

THE LOVELY RETURN



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARIAN COLE

The Lovely Return

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The Lovely Return

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Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading *The Lovely Return*! I'd be very grateful if you could leave a spoiler-free review if you enjoyed this book.



For a list of content warnings, please visit my web page here:

<https://www.cariancolewrites.com/triggers>

In the mists of my memory

I see you.

And there,

In the mists of my memory

You shall always be.

— ATHEY THOMPSON

Prologue



ALEX - 2006

Be careful what you wish for.

People say that all the time. A subtle warning, nudging you to wonder what would happen if you actually *did* get what you wished for.

Do you really want it?

Will you know what to do with it once you get it?

The same could be said for hopes. Goals. Dreams. Promises. All the elusive things we'd love to have in our grasp someday but usually are totally out of our reach.

Until they're not.

As a curator of bad luck, I didn't let myself think too far into the future. I didn't make wishes; I didn't ask for promises.

But on December 5, 2006, I did all those things.

It started just like every other day. With the promise of a new day, and a tomorrow, and a next year.

All lies.

I believed Brianna and I had an entire life stretched out before us, like a winding tree-lined road we couldn't see the end of because it was so impossibly far away.

It wasn't far away at all, though. In fact, it was less than six hours away.

I've replayed and overanalyzed every minute of that day thousands of times. Did I do something that day to set us off

course, to alter the tick of time? To invite tragedy? If only I'd driven faster... or slower. If only I'd paid more attention.

If only. If only. If only.

Earlier that day, Brianna stood framed in the doorway of the old barn I used as my art studio, watching me quietly. She used to say it was her favorite thing to do, watching me create sculptures. She looked like an angel with her chestnut hair curling down over her white puffy jacket, snowflakes falling around her like confetti.

My muse.

My wife.

My everything.

As always, the sight of her made my heart leap into my throat. I wondered for the millionth time how, at only twenty-one years old, I was lucky enough to share my life with someone so incredibly *good*.

I saw Brianna for the first time during our senior year of high school in arts and English class. There was no way to miss her hypnotic eyes, but I was also captivated by how kind she was, how she smiled at everyone—even at me—the quiet loser sitting in the back of the room. Halfway through the school year, we were given the horrifying task of writing a poem and reading it aloud. I said fuck that and took the *F*. But Brianna strolled in front of the class and recited her poem from memory. She made eye contact with each and every one of us like she was injecting her words into our souls. Her poem was something about a butterfly falling in love with a snowflake. I wasn't into poetry, but even I couldn't deny how deep and magical it was. Her voice hiccuped with genuine emotion as she spoke, making me want to sit in the dark with her and hear all her secrets. The entire class was silent after she finished her poem, reveling in the finale, wishing for more. I think everyone fell in love with her star-crossed butterfly and snowflake that day.

Including me.

One day after school, I found her in the parking lot with her keys locked in her car, her hair frizzy from the misty rain. I used my unsavory yet useful delinquent skills to break into her car and retrieve her keys. I was embarrassed. She was impressed.

We became friends. Then became more.

I've felt like an impostor since our first date. I'd wake up every day thinking it was a dream or a sick joke. I kept waiting for her to dump me and I was shocked to see her every morning waiting by my locker. Getting into my car. Sleeping in my bed. Smiling at me. It made no sense to me. Why would someone as pretty, caring, smart, and popular as Brianna Brooks want to be with me? A scruffy dude living in foster care, driving an old beat-to-hell Dodge Charger, blasting grunge rock? She could've had anyone; hell, she deserved someone as amazing as she was.

But she picked me.

It was the biggest mistake of her life.

"I watched you for weeks," she whispered in the front seat of my car at midnight on our third date. "Every day in class. You were so quiet and serious...so focused." She stroked my cheek, her thumb moving over the corner of my lips. I froze under her touch. I'd never been touched so softly, so gently. My heart pounded until I thought it might explode. "Then I saw you smile for the first time—at me, no less—and I fell for you like a star falling from the sky."

That did it. A girl as special as her spinning poetic words about me? Fuck. Sign me up for the rest of my damn life.

Here we are, four years later, with my ring on her finger, her hand pressed against her stomach, and that same dazzling smile still bringing me to my knees. And I still thought I must be dreaming.

Her lips curved with an excited smile. "My water broke a few minutes ago," she said softly.

For at least ten seconds, I forgot how to breathe. Excitement and fear rose up in a massive wave, momentarily

suffocating me. My hands stilled, hovering over my latest sculpture of metal chains, gears, and black feathers resembling a steampunk fallen angel. I shook my hair out of my face, reached for a rag, and wiped my hands. “Now?” I blinked. I tried to force air into my lungs. “She’s coming now?”

Brianna’s sea-green eyes glistened like jewels. “Yes, she’s coming.”

“Holy shit.” I ran to her, took her face in my hands and kissed her until we swayed breathlessly. Smiling against her lips, I lowered my touch to her stomach, softly caressing as if she and the baby were made of glass.

“I love you,” I whispered. “Both of you. Like crazy.”

She touched my cheek, skating the pad of her thumb over my lips before kissing me. My knees nearly buckled every time she did that little signature move on me. On our sixth date, I finally asked her why she did it.

“Your smile is where the magic happens,” she murmured, staring up into my eyes. “It’s where our love started. I want to capture it over and over again.”

“I’ll smile at you every day for the rest of your life if you’ll let me.”

She gasped with surprise and whispered, “Promise?”

“I promise.”

“I’d love that, Fox.”

“Then you got it. Promise me you’ll never leave me. It would kill me.”

“I promise. I’m yours for eternity.”

“Eternity is a long time. Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. Nothing could ever take me away from you.”

Admittedly, I’d never known love before. But with her, it was easy and natural. It washed over and through me like a warm breeze blowing through an open window. It was gentle and safe.

On the flip side, I was terrified of losing it, of losing her.

Brianna never said, “I love you too.” Her response was always to kiss me, to touch my cheek, and my lips. When Bri said she loved me, she meant it. Every time. It was never just an echo of my words.

“I called the doctor,” she said when our lips parted. “I haven’t had any contractions yet, but she said we should head in now because the snow is supposed to get worse tonight. Better safe than sorry.”

“If we leave now, we’ll get there within the hour. Let’s get your stuff.”

For a month, I’ve been tripping over her hospital bag sitting in the hall by the front door.

She waited on the porch while I ran inside to change my clothes and wash my hands. On my way out, I grabbed her bag and leaned down to say goodbye to Cherry, our red Chow Chow I surprised Brianna with last year for our anniversary.

“I heard puppies are good practice for having a baby...” I’d joked when I put the puppy into Brianna’s arms. The first year of owning Cherry made us experts at sleepless nights, cleaning up messes, and finding endless patience.

“We’ll be back soon with Lily,” I said to the now sixty-pounds-of-fluff dog. “Be a good girl.”

The last thing I saw before I locked the front door was Cherry, with her bright-green tennis ball in her mouth and her tail wagging furiously. That vision has stuck with me for years...I wouldn’t see her wag her tail again for a long time.

A gust of wind sent a chill up my spine, but I refused to waste time going back inside for my jacket. I helped Brianna into the car and threw her overnight bag into the back seat.

“Alex...take a deep breath,” she said when I settled behind the wheel. If I close my eyes now, I can still hear the echo of those words. It’s branded on my soul.

She ran her hand up my arm, giving my shoulder a squeeze infused with affection and reassurance. “You look like you’re

hyperventilating.”

“I think I am.” I turned to her while I waited for the car to warm up and melt the snow on the windows. One of the things I loved most about Brianna was her calmness. She never worried, never freaked out, never got mad, never raised her voice. I grew up surrounded by people who yelled and slammed things, so she was the blanket of quiet and serenity I needed. Everything about her sedated me. “I can’t believe this is finally happening.” Grabbing her hand, I brought it to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “We’re having a baby, Bri.”

A sweet, excited smile spread across her face. “We’re having a baby, Fox.” My heart clenched, as it did every time she called me by my last name. My closest friends have called me Fox since kindergarten, but Bri was the first and only girl to ever use the nickname.

The only thing my biological father ever gave me was a cool last name.

“I can’t wait to meet our little Lily,” I said when I backed out of the gravel driveway. “I hope she looks like you and not me.”

Still holding on to my hand, she laid it over her stomach, and an itty-bitty foot kicked against my calloused palm. I couldn’t wait to see that tiny foot clad in pink sneakers. “Stop it,” she said. “You’re gorgeous. If she has your smile, we’re in trouble. She’ll get away with anything.”

“She’s not allowed to date until she’s twenty-five. That’s the rule,” I said, only half teasing.

Brianna just grinned. “Reality check, honey. She’s going to date long before that, whether we like it or not.”

I knew she was right. I’d have to work on not being *too* overprotective. “I just want to be a good dad...”

That was my number one fear—not being a good father. I had no positive male role model growing up. The only glimpses I saw of good parenting were on television.

“You will be. Trust me, she’s going to adore you just as much as I do. She’ll be a daddy’s girl.”

I can only hope.

The hospital was thirty-five to forty minutes away on a good day with no traffic. I worried with the snow falling that the usual ten-minute drive down the mountain from our small town to the main highway could stretch out to twenty minutes.

“Babe, are you sure we have enough time to get there? I don’t want our baby being born in the back seat.”

Laughing, she rubbed her thumb across my knuckles. “We’re fine, love. The doctor only wanted us to come in right away because of the snow. I still haven’t even had a contraction yet. We’re all good.”

“Okay, just making sure.” I wanted to do everything right. I had a deep need in the root of my soul to be the perfect husband and father. I’d never mess this up like my old man and my foster father had. My girls would never know fear or hunger like I had. They’d never hear me raise my voice or see me drunk. They’d never go to sleep feeling unloved or abandoned. I’d be their protector, their best friend, their rock. No matter what.

Brianna pulled out her phone from her jacket pocket. “I’m going to send a text to my sister to tell her what’s going on and ask her to watch Cherry ’til we’re home,” she said as her red nails pushed the tiny keys on her new flip phone—her favorite gadget. “I’ll text my parents, too.”

The vein in my temple twitched at the mention of my in-laws. From the moment they met me, her father made it clear he didn’t want his youngest daughter with the boy who was found abandoned, living in trash, at ten years old. My hair was too long. My car was too shitty. My hands were too dirty. My heritage was unknown. My mere existence was not good enough. His hatred for me grew with every milestone of our relationship. I expected the gates of hell to open and swallow me up the day she told them she was pregnant. Flames will probably shoot out of my father-in-law’s ears when Lily is born. With any luck, his nasty ass will spontaneously combust during his fit.

Screw him.

“I asked my sister to stop at the pet store and get my Cherry Pop a new ball and a stuffy toy. I’m worried she’s going to miss me. I didn’t even get to say goodbye to her.”

“You gonna spoil the baby as much as you spoil that dog?” I tease.

“Yes!” She laughed and crinkled her nose—an adorable little thing she did sometimes. I don’t even think she knew she did it, let alone how much I loved it.

“Good, ’cause I plan on spoiling all of you.”

She rubbed our hands over her belly again. “You’re going to meet your crazy parents really soon, Little Lily.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror and my breath hitched when I saw the empty back seat. “Shit,” I muttered. “I forgot the baby seat.” It was in a box by the front door. Waiting.

“It’s okay. You’ll have time to go back and get it. Or someone can bring it to us. It’s not a big deal, hon.”

My gut twisted and sent a burn up through my chest. The snow started to fall even faster, the flakes smaller, morphing the road in front of us into a dizzying, hypnotic tunnel. The windshield wipers squealed against the glass trying to keep up with the falling flakes.

“It is a big deal,” I said, shoving my hand through my hair. I was failing my daughter already, and she wasn’t even here yet. Maybe I didn’t deserve Brianna and the baby. Maybe I really was too stupid. Maybe her father was right and I—

“Alex!” Brianna shrieked and grabbed my arm.

I’ll never know how she saw the semi coming head-on before I did. I wrenched the wheel hard, the grating of metal crunching metal piercing my ears. The truck tore along the side of our car and propelled us into a lightning-speed spin on the icy road. I reached for Brianna and pressed my arm protectively across her body as I tried to straighten the car and slow it down. Her hands gripped my arm, hugging it to her, just like she did when we slept together.

A thunderous boom followed by a sickening jolt snapped my head back against the headrest when another vehicle slammed into us. The air was sucked from my lungs. My wife let out a scream that would imprint my soul for the rest of my life. We were lost in a chaotic blur of black and white. Instinctively, I hit the brakes, but the car took on a life of its own. Another deafening crack slammed us backward, and for a moment, there was a sense of complete weightlessness. Silence. Total nothingness except for the pounding of my heart. I thought I was dreaming. I silently begged to wake up home in bed, safe with my wife, our baby, and our dog in our little house with promises and hope and love. But that wasn't meant to be. The hand of fate was already in motion, and it was an unforgiving, unchangeable force. One moment we were flying, and in the next, we were rolling and slamming over and over. We thrashed against each other inside the car in a horrifying dance of gasps, blood, and broken glass.

It stopped just as suddenly as it started, then everything went dark.



When I opened my eyes, I seemed to be floating among the treetops. I stared down at the car below—wheels up, a mangled pile of metal in the snow and earth.

Brianna and I lay motionless beside it.

Everything had gone still and quiet. I was numb, feeling neither warmth nor cold. No fear or pain. Snowflakes froze perfectly still in the air around me.

I wanted to stay there forever, enveloped in the safety blanket of numbness.

“Go back,” Brianna’s soft voice whispered in my ear. *“Wait for me.”* Then, an unseen force shoved me, and down I drifted through the trees with the reanimated snow—seemingly light as a feather. Suddenly, I jolted back to life on the ground several feet from the car—exactly where just moments ago I saw myself and Brianna from above, as we lay

so still. Every bone in my body screamed with agony as I retched and sputtered blood.

When my vision partially cleared, a surge of fear barreled through me, so powerful I thought it would stop my heart. Her name tore through my throat in a gurgling scream. Half out of the car, my beautiful wife lay in crimson-stained snow.

“Brianna!” Frantically, I crawled over ice, broken glass, branches, and rocks to get to her. My heart seized at the sight of her—so still, so fragile, so quiet. “Bri...” Shivers racked my body when I gently turned her head toward me and moved her blood-soaked hair from her face.

Her green eyes stared right through me.

Like I was dead. A ghost.

Ice ran through my veins. I cradled her head in my hands. Rubbed my thumbs along the row of her perfect lower lashes.

“Look at me. *Please,*” I begged.

Her head lolled like a doll’s in my hands, her eyes pinned on something way beyond me, far beyond the depths of the sky.

I choked on a suffocating sob. My tears splashed onto her pale face. “No,” I rasped. “Please no...” My hand shook uncontrollably when I touched my fingers to her throat, making it impossible for me to feel a pulse of life tapping against my fingertips.

When I gently placed my hand on her stomach, my teeth chattered just as violently as my hand trembled. No tiny foot kicked me.

Lily.

I gulped for air, fighting a searing pain that roared up through my chest and splintered out to my limbs. I stared around wildly, trying to gather my wits. The car had busted through the guardrail and rolled down the side of the mountain, out of sight from the road.

But there were other cars on the road. There were other people. Were those voices I heard echoing through the trees?

Or was it the wind?

“Help!” I yelled. “Somebody help!”

Blood dripped from my face when I yanked Brianna’s phone from her jacket and dialed 911. I begged and pleaded for help like an incoherent lunatic until my voice grew too hoarse and I became too disoriented to say another word. White-hot pulses of pain shot through my skull as the edges of my vision blurred. The phone slipped from my hand and fell into the red snow.

I pulled my wife’s body against my chest. The metallic essence of blood filling my mouth and nose, soaking through my clothes, sticky and sickeningly warm. I wrapped myself around her and held her like a vise. I rocked her gently, back and forth, humming our wedding song to the love of my life in my arms.

That morning, our story was different. We were living a fairy tale—two kids from different sides of the tracks, chasing our dreams together, wildly in love, destined for a happily ever after. We were going to grow old together in our little house. We were going to sit on the wooden swing on the porch and watch our kids and grandkids run through the field of lavender.

We were never going to be apart.

You promised me eternity.

You promised you’d be the one who would never, ever abandon me.

And I believed you.

A bright-red cardinal glided in from the trees and landed on the tip of my boot. I stared at his vivid garnet feathers and wished Brianna could see him. Red was her favorite color. Red lips. Red nails. Red dog. Red door. Red hearts. Red dress. Red roses. The bird stayed there—perched on my foot—watching me with sorrow pooling in its glossy black eyes. Like a tiny guardian, he stood vigil.

“Please wake up,” I whispered. Brianna’s cheek was cold against my lips. “I love you. I love you so much. Don’t leave

me alone. You promised.” Sobs and blood caught in my throat.
“I’ll do anything. Please come back.”

A shadow slowly crept over us, inch by inch, until it overtook all light. I could no longer see the little red bird, but I could hear his soft, faint chirps.

Just as the darkness enveloped me, a sparkling, silvery-blue falling star shot right before my eyes.

Delirious and desperate, I made a wish.

I didn’t listen to the advice.

I was not careful what I wished for.

Chapter 1



LAURA - 2013

“I’m going up to bed,” Ben says as he rises from the couch. He stretches his arms over his head, yawning loudly. “I have an early meeting in the morning.”

I smile at him as I unfold my legs across the warm cushion he just abandoned. “I’ll be up in a few minutes. I’m just going to finish my wine.”

He throws me a look that might be disappointment—or maybe just exhaustion—before he disappears upstairs. There was a time, which feels like a long time ago but really wasn’t when we went to bed together every night. We’d make love, or I’d lie next to him in bed and read until I was too tired and fell asleep. We were happy and content. Building a life together like people do. But lately, we’ve been in a state of perpetual annoyance with each other. Therefore, I prefer to sit alone for a while each night, sipping my wine and staring out the window at our quiet street.

After a few minutes pass, I take my glass into the kitchen and place it in the sink. I check the French doors leading to the deck out back and then the front door, ensuring the double locks and dead bolts are secured. On my way to the stairs, I pause in the foyer to enter the passcode into our security system. It’ll trigger a siren sound that could wake the dead if any doors or windows in the house are opened.

I flick off the lights and pad upstairs on thick, plush carpet. Ben didn’t want carpet on the stairs when we bought the house and remodeled, but I did. Carpet is softer. Safer.

At the top of the stairs, instead of going left to the main bedroom suite, I go right and quietly open the door to my daughter's bedroom. Closing my eyes, I inhale a quick prayer that I'll find her cuddled up under her pink blanket with her favorite plush fox, sleeping peacefully like every six-year-old should be at eleven o'clock at night.

My shoulders fall and a long, weary sigh escapes me when my eyes adjust to the dark room illuminated by a glowing teddy bear night-light. She's not in her bed, but sitting on top of her white wooden toy chest under the double window. Her little palm is pressed against the glass. Still as stone, she gazes out into the darkness.

I've found her this way every night for the past eleven or twelve months. It may have even been longer than that. I've wished so many times that she'd been inspired by bedtime stories and was looking up at the stars or the moon, seeking magical worlds that sprang from the pages of her books. Or perhaps a sleigh pulled by reindeer. But soon I realized that wasn't the case at all.

Quietly, I sit next to her on the toy chest and gently move her long, wavy red hair away from her petite face. "Penny..." I say softly. "It's very late. You should be in bed now."

My presence and touch do nothing to budge her attention from the window. A weight of despair settles in my chest when a single, pear-shaped tear slowly slides down her dimpled cheek. Her bottom lip quivers as she blinks away a second tear.

"I want to go home." The soul-wrenching sadness in her delicate voice brings instant tears to my own eyes, even though she's said those same words dozens of times since she first learned to talk. One would think I'd be immune to them by now. But I am far, far from it.

A lump forms in my throat, choking me with feelings of failure, anxiety, and doubt. A good mother wouldn't have a child who cries inconsolably at the window every night. A good mother would know what to say and what to do to make

this better, right? I must be doing something wrong. I just don't know what.

Inhaling a breath, I rest my hand on her back. Her pajamas, with their cheerful ducks holding umbrellas, seem to mock her while she's so distraught. "Honey, this is your home. Here with me and Daddy."

She shakes her head. "No. My other home." Sobbing, she gulps for breath, and I slowly rub circles on her back, hoping to comfort her. But she continues talking through her hiccuping sobs. My touch has never comforted her. Not when she was an infant, and not now. "The one with the porch. And the red door. And the big fuzzy puppy." She finally turns away from the window and stares at me with pleading eyes so full of heartache. I wish I could take her to the house that she so desperately wants.

But I can't because it doesn't exist.

"You've lived here your whole life, Penny. Ever since you were a tiny baby, just two days old."

Her pale-green eyes narrow at me. "Before that," she says with an impatient tone that has no business coming out of a six-year-old.

"There was no before that, baby. Now let's get you to bed. You have school in the morning. You don't want to be tired while all the other little boys and girls are bright, learning all kinds of new and fun things, do you?"

She jumps off the toy chest, stomps across the room, climbs into her bed and flops back on her pillow with a dramatic sigh. "I don't need school. I know all that stuff already."

I can't exactly argue with that. She's an extremely fast learner. She could talk, read, and write way before other children her age. I remember when Ben and I thought it was so funny when we couldn't recall what her first word was. She just suddenly started speaking in full sentences one day.

"You are very smart, but you have lots more to learn and new friends to make."

As I move closer to sit on the edge of the bed, my foot bumps into something on the floor behind her bed skirt. I kneel down to pick it up, thinking it must be a toy she forgot to put away, but it's not a toy. It's the broken, hand-held metal can opener I threw in the garbage bin two days ago.

"Penny, why did you take this can opener out of the trash?" I ask softly, perching next to her.

Sniffing, she says, "I don't know. I just felt like I needed it."

"We talked about you taking things out of the trash, remember? You can't do that. It's dirty and it could be dangerous. Okay?" Taking random objects out of the garbage can is another odd habit my little girl has had since she was about two years old.

She smiles weakly up at me after I kiss her forehead and says, "You're my favorite mommy. You're so pretty."

"Well, thank you. You're my favorite little girl. Now get some sleep." I give her nose an affectionate boop before I turn away. I reach to turn on her sound machine, but my attention is caught by a drawing on her nightstand. Penny abandoned crayons over a year ago, insisting we buy her colored pencils. She was born with a talent for drawing beautiful, incredibly realistic pictures. I'm stunned every time I see her artwork. The scene she's drawn today is one she's done quite a few times in different variations—a man and a woman in a field of flowers with a sunset backdrop. Another favorite of hers is a snowy, tree-lined road with a tiny red bird. In this drawing today, the woman is holding a baby. An animal with a lionlike mane and a teddy bear face sits in front of them.

"This is beautiful, Penny," I praise. "And who are these lovely people?"

"My family," she says with such pride that my heart swells. I'm sure she's going to be a famous artist someday.

"Why do you always draw me with long brown hair?" I ask with curiosity. My hair has been shoulder length and blonde since she was born.

“That’s not you, Mommy, that’s me.”

My eyebrows pinch together. “Oh. But you have gorgeous red hair. Do you need pencils in a different shade of red? We can go to the craft store tomorrow.”

She shakes her head. “No, my hair was brown when I was bigger.”

I nod. “I see. And who is this little baby? Is this you when you were smaller?”

Yanking the paper from my hand, she carefully folds it and tucks it under the blanket with her. “No, that’s my baby,” she says softly, and so sadly, it makes my heart hurt. “But I lost her.” New tears squeeze from the corners of her eyes, and she wipes at them with tiny balled-up fists.

A chill ripples through me. I’m not sure how to respond to such a grave answer when she can’t possibly understand the meaning of her words.

It’s make-believe, I tell myself. She’s insanely gifted and has an incredible imagination filled with empathy. That’s a good thing.

Right?

“Time for bed,” I say, switching on the sound machine. It projects LED jumping lambs onto the ceiling while playing soft music. I bought it for her when she was just a baby. It’s always been the only thing to calm and lull her to sleep.

Placing the tattered, plush fox toy into the crook of her neck, she leans her damp cheek against it and closes her eyes.

I ache to stay here with her. To crawl under the covers with my baby, hold her tight in my arms, and watch the smiling lambs jump over the fluffy clouds. To allow the music to soothe my soul and help me find the answers to fix my child and my marriage. Me and Ben used to be happy and inseparable, but ever since Penny was born, we’ve slowly been drifting apart. As a baby, Penny seemed to struggle to bond with us and it hasn’t gotten much better. That quiet disconnect slowly trickled into our marriage. Now, we spend our days

barely speaking and just going through the motions while our daughter cries every night, wanting to live somewhere else.

I feel helpless watching our happily ever after crack and crumble.

“She was at the window again,” I say as I climb into bed next to Ben. “Crying her little heart out. And she had that broken can opener hidden under her bed. Why does she do that? I threw it out days ago.”

He rolls over, huffing a deep sigh. “Just ignore her and she’ll stop. Making a big deal out of everything she does is only giving her attention and reinforcing her behavior.”

“Are you kidding me?” I whisper loudly in the dark. “I will not ignore her. She isn’t doing it for attention. Most of the time, she wants to be alone. This is not tantrum behavior.”

“What is it then?”

“I think we need to take her to a child psychologist. Something isn’t right.”

“A *shrink*? She’s a little girl, Laura. She doesn’t need to be dragged to therapy just because she has an overactive imagination.”

“I don’t think that’s what this is. For God’s sake, we had to install a security system just to keep her in the house at night. That’s a lot more than an overactive imagination, Ben. Something horrible could’ve happened to her.”

I almost had a heart attack when a neighbor rang our doorbell at two a.m. a few months ago with our daughter in tow, telling us she found Penny meandering around the sidewalk in her pajamas. Unbeknownst to us, she was sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night. At only six years old! The third time it happened, I was terrified the neighbor would report us to the police for child neglect. I wouldn’t blame them either. Who knows what could’ve happened to Penny if our insomniac neighbor hadn’t seen her on the sidewalk those times? We assumed Penny was sleepwalking—until she nonchalantly told us she was leaving because she was living in the wrong house.

“She hasn’t done that in weeks,” Ben countered.

“Thank God. I can barely sleep at night worrying about whether she’s going to be here when I wake up.” I came very close to being one of those people who locked their kids in their bedrooms just so I could have some peace of mind.

“She’s growing out of her quirks. When was the last time she had a nightmare or was afraid to get in the car? And the house thing is probably just her thinking she lives in a house she saw on a TV show or in a book. Kids do things like that all the time. They don’t know the difference between make-believe and reality. Penny’s totally fine.”

Frustrated, I turn on my side, away from him, but sleep doesn’t come. For hours, I lie in the dark as worry continues to twirl and toss things around in my mind like a tornado.

Ben is wrong. My little girl isn’t fine.

Chapter 2



LAURA

I'm late picking Penny up from school. I got distracted earlier researching child behavior again, and before I knew it, three hours had passed in a blur. Then, I hit a detour only after driving half a mile, forcing me to go down bumpy side streets to get back to the main road.

When I finally get to the school, I power walk across the lot. Penny is standing near the school entrance, talking to her teacher. I cringe inside when I notice there are no other kids around. Their parents were all on time.

"Penny!" I call out happily as I walk toward them, but her head doesn't turn. "Penny! Mommy's here." I raise my voice to be heard across the distance. Her teacher turns my way, smiles, then taps Penny's shoulder and points at me. Finally, my daughter turns and blinks at me as I approach—almost as if she doesn't recognize me.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. There was a detour and traffic."
And the endless rabbit hole of the internet.

"It's no problem at all." Her teacher says. "It happens. I'm always happy to wait, Mrs. Rose."

"I appreciate it. I promise it won't happen again." I reach for Penny's hand. "Come on, sweetheart. Say goodbye to Miss Foster."

Penny gives the teacher a small wave and we head to the parking lot.

"Why were you so late?" she demands as I'm buckling her into the car seat. "What were you doing all damn day?"

For a moment, I'm speechless. "Penny!" I say in a hushed yet stern tone. I glance around quickly with flushed cheeks, hoping no one heard my child scolding me in the middle of a parking lot. "You can't talk to me that way."

"Yes, I can!" she says adamantly. "Why is it so hard to be on time? You don't even have a job. Taking care of me is your job."

I meet her accusing stare and she holds my gaze, unwavering. Her words are like daggers of truth, stabbing me in the chest. She's right. Being a mom is my job now.

Sometimes, that's a painful dose of reality for someone who once had a successful career.

"I'm your mother," I remind my daughter. "And you are not my boss."

"Can you at least *try* not to be late anymore? Please?" Her frustrated tone, contrasted with the way she's clutching her lunchbox with trembling fingers, is so contradictory. Sometimes, she acts and speaks like a teenager—feisty with a major attitude using words I have no idea where she picked up. Other times, she's sweet and vulnerable.

"Yes." I lean into the car and kiss her forehead. "I'm sorry I was late."

"I thought something bad happened to you." Her voice wavers and she looks down at her hands.

My heart swells with a tidal wave of despair. I stroke her cheek and tuck strands of her hair behind her ear. "Nothing bad is going to happen to me, Penny."

Still not looking up, she says in a small voice, "What if something bad happens to *me*?"

A chill tiptoes up my spine, sprinkling goose bumps over my arms. Children aren't supposed to think about things like that, let alone say them. Penny has been raised with gentle love and kindness. Nothing scary or bad has ever happened to her or to anyone we know. I wonder if she's seen or heard something in school that's instilled fear in her. Could that be

why she has occasional nightmares? My stomach lurches when another possibility flashes through my mind.

What if someone did something to her when she snuck out of the house?

I inhale a deep breath and force a smile to my lips.

“Sweetheart, I will never let anything happen to you. I promise.”

She slowly lifts her head and looks me in the eye. “You can’t stop bad things. Nobody can.”

The smile stays plastered to my lips—a lie masking the chill in my bones. “Bad things aren’t going to happen to you, or to me, or to Daddy.”

Holding my gaze for a few beats, she blinks, then says, “Okay, Mommy. Can I have rice for dinner?”

Oh, the marvel and relief that a child can switch subjects so quickly.

“Of course you can.” Penny’s favorite meal is white rice with a tiny bit of spaghetti sauce on it. I don’t even know how or when she started eating it. It’s not something I ever made before until she specifically asked for it one night. “Do you want to go to the park on the way home? Play on the swings for a while?” I ask with a lilt of hope in my voice.

She immediately shakes her head. “God, no.”

Penny never wants to play with other children, no matter how many times I’ve taken her to the pool or the park. She just sits there with an expression that clearly and undeniably says, *What the hell am I doing here?* Instead of engaging with the other kids, she always looks distracted, bored, lost. *Displaced.*

“Okay.” I smile and smooth her hair. I’ve learned it’s not worth it to push her.

On the drive home, we hit the detour again. I follow the car in front of me down a residential street one street over from where we live.

“Mommy! Stop!” Penny suddenly screams from the back seat.

My foot hits the break and we pitch forward. “What? What’s wrong?” Heart racing, I scan the road for a child or an animal that may have run out in front of the car.

There’s nothing there.

Worry slides into my veins. Up until a few months ago, Penny would cry and scream every time she had to get in the car. I’m not sure I can handle the stress of an ordeal like that again.

She kicks her sneakered feet against the back of the passenger seat. “That’s my house. Let me out!”

I glance at her in the rearview mirror to see her staring out the window. Her eyes are wide and frantic, cheeks bright red, lips parted. This street is more rural than the one our house is on. The houses here aren’t as modern, and most of them are on larger wooded lots with hobbyist farms. I’m pretty sure the woods behind these houses abut the woods behind our own house.

“Honey, that’s not our house. We had to go a different way home. This isn’t where we live.”

“It is!” she wails at the top of her lungs, banging her hand against the window and thrashing in her seat. “Let me out. Please!”

She’s so upset I have no choice but to pull over to the side of the road. “Okay, calm down. I’m pulling over.” Worry and frustration course through me as I put the car in park and get out. When I open the passenger door to console her, she’s already gotten herself unbuckled from the child seat, jumps out, and bolts toward the street.

“Penny!” I chase her with my heart pounding so hard the air is sucked out of my lungs. My hand clenches the fuzzy fabric of her sweater just as she’s about to run into the road. Yanking her back, I spin her around and immediately kneel to her level. “Never run into the street!” I shout. “Do you hear me?” I rarely raise my voice to her, but my God, my stomach

dropped like an anchor and my hands are still trembling. “You cannot jump out of the car like that ever again.” My voice is still stern but not as loud. “You wait for me to unbuckle you.”

Nodding solemnly, she turns away to stare across the street at the little house that’s captivated her. “That’s where I lived,” she tells me in a faraway voice. “When it was before.”

I follow her wide-eyed gaze to a two-story cottage nestled deep among flowering rose bushes and lush trees as if it grew right out of the earth. Small, yet charming with peeling white paint, faded red door, and weathered roof and shutters. Vines twist from the ground all the way up to the roof, embracing the front porch and possibly even holding it up. Soft green moss fills the cracks between the stones of the walkway. Behind the house, off to the left, is an old wood barn. A picket fence, which may have been white some time ago, runs around the perimeter of the house. A smile tips my lips at the sight of a colorful painted mailbox in the shape of a birdhouse that’s posted near the crooked front gate.

With a sigh of relief, I realize Ben is right. It looks exactly like a cozy old house Penny might have seen in a movie or a book.

I release my grip on her arm and take her hand in mine. “It’s a beautiful little house,” I say with a smile, standing upright.

“It’s a fairy-tale house,” she replies softly.

“It is. I can see why you like it. But it’s time to go home now.”

Reluctantly giving in, she frowns and then suddenly gasps and points to the house. “It’s Cherry Pop!” she yells, tugging at my hand. “See?”

On the front porch, a big, fuzzy red dog emerges from behind an old rocking chair where it must have been napping. It stands at the top of the stairs with a ball in its mouth, eyes locked on my daughter, tail wagging happily.

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up as things start to click in my brain. For years, Penny has been talking

about—and drawing pictures of—a little house with a red door and what I thought was a red lion with a big mane. Is it just a coincidence that something she’s seen on television or in a book happens to be right in front of us?

I tighten my grip on her hand. “Come on, Penny, it’s time to go.”

“No!” She pulls hard on my hand and bursts into full-on tears. “That’s my puppy! I want my Cherry!”

After a few seconds of her screaming and trying to get away from me—which she’s never done before—I’m forced to carry her, kicking and screaming, back to the car. She fights me like a little wild animal as I buckle her into the car seat. She continues to cry for the dog and begs me to take her back to *her* house—the cottage across the street. Her shrieking has me worried a passerby will think I’m attempting to kidnap her.

“Shhh... We’re going home, Penny. Everything is okay.” I turn to check on her once I start driving away. Thank God for child safety door locks, or else I think she’d be attempting to jump out of the car.

“No! I don’t want to go there! I want to go to my *real* home! My husband is waiting for me! Watch the road for crying out loud!”

Quickly turning back to the road, I inhale a deep breath and release it slowly through my nose. My hands grip the steering wheel so tight my knuckles hurt. A dull ache pulses in my head and radiates to the back of my neck. This is the worst outburst Penny has ever had. It’s also the first time she’s had one outside our house.

There’s no doubt Penny believes she’s seen that house before. I wholeheartedly believe that she believes this. I just can’t stop wondering how—and when—she could have. Even though it’s only one street over, it’s not a road I’ve ever driven down before today, and I’ve never seen Ben go this way. But the more I think about it, the less I believe she’s seen a similar house and dog in a movie or book.

Scenarios flip through my mind for the rest of the afternoon, and by my second glass of wine, they've jumped on the crazy train. Sometimes, Ben takes Penny out with him to run errands. *Or so he says.* What if he's having an affair with a woman who lives there, and he's been taking Penny with him as a cover-up? That might explain how she recognized the house.

No. I sip more wine. That's ridiculous. Ben's not a cheater. We might be having our problems, but he'd never go so far as to have an affair, especially with our daughter tagging along. People having an affair don't want a child there asking a million questions and demanding snacks every ten minutes. What fun would that be?

Unable to put my mind at ease, I go up to Penny's room and stand in her doorway. She's sitting at her little desk, deeply engrossed in drawing a picture of a path in the woods.

"Penny," I ask casually. "Have you been to that house before today?"

"What house?" she asks innocently.

"The one with the dog."

She doesn't even stop drawing when she answers with a simple "Yes."

"When? Does Daddy take you there?"

My heart races when she looks up from her drawing. Torturous seconds tick by while she chews her lower lip, studying me. Cocking her head, she says, "Don't you trust him?" When I'm too dumbfounded to answer, she shakes her head and sighs. "Distrust will ruin your marriage, you know."

Goose bumps erupt over my arms. A subtle shift darkens her irises. Her voice, although childlike, suddenly had an unexpected tone of maturity and confidence. Of knowing worldly things a child couldn't know. It was quick as a blink, as if she had suddenly morphed into a miniature adult.

It's the wine. I haven't eaten today, and it's making me loopy.

Unfazed, Penny turns her attention back to her drawing, carefully selecting an emerald-green pencil from her pencil set, then leaning closer to the paper. “No,” she replies, once again back to the sweetness and innocence of her little girl self. With a chill, I wonder if she was even aware of the pronouncement she just made about my marriage. “Daddy’s never been there.”

Relief filters through me. Ben’s not cheating. Penny’s talking like a little girl again. Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

“Honey, can you tell me when you were there? Was it when you snuck outside at night?”

“Nooo,” she singsongs. The pencil scratches lightly across the paper, sketching out fluttering leaves that actually appear to be blowing in a breeze. Her drawing is so realistic I can almost smell the pine. “I was trying to find it.”

“But why, sweetheart?”

“I told you already. That’s my house. I lived there with my husband and our dog and we were going to fix it all up. I bought it with the money from my grandfather.”

“What money from your grandfather?”

She continues to draw, not bothering to look up at me as she does. “The money he left me when he died.”

An odd feeling flutters deep in my stomach. “All your grandparents are alive, Penny.”

“Those ones are. Not the other ones.”

I’m afraid to ask any more questions. Tightening my grasp on the wineglass, I blink at her, wondering what’s worse—me thinking my husband is having an affair or that my child is suffering from a myriad of delusions.

And giving me marriage advice.

Chapter 3



ALEX - 2013

Mikey's name and number flash across my phone screen. I want to let it go to voice mail, but I know my best friend. He's relentless and will keep calling. If I don't answer, he'll show up here to make sure I'm not drunk, dead, or heading in either of those directions.

I swipe my dirty thumb across the screen. "Hey." I feign a casual tone. "What's up?"

"Headin' to the bar for a burger, maybe throw some darts. Want me to swing by and pick you up?"

Leaning against my workbench, I drag the back of my hand across my forehead and glance over at Brianna, who's perched on the edge of my workbench. The hem of her white gauzy dress clings to her midhigh. She slowly and deliberately crosses her long legs and smiles at me, playfully swinging her bare feet. Shiny red polish flashes at the tips of her toes.

I'm not going anywhere.

Clearing my throat, I say, "Thanks, but not tonight. I'm in the middle of a project and I don't want to stop." My gaze swerves to the untouched heap of scrap metal, PVC pipe, gray tarp, and old vacuum hoses on the barn floor. We've been staring at it for five hours and still have no idea what the hell I'm going to make with it.

"C'mon, Fox. We'll shoot the shit. Blow off some steam." He pauses, concern lacing his voice. "A change of scenery will be good for ya."

“Yeah... I’m good, bro, really. I gotta work when I’m feeling it. I don’t wanna lose momentum.”

So far, the only momentum I have today is working on a good buzz. But he doesn’t need to know that.

“I could come hang with you,” he offers, not giving up. “I’ll bring pizza. None of that pineapple shit you like, though.”

My eyes close for a long moment as I stifle a deep exhale. “Nah, you’ll just distract me. You know you can’t sit still and be quiet for shit.” I push a laugh through the tight walls of my chest. Lying to the people you love hurts.

“You sure? I don’t want—”

“I’m sure.” I already know what he’s going to say, and I don’t want to hear it. I can’t hear it. “I’ll catch up with you in a few days when this is done.”

He sighs into the phone. “Alright, man. Call me if you need me.” Another long pause hangs between us, thick and murky as fog. “Take it easy,” he finally says.

“You too.”

I end the call and finish my beer with a gulp before lining it up with the four bottles I’ve already downed in the past hour.

“You should’ve gone with him,” she says softly.

Grabbing another bottle, I slam the cap off on the edge of my bench and restart my playlist. “God Only Knows” filters through the Bluetooth speakers from the dim corners of the barn.

“It’s our anniversary,” I remind her. “I’m not going anywhere. And we have to make something out of this mess you talked me into dragging home.”

Tilting the bottle to my lips, I circle the pile of junk again, eyeing it like prey, waiting for my muse to come out of the muddled shadows of my brain and throw me a bone.

Creative block sucks balls.

“Why aren’t you helping me?” I ask her. “You always used to. You’re just gonna sit there and look pretty now?”

I used to describe all my ideas to her right here in the barn until the wee hours of the night. She'd sit exactly where she is now, excited and animated, embellishing my visions as she sketched them in that old dusty notebook.

"You can come up with your own ideas, Fox. You don't need me for that."

The lyrics of the song weave through me, resurrecting memories—wanted and unwanted—sucking me back in time like not a day has passed. Our favorite songs. The soundtrack to all our memories. Brianna's soft laughter echoing in my ear, her lips warm against my cheek, the curves of her body pressed perfectly against mine, swaying to this playlist that'll play on repeat tonight.

She hasn't danced with me in a long time.

Life sucks.

I take another drink.

A slice of glittering sunlight suddenly appears on the dusty floor and I turn toward the double doors. The cold, damp bottle almost slips from my grip when I see a little girl standing in the doorway. At first glance, I'd swear a garden gnome came to life. She is staring at me with huge eyes, freckled pale skin, and a big, pointy green hat flopped on top of her long, red hair.

"Hey there, little darlin.'" I turn the music down and step closer to peer behind her, looking for the adult this tiny stray human belongs to. Sometimes, people randomly stop by the studio—wanting to buy a sculpture or to pick my brain about how I do what I do. But no one else is there.

"Hello," the little girl says in a soft voice.

Smiling, I kneel in front of her. "What's your name?"

She looks up at me, and my chest clenches like a fist has taken hold of it. Her eyes are just like Brianna's, the exact hue of green, with the same shimmery glints of gold.

Clasping her hands behind her back, she says, "My name is Penny Rose."

I raise my eyebrows, acting impressed, and glance over at my wife, who grins with amusement. “That’s a beautiful name,” I say. “It’s nice to meet you, Miss Penny Rose. Are you here with your parents?”

“No.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m six right now.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t before.”

She’s too cute. “Are you lost?”

She grins shyly and shakes her head. “No, I’m right here.”

I let out a laugh. “That’s true. Here you are.”

“And you’re here, too.”

Her adorableness is bittersweet. I can’t help thinking that if things had been different, my own little girl would be here right now.

“Yup,” I agree. “Here I am.”

“I have something for you,” she says in a hushed voice as if it were a secret. I wait patiently as she digs into her coat pocket. “Here.” She triumphantly holds up an old metal can opener. “I’ve been saving it for you.”

My hand shakes as I take it from her.

Years ago, Brianna gave me a broken can opener just like this one and inspired me to build a steam-punk toucan with it. “*What do you think you can make with this, Trash Cowboy?*” she’d teased, alluring and sultry, then went up on her tiptoes to kiss me. It was the first project we worked on together. We inscribed our initials on the bottom of it. It turned out to be the first piece I ever sold. Bri had so much faith that I’d be crazy successful someday. Two hundred dollars was life changing for us back then. But I’d do anything to have that toucan back now. The sentimental value to me is priceless.

I smile at the little girl. “Thank you. I think I can do something really cool with this.” I assume her parents must’ve brought her along to one of my art shows. Gotta admit, I never thought I’d have such a young fan. It’s cool as hell.

Penny stares at me, then exhales a faint, dreamy sigh. “I remember you,” she whispers, reaching out to lightly touch the leather patch over my eye. “Does this hurt? Under there?”

“Not anymore.”

A faraway look fills her green eyes. Her hand lingers near my face, lightly twirling the strands of my hair. As weird as it is to be touched by a kid I don’t even know, she’s rendered me totally motionless and breathless. It’s as if a butterfly has landed on me, and I fear if I move, it’ll fly away. After a few seconds, she pulls her hand away and steps around me to walk toward the pile of junk. I watch her as she tilts her head at it, deep in thought.

“It’s an elephant,” she finally says matter-of-factly.

A grin spreads across my face. *An elephant.* Why the hell didn’t I think of that? I can already see how I can use the pieces of tarp to make its skin, the hoses for its trunk and tail, tusks from PVC... it’s perfect.

“You just saved me a ton of time, little darlin’.”

She beams up at me. “Can I see it when it’s done?”

“It’s gonna be a while, but sure.”

“Of course you can come back and see it,” Brianna adds. “You can come here anytime you want.”

“I’ll definitely come back,” Penny says, and suddenly, her attention is caught by something behind me. In the blink of an eye, she runs toward the doors, yelling, “Cherry!”

My dog is standing there, wagging her tail so hard her butt is wiggling with happiness as Penny throws her arms around her.

“I love her so much,” Penny says, burying her face in the dog’s mane.

“How’d you know her name?”

Penny shrugs absently, continuing to run her little hands through the dog’s thick fur. “I don’t know, I just did.”

“I think she likes you. You’re lucky. Cherry is usually kinda shy.”

“She knows I love her.”

Through the trees, the sky is a blaze of pink and orange as the sun sets. I wonder where her parents are and why she’s wandering around all alone when it’s almost dark.

“Where’s your mom or dad? Are they at a neighbor’s house nearby?” I ask.

“No.”

I meet Brianna’s eyes across the room. She shrugs and continues swinging her feet.

Running my hand through my hair, I scan the yard and street, hoping her parents—or any other capable adult—will materialize.

“Are your parents at home?” Long buried memories of my own neglect-filled childhood stir back to life as those same exact words echo in the darkest corners of my mind.

Cherry rolls over so Penny can rub her belly. “I think so,” she says.

“Do you know your address?”

She shakes her head, which heightens my growing worry. I’m not comfortable around kids and have no idea what to do with a lost one. Or an unlost one.

I look to Brianna for help and she arches a brow at me.

“You should be handling this,” I say to her.

“You can be responsible for a child, Fox. Don’t you know that? What are you afraid of?”

Frustrated, I turn back to the little girl. “Do you know how to get to your house? Could you take me there?”

Penny flashes me a big grin. “Can Cherry come with us?”

“Sure, little darlin’, she can come. We better go before it gets dark.”

She follows me out to the driveway with no hesitation. Just pure trust. My jaw grinds with anger. This innocent, adorable little girl could’ve walked up to anyone, could’ve been kidnapped, or worse. Where the hell are her parents? Shouldn’t they be looking for her?

Or maybe she’s like me. Forgotten.

