of the TV remote or whose turn it is to do the dishes. But hey, I’m always up for... negotiating.”

As he pulled back, his roguish grin made Rachel’s heart flutter in a way it hadn’t in too long. She laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls of their home, filling the space between them with warmth and familiarity. His laughter joined hers, and she was struck by the comforting melody of their shared joy.

She had missed this—the easy banter, the shared laughter, the warmth in his eyes when he looked at her. It was these simple yet profound moments that had woven their relationship together.

“All right then, my love. Lead the way,” Liam said, giving her hands a reassuring squeeze, his grin unwavering. The corners of his eyes crinkled in a way that conveyed his genuine happiness.

Blushing under his gaze, Rachel gave a firm tug at his hand, leading him toward their bedroom. The sound of their laughter trailed behind them, a stark contrast to the stony silence that had once filled their home. They still had many obstacles to overcome, but in that moment, Rachel knew that as long as they had love, laughter, and each other, they could face whatever the future had in store. And they would face it together.

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