“Is it close enough to walk?” I ask. I can’t stick her on the back of my bicycle, and my old pickup is parked in front of the barn with weeds growing over it. Getting behind the wheel of a car vaults me into a full-blown panic attack. PTSD is a perpetual, lurking vampire, just waiting to suck the life out of me.

Besides, I’ve had a few too many beers to drive, especially with a kid as a passenger.

Penny points down the street. “My house is that way.”

Before we go, I turn back to see Brianna standing in the doorway of the barn. The sight of her is breathtaking and borderline angelic, with the space around her seemingly glowing with warm energy. The wind blows her dark hair across her face, her dress fluttering like butterfly wings across her thighs. My heart stumbles into love with her for the millionth time.

“You coming?” I call out to her.

She shakes her head. My favorite smile lights up her face. “You two go.”

Penny smiles in Bri’s direction, then slips her tiny hand into mine and gently tugs me toward the road. When we reach the sidewalk, Cherry hesitates, looking back at the house and barn like she’s not sure she should leave. She lets out a short whimper, then wags her tail and continues to follow her new little friend.

I turn back once more, too, but Brianna is already gone.

Chapter 4



ALEX

Penny leads me to a remodeled yellow Cape one street over. The lawn is perfectly landscaped and has those cool diagonal mow stripes, not a weed in sight. I've always thought you can tell a lot about someone by their lawn. Cherry trots off to sniff, and I hope she doesn't take a crap on their emerald-green grass. I also hope the white Volvo SUV in the driveway means someone is home.

"This is your house?" I ask Penny.

"Yes." She points to a second-floor window. "That's my room."

From the outside, it appears to be a normal house with normal, decent, loving people inside. But my little dark demons are whispering about bad parents who leave to get groceries and never come back, so I jab the doorbell button. I'm not leaving her here until I make sure someone's home.

"We can go inside," Penny suggests. "You don't have to ring the bell."

I smile down at her. "I can't just walk into your house, kiddo."

"But you're with me."

The door swings open, and a woman with a pink towel wrapped around her head like a genie gives me a blank look.

"Mrs. Rose?"

"Yes..." Her confused gaze drops to the little girl standing beside me. "Penny... oh my God. What are you doing out

here? Did you wander off again?"

"Again?" I echo, raising a brow.

"I wasn't *wandering*," Penny protests. "Wander means aimlessly, and I knew where I was going."

The woman lets out a gust of breath that tells me even more than her lawn does. "How many times have I told you that you cannot sneak out of the house?"

Penny chews her lip and tilts her head, eyes cast to the sky as she counts silently. "I think more than twelve times," she finally answers.

I laugh until the woman shoots me the same warning look my foster mother used to give me when I was acting up. I quickly wipe the grin off my face.

"I apologize," the mom says with a tired smile. "It's been a day. Thank you so much for bringing her home. One of these days, she's going to give me a heart attack. I'm Laura Rose, by the way."

"Alex Fox," I reply. "She was in my yard. In case you didn't know, the big light in the sky goes out soon and your kid was gonna be out there alone in the dark."

Leaning forward, her nostrils flare slightly. "You smell like you've been drinking *alcohol*." She whispers the last word like I've been caught in some kind of murderous scandal.

"Says the chick who didn't even know her kid was gone because she was busy washing her hair."

Her eyes flash with irritation, but I catch the guilt smoldering there. "For your information, she was in her room playing when I went into the shower. She snuck out. Obviously, you don't have kids."

"Yeah." I snort. "Obviously."

Cherry appears from her investigation of the lawn and nudges Penny's small hand with her muzzle.

"Mommy, look! It's Cherry. She's just like I remember, but bigger and fuzzier."

Penny's mother does a double take. "Wait—is that your dog?" she asks. "Do you live in the house with the barn?"

"Yup. Right through the woods behind your backyard."

"We drove by the other day when there was a detour. I don't know why, but Penny was very taken with your house and your dog. I'm surprised you didn't hear her screaming in front of your house."

"Kids always love Cherry. I think it's all the fur. They think she's a teddy bear."

Mrs. Rose pulls the towel off her head, and damp blonde hair spills down to her shoulders. "This might sound like an odd question, but are you married?"

Penny answers before I even have a chance to open my mouth. "Of course he's married. And you're married to Daddy." Her little fingers squeeze mine possessively.

I should've let go of this little girl's hand five minutes ago. I didn't even realize I was still holding it. An odd thrum of unease courses through my veins as I realize I don't *want* to let go.

I really need to quit drinking. It just tangles grief, memories, and loneliness all up in my head like a web spun by an intoxicated spider.

The woman laughs at her daughter's comments. "I'm not trying to pick you up," she assures me. "I was just curious because Penny acted like she'd been to your house before. I thought maybe your wife—"

"I *have* been there." Penny insists, leaning her head against my forearm and holding on to my hand with both of hers. The small act of affection shoots a spike of bittersweet warmth straight to my heart. It's got me caught somewhere between smiling and feeling feverish.

I rearrange my thoughts and shake it off. "I thought maybe you brought her to one of my shows."

Confusion narrows the mom's brown eyes. "Shows?"

"Art show. I make sculptures from trash."

She blinks three times. “Like garbage trash?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s actually a thing?”

“I guess it’s my thing.”

“Alex is awesome,” Penny grins up at me. Her smile takes up her whole face. “He’s making an elephant now. I helped.”

“That’s very weird but also fascinating. I’m sorry to say we’ve never been to one of your shows. We’re not art collectors, and to be honest, I’m not sure I could get on board with art made from garbage. No offense.”

I shrug. I don’t give a shit. I just want to go back home to my beer, my wife, and my junk elephant.

“Penny, please stop mauling the nice man.” The mom smiles apologetically and says, “Thank you again for walking her home. I really do appreciate it, and I’m sorry for coming off rude. It’s been a day from hell. Never a dull moment with this one—I thought her days of sneaking off were behind us, at least until she’s a teenager. She seems to have a weird attachment to you and your dog.”

“She’s the cutest stalker I’ve ever had.” Grinning, I finally let go of Penny’s hand. My fingers tingle. “I should get going.”

Penny leans down to plant a kiss on Cherry’s head, then looks at me expectantly. “Aren’t you going to hug me goodbye?” she asks.

“Penny, we don’t ask strangers for hugs. Just say thank you and goodbye.”

Her little chin juts out. Tears begin to pool in her eyes. “But he’s not a stranger. He’s my Alex.”

“I’m so sorry,” the woman says to me. “She has a very vivid imagination.”

I give the pom-pom at the tip of Penny’s hat a playful tug. “I’ll be seein’ ya around, little darlin’. Thanks for helping me with the elephant.”

She stares up at me with eyes so big and woeful they almost pull my battered heart right out of my chest.

“Wait... I have something for you,” she says in a delicate voice. Once again, she reaches into her jacket, this time pulling out a folded piece of paper.

“My little artist. She sketches for hours,” Mrs. Rose says proudly. “She’s actually really good. I’m amazed at the things she can draw. I have no idea where that talent came from. Definitely not from me or my husband.”

Smiling, I take the paper and shove it in my back pocket. “When I get home, I’ll hang it on my fridge.” I click my tongue at the dog. “C’mon, Cherry. Let’s go.” Nodding at Mrs. Rose, I say, “Nice meeting you.”

“You too,” the mom says. Penny doesn’t say goodbye, but my spine burns from the weight of her eyes on me as I walk down the brick walkway and disappear around the side of the house. I cut through their backyard and take the overgrown path through the woods back to my property.

It’s dark when me and Cherry emerge from the other side of the woods. The light in my studio is still on, and a tiny lamp glows dim amber in my bedroom window. I’m sure I saw Brianna brush the sheer curtain to the side, looking for me.

“We’re back,” I yell when I enter the kitchen through the back door.

Silence.

Dead silence.

Laughing at absolutely nothing funny, I grab a cold beer from the fridge, which reminds me of the drawing from the little girl. When I pull it out of my pocket, the paper is wrinkled with a small tear in one corner. Bittersweet bile rises up the back of my throat. This shouldn’t be my first drawing from a child, but it is.

As I unfold the paper, my breath is immediately held hostage. The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand up. Reaching for my beer, I take a gulp and swipe the back of my hand across my mouth.

Even with one eye, I can clearly see the drawing is of me, Brianna, Baby Lily, and Cherry in the field behind the barn. The artist in me is impressed with the detail of the drawing—the perfect use of light, shadows, and shading. The depth of field and realistic color tones. It's unbelievable talent for a child.

But the broken man in me sees a captured moment that was wished for and never came to be.

Chugging the rest of my beer, I toss the drawing onto the counter as if it were drawn with venom. Touching it for another second is murderous to my heart.

I contemplate lighting it on fire.

Suddenly, the silence is permeated with a low, insistent hum, giving the house a pulse. It vibrates through the soles of my feet and rises up my legs, through my chest, then drifts further, tingling my scalp.

I rip my gaze from the drawing to eye Cherry lying on the floor in front of the oven. She's fast asleep, totally unaware of the hum.

I'm probably losing my fucking mind.

Taking a bottle of Jack Daniels with me, I stagger back to my studio to start on the elephant. It's been a long time since any creative juices simmered in my soul, and I don't want to lose them.

"It's a start, Fox."

My head jerks up at the sound of her voice, and I almost fall into the pile of soon-to-be-elephant parts.

"Where have you been?"

She flashes me a smile and jumps up on her spot on the workbench. "Right here."

"You weren't there a few seconds ago."

"I can't stay here. You know that."

I tip the bottle against my lips, refusing to accept that.

“Drinking won’t keep me here, Alex.”

Laughing, I grab one of the tarps and shake it out. A cloud of dust and dirt fills the air. “It’s kept you here this long.”

She’s quiet as a mouse, watching me pull long, thin metal bars from a barrel across the room and carry them over to the elephant pile. They’ll become the skeleton once I bend and solder them.

“She inspired you,” she says quietly after a few minutes.

“Who?”

“The little girl.”

“She gave me an idea, that’s all.”

“It’s a *really* good idea.”

“It is. I think I can make it work.” I *know* I can. It’s already forming in my mind—seven feet tall, rough gray flesh and smooth tusks. Soulful glass eyes and a tassel tail. It’ll be one of my biggest pieces, which will narrow down the collector niche, but I don’t care. Fuck it if it never sells. Creating art was never about money for me.

Brianna’s next question pulls me out of the creative zone I’m slowly tipping into. “Why do you think she came here?”

I pull the tools I need off the workbench. “Who knows? My guess is her mother had her head up her ass, and the kid wandered off.”

“Hmm.” She gathers her long hair in her hand and pulls it all over one shoulder, holding it there and fingering the ends absently. “How do you think she knew Cherry’s name? And yours?”

I shrug like I don’t care, or hadn’t even thought about it.

But that’s a lie.

“She must’ve heard us talking,” I reply.

“She didn’t hear us talking, Alex,” she says softly. “And what about the drawing? You can’t ignore that.”

I *can* ignore it. Anything can be explained away. Or drowned in alcohol, as is the case tonight. “C’mon, Bri. It’s just a little kid’s random drawing.”

“It’s not. It’s *us*. The way it should’ve been. The way it’s *going* to be.” Her voice trembles with a mashup of emotions—heartache, anger, hope, conviction.

I stare at her across the room. My vision blurs. She’s translucent. Ghostlike.

Fading.

“What did you just say?”

She takes an abnormally long breath. Her fingers grip the edge of my workbench. I can see the woodgrain through her flesh. “Just... remember all our promises, Fox.”

“Okay,” I swallow hard. She’s turning transparent right before my eyes. I reach out to touch her, to grab her and hold her here with me.

But she’s not there.

Chapter 5



ALEX

“Wake up.” A hand smacks my face. First, one cheek, then the other.

I mumble something unintelligible around my thick tongue.

The hand smacks me again. Hard enough to sting this time. “C’mon. Get up.”

A dull, persistent throb pulses in my head as I attempt to sit up. With a sigh, he grabs the front of my shirt and hoists me up, propping me in a sitting position.

“Fell asleep,” I mumble.

“More like passed out.”

I shrug and lean my head back against the wood slats. “Tomayto, tomahto...”

He gives my shoulder a shove. “Open your eyes.”

“One is open. You just can’t see it.”

“Cut the shit, Fox. What is all this?”

I peer around through my groggy haze. The metal elephant skeleton is standing eerily under a ray of sunlight coming through one of the upper windows. I don’t remember getting that far with it last night, but I also don’t remember the empty bottle of champagne and two glasses on my workbench, either.

“You have a date or something last night?” he asks.

“Something like that.” I stare at the glasses. One is tipped over, the other still standing with a splash of pale-gold liquid pooling in the bottom. “It was our anniversary. We drank and started this monstrosity of an elephant.”

If I thought my best friend Mikey hovered too much, he’s got nothing on my stalker friend, Kelley. He’s been hounding my ass ever since I tried to drink myself into oblivion for a year after Bri died.

He sits on the floor in front of me, cocks his head to the side, and studies me. His sky-blue eyes remind me of Jasper, the Siberian husky I had as a kid. Ironically, I’m an eye person. I’m drawn to eyes more than any other feature, not just because of the whole window-to-the-soul thing. It’s the fractals of color and light reflecting like a kaleidoscope that mesmerize me. I could easily pick my favorite people out of a lineup by their eyes alone.

But I’m also drawn to the soul that inhabits the space behind those eyes. Kelley, much like my childhood dog, is rough around the edges, vocal, and has zero conception of personal space. He’s goofy, empathetic, and endlessly fiercely loyal.

“I’m sorry, man,” he says in a lower tone. “But she’s not here.”

I glare at him. “She was.”

“Because you’re keeping her here. I get it. You love her. You miss her. You want her back. You’re allowed to feel all that. But she’s gone.”

I nod. To acknowledge I’m listening, not exactly because I agree.

“I hate to break it to ya, but you didn’t die with her. You’re still living, whether you like it or not. And you can’t sit around drinking for two, man. Look at this place. There’re empty beer bottles everywhere. You’re passed out on the fuckin’ floor with one of her dresses. You gotta get your shit together.”

My stomach threatens to purge itself when I see he’s right—I’m clutching Brianna’s white dress. The one she was

wearing last night as she stood in the doorway and when she sat on the bench.

The one she was wearing when she told me she was pregnant.

The dress is wrinkled, smudged with dust and dirt. Ruined like everything else I get my hands on.

“Alex, you can’t be this fucked up.”

I can. *I am.*

Wiping my face with the dress, I say, “I know.” Faint traces of her perfume still linger in the thin fabric, vanilla and anise, now mixed with the scent of oil, smoke, and dirt. So much like us—her so sweet and beautiful, me so messed up and ratty.

He stands and grabs my shirt again, pulling me up to my feet. “Let’s go, fuckface. You’re going to take a nice hot shower, and I’m going to make you breakfast. Then you’re going to tell me about this dinosaur you’re making, and we’re gonna figure out how to get your act together.” He squeezes my shoulder as he leads me through the dandelion-lined path to the house. “You got that?”

I got it. I want it. I just don’t know how to do it.



While the steam from the shower mists around me, I’m tempted to stand under the water with my mouth wide open, let it pour down my throat, and drown me.

These thoughts taunt me constantly. When I’m standing on a ladder cleaning the gutters—why not just let myself fall backward onto the driveway and hope I smash my skull open? When I’m taking sleeping pills at night—why not take the whole bottle? Two bottles? When I walk through the woods and spy a vine swinging in the wind—why not hang myself with it?

There's always a grim, destructive voice in my head whispering, *End it. Just end it. You've got nothing. Do it. End it.*

What always stops me is the fear that I won't find Brianna in death. At least here, living in this delusion I've been wading around in, Brianna is with me.

It's all I have left.

The smell of fresh coffee, bacon, and eggs hits me like a wall the second I step out of the bathroom. My stomach growls like a bear in response.

"Where'd you find bacon and eggs?" I ask Kelley when I enter the kitchen. "Anything here resembling food probably expired five years ago."

"I went to the store on the corner while you were in the shower. You should try it sometime. You can't live on alcohol and saltines."

I smirk from behind my *Please Fuck Off* mug. "Actually, I can. Been doin' it for years."

"Sit down and eat," he says, putting two plates piled with food on the table, which once was a beautiful, polished bird's-eye maple. It's one of my favorite projects from when I was going through a woodworking phase. Now, the top is marred with long scratches from Cherry's nails. When Brianna never came home, the dog got into the habit of lying on it to look out the window to watch for her.

I never stopped her. How could I tell the dog to get off the table when I was sleeping on the floor or out in the barn?

Sinking into one of the chairs across from Kelley and picking up a fork feels foreign to me. Not just because the table has become the dog's perch but also because it's like I've walked into someone else's house and started chowing down on their food. Me and Bri used to eat at this table twice a day, every day. We had sex on this table. Also, sometimes twice a day. But when she died, meals at tables and spontaneous sex went with her. For years, I've been eating standing up near the

sink, and it's usually something that doesn't require a fork—like pizza or a sandwich.

Kelley's raspy voice drags me out of my thoughts. "I fed your dog and put some groceries in your fridge."

"Thanks. You don't have to take care of me, Kel."

"You're right. Because you're going to start taking care of yourself. I can't sit back and let you live like this anymore. I know people have to grieve in their own time and all that, but this has gone way beyond..." He waves a forkful of pancake in the air between us before shoving it in his mouth.

What's normal is what Kelley doesn't say.

There's no expiration date for grief. For me, there's no getting over it. There's no moving on. Death snuck into my life like a masked thief and stole everything from me, leaving me with a terminal disease that festers in my soul, slowly depleting the life from me, hindering the remotest chance of happiness, security, or peace of mind.

All I can do is muddle through each day, waiting for something—*anything*—that will either cure me or kill me.

"I was surprised to see you started a new project."

"Me too."

"It's about time. What'd you say it was? An elephant?"

I nod. "Found some intriguing stuff at the dump. Of course, as soon as I got home with it, all my creativity went to hell."

"Back in the barn, you said Brianna was with you."

I swallow my last bite of food and slowly push the plate away. Kelley is filed in my mind as a post-Brianna friend. A year after Bri died, I was at a small bar in town, trying to drink myself into oblivion and mostly succeeding. Kelley was up on the stage singing cover songs with a local band. I hurled a beer bottle at his head when he started to sing one of Bri's favorites. He ducked and switched songs, which was kind of a shame because he's got a killer voice that sounded better than the original. The bartender removed me from the premises. It

wasn't the first time. As I was stumbling home an hour later, a car pulled over in the pitch darkness and the driver offered me a ride. There was no mistaking his voice.

He asked me why I hated the song.

I told him I loved the song and hated myself.

He didn't ask why. He wordlessly took me home and dragged my ass to the couch. While I was passed out, he straightened up my house. He brushed my dog. He saw the pictures of Bri everywhere. He saw the hole I punched in the wall. He saw the stack of unopened condolence cards. He saw the untouched nursery. He saw the scars down the side of my face.

I never had to say a word to this guy, who became like a brother to me overnight. He just *knew*. Unlike Mikey, who's known me since I was a kid, Kelley has never seen me happy. He's never seen me full of dreams and ambition. He only knows this decaying version of me. And yet, he stays. Unconditionally.

Just like Jasper, my faithful blue-eyed childhood dog.

I wish I'd met Kelley right after the accident when I was in what I call the infectious stage of grief. The few friends me and Bri had avoided me like they were afraid what was happening to me would grab on to them next if they got too close. Instead, they sent cards and left voice mails while they hid at home, silently clinging to whoever they loved, grateful to be the lucky ones.

Lying to Kelley isn't an option. "Brianna was there last night," I say, leaning back in the wooden chair.

He puts his elbow on the table and rests his chin on his palm. "You see her and talk to her?"

My gaze follows my finger as I run it along one of the long grooves in the table. "Yeah."

"Tell me about that."

I'll never be able to describe how Bri never really died. How she still lingers here, leaving me a little more each day.

Slowly, fragments of her have disappeared, but she's still here. Everywhere. In the shadows. Whispering in my ear, jolting my heart back to life when I least expect it. She's between my bedsheets. Her voice and her laugh still echo in the halls and near her beloved rose bushes. Her special scent clings to the air and the curtains and our closet. I can still feel her touch, late at night when I'm trapped in the place between exhaustion and insomnia. She's everywhere and nowhere, and every little leftover piece of her breaks my heart and heals it again over and over and over.

It's both heaven and hell to be trapped in grief.

"She's just there," I say simply. "She sits on my workbench and watches me."

"You ever see her in here? In the house?"

"Sometimes." *All the time.*

His expression remains level, not laughing or looking at me like my elevator doesn't go to the top floor. "Does she talk back to you?"

"Yeah."

"Do you actually hear her, or do you only hear her in your head?"

"I hear her just like I hear you right now."

"Do you ever see her and talk to her when someone else is here?"

Kelley obviously has massively overestimated my social life. Other than him, Mikey is the only other person I've seen in months.

Until little Miss Penny Rose came.

"Not until yesterday. A little girl came by."

Concern flickers across his face, narrowing his brows. "Was it *your* little girl?"

Painful memories clutch at my throat. "No, it was a kid who lives around here. I've never seen her before."

“Did the little girl see or hear Brianna?”

I’m not positive, but I’d swear Penny saw Bri standing in the doorway of the barn when we walked away. I think Cherry did, too.

Scoffing, I say, “C’mon, Kel, I haven’t lost my fucking mind. Logically, I know she’s not really here, but in a way, she is. It’s messed up. I see her—maybe envision is a better word. I can hear everything she’d say to me if she was here.” Then there are the magical times when alcohol blurs reality. Perception shifts. For the briefest of moments, Brianna is really here. Not just in my head.

He’s stone quiet as he studies me, weighing my sanity in his mind. No doubt I’m tipping the scales into crazy town.

“You think I’m screwed up, don’t you?”

He coughs and lets out a short laugh. “After everything you’ve been through, I’d worry about you if you *weren’t* a little fucked up. I think this is your coping mechanism. The only way you can accept she’s gone is to not accept that she’s all the way gone. That she’s still here with you on some level.”

Smirking, I tilt the chair back on two legs. “Singer, landscaper, shrink. Anything you can’t do, Kels?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Cherry comes into the room and stares at us, purple tongue hanging out, probably wondering what we’re doing on her favorite resting spot. I get up and put my dishes in the sink. “Whaddya want me to say, Kelley? You’re right. I pretend she’s here because I miss the hell out of her and I’m lonely.”

“You don’t have to be lonely. There’re millions of people out there.”

“And none of them are her.”

“They’re not supposed to be. You’re allowed to move on.”

“I have absolutely no interest in ever falling in love again. Bri took my heart to the grave with her.”

“Did she take your dick, too? You could at least go out and have some fun. You’re twenty-seven, not eighty. And maybe get a haircut. I can’t even see your face anymore.”

Hooking up with random chicks for sex is about as appealing to me as sticking my dick in the garbage disposal.

“Nobody wants to see my fucked-up face. And what about you? I don’t see you with anyone. I’m sure that swoony voice of yours has chicks strapping mattresses to their backs from here to Boston.” Kelley’s intense blue eyes, raspy voice, endless charm, and muscles must be getting him laid every night.

“Stop changing the subject. I’m trying to help you.”

“Who says I need help?”

“Getting plastered while talking to your dead wife and passing out on the floor of the barn sounds like a scream for help to me.”

“There’s no law against any of that.”

“No law against trying to be a good friend, either.”

Kelley is exhausting me with his persistence, and he’s wasting his time. Nobody can fix the mess that is me.

Leaning against the counter, I cross my arms and level a one-eyed stare at him. “Okay, Kels. What do you propose I do?”

“Stop drinking. Focus on your art. You’re throwing away your talent and your career. Start going to AA meetings and grief counseling.”

“I’ll say yes to the art and no and no.”

“Why no?”

“Because I hate people too much to sit around with them. What kind of bullshit is that? Welcome to this group of people just like me who got screwed out of happiness. Let’s all commiserate in our misery. No thanks. I’m depressed enough already.”

“It’ll be good for you.”

“No.”

“What about a private counselor?”

“Tried that. Talking to someone once or twice a month for an hour does nothing for me.”

He lets out a breath that blows his light-brown hair off his forehead. “How ’bout this then... I’ll stop by every night after work. I’ll make us some real food, we’ll hang out for a while, maybe go dumpster diving for your art shit, listen to some tunes...”

“You tryin’ to date me, Kelley?”

“I’m serious, dickhead. It’ll get you out of your head. If you feel messed up during the day, give me a buzz. Just don’t dive into the bottle.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

He flashes me his notorious stage smile. “Think of me as a mood manager.”

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your life?”

“Nothing that’s more important than helping a friend.”

I wish he’d leave me alone. I don’t need a mommy or a supervisor. I need my wife and my daughter.

As if reading my mind, he says, “You need some real human interaction, Fox. You’re buried in the past, living in an alcohol-induced hallucination. It’s not cool. Give me a month.”

“Why do you give a shit?”

He chews the inside of his cheek and shrugs. “Guess I’m just a nice guy.”

Sarcasm sits at the tip of my tongue like a bullet in the chamber. I stop myself before I spew profanities at him. Kelley’s never mentioned any friends, partners, or family. No one. He’s two years younger than me. He was twenty the night I threw a bottle at him and he drove me home. I’ve been so messed up I’ve never taken a good long look at him. The only things I know about him is he’s a landscaper and sings in a

band. For all I know, *he* might be the one who really needs a friend and a distraction.

“Whatever, man,” I say. “If you want to cook me dinner for a month, I ain’t gonna stop ya.”

But if he starts trying to fold my laundry, I’ll kick his ass to the curb.

Chapter 6



ALEX

Kelley's one month turned into two. Then three. I haven't drunk a drop of liquor in that time.

But I want to.

In fact, I'm staring at a bottle of Fireball right now. It's been sitting on a little wood shelf above my workbench long enough for it to be barely recognizable under a layer of dust. Just looking at the amber bottle brings the familiar taste of cinnamon heat to my mouth.

I've caught Brianna out of the corner of my eye, a shadow darting across the room, a whisper of her perfume in the air. The falling of rose petals as she rustled by. Kelley told me not to look. Not to talk to her. Not to give in. *Especially today of all days.*

But I want to.

So. Fucking. Bad.

I'm supposed to be cleaning and organizing my tools, which is code for keeping myself busy without weed or alcohol while Kelley is playing a gig. I declined his customary offer to tag along this time. I was afraid I'd start throwing bottles at him again.

I want to be alone, and at the same time, I don't want to be alone at all. What am I supposed to do every year on the day my entire life was obliterated? Cry? Reminisce? Get wasted? The date is branded into my existence, along with birthdays and holidays. It can't be forgotten or ignored. It's disturbing. I wonder if there's a card for this sort of thing? *Sending our*

condolences on your yearly day of horror. Or, a little birdie told us it's seven years today since you lost everyone you love!

I drip oil onto a rag and swipe it over my wrench, staring up at the photo of Bri pinned on the wall. Weirs Beach, 2004. Caught forever smiling and squinting at me with her little nose crinkle. Her long hair damp and tousled under a funky straw hat, the water behind her. I kissed her just seconds later. The last time I tasted fried dough and powdered sugar was on her lips.

“I miss you,” I say softly, touching my finger to her cheek in the photo. “I wish you were here.”

I could unscrew the cap off the whiskey bottle, pour the liquid over my tongue, succumb to the burn and the blur. Bri will come out of the shadows. I'll see her and hear her, and—

“I'm back.”

Goose bumps erupt over my arms. My hand freezes on its way to the bottle as I turn my head toward the barn door. Like a kid caught in the cookie jar, I quickly pull my hand back.

“Hey there, Miss Penny Rose.”

Smiling, she reaches up and straightens the white wool beret balanced on top of her mane of fiery-red ringlets. “I told you I'd come back,” she says.

I grin at her. “And here you are.”

“Here I am, Alex.” Her green eyes hold mine like magnets. The corner of her mouth tips slightly into a subtle, mischievous smile. “Who were you talking to?”

“No one.”

Arching an eyebrow of doubt at me, she skips across the room, grabbing an empty bucket on the way. I watch, dumbfounded, as she plops the bucket next to me, bottom side up, and uses it to climb up on the workbench. She sits on the edge, swinging her feet—clad in the tiniest pair of suede work boots I've ever seen.

“This is better,” she says. “Now we're on the same level.” She points to the bottle of Fireball. “Were you going to drink

that? It looks old.”

I chuckle. “I was thinking about it.”

“There’s dust all over it. It probably doesn’t taste very good.”

“There’s no dust on the inside. Does your mother know where you are?”

Her shoulders rise almost to her ears. “She’s busy on the computer. She works from home and I’m not supposed to bother her.”

“You really shouldn’t be out alone. You’re just a little girl.”

Her teeth dig into her bottom lip. “No, I’m not. I came through the path in the woods, with the trees and the moss. It’s just like being in the backyard.”

“No, it’s not. You’re too little to be walking through the woods and a big field by yourself. The weeds are taller than you.”

She pushes her lips together, nostrils flaring like a pissed-off bull. “I’m not little. You said I could come back and see the elefant.”

I try not to laugh at her pronunciation. “Yeah, but not all by yourself. You should’ve asked your mom to bring you.”

“But I like doing things by myself.”

Me too, I agree silently. Me too.

“Just stay away from the lake, okay?”

There’s a small lake on the other side of my property with an old deck and a wooden swing. Me and Bri spent countless hours there, under the blazing sun and the glow of the moon.

“Okay,” Penny says.

Somewhere in the muddle of my mind, a voice is telling me I should take her home immediately. But another voice reminds me this isn’t my problem. If Penny wants to sit here and talk to me, well, I’m not going to stop her. It’s not my fault

her mother's a flake and doesn't know her offspring is wandering around the neighborhood, hanging out in a barn with depressed artists. If I can train my dog to stay on my property, then she should be able to do the same with her kid.

Swiveling her head around like an owl, Penny asks me where the elephant is.

I slide the wrench onto its hook on my wall o' tools. "It's in the other room where I keep all my supersecret finished projects."

"Can I see?" she asks excitedly.

"I don't know..." I say, not looking at her. "I'm not sure if you can handle how awesome it is." I glance sideways at her as I twist the cap on the bottle of oil. "Your head might explode... pieces of your brain will fly everywhere." Her eyes widen like tiny saucers, and I shake my head sadly. "And then I'll have a big mess to clean up."

Giggling, she kicks my hip with her miniature boot. "That's not funny."

"You're right. It's serious stuff."

She swings her feet faster. "Please let me see?"

I tilt my head and pretend to think about it. "You promise not to climb on it or tip it over?"

She looks slightly wounded. "Of course not. I'm not stupid, Alex."

"I didn't say you were stupid. I'd never say that to you. I just want you to be careful."

"I will be. I promise." She holds her arms out to me. "Can you help me down? Please?"

As I gently lift her off the bench, she grabs on to my shoulders, and leans her face toward mine until our noses almost touch. When I pull back, she smiles impishly and crinkles her nose.

The gesture is like a Taser to my heart, zapping me with a flash of grief and longing so strong I almost drop her. Her

fingers tighten around my shoulders. Ten tiny clear nails cling desperately to the fabric of my flannel shirt like a stray kitten.

My heart thumps, then pauses as if it's forgotten to keep beating. A low hum—like that time in the kitchen when I was looking at Penny's drawing—channels and crackles through my limbs, prickling my skin. The sudden racing of my heart dizzies me. An eerie sensation, a mix of joy and fear, swirls through my chest.

I've felt this way before, a long, long time ago.

I quickly set Penny down on her feet, and the odd feeling disappears just as abruptly as it started. Wiping my shaking hands on my jeans, I take a step back from her, almost tripping over the bucket she left on the floor.

"I just felt buzzy," she says, flexing her fingers in the air between us. "Like a bee. Did you?"

"No."

Yes.

Her eyebrows slant together in a tiny *V* as she peers up at me. "How come you lie to me?"

"I don't."

"Really, Alex?"

"Really, Penny."

She pins me with a look that's half disappointment, half amusement. "You're gonna have to stop doing that," she says.

"Doing what?"

Her head shakes with exasperation. "Can I see the elephant now?"

Still feeling marginally disoriented, I tilt my chin toward the storage room. "C'mon."

Her little boots thump on the floor behind me as I cross the room and insert the old key into the lock of the oversized door. She waits just outside until I flick the light on, then she slowly steps inside.

This windowless room now has the air of a morgue—desolate, cold, and haunting, harboring ghosts with nowhere to go. Years ago, it was full of sculptures shining under spotlights, waiting to be displayed and sold. My work took a major turn right before the accident. An A-list actress commissioned me to build a six-foot unicorn made solely of her own objects and fabric—glass, chrome, mirrors, silk, lace, glitter, and old jewelry. It was one of the coolest things I’ve ever made. The actress loved it so much she insisted on paying me twenty-five grand for it—five times the amount I initially quoted her. She displayed the piece in the foyer of her mansion, and a picture of her posing next to it ended up in a popular magazine a month later. Within days, I had six new large commissions. Not long after, several art galleries contacted me offering exhibits.

It was my ultimate dream come true.

My art—appreciated and respected.

Brianna—so proud of me.

Her parents—stunned.

I started to think maybe life was going to be really good. Then tragedy barreled through like a tornado, destroying everything in its path.

Art has been my therapy since I was a little kid. For years, it was all I had. It saved me from loneliness and insanity more times than I can count.

But not this time.

After the accident, a door in my brain slammed shut, blocking me from all creativity and happiness. A lock slid firmly in place, leaving me trapped in the worst kind of silence. The kind where I was alone with my thoughts. That was a place I’d been hiding from for a long time.

It took a year of grieving and drinking myself stupid before I tried to crawl out of the hole and get back to work. I needed money. I needed a distraction. I needed my soul and my mind to be soothed. Without Brianna, all I had left was my art. But the minute I stepped foot in the studio, I crashed

straight into that invisible door in my head. All my artistic visions seeped under that door—out of sight and reach.

It wasn't the welcome I was expecting.

For months, I sat in my studio, waiting for inspiration and motivation to come. The sun rose, the sun set. I didn't move. I stared at piles of junk that once inspired sculptures I'd get paid thousands for. But they remained someone else's tossed shit. Every day, I leafed through Brianna's notebook, staring at her sketches of my rambling ideas. I'd gently run my fingertips over the textured pages, smudging the charcoal, desperately hoping the images would jump off the page and spring to life in my head again.

That didn't happen.

I returned all the deposits for my commissioned projects.

Once again, I was lost and broke, which was probably always my destiny. My time with Bri was just a detour. It felt like forever ago when she taught me to dream. To believe. For a while, I did. I dared to love, to feel safe.

To make wishes...

I should've known better.

"Alex?" Penny slips her small hand into my palm. "Don't look sad."

"I'm not."

"Can I tell you something?"

"Go for it."

"You'll be sad until it's done teaching you. Then it will go away."

I blink at her, wondering where she gets this stuff from. Mrs. Rose shouldn't let her watch so much TV. "You want to see the elephant or stand here and psychoanalyze me?"

Her eyes sparkle mischievously. "Both?"

"No."

Still holding on to my hand, she sweeps her attention to the elephant, which is seriously the elephant in the room. It's massive and looming and it was a bitch to move in here. Penny's lips part slightly in awe. "It's so beautiful," she whispers. "I knew it would be."

It's been a long time since anyone had faith in me. It feels good, even coming from a six-year-old. "You like it? You inspired it."

Nodding, she pulls her hand from mine and slowly approaches the seven-foot sculpture as if she's afraid she might spook it. "Wow. It's like real-life size."

"Close to it."

Tiptoeing around the elephant, she lightly rubs her hands over its body, reveling in all the details. "It feels like real skin," she exclaims.

"When have you ever touched an elephant?" I tease.

Flashing a lopsided grin at me, she walks under the statue, around to the other side. "I'm touching one right now."

"Smart-ass," I reply, laughing.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asks, standing next to its front leg and idly stroking its chest.

Shrugging, I step closer. "Not sure yet. I can try to sell it. If not, I guess it'll just stay here and take up space."

"Maybe a zoo will buy it," she suggests.

"Why would a zoo buy it when they have *real* elephants?"

"For the gift shop. Or to stand where people go inside and buy tickets. With a sign on it."

Not a bad idea.

Quietly, Penny browses the room like she's in a museum, pausing to study each of the six other sculptures that have been here since before the accident. They were meant to be displayed at an exhibit, but that went down the drain. Ever since, they've been trapped in this hellish limbo with me.

Penny calls out the name of each statue as she passes it, tapping them lightly. *Stork. Turtle. Lighthouse. Dolphin.*

“It’s a heron, actually,” I correct, nodding toward the long-legged bird.

She turns and stares at it doubtfully, analyzing its long forceps beak, then its silver fork legs. “I don’t think I know what that is.”

“It’s like a stork. But different.”

“Like a flamingo?”

“Sorta. But not pink.”

“It’s weird that the same things have different names. Like couch and sofa. Why? Why are words confusing?” Her big green eyes search my face like she expects me to have half a clue about life. Clearly she hasn’t picked up on my inadequacies yet.

“I dunno, kiddo. I don’t make up the words.”

“Who does?”

“Someone with a lot of time on their hands.”

“Well, I think it’s silly and complicated.”

I stifle a laugh. “You sure you’re six?”

“For now.” Reaching up and rising up on her tippy-toes, she runs her hand over the elephant’s white plastic tusk. “Are you going to make another one?”

“Another elephant?”

“No. Like maybe a bear or a castle would be nice.”

Thinking about starting a new project rustles up a pile of endless, overwhelming thoughts. If I hit that creative wall again, it’ll do my head in. Kelley’s get-fox-to-stop-drinking-and-hallucinating plan will go up in flames. “Maybe...I’m not sure.”

Penny’s jaw drops. “But isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? Keep making new ones? Then more new ones. Then more and more and more.”

My breath is a misty cloud in the air between us, reminding me it's December, and this kid should be home, not hanging out in the cold with me.

"What makes you think that?" I ask, leading her back to the door.

"It's just...I don't know." Pausing, she turns to give the sculpture a pensive stare. "I just have this feeling that it's what you're supposed to be doing."

"Is that right?" I say, locking the door behind us. "And what are *you* supposed to be doing?"

"I think..." She inhales a deep breath of frigid air. "I think I'm supposed to put things back together."

"What things?"

She puts her palms up and shrugs dramatically. "Important things, I guess. I'm not sure yet."

"That sounds like a pretty big job for a six-year-old."

She nods solemnly while pulling fuzzy mittens that match her hat onto her hands. "It is, but I have time."

When we step out of the barn, Cherry greets us in the driveway, trotting straight to Penny, tail wagging.

Once again, Penny's parents are nowhere in sight.

"I'm going to walk you back to your house now," I say, staring down the road.

"Can't I stay here a little longer? I promise I won't bother you. I can sit with Cherry on the porch."

"You'll freeze your tail off. Don't you want to go home?"

When she shakes her head, a draft of dread creeps up my spine. I kneel down on the walkway to look her in the eye. "Why don't you want to go home?"

"Because today's my birthday." She snuffles. "Well, tonight is."

My heart has curled up in a ball and crept up into my throat, forcing me to squeeze words out. "Today's your

birthday?”

“Yes. And my mom said I can do whatever I want on my birthday, and I want to be here with you and Cherry.”

Here. Not out getting ice cream or going to a movie with friends. *Here*. “Why would you want to be here on your birthday?”

Her eyes stare right through me, flickering with thought. Their hue and emotional depth are so much like Brianna’s that I sway between falling into the abyss of them and wanting to pull her hat down over them.

A tiny raindrop-shaped tear clings to her lashes. “I don’t know,” she whispers.

I remember being scared, hungry, cold, and bruised. I remember being alone. I remember the neighbors closing their doors in my face, acting like if they didn’t look at me, I didn’t exist. I remember wishing someone would come help me.

Months later, when someone finally did, they asked me what had happened, and all I could say was *I don’t know*.

“Penny, are you scared at home? Does anyone hurt you?”

Looking down at her feet, she says, “No. I just don’t—”

“Penny!”

We both jump and turn to see Mrs. Rose yelling out the window of her SUV. She turns into my driveway, throws the car in park, and jumps out while the car is still running.

“Thank God. You had me so worried. I had a feeling you’d be here,” Mrs. Rose says as she stalks up the driveway. The pink fuzzy slippers on her feet are a dead giveaway that she flew out of the house when she suddenly realized her kid was gone. “I’m so sorry,” she says to me. “I’m embarrassed to say she managed to leave the house again while I was on a work call.”

I glance down at her feet. “I’d be more embarrassed about those slippers.”

“Very funny,” she replies. “I apologize for the inconvenience. I don’t know why she’s obsessed with coming here.”

“Have you asked her?”

Her eyes narrow at me. “What? Of course I have. Why?”

I run my hand through my hair and let it fall back into my face. “Never mind. I think she just likes seeing my art and my dog.”

“Mommy, you said I could do whatever I wanted for my birthday,” Penny protests. “Remember?”

“I meant we could go to your favorite restaurant or the toy store. Not run off when I’m not looking. You know you’re not allowed to leave the house without me or Daddy. You scared the daylights out of me. I’m sure Alex has better things to do than entertain a child.”

“Not a problem,” I say. “But she shouldn’t be out alone. She could get lost, run over, kidnapped, mauled and eaten by coyotes...”

That gets me a death stare.

“I’m well aware of all that and it terrifies me. But when she sets her mind on something, that’s it. You have no idea how determined she is. She’s like Houdini when it comes to getting by me and getting out of the house. And let’s tone down the horror movie plots, please? She already has nightmares. She doesn’t—”

“I came to see the elephant,” Penny interrupts. “And Cherry and Alex. That’s all. I didn’t want to bother you while you were working, Mommy. You said not to bother you.”

Mrs. Rose sighs. “I hate to say this, but she’s probably going to come back here unless I shackle her to something or lock her in her room.” She smiles weakly and quickly adds, “I’m kidding, of course.”

“Gimme your number,” I suggest, feeling bad for her. “So I can call you if she shows up again.”

“That would be great. Really. Thank you so much. I know this looks bad, like *really* bad. I’ve just been so busy, and I can’t watch her every second.” She hunts in her purse for a pen and scribbles her number on the back of a business card.

I take it from her and shove it in my pocket without looking at it. “You might want to look into a babysitter.”

She laughs. “Are you interested in the job? You seem to be good with kids.”

“Do I look like a manny to you?”

“No, but it might be better than playing with other people’s garbage.”

I flash her a smirk. “Obviously, you’ve never played with someone else’s junk.”

Her cheeks redden. She opens her mouth and immediately closes it. “On that note... we better be going. Come on, Penny.” She reaches for her daughter’s hand. “Your birthday cake is waiting. Today’s her birthday,” she tells me. “Her party is Saturday, but we’re having ice cream cake tonight.”

Penny hops up and down on one foot. “Can Alex come have cake?”

Hard pass. There’s no way I’m eating cake today. “Sorry, little darlin’, I’ve got plans tonight.”

Regret practically eats me alive the moment the words leave my mouth. Penny’s bottom lip quivers. Her eyes glisten with tears as she stares at me.

“You won’t come sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to me?” The waver of heartache in her voice guts me. I feel like the world’s biggest asshole for upsetting her on her birthday, but celebrating anything today will make me physically sick.

Mrs. Rose tugs her away. “Penny, you’ve bothered Mr. Fox enough for one day. You can bring him a leftover piece of cake tomorrow if you want. For now, let’s say thank you and goodbye.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye,” Penny says softly, still not taking her teary eyes off me. “Where are you going to go,

Alex? You love ice cream cake,” she says. “Everyone does. It has chocolate crunchies in the middle.”

Her mother sneaks me a look like I know about kids throwing tantrums. I should, but I don't. “I'll try to make sure this doesn't happen again,” she says.

“You're really not coming to my birthday?” Penny asks, blinking up at me. Utter disbelief pools in her eyes and trickles down her red cheeks.

“No can do, sweetheart. But it sounds like you're going to have an awesome time.”

“Thank you again for being so understanding, Alex,” Mrs. Rose says.

I nod and watch her pull a sobbing Penny to the car and strap her into the back seat. My old friends, guilt and loneliness, return as soon as the taillights have blurred out of sight.

“I should've gone for the cake, huh?” I ask Cherry. Wagging her tail, she walks slowly to the front porch. I follow and sit on the steps with her, idly stroking her fur, trying to figure out why I suddenly feel more unsettled than usual.

It's not just the date.

December fifth. The day I lost my wife and my daughter.

It's that Penny Rose first randomly visited on my wedding anniversary. Gave me a drawing that had an uncanny likeness to the family I no longer have. It's the old can opener Penny gifted me, which happened to be almost an exact replica of the one Bri gave me years ago. It's how she knew my name and Cherry's name.

It's how Penny showed up tonight out of nowhere, on the day of Brianna's death, which is coincidentally the same day Penny was born.

There're way too many similarities going on. I'd be an idiot to ignore them.

The explanation finally comes to me clear as day, making my stomach coil like a python. My hand shakes as I pull my

mobile phone from my pocket and press the saved contact icon.

The other end picks up, but they don't speak.

"Why are you fucking with me?" I seethe after a few beats of dead air. "After all this time?"

"Who is this?"

"You know who this is."

His deep sigh comes through the line. "Still drunk, Alex? Why am I not surprised?"

"I'm sober. I want you to stop this sick, twisted game you're playing. Using an innocent child to fuck with me? That's low, even for you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Fuck you."

He snorts. "You know why your parents abandoned you, Alex? Because you're a worthless loser. A filthy, stupid, delusional drunk. You're trash, just like your so-called work. My daughter was beautiful and smart, with her entire life ahead of her, and you killed her." I hear him inhale, then exhale a long, crackling breath. His grief for Brianna battles my own in the silence that follows. "You should be buried in the ground, not her," he finally says with palpable hatred.

"For once, we agree on something."

There's a click and the call ends.

Fucking dick-faced asshole.



Each step I take on the path through the woods to the Roses' backyard stokes my fury even more. Getting an answer out of Brianna's douche of a father is never gonna happen, but I sure as shit can get one out of that ditz, Mrs. Rose.

I almost felt sorry for her earlier, appearing as the frazzled, worried mother. My demons were ready to go to battle for Penny, a little girl I thought was neglected and wandering around alone, armed with nothing more than an intriguing and charming personality. It sickens me that she was planted in my yard on purpose on the days that would hurt me the most, coached on all the right things to say to mess with my head, to pry open my heart, and dig memories up.

I wonder how long my ex-father-in-law hunted for a little girl with eyes the exact color that would speak to my soul. I wonder how much he paid Mrs. Rose to go along with his sick plan.

I feel sorry for Penny. Just an innocent little girl being used and manipulated to toy with an adult man. Forced to pretend to know things about me, to give me gifts, and to lie about her birthday.

Who the hell does things like that?

I guess child abuse comes in all sorts of messed-up forms.

Rage is pulsing like lava through my veins as I tread through the dark across their perfect green lawn. If it wasn't so cold, I'd take a piss on it.

Every light on the first floor of their house is on. Faint voices can be heard. I creep along the side of the house, not wanting to be seen on my way to the front door. As I round the corner of the garage, the voices grow louder, breaking out into a chorus of "Happy Birthday."

Surprise at hearing the song halts me. Glancing around to make sure none of the neighbors are outside, I edge toward the nearest window and peer inside.

It's a scene right out of a movie. Penny is kneeling on a chair in front of a pink cake glowing with seven candles. Laura's taking pictures with her back to the windows. A guy, who I assume must be Penny's father, is standing next to her. I was expecting him to have red hair, but his is black and gelled up. All three of them are wearing silly paper party hats with too-tight elastics under their chins.

I was wrong.

This isn't a sick revenge game orchestrated by Brianna's father to torture me. It really is Penny's birthday.

My attention is riveted on Penny as she closes her eyes, leaning fearlessly close to the flames. She blows each one out, pausing in between, not in one big breath, but with seven tiny breaths.

I don't have to be in the room to know she just made seven wishes.

I've only ever seen one other person make a wish on each individual candle.

"Everything we want starts with a wish, Fox," Brianna said dreamily. Smoke from the candles drifted in the air between us like wispy ghosts. "We should never settle for just one."

"I don't do wishes," I said. I'd never had a birthday cake. My first ever was the one sitting between us that Bri spent the entire day baking and decorating for me. Eating it seemed like a sin. I wanted to save it forever—perfect and untouched.

Holding my gaze, she pulled a candle out of the cake and licked the frosting from it. "That's why I made the wishes for you." She leaned across the table and kissed me with sugary lips. "And you, my love, deserve to have every single one of them come true."

I have no idea what wishes Brianna made for me that day. I'll never know if they came true.

I wonder what Penny Rose just wished for and why she wanted to spend time with me and my dog on her birthday, of all the freakin' places she could've picked.

"You and Cherry Pop and our little house are my favorite place," Bri had said. "I don't ever want to be anywhere else or with anyone else."

Closing my eyes, I shake my head to rattle the memory away. That's the thing about memories—they're like a slot machine. I never know what I'm gonna get when my brain

spins. It might land on one that'll make me smile, or it might land on one that'll be a knife plunged in my heart.

When I open my eyes, Penny is giggling as she plucks one of the candles from the cake and licks the icing off.

What. The. Fuck.

A surge of despair and envy tears through me. I don't know what I'm doing here. All I know is the scene through the window should be *mine*. Me and Brianna should be at our table in the kitchen right now, celebrating Lily's seventh birthday with a pretty pink birthday cake and presents. We should be singing and taking pictures. We should be making memories.

I'm not supposed to be alone and they're not supposed to be gone.

She promised.

Chapter 7



ALEX - 2016

I'm wrestling with the rose bushes. *Again.*

Armed with welding gloves, I grasp the snarly branches and snap them in half. I'm not even sure how these bushes are still alive. The way they bloom every year annoys the hell out of me. I hate that the bushes die every winter then come back to life in the spring, all beautiful and thriving, even when there's no one here to give a shit about them anymore.

Bri loved the roses, though. So every now and then—like today—I get a crazy urge to take care of them for her. Just in case she's somehow watching me from wherever she is.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch what I'd swear is Bri's long hair blowing in the breeze around the back corner of the house. I can't resist turning to look, my heart lurching at the hope that she might be there.

"I don't think you're doing that right," she says.

Her voice slams my heart back to the well of my chest, then coaxes it back to a normal beat.

"Well, look who's here." I toss the branches into the pile with the others I've mangled. "Little Miss Penny Rose."

"Here I am... and here you are," she says.

I can't help but grin at her. "Here we are again."

A small smile flits across her face, making her green eyes sparkle under the sunlight. "Did you miss me, Alex?"

"Like a toothache," I tease.

“You’re still a bad liar,” she says, giggling.

“Haven’t seen you creeping around in a long time.” I turn to pull another branch. “Thought you moved away or somethin’.”

She takes three steps closer. “I wasn’t creeping. And it’s been over two years.”

“Damn, has it been that long?”

Nodding, she pulls a small strip of peeling paint from the side of the house and looks down at it, picking it apart with her fingers. “I was mad at you.”

I shake my hair out of my face. “Mad at me? What for?”

“Because you had plans on my birthday.”

“You’ve been holding a grudge for more than two years over *that*?”

Dropping the paint chip on the ground, she finally looks up at me with her lips and eyebrows all scrunched together in adorable anger. “Yes,” she finally says.

“Sorry, little darlin’.” I reach for another branch, but suddenly, she’s morphed next to me and has her hand on my elbow.

“You shouldn’t do it that way,” she says, eyeing the bushes like I’m about to murder them.

“What way?”

“Yanking them. You have to use the scissor things.”

“Scissor things?”

“Yes, they look like this.” She holds up her thumb and forefinger and chomps them together in front of my face.

“I know what they look like.”

Pointing to the shed behind the house, she says, “They’re probably in there.”

“Ya think so?”

She nods. “Yup.”

“Let’s go see if you’re right,” I say, knowing the pruning shears are in there exactly where Brianna left them.

We walk across the backyard to the old shed. A rusty antique planter with long-dead plants sits near the aging white door. I bought it for Bri at a consignment shop right after we moved here. Every year, she planted flowers in it that draped down the sides like little curtains. The shed was Brianna’s special domain—filled with all her gardening supplies and yard decorations. Inside, she hung twine across the ceiling and used miniature clothespins to hang Polaroid photos. She loved taking random photos, especially of me and of Cherry. A handful of them are of the three of us together. She’d hold the camera at arm’s length and quickly press the shutter button. In most of the pictures, we look perfect—smiling and happy.

But others are a haunting premonition. Brianna’s attempt to center us in the frame went wonky, and she’s cut off in the picture, with only her arm and shoulder or half her head showing. We used to laugh at them, but now they tear my guts out, seeing her suspended in time, half in and half out of life. The only time I ever go in the shed now is to grab a rake or shovel that I’ve strategically placed right near the inside of the door so I can grab what I need without having to go in.

But today, I venture inside. It smells damp and earthy, like fresh rain.

“Oh, pictures from olden days,” Penny says, tilting her head up to stare at them.

I don’t look at them. “They’re not old. The weather faded them.”

“I like them that way. That’s the snippers.” She points to the shears hanging on the wall.

Silently, I grab them. My fingers burn when they press into the soft indents worn into the red rubber grips. A leftover, imprinted ghost of my wife that hasn’t faded away yet. I still find them. Dents in pillows and cushions. Stray hairs in brushes. And the one I love to hate—the Brianna-shaped curve in her side of the bed.

Penny picks up a pair of small stone cherub statues and says, “You should put these in the yard. They’re so cute.”

They were Bri’s favorites. My chest hurts when I see the jagged line on the cherub’s arm that was broken during a bad storm. Brianna glued it back together. She also accidentally glued her finger to it and I had to gently pry it off while we laughed our asses off.

I wish I could’ve glued *us* together.

I swallow as Penny looks at me expectantly. “You can put them outside if you want,” I tell her.

Smiling like she won the damn lottery, she lugs the statues out to the front yard. After a few minutes of serious contemplation, she finally settles them in the mulch on each side of a small, round bush.

“There,” Penny says proudly, stepping back to stare at them. “Doesn’t that look so much nicer? They’re friendly angels.”

“As opposed to nonfriendly angels?”

She squints up at me. “Yes. They’ll watch over you.”

Scoffing, I mutter, “Great,” under my breath and start cutting the rose branches.

“Alex,” she tugs on my flannel sleeve. “You have to cut them down lower.” She points to a specific spot on a branch. “Here.”

I throw a smirk at her. “You been studying horticulture for the past two years, little girl?”

She smiles and replies coyly, “Maybe.”

I hold the shears out to her. “Do you want to do it?”

Her eyes light up. “Can I?”

“Have at it. Just don’t cut a finger off.”

Standing back, I watch as she skillfully trims the three bushes. Her mother would probably cut my balls off if she

knew I was letting her kid wield something sharp enough to lop off a limb.

“See?” Penny says, handing the sheers back to me. “That’s how you do it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Hey, does your mother know you’re here?”

“Probably not, why?”

“Because I worry about you out and about alone.”

“I’m older now.”

I love her bulletproof attitude. “You’re still just a little kid.”

“I have my own phone.” As proof, she pulls a small phone from the back pocket of her jeans. “I’ll send my mom a message and tell her I’m here.”

“A phone can’t do shit for you.” Although, I wish I’d had a phone when I was her age. Not that I had anyone to call or anyone to give two fucks about me. “By the time you call for help, you’d already be in someone’s trunk.”

She looks at me like I have a screw loose. “I’m not a regular little kid like you think.” Her fingers tap the tiny keyboard.

“Can’t argue with ya there.”

Her phone chimes and she holds it up to her face to read the screen, then turns it toward me. “She says I can stay for an hour if it’s okay with you.”

I stifle a groan. I’ve been in a shitty mood all day. The last thing I want to do is deal with anyone—especially someone’s kid. But how the hell am I supposed to tell her to leave? Especially after she avoided me for two years just because I didn’t sing “Happy Birthday” to her and shove cake in my mouth. If I tell her she can’t stay, she’ll hate me for the next *ten* years.

“Oh no, my finger’s bleeding.”

I follow her worried gaze to the bright blood bubbled on her fingertip. My stomach twists. I can almost taste and smell the metallic bitterness of it.

I tear my focus away. “Looks like a thorn got you.”

Her voice wavers when she says, “I don’t like blood.”

“Don’t look at it.” I lightly touch the back of her head. “Let’s go inside and get you a Band-Aid.”

The old wood porch creaks in welcome as we climb the stairs to the front door. After stepping inside, I glance over my shoulder to see Penny frozen behind me, her feet rooted to the threshold.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Her face pales two shades as she stares into the living room. Her nonbleeding hand slowly inches up the doorframe, gripping it like a lifeline.

The last thing I need is this kid passing out in my doorway. “You okay?” I take a step toward her, ready to grab her if she starts to sway.

She nods in slow motion with a glassy and dazed look, eyes the color of sea glass. “I feel buzzy again.” Her voice is soft, almost dreamy. She rubs her hand across her face, smearing blood across her nose and cheek.

My vision blurs. My limbs vibrate.

There’s so much blood. Mine. Hers. Ours...

The memory is an invitation down sorrow and anxiety lane. I grind my teeth, refusing to succumb to it. “Hey, don’t faint on me, kiddo.”

“I won’t.” As if walking on ice, she takes a tentative step into the room, her hand remaining on the doorframe.

“You don’t have to come inside.” Her mother must’ve told her not to go into a stranger’s house, and here I am, probably scaring the heck out of her. “I can get—”

“No,” she says quickly, darting into the center of the room like a little mouse. “I’ve been wanting to...” Her words drift

off as she looks from the collage of wedding pictures on the wall to Bri's old red velvet chair by the fireplace to the hallway. "...come inside."

I'm slightly transfixed by her as she delicately touches the soft cream-colored throw blanket draped over the back of the couch, gently trailing her fingers over the tassels at the edge. She's a twisted vision of innocence and horror when she smiles at me with her face streaked with blood.

"I like this," she says softly.

I point to the stairway. "If you go upstairs, there's a bathroom right across the hall. There're Band-Aids in the cabinet under the sink. You can grab a washcloth and get the blood off your face." She fixes her eyes on me, holding her hand close to her chest. "Can you do it yourself?"

"Do I look like a baby?"

"No, you look like a weird little gremlin bleeding in my living room."

"I do not!" She laughs.

I nod toward the stairs. "Then get to it," I say lightheartedly. "I ain't got all day."

While she's upstairs, I head to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water and shuffle through a week's worth of mail that's piled on the counter.

And wait.

And wait.

I go back to the living room, lean over the banister, and peer up the stairs. I don't hear a sound.

"Hey," I call up the stairs. "You okay up there?"

Silence.

I eye the stairs, waiting for her answer. "Penny?"

Nothing.

Taking the steps two at a time, I rush upstairs with horrible visions running through my head of her sprawled out on my

cold tile floor. She could've hit her head, and there'd be blood everywhere, dripping down her face, just like—

My breath stutters.

The bathroom door is wide open, but she's not there.

“Penny?”

The door at the end of the hall—the room I haven't stepped foot in for years—is still closed. I pace to the opposite end of the hall to my bedroom. A wave of relief and surprise courses through me when I find her lying on my bed with her eyes closed.

On Brianna's side.

Another surprise is Cherry planted next to her with her head nestled on Penny's shoulder. I can't remember the last time Cherry came upstairs. She used to sleep on the bed with us every night, which was just as endearing as it was annoying. Ever try to have sex with a big-ass fluffy dog staring at you, not moving out of the way? Or them dropping an old slimy toy right next to you when you're midthrust?

I hover in the doorway, stewing with confusion about what to do with a stray, peculiar child who's made herself at home in my room with my dog.

“Hey...” I say, leaning against the doorframe. “You get lost?”

“No.” She doesn't open her eyes. “I felt like I had to lie down. Cherry was worried about me.”

“Do you feel sick?”

“Not like *sick* sick...but like, homesick.”

Her words make my heart squeeze. “C'mon, I'll take you home.”

“I don't want to go there.” She sits up and blinks at me. “I miss my bed. I want to live here again.”

I let out a laugh. “You've never lived here.”

Frowning, she smooths her hands over the comforter. I'm glad to see she's got a little bandage on her finger and isn't turning my bed into a crime scene. "Yes, I did. I picked out this blanket."

Heat tingles up my spine. "My wife bought that blanket."

"That's what I said."

My patience for dealing with a little kid is fading. I didn't realize they constantly made stuff up. It's kinda scary. "C'mon, Penny. Let's get you home. I'm sure your mom is gonna be wondering where you are."

Ignoring me, she flops back down on the pillow. "I want to stay here for a little while. Can you sit with me?"

I push myself off the doorframe and cross the room to sit on the edge of the bed. "You want to tell me why you don't like being home?" I ask. "You can trust me."

"It's just..." She sighs, struggling with words. "I had a dream I live here. With you and Cherry."

Ah, so that explains a lot. She must be a vivid dreamer and wakes up thinking her dreams actually happened. I've had those myself. Some dreams I'd rather stay in forever and never have to wake up to reality. "Well," I say. "Sometimes dreams are tricky and seem real."

"But... I don't think it really *is* a dream. I think this is my real home."

"Dreams can make you feel that way." Curiosity crawls up my spine. "Tell me, what makes here feel like home to you?"

She chews her lip and stares up at the ceiling. "I like your statues. And the way the barn and flowers smell. I like the moss on the rocks. I like all the pictures and the blanket and the red chair and couch. And I like this big, soft bed. Everything here is loved on."

"What do you mean?"

"At my mom's house, everything is new. Like at a store."

Me and Brianna furnished our house by hunting through antique stores, consignment shops, and garage sales on weekends. Everything we bought felt like a treasure that traveled through time. Faded, worn, scratched, and, as Brianna used to say, *very well loved*.

“You’ve got a really unique way of looking at things for a little kid, ya know that?”

“My mom says I have an old soul.” She squints her eyes, like she’s thinking really hard. “I love Cherry, and I like your smile a lot. When you smile, I feel happy. That all feels like home.”

“You ain’t wrong. All that is what home should feel like.”

“And I like the baby’s room,” she adds softly.

My soul clenches as if an invisible hand just reached into me and held me in its fist. “You shouldn’t have gone in there. There’s no baby.”

Ignoring me, she asks, “Does it feel like home here to you, too?”

I exhale a breath that only slightly eases the pain in my chest. “That’s a loaded question.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means it’s not easy to answer.”

Sitting up, she tilts her head at me. Her pigtails flop to the side, making her look like a puppy hearing a squeak toy. “How come?”

“It just is.”

My gaze is drawn to the nightstand behind her. The book Brianna was reading is open and face down, exactly how she left it. Forever a cliffhanger. I used to watch her from my pillow, up all night reading next to me, unable to put her book down. I’ve refused to move it or pick it up all this time, even though my heart aches to immerse myself in the same words she lost herself in. Her glasses are there too, smudged and dusty, along with a heart-shaped candle she’d light on a date

night and a ceramic cup she used to sip water from. I can't bring myself to disturb her last normal moments.

Kelley calls these my souvenirs of denial.

"I love how Cherry always remembers me no matter what," Penny says, leaning her forehead against Cherry's.

"Dogs have great memories. Especially if someone is nice to them. Or feeds them."

Half of her face is hidden by the dog's fur. "Do you remember me no matter what, too?"

"Course I do. How could I forget my favorite little stalker?" I stand and straighten my eye patch. "Let's go. You shouldn't be up here."

"Why not?"

I give her the one-eyed blink. "Because it's a private, grown-up room."

She jumps off the bed and follows me but pauses at the doorway, staring longingly back into the room. "Alex, do you ever dream of me living here?" she asks with a hauntingly soft and dreamy voice. "Reading the book about the rabbits and the meadow while you slept?"

For a few seconds, the air clogs in my lungs with eerie déjà vu and outlandish, desperate hope. *How could she possibly know that—and the other things she makes random comments about...* But it can be all flushed away with simple explanations—Penny looked at the book. It's next to the bed. Where I sleep.

That's all.

"No, Penny," I answer. "I don't dream at all anymore."



"Alex, wait!"

I'm tempted to pretend I don't hear Mrs. Rose chasing me down her driveway, but after a few seconds, I stop and turn

around.

“Can we talk for a minute?” she asks.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to ask if you’re busy tomorrow?”

She catches me zeroing in on the wedding band on her left hand. “Oh,” she says with reddening cheeks. “That came out totally wrong. I meant, do you have plans?”

“Still sounds wrong, but no.” Saturdays are just like any other day for me. Which usually consists of hunting for trash, cleaning trash, and making cool stuff out of trash.

“I was wondering if maybe you could watch Penny for me?”

“Watch her?” I repeat. “Watch her do what?”

“I mean, like, babysit. I have an appointment in Boston. I really can’t bring her with me and anyone else I could ask is busy.”

“What about her father?”

“He’s in California on a business trip. He won’t be back until Monday.”

I narrow my eye at her. “What’s up with you, lady? Letting your little kid run around the neighborhood to hang out with men you don’t even fuckin’ know.”

Her head pulls back and it takes two seconds for her to debate telling me off. Instead, she says, “I know that’s how it looks. But it’s really not like that.”

I cross my arms. “How is it really, then?”

“Penny’s not like other kids her age.”

“You’re gonna have to do better than that.”

“I don’t know how to explain it. We don’t know why she leaves the house. It’s been two years since she’s snuck out, so we assumed she’d finally outgrown it. We’re doing everything we can to help and understand her—she’s even under the care of a child psychiatrist. But it seems she’s fascinated with your

house and your dog. I know this sounds horrible, but we don't know what to do. If we try to stop her, she cries and screams for hours, almost to the point of making herself pass out. I just want to see her happy, even if that means her running to see your dog and your house. Penny is just a very different, special and unique child."

"That makes zero sense to me. It's an old house. Nothing special about it."

"My husband and the doctor both think it looks like a house she must've seen in a book or movie, like a fairy tale; she's just fixated on it. Maybe she believes the story that takes place in the house is real and she wants to be part of it. I don't really know."

Brianna's voice echoes from the past. *"We have to buy that house, Alex... it looks just like a fairy-tale cottage where all happily ever afters happen... I can't live anywhere else... I'm so in love with it..."*

"I read about you," Mrs. Rose blurts out, chasing Bri's voice out of my head. "About your childhood and your loss. I'm very sorry."

My jaw tightens. "You think because I was abandoned as a kid and lost my wife and baby, that makes me want to hang out with your kid?"

She quickly shakes her head. "No, of course not. I talked to some of the neighbors. Everyone says you're a nice guy. They told me you give art presentations at the school and how much the kids love you. Penny loves art—she talks about your sculptures all the time. I thought maybe you could spend a few hours with her, let her watch you work. She's very helpful. It would mean so much to her."

"And give you time to hang out in Boston."

"I won't be hanging out. I have a doctor's appointment. Believe me, if I had anyone else to ask, I would. I don't trust leaving her with a total stranger. Penny will just wait until the babysitter's not looking and run to your house and then I'll have someone calling me in a panic that they lost my child."

Her eyes flicker with desperation. “I’m sure she won’t be much trouble. She talks a lot sometimes, but she’s very well-behaved.”

I stare past Mrs. Rose to Penny’s face at the window. When she waves at me, all I can do is chuckle and shake my head.

“Fine. But just this one time. I’m not a fucking day care center.”

“Thank you. I really do appreciate it. I’ll pay you, of course.”

“I don’t want your money. Just bring her with something to eat and drink. I don’t have kid-friendly food.”

“Noted. Is it okay if I drop her off around nine?”

“In the morning?”

She laughs. “I take it you’re not a morning person?”

“I work better at night.”

“I’ve read that about creative people. I’ll probably pick her up around three.”

Shit. I just stuck myself with a nine-year-old for six hours.

“I really do appreciate this,” she says. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for her.”

“You don’t like me, do you?”

“I don’t know you. But since you went nosing around in my past, I got no problem telling you I think you treat Penny like an outdoor cat that goes exploring — thinking they’re just going to come back every night and won’t get lost, run over, or eaten by something.”

Her lips tighten and she nods slowly. “You’re right. But we really are doing our best. It’s hard to understand a situation unless you’re actually *in* it.”

I walk away, unaware that I was already deep *in* the situation.

Chapter 8



ALEX

Me and Penny have an awkward stare-off on the front porch after her mother drops her off. I think we silently agree we like her random visits more.

Finally, she shrugs her backpack off her shoulder and hands it to me.

“There’re juice boxes inside,” she says. “I brought one for you, too.”

I yawn. Three hours of sleep is making every molecule in my body scream at me for agreeing to do this today. All I want to do is crawl back in bed.

“Thanks, but I’ll be having a Bloody Mary.” I hold the door open for her and we go inside.

Her eyes dilate. “You’re drinking blood?”

“That’s just the name. It’s a vegetable drink. For adults.” According to Kelley’s ongoing rules, I can have one Bloody Mary per week, which I’ve begrudgingly adhered to.

She crinkles her nose, and this time, the likeness to Bri actually makes me smile instead of shredding my heart to pieces.

“Juice boxes don’t require refrigeration, but they taste better really cold.” Her serious tone tells me cold juice boxes are nothing to be fucked with.

“Okay, then. Let’s put them in the fridge.”

In the kitchen, I put her backpack on the table. She pulls out five juice boxes, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in a clear plastic box, four small ziplock bags filled with pretzel sticks, grapes, graham crackers, and cereal. There's also a tiny container of milk, a plastic spoon, and a disposable bowl. Each has a small white label on it with its contents and intent written in marker. *Pretzel - afternoon snack*. I wonder if Mrs. Rose has an organizational stick up her ass or if she thinks I'm too stupid to know what a pretzel is.

"I'll share with you if you don't have any of your own snacks," Penny offers as she lines her juices up on the empty bottom shelf of my refrigerator.

It's probably the nicest thing someone has said to me in a long time.

"Thanks, little darlin'. That's sweet."

With her bowl of cereal and milk situated in front of her, she leans her elbows on the table and quietly watches me make a Bloody Mary.

"So, it's like breakfast wine?" she asks.

That makes me laugh. "Somethin' like that."

"You shouldn't drink in the morning."

"Who says?"

"My dad. Sometimes, my mom has wine, and he tells her it's too early. She has white wine, though, but never this early."

The chair legs screech across the floor as I pull it out from under the table. "Your mom drinks a lot?" I fall into the chair and take a long sip. The liquid burns a trail from my throat all the way down to my gut.

"She likes wine. She doesn't get drunk, though. She says she just wants to not think sometimes."

"What's she not thinking about?"

Penny scoops cereal out of her bowl and spoons it into her mouth, chewing before she answers. "The baby."

I almost choke on my drink. “She’s drinking while she’s pregnant?”

Penny shakes her head and swallows another mouthful of rainbow-colored loops. “No. She’s not pregnant anymore. The baby changed its mind.”

“She lost the baby?” I ask softly. I’m completely out of touch with the reality of being with kids, but this is not the conversation I thought I’d be having at nine fifteen a.m. on a Saturday with a nine-year-old.

“Yeah. That’s why she’s going to the doctor today. To find out if she can have another one.”

“Oh.” I feel a blip of empathy and struggle with what to say next. “I’m sorry you guys went through that.”

Nodding, she says casually, “I told her all she has to do is ask the baby to come back, but she doesn’t want to listen to me.”

“Ask him to come back?”

“Yeah. It didn’t work for him this time, but he can have another chance. That’s how it works.”

Years of bizarre conversations with Brianna kindle my curiosity. I can’t resist nudging for more. “What makes you think that’s how it works?”

“I just do. It worked for me.” She swirls her spoon in the bowl, and I feel dizzy staring at the milk cyclone. “You asked me to come back, and I did.”

Amused, I lift my glass and finish my drink in two gulps. “I said you *could* come back and see the elephant. I didn’t *ask* you to.”

She sighs and rolls her eyes. “Not that time, the other time.”

Before I can ask her what she’s talking about, Cherry bounds into the room with her old favorite tennis ball in her mouth, spitting it out at Penny’s feet.

Picking the bedraggled ball up, Penny looks over at me with a big smile. “She wants to play.”

She hasn't done that in years.

“Can I throw it?”

“You can roll it gently down the hall. If you throw it, she'll wreck the place chasing it. She's a sixty-pound klutz.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Penny sits on the floor and rolls the ball across the house for Cherry to trot after. She giggles every time the dog brings it back to her.

After I clean the table, I stop the ball midroll with my boot. Four eyes pin me with a *how dare you* stare.

“How 'bout we go over to the studio and do some work?” I say.

“Yes!” Penny scrambles to her feet. “I love the barn.”

“Bring your ‘drink in a box’ and a snack.” I suddenly feel like I'm responsible for an exotic pet. How often am I supposed to feed her? Every two hours? Three? Beats me.

“I'm bringing a snack and juice for you, too, Fox.”

I stop in my tracks on my way to the back door, my head snapping in her direction. “Did you just call me *Fox*?”

“Yup.” She smiles innocently. “Isn't that your name?”

“It's my last name... and a nickname.”

Confusion glazes her eyes as she blinks at me.

“Never mind,” I finally say. She reminds me of Brianna in the oddest, most subtle ways. Shaken, I step into my work boots, not bothering to tie them and swing open the door from the kitchen leading to the side yard.

“Are we gonna go hunting through people's garbage?” she asks eagerly.

Laughing, I shake my head. “Nah. I don't think your mom would like that.”

“You're probably right, but I still want to do it.”

She wanders around the barn while I sort through a wheelbarrow full of stuff I picked up earlier in the week. People throw out the weirdest shit. Most of it really is garbage, like broken appliances, old clothes, tons of shoes, and scrap metal. Not to mention the toys—the kid kind and the adult kind. Yes, I wear gloves. But every once in a while, I find things that obviously weren't thrown away due to being old or broken. Things like jewelry boxes full of expensive jewelry, brand-new wedding dresses still with the tags on, photo albums, and filled diaries. Those items go into what I call my *haunted memories pile*, where they can sit undisturbed with their secret tragic backstories. I rarely use those pieces in my art unless it's for something very special.

The dead should always be respected, even if it's a memory.

“Ooh!” Penny squeals behind me.

She's found her way to Brianna's art nook. It's partially hidden in a corner by an old, decorative freestanding wall. I built it for her so she'd have her own private space, but still be close to me.

Penny is so engrossed in touching all the different paintbrushes and pencils that she doesn't look at me when I approach.

“My wife really liked to paint and draw,” I say.

“Maybe she still does.”

“Kinda hard since she's not here anymore, kiddo.”

“Maybe she is and you just don't see her.” She leans in to squint at a sketch of Cherry that's pinned to the wall. “Maybe she still wants to draw.”

“Well, it's all just sitting here.” *Wasting away*. Bri would be heartbroken to see her art space so forgotten. “You like to draw. Why don't you draw while I work?”

She stares up at me, her mouth quirked skeptically to the side. “My mom doesn't really like when I draw anymore.”

“How come?”

“She gets upset when I draw the memory pictures.”

I run a rag over Brianna’s table, brushing away years of dust. “Memory pictures?”

“Yeah. The people and things in our memories.”

“Why would she be upset about you drawing things you remember?”

“Not just things *I* remember. Things *other* people remember.”

“Lemme get this straight,” I say playfully. “You draw other people’s memories?”

“Yes. And I do it all in my own head.”

“Okay...”

She crosses her arms and flings her hair over her shoulder. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

I lean back against the desk and cross my boots. “I wouldn’t say I don’t believe you. I’d just need proof.”

“Fine,” she says like she’s about to turn twenty-five right in front of me. “I’ll draw a picture from your memory. Then you’ll see.”

Hell no. With my luck, this kid really does have a weird gift and she’ll draw my dead wife and creep me all the hell out and ruin my Saturday.

“Don’t be scared, Alex,” she says.

My chest involuntarily puffs out. “Seriously?” I scoff. “I’m not scared. I got work to do. I can’t play games with you.”

“It’s not a game. Please, Alex? I need someone to believe me.” Her pleading green eyes shimmer like moonlight over a lake, seeping right through my defenses. “I know you’ll believe me. You’re my only friend.”

Fuck. I don’t want to be her only friend. I’m a shitty-ass friend.

She doesn’t give up. “I promise the memory picture will make you happy.” Hope scatters through her voice. “I can

already see it.”

“Fine,” I mimic her word from earlier. “But you hafta do it right here so I can make sure you’re not cheating.”

“Okay, but you can’t watch me draw it. It has to be a surprise when it’s done.”

“Deal.” I glance over at all the brushes, markers, and colored pencils as she climbs up on the chair, sets her juices and snacks to the side, and opens up an empty sketchbook. “You got everything you need, Picasso?” I ask.

With a determined smile, she’s already reaching for a light-gray pencil. “Yup. Don’t forget your juice box,” she says as I start to walk away. “It has vitamin C.”

Shooting her a grin, I swipe one of the juice boxes and go back to my mountain of garbage.

Hanging out with Penny stirs up questions I’ve asked myself at least a thousand times over the years. Would I have been a good father? If things had turned out differently, I’d be raising my nine-year-old daughter. I wonder if she’d be fascinating and smart like Penny. Would she roll the ball patiently and endlessly for Cherry? Would she love the smell of the barn? Would she have her mother’s talent and curiosity?

I wonder if she’d consider me her friend and not just her dad.

I guess I’ll never know.

While I sort through other people’s trash, I steal peeks at Penny. It’s bittersweet to see her bent over the drawing table with her hair falling into her face, lost in the magic of her imagination. Bri used to sit there for hours, quiet, a million miles away, but still right here with me. The best kind of company is when you don’t have to be talking or touching, yet you still feel physically and mentally threaded together.

I flip on my favorite playlist—one me and Bri made so many years ago—and sing along idly, wondering what the hell I can make with an ancient typewriter, when I hear Penny also singing along, nailing the lyrics perfectly. Grinning, I wonder how a nine-year-old knows the lyrics to songs by Aerosmith,

Pearl Jam, Creed, Fleetwood Mac, and 3 Doors Down. Mrs. Rose doesn't strike me as the type to blast this kind of music.

"You like these songs?" I ask curiously.

She doesn't look up from her drawing. "Of course. They're our favorites."

"Whose?"

"Ours," she says simply. "Stop looking over here and work on your own stuff."

I laugh. "I'm way over here. I can't even see that far."

Smiling, she glances at me. "Good. You're gonna love it."

"Is it done yet?"

"Not yet. Are you bugging me because you can't figure out what to make with your garbage?" she teases.

"Actually, I have some ideas."

"Is one a hot-air balloon?"

"No. Not even close."

"A hot-air balloon would be *really* cool."

I straighten my eye patch and turn back to my own project. "I'll keep that in mind."

An hour later, she screams, "I'm done! Come see!"

Dread builds with every step I take toward her. How am I supposed to react to her memory drawing? Do I pretend to recognize who she drew? Or do I crush her and tell her I have no clue who it is?

As she's accurately pointed out before, I'm not a good liar.

But what I'm even more scared of is that she's drawn someone I *do* remember. Like Brianna. Or my birth parents—who could be dead by now for all I know.

Her smile is brimming with excitement. "Close your eye, Alex, and I'll hand it to you."

Funny and very considerate how she said *eye* and not eyes.

Holding out my hands, I do as she asks. The smooth paper is slid between my fingers.

“Okay, you can look now.”

I do, and my blood instantly goes ice cold. My breath strangles in my throat. The old familiar ache of grief pulses in my chest.

“Did I draw your memory right, Alex? I tried really hard.”

My voice is low and hoarse over the lump in my throat. “You did.” I inhale a deep breath. “You really did, little darlin’.”

Jasper’s blue eyes are staring at me from the paper. His whiskers and ear tufts are exactly as I remember them: soft and fuzzy. I can almost feel his moist black nose coming off the paper to boop against mine.

The realistic accuracy with which she’s drawn my childhood dog is surreal. Breathtaking.

Unreal.

Impossible.

I have exactly *one* faded picture of Jasper, and it’s been hidden behind my driver’s license in my wallet for years. I don’t even remember the last time I looked at it.

“How did you do this?” I whisper. “How do you know what he looked like?”

She shrugs and starts nibbling on her pretzel sticks. “I can see him.”

“Where? Did you see a picture of him?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

I can’t believe I’m even asking this. “Did you see him in my mind?”

“Sorta. I see him around you. He’s always there.”

“Do you mean he’s like a ghost?”

She pokes a straw into her juice, takes a sip, then quietly says, “We’re all like ghosts. Some of us are just a little bit

more.”

Mrs. Rose wasn't kidding when she said Penny is *different*.

“You ain't wrong,” I reply.

“Do you believe me about the memory pictures now?”

I don't know what to believe. I'm still lost in the drawing, grasping for a logical explanation that I can't find. Is someone playing a trick on me? Could Penny possibly be psychic? Does she have some kind of magical powers? I don't believe in that kind of stuff, but yet I'm holding something that defies logic in my hands.

“Please don't say I'm weird, Alex. Please don't make me stop coming here.” Tears glisten in the corners of her eyes. “The memory pictures are happy.” Her words start to come out fast and frantic. “They're just memories that are still here. That's all. It's not scary. There's nothing wrong with me, I—”

“Hey, whoa... don't cry.”

“I'm not weird or scary, Alex.” She sobs, sucking in sharp breaths. “I'm not...I just like to draw. And I like coming to see you and Cherry.”

“Who told you you're weird and scary, Penny?”

She rubs her eyes with the back of her hands. “Mom and Dad. I heard them say it when they thought I was sleeping.”

Anger and heartache slam through my chest. “Listen to me.” I touch her chin and lift her face up. “There's nothing wrong with you. You're not weird or scary. Don't you ever, *ever* believe that.”

“Are you sure, Alex?” She sniffles.

“I'm positive. You're bright and magical and captivating, like a rainbow after a thundershower. I've never met anyone like you.”

Her red-rimmed eyes widen and search my face. “Really?”

“No lie.”

“And you'll still be my friend?”

“Damn right I will.”

“Will you always believe me?”

“Always.”

“And you won’t ever forget me?”

“Never.”

“Can I live here?”

That took a quick whiplash turn. “No, little darlin’, you have to live with your parents.”

She pouts. “Why? Why can’t I live where I want to?”

“Someday, when you’re grown up, you can.”

“I think I’m grown up now, though.”

I laugh softly. “All kids think that way. But listen, your parents love you. Parents sometimes just have a hard time understanding their kids.”

“Mine didn’t want me.”

I want to tell her I know exactly how that feels, but I can’t. I can’t because this adorable little girl is nine, and the right thing for me to do is make her feel better, even if it might be bullshit. “Don’t say that.” That’s the bullshit that comes out of my mouth. “I’m sure they wanted you more than anything.”

“They wanted a baby, but, instead, they got me,” she says solemnly.

“I’d say they’re pretty lucky.”

Her eyes travel from the old, dry brushes on the drawing desk to the faded sketches and paintings hanging on the wall. A veil of sadness and melancholy shrouds her face. She pulls her lower lip between her teeth. “Do you promise you’re not going to forget about me, Alex? Ever?”

“Of course I won’t.”

“But what if you do...” she gulps back tears. “Then what happens to me? I’m just forgotten and alone forever? Where will I go?”

There's so much fear and desperation pooling in her eyes and trembling in her words; it guts me. Literally filets my heart. I don't know what's happened to this little girl to make her so worried about being forgotten, but it's a feeling I'm way too familiar with.

I grew up unwanted and forgotten.

And when I finally found someone who *did* want me, I was terrified of losing her. I wanted irrational guarantees—some armor against the fear. I begged for assurance. Even in the end, I held on to promises and wishes, like they could somehow save us.

“Wait right here,” I say, and go off to the haunted-stuff corner. I rummage around until I find something I saw a few months earlier—a tiny red ruby heart ring set in a silver vine setting. I'm sure it's old. The inside of the band is worn, but the stone glistens deep, iridescent red in the light. Penny watches me intently as I wind a small, thin piece of wire around and around the inside to make the band smaller.

“Give me your hand,” I say, and when she holds her hand out, I slip the ring onto her index finger. “This is a special ring. It once belonged to a forest princess. The fairies made it for her. Each of them gave a little piece of their heart to show how much they loved her and would always be with her.” Penny stares at the ring, her lips parted in awe, eyes wide. “Now it's yours, so you can look at it when you feel lonely or sad, and know that me and Cherry and the forest fairies will always be your friends. Forever.”

“Wow,” she whispers, turning her finger from side to side. “I can really keep it?”

“It's yours.”

“And you promise to be here forever?”

“Cross my heart.”

Suddenly, she throws her arms around my neck and hugs me so tight I can't breathe. “Thank you,” she murmurs into my shoulder. “I still promise, too.”

After a few moments, I slowly disentangle from her, and she reluctantly lets me go. “Why don’t we start a new project? I’ve got some cool stuff over there, but I could use your help again.”

She nods excitedly, all worry and sadness banished. My fairy ring plan worked. “Yes!”

In under twenty seconds, she’s hauling an antique birdcage from the pile. We sand it and paint it black. While it’s drying, she scavenges through the old toys and carefully chooses a small plastic doll wearing a silver dress. She decides we should add glittery feather wings to it to make her look like a magical fairy like in my story about the ring. When the doll is finished, she gently glues it on the tiny swing in the birdcage. It’s her idea to line the bottom of the cage with moss, leaves, and twigs from the woods out back. She braids some thin vines through the bars, up to the top of the cage. To finish it off, I attach an old weathered chain so it can be hung.

“It’s so cool!” she exclaims, clapping her hands.

“It’s cool as hell. You did good,” I praise, holding the birdcage up. “In fact, I think you should take it home.”

Her smile wilts. “My mom won’t like that in the house. She’ll say it’s dirty and put it right back in the garbage all over again.”

“You’re probably right. You can keep it here, then.”

“Really? Can we hang it in the shed? With all the pictures?”

“I’m not sure...” I rub the scruff on my face, debating if it’s violating Bri to put something in her shed that she didn’t put there herself. Will the need to preserve her things and space ever go away? Or am I going to live the rest of my life with an invisible barrier around parts of my house and property?

“I think that’s where a fairy bird would want to live,” Penny says softly. “Surrounded by memories it can sing to. Don’t you?”

As I stare into her green eyes, my vision blurs and I can almost see Bri standing there again, animated and so genuinely hopeful, impossible to refuse and not want to give the entire damn world to.

“Ya know what?” I say with a slow nod. “I think you’re absolutely right.”

Laura arrives just as we finish hanging the birdcage from the shed ceiling, and Penny runs to tell her all about her day in one huge, babbling, run-on sentence. Cherry stands next to her with her tail wagging, barking along with every few words like she’s attempting to add to the story.

“It sounds like you had an amazing day,” Laura says, then turns to me. “I haven’t seen her this happy in a long time. She’s been a bit sad lately, moping in her room and staring out the window.”

“I haven’t been this happy in years!” Penny exclaims.

“Thank you for spending the day with her. It was a huge help to me, and you’ve really made her happy.”

I nod. “We had fun. Everything go okay in Boston?”

Her eyes shift a bit. “Yes. I think it went well.”

“Good.”

“Can I come back tomorrow?” Penny is still in an excited tizzy. “We can make more art.”

“I don’t think so, Penny. Grandma is coming over, and I’m sure Alex has plans.”

Penny frowns and looks at me. “What about next Saturday? I saw a typewriter in the pile and I have the most amazing idea! And I want to play with Cherry again and visit the fairy and the flowers and draw in the special place and listen to our music. Please, Alex?”

Those eyes again, burrowing into my soul, unlocking doors, dusting off memories and echoing promises.

Mrs. Rose takes Penny’s backpack from her. “No, honey, this was just a one-time—”

“It’s okay,” I interrupt. “She can come next Saturday. She’s got a great imagination, and I’d love to see her idea for the typewriter. If it’s okay with you.”

“To be honest, it would be a big help. I’ll be able to catch up on some work. As long as you’re sure?”

Penny smiles, never taking her eyes off me.

I’m drawn in, hypnotized. Enchanted and irrationally unable to say no.

Chapter 9



ALEX - 2019

A glossy black pickup truck rumbles down the driveway with rock music blasting so loud the ground vibrates. Mikey and I exchange a glance and shake our heads, laughing.

“You deaf yet, Kels?” I joke when he climbs out of the driver’s side door.

He grins. “Workin’ on it.”

“You finally got your new truck,” Mikey says.

Kelley joins us on the porch, settling in the empty chair. “Finally. Ain’t it pretty?”

Me and Mikey laugh at how he’s staring at the truck like he’s in love with it. “It’s cool,” I reply. “Very loud and shiny.”

“You can have my old one. It’s got some miles, but it still runs great.”

“Nah, sell it.”

Kelley lets out a laugh. “Fox, your old piece-of-shit truck is never gonna run again. Chipmunks living in it.”

“I like chipmunks.”

“Let them live in it, then. But since your ass is too cheap to get another car, I’m giving you mine.”

“You get hit on the head, Kels? I don’t drive.”

“You’re fighting a losing battle, Kelley,” Mikey says. “I’ve been trying to get him to drive for years.”

Kelley sighs and leans back in the chair. “Screw that bullshit. It’s been, what...almost thirteen years, man. Time to get back behind the wheel.”

“And give up the fun of having you drive me around?” I say.

“Exactly.”

Penny emerges from the barn where she’s been working on a painting for her school art show, closes the big door behind her, and comes up the path with Cherry trotting at her side. She disappears in the house for a few minutes, then reappears at the front door. She steps onto the porch with two glasses of lemonade and hands one to me.

“Extra ice and sugar,” she says with a smile.

“Thanks, little darlin’.”

“None for us?” Mikey teases.

“I didn’t know you were here,” Penny replies, sitting on the porch floor next to my chair. Cherry takes the opportunity to climb onto her lap as Penny squints out at the driveway, absently stroking the dog’s head. “You got a new truck, Kelley?”

“Yup. Trying to get this loser to take my old one.”

Her nose scrunches and flashes of Brianna blind me. Sometimes, Penny reminds me so much of Bri that I wonder if she’s somehow related to her. Possibly a long-lost little cousin.

“Why does he need a truck?” she asks. “He doesn’t drive.”

I bust out laughing. “See?”

Kelley rolls his eyes. “Don’t encourage him, Penny. I’m trying to get him to be normal.”

“But this is *his* normal. He doesn’t have to change.”

“Thank you.” I bow my head in her direction.

Two young girls walk down the sidewalk in front of the house, chatting and laughing. Cherry barks twice at them, and they pause at the edge of the driveway.

“Hey, Penny!” the taller girl yells out. “That dog is so cute.”

Penny smiles. “Thanks.”

The girl puts her hand above her eyes to block the sun. “We’re going to the ice cream place in town. Dylan works there, and Heather wants to see if she can get him to look at her.”

The shorter girl—who must be Heather—turns bright red and smacks the girl’s arm. “I do not.”

“Want to come with us?” the girl asks. “My mom gave me twenty dollars so I can pay.”

Penny shakes her head. “No thanks, I have plans.”

“Okay. See ya Monday at school.” The girls wave and continue on their way.

Kelley nudges his foot into Penny’s. “You should’ve gone with your friends and had some fun,” he says.

“I’m already having fun,” she replies simply. “And me and Alex are going to start a birdhouse condo today.”

“Actually, we’re dragging Alex out. We’re gonna grab some food, shoot some pool, and throw some darts,” Mikey says.

Penny’s gaze sweeps from the guys to me. “You’re going with them?” she asks.

Kelley and Mikey also turn to look at me and I suddenly feel like I’m under a high-powered microscope.

An odd uncertainty creeps up my spine as I reply, “Yeah.”

Penny’s smile falls from her face, slow and fluttery, like a leaf falling from a tree. “But... I thought we were going to start the birdhouse.”

I take a sip of my lemonade. A heart-shaped slice of strawberry floats among the ice and presses against my lips. “We can start it tomorrow. I promise.”

Her cheeks redden with a flare of instant despair. “You said we were going to do it today. I’ve been looking forward to it all week. I made a mood board. I picked out colors that attract birds, I hunted around for tiny twigs, and—”

“Hey,” Kelley interrupts softly. “Take it easy. There’s no reason to get upset. You can do it tomorrow. It’ll still be awesome.”

“But we had a *plan*,” she protests. “And now he’s just ditching me.”

“I’m not ditching you, Penny. You know I never ditch you.” I’ve been looking forward to building the birdhouse condo with her all week, too, but Kelley and Mikey threatened to literally drag me out of the house if I said no to a guys’ night out again.

Penny crosses her arms. “It sure feels like it.”

Mikey laughs. “Join the club. He’s been blowing us off for years, kiddo.”

“Whatever,” she mutters, standing. “I’m going home.”

“Why don’t I drive you to town to meet your friends?” Kelley offers. “Call your mom and ask her if it’s okay.”

“No, thank you,” she answers, sniffing. “I’d rather just be alone.”

“Penny,” I call after her as she steps off the porch. “C’mon, don’t be mad. I promise we’ll start the birdhouse tomorrow.”

Her eyes are damp and glistening when she turns to me. “I’m not mad, Fox. I’m *upset*.” She lifts her chin in an attempt to compose herself as much as a twelve-year-old girl can. “There’s a difference.”

Dumbfounded, I watch Cherry escort Penny to the end of the driveway, then return to the porch.

“What the hell was that all about?” I mutter.

“She’s got a crush on you,” Kelley says.

“What?” I scoff. “No, she doesn’t.”

“Yup,” Mikey agrees. “A wicked bad crush.”

I blink at them in surprise. “Have you guys lost your damn minds?”

“Alex, wake up. She does. Don’t you see the way she looks at you? How she brings you snacks and drinks? How she’s totally at home in your house and in your studio?”

“She’s twelve, Kelley. She’s too young to have a crush. She brings the dog snacks and toys all the time, too. It’s just how she is—she likes to do nice things. And she’s been coming here for years, so of course she’s comfortable here. Why is that wrong?”

“Trust me,” Mikey says. “She’s not too young to be crushing. I have a cousin her age, and she’s totally crazy about a boy in her class. Wants to marry him and everything.”

“Maybe your cousin is weird.”

“We’re serious, Fox,” Kelley pipes up. “The kid has a major crush on you. We noticed it a while ago, how she’s here all the time and totally focused on you, always wanting to be around you, sitting close to you. Her eyes totally light up when you talk to her.”

Her eyes do light up, but I love that about her. She’s always so bright and excited to start new projects or to talk about art, or something she read or saw on TV. I love the way she listens so intently to me.

“She helps me out. She sorts through the trash and helps me with ideas, and I pay her. She saves her money to buy books and art supplies. She sits at the desk in the corner and draws and writes for hours. Her mother knows she’s here. She doesn’t mind.”

“Yeah,” Mikey says. “Because you’ve basically been free childcare for years.”

“Seriously? Fuck off.”

Kelley throws Mikey a warning look, then faces me. “Look, it was cute and sweet that you let her hang around when she was younger, but I think you gotta put a stop to it.”

I sit forward. “I think you guys are overreacting. I feel bad for her. Her parents are always working. All she wants is a little attention. She loves coming here to help, and doing her own thing. It makes her happy. Have you seen her drawings and poetry? Her talent is endless. She’s incredible.” I don’t tell them the extent of her unique, mind-bending talents—like the memory pictures or her uncanny ability to *know* things.

“She is,” Kelley nods slowly. “but she’s getting way too attached to you. And honestly? I think you’re too attached to her. You guys are too close. You can’t be hanging around with an almost thirteen-year-old girl, Fox. It’s only going to look worse as she gets older. The last four times we asked you to come hang out with us, you blew us off, and stayed here to do things with her. It’s got us a little worried.”

I don’t know how I got in the middle of this impromptu intervention, but it’s starting to piss me off. “I like hanging around with her. She makes me laugh, and I love her creativity. And I’m not gonna lie—she kinda reminds me of Bri.”

Mikey nods. “I’ve seen that in her, too. She’s got a lot of Bri’s mannerisms.”

“Which makes it worse,” Kelley adds. “I think she’s stirring up old feelings for you.”

Nausea festers deep in my stomach. “Are you serious? You think I have feelings for a *kid*?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “We never said that. We know it’s not like that. I’m just saying she’s got feelings for you, and I think she’s unknowingly digging up buried memories of Bri too much. I’m afraid it’s gonna get messy as she gets older. I’m worried about the lines blurring for you.”

Blurring lines? What the hell does that mean?

Mikey nods. “I agree. I think you should stop letting her hang around.”

Shocked, I shake my head. “You guys really think that? You’re serious?”

Kelley pushes his hand through his hair. “We like Penny; she’s a really cool little kid. Hell, we’ve watched her grow up. But now it’s almost like you guys are in a relationship. She literally just blew off ice cream with kids her own age to be with you. And I’m gonna guess that wasn’t the first time. Did you not notice how upset she was that you weren’t going to hang out with her later? It’s not good for her, or for you, to be so attached to each other. She’s not your kid, or your girlfriend.”

Pain slices through my chest at the mention of *my kid*.

“You guys are making me feel sick. She’s a friend. I’ve never crossed any kind of line with her. I never—”

“Alex, we know that. We just think you should end it now. So she’ll make friends her age. Do you want the kids at school to start making fun of her? Maybe start rumors? They just saw her here, hanging out with three men. The age difference between you guys is just too much. All that aside, you gotta get out more, maybe meet someone, start dating?”

I blow out an irritated sigh. “Screw that. I don’t want to meet anyone.”

“Fine,” Mikey says. “But at least come out with us and have some fun a few times a month. Remember when we used to hang out all the time? You can’t just sit in your studio by yourself or with a twelve-year-old girl all the time. It’s all way too dysfunctional.”

When they point everything out, it does all sound bad. I don’t want the other kids to make fun of Penny. The last thing I’d ever want is for her to be an outcast like I was. She’s too adorable and smart to go through that.

I fall back into the chair and stare out at the barn, letting their words sink in, flooding past the dam of denial.

They’re not entirely wrong. Penny and I have a special connection. I’ve never been able to put a label on it, but it’s undeniably there—a lingering static, a warm hum that perpetually fills the air between us. Even though it’s always been a thousand-percent innocent, they’re right. I like

spending time with Penny. She calms me; she ignites my creativity, and she makes me happy. I love watching her talent grow. She's filled a huge, lonely abyss in my life. But my friends are right—it's not a connection a guy my age should have with a young girl, especially one I'm not even related to.

Letting out a deep breath, I swirl the ice in my drink and watch the strawberry slice spin around. Is it a coincidence it's the shape of a heart? Or did Penny cut it that way?

"Maybe you guys have a point." I continue to stare at my drink, unable to meet their eyes. "What if I just spend less time with her? Maybe just once a month to work on art projects with her?"

Mikey shakes his head. "Dude, your head's been messed up for years after what happened. Grief is ugly. I get all that. You've put yourself in a bubble with a sweet kid who's like a little ray of sunshine who craves your attention. But it's time to break the bubble—for both your sakes. I think you both need a clean break."

I look at Kelley, whose blue eyes reflect agreement with my other best friend.

Defeated, I say, "Do you know how upset she's going to be when I tell her to stop coming over? How the hell am I supposed to do that to her?"

"That part sucks," Kelley agrees. "I hate to think of her being upset. She's a sweetheart. But I don't think there's an easy way to do it."

Mikey's head bobs up and down. "You gotta just do it, Fox. Tell her you're moving."

"She practically lives in my backyard, you idiot. She'll see me."

He shrugs. "Just make something up. She's a kid. She'll believe you. Kids are resilient. She'll probably forget about you in a week."

A heavy weight presses down on my chest. Penny is smarter than most kids. But she also *knows* me. She's not

going to believe some BS reason, and I don't think she's just going to forget about me, either.

Kelley rises and stretches. "C'mon. Let's go to the diner. The special tonight is maple-bacon, double cheddar burger on a toasted bun with curly fries." He slaps my back with a grin when I stand. "Food fixes everything, right?"

If only life were that easy.

Chapter 10



ALEX

The burger did not, in fact, fix anything.

But it did keep me awake all night with wicked heartburn.

Or maybe my chest was hurting because I replayed the conversation with Kelley and Mikey a million times, trying to find ways to deny everything they said and coming up empty.

My friends planted a seed of doubt in my brain, and it was slowly sprouting, making me feel *guilty*. What once felt like a totally innocent friendship with a kid who fascinated me—with all her unique little quirks and talents—now felt unhealthy for both of us.

Exhausted and grumpy, I wait on the porch with Cherry for Penny to show up. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted to just text her not to come over and just keep repeating it until she finally gives up and stops coming over. Or I could just text her mother and tell her I don't want her daughter coming by anymore. That'd be a hell of a lot easier than having to do it to her face. That would make me a coward, though, and Penny deserves better than that.

Cherry's ears perk up, and she leaps down the porch steps, disappearing around the side of the house where I know Penny is coming up the path. It's their little ritual. Reluctantly, I do the same, meeting Penny and my dog by the old willow tree near the shed.

"Hi Alex!" She's all smiles like she is every time she comes here. "I wrote you a poem last night." A piece of

parchment paper is thrust at me. Forcing myself to smile, I take it from her and fold it into a small square.

“Thanks.” I shove it into my back pocket. “I’ll read it tonight.”

“You can read it now if you want. I think it’s my favorite. The words just came to me in the middle of the night. That only happens sometimes when something’s really meaningful. Maybe because I was upset yesterday. I’m not upset anymore, though.”

“I need to talk to you about something.”

She looks up at me expectantly from under the rim of the floppy beach hat her mom makes her wear to avoid sunburn. Her eyes are still bright with excitement over the poem. I feel like I might be sick, and I don’t even know why. I keep telling myself she’s just a lonely little kid who sits in my studio and keeps me company while I work. She’s not my responsibility. We share a mutual love of art. That’s it.

But then, why is there a little voice in my head telling me that’s not all it is?

I clear my throat. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I really appreciate all the help you’ve given me with my projects.”

Her smiling continues, and so does the dread snaking through me.

“I love making stuff with you, Alex. I want to be an artist like you when I’m older.”

“I think you’re going to be amazing at anything you want to do.”

“Thank you.”

“But...” I inhale a deep breath and slowly exhale. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to come here anymore.”

Her smile slowly fades, much the way night comes—in tiny increments, until suddenly, daylight is gone and there’s only darkness.

She blinks rapidly. “What do you mean?”

I shove my hands in my front pockets. “I don’t think we should spend time together anymore.”

The quiver of her lip nearly rips my heart out. “But why? What did I do?” Swallowing hard, she casts her gaze to the house, then to the barn. I can almost see the memories playing in her mind. Finally, her attention travels back to me. “Whatever I did, I can fix it. I can—”

“Penny, you didn’t do anything wrong. Nothing at all.”

Her teeth dig into her bottom lip. “You’re breaking up with me?” Her delicate voice pitches with what can only be described as complete shock and despair. “You can’t do that... We’re supposed to be together forever... We’re sup—”

My stomach fills with dread and plummets like a boulder in a murky lake. *Oh, God.* Kelley and Mikey are right. How did this go so wrong? How was I so blind?

“Whoa, Penny, we’re only friends. You’re just a little kid.”

Reaching up, she knocks her hat off to clutch her head in her hands, yanking her hair. “I don’t know why I said that,” she sobs, clenching her eyes shut. “I don’t understand. Why are you doing this to us? I’m so confused!”

“Penny, please don’t cry.” I stare at her as she sobs, feeling like I’m drowning in her tears. I’ve dived into completely uncharted territory. I have no experience with emotional children, let alone heartbroken girls.

“I’m not a little kid,” she protests under her breath. “I’m *not*.” When she opens her eyes, they’re filled with near-feral desperation. “Why can’t you see that?”

“You’re right,” I say quickly. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re almost a teenager.”

“What’s happening?” she whispers, taking gulps of air and shaking her head back and forth repeatedly. “This isn’t supposed to happen. Why is this happening?”

Cherry grabs an old ball from the yard and parks herself between us. Whimpering, she nudges Penny’s hand and then

mine. After a few seconds of being ignored, she barks at me like she's trying to tell me to stop this.

I almost take the dog's advice because the shock in Penny's eyes, the way she's shaking her head, and how her entire body is trembling is scaring me. This was a mistake—I should have done this through her mother. Not alone with her at the edge of the woods. I knew she'd be upset, but I didn't expect her to be so devastated and confused.

"Shh..." I stroke Cherry's head to calm her, but as I do, a carnal ache to pull Penny into my arms comes over me—so strong that it sucks the breath from my lungs. "I'm sorry, Penny," I force out, refusing to let myself console her with anything more than words. "I just think it's best if we both spend time with friends our own age. I'm a lot older than you."

She wipes her hand across her teary, freckled cheeks. "I don't care about that," she says with exasperation.

"I know..." *I don't give a shit, either.* "But it's just not right."

She searches my face with wild, sorrow-filled eyes. "But why?"

My heart doesn't know or believe any possible answer, so my brain takes the wheel. "It's just the way it is. And...I have a lot of work to do. I just got two new big commissions."

"I can help you." Her voice lifts with hope in the midst of her sobs. "I'm good at helping you. I can be more quiet."

She *has* always helped me. I tell her that all the time. My mind spins like a carousel, grasping for any other valid reason, anything to lessen the blow for her so she'll stop crying because it's shredding my soul to pieces.

I'm going to strangle Kelley and Mikey.

I look out at the path in the woods behind her, worn down from her countless trips back and forth. "The thing is, I also met someone, so I won't have a lot of time. She might be here a lot, so it wouldn't be cool for you to be hanging around."

Her thin jawline tightens. Her eyes narrow. “That’s a lie.”

Ugh. She knows me too well. “No, it’s not.”

“Yes,” she says with determination. “It is. Why are you lying to me?”

“Penny, please. I don’t want to see you cry. I care about you. But I think you need to be with friends your own age, and so do I. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. It’s not up for debate.” My foster mother used to end almost every conversation with that line.

Penny snuffles. “So, that’s it? What about us? What about Cherry? Everything is just...over?”

I witness all the light, glitter, and adoration disappear from her eyes. Totally snuffed out, replaced with the same vacant stare that still haunts my memories and chills me right down to my bones. *Brianna’s death stare*. I feel like a murderer.

“You promised,” she says, new tears dripping down her cheeks. “You promised you’d be here with me forever. We promised *eternity*.”

I nod slowly. “I know. I’m so sorry, little darlin’. Sometimes promises, they can’t be forever.”

Her huge green eyes stare at me. Unblinking. Suspended with pure disbelief.

“But that’s what promises are.”

I have no words. She’s right.

“You lied,” she chokes, then yanks the little ruby heart ring off her finger. The twisted wire digs into her, and a tiny trail of blood erupts from her flesh. She throws the ring at me, and it tumbles into the leaves and moss at my feet.

What’s left of my heart splinters. I want to tell her I meant it. I didn’t lie. I still mean it. I wanted to be the one person she could count on forever—something I never had as a kid but felt I could easily give her.

But I can’t because it’s a promise that can never be. Whatever unspoken bond we have, no matter how beautiful

and innocent it is, it's not right.

I kneel and rustle through the leaves until I find the ring. Still kneeling in front of her, I take her hand and press it into her palm.

“Don't do things you'll regret, Penny,” I say softly. “I think you'll miss this if you throw it away. It's special.”

She closes her hand over the ring. “I'll miss *you*,” she says tearfully.

I stand and smile weakly. The pain in my chest persists. Deep and throbbing with my pulse. “I'll miss you, too.” I will. More than I want to admit.

If this is the right thing to do, why, deep in my gut, does it also feel so incredibly wrong?

She gives me one last tearstained look before she heads back toward the path through the woods, with Cherry following her for the final time. Penny stops suddenly, turning her face slightly. The breeze carries her low, heartbroken voice back to me.

“You can't change eternity, Fox.”

A chill creeps down my spine.

When Cherry returns, we sit on the old porch. Sulking. I have a thousand things to do, but I do nothing. I suddenly feel as lost and broken as I did when Brianna died.

But also, the odd hum I've grown accustomed to has disappeared, replaced with an eerie silence in my head.

When the sun sets, I finally stand to go in the house. I feel the paper Penny gave me in my back pocket. I pull it out and gently unfold it to read her poem:

*Oh, what a lovely return it will be,
Slipping quietly from there to here,
among whispers and memories,
To find you again, my eternal love,
with your beautiful smile*

Waiting always for me

It's beautifully sad and haunting and so beyond her years. Penny's old soul seems to be trapped, constantly fighting for escape.

As I hold the poem, a warm, electric tingle zips through my limbs like a lightning bolt. Tiny hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stand up.

The wind blows my hair across my face, and I swear I feel Brianna's touch on my lips and catch the long-gone scent of her perfume. For a brief moment, my heart races. My breathing stills. I smile the smile that's just for her as if she's there with me again.

And oh, what a lovely return that would be.

But, of course, she's not there. She'll never return. It's just me and my dog and a poem from a little girl who somehow has the ability to sprinkle magic on my soul.

Chapter 11



PENNY - 2023

My mom is a great cook. Unfortunately, she also hates to cook. She loves takeout, though, so I usually have one of many tattered menus put in front of me about four times a week. Last night, my veggie fried rice was accompanied by a stale chocolate fortune cookie that read: *You will soon meet someone who will change your life.* These cookies aren't exactly a culinary treat, but I once heard the fortune will only come true if you eat it. So I quickly chewed it, chasing it down with a gulp of iced tea. Because I very much want to meet someone who will change my life. I mean, who could pass an epic prediction like that up? After dinner, I placed the intriguing strip of paper in an old maple box I keep in my closet, where it will live with other random trinkets and treasures that are mostly useless but also too special to throw away.

I believe hints of what's to come in life are hidden all around us, sometimes even in the oddest, most unexpected places. Some might come as whispers that only we can hear. We just have to take the time to look and listen. And wait.

I'm not quite sure why, but I always seem to be looking and listening.

Heather, Olivia, and Ava are waiting by the old tree on the front lawn of the high school. They squeal when they see me approaching, and before I know it, I'm caught in a smothering, giggling, four-way hug.

Laughing, I do my best to hug them back.

“I just saw you guys two days ago,” I say when they release me.

“But it’s the first day of school!” Ava exclaims. “Aren’t you excited? We’re juniors!”

“Just two more years to go,” Heather adds as if that’s not practically a lifetime.

“I’m more excited about your hair,” I say to Ava. “It came out gorgeous!” Her natural light-brown hair is now a deep chestnut ribboned with caramel highlights that I’m totally jealous of. My mom won’t let me dye my hair until I’m eighteen, so until then, I’m stuck with boring red hair.

Ava’s face brightens as she touches the chunky curls at her shoulder. “Thank you! You look stunning, as always.”

I mimic their excitement while we wait for the bell to ring. I’m a pro at pretending to fit in—so much so that I’ve been one of the most popular girls in my class for four years. A status I don’t want or even like. But inside, I feel as disconnected as an old phone number. I perpetually feel a sense of homesickness, as if I’m in the wrong place and with the wrong people. Two years ago, I cornered my parents during dinner, demanding to know if I was kidnapped as a child. I begged them to take me back to my real family, promising them I wouldn’t let them go to jail. My mother quietly proceeded to haul out photo albums featuring her holding me the day I was born—pink and wrinkled—right up to my most recent birthday. She showed me my birth certificate, which I suppose could’ve been Photoshopped, but my mom isn’t very tech-savvy. My father threw his napkin onto his plate and disappeared into the garage. The next day, I had a visit with the child psychologist I’ve been seeing off and on since I was six years old. I rolled my eyes and told her my parents overreacted. I was just curious because I look nothing like them, and I’ve been watching a lot of true-crime documentaries lately.

I mean, that *is* true.

I’ve learned to go through the motions, say all the right things, make the right faces. Guilt constantly plagues me

because my friends are completely oblivious, believing I'm just as happy as they are, as deeply invested in our teenage life and drama as they are, when sadly, I'm just...not.

I want to be. I really and truly wish I was. But I'm trapped in a strange limbo, waiting for something or someone that's a total mystery to me.

"...we're going to eat lunch together, right? Penny? Penny!"

Blinking, I shake my head. "I'm sorry, what?"

Olivia's almond-shaped brown eyes come into focus just inches from mine. She's a close talker, and it totally freaks all of us out.

"Lunch?" Olivia says. "We're all going to eat together like we always do, right? On the bleachers?"

I inch backward. "Yes, of course."

She nods, letting out a sigh of relief as if we just avoided a catastrophe.

The bell rings, and we jostle to the front entrance of the school with the swarm of other students. For the briefest moment, when I squeeze through the doors with my three best friends, I'm overcome by the all-too-familiar sense that something is missing or forgotten, and the viselike fear that I may never find it, never remember, tightens around me, taking my breath away.



The morning is a whirlwind of unlocking new lockers, finding new classes, complaining about how stuffy the rooms are, and meeting new teachers. More excited hugs from classmates who look totally different than they did the last day of sophomore year. Everyone is growing up so fast. Girls are prettier. Boys are taller and hotter. Couples are attached at the lip and hip between classes like they can't bear to separate.

I wonder if I look different.

At noon, I meet up with the girls at our spot on the bleachers.

“Penny, where’s your locker?” Heather asks. “I looked everywhere for you.”

I bite into a carrot stick, which is almost the same color as my hair. Not a good vibe. “It’s right outside the art room.”

She frowns. “Lucky you. Mine is down by the gym. I was hoping I’d be near you again.”

“Mine is right where it was last year, by the library,” Olivia says.

“I can’t even find mine,” Ava says, attempting to get the lid off a small Tupperware. I take it from her and pull the top off.

“You have to pull the tab part,” I tell her. “What number is your locker?”

“Two thirty-six.”

“That’s on the second floor, across from where we had math last year.”

“Oh.”

I can never quite tell if Ava’s helplessness is genuine or an odd, subconscious way to get attention. Either way, I’ve always found it endearing.

While the girls talk about the cutest boys they’ve seen so far today, my mind wanders to the painting of a lake I started yesterday. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t capture the glistening reflection of the sunlight on the water. I decide I’m going to have to try a different brush and possibly start all over.

“Damn. I’d hate to be her,” Heather observes out loud.

“Who?” Me, Olivia, and Ava ask in unison.

“That new girl over there. Sitting all by herself.”

We follow Heather’s gaze to a dark-haired girl sitting alone at a picnic table under the trees.

“Who is she?” Olivia asks.

Heather shrugs. “Some new girl in our grade. I saw her in my English class earlier. Jennifer Smith told me she came from a private school. She’s probably a bitch.”

“Why would you say that?” I ask.

Heather’s eyes shift. “I don’t know... just assuming. She doesn’t smile at all. I think there’s something wrong with her. She’s wearing all black, even her nails are black. Is goth even a trend anymore? And she has two different eye colors.”

“Really?” Ava exclaims, her own eyes widening.

I squint at the girl, but I can’t see her too well from where we’re sitting. She looks fine to me—wearing cute black overalls, one strap unbuttoned and hanging at her slim waist, with a black T-shirt underneath. Her neck and wrists are layered with thin silver jewelry.

“Are they contacts?” I ask.

“No,” Heather replies. “They’re her real eyes.”

“Wow,” I say, fascinated.

“Isn’t that freaky?” Heather asks.

“Or is it seriously cool?” Ava adds.

My three friends stare at me, waiting for me to decide the new girl’s optical fate. For some bizarre reason, they treat me like I’m their leader. My mother says it’s because I’m one of the tallest girls in our class and also because of my long red hair. My mom says red is a power color that exudes confidence and leadership.

“I think it’s really wild,” I say.

Heather frowns, clearly unhappy with my approval of odd eyes, and tosses her pink-tipped hair behind her shoulder. “Either way, it must suck for her to have no friends.”

Yes, I think to myself. That must be absolutely awful.

Grabbing my books and lunch bag, I grin and say, “Who says she has no friends?”

My friends' stares practically burn a hole in the back of my head as I step down the bleachers and approach the new girl. She slowly looks up from her book. A line of trepidation forms between her beautiful, kohl-rimmed eyes—one the color of hot cocoa, the other a bright leafy green. Even though she's sitting, I can tell she's petite, maybe five foot two. A tiny diamond glistens in her nose. She reminds me of popular fairy artists' paintings.

"Hi," I say, smiling. "I'm Penny Rose. I'm a junior, too."

Her eyes widen like a cornered animal. "I'm Lily," she replies, closing her book. "Lily Fox." Her voice is so soft I can barely hear her.

I motion to the empty bench across from her. "Can I sit with you?"

She nods skeptically and mumbles, "If you want to..."

"Did you recently move here?" I ask, settling on the bench.

Looking down, she says, "No. I went to Hilltop Academy."

"Did you like it there?"

Her lips, tinted a dark maroon, quirk to the side. "No."

"I think you'll like it here."

She glances uneasily over at the bleachers where my friends are watching us. "If you're part of some *welcome the weird new girl club*, you can just go," she says.

"I swear, I'm not. I'm honestly a friendly person. Probably annoyingly so."

A shy smile emerges, morphing her face from dreary to adorable. After glimpsing it, I think she should never *not* smile. But sadly, her smile quickly fades away. Awkwardly, she pushes her hand through her dark hair. It falls back, covering half her face and draping past her shoulders in a silky, violet-hued curtain. My scalp tingles with an odd, déjà vu sensation.

She catches me staring at her and asks, "Have we met before?"

I shake my head a little. “I was just thinking the same thing, but I don’t think we have. I’d remember you. Your eyes are stunning. I’d never forget them.”

“I get made fun of a lot because of them,” she replies, fingering the strap of her backpack. “I was going to wear colored contacts to start the new year here.”

“What? That’s crazy. They’re so unique and beautiful. Don’t you dare hide them.”

Still not meeting my eyes, she says, “The contacts drove me insane. I couldn’t last an hour with them.”

“I’ve never tried them, but I’m sure I couldn’t deal, either.”

The bell sounds again. We stand and gather our things. I notice she didn’t even touch her lunch.

“What class do you have next?” I ask.

She glances at her schedule. “Photography one.”

“Me too!” I exclaim. It’s the class I’m most excited about this year. Well, next to art. “We can go together if you want. I can show you where it is.”

Chewing her lip, she looks back at the school warily. “Um... it kinda looks like your friends are waiting for you.”

I smile. “That’s okay. You’re my friend now, too. Come on, I’ll introduce you to them.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive.”

And I was. This shy, unique girl was going to be my friend. I could just feel it.



The end of the day couldn’t come fast enough for me. I’ve been an honor roll student for years, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m completely uninterested in all things school. For years, my friends have been begging me to join them on

the cheerleading squad and other various after-school activities. All those things look super fun to me, but I still just don't feel any motivation to actually do any of them.

With my backpack filled with new books, I start the two-mile walk home. As long as the weather's nice, I don't mind walking. I enjoy the exercise and fresh air to clear my head at the end of the day. And I have toned legs to show for it, so there's that.

About two blocks into my walk, I spot the new girl on the sidewalk ahead of me.

"Hey!" I call out, jogging to catch up to her.

She pauses and turns around. "Oh, hey," she says unenthusiastically.

"Are you walking home, too?" I ask breathlessly.

"Yeah."

"What street do you live on?"

"On Willow Lane."

"Oh, wow. I live on the next street over. Want to walk together?"

She looks at me like I'm an overly friendly golden retriever.

"I'm not stalking you," I assure her. "Just trying to be nice. It's okay if you don't want to. I won't be offended." I've never tried to befriend someone first before, but Lily feels like a kindred spirit. Maybe because she looks how I feel—uncomfortably out of place.

"Okay," she says.

After a few blocks of silence, I ask her why she switched schools.

"I was raised by my grandparents," she tells me. "And they just got a divorce."

"I'm so sorry," I say, not realizing old people got divorced. What's the point after spending half their lives together? Why

not just stick it out?

Her shoulder lifts. “I guess they both wanted a new start and didn’t want to do that with me around.”

“So, who are you living with now?”

“My father. It’s super awkward. I don’t know him at all, but I have nowhere else to go.”

“You never saw him before you moved in with him?”

“Nope. He just sent cards to me for every birthday and holiday for the past sixteen years.”

“That sucks. What about your mom?”

“She died during childbirth.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay. I’m not sad about it. They’re both strangers to me.”

Regardless, a deep, unsettling sadness sinks into the pit of my stomach. Poor Lily is like an orphan, abandoned by everyone. I want to hug her right here on the sidewalk—but I’m pretty sure that would be weird since we just met. I don’t want to scare her away.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I ask her.

“Nope. It’s just me.”

“You’ve had a lot of changes to go through alone.”

“It’s no big deal.” Her voice drips with dejection. “I’m used to being alone. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly Miss Popularity like you are.”

I cringe inside. “I’m really not. To be honest, I don’t even have a lot in common with my friends. I love art, nature, and poetry. They love all the fun stuff like popular TV shows, shopping, and boys. Me? I’ve never even been on a date. I consider myself a loner, but for some reason, people gravitate to me and just kinda make me their friend. It’s really weird.”

“That *is* weird.”

“Now that I said that, I hope you don’t think I’m doing that to *you*... making you be my friend.”

She lets out a short laugh. “It’s okay...you’ve been really nice to me. I’m just not used to it.”

We come to Willow Lane and I follow her, curious to see which house she lives in. Every step I take is haunted by bittersweet memories. I haven’t been on this street in such a long time, but the ache in my heart is making it feel like it was just yesterday when I ran into the woods, heartbroken and crying.

“Well, this is me,” Lily says, stopping on the cracked sidewalk. “Thanks for keeping me company.”

The little white house nestled in the bushes and trees is like a punch to my gut. It takes me several seconds to wrestle words out of my mouth. “Th-this is where you live?”

“Yup.” She sighs and shuffles her sneakers. “I know...not exactly what I pictured, either.”

“No... it’s beautiful,” I say dreamily. “Like a fairy tale.”

Her brows shoot up with skepticism. “If you say so...”

My soul begins to tremble at the realization that Alex and Cherry have moved, and I will never, ever see them again. I may have only been twelve when Alex stopped being my friend, but I’ve always secretly believed, always heard a whisper in my heart, that it wasn’t the end of our friendship. I think Alex knew that, too.

A lump catches in my throat. They could be anywhere in the world now.

“Do you know when or where the man who lived here before moved?” I ask, staring longingly at the front door. All the special things I loved so much must be gone now—the beautiful black and white photos, the luxurious Victorian red velvet couch, the soft throw blanket with the enchanting little round tassels.

Lily shrugs. “Beats me. I only just moved in last week.”

My attention is pulled away from the house when movement near the barn catches my eye. Tears immediately spring to my eyes and my knees nearly buckle.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. “Cherry...”

I run across the yard to where the dog is slowly coming toward me, tail wagging in the tall grass. Her steps are tentative and stiff, her head slightly tilted. When I reach her, I fall to my knees and gently throw my arms around her. Happy whimpers escape her as she nuzzles into my neck and licks my face.

“I missed you so much!” I exclaim, stroking her gray muzzle. My heart clenches over her beautiful brown eyes clouded with age—a reminder that this furry ball of love is older than me. I plant a soft kiss on her forehead.

Beige work boots appear on the ground a few feet away from me—untied and covering low white socks. My pulse hammers in a totally unfamiliar way as I slowly lift my gaze to take him in. Camouflage cargo shorts. Tight black sleeveless shirt. Arms corded with muscles and thin blue veins. Dark, tousled hair hanging almost past his shoulders. Black leather eye patch faded and cracked from the sun.

And one very intense, cocoa-colored eye riveted directly on me.

Holy crap. I’m frozen, trembling, caught up in my very first experience of attraction to the male species, and it’s to a guy twenty years older than me who looks like he just stepped out of a rock album cover.

But I’m also not the tiniest bit surprised or disappointed that this monumental, coming-of-age moment, which I’ll remember forever, would occur with *him*.

I slowly stand. “Fox...”

Just as his name leaves my lips, I make the connection—he still lives here, and Lily must be his...daughter?

But how?

“Penny Rose?” Surprise, and something else I can’t quite put my finger on, filters through his deep voice. My stomach lurches, fearing my idiotic, daydreaming self had it all wrong—maybe he truly never wanted to see me again and here I am trespassing, hugging his dog.

“I’m here again...” I say softly and very awkwardly. “I hope it’s okay...I met your—”

“You guys know each other?” Lily interrupts, coming to stand next to me.

“Uh...” Alex takes on the expression of a squirrel in the middle of a busy road.

“Alex used to teach art when I was little,” I say. “I used to come here sometimes to paint and see his sculptures. He’s an amazing artist.”

Lily glares at him, her lip slightly turned up with undeniable disdain.

“You’re filthy,” she says. I hadn’t noticed the dust and grease at all.

He looks down at himself sheepishly. “I’ve been working.”

“Whatever,” she mutters and heads back toward the house.

“Hey,” I say, following her. “Do you want to walk to school together tomorrow? I live right through your backyard.” I point to the woods. “I can meet you here.”

Gripping the handle of the front screen door, she side-eyes me like I’m a door-to-door salesman.

“Did he put you up to this?” she asks, nodding her head toward the barn.

“Up to what?”

“To try to be my friend.”

I’m taken aback. “No. I swear I had no idea he was your dad. I haven’t talked to him in years.”

Her deadpan stare tells me she’s not the least bit convinced.

“Lily, I’m sincerely just trying to be your friend. I had no idea you lived here. But now that I do, I think it’d be cool to have a friend who lives so close, don’t you?”

She stares down at her feet, her voice soft. “I’m not used to having any kind of friend.”

Her loneliness is heart-wrenching. “Maybe for now, just consider me a walking partner,” I offer brightly. “How’s that?”

Shaking her head, she says with a small smile, “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I don’t know why I’m inexplicably drawn to everything here—this house, Cherry, Alex, and now Lily. All I know is I’m just as powerless to fight the magnetism as I was when I was six.

The heart is a compass, and for some reason, mine keeps leading me here.

Chapter 12



PENNY

When Lily goes inside, instead of taking the sidewalk around to my street, I walk around Alex's house to my old path through the woods. I've missed the old path with its canopy of branches and leaves, the mossy rocks, the birds and squirrels flitting about, and the scent of damp earth.

Twice now, after Alex abruptly ended our friendship, I crept through these woods at dusk and stood at the edge of the clearing, staring at the house and barn with an aching heart. I hoped to see a glimpse of him. I hoped Cherry would be waiting for me. But I only heard Alex's favorite music drifting across the field. With tears on my cheeks, I mouthed the words to the songs, wondering what I did wrong.

I was six years old the first time I wandered into Alex's yard, but I knew him way before I met him.

That sounds crazy. I know.

But even at such a young age, I somehow just *knew him*.

Like most little children, I believed in all sorts of things that didn't make any logical sense—like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the tooth fairy. Believing I had once lived in Alex's little house, had once owned that dog, had once known that man didn't seem odd to me at all. I just could never understand why all those things were taken away from me and why every adult in my life kept telling me it was all a dream or some kind of fantasy I made up and had to forget about.

I've tried so hard. I really have. I stopped trying to get my parents and therapist to believe me. I even stopped sketching

the memory pictures, as I used to call them.

But I've never forgotten.

And now, walking right past the barn is too much of a temptation for me. I can't stop myself from pushing the door open a few inches and peeking inside. Alex is exactly where I expected him to be—standing in the middle of the barn with his back to the door, surrounded by speckles of floating dust. He's staring at what looks to be the beginnings of a giant hedgehog.

"You creeping up on me again, little darlin'?" he asks without turning around.

My cheeks heat. I break out into a huge grin. "I'm not creeping, exactly..."

His shoulders shake with laughter.

"Can I come in and see the hedgehog?"

He turns and gives me a nostalgic smile that twelve-year-old me thought was sweet, but sixteen-year-old me thinks is charming.

"You don't have to ask," he says.

Stepping inside, I pull the door closed behind me. I gingerly walk around him to look at his current project.

"It's so cute," I say. "I love how you used knitting needles for the quills. I didn't know they came that big." The needles are at least twelve inches long.

"A sewing store went out of business. They sold me a huge box of them for twenty bucks."

"Is this a commission piece?"

"No, but one of my collectors is interested in it. He's thinking about putting it in the middle of his garden."

"That would be really cool."

He starts to put his tools away, not giving any clues that he might want me to leave, so I quietly wander over to the corner desk where I used to spend hours painting, drawing, and

writing. I've always felt safe and peaceful in his studio and in his house. I always knew where he and Cherry would be at each point of the day or night. It might seem repetitive or boring to someone else, but to me, it was comforting. It felt like home.

I'm surprised to see the plastic cup I was drinking from when I was twelve is still in its place. The last painting I was working on is still on the easel. Everything is untouched. Under a veil of dust, memories of me and Alex's beloved Brianna are enshrined together.

A strange feeling stirs in my chest.

Alex is holding on to every shred of the past. He's trapped in these memories just as much as these dusty items are.

Closing my eyes, I lightly run my fingertips over the top of the desk. The old warm, tingling sensation immediately returns—traveling down my spine and through my limbs like tiny shock waves. When I was little, I called it the buzzing. I'd forgotten all about it until now.

I steal a glance at Alex. There are so many things I want to ask him. So many things I want to tell him.

Just as I'm about to open my mouth, he asks, "How have you been?"

Lost. Homesick. Heartbroken. Missing things that aren't mine.

"Good," I reply.

"You got really tall."

Laughing, I move away from the art corner and lean against his workbench. "Or maybe you're just shrinking."

He flashes me a grin that makes my heart flutter. "Still a little smart-ass, I see."

I watch him organize his tools for a few minutes while questions jump up in my brain like a jack-in-the-box.

"You never told me about Lily," I finally say quietly. "I know I was just a little kid, but we used to talk so much. You

never mentioned her. I was shocked to find out she lived here.”

He blows out a long breath and rubs the back of his neck. “It’s a long, messed-up story.”

“I have time,” I say. “Unless your girlfriend is coming over?” I arch my brow up at him.

“There wasn’t a girlfriend,” he says.

“I know. You suck at lying.”

He laughs and sits on his old wooden stool. “I suck at a lot of things.”

Leaving that comment alone, I say, “Lily seems really sad.”

“Sad?” he repeats. “Try pissed off. She friggin’ hates me.”

“She doesn’t know you.”

He pulls his eye patch off to shake the dust out of his long hair. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him without it. The eyelid is pale, and I assume it must be stitched closed. A faint, jagged scar runs from his forehead, over his eyelid, to his cheekbone. I have a strange urge to run my fingertips, then my lips, over it.

Jesus, Penny! What’s wrong with you?

While I try to recover from random, creepy, sexy thoughts, he fastens the eye patch back on and gives me a frustrated stare.

“What did she tell you?” he asks. “She won’t talk to me unless you count spewing condescending shit at me.”

Should I tell him what Lily said to me, or is that breaking a friend rule? I still consider Alex a friend, and they’re obviously not doing well. Maybe I can give them a little help.

“She told me her mother died during childbirth, her grandparents raised her, and don’t want her around anymore since they got divorced. She said she had nowhere else to live except with you, and she’s never had any contact from you other than birthday and holiday cards, and you’re a stranger to her.”

“Fuck,” he mutters.

“Is that all true?”

His jaw muscles twitch. “Yeah...I mean no...” He lets out a breath that blows his hair up out of his face. “It’s true, but shit’s a lot more complicated than that.”

“When I was little, my mom told me your wife died in a car accident.” I don’t tell him that right after my mother told me that, I ran to my room and cried for hours. She had to give me a tiny plastic cup of grape-flavored cough medicine to calm me down. “But she never mentioned a daughter.”

“Brianna was in labor and we were on our way to the hospital when we crashed. She didn’t die at the scene,” Alex says in a low, pained tone. “They were able to get her to the ER and deliver the baby, but Brianna passed away right after. She had too many injuries. It was a miracle Lily lived.” He blinks away a tear. “It all happened so fast. Brianna’s parents were out of their minds with grief and anger. They blamed me, called me a murderer.” Sucking in a breath, he raises his gaze from the floor to look at me. “I was a fucking mess,” he says. “Brianna’s parents took the baby at first, supposedly to give me time to get out of the hospital. Once I was discharged, I visited her on the weekends, but didn’t take her home yet. I was afraid to be alone with her. To be responsible for something so...” A tear escapes and slides down his cheek. “...so precious and fragile that came from my wife. The only part of Bri that was left. I was afraid I’d fuck up and kill Lily, too. Next thing I knew, Brianna’s parents were suing for custody. They had a whole case built up of how I was an irresponsible drunk, a danger to myself and the baby. I couldn’t afford to fight them. They refused to let me see her after that. To be honest, I just didn’t have any fight left in me at all. I let Lily go because they convinced me it was best for her. That I didn’t fucking deserve her.”

My limbs begin to tremble. Like ocean waves, his words crash in unison with my heartbeat in my ears. The right side of my head suddenly begins to throb as a red, blurry hue clouds my vision. I feel his grief burrowing deep into my soul, carving a place there like it’s my own.

I grip the edge of the workbench to steady myself and take a few deep breaths to stop myself from either passing out or hurling myself into his arms and never letting go.

“Oh, Alex,” I say. “They’re so, *so* wrong.”

Shaking his head slowly, he says, “You don’t know that.”

“I do.” I have no idea how, but I know without any doubt that Alex would have been an amazing, loving father if he’d only had faith in himself. I believe that as much as I believe I’m going to take my next breath.

Emotion deepens his voice. “I thought about Lily every single day. She’s never known that she’s the light of my life. She doesn’t know how much we wanted her, how much we loved her. When Bri was pregnant, I used to talk to Lily every night. I wanted her to know my voice. I wanted to give her the love I never had, and instead, I fucked her all up.”

I don’t think Lily is fucked up, but it’s obvious she’s dealing with an overwhelming amount of shit. But who wouldn’t be mad if put in her shoes? In her eyes, everyone who was supposed to love her had left her.

“You have a second chance,” I say. “I think you can make things right.”

“It’s too late. She hates me.”

“I don’t think she hates you. She needs time. You have to gain her trust.”

“You’re just a kid, Penny. What the hell do you know about time and trust?”

Offended, I pick my backpack up off the floor. “I’m not an idiot, Alex. Even *being a kid*, I know if someone’s hurt, they need time to heal and trust again. You, of all people, should understand that.”

When I was eleven, he told me how his parents abandoned him when he was just a little boy. I’d never heard such a horrible thing before. The thought of my own parents leaving the house one day and never ever returning, leaving me to fend for myself, was horrifying.

A slow, sardonic smile crosses his face. “Yup. You got that right.”

“Look, I’d like to be Lily’s friend. Is that going to be okay with you, or would you rather I stay away?”

Several seconds of him not looking at me tick by before he answers. “I think you’d be a good friend for her. She needs that.”

“Hopefully, *she* won’t suddenly ditch me for some random-ass reason.”

He lets out a quick laugh. “Okay, little snark queen. I was an asshole, but I had my reasons.”

“Good to know,” I reply. “Maybe someday you’ll clue me in.”

Silently, he walks me to the other side of the barn and pulls the door open.

Before I leave, I turn to face him. He’s standing so close to me that I can smell his cologne—familiar, woody, herbal. My forehead comes to his chin, and I secretly hope I don’t grow any taller.

“Alex... I don’t know if you remember the time we spent together years ago, but you were really good with me. You were incredibly patient. We talked about so much. You taught me all about creativity and believing in myself. And you believed me when I needed you to. You really were my best friend, as weird as that sounds.” I swallow the crackling emotion feathering into my voice. “What I’m trying to say is, I think you would’ve been a great dad. I wish my father had spent time with me like you did. I think Lily will see that she’s lucky to have you.”

His eye softens, turning a darker chocolaty hue. “I guess you were kinda my best friend, too. You inspired me, and you helped me through some really bad times,” he says in a low, gravelly voice. “Lily is gonna be lucky to have you.”

The moment stretches with heart-tugging silence. I swallow hard and finally tear my gaze from his, not wanting to go but knowing now is the time I should.

Cherry lifts her head as I leave, but she doesn't get up to walk me to the edge of the woods like she used to. I realize with a pang in my heart that it's too far for her to walk now.

I bend down to kiss her forehead. "I'll be back, Cherry," I whisper. "I promise."

"Penny...wait."

I turn to see Alex coming out of the barn, pulling a small red wagon. My bottom lip quivers as he gently lifts Cherry and places her in the wagon. I almost lose it completely when Cherry wags her tail with excitement, her doggy face smiling.

Alex grabs the wagon handle and starts walking with me. "One of her favorite things was walking you back and forth to make sure you were safe. I'm gonna make sure she still gets to do that."

All I can do is smile tearfully and nod. My heart is bursting. Any words I could possibly say are tangled up in a big ball of emotion in my throat.

We barely talk on the way through to the other side of the woods, but I take a few pictures of Cherry in her wagon to cherish. I may have even snuck a few photos of Alex, who laughed and kept putting his hand up in front of the camera. I long to print some and hang them on the string in the shed, but I doubt Alex will let me. That was Bri's special hobby. Not mine.

As I wave goodbye to them from my own backyard, I idly spin the little ruby heart ring on my finger.

I feel like forever just started again.

Chapter 13



PENNY

“I’m going to the salon, honey. Do you want to come along? Maybe they can squeeze you in for a manicure while I’m getting my hair done.”

I look up from my journal to glance at Mom in my bedroom doorway. That’s a tempting offer. My nails haven’t seen the inside of a salon in about six months. But it’s also eight a.m. on a Saturday and I’m not even dressed yet.

“No, but thanks for asking,” I reply. “Maybe next time.”

“Are you sure? We can grab lunch after.”

“I’m sure. I think I’m going to text Lily and see if she wants to hang out.”

Mom’s forehead creases. “Is Lily a new friend?”

“I mentioned her the other day. Remember, we walked home together? She’s Alex’s daughter.”

She rummages through her purse and pulls out her sunglasses. “Alex who?”

“Alex Fox.”

Perching the sunglasses on the top of her head, she says, “The garbage guy?”

I let out a sigh. “Mom, really? He makes recycled sculptures. It’s art.”

“I didn’t know he had a daughter. Where has she been all this time?”

“Living with her grandparents. Now she lives with Alex. She’s really shy and sad, but I like her.”

A pensive look sits on her face. “Are you sure it’s a good idea for you to be friends with her? You cried for weeks when Alex became too busy to let you use his little studio. I never should’ve let you spend so much time over there. You’ve always had a strange fixation on that entire place.”

“I’m not spending time with *him*, Mom. I’m spending time with Lily.”

“Alright, then. Just make sure you don’t bother him. You and your friend are welcome to hang out here. Just clean up after yourselves. I don’t want to come home to a sink full of dishes.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll text you if I go over there.”

“Please do. You know I worry when you disappear.”

With that, she leaves. For the record, I don’t disappear. I like to go for walks. I bring my journal and my camera so I can jot down poetry, make sketches, and take photos. I admit I don’t always tell my mom where I am. A peculiar but soft voice seems to murmur in the recesses of my mind, whispering things like *why do I have to tell her my every move? I’m an adult*. But, logically, I know I’m still a teenager and have to tell her where I am because she’s my mother.

That hushed voice has been my companion for as far back as my memories reach. In fact, I can remember hearing it when I was just a toddler. It’s not creepy like how voices in people’s heads are shown in movies where they go crazy and hurt people. It’s more like there’s another, older me inside my head who has her own thoughts.

Anyway, back to nonimaginary friends. Lily and I have been walking to and from school together every day. I’ve finally managed to convince her to sit on the bleachers with me and the girls for lunch, but she just sits there, quiet as a mouse, reading a book or staring at her phone. She rarely eats her lunch. Every now and then, she’ll nod, or if we’re really lucky, a faint smile makes a brief appearance on her face, but

that's it. The girls think she's weird and they've cornered me alone more than once to ask why I'm even bothering with Lily at all because she's *so not cool*. Their words.

Do I care what they think? Abso-damn-lutely not. Lily desperately needs a real friend—someone who isn't going to just give up on her—and that someone is going to be me.

I grab my phone and send her a message.

Hi, it's Penny. Do you want to hang out today?

Fifteen minutes later, she replies.

LILY:

My father is making me unpack my things so I "feel like I'm home." What a load of crap.

I finish applying mascara and answer.

I can help you. I'm really good at organizing and decorating.

LILY:

Are you sure? I wouldn't want you to waste your Saturday helping me.

It's not a waste. It'll be fun. :-)

LILY:

Ok. But only if you want to!

See ya in a few minutes!

I throw on a pair of jeans, a hot-pink hoodie, and white sneakers. As I leave the house, I send my mom a quick text.

When I get to Lily's house, she's waiting for me on the front porch steps. Smoking!

"You smoke?" I ask in surprise.

"Sometimes," she answers without looking at me.

I wave a cloud of smoke out of my face. “That’s super unhealthy. You could get lung cancer. And you’ll get yellow zombie teeth. Do you know how much veneers cost?”

She stares at me blankly. “I smoke like two a day if that.”

“That’s two too fucking many!” Alex bellows from the upstairs window.

Yikes. I don’t think I’ve ever heard Alex raise his voice before.

Lily rolls her eyes and snuffs the cigarette out on the wooden step. I almost feel the embers burn in my soul. I love this beautiful old porch. I’ve sat here for hours with Alex and Cherry, listening to the wind chimes.

I swallow back the comment sitting on the tip of my tongue. I don’t want Lily to feel like everyone—including me—is against her. Maybe I can politely slip a cute little ashtray over here.

“I guess we should go unpack my stuff,” she huffs out.

I follow her into the house. Odd relief floods through me when I see everything is exactly the same inside. As we walk past the red velvet couch, I have to literally restrain myself from crawling on it like a cat and pulling that lush throw blanket over me. I’d give anything to take a nap there with the breeze blowing through the bay window.

We pass a disheveled, exhausted-looking Alex on the stairway. He nods a hello at me but says nothing. The tension in the air is thick and so different from the quiet calm that usually envelops the house.

When Lily opens the door to her room, my heart lurches so hard I almost double over.

“Are you okay?” she asks as I grip the doorframe.

“Yeah,” I say shakily, waiting for the queasiness to pass. “I felt dizzy for a second.”

“Probably from this,” she says, gesturing around the room and then throwing her hands up. “Like, seriously? He just left the room like this.”

I wandered into this room once, a long time ago. I remember wondering where the baby was because it was so obviously a nursery.

And it still is.

One corner is piled with cardboard boxes, each labeled *Lily's Stuff*. The room is painted a pale lavender, which isn't bad in itself, but it's the mural of baby bunnies, smiling sun, fluffy clouds, and bluebirds painted on the walls that's just not okay for a sixteen-year-old girl's bedroom.

As if in a trance, I cross the room and gently touch the smiling sun. My fingertips tingle. Bursts of images flash in my mind like a movie on fast-forward.

"Brianna painted this," I say dreamily, but I have no idea how I know that. "She wanted the room to be happy and peaceful for the baby." I move my hand lower, drifting over the baby bunny sitting on the green grass and flowers. "It's the meadow behind the house."

Two small bookcases—filled with nursery rhyme books and plush stuffed toys covered in dust—flank the double window on one wall.

But the very worst, most heart-wrenching part is the oak crib, the twirling-butterfly mobile above it, the changing table, and the matching rocking chair.

Oh, my poor Alex. All his hopes and dreams lived and died in this room. His grief wouldn't let him look at these things, let alone touch and move them.

Against another wall is a small, twin-size bed that he must've put in here right before Lily moved in. And that's where his efforts started and stopped.

"I don't even know what to do," Lily exclaims. "What's wrong with him?" Her eyes fill with tears—not of anger, but of hopelessness.

I put my arms around her and pull her into a probably very unwanted hug.

"Shhh..." I stroke her glossy black hair.

“My grandfather was right...it’s like he doesn’t even care about me,” she sobs. “It’s awful.”

I gently pull away and look into her eyes. “That’s not it at all, Lily. The room is like this because he loves you so much that he couldn’t let go, not because he doesn’t care. Please believe me on that.”

“How can he expect me to sleep in here with all this? It’s giving me nightmares.”

“I’m going to help you fix it.”

“How?” she asks hopelessly.

“Wait right here.”

Leaving Lily upstairs, I march out to the barn and pull an electric screwdriver off Alex’s wall of tools.

He puts down his welding gun and watches me as I walk past him again. “Hey, do you know how to use that thing?”

I hold the tool up and press the button, the screw bit whirling above my head. “Stick the bit in and press the button. I’ve watched you do it a hundred times.”

“What exactly are you sticking it in?”

I give him a teasing grin. “Don’t worry about it. I got this.” If I tell him what I’m doing, I’m worried he’ll try to stop me or get involved. I have to do this alone to spare him any more grief.

“You better not ‘got this’ straight through your hand or one of my walls.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“What are you going to do with that?” Lily asks when I return to her bedroom.

“We’re going to take this furniture apart and put it in the basement.”

Surprise widens her eyes. “You know how to do that?”

“It’s all just screwed together.”

“What if he gets mad?”

“Then we’ll deal with it. Right now, we’re doing what’s best for *you*. This was obviously always meant to be *your* room, so let’s make it *your room*.”

She nods and smiles. “Okay.”

Two hours later, we have all the nursery furniture dismantled and piled neatly in the hallway. We emptied two of Lily’s cardboard clothes boxes, dusted off all the children’s books and toys and carefully placed them in the empty boxes to be stored downstairs.

An ache pressed in my chest the entire time, and twice, I came so close to tears I had to go to the restroom to blot my eyes and blow my nose.

I blamed my erratic emotions on PMS.

“I think I’m going to keep this one,” Lily says. I turn to see her holding a small plush red fox. “I feel like my mom must’ve got this one because of our last name.”

I push my hair over my shoulder and smile. “I think she’d really want you to have it.”

She looks down at the stuffed toy. “You won’t tell your friends, will you?”

“Of course not. I still sleep with my favorite stuffed toy on my bed.” I don’t tell her I have the same one she’s holding and that it’s been my favorite since I was a baby.

“You’re a lot nicer than your friends,” she observes. “They seem a bit... shallow.”

“They’re not, really. I think it’s just an act they put on. Pretending like they really don’t care about anything except being popular and pretty.”

“I guess.” She stares around the mostly empty room. “Where am I going to put my stuff? There’s no furniture.”

“For now, you can put most of your clothes in the closet. We can go online and order some dressers that match the bookcases. I’m sure Alex won’t mind.”

“My grandparents gave me a little money. They said my father is broke because he doesn’t have a real job and drinks too much.”

My blood starts to boil. “Um, I don’t think that’s true, Lily. He’s an artist, but he makes money. I was here once when he sold one of his statues. He got a lot of money for it.” Ten thousand dollars, from what I remember, but I’m not going to throw that figure out because it’s not my business.

She looks skeptical. “You really think so? Look at this place. It’s so run down. My grandfather said all this furniture was garbage picked.”

Is it possible to hate someone I’ve never met? Because her grandfather sounds like a total obnoxious jerk.

“Your dad told me your mom loved to buy furniture and decor in local antique stores. I think it’s charming. This house is historic; it was built in 1938. A well-known poet used to live here, and she was the one who planted all the berry bushes and flowers. All these doorknobs are the originals. Do you know how hard it is to find these? They had a cat that lived to be twenty-two years old. He sat on the front porch all the time and people would walk by and talk to him every day. There’s a little headstone for him right behind the shed; it’s got moss grown over it, but you can still see his name.”

I’m breathless from talking, and Lily is blinking at me like I’ve just lost my mind here in her bedroom.

“Jesus, Penny, how do you even know all that?” she asks.

“I—”

“It’s all true,” Alex says from behind me. I turn to see him leaning against the doorframe, eyeing me with curiosity. “Where’d you learn that stuff about the house?”

My pulse races as I realize I don’t know.

Lily and Alex continue to stare at me, waiting for an answer I don’t have.

“I…” My brain kicks into overdrive. “A few years ago in school, we had to read about local historic landmarks. I was

fascinated with the cat story, and I recognized this house from the photo online.”

A big pile of stinking lies, but they buy it.

Or maybe Alex is just distracted by the dismantled nursery furniture he’s staring at. His breathing is deeper, the muscle in his jaw twitching.

“I was really careful,” I say quickly. “I thought we could store it in the basement.”

He nods.

“It’s all beautiful, but there weren’t any drawers for Lily to put her clothes in,” I add, hoping to get that look off his face and bring the color back to his complexion. “I think she needs maybe two small dressers. She can order them online, and they can be delivered.”

“Um... sure.” He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and hands Lily a credit card. Wordlessly, she takes it from him. “Get anything you need. Try to keep it around two grand.”

“I can pay you back,” Lily says quietly.

“I’m not letting you pay me back, Lily. I’m sorry about the furniture... I couldn’t...”

He finishes with a deep breath that says a lot more than words ever could.

For long moments, they stare at each other silently. I step between them and plaster a smile on my face. “It’s okay,” I say brightly. “This way, she can pick out what she wants. Maybe a corner desk, too.”

They nod simultaneously, and I realize Lily looks a lot like Alex. They have the same brooding expression, the same rare-but-adorable smile, the same aura of sadness.

“I guess you’re too old for bunnies,” Alex grumbles.

Lily peeks up at her father. “Kinda...”

“You can paint over it.” His voice has gone flat and emotionless. I can see him shutting down, retreating back to his shadows.

I wish Alex would tell Lily how Brianna decorated this room for her with so much love, how she spent hours painting this adorable, detailed mural, and what a special piece of art it is. I wish he would tell her how he talked to her before she was born. I wish he would say *something* so Lily wouldn't keep feeling like her parents are strangers who don't love her.

"It really is a beautiful mural," I say. "I have an idea. I'll take pictures of it, and if you want, we can have parts of it printed on canvas. That way, you'll always have your mom's artwork."

"I like that idea," Lily says.

"Do you have a favorite color for the walls?" I ask as I snap pictures with my phone.

She looks around. "I always wanted a dark, dusky purple, but my grandparents wouldn't let me paint my room. It was just boring white."

Alex finally looks up. "You can paint it any color you want. It's your room. I want you to like it."

"How am I going to get paint?" Lily asks, her face crestfallen. "You don't drive. I can't walk from town with gallons of paint."

Alex's wide shoulders sag. Having Lily in his life is shining a spotlight on things I don't think Alex really wants to see. But maybe he needs to start seeing them.

"I'll call Kelley and have him bring some paint and brushes over. Just look up the color online so I can tell him what to get. We can start it tomorrow."

I'm surprised Kelley hasn't duct-taped Alex behind the wheel of a car already and forced him to start driving again.

Lily looks at me with a hint of hope in her eyes. "Can we do it? If you're not busy?"

"I don't have any plans," I say. "I'd love to help you."

Alex picks up some of the furniture pieces. "Suit yourselves. It's probably gonna need a few coats. I'll see if Kelley can get the stuff here today so you can get it prepped."

When Alex is gone, Lily flops back on her bed and gives me a weak but grateful smile.

“Thanks for all your help,” she says. “It’ll be cool to have a room that’s really mine. At my grandparents, it was the same weird shit. I was in my mom’s old bedroom that she grew up in.”

“Hopefully, this can be a new beginning for you. For *both* of you.”

“I’m sure you noticed he and I don’t exactly talk.”

“I think things will get better. He’s trying.”

“As he should. I mean, he abandoned me.” Resentment coats every word.

I hesitate, debating on how much I should say. Lily has a right to be upset, but she seems to be missing parts of the story. Maybe if she knew more, she wouldn’t feel so much anger and animosity toward Alex.

“He didn’t abandon you, Lily. Not like you think.”

Her eyes narrow to slits. “What other way is there to think? He didn’t want me.”

“That’s not true. He did want you, but he was hurt during the accident. He lost his eye and he was grieving the love of his life. He didn’t know how to take care of a newborn by himself. Your grandparents were only supposed to be helping him at first, and then they sued him for custody, knowing he couldn’t afford to fight them. They told the courts—and him—that he’d be a shitty father. They refused to let him see you.”

She stares at me, her lips slightly parted. “How do you know all this?”

“He told me.”

Looking down at her hands in her lap, she says, “I don’t know, Penny. My grandparents never told me any of that. They told me he didn’t want me, and he just left me at their house. I’m not sure why they’d make all that up.”

“I don’t know why either, Lily,” I say softly. “But I know he wouldn’t do that to you, not after what happened to him when he was little.”

Her head snaps up. “What happened to him?”

Sighing, I peer down the hall to make sure Alex isn’t upstairs. “I shouldn’t be telling you all this,” I say in a hushed voice. “I probably said too much already.”

“Tell me. How else am I supposed to understand him? I’m not at a place with him where we’re having heart-to-hearts, Penny. We probably won’t ever be.”

I don’t know why it’s so important to me, but I want Alex and Lily to understand each other and be close. This wall between them seems so wrong. They’re all each other has.

“Okay.” I relent. “But please don’t tell him I told you. I don’t want him to get mad at me. I’m only telling you because I think you need to understand his side.”

“I promise I won’t say anything.”

Emotion wells up in me as I remember how Alex’s deep voice wavered when he told me about his childhood. “When Alex was ten, his father left him and his mom. He just took his stuff in the middle of the night and disappeared. A few weeks later, his mother went out to get groceries, or so she said, and never came back. They just left him there all alone with his dog. He didn’t have any money or any relatives. All he had was what little food that was left in the kitchen. When that ran out, he had to go through people’s garbage. He was afraid to tell anyone, so he lived totally alone for months. The electric and phone got turned off and everything. *That’s* being abandoned.”

“Holy shit,” Lily whispers. “That’s just... terrible. Like, I can’t even imagine.”

“I know you’re mad, Lily, and I totally think you’re allowed to be. But try to go easy on him. He really is a nice guy. He told me he never stopped thinking about you and loving you.”

She looks leery. “Do you really think that’s true? Or do you think he’s just saying it?”

“I think it’s true. I have no doubts.”

“It’s kinda weird that he told you so much about his personal life, isn’t it? Why would he do that?”

“Probably because I was an annoying little kid and asked him a ton of questions. And maybe it felt safe for him to talk to me, knowing he wouldn’t be judged.”

She’s quiet as she stares out the window with her face scrunched, absorbing everything. “I guess that makes sense. Thanks for telling me. I’ll work on not being so mad at him, but I’m not making any promises.”



Later, after me and Lily have primed the walls and then inhaled an entire veggie and ricotta pizza, I run into Alex in the living room as I’m leaving.

“Hey,” he says. “Thanks for being the mediator.”

“Maybe I’ve found my future calling.”

“I thought you wanted to be an artist or a poet?”

“I do...but that probably won’t pay the bills.”

He pulls back, mocking offense. “Not all artists are starving, little darlin’.”

“The good ones aren’t.” I grin. “Like you.”

“I think you’ll do great at anything you decide to do.”

I hope so. When I think of my future, it’s all a cloudy haze.

Lowering my voice so Lily can’t hear from upstairs, I say, “I have an idea; something I think Lily will love and could help get you on her good side.”

He puts his hands up. “Spill it.”

“Make her a canopy bed. Not from trash, though, because I think that’ll weird her out. But something Victorian or goth, maybe something made of metal... maybe decorative leaves and vines... Something that she can drape black sheer curtains and fairy lights over.”

He breaks out into a huge grin. “That would be wild. I can do that.”

“I know you can. But I think you should ask her to build it *with* you.”

The smile fades from his lips. “I don’t know if she’ll go for that. She wants a ten-foot radius around her when it comes to me.”

“Ask her. Nicely.”

He blows out a weary breath. “I’ll try. If she says no, I’m still gonna make it for her.”

Nodding, I head for the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow to help paint.”

“Wait up,” he says, rising from the couch. “Me and Cherry will walk you home. Her wagon is outside.”

He holds the screen door open for me, and my shoulder brushes against his chest as I glide through the doorway.

My heart shouldn’t flutter from an innocent, accidental touch, but suddenly, it’s beating wildly like a hummingbird in a gilded cage, desperate to be released.

Chapter 14



PENNY

It's the last week of November. The air is chilly and the vibrant New England leaves have fallen from their branches. The comforting scent of burning wood fills the air at night. Colorful lights outline houses, and twinkling Christmas trees are already visible through some windows.

I've been friends with Lily for three months.

I've had lots of friends who have come and gone over the years. For some reason, we always seem to drift away from each other, much like how Heather, Ava, and Olivia have done since I met Lily. We all still talk, but it's not the same. I've learned to accept it as part of life and growing up.

But I've never had a best friend. There's a difference. A best friend will accept you in all the ways that you are you. They don't judge you. They expect nothing from you. They don't care about your looks, how much money you have, or how popular you are. They will laugh with you and cry with you. They will eat all the ice cream with you. They will look you in the eye and tell you you're an idiot when you're being an idiot, and you will love them for it. Unconditionally, you will mirror their love and loyalty.

Lily is my best friend. She's unexpected. Sometimes difficult. But still, my best friend.

We even share the same birthday—born in the same hospital on the same night. It's like we were destined to be friends from the start.

I hope we never drift away from each other.

“You have to keep your eyes closed,” Lily is saying as she hovers over my face.

“I’m trying to.”

“Your eyelids are twitching.”

I giggle, which only makes my eyelids twitch even more. “I’m not doing it on purpose.”

Lily wants to be a cosmetologist. To be more specific, she wants to be a mortuary cosmetologist—someone who puts makeup on the nonliving. When she first told me about this career goal, I thought it was creepy and macabre. And, I have to admit, very much *her*. Lily has a fascination for the dead. She loves to look at postmortem photos from the 1800s, when it was common to dress and pose the dead with their loved ones as if they were still alive. For many, it would be the only photograph their families would ever have of them. My obsessed-with-photos self found this heartbreaking.

Today, I’m lying on an old table with a white sheet over it in Lily’s basement, pretending to be dead while she puts makeup on me. I’m not being a very good dead person, though, because I keep squirming, twitching, and having to scratch some random itch.

“What the hell are you doing?”

We both jump at the sound of Alex’s deep voice. Lily drops her makeup brush, which clatters to the concrete floor.

“What the fuck, Dad?” she says, picking the brush up and wiping it on her jeans. “I’m practicing mortuary makeup.”

“No, you’re not,” he replies. “Sit up, Penny. Now.” He grabs my hand and pulls me up. I’m surprised to feel his hand shaking in mine.

“What’s wrong with you?” Lily demands. “I can’t do it if she’s sitting up. I have to learn to do it on people who are dead, lying down.”

“No one is pretending to be dead in my house.”

Lily tosses the brush into her makeup kit. “Why are you such a freak? I don’t make fun of your art.”

“You’re the one who wants to doll up dead people, and *I’m* the freak?” he scoffs.

“Dead people deserve to look good, too. It’s the last time people get to see them. My mother looked beautiful in her coffin, even though the side of her head was bashed in. That was from makeup.”

Color drains from Alex’s face. “How do you know that?” he seethes through clenched teeth. Pale-blue veins bulge in his temple and neck.

Lily cowers back from him. “Grandpa showed me pictures he took at her funeral.”

Alex’s fist crashes down on the table next to me. “I’m gonna kill that sick fuck.”

“Dad!”

My head swims as they yell at each other. Lily shouldn’t have pictures of her mother in a coffin. She never should’ve seen something so morbid. Brianna wouldn’t want anyone to have pictures of her like that, no matter how much they loved her—she just wouldn’t want that. She would never want Alex or Lily to see her that way, to remember *me* that way...

She just wouldn’t want that.

A stabbing pain pierces my temple, making me gasp. Squinting, I reach up to rub my forehead. My other hand is still clenched in Alex’s and I can’t bring myself to pull it away.

“Please, stop yelling,” I beg in a whisper. “*Please...*”

My voice suddenly sounds foreign to me, like it’s not my own. The pain in my head threatens to split my skull open.

“What’s wrong?” Concern etching Alex’s low voice.

I stare up at him, but his face blurs in and out of my vision. “I don’t know... my head hurts. I feel dizzy.”

He releases my hand to cup my face in his palms. His thumbs swipe my cheeks and eyelids. My heart pounds in unison with the throb in my head.

“You’re wrecking her makeup,” Lily protests. “She gets dizzy a lot. She told me it’s from her allergies. Right, Penny?”

“Can you be quiet for a minute, please? She just said she feels sick. Look how pale she is.”

“That’s the makeup. I had to make her look dead first. She was fine until you came down here and started yelling like a lunatic.”

“Lily, run upstairs and get her a glass of water.” He searches my face. “Penny, are you alright?” he asks.

“I think so,” I reply when Lily’s gone. My voice sounds like it’s echoing through a tunnel. “Maybe I sat up too fast.”

He’s still holding my cheeks in his warm palms and I seriously don’t ever want him to let go. His face is bent over mine, his breath minty and warm. The roughness of his hands is surprisingly calming. The pain in my head fades away.

“I don’t like you pretending to be dead,” he whispers. “Please don’t ever do that again.”

Reaching up, I cover his hands with mine, not to move them, but to hold them there a little longer while my heartbeats slow down. “I won’t,” I reply softly, the pain in my head ebbing. “I promise.”

“For God’s sake, let go of her,” Lily says when she returns. She pushes Alex out of the way and hands the glass to me. “You’re okay, right Penny?” A hint of worry tips her dark brows.

I take a few sips of water. “I feel a lot better now.”

“Are you sure?” she asks. “Want me to call your mom?”

I shake my head. My cheeks heat with embarrassment from being fussed over. I’m usually the one taking care of people, not the other way around. “God, no, I’m totally fine now. I just sat up too fast.”

“Maybe you should wash your face and rest on the couch for a little while,” Alex suggests.

Yes. I want nothing more right now than to lie on my favorite red couch.

“We can watch more *Gilmore Girls* reruns,” Lily adds. “That always makes us feel better.”

Alex helps me climb off the table, though his hand lingers on my arm as I steady myself and move toward the stairs. I like his touch there—protective, almost possessive. And familiar. So very oddly familiar.

Upstairs, I curl up on the red velvet couch, and before I can even reach for it, Alex drapes the buttery-soft cream throw blanket over me. Cherry climbs up and nestles at my feet, her warm chin resting on my ankle. Lily grabs the television remote and settles into the matching chair across the room, chatting about being “Team Jess.” I smile in agreement while Alex lights a fire in the old stone fireplace, then disappears into the kitchen. The scent of chili wafts through the house, making my stomach growl.

An ethereal sense of comfort, of *home*, envelops me. It stirs a sensation of nostalgia, of buried memories nudging my soul. It whispers in the crackle of the fire and the dancing flames: *You belong here.*

Goose bumps prickle my skin.

For the first time, I wonder if it isn’t just a childhood dream, a fairy tale, or an odd fixation on this house and this family.

I wonder if there’s something more that led me here. Something I’ve been trying to remember all along.

Something that was never supposed to be forgotten.

Chapter 15



PENNY - 2024

“Mom, I’m going over to Lily’s house!” I yell as I grab a pear from the fruit bowl on the kitchen island.

“Come here for a minute before you leave,” she yells back from her home office at the end of the hall.

“What’s up?” I ask from her doorway.

“Have a seat for a sec. I need to talk to you about something.”

I sit on one of the brown leather chairs facing her desk and wait for her to look away from her computer screen.

When she finally does, I immediately notice the hesitation in her eyes.

“You know your father recently got a big promotion,” she says.

I nod and smile hopefully, sure that this conversation is leading to me getting the car I recently started asking for since my childhood fear of cars faded away. I can already see me and the girls cruising around with the top down, our hair blowing wildly in the wind, blasting our favorite tunes.

“Well, his company has this program where their senior executives spend time working at the other branches. To get to know the other staff, to head up new projects, to meet with different clients, all that sort of thing.”

Unease simmers behind my pearly smile. This doesn’t seem to be heading in the *we’re taking you to get that cute car this weekend* direction.

When I don't say anything, she continues. "Your father has been asked to actually start up a new location."

"That's great."

"It is. The thing is...it's in California."

The unease that was simmering a few moments ago is now ramping up to a rapid boil.

"Um, how will that work?" I ask. "Is he going to have to fly back and forth from California to New Hampshire?" That sounds like it will make my father even more irritated than his norm.

She takes a breath, making an expression I can't read. "No, he's going to have to relocate to California. At least for a year, possibly two."

"Are you guys getting a divorce?"

It's not really an off-the-wall question. My father is hardly ever home. He's always been a workaholic, working fifty-plus hours a week, taking conference calls at all hours of the day and night when he actually is home. Other than sitting at the dinner table together every night, I barely see him or have any interaction with him. I suppose that should upset me, but we've never been close. He's always kept me at a distance, quietly watching me like he's not quite sure where I came from or what I'm doing here.

Same, Dad. Same.

"No, we're not getting a divorce, Penny. What kind of question is that?"

"A realistic one? You guys are both always working. You never go out together, you go to bed at different times, you don't take vacations, I never see you hugging or kissing, or even smiling at each other."

"There's much more to marriage than all that," she says, shuffling paperwork on her desk.

"Aren't those the really important things, though?"

She gives me an exasperated look. "No, they're not."

“I think they should be.”

“That’s because you’re seventeen, darling. You’re not old enough to understand what a marriage is.”

If I ever get married, I want my husband and me to be best friends and always be hugging, kissing, and smiling. I want us to always put each other and our happiness first, not our jobs.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I’m sure it’s Lily texting me, wondering where I am.

“So, are you going to be in a long-distance marriage, then?”

“No, we’re going to move to California with your father. I think it’ll be a nice adventure for all of us. A change of scenery, an escape from all the snow in the winter. One of your father’s associates will be coming here to fill in while your father is in California. He and his wife will be renting our house. It’ll work out perfectly.”

A surge of paralysis roots me in the leather chair. The air in my mother’s breezy office has suddenly become thick with uncertainty, and I can’t seem to breathe or utter a single syllable. My heart is pounding in my throat, suffocating me. Simultaneously, my stomach plummets like a boulder.

“What?” I manage to squeak out.

My mom smiles like she didn’t just single-handedly vault me into an epic panic attack. “I think it’ll be fun. You’ve never traveled anywhere. We’ll be renting a gorgeous condo. There’s a pool, and it’s near the beach.”

I blink at her. “You expect me to go with you?”

“Of course you’re coming with us. We’re a family.”

My pulse races with anxiety. “Mom, I’m in my senior year. What about my job? And my friends? What about Lily? I finally have a real best friend—something you’ve been telling me I need for years. For the first time, I’m happy. Like, really, truly happy.”

“You can make new friends in California. Lily isn’t going anywhere. You two can call each other, text, and video chat.

She can even come visit. Your father and I will pay for her travel. The time will fly by, and we'll be back here in a year or two. I think you'll love California. And"—she smiles and leans across her desk—"your father said he'll buy you a car as soon as we get there. You're not going to be able to walk to school there like you can here. It's too far away."

I don't even want a car anymore. All I want is to stay here. The thought of moving away from Lily, Alex, Cherry, and everything I love is catastrophic to me. My brain can't even comprehend not being able to walk through the path in the woods to see them, or sitting at my little reception desk at the animal hospital, hanging out with Lily every day after school, planning our weekend sleepovers, or sneaking moments with Alex to talk about art and life. Hoping with all my heart he might smile at me or accidentally touch my hand.

"Screw that," I say, standing up. "I don't want new friends. I love living here. I love the fall and the winter. I love the snow. I love my life *here*."

"I know it all feels like the end of the world right now, Penny. But trust me, once we get there, you'll love it."

"No, I won't. I'll hate every minute of it, and you know it." I grapple for more valid reasons for why I shouldn't move across the country. "What about my therapy appointments?" I only go once a month now, but I've been seeing my doctor since I was six years old. "Even Dr. Sloane said I'm doing really well now. If you take me away from everything I love, I'll be depressed again. Is that what you want?"

She sighs and folds her hands on her desk. "Of course not. Your father and I put a lot of thought into that. We can find you a doctor in California, or you can do televisits with Dr. Sloane. Life is about learning to change and adapt. You're almost an adult. You need to experience that. You can't just live in a bubble."

I *want* to live in my bubble.

"Can't I just stay here? Let Dad's colleague live somewhere else."

“Absolutely not. You can’t live in a big house all by yourself with no supervision. What if you got hurt or sick?”

The pit of my stomach burns with anxiety-induced acid. I can’t believe this is happening. They can’t do this to me. I’m an adult, a marr—

My brain zaps with a sharp jolt. Shaking my head, I reorganize my thoughts. I’ll be eighteen in a few months—an adult who can make my own decisions.

There has to be something I can do to stop this.

“When is this move supposed to be happening?” I ask.

“Next month. We’re going to start packing our things and putting most of them in storage until we come back. We’ll only take what we need. You’ll probably want to get a whole new wardrobe when we get there since the weather will be so different. We’ll go shopping, it’ll be fun.”

It won’t be fun. I’ve always hated shopping. My idea of shopping is ordering things online, keeping my fingers crossed that it’ll all fit when it arrives, and hiding whatever doesn’t fit in the back of my closet.

Tears pool in my eyes. “None of this is going to be fun. You’re ruining my life. This is supposed to be one of the best years of my life. Senior prom. Graduation. Getting a car. Spending time with my friends. I won’t know anyone in a new school. I’ll be an outcast.”

“Please don’t be dramatic, Penny. You’re beautiful and smart. You’ll probably be even more popular at a new school.” Her desk phone rings and she reaches for it. “I have to take this call. We can talk more later.”

Before I can get another word out, she’s talking to the person on the other end of the phone, and I’ve been dismissed.

Like a zombie, I leave the house and walk slowly to Lily’s house with tears streaming down my cheeks. I can’t leave here. Not just this town, my house, and my school, but *here*. Alex and Lily’s house. The only place that has ever felt like home to me. The only two people who truly understand me,

who care about me and who I've ever felt any kind of connection to.

That little voice in my head—which is usually so soft—is screaming, *you can't leave! You belong here! They need you! You need them!*

“Oh my God. Penny, what's wrong? You look, like, awful!” Lily says when she opens the front door.

I burst into a new flood of tears. “My parents are moving!” I cry. “They're making me go with them. To freakin' California! It's completely across the country.”

Grabbing my hand, she leads me to the couch, where I pour out the conversation I just had with my mom between hiccuping sobs.

Lily's face falls, then falls some more, mirroring my own shock and devastation.

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “You can't leave. It's our last year of school. I can't go through that without you. I'll die! You're my best friend!”

“I know! I don't want to leave you, either! I don't know what to do. They won't let me stay here alone.”

“What about your grandparents?”

“They moved about an hour away last year. It's too far.”

“Damn.” She purses her burgundy lips, deep in thought. “Wait... what if you stay here?”

I sniffle and push my hair out of my face. “What do you mean?”

“*Here*. Maybe you can stay with me and Dad. You're here all the time, anyway. Then you can graduate and keep your job. And me!”

A spark of hope lights up in this bleak tunnel my mother has thrust me into. I can't think of anything in this world that would make me happier than living here. Memories of myself as a little girl sprout to the forefront of my mind like vibrant flowers. I was so sure I had once lived here. Even though I

was told over and over again by my parents and Dr. Sloane that this was never my home, that belief never left me. I agreed with them only so they'd leave me alone to cherish my thoughts, to keep them from taking my "memories" away from me. Now, I wonder if I was having premonitions of *this*—being yanked from everything I love.

Are premonitions like that even possible?

I wish I could tell Lily about all this, but I'm afraid it will make me seem weird or unhinged. Maybe even stalkerish. As much as I trust her, I'm not sure how she'll react and I don't want to risk it. Especially now.

Instead, I say, "Do you think your dad would really let me stay here?"

"I'm sure he would. He loves you. You're practically family."

I chew my lip with nervous excitement, trying to envision how my mom will react to the suggestion of me moving in with Alex and Lily. It's a toss-up. She might freak out, or she might agree.

"I'm not sure my parents will go for that."

"They have to! How do they just expect you to uproot your life in the last year of high school? You won't know anyone out in California. That would suck so bad."

"I know..."

"What will I do without you? You're the only friend I've ever had. You're the only one who makes me laugh and doesn't think I'm a freak." She tries to blink back her tears, but they spill from her eyes. "I can't lose you, Penny. I get along so much better with my father when you're around. If you're not here, we'll probably go back to not even talking to each other. You're like our glue."

That little compliment makes my heart swell. I want to wrap her words up in a tiny box and keep them forever.

Lily's gorgeous eyes plead with mine. "Please don't go, Penny. I can't lose you, too. I'll be so depressed again."

Like me, Lily has been in therapy since she was young. It's probably not healthy for either of us to be so emotionally dependent on the other, but I think that's what happens when two very lonely people find each other.

"I don't want to lose you, either. I feel sick to my stomach just thinking about it. My parents work so much they'll be totally preoccupied once we get to California. I'll be alone. I won't know anyone; I won't know where to go." I swallow hard as all the realities of living in a new place sink in. "I'm not trying to sound like a baby, but I just want my life to stay like it is, at least until after graduation."

She leans her head against my shoulder and hugs me. I wrap my arm around hers and hold her tight against me.

"We'll talk to my dad, Penny. I promise."

Just like in a scene from a movie, Alex strolls into the room at that exact moment with an energy drink in one hand and his favorite sandwich—roast beef, cheddar, and horseradish on a wrap—in the other. When he sees us, he stops short, his work boots scrunching up the faded throw rug. Suspicion narrows his eye and creases his brow. "Talk to me about what?" he asks warily.

A fluttery buzzing starts in my heart. It slowly accelerates into rapid beats with the question of how Alex will react to Lily's wanting me to live here. Suddenly, I just seem to know that the ever-mysterious thing that has always drawn me to Alex is also the very same thing that abruptly made him push me away years ago.

Chapter 16



ALEX

I've just been launched into my first experience of parental dread and suspense at the hands of my teenager.

I can almost hear the *Jaws* theme song playing in my head, warning me to avoid eye contact at all costs and get the hell out of here as fast as possible.

But, as usual, I ignore all warning signs.

“Why do you two look like you’re auditioning for *Drama Teens Gone Wild*?”

Lily shakes her head at me. “Dad, this is serious.”

I can’t seem to get this father gig right. I’m either too strict or too laid back.

“Sorry. Ten minutes before Penny got here, you were dancing around the kitchen. What’s going on?”

“Penny’s leaving!”

Confused, I take a bite of my sandwich. “Okay...I’m sure she’ll be back tomorrow. No reason to get all upset—”

Lily blows out a breath and looks up at the ceiling like she’s either praying for help or hoping something will come down and swallow her up.

“She’s *moving*. To California! It’s like a million miles away, and I’ll probably never see her again.” My daughter sniffles and wipes black smears of mascara from beneath her eyes.

I shift my gaze to Penny, whose puffy eyes and tearstained cheeks match Lily's, sans the mascara. I'm reminded of that day four years ago when I made her cry, and I don't like it one bit.

"What's going on?" I ask her.

Penny's voice wavers with emotion. "My father is being relocated to California for a year or two to start up a new branch. My mom just told me this morning. We're leaving within the month."

"Shit," I say. "That sucks."

My voice is level, but my heart has inexplicably taken a nosedive straight into the pit of my stomach. After I took Kelley's advice years ago and stopped letting Penny come around, my days were filled with an odd emptiness that I knew I had no right to feel. I wore her absence like a second layer of grief until she unexpectedly reentered my life again. The notion of Penny not being here all the time, not hearing her laugh, not seeing her smile, or not having our witty banter and art discussions brings the old familiar burn back to my gut. I'll miss the hell out of her.

"Can Penny move in with us?"

Seasoned parents probably know better than to eat while having conversations with their children, but I never got that memo—and nearly choke on my roast beef.

"Um," I cough and swallow, torn between wanting to agree with Lily's idea and saying the right parental thing. "I don't know, Lily. She should really be with her parents."

"Please?" Lily pleads, her eyes pooling with tears. "She's my best friend. We do everything together! Do you have any idea how lonely and depressed I'll be without her? Or how awful it will be for her to have to start a new school with no friends? It'll be social murder for both of us."

I'm being gutted right here in my living room.

"I'm not sure it'll be *murder*..." I say.

"Yes, Dad, it will."

“We can’t just keep her, Lily. It’s a lot more complicated than that.”

“How so?”

“Well, first off, her parents would have to agree to it, and I’m sure they won’t. Mrs. Rose has never liked me. And even if they did agree to it, where would she sleep?”

“She could have that other little room upstairs.”

That room—with its one window and tiny, narrow closet—is so small we’ve been using it as a storage space since we moved in. A full-size bed would take up the entire room.

“It’s too small,” I say. “She’d barely be able to turn around in it.”

“I don’t mind,” Penny says quickly. “I can get a twin mattress. And I don’t need a dresser. I can use those organizational stacking cubes.”

“See?” Lily looks at me hopefully. “We’ll move the stuff out of there ourselves. You won’t have to do anything.”

I tilt my head doubtfully. “I dunno, girls...I’m not used to taking care of one teenager, let alone two.”

“But she’s here all the time now, and she doesn’t bother you,” Lily continues. “It doesn’t have to be forever. She’ll be eighteen soon and can save for an apartment. Just let her stay here so we can graduate together and not spend our last year of high school miserable.”

I exhale a breath, wishing for what must be the millionth time that Brianna was here to help me through all the stress of trying to be a parent. “Lily—”

“Haven’t I been through enough?” she asks desperately. Her bottom lip quivers, and I wonder if it did that when she was little over broken toys or nightmares. It’s a raw reminder of all the times I wasn’t there to mend her broken heart. “Do I have to lose my best friend, too?”

“You know I don’t want that. It’s just not that simple.”

Leveling her eyes on me, Lily chokes back a sob and says quietly, “I’ve never asked you for anything.”

Ah. And there it is. The one-way ticket. Destination: *Guilt-Trip Island*.

My chest tightens with years of regret and defeat. “You’re right. But—”

She cuts me off before I can say anything else. “Maybe Grandpa was right,” she sobs. “Maybe you’ve never really cared about me.” Her words slice through my heart like a sword. “Maybe you really are a coward who just takes the easy way out. You don’t even want to *try*.” She runs upstairs and slams her bedroom door so hard the house shakes.

Sullen, I walk back to the kitchen and toss my sandwich in the trash. I can’t eat when there’s a meltdown going on upstairs that I’m totally not equipped to handle.

“I’m so sorry,” Penny says from behind me. “I never should’ve let her ask you to help me. It wasn’t fair to you. The last thing I want is to come between you and Lily.”

I turn to face her. “Don’t apologize. There’s a lot of truth in what she said.”

Her lips curve into a sad frown. “Grief is like a disease, Fox. That doesn’t make you uncaring or a coward. That just makes you human.”

Nodding slowly, I lean back against the counter. “Tell me... how bad will it be for her at school if you’re not here?”

Penny swallows uneasily. “Probably pretty bad. I think without me here, our little circle of friends will stop hanging out with her. They really don’t understand her like I do. They think she’s too dark and moody. I think she’ll retreat into her shell and just hate the world.”

“And you? What do you think it’ll be like for you in a new place?”

“Honestly, not much better. Being the new girl, especially in senior year with kids who’ve grown up together will be

super hard to integrate into. In a lot of ways, I'm just as socially awkward as Lily. I just hide it better."

Lily has come so far in the last year. There's still a rift between us, but she's nowhere near as withdrawn and unhappy as she was the day she moved in. She and Penny have all their cute little routines and rituals. They're like sisters. We're like a little family.

"You know I care about both of you, right?"

Penny nods. "Yes, of course. Lily knows that, too. She's just upset."

I cross my arms and stare down at the floor. "Me and you have always been close, but I'm struggling trying to get close to her. I'm still trying to find my way to her. When you're here, it's easier. She's less angry. I'm more myself. I know it sounds bad, but it's kinda like you're this little puzzle piece that clicks us together. You make us happy."

It's the closest I can come to telling her that she makes *me* happy.

"It's funny you say that because earlier, Lily said I was the glue that held you two together."

"I like that analogy better. It's true, though."

She smiles and scrunches her nose. "I think I'll take that as a compliment."

"Look, I don't want you to go, Penny. Lily will be heartbroken, and I'm worried about what it'll do to her. She really has been through enough shit already." I raise my head to meet her eyes. "I'm worried about you, too. I know you're happy here. Not *here* here, but with your life here."

"I am. Everything I love is here."

Her eyes linger on mine. My thoughts linger on the word *here*.

I try to ignore it by gripping the back of my neck and squeezing the tense muscles. These kids are gonna age me fast. "I'll try to talk to your mother, but I can't make any

promises. If, by some crazy-ass miracle, she gives the green light, you can stay here.”

Her green eyes dilate with surprise. “Alex... are you sure?”

“No, but I’m gonna do it, anyway. You two just better not drive me crazy. No drinking. No staying out all night. No boys. No failing classes. No messes all over the house.”

“I promise we won’t do any of that. You won’t even know I’m here.”

I laugh a little at the unlikelihood of that. I’ve always been powerless to ignore Penny’s presence.

Chapter 17



PENNY

Three afternoons a week, I work as a receptionist at a veterinarian's office after school. I love it because not only do I get to meet some of the cutest animals I've ever seen—like the weirdly adorable chinchilla—but because time flies by. The phone rings almost nonstop. I'm shocked daily at the things people's pets will swallow, and yes, your pet should see a vet if they swallow a foreign object...or your roommate's edibles.

When my mom picks me up at seven thirty, I'm excited to tell her about a forty-five-year-old parrot that came in for a checkup today who could mimic the sounds of a toy laser gun and a microwave perfectly.

But as soon as I climb into the passenger seat of her car, she says, "Mr. Fox called me today."

Mister Fox sounds odd to me, like it's the name of a cartoon character teaching us about forest safety.

"Really?" I say, trying to play it cool by pulling the elastic from my ponytail and shaking my hair out.

She throws me a knowing glance. "Don't act surprised, Penny."

"I'm not acting; I *am* surprised. I really didn't think he was going to call you." The fact that he called has my stomach all sorts of fluttery, even though I'm sure he only did it because he wants Lily to be happy.

"Well, imagine my surprise when he told me my daughter would rather live with two strangers than her own parents."

I raise my eyebrows at her. “Strangers? Seriously, Mom? I’ve known Alex since I was six, and I’ve known Lily for a year. I’m at their house almost every day. You and Dad are more strangers to me than Alex and Lily are.”

“That’s not funny, Penny.”

“You’re right. It’s sad...but it’s also true.”

We pull up to a red light and share a moment of tense silence. My heart has begun to race, knowing the fate of the next year of my life is going to be revealed at any second.

When the light turns green, I say, “It’s not that I’d rather live with them. It’s that I don’t want to move to California. I want to stay here and graduate with my friends, keep my job, and try to figure out what I want to do next in life while I’m of sound mind, not while having an epic depressive episode on the West Coast.”

“I understand that, Penny, but I’m not sure I feel comfortable with you staying with the Foxes.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think a young girl should be living with a single man who has zero parenting experience.”

“Lily is.”

“Lily’s not my problem.”

“Wow, Mom. Uncaring much?”

“That’s not what I meant. I care about Lily, but she’s not my daughter.”

“I really don’t see the issue. You used to let me go over to Alex’s house all the time when I was little, and no one else was even there.”

“That’s because you used to run over there every time I wasn’t looking and scream bloody murder if I tried to keep you home.”

“I’ll do that now if it’ll convince you to let me stay.” I’m only half kidding.

“Penny, this is a huge decision. Your father and I have talked about it, but we’re not sure it’s the right thing to do.”

“The other day, you said I was almost an adult and had to learn to deal with change and adapting, remember?”

She nods noncommittally. “Mmm...”

“Then let me change and adapt by staying in New Hampshire. I’m almost eighteen. Let this be my first adult decision. Let me keep my job and graduate with my friends and be happy before I have to go do even more adult things.”

We pull into our driveway and she sighs as she turns the engine off. “I’m torn. You’ve never been away from home before.”

Funny that she says that because inside, I’ve felt like I’ve been away from home my entire life.

“I’ll be fine,” I assure her. “Alex is a good guy. He doesn’t party or have random men or women traipsing through his house. Me and Lily will just do what we always do every night and weekend—eat dinner, watch TV, and listen to music down by the lake. Lily can pick me up from work, so I won’t be walking around town.”

I can see the internal debate all over her face as she stares at the front of our house.

“Please, Mom?” I plead, turning to face her in the dim light of the car. “Please let me do this. I don’t want to hurt you and Dad, but I’m happy. I don’t want to move and face the possibility of being all anxious, lonely, and depressed because I have to give up everything that makes me happy. And honestly, for what? You and Dad are both so wrapped up in work that you’ll hardly spend any time with me, anyway. Is it really worth it? Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“Of course we do. That’s all we’ve ever wanted. Between you and me, I’m not exactly thrilled with moving temporarily, either. But I love your father and that’s what marriage is about—making sacrifices. It does feel unfair to drag you out there, though. You’re a straight *A* student, you’ve never been in any trouble, you’re so committed to your job, and I know how

much Lily means to you. If my parents did this to me when I was your age, I'd be devastated."

My breath catches with hope. "Are you saying I can stay?"

She puts her hand up. "Not yet. We'd have some conditions that are nonnegotiable."

"I'll do anything!" I say excitedly.

"You have to video chat with me every morning and every night. No exceptions."

I nod rapidly. "Got it. Video chat twice a day."

"You have to keep your grades up."

"No problem."

"Absolutely no drinking or smoking anything of any kind."

I crinkle my nose. "Those things are gross."

"No dating unless Mr. Fox meets them first and approves of them, and it can't be on a school night. Your curfew is eleven p.m. Not a minute later."

Some weird little part of me wonders if that was my mom's rule or Alex's.

"The last thing I'm interested in right now is dating, Mom. All the boys in my school are immature idiots."

"That could change at any minute. Trust me. It just takes the right boy to turn your world upside down."

I'll never let some boy turn my world upside down. I've watched too many angst-y teen shows to fall for that. "Any more conditions?"

"Yes. You have to help Mr. Fox around the house. He's not your maid. You'll have to save your money and not waste it on silly things. Dad and I will send you money to buy your own groceries and toiletries."

"I have no problem with that. Me and Lily will cook for Alex. The guy lives on crackers and sandwiches."

"If you break any of these rules, then that's it—you're coming straight to California. No second chances. Period."

“I promise I won’t do anything to disappoint you.”

“We’ll have to talk about flying you out to see us for the holidays and what comes after graduation. You’re going to have a lot of decisions to make.”

“So, can I stay?”

Nodding slowly, she takes a deep, weary breath, then smiles. “Yes. You can stay.”

Squealing, I throw my arms around her and hug her. “Thank you so much, Mom. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Misty-eyed, she touches my face. “If anything changes and you’re not happy here, then you have to tell me right away, okay? I’ll fly back here to get you immediately. Or if, God forbid, you get sick—you call me right away. You’re still my baby girl and this is really hard for me, but I want you to be happy.”

Emotion forms an ache in my throat. “I love you, Mom. I’ll be fine. Maybe it’ll be good for you and Dad to have some alone time. Have date nights, be spontaneous, swim naked at midnight. Stop working so much.”

Laughing, her cheeks redden. “Maybe you’re right. I’m not sure about the swimming naked part, but your dad and I could use some time to reconnect.”

When I go upstairs to call Lily, a twinge of guilt nags me. I should be feeling trepidation or sadness about being away from my parents and the home I’ve lived in since I was born. But I don’t. I only feel excitement and relief. As I reach for my phone, I yearn for a hint of wistfulness—to prove I’m a normal teen daughter and not as disconnected from my family as I’ve always felt.

That feeling doesn’t come.

Chapter 18



PENNY

It's back. The knot in my chest, tightening with each passing day, fills me with a peculiar sense of dread. It happens every December, and I have no idea why. It's my birthday month, and it's also my favorite holiday season. I love all things Christmas—the music, the movies, the decor, the family closeness. And let's not forget the magic of waking up to find everything covered in a pristine blanket of white.

Yet the feeling that something terrifying is just around the corner, waiting to jump out at me, remains.

This December, the cloud of dread is still hanging over me even though it's been a month full of change. Me and Lily celebrated our eighteenth birthdays with Alex. My parents sang "Happy Birthday" to me over a video call, which was incredibly sweet and made me tear up. I'll be flying to California to spend a week with them for Christmas, and Lily will be spending that same time with her aunt. Since we won't be together on Christmas, Lily, Alex and I are celebrating a week early.

Alex has told us at least fifty times that he wrote off all holidays after his wife passed, but after some gentle coaxing, we convinced him to let Kelley drive him to town. Two hours later, they're plopping a beautiful little spruce tree next to the living room fireplace.

"I still think a black tree would've been way cooler," Lily remarks with a teasing glance at her dad. He shot down her black-tree idea weeks ago, saying all the ones she found online looked cheap and Halloweenish.

“Next year, we’ll make a cool black tree together,” he promises.

“I gotta run,” Kelley says after the tree is stable in its stand. “You guys have a great Christmas.” He turns to me and smiles. “Have a safe trip to Cali.”

“I will,” I answer. “See ya in the new year.”

Me and Lily give him a quick hug at the front door before he leaves.

“How is Kelley single?” Lily wonders aloud after she closes the door behind him. “He’s so cute.”

“Right?” I agree, draping the red tree skirt around the base of the tree. “His eyes are amazing.”

“He works too much to date,” Alex says. “And when he’s not working, he’s with his band. You don’t have to be dating someone to be happy.”

“You’re just as bad,” Lily says. “Don’t you guys get lonely?”

Alex grins. “How can I be lonely with you two around?”

“You should start dating, Dad. What are you going to do when me and Penny move out?”

“Enjoy the quiet,” he teases.

Lily rolls her eyes. “You can’t stay single forever. Maybe me and Penny should make you an online dating profile. I’m sure some chicks will dig your pirate vibe.”

“Thanks, kiddo. Should I stick a parrot on my shoulder while we’re at it?”

“I’m just kidding about the pirate thing. Come on, Dad, we’ll make you an awesome profile.”

Alex groans as he straightens the branches on the tree. “Don’t you dare. I’m not into the online dating crap. With my luck, I’ll get catfished.”

A weird feeling stirs in my stomach that feels an awful lot like jealousy.

“He’ll date when he’s ready,” I say, trying to thwart Lily’s scheme, which I don’t want any part of.

Because yes, there is definitely a little green monster inside me who’s rearing its head at the idea of Alex dating someone.

Alex winks at me and I almost melt into a puddle. “Thank you,” he says, totally unaware that he has the ability to make me feel all fluttery and gooey.

Ignoring my inner butterflies, I join Lily in decorating the tree with the garland and string lights Kelley and Alex bought earlier.

When we’re finished, Lily steps back to peruse our work and says with a nod, “It needs a star or an angel or something, doesn’t it? I like not having hanging decorations, but I think it needs something on top.”

Alex chews the inside of his cheek. “I have the angel tree topper your mom used to put on the tree every year. It’s a handmade thing she bought at a craft show. The wings light up. She loved it.”

Lily’s eyes widen with interest. “That sounds pretty. Can we use it?”

I’m not sure if Lily recognizes the hesitation on Alex’s face, but I sure do.

Gradually, he smiles. “Why not? I think she’d like that.”

“Is it in the basement?” I ask. “I can go get it.”

“Actually, it’s in my bedroom closet, on the top shelf,” he replies. “You can grab it if you want. It’s in a white box.”

Upstairs, I’m hit with the scent of Alex’s cologne as soon as I step into his bedroom. Pausing, I close my eyes and breathe it in. It’s familiar and comforting in a way I can’t put my finger on. Maybe it’s from all the time I spent with him as a child.

I haven’t been in this room since I wandered in here as a little girl years ago, but I’m shocked to see everything is exactly the same. Specifically, Brianna’s things are still on the

left nightstand. Her book. Her glasses. Layered with more dust, but still there.

My chest stings with heartache for Alex. Lily is right. He needs to move on.

I cross the room to the closet and snap on the light. It's not any better in here. Brianna's clothes are hanging neatly on the left side, stopping dead center, with Alex's hanging to the right. Tentatively, I reach out and touch a red blouse with one hand and his shirt with the other. My fingertips tingle with pins and needles. I can almost feel the memory of her here—can even smell her perfume mingled with Alex's cologne—as if she just left the room seconds ago. I can't help but wonder, do these things bring Alex comfort, or do they haunt him? I'm so drawn to the red blouse that I gently pull its butterfly-style sleeve out. The fabric is soft and sheer, almost see-through. *A favorite.* All I want to do is put it on and spin in front of the full-length mirror.

Don't be weird, Penny, I tell myself, and reluctantly pull my hand away from the blouse.

Not wanting to be any further invasive, I quickly locate a small white box with the words *tree angel* written in neat script sitting atop a larger box on the shelf. Not able to quite reach it, I pull on the large box to bring the smaller one closer to me, and they both tumble down, throwing me off balance and knocking me on my ass.

"Shit," I mutter.

The big box has landed on top of me, the lid has flown off, and I'm buried under a pile of white tulle and lace. Sitting up, I blink at the fabric and carefully lift it closer.

My heart jolts as if I had just been struck by lightning.

It's a wedding gown.

Suddenly, that stabbing pain pierces my temple again, sharper than it's ever been.

My wedding gown. My wedding gown.

Gathering the gauzy fabric in my hands, I bring it to my face and begin to sob uncontrollably. Random images flash in my mind, blinding me. Alex at the altar. Flowers. Wedding cake. Dancing. Music. Laughter.

Slow kisses.

I do.

Rings.

I love you.

“Penny! Holy crap, what happened?” Lily kneels down next to me. “Are you okay?”

“My dress...” Pain seers through my skull. “It hurts so much...”

“Did you hit your head?”

“I don’t —” More images carousel through my mind.

His smile.

You’re beautiful, Mrs. Fox.

His hand in mine.

Can’t wait to spend forever with you.

The tears come in unstoppable waves as I hug the gown to my body and rock against the pain.

“Penny, where are you hurt?” Lily asks desperately.

“Everywhere...” I sob.

“Dad! Come up here! Penny’s hurt and freaking out!”

Footsteps thunder on the stairs and up the hall.

Alex halts in the doorway. “What the fuck happened?”

“I don’t know. I think these boxes fell on her. She keeps grabbing her head and not making sense.”

He’s instantly on the floor beside us. *My Alex.* “Penny, what happened?”

“Alex...” I clutch the front of his soft blue flannel shirt. “My dress hit me in the head. I don’t know why it hurts so

much..."

"Does she have brain damage?" I hear Lily ask. But that can't be Lily. She's not even here yet.

"Of course not," Alex says. "Run downstairs and get some ice."

"Why is Lily here?" A voice whispers. Is it mine? It doesn't sound like my voice, but it's coming from my mouth. "She can't be here yet."

What is happening to me?

My heart pounds against my rib cage like a trapped bird. "I'm so confused, Alex...help me."

"It's okay," he says softly. "I'm here. Did the box hit your head?"

He's blurry through my tears, coming in out of my vision...with a patch over his eye, then without. I reach out to touch his face. "What happened to you?" I murmur.

"Shhh... let me check your head."

Gently cradling my head in his hands, he pushes my hair from my face and runs his long fingers over my scalp. The warmth of his touch slowly brings me out of the mental haze.

"I don't see or feel any bumps or cuts."

His thumb grazes over my forehead, pausing at my left temple. He leans closer. Worry etches his face.

A shiver shimmies up my spine.

"What's this mark?" he asks. "Is this new?"

I reach up to cover his hand with mine. "It's always been there. I cover it with my hair. I don't like looking at it."

"You winced when I touched it. Does it hurt?"

I let out a shaky breath and decide I'm not going to tell him how it feels like an ice pick is being driven into my head sometimes. "No. I just don't want you to see it."

Frowning, he asks, "Do you feel sick or dizzy, anything like that?"

“No. I feel okay now.”

He sits back on his heels and holds his hand up, making the peace sign with his fingers. His silver wedding band catches the light. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Your whole hand is up, so five.”

A slow grin spreads across his lips. “There’s my little smart-ass.”

I can’t take my eyes off his smile. It’s breathtakingly beautiful, especially for a man. I’ve never kissed anyone before, but suddenly, all I want to do is touch his lips with my fingertips, press my mouth to his, taste him.

Lily appears in the doorway. “I put some ice in a sock.”

I sit up and slowly push the dress off my lap. My fingers linger on the intricate lace and detailed beading. So beautiful and timeless. It’s exactly the kind of gown I would want.

Lily’s gaze sharpens. “Should we call 9-1-1?”

Alex takes the ice sock from her and presses it to the side of my head. “I don’t think we need to do that. I think the box just bonked her on the head and she got confused for a minute.” He turns back to me. “But maybe we should call your parents?”

“Please don’t. My mom will run to the internet and diagnose me with a brain tumor. I’m fine,” I assure them. I can’t believe I’ve ruined a fun night by having another weird meltdown. These strange episodes have only ever happened in front of my parents or when I’m alone. Having them in front of Lily and Alex is completely embarrassing. “I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t be sorry,” Lily says. “Stuff happens.”

“As long as you’re okay, that’s all that matters,” Alex adds, helping me stand.

“At least I found the tree angel.” I smile weakly and point to the box on the floor.

“We’ll put it up tomorrow when you’re feeling better. I think you should lie down and rest,” Alex says, watching Lily

attempt to fold up the mountain of tulle and cram it back in the box.

“This really is a pretty dress,” she says, forcing the lid down.

Alex looks like he’s far away, and I long to go where his mind went. “Your mom looked like a princess in it. She took my breath away when I saw her. I felt like I was gonna pass out.”

Lily smiles up at him. “Aww, Dad. That’s so sweet. I hope someday I find a guy to love me like you loved her.”

Alex shoves the box back on the shelf in the closet. “Me too. What me and your mom had was rare, which is why I’m not wasting time dating. I’ll never have that again.”

I don’t know why, but his answer makes my eyes burn with tears. “I think I will go lie down.”

“Yell if you need anything,” Lily says. “I’ll just be watching television.”

In my room, I still feel shaky as I put the ice sock on the nightstand. My head doesn’t hurt. Not from getting hit with a box. It hurts inside, like I’m thinking too hard and making my brain ache. I peer into my small mirror and push my hair off my forehead. I stare at the strange birthmark that Alex had noticed. In the shape of a star, it’s raised and white, like a scarification tattoo. It’s been randomly hurting me as far back as my memories reach. My mom even has baby pictures of me—hours after I was born—with my tiny hand on that spot.

I pull my hair back down. I feel sick every time I look at it.

Chapter 19



PENNY

Later that night, I see a shadow in the hall through the crack in my door. I can sense contemplation as it hovers there.

I sit up and lean back against my headboard. My pulse quickens with a mix of curiosity and fear. Is something wrong? Is it possible that after thinking about it, Alex is mad about me knocking Brianna's beautiful dress onto the floor, then having a meltdown and calling it *my* gown?

I wouldn't blame him. I've been lying awake for hours, trying to come up with a logical explanation for my odd behavior. But I've only dug up more questions. Why am I so drawn to Alex? To this house? To Cherry? To Lily? The dress seemed to open a door, and a flood of emotions poured out. The wedding images that flashed in my mind and the words I thought I heard felt so incredibly real, as if I was somehow a guest at Alex and Brianna's wedding and witnessed it myself.

No. It's more than that.

I only saw Alex in the visions. I didn't actually see Brianna. It was like I was seeing everything from her point of view.

They felt like memories. *Her* memories.

Shuddering from the chill that's crept up my spine, I pull my comforter around me.

That's not possible, I tell myself. In fact, that's completely fucking crazy. Dr. Sloane has said it countless times—I just have a very vivid imagination. And an odd fixation on everything and everyone at 23 Willow Lane. I've been looking

at the photos of Brianna and Alex's wedding in their shed and in their house since I was a little girl. I made them a permanent fixture in my mind. I basically low-key brainwashed myself into thinking I lived here.

That's all it is.

The shadow is still visible under the door.

I swallow hard over the ball of trepidation in my throat. "Alex? You can come in," I whisper.

The door creaks open and his broad frame fills the doorway, pausing for a second before he slowly enters the room, leaving the door open a few inches behind him.

"I wanted to make sure you're okay." His voice is low and soft, like a lion's purr. It immediately chases the chill from my bones.

"I feel totally fine." That is, I feel physically fine. Emotionally is an entirely different story.

"Good."

He doesn't say good night or turn to leave. He stands there in the narrow space between my bed and small dresser. It's the first time he's ever come into my room. Nervous energy radiates from him like a heat lamp.

I know he's nervous because I feel it, too.

"Do you want to sit with me?" I keep my voice quiet like his and pat the bed beside me.

It's too dark to see him well, but I hear him inhale a breath. Seconds pass before he glances back toward the door, then sits on the edge of the bed.

"I'm so sorry about the dress," I say. "I'm sure it was folded all neat and pretty in that box. And now it's...not." Lily seriously rolled it into a ball.

"Don't worry about it. It's just a dress." The lie sounds awful on his lips.

I pull my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. "It's not, though. We both know that."

“I probably shouldn’t have kept it. It’s just...getting rid of her things feels like getting rid of her.”

“I think it’s okay to keep them if they make you feel better.”

“I’m not even sure if any of it does make me feel better. I don’t know how to feel or what to do anymore.”

The heartache in his voice nudges my own anxiety and confusion to the back burner. He didn’t come in here because he was mad; he came because seeing the dress opened a door for him, too, and grief walked right back in. It’s so unfair—he’s been trapped in an almost debilitating emotional limbo for eighteen years. When does it end?

Softly, I say, “I once read that one of the hardest things to do after you lose someone is to figure out how to be *you* again without them.”

His head lowers. “It’s true. Kelley’s constantly on my ass about it, and I know he’s right. I haven’t moved forward. Not with my career, not with my life. It’s like I fucking died with her.”

Over the years, I’ve watched Alex attempt change in tiny increments, but he never fully commits. He’ll build sculptures but won’t agree to an art show. He’ll sit in his car but won’t drive it. He’ll start fixing things around the house but won’t finish. He’ll take his wedding ring off and a week later slip it back on again. He gets so very close but then can’t take the next step. I can only guess it’s because he can’t bring himself to move on to something without Brianna’s memory attached to it.

“Not to sound cliché, but I think she’d want you to live. Brianna loved everything about you. She believed in you. It’s so clear in everything she left behind. It’s in her paintings of this house, it’s in all her sketches of your work, it’s in all the pictures she took of you. She loved her life. She loved *your* life. If she could see you now—and I truly think she can—not living your life, not chasing your dream...” I swallow back the emotion wavering my voice. “I think she’d be really sad. As

much as she wanted a life together, she wouldn't want the end of hers to also be the end of yours.”

He takes in a deep breath and lets it out in a slow whoosh. “You’re right.” The words are a mere croak. My heart nearly cracks, hearing the pain in his voice.

I want so badly to hug him, but it feels like it would be wrong to do so in my bedroom, lit only by the moon.

He rubs his hand over his face and straightens his eye patch—which is more habit than an actual fixing. That’s when I notice there’s something in his hand.

“What’s that you’re holding?”

Looking down at it in his hands, he says quietly, “Your poem. The one you gave me the day I told you not to come back.”

Wow. The fact that he still has it after all this time makes my stomach flutter. “And here I am, years later, living in your house.”

He chuckles. “Yup. Here you are.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. It’s good for Lily to have you here.”

I love Lily to the ends of the earth. But I also want to know how he feels. “And what about you?”

He pauses for a beat before answering. “It’s good for me, too. You remind me what it’s like to be happy. To have dreams.”

His unexpected admission makes my chest tighten. “I didn’t realize I made you feel that way. I’m honored,” I say affectionately. “But you’re not giving me the poem back, are you?”

“Nope.”

He unfolds the paper and grabs my phone from my nightstand, touching the screen so it wakes and glows enough to give him light to read:

*“Oh, what a lovely return it will be,
Slipping quietly from there to here,
among whispers and memories,
To find you again, my eternal love,
with your beautiful smile
Waiting always for me.”*

I might be new to all things attractive in the male species, but I’m pretty sure there is nothing sexier or more romantic than a man reading poetry out loud.

“Did you write this?” he asks in his low, gruff tone.

I’m too mesmerized by his voice reading my words to be offended by the question. “Of course I did.”

“Then you were only twelve when you wrote this.”

I stayed up all night writing that poem, driven with such fervor that I cried, trying to get the words right. It *had* to be perfect. I just didn’t know what would make it perfect. I wrote and erased and wrote and erased until I was exhausted, my tears blurring the ink, and then, finally, it was right. The voice in my head let me rest, and I’d crawled into bed, weary but excited, at three a.m. with my stuffed fox.

I nod. “Yes.”

He lays my phone back on the nightstand, face down, leaving us in darkness again.

“Can you tell me what it means?”

My heart stutters. “Um... I’m not sure.”

I can feel his gaze pinning me with disbelief. But it’s true, I really don’t know what it means.

“C’mon, Penny. You wrote it. You must know what it means.”

“It’s hard to explain,” I say carefully. “When I was little, I used to draw scenes and write poetry with no idea where the ideas came from. I’d just get these sudden impulses inside that compelled me to bring them to paper. For some weird reason,

a lot of them seemed to focus on you and your property.” I let out a quick, anxious laugh. “No wonder you called me your little stalker.”

After a few moments, he folds the poem up and puts it in the front pocket of his shirt. “Obviously, it’s a poem about love. It’s kinda deep for a twelve-year-old, isn’t it?”

I swallow nervously. “Well, poetry is open to reader interpretation...”

“Did you write this about Brianna? For me?” There’s no accusation in his voice. Just pure curiosity.

Did I? My palms are suddenly clammy. Goose bumps pebble my arms.

I think I did write it about Brianna and Alex. Somewhere in the middle, it’s about me, too.

I inhale a breath and do my best to find the words to try to explain it to him, but I come up short. “It means what you want it to mean,” I say instead. “Words are magical like that.”

His lips press together. He doesn’t like my answer.

My shoulders lift. “I think it’s about hope, and finding happiness, and love again,” I reveal. “Maybe I thought you needed that.”

“You thought right.”

“I’m sorry if it upset you. As you said, I was only twelve.”

“It didn’t upset me. It made me wonder...” He stops and shakes his head. “Never mind.”

I touch his arm. “Tell me.”

“Nah. It’s gonna sound crazy.”

“I’m fine with crazy. Tell me.”

He looks out the window into the nothingness of the dark, then back to me. “I wondered if it was a sign from Brianna. Sometimes, you remind me so much of her, but you’re also so different. It’s hard to explain. It’s like she sent you here and made you familiar so I’d know.”

My stomach capsizes. I can't believe he just voiced the curiosity that's been living in the shadows of my mind for years. Did Brianna's spirit send me here to try to make Alex happy? To let him know that she's okay and she's watching over him? Is that even possible?

I run my tongue over my lip. "That's not crazy. I've actually kinda always wondered the same thing. That maybe Bri sent me to you." My voice is a tiptoe between us, testing uncertain ground.

He lets out a laugh that sounds as nervous as I feel. "Who the hell knows, right?"

"Right," I agree.

The familiar buzzy hum sits in the air between us, accompanying the sound of our breathing.

Finally, he breaks the silence. "I better go to bed. You sure you're okay? No headache or anything like that?"

Disappointment feathers through me. I was hoping we'd talk more about the possibility of some kind of ethereal connection. Perhaps come to an answer together about why I've always been pulled here like a magnet. Something to make me feel less crazy. But I can't bring myself to coax him any further for fear of upsetting him.

Tread lightly.

"Nope," I answer. "I'm fine. Thank you for checking on me."

He stands. "G'night, Penny."

A last-minute spark of bravery makes me quickly grab his hand. "Wait—can I ask you something?"

"Go for it."

"I've always wondered...why did you want me to stop coming to see you years ago? Was I just too annoying to deal with?"

"How'd I know you were gonna ask me that?" A touch of humor lightens his voice.

“Probably because, deep down, you want to tell me why.”

“You weren’t annoying. I liked having you around.”

“Then why? Did my parents have something to do with it?” I swear, I’ll be so mad if my mom took years of friendship away from me.

“Nope. It was the guys. Mikey and Kelley.”

That’s the last thing I expected to hear. “What?” I squint at him. “I thought they liked me.”

“They do. But they thought you had a crush on me. They said it wasn’t cool for a guy my age to be hanging out with a young girl. They felt like we were too close, which, I guess, was right.” He squeezes my hand. His fingers are so warm. “I’m really sorry I hurt you. I’ve always hated myself for it.”

I suppose all that is better than being so annoying that he never wanted to see me again.

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “It totally broke my heart, but I get it now. I forgive you.” I hope he can hear the smile in my voice. He’s more than made up for it by letting me stay here.

My breath catches when his fingers lace through mine. His thumb gently moves back and forth over the top of my hand before he pulls away and turns to leave. He pauses before he reaches the bedroom door.

“I probably shouldn’t say this, but... it broke my heart too, Penny. More than you know.”

He’s gone. The door shuts with a click. His shadow is no longer visible under the door.

Turbulent butterflies flutter from my chest to my stomach to my toes and back again.

So much just happened.

So much *is* happening—things I don’t even understand.

My eyes stay riveted to the door, willing him to come back and just keep talking. About anything—I don’t care. I just want him here with his deep, soft voice and his hand touching mine in that sweet but oh-so-sexy way.

I definitely did, and definitely still do, have a crush on Alex Fox.

And deep in my heart, where dreams and secrets live, a tiny part of me thinks that he might just feel a little bit the same way.

Chapter 20



PENNY - 2025

“I wish you’d come with me,” Lily offers as she shoves jeans and a mix of tees and hoodies into a duffel bag. It’s the end of March, and the wintry weather can’t decide if it wants to let go of the cold yet. “Aunt Kirsty won’t mind. I’m sure she’d love to have you.”

“I don’t want to infringe on your time with your aunt. Especially on her birthday weekend.” I pull her clothes out of the bag and fold them. “Everything will be a wrinkled mess if you don’t fold it.”

Shaking her head, she takes the folded shirts from me. “Okay, Mom,” she teases. “But seriously, my aunt won’t mind. We’re just going to go shopping, hang out at her condo, and watch movies all weekend. My gram is going to stop by Sunday afternoon with cake, then after that, I’ll be coming back home.”

Lily admitted to me months ago during one of our late-night talks that she’d hoped she could live with her aunt after her grandparents divorced instead of living with Alex. That idea was vetoed due to the fact that Kirsty is a flight attendant and rarely ever home.

“Thanks, but I want to catch up on my studying. I have that essay to write, too. I haven’t even started it yet.”

“Okay.” She zips the bag shut. “Even though it’s only for two days, I’m going to miss you. Text me if you get lonely. I’m sure my dad will be holed up in the studio all weekend.”

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway grabs Lily's attention. She glances out the window. "Aunt Kirsty is here. Come downstairs with me and meet her."

When I see the woman waiting in the living room, I do a double take. Not only is she stunning, but she could be Brianna's twin. Brianna passed away at twenty-one years old, but I'm sure if she was thirty-nine today, she'd look exactly like Kirsty, who is turning forty-two this weekend.

I wait off to the side while Lily hugs her aunt hello, then they turn to me.

"Aunt Kirsty, this is Penny. Penny, this is my aunt."

"Lily talks about you all the time. It's nice to finally meet you," she says, extending her hand to me.

The moment our hands touch, a burning sensation rushes up my arm and into my chest.

Ignoring the feeling, I smile and say, "It's nice to finally meet you, too."

Her eyes lock onto mine as she tilts her head with curiosity. "You look so familiar. Have we met somewhere else before?"

She looks oddly familiar to me as well, but I can't place her face, so I assume it's because I've seen so many photographs of Brianna that her sister's face appears familiar.

"No, I don't think so," I reply.

"Hmm." She turns her attention to Lily. "Are you all set?"

"Yup." Lily slings her bag over her shoulder. "Penny even folded my clothes for me," she jokes.

"Penny, you're more than welcome to spend the weekend with us. We'd love to have you join us," Kirsty says.

"Thank you so much, but I have some studying to do. I hope you have a wonderful birthday."

"As long as I don't have to count the candles on my cake, I will."

“You can’t count that high,” Alex comments, entering the living room.

Kirsty laughs. “Very funny.”

I watch them hug hello. I can’t help but wonder if Kirsty’s likeness to Brianna upsets him or if it makes him happy to see a glimpse of his wife in her, like a visiting ghost.

When they part, Kirsty reaches up and tousles Alex’s hair. “You’re looking pretty scruffy there, fella. Want me to give you a trim while I’m here?”

A niggle of jealousy rides up my spine when he smiles at her.

Say no. Say no. I silently beg. I love the way Alex shakes his hair out of his face when he’s working.

And, to be totally transparent, I don’t like the image that just popped up in my mind of her hands all up in his hair and her breasts all up near his face while she gives him a haircut.

He smirks. “I’m allergic to scissors.”

Relief bubbles through me.

Kirsty lets out a sigh. “Fine. Suit yourself—look like a ragamuffin.”

Lily steps between them to hug her father. “Bye, Dad. Have a good weekend.”

“You got everything you need?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“You’ll call to say good night?”

“Yes, Dad.”

Misty-eyed, Kirsty holds a hand to her chest. “It is so good to see you two together.”

Alex beams. “Better late than never, right?”

My eyes tear up a little, along with Kirsty’s. Alex and Lily are getting along so much better than when Lily first moved in.

Smiling awkwardly, Lily says, “Okay, let’s go before everyone gets mushy.”

As Alex closes the front door behind them, it doesn’t go unnoticed to me that he wasn’t invited to celebrate Kirsty’s birthday. Most likely because his ex-mother-in-law will be there, and she’s still hell-bent on hating him.

“Just me and you now, kid,” he says on his way to the kitchen. My insides quiver as I follow him.

Lily’s absence has immediately changed the atmosphere of the house. A thread of new energy has already woven through the air, making me feel nervously shy.

I hadn’t even thought about it when Lily told me she’d be staying with her aunt for two days, but now it’s settling in. I’m going to be totally alone with Alex—a grown man—for the entire weekend. I’m sure my mom would have several colorful words to say about that. I don’t like keeping secrets, but it’s probably best that my mom doesn’t find out, or she might go on a tirade about inappropriateness. It’s not going to matter to her that I’m eighteen.

Alex grabs an apple from the bowl on the counter and bites into it. “Want to come look at some stuff in the studio with me?”

I try not to focus on the juice on his full lips. Try not to wonder what it would feel like if he kissed me right now. “Sure. Then I have to start this paper.”

“C’mon, Cherry, let’s go out,” he says, clicking his tongue. Cherry lifts her head from where she’s sleeping under the window. Alex helps her stand, carefully lifting her hips. She has trouble standing on her own, but once we help her up, she’s able to walk, albeit wobbly and stiff. “C’mon, baby girl, let’s get some fresh air.” Her curled tail wags.

I hold the back door open as Cherry slowly trails after us. We walk next to her, at her pace, watching her sniff at the ground and raise her nose to the breeze. She loves to be outside, even if it’s a little chilly like it is today. It always seems to perk her up. When we reach the barn, she gingerly

settles into her favorite spot outside the door—her all-weather dog bed just next to Brianna’s beloved rose bushes. We both bend down to pet her before we go inside and she licks our hands—a little tradition that Alex started a long time ago. Now, we always joke that we have to pay the Cherry toll before entering and exiting.

“I have an idea for you,” I tell Alex as I follow him to his latest pile of garbage. “Hear me out before you one star it.”

He laughs. “Okay.”

“What if you started to take commissions? Not a ton of them, you’d have to be choosy. But let the customer bring you their own stuff; tell them they need at least five pieces. Maybe it’s a bunch of old things they’ve been holding on to—like an old tire from their first car or a toaster they got for their wedding years ago—stuff like that. For some, it wouldn’t always have to be an actual sculpture of something specific, but just like an abstract collage of their things all welded together with some cool embellishments. They could also ship the stuff to you if they’re not local.”

Fingering the scruff on his chin, he slowly nods. “Ya know, that’s not a bad idea.”

“I thought it might be easier than you always having to go hunting for garbage, then rattling your brain trying to make it all into something cool, then finding a buyer.”

Alex still struggles with confidence in his art and ideas, so my hope is this might ease some of the pressure off him but still keep him moving forward as an artist.

“You’re right. It would take a bit of the creative stress off me and give me income.”

“You could add the option to your website as a very limited offer, just to test the waters first.”

A slow smile fills his face. “I like it. I’ll message my PR guy tonight and have him add it to my site and social media accounts right away.” He winks at me. “Thanks, little darlin’.”

My knees go weak.

God. He hardly ever calls me that anymore, and I love it when he does.

After we talk through some ideas for his current stock as I call it, I leave him to his work. I kiss Cherry on her forehead and stroke her ears for a few minutes before I go up to my room to start on my paper. I'd rather be painting or watching a good movie on this quiet Saturday, but I promised my parents I'd discipline myself and not push my schoolwork to the side.

Two hours later, my back and neck are sore from sitting on the bed with my laptop. I take a few minutes to stretch, then venture down to the kitchen to grab a quick snack. From the window, I see that light snow flurries have started to fall like confetti. I'm surprised, as it's late in the season and I thought we were done with snow for the year. It's not even that cold out today. As I stare out the window, Alex emerges from the barn. With a smile, I watch him kneel down to pay the Cherry toll. Still watching him, I chew my granola bar, touched by how gentle he is as he runs his hands over her head and back. They look so beautiful with the slow, tiny snowflakes falling around them that I can't resist pulling my phone from my pocket to take a photo.

Suddenly, Alex yells something I can't hear as his hands frantically run over Cherry's body.

A massive chill travels up my spine.

I drop my phone and bolt out the back door.

"Alex, what's wrong?"

Without looking up, he says, "She's sleeping, right? Tell me she's just sleeping."

My heart sinks when I reach them. Cherry's body looks oddly still, and Alex's voice is cracking with desperation. I can't move. My head begins to throb.

"She's just tired, right?" He's so tragically hopeful.

Oh, no. Please, no.

Tears immediately stream down my cheeks, and my body shivers wildly—but not from the cold. I refuse to fall apart in

front of Alex again. Not when he's in such pain. Not when he needs me. I can't be the one needing consoling right now. Forcing myself into action, I kneel beside Alex and lay my head against Cherry's furry side. *No*. I can't hear her heartbeat. My hand shakes as I check for a pulse that isn't there. Still in denial, I gently lift her eyelids. Her loving, soulful eyes don't meet mine. Her fluffy tail doesn't wag. Sucking in a deep breath, I softly tap the edges of her eyes the way the vet does at the clinic where I work. My heart sinks like an anchor when there's no response.

"Alex," I manage to say through quiet sobs as I stroke Cherry's head. "I'm so *so* sorry. She's gone."

The emotional torture and disbelief on his face tear my soul to shreds.

"She can't be," he whispers, pulling her head onto his lap. "She was fine. She was acting totally normal all morning. You saw her..."

Nodding, I try to stay calm when inside, I'm crumbling. My soul is wailing with grief over the loss of my sweet Cherry Pop.

"I know," I agree softly. "I patted her before I went inside to work on my paper. She was happy, wagging her tail and sniffing the breeze. She must've slipped away in her sleep right after."

Alex curls himself around Cherry's body. "Please wake up," he sobs into her fur. "Please don't leave me."

I'm close to losing it as my vision blurs with more tears... and something else. A flash of white. A stain of red.

His words echo through my head, muffled at first, then clearer and louder as if they're traveling down a tunnel.

Please wake up. Please don't leave me. You promised. I'll do anything. Please come back.

Over and over, they repeat like an urgent recording until something in my brain clicks.

I've heard them before.

My heart clamors against my chest and thunders in my ears. Stabbing pain erupts behind my temple.

The snow swirls around me, hypnotizing me like it did that day—

Alex's heartbreaking sobs pull me away from the brink of grasping that memory. It quickly vanishes back into the crevice in my mind.

I'm right here. I didn't leave. I'd never leave you.

Trembling, I gently touch Alex's hand. "I'll be right back. I'm going to go get a blanket."

He doesn't respond. Grief has already abducted him, transporting him back to a place where the world around him, without his loves, is too painful to exist in.

Tears sting my face in the chilly air as I walk through the falling snow to the back door. In a daze, I step over my phone on the kitchen floor. When I dropped it earlier, it landed exactly where Cherry loved to sleep. My chest constricts with a deep ache, knowing I will never, ever see her beautiful, happy, smushy face there again.

Shaking my head, I tear my gaze from that spot on the floor and continue my mission to the basement. I find an old blanket and place it in the dryer, setting it on high heat for ten minutes. I'm sure that might seem silly to anyone who saw me, but I'm overwhelmed with the need to do something—just one last thing for our sweet Cherry, who has never been cold, never been without constant love and care.

As I watch the blanket tumble in the dryer, my chest and throat ache with restrained sobs. My body is shaking from the effort to not completely break down, but I refuse to let myself give in. I can succumb to the grief and let myself cry and fall apart later. Right now, all that matters is taking care of Alex and Cherry.

When I carry the blanket outside, I find Alex still sitting on the ground with Cherry's head in his lap, numbly staring into space. Snow is accumulating on top of them. Every few seconds, he gently brushes the snow off Cherry's body. I have

the horrible feeling that if I wasn't here, Alex would stay outside all day and night and let the snow bury them together.

That vision makes me so heartsick it feels like an iron fist is clutching my heart and won't ever let go.

My brain struggles to grasp that this is real and isn't just a horrible dream. Earlier, Cherry had eaten her breakfast, walked across the yard with us, then happily settled in her favorite spot. She raised her head and wagged her tail when I patted her. Now she's gone. Just like that. Snatched away from us in a heartbeat. It's a terrifying reminder that we only have the moment we're in. Our next breath, our later and tomorrows aren't promised. They are merely gifts. Death is a thief who doesn't care about plans, hopes, dreams, or those who love us.

Somberly, I cover Cherry with the warm blanket. My throat wells with pain, remembering how she loved for me to lift her up onto the couch and snuggle under the throw blanket with her.

Alex maneuvers himself out from under her, ever so gently laying her head on the ground, and disappears toward the shed.

While he's gone, I stroke her fur, wanting to memorize the feel of her soft coat between my fingers and the way her dark eyelashes look like tiny feathers against her red coat.

"Thank you for being such a good girl and for always making sure I was safe," I whisper. My fingertips tingle as I pet her, the tiny zaps coursing through my veins to my chest and scalp. My eyes blur with fat tears. I press my lips to her fur. "I'll never forget the day Daddy brought you home and put you in my arms. I loved you instantly, and I'll love you for the rest of my life, Cherry Pop."

"Penny?"

Momentarily light-headed, I shake my head and turn to him.

My stomach pitches when I see Alex standing next to me with a shovel.

I wipe my eyes and stand, shaken at the grim reality of what the shovel means. “Alex, let me call my boss. You can have her cremated. The ground is frozen—”

He shakes his head vehemently. “No, I don’t want her in a jar. She’d want to be out here, free with the breeze and the roses, close to us.”

“Okay,” I say, understanding. “Then I’ll help you.” I hug myself against the cold air and shake the snow off my head. It’s coming down faster now.

“No.” His gaze is riveted on Cherry. The muscle in his jaw is twitching. “I need to do this alone. Go inside where it’s warm.”

“Alex...” I can’t stand the thought of leaving him and letting him do this alone when he’s upset.

“Please, Penny. I need to do this.” He swipes his damp cheek with the back of his hand. “Don’t make me argue with you.”

Reluctantly, I go back in the house, but I feel like a gigantic chunk of my own heart is being buried along with a very special red fuzzy dog.

Chapter 21



PENNY

Inside the house, I can't stop pacing and noticing things that make me start to cry all over again. Cherry's dishes. Her bed. Her toys. Stray tufts of fur on the floor like tiny tumbleweeds. The house is deafeningly quiet but also screaming from every corner.

When I can't take it anymore, I pick my phone up from where it's still on the floor and call Lily.

"Hey, what's up? You miss me already?" she says when the call connects.

"Lily..." My voice cracks before I can get another word out.

"Penny, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"It's Cherry."

The other end of the phone goes silent.

"What do you mean?" she finally says. Her tone is flat, void of the playfulness it held a few seconds ago.

"She's gone," I say tearfully.

"What do you mean *gone*, Penny?"

"She passed away in her sleep."

"But... but she was fine this morning. I gave her a bite of my bagel."

"I know. It happened so fast. She walked with us out to the studio and went in her bed, and then she was just... gone." I

inhale a deep breath to try to stop myself from crying. “I loved her so much, Lily.”

“I know you did. I did, too,” she says, sniffing. “Oh my God, my father... how is he?”

“He’s devastated. He’s burying her in the yard by the barn as we speak. He wouldn’t let me help. I feel so helpless.”

“In the yard?” she repeats. “Shouldn’t he take her to the vet? That’s what my gram did when her dog died. She got her ashes back and put them on the mantel.”

“I offered that, but he wants her to be in the yard because she loved it so much. He was so attached to her, Lily. She was always with him, night and day. After your mom died, Cherry is really all he had.”

“I know,” she says softly. Lily isn’t a crier, but sadness is evident in her voice. “Do you think I should come home? I can have Aunt Kirsty drive me back.”

Without even looking out the window, I know Alex is still digging. I can hear the thunk of the shovel every six seconds.

“I don’t know...he seems to want to be alone. He made me come back in the house.”

“This is going to destroy him, isn’t it? Do you think he’ll start drinking again?”

“No,” I say quickly. “He’ll be heartbroken, but I don’t think he’ll go down that road again.”

“I hope not. That’s all I heard growing up from my grandparents. ‘What a horrible drunk your father is, what a loser he is, he killed your mother.’ Their comments were never ending.”

Anger rises up in me. “They seriously exaggerated. Don’t let their thoughts about him cloud your own. That’s not fair for either of you.”

“You’re right,” she agrees sadly. “I’ll call him tonight after he has a little while to process it.”

“That’s a good idea. I think he’d love to hear your voice.”

“Are *you* okay? You knew Cherry much longer than I did. She was so attached to you.”

“I feel like my heart’s been ripped out, to be honest. I loved her like she was my own dog. She was older than us, did you know that? She had to be at least nineteen years old. That’s incredibly rare for her breed.”

“Wow,” she exclaims. “But you know what? I think she stayed alive as long as she could just to love him. I think she waited until she felt like he’d be okay before she let herself leave. People and pets do that. I read about it.”

A tear slides down my cheek. “I think you’re right.”

“I feel so bad that this happened when you’re there alone.”

“It’s okay. It’s just a sad day.”

“I’m sorry, my aunt is yelling downstairs. She’s made reservations at a restaurant and doesn’t want to be late. I’ll call you guys later, okay? Or you can text me if you need to talk. I’ll have my phone with me.”

“Okay. Thank you. I’m sorry to call with bad news when you’re supposed to be having a fun weekend.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m worried about you and Dad. And now I’m sad about Cherry. She was such a cool dog.”

“Try to have a good time. Kirsty seemed really excited to spend time with you.”

“I’ll try. I love you guys.”

“We love you too.”

I lay my phone on the kitchen table and look out the window. My throat immediately tightens. Alex is still digging. There’re at least two inches of snow covering the ground now. Was it even supposed to snow today? I don’t recall hearing anything about snow this weekend. I sit on the edge of the table near the window. He might not want me out there with him, but I refuse to leave him alone. I’ll stay right here, watching over him, until he comes inside.

A half hour ticks by. Watching the snow fall has almost put me in a trance. Memories of Cherry filter through my mind. She wasn't just a dog. She was a friend. She always made me feel special and loved with the way she insisted on walking me to and from the edge of the woods. Right from the first day I wandered into Alex's yard, she acted like she knew me.

And I recognized her, too. I'd been drawing her since I was three years old.

How? Why?

A flash of color drags my gaze from Alex and the hole he's standing in. Squinting, I see two red cardinals flitting about, chasing each other. Finally, they perch on a tree branch near the barn.

They're beautiful, like little red roses with wings.

I sit forward when Alex throws the shovel to the side, clambers out of the hole, and disappears into the barn. Another half hour passes before he finally comes out, dragging a huge wooden box.

My breath catches and my eyes well with fresh tears.

A coffin. He made her a coffin.

I watch as he lays Cherry's body in the box as gently as if she were made of fine crystal. Suddenly, I jump off the table and crawl under it, grabbing one of Cherry's old favorite tennis balls. Without putting a coat on, I run outside. The screen door bangs closed behind me.

"Alex, wait!" I yell.

He's covered in snow when I reach him. It's clinging to his eyebrows, melting in his hair. "This should go with her," I say, holding the ball out.

Lips pressed together, he silently takes it. The two cardinals and I watch as he places it next to Cherry's body, then covers her snugly with the blanket.

"Go back inside," he says again.

"Please let me help you. You're freezing out here."

“I don’t feel a fucking thing.” The despondency in his voice makes my heart feel like it’s breaking all over again.

Ignoring me, he positions the lid on the box and starts to nail it on. Every hit of the hammer feels like it’s slamming through my chest. I’m sure he must feel the same.

“Didn’t I tell you to go inside?”

I stare at him defiantly. My lips are quivering from the cold. He shouldn’t be doing this alone, in the middle of a snowstorm, with his heart breaking. It’s not right.

“Go. In. Side.” Emotional and physical exhaustion deepen his voice.

“I want to help you. I loved her, too.”

His voice softens. “I know you did. That’s why I want you to wait inside. I don’t want you to have to remember her like this.” He finally lifts his head to meet my eyes. “Those memories don’t go away. Trust me.”

I had never seen so much pain in someone’s face before or heard it flooding through their voice as I’m witnessing in him. These are also memories that will never go away.

Swallowing hard, I nod. Then I do as he asks and wait for him in the house, watching him from the window, with my fingertips pressed against the frosted glass—wishing so badly that I could take all his sorrow away and fill his life with love again.



I watch, unblinking, as Alex carefully lowers the plywood box into the deep hole. He stands over it for a long time, his frame a blur amid the snowflakes, before he begins shoveling dirt on top.

My chest spasms with emotion. For the sweetest dog in the world. And for Alex, who can’t seem to escape the talons of grief.

I can’t watch anymore.

Shivering, I step away from the window. There's no way I'm going to go back up to my room and resume writing my school paper as if this is just an ordinary day when, in fact, it's one of the worst of my life. Instead, I move to the living room and start a fire, hoping the warmth will give Alex some comfort when he comes inside.

I've never experienced death before. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, say, or even feel. All I know is that a huge hole has been carved into my heart, and it feels like it's never going to heal. It seems impossible to envision a tomorrow, a next month, a next year, without Cherry being right there.

If I can barely accept the loss of a dog, how do people ever move on from the loss of an actual person?

Mesmerized by the dancing flames, I realize this is the pain that Alex has been living with for eighteen years. Eighteen *years* of living with some variation of this persistent ache, hollowness, and hopelessness. And now another layer has been added.

Lily's worry about her father might very well be valid. It's a real possibility that Alex may not be able to cope with this. The weight of it all might be too much for him to carry.

I can't let that happen.

The back door opens and Alex enters with a gust of wind. He stomps his feet on the mat, then remains by the door, not moving farther into the house.

He's seeing everything I saw—all the little signs that a dog lived and was loved in this house for eighteen years and will never be here again.

I get up off the couch and go to him. Without saying a word, I take his hand and lead him to the living room, gently guiding him to sit in the chair near the fire. He falls back into it, his breath coming in deep, ragged breaths.

"I can't believe she's gone," he says hoarsely.

"I know."

He's shivering uncontrollably from standing in the freezing air, wet, while working up a sweat digging. I'm worried he's going to get sick. Without protest, he lets me carefully pull his flannel jacket off and the shirt beneath. Both are soaked through, heavy from the snow. Grabbing the throw blanket from the couch, I gently cover his bare torso with it, tucking it behind his shoulders.

With a raspy sigh, he leans his head back, eye closed. "Thank you," he whispers.

I kneel on the floor in front of him and untie his work boots, slipping them off and putting them to the side. Underneath, his socks are soggy. I pull those off, too, and gently massage his damp, ice-cold feet until his skin is warm again and the bluish tint has faded.

His breathing and the crackling of the fire is the only sound between us, but I can almost hear the buzzing static traveling from my fingertips to his flesh.

"Can I make you some tea or soup?" I ask softly.

He shakes his head and his wet hair falls over his face. His cheeks are red from the cold, streaked with dried tears. "I can't eat." He coughs and takes a deep breath. "But thank you... for..."

"You don't have to thank me."

His eye opens for a moment, locks onto mine then slowly closes.

I reach for his hand, and gasp when I see his palms are blistered open, raw and bleeding from the shovel handle.

"Don't move," I say and sprint to the kitchen. I return with a warm, wet cloth, antibiotic ointment, and bandages.

"Penny..."

"Shhh..." I say just above a whisper, lightly dabbing his palms with the cloth. "Let me take care of you, Alex."

Kneeling in front of him again, I rub the ointment into his palms as gently as I can. The skin beneath the blisters is angry red, and I can't imagine how much it must sting.

“I’m so sorry,” I say when he winces. “I know it hurts, but this should make it feel better.”

“Thank you,” he says hoarsely as I wrap the bandage tape around his palms. When I’m done, he sits forward, and the blanket falls from his shoulders. The fire casts shadows and an orange glow over his face and bare chest as he stares down at me, where I’m still kneeling between his legs. My heart stutters when he reaches out and caresses my cheek with his bandaged palm.

“Are you okay?” he asks in a soft, husky voice.

Emotion crawls up into my throat, straining my words. I nod, and a teardrop slips from my eye and tracks down my cheek. He catches it with his thumb.

“She was special to both of us,” he says.

“She really was. Thank you for letting me love her.”

“She loved you. After Bri died, she never touched her ball. Not until you came.”

A bittersweet smile curves my lips. “I loved playing with her.”

“As much as Cherry was grieving Bri, she got me through so many dark days. I should’ve played with her more when she was younger instead of being such a fucking mess.”

Regret—grief’s right-hand man—is already taking up residence in his soul.

I rest my hands on his legs. “Alex, she adored you. She’d sit for hours just watching you work. And you were so good with her as she got older. So gentle and patient. Do you know how rare it is for a dog to live nineteen years? Your love for her, and hers for you, did that. Please don’t doubt that.”

His head bows lower, closer to mine. He smells like winter and wood. “I’m not sure I know how to love anymore,” he admits quietly.

I look up into his tormented face. “Yes, you do. You love perfectly.”

Dragging in a breath, he cups my other cheek, holding my face in his hands and pulls me to him. My breath catches and my pulse races as he presses his warm lips to my forehead, holding them there for several long, breathless seconds.

“How do you do that?” he asks when he slowly pulls away.

My ability to form words is lost in a swirl of emotions and sudden light-headedness. “Do what?” I finally manage to ask.

“Always make me believe that I’m better than I really am.”

“No, Fox. Not better. I want you to believe that you deserve to be happy. To be successful.” I lean into his palm. “To have love.”

His gaze drifts down to my lips, making my heart launch into an unexpected, wild percussive. I’d be surprised if he can’t hear it drumming against my rib cage. Nervously, I run my tongue along my lower lip. I immediately catch the slight clench of his jaw, the twitch of the muscle.

His eye darkens as he leans back. “I should go take a shower,” he says.

Nodding, I stand to move out of his way. I take the blanket and fold it as he rises and walks to the stairway. I can’t help but notice his slower gait, the slump of his shoulders, the weight of sadness already pressing down on him.

I was unprepared to see the tattoo spanning his entire back, shoulder to shoulder, of a heart made of dragon scales, cracked down the center by a jeweled dagger directly over his spine. It’s both breathtaking and heartbreaking to see his broken heart forever branded into his flesh.

Glancing at him once more before he reaches the top of the stairs, my heart jumps into my throat. There, on the landing, is a tennis ball that wasn’t there before. Standing over it are Cherry and Jasper—transparent as mist but unmistakably there, tails wagging, following Alex to the bedroom. He doesn’t see them, but maybe someday, he will.

A bittersweet smile touches my lips. The pain in my heart eases a little.

They're not gone, not just memories, but still here with us.

Chapter 22



ALEX

I didn't make it to the shower. I flopped on my bed, completely physically and mentally drained, and didn't have the strength to get back up.

The icy chill is still in my bones, the same way it clung to me when Brianna passed away.

As much as I tried to deny it, I knew this day would come. Once Cherry started limping, she became a small, furry time bomb, slowly ticking away the moments we had left. I tried to mentally prepare myself for it, but that's fucking impossible. You can't prepare yourself to lose someone you love. What you do is love them even harder.

And in the end, it just fucking hurts more than you ever thought it could.

Cherry was my partner in grief. She loved Bri as much as I did. Missed her as much as I did. And just like me, she denied herself things that used to make her happy.

Until Penny came along.

What *is it* about Penny?

Somehow, she lifts the veil of darkness. Like a ribbon, she's wound herself around me, Lily, and Cherry—threading us together, stitching our broken places. There's a vague familiarity about her that flicks a little switch in my mind that flashes, *Oh, there you are*, every time she's near.

But even Penny's ethereal presence can't change the fact that my beautiful dog is alone in a box in the cold ground right

now, and I have to force my brain to accept that everything that happened today was the last of all the everthings with Cherry.

It hurts like hell.

I throw my arm over my face. My head is throbbing. My heart is broken. My entire body is aching and shivering.

And my soul is so fucking lonely.

Sleep doesn't come to rescue me because my old friends, guilt, regret, and bargaining, are having a party in my gut, keeping me awake. As I lie there staring into the darkness, movement in the hallway catches my eye. I assume it must be Penny using the hall bathroom, but then her shadow darkens my doorway.

I pretend to be asleep like I always do when she tiptoes into my room in the middle of the night. She'll stand next to the bed, quiet as a mouse, watching me. After a few minutes, she'll slip out just as quietly as she came. I don't know if she's sleepwalking or if she's awake, but this time, when she turns toward the door to leave, I grab her hand.

She lets out a yelp of surprise.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

"I think that's my line."

Pulling her hand from mine, she says, "I-I just wanted to make sure you're okay. You never came back downstairs, you haven't eaten all day—" Her voice is congested from crying, and it makes my heart hurt even more.

"I feel too sick to eat," I mumble.

"Did you take a hot shower?" she asks softly. "That might help."

I shake my head. "I can't. My head is killing me. Everything hurts."

She turns on her heel and goes into my bathroom. The sound of her rummaging around, then running water, breaks

the silence. When she comes back, she sits on the edge of the bed and hesitantly pulls my eye patch off.

My body stiffens. Even though it's dark, I don't want her to see me that way. "Penny..."

"Shh..." she says, placing a hot, wet washcloth over my face. "Just let me take care of you for once, okay? I could use a distraction, or else I'm just going to keep crying."

I'm powerless to protest. I can't stand to see her cry. And, I have to admit, the warmth feels good on my forehead, melting into my sinuses.

"Lily called earlier," she says quietly. "I told her you were asleep."

"Did you tell her?" I can't say the words. Not yet.

"Yes. She said she's very sorry, and she loves you." Her voice wavers with tears. "She feels bad that she wasn't here for us."

I inhale a deep breath through the cloth. "I'm glad you were here when it happened. It means a lot. Are you okay?"

She sniffles. "My heart feels obliterated, but I'm glad she passed peacefully. I'm grateful I was here and able to kiss her goodbye. I'm just going to miss her so much."

Suddenly, I remember walking up behind Penny earlier as she was leaning over Cherry's body, saying goodbye. I could've sworn I heard her say *I'll never forget the day Daddy brought you home...*

Those would've been Brianna's words. Not Penny's.

I press the cloth into my temples. I was upset and not thinking clearly. I must've misunderstood her or been thinking that if Bri were here, how devastated she'd be.

"You're still wearing your wet jeans," she says.

I let her derail my thoughts because my head hurts too much to overthink anything right now. "I'm too fucking tired to move."

The mattress lifts as she stands. With the cloth over my face, I can't see what she's doing, but I hear her open and close my dresser drawer.

"Maybe you should put your sweats on." I wonder how she knew exactly where my clothes were. "So you don't fall asleep in wet clothes."

I pull the cloth off my face and glance up at her in the dark.

"Will you let me do something for you?" she asks gently.

"I can undress myself."

"That's not what I was going to do. I'm going to go get something from my room." She pauses, and an odd shift in the air fills that brief silence. "As long as it's okay if I come back?"

The word *no* creeps up my throat and sits on my tongue. Because that's the right answer. My daughter's best friend shouldn't be in my room at one a.m., no matter how sad and emotionally fucked up we both are.

"Sure," comes out of my mouth.

Cursing myself under my breath, I change my pants while she's gone, then fall back on the bed. My back, arms, and hands are killing me from digging a four-by-four hole in the near-frozen ground for my poor, sweet dog.

Minutes later, Penny returns holding a small black ceramic jar.

"What's that?"

She lights a match and holds it to a wick in the center of the jar. Soon the corner of my bedroom is glowing.

Her long hair is ruffled, and her eyes are swollen. I don't think she's gotten any rest tonight, either. Despite that, I catch her faint smile in the dim, flickering glow. "You'll see."

At this point, I'm too depressed and sore to care what it is, but the scent of it—almond and lavender—is nice. I close my eye and try not to keep seeing Cherry in a box. I try to

remember her when she was a puppy—just a tiny ball of wiggling fuzz—and how Brianna would laugh over every little thing Cherry did. This house used to be such a happy place.

I want it to be filled with smiles again.

I don't move or say a word when Penny pulls the bandages off my hands. Intrigued, I watch as she carefully pours the warmed wax from the jar into her palm. She takes my hand between hers and slowly massages the warm liquid into my hand.

And it feels fucking amazing.

“Damn...” I breathe out.

“It's a special wax that liquefies into a lotion. It has oils in it for soothing and healing,” she says, pouring more of the wax directly onto my other palm, then gently spreading it to the tops of my hands, over my cracked knuckles.

The intimate touch makes my pulse race, banishing the chill from my bones, leaving my body heated in a way I haven't felt in a very long time.

“It's nice,” I push the words past the tightness in my throat.

Her fingers languidly slide between mine, fusing our hands together, drenched in the hot, creamy lotion. It's one of the most sensual things I've ever felt in my fucking life. My cock agrees.

I clear my throat. “You don't have to do this—”

“Alex, please let me do something nice for you,” she pleads, continuing to glide her hands over mine, from my wrists to my fingertips. Her hands are warm, incredibly soft, and slippery, slathered in the wax. “You did so many nice things for me when I was younger. You let me come over here all the time. You taught me all about art. You stocked your fridge with juice boxes for me. You believed in all my strange little quirks.” She's completely clueless that her touch is driving me wild. “You took such good care of Cherry—carrying her up and down the stairs, wheeling her around in the wagon. You saved money for eighteen years for Lily to have a college fund, even though you were told over and over

that you weren't good enough for her. You deserve to have someone do nice things for you, too."

Maybe so. But what I don't need is an epic hard-on from an eighteen-year-old girl.

"Doesn't it feel amazing?" she asks with complete innocence.

Fuck.

I swallow hard. "Yeah. It feels great."

"It should help your blisters heal."

The blisters are the last thing on my mind. But I gotta give her credit; she's doing a good job distracting me from this day of hell.

Silence falls between us as our hands caress each other, slower and slower, fingers intertwining, palms molding together. The warmth and gentleness of her touch slowly lull me to a place I ache to go but can't, not with her.

After a few torturously tantalizing minutes, I force myself to sit up. She doesn't let go of my hands.

I don't let go of hers, either.

But I should. Now.

"Thanks for making me feel better," I say softly.

"I can't stand to see you in pain." Her voice is barely above a whisper. "I want to take it all away."

If things were different...if she were someone else. If she was older... if she wasn't Lily's best friend... if she wasn't *my* friend... then maybe, just maybe...

My mind quickly slams shut on that thought like an iron door, obliterating any chance of Penny's words planting a seed of hope in my heart.

"You do take it all away," I finally say, unable to mask the grief and forbidden wishes in the hoarseness of my voice.

Reaching up, she pushes my hair out of my face and slowly leans into me. My breath catches in my throat when she

kisses my forehead, then my eyelid, then each of my cheeks. Her kisses are gentle, like butterflies. Pulling back a bit, she opens her eyes. The flash of familiar mossy green makes my heart pound. In a blink, she softly presses her mouth against mine. Tiny electrical sparks tingle across our lips like static. Surprised, we both separate.

My mind reels.

Did she seriously just kiss me?

That was unexpected. Sweet. And—I hate myself for even thinking this— sexy.

The tingling travels to my scalp, then down to my chest, leaving me feeling warm, light-headed, and borderline high.

Touching her chin, I bring her face to mine and kiss her softly on the lips, then linger there with a million feelings pumping through my veins. Red-hot desire thrums through me. My cock swells with hunger. I want to pull her onto my lap and devour every inch of her.

Fuck. I don't know what we're doing.

Cast by the flickering candle, our silhouette dances on the wall like a slow-motion movie. The room is still and quiet, like it's watching and waiting to see what happens next.

I inhale a deep breath and hold it, trying to get my head, my heart, and my dick back together.

Nothing can happen next. Not with Penny Rose, my little darlin' who I've known since she was just six years old. And definitely not when we're both drowning in a cocktail of emotions.

She swallows, still just inches from my face. Close enough for another kiss. "You must be exhausted," she says to break the silence.

I nod. "Yeah..."

"Can I..." Her tongue skims over her lips. "Can I lie down next to you just for a little while? The house feels so lonely without Lily and Cherry. I don't want to be alone yet."

I should absolutely say no. It's bad enough I momentarily lost my mind and kissed her. That never should've happened. Letting her sleep next to me crosses over into hell-no territory. But I can't get the word out, no matter how hard I try. My throat is paralyzed.

Pulling the comforter back, I climb under the blankets, leaving the side next to me folded down exactly as I used to.

Wordlessly, Penny settles into the dip in the mattress next to me. I don't have to turn her way to see that she's curled on her side, facing me and that she's pulled the blanket up to her chin.

Inhaling an unsteady breath, I close my eye and lift my right arm. My heart surges when, like clockwork, she immediately snuggles into my side, molding her body perfectly against mine, laying her head on my chest. Simultaneously, I wrap my arm around her as she encircles my waist, just as I knew she would.

Finally, I exhale. My body relaxes against hers. My pulse slows with contentment. The hum fades to a low purr.

The guilt I expected to feel doesn't come.

The ache in my heart subsides.

I don't let myself question or wonder. I surrender to the comfort and familiarity and hold her tighter.

There're no words to explain it, except that nothing has ever felt so right.

Chapter 23



ALEX

“Dad? Dad!”

My eyes spring open. Lily’s blurry form slowly comes into view at the foot of the bed.

“Huh?” I quickly sit up and touch the empty space next to me, which feels emptier than usual. I could’ve sworn Bri was just here.

I rub my hand over the blanket, remembering her resting on my chest, my hand caressing her long hair, her soft voice telling me to just rest.

Lily frowns. “Are you okay?”

Groggy, I rub my eyes with my palms. More memories of her sleeping in my arms, her body wrapped around mine, drift through my hazy mind. Suddenly, my heart flies up into my throat.

It was Penny.

Here in my bed.

Did that happen? Or was I dreaming?

Please let that have been a dream. Don’t let me have been that stupid.

But then the even worse memory of losing Cherry yesterday slams into me like a freight train.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t a dream. That was too incredibly fucking real.

Lily is staring at me expectantly. “I’m okay,” I tell her. “When did you get home?”

“Aunt Kirsty just dropped me off. I was worried about you, so I came home a little early.” Her eyes narrow at me. “I know you’re really sad about Cherry, and please don’t get mad at me for asking, but you’re not hungover, are you?” Worry trails in her voice.

“No. I haven’t had a drink in a long time. You just woke me from a dead-ass sleep.”

Her nose twitches and it’s odd to me that she doesn’t do it in the way her mother did, but somehow, Penny does. “It smells weird in here,” she says. “Like flowery cookies.”

I spy Penny’s lotion candle on the nightstand. The way she touched my hands with the warm waxy lotion was one of the most intimate things I’ve ever felt in my life. How the hell could her touch have been so caring and such a fucking turn-on at the same time?

Shit.

I hope she went to her own room right after she massaged the wax into my hands and my exhausted, grief-stricken mind just dreamed the kissing-and-cuddling-in-bed parts.

Quickly looking away from the candle, I ask, “Did you have a good time at Kirsty’s?”

Lily nods. “Yes, but after Penny called, I couldn’t stop thinking about you and Cherry. I really loved her, even though I didn’t get to love her for as long as you did.”

Bri was obsessed with the idea of having our baby and the puppy grow up together. She wanted to take tons of cute photos of them doing things as they grew up. The only picture I have of them together is Cherry lying on Bri’s stomach while she was pregnant.

“I’ll show you something cool.” I reach across to the nightstand, open the drawer, and pull out that very photo that I keep next to my bed with a few of my other special favorites. I hand it to Lily.

“Oh my God, Dad.” Her eyes well with tears. “Is this Mom pregnant with me? And look at Cherry so young!”

“Yup.” I smile at the bittersweet memory. “I think Cherry knew you were in there. She used to wag her tail when she felt you kick.”

“Seriously, Dad? That’s so adorable and sweet.” She throws her arms around my shoulders and hugs me—a rarity for her.

“I’m so sorry, Dad. It all really sucks.”

I hug her back before she has a chance to pull away, which she quickly does. “As Kelley says, with deep love comes deep pain.”

She tilts her head. “That’s sad but also kinda beautiful.”

“It is.”

She sighs. “I’m going to make breakfast. Maybe chocolate chip waffles will cheer you up?” she asks hopefully.

I have zero appetite, but I agree to breakfast because I never want to miss any time with my daughter. I missed enough already.



Lily and Penny are in the kitchen mixing waffle batter when I get down there. As I walk by Cherry’s empty dishes, I automatically reach for them to start getting her breakfast and meds. But then reality sets in, and a stab of pain pierces my heart. She’s gone. I have no idea what I’m going to do with another huge void in my life. Cherry was with me all day, every day, for nineteen years. That’s even longer than Brianna was in my life.

As I sit at the table, I glance at Penny by the coffee maker and search for clues about last night. I’m still trying to convince myself that most of last night was a dream.

She catches me staring and smiles. A hint of pink colors her cheeks.

Shit.

“I made you a toasted marshmallow latte,” she says a few minutes later, setting my favorite mug in front of me. The girls have turned half of my kitchen into a coffee bar stocked with at least a dozen different-flavored syrups and canisters of toppings. The toasted marshmallow is my weakness—especially when Penny makes it with whipped cream, marshmallow, and smashed graham crackers on top. I wouldn’t be caught dead drinking this fluffy concoction in public, but I’ll drink it all day here at home.

Before I can say thank you, Lily slides a plate of waffles in front of me.

“You two are spoiling me. And making me fat,” I say, pouring syrup over my waffles.

“We’re just trying to cheer you up,” Lily says.

“You’re far from fat, Alex. You look great.” Penny adds.

I almost choke on my food.

Lily falls into the seat next to me and chimes in with Penny. “We’ll let you know if you start getting a dad bod.”

“Great,” I mumble.

Penny’s knee bumps into mine under the table when she takes the seat across from me. She doesn’t move her leg away but leaves it there, lightly pressing against mine.

I steal a glance at her, but she’s busy cutting her waffle up into small pieces.

Is the touch her way of reminding me something happened last night? Or is it just as innocent as the hundreds of touches we’ve shared over the years?

I’m probably reading way too much into all this.

“Are you going to make a headstone for Cherry?” Lily asks.

Of course I’m going to make something epic for my dog. “Yeah. I have some ideas.”

“You could have her taxidermized. Since she’s been out in the cold, and it only happened yesterday, it’s not too late—”

“Lily!” Penny interjects, dropping her fork onto the table. “No. That would be horrible.”

“Why? Lots of people do it. I’ve read about it. We could preserve her and put her right over there where she used to sleep.”

“I don’t think I could deal with that,” I say. “Let’s just let her resting place be in the yard.”

The idea of Cherry’s body forever sitting in the kitchen, as sentimental as that might be, makes me feel sick. I have enough issues letting the dead go already. I don’t need them propped up in the house.

“Your obsession with dead things is getting super weird,” Penny tells Lily.

“It’s not weird,” Lily counters. “People have been preserving and displaying the dead for years and years. It’s very popular in some cultures.”

I nod vaguely. “That’s true, but—”

“I think it’s totally bad timing to talk about *now*,” Penny interrupts. “Especially over breakfast when we wanted to cheer your dad up.”

Lily swallows a mouthful of waffle. “Sorry, Dad.”

“It’s okay. I respect your macabre passion. I’m just not in a good headspace right now.”

My daughter nods. “You have to go through the stages of grief.”

I’ve been drowning in the stages of grief for half my life.

I wish I knew where Lily’s fascination with death came from. I don’t know if it’s something she picked up from her twisted grandparents or if it’s because her mother died right after childbirth. Or maybe she watched too many horror films growing up.

She puts her dishes in the sink. “I’m going to go upstairs and unpack my bag.”

After Lily leaves the room, Penny gets up to rinse the dishes. I stand next to her and take each dish from her to put in the dishwasher.

“Did something happen last night?” I ask her, keeping my voice low.

“Something like what?”

“Between us.”

She turns to me and leans her hip against the counter. “You don’t remember?”

“It’s a bit cloudy. Did we sleep together? Or did I dream that?”

A teasing smile tips her lips. The perfect lips I kissed last night and have to look away from right now so I don’t do it again.

“Do you usually dream about me, Fox?”

“No.” I scoff. “Stop being a little smart-ass.”

“We slept *next* to each other because we were both sad and lonely.” She tilts her head, a slight line creasing her forehead. “You seriously don’t remember that?”

“I do. I was just—”

“What? Hoping it was a dream?”

“Yeah.”

Her nose scrunches. My heart pounds like a bass drum, echoing in my ears.

“Why would you want it to be a dream?” she asks, voice full of innocence.

“For millions of obvious reasons, but let’s just go with the top three. You’re only eighteen, you’re Lily’s best friend, and your parents entrusted me with your care.” I punctuate each one by holding a finger up.

“We were only comforting each other in grief. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

There is, though. Because that hand massage turned way too sensual. Then there were kisses. Little kisses, with no tongue, but still—kisses that had enough power to turn me on and still continue to haunt my thoughts. Then we fell asleep hugging and I slept better than I have in years. All things I’ve only ever done with my wife.

All things I want to do with Penny again.

I’m only slightly reassured by the fact that she wasn’t in the bed when I woke up. For all I know, she could’ve disappeared ten minutes after I fell asleep.

“Nothing happened, Alex. It’s okay to comfort someone you care about, right?”

The way she says it so innocently makes me feel like I’m being an overreactive asshole. Not socializing for eighteen years has made me completely dysfunctional. Especially around females, apparently.

I nod. “Of course.”

Her eyes linger on my face, and an odd feeling rustles in my stomach like there’s more to be said.

But right then, the back door flies open and Kelley slides in like Kramer from a Seinfeld episode.

Perfect timing.

“Hey. I didn’t know you were stopping by today,” I say.

“A little birdie sent me a text, so I thought I’d come by to make sure you’re okay.”

Penny smiles knowingly. “I’m gonna go work on my paper.”

When she’s gone, Kelley hugs me and slaps my back. “I’m so sorry about Cherry, man. She was the coolest dog.”

“She was. I’m gonna miss the hell out of her.”

He pulls back and holds on to my shoulders, studying me. “You doing okay?”

Everyone is waiting for me to fall apart. Everyone, including me.

“Yeah,” I nod and force a smile. “I’ll be alright in a few days. It just hit hard, ya know?”

“I know. She had a great life, though, nineteen years is fucking amazing.”

“It still doesn’t feel like long enough.”

He makes himself a latte and we sit at the table. From the window, I see the snow has already melted and the mound of dirt where I buried Cherry is visible. An ache crawls up from my chest and settles in my throat.

“How are you and the kid getting along?” Kelley asks, breaking into my thoughts.

“Good. Much better than we were.”

He sips his coffee. “Good to hear. I told you things would get better in time.”

“It’s crazy living with teenagers. Their moods are all over the place.” I nod my head toward the corner. “I’ve got a mini Starbucks in my kitchen. Lily leaves clothes and makeup everywhere, and Penny trails around after her cleaning it up. Every TV in the house is on twenty-four seven.”

“I still think you’re nuts for letting Penny move in. Double the trouble.”

“Nah, she’s a good kid. And she helps smooth things out a lot with me and Lily. If it was just us here living alone, I think we’d have been at each other’s throats. Penny’s an amazing cook, too. I keep telling her she doesn’t have to cook dinner for us, but she loves to.”

“She texted me first thing this morning to tell me about Cherry. She’s worried about you. I’ll tell ya what, that girl cares about you a fuckin’ lot. It’s a shame she’s so young ’cause otherwise, she’d be perfect for you.”

I shift in my chair. “She’s a good friend. Just like you.”

“Friends don’t keep the bed warm,” he says. Ironic, considering my experience last night proved to be the exact opposite. “There’s a new waitress at the bar who I think would like you. She’s cute, a single mom. She’s got a sweet personality.”

“So why don’t you ask her out?”

“I’m too all over the place to date someone. You’re already settled down. So settled down, you’re practically glued here.”

I shake my head and gulp the rest of my latte. That last bit is always the sweetest. “I don’t want to get involved with anyone. I’ve had enough heartache for a lifetime.”

He pins an impatient look at me. “Not everything has to end in heartache.”

“I don’t wanna find out.”

“Dude, if your life was a movie, I’d already have your plot twist figured out. You’re not really here.”

Laughing, I say, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You never leave the property. We never see you talking to anyone else. Everyone comes to you. Every scene happens here. If this was a movie, there’d be some crazy moment when we realize you’re not really here and you’re either a ghost or everyone else is hallucinating. Like in *Sixth Sense* or *The Others*.”

I raise my eyebrow at him. “You watch way too many movies. You know that, right?”

“I’m serious. You gotta get out of here and do things. And not just go pick through garbage and buy groceries. You hafta meet people. Live.”

“Can we ever have a conversation without you playing therapist?”

He grins. “Nope.”

“I love ya, man, but focus on your own life.”

Leaning back in his chair, he says, “Actually, I am. I’ve got some cool news I was going to tell you later this week when I stopped by. But since I’m here, I’ll tell you now.”

“Cool news would be great right about now.”

“There’s a tribute concert happening in three months for Dylan King. They’re calling it DylanFest. It’s the anniversary of his death. Somebody sent the guys at Seven Shot a video of me singing their covers at the bar. They love my voice and stage presence so much they want me to sing with them at the concert. Can you fucking believe that? I’m going to sing with Seven Shot. In front of a huge-ass crowd.”

Dylan King is the former lead singer of rock group Seven Shot—Kelley’s favorite band. Dylan was killed in a wreck years ago, and Kelley’s band has been covering Seven Shot’s songs since he was in high school. Somehow, Kelley’s voice is a dead ringer for Dylan’s unique vocals.

“Are you serious?” I say. “That’s fucking wild.”

“I nearly shit my pants when their manager called me. This is like my fucking dream.”

“I have zero doubt that you’re gonna kill it, bro.”

“I want you to be there. So you’re gonna have to leave the house. I’ll tie you up and throw you in the back of my truck if I have to.”

I let out a laugh. “Alright. I’ll make an exception for you. There’s no way I can miss something as cool as this.”

“I’m kinda nervous. I never thought I’d be on stage in front of thousands of people with my favorite band.”

My gut tells me this is going to be the start of the music career Kelley has been dreaming about since he was a kid.

“You’ll do great, Kel. Don’t think about the band and the crowd. Just sing like you always do. If they didn’t believe in your talent, they wouldn’t be putting you in front of all their fans. Especially for a tribute concert.”

He tips his chair back on two legs and drums his fingers on the table. “Yeah. I hope you’re right. I just don’t want pissed-

off fans throwing shit at me on stage.”

“That ain’t gonna happen. Trust me, you’re gonna nail it and the fans are gonna go wild.”

“Fingers crossed. In the meantime, I’ll be rehearsing with them. It’s surreal.”

I smile. “I’m really proud of you.”

“That means a lot.” He rights the chair and stands. “I gotta get going. I just wanted to check in on you.”

“I’m fine. Really.”

“Text or call me if you want to talk. And stop being a weird plot twist,” he yells over his shoulder as the back door shuts behind him.

What he said reminds me of a poem Penny wrote a few years ago. It’s pinned to the wall in her little space in my studio:

*You think I can't see you
But I do
A lingering ghost
Peeking from the corners
There in the shadows
You think I can't feel you
But I do
Haunting my dreams
With my name on your lips*

Chapter 24



PENNY

“You look beautiful,” Alex comments, slowly shaking his head in awe.

Lily immediately blushes but smiles from ear to ear at the compliment.

“Thanks, Dad.” She turns to me. “I don’t know why I let you talk me into a dress. I don’t like my legs out. I feel naked.”

“But it’s *prom*,” I laugh, spinning in my three-inch heels until my champagne-colored tulle gown billows around my legs. “Everyone should wear a dress at least twice—for their prom and their wedding.” I don’t miss the double take Alex lands in my direction as I twirl across the room like a ballerina.

“Great,” Lily says. “Then this will be the last dress I ever wear because I don’t think I’ll ever get married. I can’t even find a boyfriend.” She pulls the hem of the off-shoulder black gown. Earlier, she let me style her hair and makeup and Alex is right—she looks absolutely beautiful. The black silk dress and smoky makeup make her unique eyes pop.

“Music to my ears,” Alex teases. “Before you were born, your mom and I agreed you couldn’t date until you were twenty-five.”

I raise my eyebrow playfully. “Are you sure Brianna agreed to that?”

He grins in response. “Yup.”

“You might get your wish at the rate I’m going, Dad.”

Lily and I are going to the prom with twin brothers, as friends only.

“Can you two stand in front of the fireplace so I can take some pictures?” I ask, pulling my phone out of my tiny purse. I notice a glimmer of tears in Alex’s eye as I’m snapping the photos. It makes me happy to see how much he loves being in Lily’s life.

Alex takes my phone from me. “I promised your mom I’d take some pictures of you for her.”

“She’ll love that.” I put my arm around Lily, and we smile as Alex taps at the screen. He’s horrible with phones, so I silently hope we don’t end up headless in the photos. I want to hang a few of our prom pictures in the shed. Alex has been letting me and Lily add to Brianna’s collection.

Snatching the phone back from Alex, I say, “I’m going to video chat my mom so she can see us.”

“Look how gorgeous you are!” My mom exclaims as soon as the video connects.

“Thanks.” I turn the phone toward Lily. “Look how beautiful Lily looks. I did her hair and makeup.”

“You both look stunning. Wow, Lily, your eyes are mesmerizing.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Rose. As you can see, Penny is forcing me to wear a dress and I already can’t wait to take it off.”

“Aww, you look so pretty. But I hated dresses when I was young, too, so I totally get where you’re coming from.”

I turn the phone camera back toward myself. My father appears in the background behind my mother.

“Penny, I barely recognize you,” he says, smiling. “You look like you’re in your twenties.”

“You’re just not used to seeing me in makeup.” Lily did my look tonight in bolder colors than I usually use, and I have to admit, she made me look like a runway model.

“Where’s these boys you’re going with?” My father asks.

“They’re not here yet.”

He leans toward the camera. “And you say they’re just friends?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, well, make sure he doesn’t get handsy with you.”

Only my father would say *handsy*. “I’m sure he won’t.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mr. Rose. If either one of those kids touches them, I’ll break their fucking fingers,” Alex yells from behind me.

My dad laughs. “I don’t doubt it. Thank you for watching out for Penny for us.”

I turn the camera toward Alex. “Always,” he says, and it makes my lungs tighten.

“Okay,” I say, turning the camera back so my parents can see me. “I should go. The guys should be here any minute.”

“Have a great time, honey,” Mom says. “We love you. Please text me during the night and when you get home, so I know you’re okay. And you can call me too. I can’t wait to hear about your night.”

“I will, Mom. I love you guys.” I blow them a kiss and end the chat.

Lily looks at me and laughs. “Handsy,” she teases.

“Hey,” Alex says. “Mr. Rose is right. Most guys think they’re gonna get laid at prom.”

“Did you?” Lily shoots back.

“Did I what?”

“Get laid at prom?”

“I went with your mom.”

“Well, the question still stands,” Lily prods.

“No,” Alex finally answers. “We didn’t have sex at prom.”

Lily goes to the mirror near the hall and touches her hair. “Were you two virgins when you got married?”

I can see Alex chewing the inside of his cheek.

“Lily,” I say, slipping my shoes on. “That’s kinda personal.”

“I know, but I’m just curious. I really don’t know anything about how they met and fell in love.” She spins around to look at her father. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Alex runs his hand through his hair. “Yeah, we were. We gave each other promise rings a few months after we met.”

“Is that like a purity ring?” Lily asks.

“Yup.”

“That’s so sweet and romantic,” I remark. “I would love to have a relationship like that. With someone who I know really loves me for me.”

I look down at the ruby ring and straighten it on my finger. In a way, it was my own promise ring from Alex. He promised to be my friend forever. Even though we hit a speed bump, he’s still honoring that promise.

But ever since the night Cherry died, things have been different. I tried to play it off as nothing when Alex asked me about it the next morning. I could see he was nervous and worried, and I didn’t want to add to his emotional stress.

Actual sparks flew when we kissed. I felt that strange, intoxicating energy zip through my body, setting all the tiny nerves on fire. When I slid under the covers with him, it was like something inside me shifted and took over. I should’ve felt nervous and shy being in bed with a very good-looking, half-dressed grown man, but I wasn’t. Not the teeniest bit. It was as if my body was on autopilot—moving me right into his arms and snuggling up with him in a way that was incredibly, undeniably intimate.

And familiar.

For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of incredible peace.

The void I've felt since as far back as my memories go—the homesick feeling that kept me awake in tears for so many nights and pushed me to escape the house and wander, searching for the thing that would fill the void—vanished.

I finally felt at home. In body, mind, heart, and soul. Exactly where I belonged.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since that night. I can still feel the warmth of his lips on mine, the gentle grip of his fingers on my chin, his arm around me as I drift off to sleep. I'm sure Alex felt the connection that night too, even though he either somehow doesn't remember it—which I don't believe—or won't let himself admit it.

But now what? Am I just supposed to forget it happened? How can I possibly do that when every part of me feels like it's endlessly aching for him? He must feel it, too...I can't even grasp that he might not feel the same way.

When I look up, he's watching me. His intense expression sends a flash of heat to the pit of my stomach. The burn spreads to my thighs.

Slowly, I uncross and recross my legs beneath the fluffy gown. His dark gaze languidly travels down the length of my leg to my ankle. My thighs clench when the tip of his tongue wets his bottom lip.

I flex my foot in his direction—a secret gesture to let him know that I know he's looking. When his attention shifts back to my face, I smile discreetly at him.

Shaking his head, he gives me a sexy grin and winks at me before moving to answer the front door.

I was right. He feels it, too.

Chapter 25



PENNY

Matt and Mitch arrive right on time in a black limo. Even though we're not going to any parties after prom, the four of us chipped in and got a limo since none of us has ever been in one before.

I feel like a celebrity as I climb into the car. I wasn't expecting the huge wraparound leather-back seat, TV screen, fiber optic purple lights, and bar.

Like little kids, the boys sat on one end of the couch and Lily and I sat on the other. Matt, or maybe Mitch, poured us each a plastic cup of sparkling cider. I can't tell the guys apart, but Mitch is my date. They're cute—tall, with dark hair and hazel eyes, but they're both incredibly shy. They were homeschooled until their junior year, so, unfortunately, they have a hard time integrating and making new friends. It doesn't help that they stick to each other like they're glued together.

But they're smart and polite. I'm pretty sure they'd both pass out if I raised my voice or shot them a dirty look, so they seemed safe as dates.

We laugh and joke about the sordid things people must've done on the very seats we're sitting on, but my mind keeps wandering back to the look on Alex's face when he took pictures of me and Lily with the twins earlier. Especially when Mitch put his arm around my waist. Alex's brows instantly narrowed on the poor guy like a hawk stalking prey. Maybe it was his overprotective, fatherly side coming out, but I've never seen him look like that before.

Then, before we all left, he warned the boys that they better treat his girls right.

His girls.

Something about the way he said that made my insides flutter.

It takes twenty minutes to get to the banquet hall where the prom is being held. As we walk through the glass lobby, I feel like I've been here before, but I'm sure I never have.

We're immediately ushered to a small sitting room where a photographer takes our photos in front of a fake backdrop. With a bittersweet pang, I wish I were here with a real date so I'd have memories to cherish forever. Although, I suppose the chances of going to prom with someone I'd end up spending the rest of my life with is pretty slim. That rarely happens.

Alex had that, though. He and Brianna were in love when they went to the prom, then married a year later.

Here, a tiny voice in my head suddenly whispers. They got married here.

How could I possibly know that?

"You okay?" Mitch, or maybe it's Matt, asks me as we make our way down the hall to the banquet room.

Blinking, I nod, fighting off the sudden feeling that I might burst into tears. "Just admiring all the pretty decorations."

A stupid lie. Balloons in our school colors aren't the least bit exciting.

"You looked like you spaced out," he says, eyeing me.

Lily makes a face at him and pushes herself between us. "She does that sometimes. Usually, it's when she's inspired by something for her poetry." Leaning close to me, she whispers, "Are you okay? Do you feel like you're going to pass out again?"

"I'm okay." I smile, but it's forced and makes my face feel odd. "It's just warm in here."

“You write poetry?” Mitch asks as we navigate through small crowds of classmates to find our table.

“I do. My goal is to have books published with my poetry and artwork. I paint and sketch images that relate to each poem.”

“Her stuff is amazing,” Lily beams. “So haunting and thought-provoking.”

My cheeks heat as Mitch pulls my chair out. I’m not used to discussing my art and work with people other than my mom, Lily, and Alex.

“Is that what you plan to do career-wise?” he asks with a slight tone of skepticism.

I scoot my chair closer to the table. “Hopefully.”

“Can you really make money writing poetry?” Matt asks. Or maybe he’s Mitch. Somehow, I’m sitting between both guys, and I’ve lost track of which one is which.

God. I’m so confused.

I catch Lily’s attention. “Switch seats so we’re sitting next to each other,” I suggest. When she does, I turn to the boy still seated next to me, who, I hope, is Mitch. “Lots of people make money with their poetry and artwork.”

“Yeah,” he says. “But you have to be really talented.”

“She is,” Lily says before I can get a word in. “If you saw her paintings and read her words, you’d agree.”

“How about you? Do you have any career plans?” I ask Mitch, hoping to get the subject off me.

He nods. “I’m going to be an electrical engineer.”

“That sounds great,” I say, even though I have absolutely no idea what that is. Anything with the word engineer in it sounds important, though.

Lily tells the boys she wants to do mortuary makeup, and I almost crack up when they both make the exact same appalled face.

“The hall looks so beautiful,” I say to fill the awkward silence.

Everyone nods and murmurs in agreement.

Yup. More balloons and tiny fairy lights.

Olivia and Ava join us with their dates, and our table soon becomes busy with chatter. I hardly ever see Olivia and Ava. They’re both in serious relationships and spend all their time with their boyfriends or going on double dates. I wish me and Lily could go on double dates, but I don’t see that happening with the Mitch and Matt duo. They’ve been firmly placed in the friend zone.

The band takes the stage, and at the first slow song, Ava insists we all get up and dance. The moment I’ve been dreading. Mitch and I stand about a foot apart and awkwardly shuffle together on the dance floor. Thankfully, almost everyone else is doing the same.

“You look really pretty,” Mitch says.

“You look nice, too.”

“Thanks for coming with me. It beats sitting at home with my brother when everyone else in our class is having fun.”

“Agreed. I’d be sitting at home watching reruns of *Gilmore Girls* and *Grey’s Anatomy* with Lily.”

“I love *Grey’s Anatomy*. As dumb as it sounds, watching that show is what made me want to be a doctor.”

“I thought you wanted to be an electrical engineer?”

Letting out a laugh, he says, “No, that was Matt.”

Yikes. Major screwup on my part.

“In the future, maybe you guys should date separately. Or wear name tags.”

“See this?” He taps a tiny birthmark right above his eyebrow. “That’s how you can tell it’s me.”

I nod. “Ahh. I’ll be on the lookout for that from now on.”

We endure one more slow dance but scurry back to our table when it's over. Lily looks just as relieved as I feel to be off the dance floor.

“Screw these shoes,” she says. “I’m taking them off.”

“You could’ve worn your Doc Martens,” Matt-with-No-Birthmark says. “I wouldn’t have minded. I think they’d look kinda hot with the dress.”

Lily blows out a breath. “I wish I had. High heels aren’t my thing. But my dad and Miss Fashionista over there convinced me to look all girly.”

“You could totally pull off girly in Doc Martens,” Matt says.

I’m thinking he might have a crush on her.

Oblivious to Matt’s subtle flirting, Lily pulls her phone out of her clutch and stares at the screen for a few moments before typing.

“It’s my dad checking on us,” she tells us. “He’s turning into a helicopter.”

That reminds me to send my mom a quick text. Just as I hit send on my message to her, my phone chimes with an incoming message.

ALEX:

Checking in on you, too... having fun?

Smiling, I type back.

Yes. It’s a little awkward. Make that a lot awkward.

ALEX:

That kid behaving himself?

So far ;-)

ALEX:

Good.

A few seconds pass before another message comes through.

ALEX:

I didn't get a chance to tell you how beautiful you look.

Chewing my lip, I glance at Lily to make sure she's not paying attention to me.

You kinda did tell me. You couldn't keep your eyes off me.

ALEX:

Eye, sweetheart ;-)

Oopsy. I'm so sorry.

My heart sinks. I've always made sure not to slip up when it comes to his eye, and now I had to go and do it for the first time when he seemed to be flirting with me.

Wait...is Alex really flirting with me?

Reading back over the messages, I realize he complimented me, but I flirted with him first.

I'm not even sure why. I just replied that way without even thinking.

ALEX:

Don't worry about it. Everyone does it. It's a habit to say eyes.

I know, but I've always tried really hard to never do that.

ALEX:

I know you have. Did you think I didn't notice?

Now I feel even worse.

ALEX:

Don't. I'll let it slide since you're having an awkward night.

So, what are you doing tonight? Do you miss the nonstop chatter of two girls in your house?

ALEX:

I actually do. :-) I just did some work, and now I might go sit by the lake.

I've always known about the small lake on Alex's property, but it was off-limits when I was young. He even stopped going there himself to make sure me or Cherry didn't follow him. A long time ago, he told me Cherry fell in when she was just a puppy and almost drowned. But now that the weather is warming up, and he doesn't have to worry about anyone falling in, he's been spending time there. I hate that he secludes himself so much. A good-looking guy his age shouldn't be so weighed down by grief that he sits in the dark alone all the time. His love and loyalty to Brianna are swoonworthy, but wouldn't she want him to move on and be happy?

Yes. A tiny voice in my head whispers.

That sounds nice

ALEX:

It is, but it'd be nicer if I wasn't alone

My eyes lock onto his words on the screen. Wondering... hoping...that he wishes I was there with him.

Could he possibly be thinking that?

“Who are you talking to?” Lily asks, leaning toward me.

I almost drop my phone. “Just my mom.”

The lie came out of my mouth so fast. *Too fast.* I don’t know why I lied. Me and Alex text all the time. It’s not like I’m doing anything wrong.

Am I?

When Lily turns away, I stare at my phone, unsure how I should reply to Alex’s text.

I decide to play it safe and not entice him any further.

That’s true.

The waiter arrives, and I let my attention be carried away by yummy food—vegetable lasagna, cake and tarts, and chocolate fortune cookies. I can’t resist cracking a cookie open and reading my fortune right away:

If you loved them once, you will love them twice.

For some reason, the short quote resonates in my heart. Deciding to save it for my box of treasures at home, I slip the tiny paper into my purse. Before I zip it closed, I notice my phone screen has a message notification.

My finger trembles slightly as I slide it across the screen to read the message.

ALEX:

Maybe I’ll still be out here when you get home.

My heart skips a beat.

He said *you*. Not you and Lily.

Smiling, I turn my attention back to my friends, but my mind is elsewhere, drifting back to a painting I did a long time ago of two figures sitting by the lake, their heads leading against each other, staring up at the stars.

Chapter 26



PENNY

By the time the limo drops us off at the house, I'm filled with so many conflicting emotions about the text exchange with Alex that I practically barrel over the twins and Lily to get out of the car faster. Catching Mitch's wounded expression, I give him a quick, friendly hug and thank him for a fun night. Lily follows my lead, telling the boys we'll see them in school next week.

"Your dad's probably in the studio or by the lake. Should we go say good night before we go inside?" I ask Lily.

Part of me hopes she'll say no. I want to find out if time alone with Alex on this beautiful spring night might get him to reveal any feelings he might have for me. Yet, I'm also terrified to find out that maybe I've been reading too much into things. He might not have any feelings beyond friendship for me at all. That would be horrible. If I can never feel that sense of contentment with Alex like I did the night of Cherry's death—if I have to go through the rest of my life feeling lost, homesick, and pining for him forever—I'll be shattered.

Lily pulls the clip out of her hair and shakes her head. "I sent him a text on the way home. I just want to go upstairs and take a shower. This dress made me itchy all night, and my feet are killing me."

I stand with her at the base of the porch steps, contemplating what I should do. I can just go inside, get ready for bed, and read until I fall asleep like I always do. That's really what I *should* do. Because no matter how I feel, I can't ignore that he's my best friend's father, and he's twenty-one

years older than me. And I live in his house. Logically, this isn't a fire I should be playing with.

But the temptation of going down to the lake to see Alex is making my heart race like I just drank a gallon of coffee. That buzzy energy is coursing through my veins, creating a magnetic pull to him that's impossible to resist.

As I teeter with indecision, something inside me decides to ignore all signs of fires and run with the indescribable pull because I hear myself casually telling Lily, "I think I'll just go say hi and tell him about our night." With a little laugh, I add, "I'll assure him the twins didn't get handsy on us."

Who am I trying to fool? The last thing I want to talk about is a high school dance.

"Okay, I'll probably see you in the morning then." She climbs the steps. "Penny?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks for doing my hair and makeup and helping me pick the dress. I really felt pretty. I never would've gone without you."

Smiling, I say, "You *are* pretty. Every day. But you seriously looked gorgeous tonight. And thank you for agreeing to go. I wouldn't have gone without you, either. I'm glad we ticked off one of our last teen milestones together."

With that, she disappears inside the house.

The tiny round solar lights outlining the dirt path illuminate the ground enough for me to make my way through the dark field. I keep my eyes peeled in case any opossums or foxes decide to dart out of the woods and scare the bejesus out of me. Alex's trail cams are always recording wildlife on his property.

At the end of the path, I pause for a moment and take a deep breath when I glimpse Alex's silhouette at the edge of the pier. Amber string lights are wound around each wooden post, giving the scene a magical glow. My heels clicking against the weathered wood announce my arrival, and I catch the slight turn of his head.

“There you are.” His low, gravelly voice sends goose bumps over my flesh.

“Here I am.”

Taking my shoes off, I sit beside him, letting my feet dangle over the edge above the water.

“Was prom everything you hoped and dreamed it would be?” he teases.

“Sadly, no.” I sigh. “I mean, everything was perfect, and it was fun to get all dressed up, ride in a limo, and see all our friends decked out. I just think it would’ve been better to be with a real date and not a friend. Some of the couples looked so romantic dancing together,” I say wistfully.

Nodding, he looks down at something in his hands that I can’t see.

“Then why didn’t you go with one of the other guys who asked you? Guys who were interested in you as a girlfriend? Like the good-looking kid from the lacrosse team?”

My head snaps toward him. “Who told you that?”

“Lily.”

I look out at the water, not wanting to answer him, because I’m afraid I’ll blurt out the truth—that I have no interest in any kind of boyfriend. A long time ago, I accepted that my heart and soul are a thousand-percent his and his alone.

“Is it because you wanted Lily to go, too? And going with the twins as friends made that happen?”

“Yes,” I admit quietly, uneasy with the half-truth. “No one asked her to go. She kept acting like she didn’t care, but I knew inside she really wanted to go. There was no way I was going to get all dressed up and leave your house with a cute guy in a limo and have a great night while Lily stayed home. Screw that.”

“That was a really sweet thing to do.”

“She’s my best friend,” I reply simply. It’s the truth, but what I don’t tell him is that attending prom with a real date felt

wrong to me. As ridiculous as it sounds, it felt like I'd be cheating on him.

"I know," he says. "But we both know she can be a little difficult. She doesn't do people well."

I bump my shoulder into his. "I wonder who she gets that from?"

He laughs a little. "When Brianna was pregnant, I told her I didn't want Lily to be like me."

"Why would you say that?"

"I wanted her to be happy and confident, have lots of friends, and just love her life. I wanted her to be more like Brianna. Not unhappy like me."

"You've both been through some shit, that's all. There's nothing wrong with either one of you. You're both still lovable."

He bumps my shoulder back. "You think I'm lovable?" he asks in that sexy, teasing tone that makes my thighs tighten.

"Immensely so."

With a tilt of his head, he casts me a sideways glance that's simmering with flirtatious charm. "You're pretty lovable, too." A hint of longing fills his deep voice.

Turning to me, he holds out a flower that he must have plucked from the yard.

"That kid fucked up and didn't even bring you a corsage, so I picked this for you. I know it's not the same, but I thought you might want to save it in that little memory box you have."

My very first flower from a man.

Words catch in my throat. My heart is spinning like a top—twirling with so many emotions I can barely put a sentence together.

"Thank you." The words drift on a quiver in my voice.

"I don't have a pin to stick it to your dress, but how's this?" Leaning closer, he tucks my hair behind my ear and

pushes the flower stem in with it.

“That’s perfect,” I murmur.

“Yeah. It is.” His fiery gaze travels from the flower to my eyes, then drops to my lips.

He moves his hand to my cheek, slowly dragging his knuckles down the side of my face. I wonder if he can feel the flush of my skin.

He must because he pulls his hand away, clears his throat, and looks back out at the dark lake. He’s become as still and quiet as the water.

Slowly moving my bare feet back and forth, I say, “I love how quiet it is. What do you think about when you come out here?”

“Everything. The past. The future.”

“What about the present?”

His chest lifts with a heavy sigh. “I’m trying not to think about the present right now.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s off-limits.” The deepness of his voice is like distant thunder, rumbling with a subtle warning of the storm to come. It makes my insides tremble. “That’s why.”

Realization slowly creeps over me, causing my heart to beat like a hummingbird in my throat.

It’s me.

I’m off-limits.

My mouth is suddenly as dry as sandpaper. I wet my lips and try to mentally compose myself.

I can’t let him convince himself that this roadblock he’s trying to erect between us has to stay. I have to let him know I disagree. After a few moments, I muster up the courage to say something.

“What if it doesn’t have to be off-limits?” I ask carefully.

The crickets pause their symphony as if they are also waiting, with bated breath, for his answer.

“Trust me, little darlin’, it has to be.”

My heart knows he’s wrong. Something inside me has known since I was six years old that Alex Fox is meant to be mine. I’ve never understood it or even questioned it. It was just something I knew—like knowing my favorite color or flavor. It was that simple.

But I’ve also instinctively known anything concerning Alex requires patience.

Which, thankfully, I have loads of.

“I really like when you call me that,” I tell him, swinging my feet above the water. “It makes my heart jump around.”

“Then I should probably stop.”

“You better not.”

The crickets resume their little chorus of chirps.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about after graduation,” I admit. “I don’t think I’m moving to California. I’m going to stay here in town.” I want him to know I’m not someone else in his life who’s going to disappear.

“How do your parents feel about that?”

“They understand. I’ve always had a somewhat distant relationship with them, even when they were here. We get along better when we don’t try to force it. They just want me to be happy.” In a subtle attempt to make my feelings clear, I add, “And this is where I’m happiest.”

He throws me another sideways glance—complete with a grin that tells me he picked up my hint. “Then the road to happiness is the one you should take.”

At the edge of the lake, a frog leaps in with a plop, sending slow ripples across the surface of the water.

“Why did you stop taking the happy roads, Alex?” I ask. “I know losing Brianna changed your life in horrible ways, but

why did you give up pursuing your dreams? That art agent keeps calling, and you send her to voice mail every time.”

He leans back on his palms. “Now you sound like Kelley.”

“Because we care about you.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not, though. Not really. You’re in limbo. It’s like time has just stopped here. I’ve known you for almost twelve years, and nothing has changed. Other than Cherry passing,” I say sadly. “You’re still even wearing the same clothes. Everything in the house is exactly as it was the first time I came here. You still won’t drive. You won’t take your career to the next level. This place...it feels like home. I feel it, too. It’s safe and comforting and warm and cozy. I love it. But it’s also all slowly falling apart, like an old, abandoned house with no one to live in it and love it. And you’re right in the middle of it.”

He’s eerily quiet for a few moments and I hope I haven’t upset him, but finally, he says in a tone so low I have to strain to hear him, “You’re right.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. You don’t have to leave here. You don’t have to let go or forget. You don’t have to feel guilty. But you *can* move forward and do things that make you happy. You deserve to live your life.”

He bows his head, and his hair falls over his face. “I want to. I just... I don’t know how to explain it.” His low, tortured voice pierces my heart like a dagger. “I just can’t get out of this hole. I can’t forget what happened.”

“Alex...” I say softly. “Look at me.”

When he doesn’t, I touch his chin and turn him toward me. Holding his face in my hands, I gaze at his handsome features. I don’t even see the eye patch. I see two beautiful, soulful eyes.

“Listen to me,” I say, my face just inches from his. “It was an accident. It’s not your fault Brianna died. It’s not your fault Lily was taken from you. It’s not your fault your parents left you.” A tear slips from his eye, and it crushes my heart. “Your

art deserves to be seen. You deserve to love and be loved. You have the universe's permission to be happy."

Tears fall down his cheek, wetting my fingers. His chest heaves with deep breaths.

"It's okay, Fox," I whisper as I put my arms around him. "It's okay for you to keep living."

He sighs against me as I hold him in my arms, and we stay there quietly until his breathing calms.

"Fuck," he says after a few minutes. Pulling away, he wipes the side of his face with his hand. "I'm a mess."

"You're not. Not at all."

He blows out a breath and pins me with an intense look. "No one's ever said those things to me in that way before. And hearing them from you...for some reason, it hit hard."

"I'm glad. You needed to hear it."

Chewing the inside of his cheek, he looks toward the barn, then to where his old rusty truck is parked, then to the shed and the spot where Cherry is buried, then to the house.

"I did," he agrees, swooping his gaze back to me. "And now I'm starting to see just how much."

"If I have to, I'll keep telling you until you believe it."

"I'm gonna hold you to that," he warns with a weak smile.

"Good. I want you to."

Contented, I lie back against the pier and stare up at the dark sky studded with bright stars.

"I love nights like this," I say dreamily. "The warm air, the breeze, the sounds of the crickets and owls. And all those stars. Look at the sky, it's like black velvet and—"

"Glitter," he says at the same time I do.

I laugh. "How'd you know I was going to say that?"

"I don't know. I just did."

"Can I ask you something?"

“Something tells me you will, even if I say no.”

“Were you hoping I’d come out here to see you tonight?”

He flashes me my favorite grin—the one that’s crooked in a sexy but adorable way, making my heart flutter like a drunk butterfly. My veins begin to hum.

“Maybe a little,” he says.

I quirk my eyebrow up. “Just a little?”

“Okay, a lot. Happy now?”

“Maybe a little,” I tease back.

He chuckles. “Is that how it’s gonna be?”

“I’m very happy.” I hold his gaze and let the smile fade from my face so he knows I’m serious about what I say next. “I honestly couldn’t wait to see you,” I say softly.

The rhythm of his breathing shifts from steady to a held breath to a slow, cautious exhale.

“Same,” he finally says.

Pulse thrumming, I absorb his admission like a sponge. “I’m glad.”

My racing heartbeats come to a standstill as he slowly leans down and kisses the tip of my nose.

“Something about you really rattles my heart up somethin’ fierce, little darlin’. When I look at you, you’re just like the stars in the sky. All glitter and magical mystery, and I cherish every fucking minute with you,” he says in a husky whisper that makes my insides turn to jelly. “But that’s gotta be enough for right now.”

Nodding slowly, I reach up and touch his lips. “Okay,” I whisper back. “That can be enough. For now.”

His mouth curves into a smile beneath my touch, and nothing has ever made me happier.

Chapter 27



PENNY

“I’m heading out,” I call out to Kris, the veterinary office manager. Since graduating two weeks ago, I just completed my first week of working full-time, and I’ve loved every minute of it. There’s never a dull moment here, but the worst part is resisting the urge to adopt every homeless or neglected pet that comes in. If I had my own house, it’d be filled with cute and furry critters.

“You have any plans for the weekend?” Kris asks, switching off the light to her office and joining me in the hall.

“Nothing exciting. How ’bout you?”

“My in-laws are coming for dinner tomorrow.” She grimaces. “So, I’m in for a night of my mother-in-law’s condescending remarks and hearing stories of how much she loved Mark’s high school sweetheart.” Kris rolls her eyes. “You’d think after twenty years and two kids, she’d accept that he’s in love with me, but no.”

I make an apologetic face. “That sounds awful.”

“It is. But I’m going to conveniently forget how much she hates chocolate cream pie and make that for dessert, so she can’t have any.”

I laugh. “Great revenge plan.”

“Do you need a ride home? I’ll be heading out in about ten minutes.”

“Thanks, but I’m going to walk. It’s really nice out, and I might stop by the café and get a slice of quiche and a

smoothie.” I’ll pick up the same for Lily, as it’s also her favorite.

Kris’s brown eyes light up. “That sounds delish. I may just get the same on my way home.”

“I’ll see you Monday. I hope your mother-in-law doesn’t wreck your entire weekend.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” she says with a laugh. “Have a good weekend, Penny.”

Waving goodbye, I take the back door to the employee parking lot.

I don’t have a car yet. The original plan was my parents were going to fly out here for my graduation and take me car shopping while they were here. But then their flight got canceled twice, and they couldn’t get flights that worked with their work schedules, so they watched me graduate via video chat.

After thinking about it, it seemed silly to buy a car when I wasn’t sure if I’d be moving to California. As a new driver, there’s no way I’d feel safe driving alone across the country. It’d cost a fortune to ship it, and it’d be a pain to sell it. Lily doesn’t mind sharing her car, so it hasn’t been a problem. But now that I’m certain I’ll be staying in New Hampshire, a trip to the car dealership is in my near future.

I blink rapidly when I see Alex in front of me, leaning against a black SUV.

“Alex?”

I blink some more, positive I must be hallucinating. I’ve never seen Alex out in the world before. He’s always seemed somehow oddly bound to his home and property. It’s been weeks since he kissed my nose the night of prom and I’ve been thinking of him nonstop since. Perhaps I’ve manifested him right into the parking lot.

“What are you doing here?” I ask when I approach him. Before he can respond, my mind immediately jumps to tragedy. “Is Lily alright?”

“She’s fine. I just wanted to surprise you.”

“Surprised doesn’t even cover it.” I reach out and squeeze his shoulder playfully. “Are you really here? Or am I dreaming?” My eyes rove over the black long-sleeved shirt showing off his broad chest and biceps. The shirt is new. The jeans look new, too. His usual tan work boots have been replaced with black leather.

What is going on?

With a sheepish grin, he holds up a set of car keys. “I did a thing.”

My brain races to make sense of what he’s saying.

Finally, it clicks. “Oh my God! Did you buy a car?”

“Yup. And I drove it here.”

Such a simple, normal thing. But for him, it’s huge. My chest instantly bursts with excitement for him.

“Wow!” My eyes shift behind him to the glossy SUV. “It’s beautiful. I’m speechless...but so proud of you.”

I try to tamp down my bubbling excitement so as not to embarrass him. I don’t want to strip him of his machismo the first time he’s ventured out in public in years.

“Thought I’d give you a ride home. If you want. If you don’t, it’s—”

“Yes!” I exclaim jubilantly. “Of course I want to.”

Like a gentleman, he opens the passenger door for me, lightly holding my arm as I climb inside, then shutting the door behind me.

“Is this brand new?” I ask when he gets in behind the wheel. The new leather car smell is intoxicating.

“Yup. It’s wild. It’s got cameras, ultrasonic sensors, three-point safety belts, occupant sensing, GPS, all-wheel drive, antilock brakes, multiple airbags...it even has an SOS button to call for help. It cost a fucking arm and leg, but it’s the safest car I could find.” He skates his hand across the sleek dashboard, then turns to face me. His smile falls to a frown.

“Go ahead and say it,” he says. “I sound like a fucking lunatic.”

“No, you don’t.”

“They didn’t have all this stuff when...”

I cover his hand with mine. “Remember what we talked about,” I remind him gently. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Right. But I feel better with all this stuff. Especially if I’m driving you and Lily anywhere.”

Alex had a mild anxiety attack when Kirsty took Lily to get a car of her own. He’d been putting off taking her himself for weeks, and there’d been many fights between them, ending with Lily slamming her door, screaming that not everyone dies in a car crash.

“You did great. But can we take a moment to appreciate this gorgeous buttery tan leather with the black exterior?” I sink back against the seat. “It’s so comfy,” I say, trying to divert his attention away from safety features.

“Do you want to drive?” he asks, fidgeting with the keys, twirling them in his fingers.

Stalling.

“I’d rather you drive so I can look at your arms.”

He actually blushes. “Not the answer I was expecting.”

Laughing, I say, “It must be like getting back on a bicycle, right? Driving again?”

Nodding skeptically, he says, “Yeah. I guess you could say that.”

“It’s a beautiful day. Almost too nice to go home.” I hope he picks up my subliminal hints. It’s safe. It’s not snowing. We don’t need to rush home to get off the road.

“Should we go somewhere?” he asks. “Or do you have plans?”

I can’t resist. “I have zero plans. I’m all yours.” I bat my eyelashes playfully.

He laughs and shakes his head like he's trying to restrain himself from a witty comeback, then puts the key in the ignition. "Behave yourself," he says, backing out of the parking spot. "And put your seat belt on."

As we drive through town, I tell him about my first full-time week, and how each day I mentally pick a favorite patient. Today's favorite was an adorable Corgi, who brought his favorite ball with him and held it in his mouth during his entire exam.

"That's cute. I really miss having a dog."

"Maybe someday you'll feel ready again."

He nods and slips into silence that I'm sure is filled with memories of Cherry. After a few minutes, his mood switches, and he says, "You know what I'm dying for right now? Something I haven't had in years."

"I'm afraid to ask."

"There's this ice cream shop a few towns over, it's in an old trolley car. They make my favorite sundae. When I was younger, I used to ride my motorcycle there to clear my head."

"You haven't driven in years and the first thing you want to do is have ice cream?" I tease. As someone who absolutely loves dessert, I'm sure he has no idea how high that puts him on the attractiveness scale.

"Actually..." He takes his eyes off the road just long enough to throw a crooked grin my way. "The first thing I wanted to do was see you. Ice cream was second."

My heart does a cartwheel.

"I'm beyond honored. And I didn't know you had a motorcycle." Now I'm dying to see him in his tight black T-shirt, tanned, muscular arms stretched to the handlebars, while straddling a rumbling Harley.

"Years ago. I sold it to buy Brianna's engagement and wedding rings."

"Oh."

He pushes his hand through his hair and straightens his eye patch—a sure signal he’s going to say something that bothers him. “She was buried with them on. She never took them off. Sometimes I wonder...maybe I should’ve kept them... given them to Lily.”

I suddenly feel light-headed. Hunting for the window control button on the door, I press it and lower the window a few inches, turning my face toward the cool air. The ruby ring burns my finger beneath the thin band. I gently turn it, wondering if soap got trapped under it when I washed my hands earlier.

“No,” I reply, ignoring the twitch in my temple. “I think Brianna would want to wear her rings for eternity. That’s what I’d want.”

I’ve never felt any jealousy when Alex talks to me about Brianna, which he’s been doing since I was a little girl. In fact, I’ve always felt quite the opposite. Despite my initial visceral reaction to hearing tidbits about her and their life together, I always longed to hear more, to immerse myself in every detail of Alex’s memories and etch them into my soul. The craving for more of those cherished moments is usually so strong that it’s like going through withdrawals—exactly how I’m feeling right now.

I realize all this could very well classify me as a stalker or a person obsessed, which is why I stopped telling Dr. Sloane about these feelings a long time ago.

“Kelley keeps telling me it’s time to take my wedding ring off,” he continues. “He says I use it as a barrier to keep women away.”

“And yet here you are, with a woman.”

“You don’t count.”

I turn to face him. The seat belt digs into the side of my neck. “Excuse me? Am I an ogre or something? Why don’t I count?”

“Because we’re friends.”

My eyes mist with tears as I turn to stare blankly out the window. Did I totally misread the signs? He kissed my nose. He told me I rattled his heart. He chose to share his first venture back into the real world behind the wheel with me.

His low voice drags me away from my thoughts. “I have to keep telling myself that, Penny. If I don’t, I start feeling like a scumbag.”

I hate that word. It’s vile and doesn’t fit him or our relationship at all. I understand why he thinks he should label himself that way, but I don’t want him convincing himself that we can only ever be friends.

“Don’t call yourself that. You’re not a scumbag in any way.”

His fingers tighten on the leather steering wheel. “I know that voice. You’re upset.”

“I’m not.” It’s half true. “I’m just not sure what to think. Or what *you* think. About us.”

“I know, and that’s my fault ’cause I’m confused.”

“I don’t want either one of us to be confused. Especially about each other.”

“Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m trying to make some changes and make myself and my life better. I need to do that before I can do anything else.”

“I definitely notice everything, Fox.” Every detail. Even the cologne he’s wearing. “I guess I just want to know in what way I fit into it.”

He reaches over and squeezes my hand. The burning in my finger dissipates. “You fit in ways I never expected. I just need a little time to get my head straight about that.”

Squeezing his hand back, I nod. “Okay,” I say softly.



Alex looks relieved to be out of the car when we arrive at the ice cream parlor. The remodeled trolley car is nestled on the side of the road, surrounded by trees. The inside is small but adorably decorated with a vintage theme.

“I want what you’re having,” I tell him, eyeing the vast menu posted on the wall. “I need to see what your favorite sundae is.”

“You’ll love it,” he says, then turns to the girl behind the counter. “We’ll get two Dusty Roads. We’re going to sit outside.”

“Sure thing,” she replies. “I’ll bring your order out.”

“That’s what it’s called?” I ask as we sit at a picnic table out front. “A Dusty Road?”

“Yup.” The wind blows the hair away from his face as he gazes quietly at the few cars that drive by. He takes a deep breath of the breeze, and I’m sure I can see him slowly coming to life.

“What?” he asks when he catches me smiling at him.

“It’s just so nice to be out with you. You look happy.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is nervous.”

“Nervous?” I repeat. “Why? You did great driving.”

“It’s not just the car.” He pauses, his gaze drifting to my eyes. “It’s being with you.”

My heart stirs with excitement and anxiety. “Okay.... are we talking a good nervous... or a bad nervous?”

His lips press together while he thinks that over. “Both.”

I lean my chin on my hand and give him my most reassuring smile. “Tell me the good and bad.”

Shifting on the bench, he meets my smile with his own sexy, crooked one.

Touché.

“We shouldn’t be talking about this,” he says with a shake of his head.

“Fox. Don’t do that. Don’t be a turtle.”

“Turtle?” He scoffs. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means don’t hide in your shell. You know you can tell me anything, the good and the bad. I’m not going anywhere.”

The waitress arrives at that moment, plopping in front of us two enormous bowls of ice cream under a mountain of whipped cream.

“Holy moly,” I exclaim when she walks away. “You didn’t tell me it was going to be huge.”

He smirks. “I like the size to be a surprise.”

Kicking him under the table, I pick up my spoon. “Not funny. Now tell me exactly what this is before I put it in my mouth.”

Cracking up, he says, “I’m not gonna fall into your innuendo trap.”

“Ha ha. Come on. Tell me what’s in this favorite sundae of yours.”

“It’s vanilla soft serve with malted milk powder and drizzles of hot fudge. That’s why they call it Dusty Road; the fudge is like a little road in the malt powder.”

Eyes bugging out, mouthwatering, I say, “Ooh, it sounds *really* good.”

He shoves a heaping spoonful into his mouth and nods, making a euphoric face that nearly stops my heart. “Damn,” he lets out a sinful moan. “It’s so fucking good.”

He’s not kidding. The first spoonful is like heaven in my mouth. The sweet flavors mingling together are indescribable.

“Wow,” I say, licking whipped cream off my lip. “This is seriously one of the yummiest things I’ve ever had.”

“Told ya.”

“Now I see why this is the first thing you wanted to do. I don’t know how you stayed away from this for so long.”

“Second thing,” he corrects, grinning at me from behind his spoon.

His boyish smile sends my heartbeats into a racing gallop.

Blushing, I say, “Back to that. You were about to tell me why you’re nervous.”

“Was I?”

“Yes. No turtling.” He watches my tongue as it swirls around the spoon. The fiery glint in his eye makes my thighs tingle and burn.

“You better stop calling me out on that.”

“I will when you stop doing it.”

“I like when you call me out on my bullshit, little darlin’.”

“Good, because I don’t plan on stopping. Especially when it results in fancy cars, muscle shirts, and ice cream.”

He casts a glance down at his bicep. “You like the shirt?”

“I like what’s under the shirt.”

He smiles from ear to ear. “You’re not making this easy on me. You know that, right?”

“I don’t want it to be hard for you, Alex. For me, everything with you comes easy.”

He’s always felt like home to me. He’s always felt like my person. Everything with him has always come completely natural—trust, spending time with him, and now, two new things—intimacy and flirting.

My honesty sobers him. He takes one more spoonful of ice cream, then pushes the empty dish to the side. I can’t believe he ate the entire thing. I’m only a quarter of the way through mine and I’m stuffed.

“I remember the very first day you showed up in my barn. You acted like we’d known each other forever. You even introduced me to your mom as *your* Alex. I thought she was going to call the cops on me.”

I let out a little laugh, remembering that day. “I’m pretty sure nothing that came out of my mouth surprised my mother. She knew when I set my mind on something, that was it. And for some reason, even at six years old, my mind was set on you.”

He inhales my words, lets them sit in his lungs.

“I’m glad, because you turned into a very unlikely, very unexpected friend.”

There’s that friend word again. *Cringe*.

“Why is that?” I ask. “Just because I’m younger than you?”

“Well, yeah. It’s not exactly normal.”

I shrug. “Does that really matter? I think what’s accepted as normal in the world nowadays is being completely redefined.”

He nods slowly. “I’m not sure. Like you said, being together comes easy. I’ve always loved our talks and working on projects together. You’ve been a bright light in a very dark place, and that means everything to me. But lately...” His attention drifts away from me, taken hostage by things he clearly doesn’t want to say.

I reach across the table and touch my fingertips to his. “Lately, things are a little different between us,” I finish softly.

He visibly swallows. “Yeah. Now, it’s like other things are coming too easily. All of a sudden, it feels completely fucking natural to touch you and kiss you. When you’re not around, I can’t stop thinking about you. I try to find ways to bump into you in the house just so I can see your smile and hear about your day.”

“I feel the same way. When I’m around you, it feels like something inside me just”—I struggle to find the right words—“takes over. I literally have to restrain myself from kissing you good morning every day. At night, I can barely fall asleep because it’s like there’s this craving inside me. I swear I can hear your heartbeat through the wall and I just want to get into bed with you and—”

He puts his hands up. “Whoa. Don’t say any more.”

“Why? That’s how I feel.”

“I know. And I feel it, too.” He leans across the table and whispers, “I fucking feel it, too.”

“Isn’t that good?” My voice wavers with brimming hope.

“If things were different, hell yeah, it’d be fucking amazing. But you’re eighteen.” He punctuates each syllable, driving it like a wedge between us.

I blink at him while pushing my spoon through my melting ice cream. “So?”

He stares at me with his full lips slightly parted. “The teen at the end of that word is a real fucking problem for me, Penny.”

“I’m almost nineteen.”

“Still have that teen attached to it, sweetheart. I don’t think I can get past that, no matter how much I wish I could.”

I’ve never felt my age. I’m a year and a half away from relinquishing the *teen* title. Does he really want to suspend our feelings for each other that long over a silly word and meaningless number?

“Don’t look at me like that,” he says, shaking his head. “If you cry, it’s going to break my heart.”

Desperate, I force back the tears of frustration. Letting them stream down my cheeks will only cement my immaturity into his brain, which is the last thing I want to do.

I’m not a child. I’m a grown woman fighting for her man.

“I’m not crying, Alex,” I say evenly. “I’m waiting for a better explanation than my age because, teen at the end of my age or not, I *am* a legal adult.”

“Barely.”

I pin my gaze on him. “Do you think I’m immature? Is that it?”

“No. It has nothing to do with how you look or act, Penny. It’s that I’ve known you since you were a little kid. It’s that you’re eighteen, right out of high school, and I’m thirty-nine. You’re the same age as my daughter.”

“You were very young when you had Lily.”

“It doesn’t change the facts. You’re her best friend. She’ll freak the hell out if she finds out. She might hate us both and never speak to us again. I can’t risk that now when I’ve finally got her in my life.”

My head begins to ache with a horrible game of tug-of-war. Part of me agrees with him. I *am* much younger than him. And I couldn’t live with myself if we hurt Lily and caused her to shut us both out. But another part of me can’t accept anything he’s saying. A little voice is screaming, *but we belong together*, from the depths of my soul.

This time, it’s him who reaches across the table to pull my hand into his. His wedding ring presses against my finger. Shiny, engraved, familiar.

“I’m not gonna lie, Penny. I’ve got feelings for you I never thought I’d have again. There’s definitely a connection here that I can’t even explain. I wish things were different. I can see myself happy with you. I want that so fucking bad. For the first time in eighteen years, I can see something other than a dark, endless tunnel in front of me.” Our hands squeeze each other tighter, wanting to hold on and run from that tunnel. “You inspired me to get out of the house. To get a damn car. To want to look good again. To want a new beginning. I love being with you. But as right as it might feel, I can’t sit here and ignore that it’s wrong.” His beautiful brown eye searches mine. “It’s the totally right person, wrong time, and I fucking hate it. It’s another cruel twist of fate.”

My temple twitches, sending warmth down the side of my skull, then travels to my chest, where it lingers like burning embers. A subtle shift straightens my spine, calms the rhythm of my heart, and dries my eyes. I wet my lips and smile.

“Then time will do what it always does. It will move forward, and it will bring me closer to you, where I belong. I

have faith in that.”

Cocking his head to the side, he squints at me. “What just happened there?”

“What do you mean?”

His brow divides with curiosity. “Your entire demeanor changed. Even your voice sounded different.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m just agreeing with you. I don’t want to see you torn up this way. We know in our hearts we want to be together; it’s just not the right time. *Right now*. But until it is, we can enjoy each other’s company, right?”

He takes a slow breath, still regarding me with an odd expression on his face.

“Right.”

“I just want you to be happy, Fox.”

“That’s what I want for you, too. But I want you to enjoy this time of your life, not waste it waiting around—”

“Don’t even say it. I can enjoy my life without going off and dating other guys. I want *you*. Only you.”

He raises my hand to his lips, presses a soft kiss to my palm then closes my fingers over it. “I want you to hold on to that kiss,” he says in a low, husky voice. “Until I can give you a real one.”

I pull my hand from his and lay it against my chest, over my pounding heart.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Chapter 28



ALEX

After a shit ton of trial and error, I finally finished Cherry's grave marker—a life-sized, carved wooden statue of her stained mahogany. I even made a wooden tennis ball to sit next to her.

It came out so good I'm tempted to start working with wood more. Maybe I need to get away from other people's trash for a while.

"Holy crap, Dad. That's incredible. It looks exactly like her. I had no idea you could make things like this."

I turn to see Lily standing in the yard behind me, gaping at the statue.

I step back beside her to view my work. I spent the morning piling dark mulch and rocks around the base of the statue. "Thanks. I'm gonna ask Penny to plant some flowers around it. Pretty it up."

She smiles. "It's cool that you have a sweet side. I like it."

"So, what are you up to? I feel like I haven't talked to you in days." Lately, she's been quiet and holed up in her room, more often than her norm. I was hoping we'd spend more time together before she starts cosmetology school in a few months. Thankfully, she gave up the idea of mortuary makeup, saying it would be too narrow a niche for her to find full-time work. I agreed. Now she wants to focus on bridal and theatrical special effect makeup.

"I'm running to the mall to get some things. Me and Penny are going to camp out tonight," she says while typing on her

phone.

“Camp out where?” An image of the two of them eating popcorn and ice cream in a huge pillow fort in the middle of the living room pops up in my mind.

“By the lake. Neither one of us has ever been camping and we thought it’d be cool to cook hot dogs, roast marshmallows, and sleep in a tent under the stars.”

Definitely not a cute pillow fort.

I shake my head. “No.”

She looks up from her phone. “No what?”

“You two aren’t sleeping in a tent out on the edge of the woods.”

“Why not? It’s not like we’re hiking up the White Mountains. We’re literally going to be right on our property.”

“Yeah, and so are bears and coyotes.”

“Seriously? We’re not going to get eaten by bears. You worry too much.”

“It’s my job to worry about you.”

I get her customary eye roll. “Please don’t ruin this for us; we’re both excited about it. We’ve been talking about it for weeks.”

“You can still do it. But only if I stay out there with you. In my own tent, of course.”

Her eyes widen with horror. “Are you kidding? Dad, we’re not babies!”

“I didn’t say you were. You can just pretend I’m not there. I’ll stay in my tent. But I’ll feel better knowing I’m there in case something happens. You’ve seen the trail-cam footage. Bear and coyote come through here almost every night. The smell of the food might get them riled up.”

She cocks her head. “And then what? You’re going to tackle a bear? Wrestle a family of wild coyotes?”

“If I have to. I have a gun.”

“This is ridiculous. How am I supposed to tell Penny my father wants to babysit us?”

Her choice of words slices through me in ways she can't even imagine.

“I don't think she'll mind.” Actually, I think she'll love it. Either way, spending time with Penny isn't my motive. I legit don't want them out in the dark alone all night.

But being close to Penny is definitely going to be a bonus.

It's been two weeks since the afternoon we went for ice cream. And while we haven't really spent any time alone together since, we text during the day, talking about everything from the weather to poetry to movies to aliens. Every night before I go to bed, I send her an image of something she'd like—like a flower or sunset—with a sweet note. Every morning, she leaves an iced toasted marshmallow latte in the fridge for me before she goes to work.

Little things mean a lot to me. I've learned the hard way how precious they truly are.

I also let Penny borrow my new car a few times a week. Every time I get in it, the scent of her perfume makes me crazy, missing her.

“I'm going to text you a list of what to get,” I tell Lily, who's back to typing on her phone. “Use my credit card.”

Thankfully, Penny's idea of special commissions has really paid off because I'm more financially stable than I've ever been. This is good because I'm sure this one night of camping is going to set me back at least a grand. After tonight, the tents will probably sit in storage forever, but it's worth it if it's going to make them happy.



“How were you planning on setting this tent up if I wasn't here?” I chew on the toothpick hanging from my lips. “Since

you've been on your phone nonstop? Camping means no technology."

Penny drops the sleeping bag she was cutting price tags off of. "I'll help," she says quickly.

"You're doing something and you put the food in the cooler. She's been glued to her phone." I look over at my daughter. "And who are you texting, anyway? Penny's right here."

"I have friends other than Penny," Lily says defensively, shoving her phone in her pocket. "I'm sorry I got distracted. I'll help now."

Penny and I share a discreet, confused look. I love that Lily is being more social, but this is the first I've heard of any other friends. I wouldn't mind if it was the kid who took her to the prom. He seemed harmless.

An hour later we've got two crooked tents up near the lake, twenty feet apart, so they can pretend I'm not hovering. At least, I think Lily wants to pretend I'm not here. Penny is a different story. Ever since I took my T-shirt off earlier, her eyes haven't left me. I'm trying like hell to ignore the longing behind those sky-high lashes, but she's making me want all sorts of things I shouldn't be wanting.

This was probably a bad idea.

Just before dusk, I put my shirt back on and light a small bonfire. We roast hot dogs while sitting on the folding chairs Lily bought. Mine is crooked and leans to the side.

"Isn't it weird how they taste so much better out here than when we cook them inside?" Lily asks.

"This is nothing," I answer. "Wait 'til you taste the marshmallows."

"I'm really liking this," she says. "Maybe we should go on a real camping trip up in the mountains for a few days."

"You're forgetting you won't be able to run inside to use the bathroom. Or use your hair straightener. Or take an hour-

long hot shower. Not to mention your phone reception will be sketchy.”

Lily laughs. “Valid points. Maybe we’ll just stick to camping in the yard, then.”

Penny suddenly looks up at the sky. “Was that a bat or a bird that just flew over us?”

I didn’t see anything. “Bats fly erratically. Birds fly straight.”

She’s still staring up. “I think it was flying straight. If it was a bat, would it attack us?”

“I won’t let anything hurt you,” I say a little too quickly, then add, “But don’t worry—bats only attack people in movies.”

“I love bats. They’re like little black Chihuahuas with wings,” Lily exclaims. “I don’t think it’s dark enough for them to be out yet. It was probably a bird or a moth.”

Penny hugs herself and continues to peer warily at the sky. If things were different, I’d pull her against my chest and wrap my arms around her. “Not really stoked about a moth as big as my hand flying around.”

“I talked to the couple who run the haunted house and hay ride for Halloween,” Lily says as Penny stands to get the s’mores stuff. Her hand lightly brushes my back as she walks behind me. “They’re hiring me to do the horror makeup for their staff. It’s only for a few weeks, but hopefully, they’ll hire me again next year.”

“You mean for the scary clowns and psychos that jump out at people?” I ask, poking at the fire. From the corner of my eye, I notice Penny bending over the cooler. I’m suddenly aware of her breasts swelling against the thin fabric of her mint-green sundress. When she straightens, she pushes her long, wavy red hair behind her shoulder. My mouth goes bone dry. She’s absolutely stunning.

It’s weird to me how Penny could easily pass for a twenty something, but Lily looks every bit of eighteen.

I turn my attention back to my daughter, who's nodding excitedly about her job. "Yes," Lily says. "I'd be doing makeup for zombies, clowns, all sorts of creepy things."

"That's awesome," I say. "Me and Mikey used to go every year when we were in high school."

"I always thought they were wearing masks," Penny says, falling back into her chair. She crosses her long, tan legs. Red nail polish glimmers at the tips of her bare feet. I suddenly have a foot fetish. All I want to do is run my hand along the curve of her foot, kissing the dainty bone of her ankle.

Fuck.

Lily nods. "Some are masks, but most are makeup. Makeup takes longer, but it's more comfortable than wearing a mask, especially if it's hot."

"If you want a guinea pig, you can experiment with makeup on me," I offer. "Maybe you can do something cool with my missing eye."

My daughter's eyes light up. "That would be wild. Maybe we can put a fake axe coming out of your face, with blood oozing out of your eye socket."

Penny spears marshmallows on long metal skewers and passes them around. We hold them over the fire, mesmerized by the oozing marshmallow. I wonder if my soul is going to melt the same way when I'm burning in hell for falling for an eighteen-year-old girl.

"Oh my God, Dad. You weren't kidding. This is amazing," Lily says after her first bite of the marshmallow sandwiched with crackers and chocolate. "How have I never had these before?"

I restrain myself from telling her it's because she was raised by assholes who didn't let their daughters—or granddaughter—have sugar or do anything fun.

"It's not as good as the Dusty Road," Penny says, smiling my way.

“What’s that?” Lily asks. Guilt crawls up my spine. Lily and I should have little secret things that are just between us, but we don’t.

“It’s my new favorite sundae,” Penny answers.

My cock throbs when she licks marshmallow and chocolate off her fingers, glancing at me to see if I’m watching her.

Of course I’m watching her. It’s been an epic struggle to not watch her. And not just because she’s beautiful, but because every time our eyes lock, my heart pounds to life.

I remind myself again that I’m here to spend quality time with my daughter and shouldn’t be letting myself get distracted. I force myself to keep my mind off Penny while the three of us sit by the fire. Lily comes to life in the dark and tells us stories about real haunted places she’s read about and wants to visit someday.

“Did Mom believe in ghosts or the paranormal?” she asks, making another s’more.

Smiling at memories of all the strange conversations Bri used to start, I say, “Your mom was fascinated with anything mind-bending. She loved to talk about all sorts of weird things like missing person cases, lost cities, reincarnation, magic tricks, art. You would’ve loved her.”

Lily looks wistful. “I wish I could’ve met her. She sounds really cool. Sometimes, I have dreams that she’s still here.”

“Me too, kiddo. Me too.”

“I’m sure she’s always here, watching over you,” Penny says. “Like a guardian angel.”

I wonder if that same guardian angel is also watching over me.

Chapter 29



ALEX

Around midnight, we clean up and the girls crawl into their tent. I make sure it's zipped, say good night, and walk out to the pier with a Stephen King book that I swiped from Lily's bookshelf earlier. Leaning back against one of the dock posts, I clip a tiny book light to the pages and start reading. After a while, the chatter and giggling drifting from the girls' tent stops.

I snap a picture of the starry sky, then text it to Penny with the message:

Sweet dreams, beautiful. Your smile is brighter than all the stars.

I'm on chapter eight when I hear the faint sound of a zipper, then soft footsteps padding through the grass.

I turn the book light toward the edge of the pier, wondering if it's Lily.

Hoping it's Penny.

"What are you doing out here?" I whisper when she kneels next to me.

"I couldn't sleep. I can't stop thinking about you."

I let out a resolved sigh. "I've been thinking about you, too."

"It was sweet of you to do all this tonight." Smiling, she reaches out and pushes my hair off my forehead. "You're such a good dad."

“You shouldn’t be out here... what if Lily sees us?”

“She took a Benadryl for her allergies so she wouldn’t be all congested in the morning. Trust me, she’s out like a light. I can never wake her after she takes one of those.”

“Penny...”

“I just want to sit here and stare up at the stars with you. Can we do that?”

My pulse whirs with the desire to be close to her and the fear of getting caught.

A lethal cocktail.

“Come here.” Putting the book to the side, I motion for her to sit between my legs. When she leans her back against my chest, I wrap my arms around her.

Sighing with contentment, her head falls back into the crook of my neck. I turn my face into her hair, inhaling the coconut scent of her shampoo, and clasp her hands in mine.

“I love being with you. You make my heart go crazy,” she whispers, pressing my hand over her chest. “Do you feel it?”

I do. I can feel it fluttering through her dress.

“You do the same to mine.”

She moves our hands in slow circles over her heart. “Do you feel that buzzing?” she asks in a hushed tone.

“Yes.” I feel it in my hand, vibrating off her chest and traveling up my arm.

She tilts her face up toward mine. “I’ve always felt it around you, even when I was little. What do you think it is?”

I’ve always wondered what that weird feeling is. Now, I’m not sure if I’m relieved or scared that she feels it, too. “I don’t know.”

“I like it,” she breathes, making my heart race faster. “It makes me feel alive.”

I drag my hand up to her throat and let it rest there, feeling her pulse tap against my palm. It spurs a bittersweet ache in

my chest.

I've been in love with the dead for so long, I've forgotten what it feels like to be with the living.

And Penny is so achingly, beautifully alive—her body warm in my arms, her breath against my neck, her desire for me igniting tiny sparks in every fiber of my being like fireflies. My body is thrumming, awakening, remembering what it feels like to lose myself in someone else.

Penny makes me believe I could be lucky enough to have that again.

She lifts her arm, extending it backward to cup the back of my neck. Her fingernails graze the base of my scalp, sending goose bumps down my spine.

“Can I kiss you?” she murmurs.

I move my hand down to the tantalizing curve of her hip. “That’s a bad idea, little darlin’.”

“Then you kiss me.”

My lips find their way to her exposed neck. I grin against her soft flesh.

“Who’s my little smart-ass?”

“Me.” She arches back against me, pressing her ass against me through our clothes. Blood surges to my cock like a stampede.

“Damn right, you are.”

I nip at her neck and the little gasp she lets out nearly undoes me.

Glancing back toward the tents, I say, “I don’t think we should be doing this...”

“Let’s not think. That’s all I do; think about you, what we can’t do, or we don’t have. Tonight, can’t we just *live*?”

She grabs my hand at her waist and slowly guides it down over her stomach, then inches down farther.

Swallowing hard, I force myself to freeze our hands.
“Penny...”

“I want you to touch me.” Her voice has suddenly shed its innocence, adopting a sultry lilt that stirs an odd familiarity inside me.

“I can’t.” But I want to so fucking bad.

“Please, Alex,” she begs, reaching for the hem of her dress. I can’t tear my gaze from the beautiful, smooth skin slowly being bared to me as she lifts her skirt up to her hips. The sight of her pink lace panties makes my cock press harder against her ass.

“You’re fucking killing me.” I don’t think she has any idea she’s playing with a fire that’s been dormant for way too long. I should get a medal for this level of restraint.

“Don’t say that. I just want to be with you. I need you.”

As respectful as I want to be, I’m still a guy who hasn’t had sex in almost nineteen fucking years. There’s only so much temptation I can take.

My resistance crumbles like a stale cookie.

“Touch yourself,” I whisper against her ear. “Show me how you want me to touch you.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

The breeze caresses us like warm silk as she pushes her panties down to her knees then bends her leg, catching the fabric with her toes and slowly dragging the panties down to her ankles. With a little kick, she flicks the lace thong off to the side.

Her long, toned legs stretch out next to mine, flesh against denim, as she slowly moves her hand to the apex of her thighs. Torturous envy fills me when her fingers tiptoe through the triangular patch of ginger curls. My chest rises and falls against her spine, every breath filled with a battle of desire and guilt. I watch her thin fingers skim over her flesh, then disappear between her folds.

My cock swells and strains against my jeans, aching for her.

She's awoken the man in me that isn't morally perfect and polite.

I move my lips over her neck, grazing her with my teeth until I reach the curve of her ear. "How does that sweet pussy feel, baby?" I whisper with a low growl.

She sucks in a surprised breath. Her nails dig into the back of my skull. Her thighs tighten around her hand. A low moan drifts from her lips when my hand travels from her hip to cup her breast.

My entire body buzzes with intense want.

Turned-on Penny is *way* too tempting.

"It feels so good..." she whimpers. The sound of her fingers sliding in and out of her wet flesh drives me wild. I'd kill to sink my fingers into her, feel her hot and wet and tight around me.

I never thought I'd want another woman again. I never thought I'd be falling in love with another woman again.

I wait for guilt and denial to clench its fist around my dick and my heart, but it doesn't. Penny is crashing through my walls, resuscitating me in every way. All I want is to let myself fall into a life with her.

But I can't. No matter how much I want to, we aren't meant to have more than stolen, forbidden moments like this.

"Alex," she moans softly, writhing against me.

"I'm right here," I breathe against her ear.

She pulls my head down to her, kissing me hungrily as her hips thrust up into her hand. I'm powerless to pull away. My tongue is in her mouth, sweet with chocolate and marshmallow, and my fingers are edging under the top of her dress, seeking her peaked nipple. She moans against my lips as I gently pinch the bud, her hand moving faster between her thighs.

My legs tighten around her hips, the length of my cock pressing between her ass cheeks.

“Oh my God, Fox...” she gasps as her body begins to shudder.

My nickname on her lips as she comes almost makes me explode.

I kiss her long and deep, gazing into her eyes as her body trembles uncontrollably. Her legs shake, thighs spreading, then clamping tight around her hand. Watching her come is like seeing a rainbow after a storm. Her pouty lips, freckle-stained cheeks, and hazy eyes are breathtaking. I want to devour every part of her.

When her breathing calms, I reach down and pull her dress back down to her thighs, then wrap my arms around her. Her body is warm and quivering.

“Holy shit,” she whispers breathlessly.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” I tell her. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She laces her fingers through mine. I can still feel the dampness of her on them. “I’ve never done anything like that before,” she confesses.

Just thinking about another man seeing her or touching her makes my blood boil.

“I don’t know what comes over me when I’m around you, Alex. It’s... indescribable,” she says dreamily.

My arms tighten around her. “I feel the same way.”

We stay that way, hugging as the moon shifts across the sky. I lose track of time, listening to crickets sing, kissing her softly. Falling deeper into a hole I know I’ll never crawl out of.

“I love being out here with you.” Her voice is whispery-soft, coming to me almost like a faint echo. “Everything about this place, about you, feels so comforting. Like a dream I never want to wake up from.” Her hand caresses mine. “Maybe we lived here in a former life.”

I rock her back and forth, kissing the scar on her forehead.
“Maybe...”

I wish we could stay like this forever.

She becomes so still and quiet, breathing softly in my arms, that I think she may have fallen asleep. I could easily do the same, but I force myself to stay awake, savoring every moment because I don't know if we'll ever have this again.

“You should go back to your tent,” I eventually say. “It's late.”

She hugs my arm against her chest like she never wants to let me go. “I wish I could stay with you like this all night.”

“I do, too. You have no idea how much I'd love that.”

“Someday we will,” she says.

I help her to her feet and hold her face in my hands. Her huge green eyes stare up at me, full of wishes I want to make come true. But as perfect as we feel together, so much can go wrong. So much *is* wrong.

It's hard to shake the memories of her coming to see me as a little girl, drinking juice boxes in my studio. Listening to me intently when we talked about paints and shadows and perspective. Swinging her tiny feet from my workbench.

Lily would be disgusted with me if she found out. It could ruin our relationship forever.

It could also destroy her friendship with Penny.

The little happy family we've built here could go up in flames.

Lily has lost so much already. I can't let her be hurt again.

And nothing can change the fact that Penny is half my age. I've lived, loved, and lost, but she hasn't. She has so much life to experience. What she wants today might not be what she wants five or ten years from now.

It's a huge risk.

If I give her my love, she cannot leave. She cannot die. She cannot take my heart and drift away with it in her hands.

My soul would never recover.

I can't be a "happy for now" while she grows up.

I want—I *need*—a forever.

Chapter 30



PENNY

“Why aren’t you dressed?”

I’m standing in Lily’s doorway wearing black boots, my favorite dark skinny jeans with frayed rips, a black V-neck blouse, and a black denim beret. I’m trying to figure out why my best friend is sitting on her bed wearing an oversized T-shirt and pink pajama pants when we’re supposed to be leaving in fifteen minutes.

“Lily?” I repeat.

She pulls a pillow onto her lap and hugs it. “I’m going to stay home.”

My heart sinks as I step inside her room. “Why?”

Shrugging, she fingers a lock of her hair. “I’m not feeling too good.”

“What’s wrong?” I press my fingertips to her forehead. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

Frowning, she pulls away from my hand and says with horror, “Oh my God. You just turned into my grandmother. It was terrifying.”

Laughing, I say, “I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine. I just have really bad cramps. You know how it is. I want to just lie in bed and watch sad movies.”

I sit on the bed with her. “Now I want to do that, too.”

“I wish you could, but I think Kelley will be upset if neither one of us shows up at his first real concert.”

“True...”

“And you look way too gorgeous to stay home.”

“Thanks... but I really wanted to go together.” Not only is tonight Kelley’s first time performing at a concert, but it’s also my first time going to one. I was excited to dress up with Lily, dance like fools, and sing lyrics at the top of our lungs until we lost our voices.

“I know,” she says. “But you’ll have fun with my dad. If you see any women flirting with him, let me know how he reacts so we can figure out a dating strategy for him.”

I force a smile to my lips to mask my instant jealousy. “Dating strategy?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you noticed how different he is lately? He finally got a car. He’s dressing nicer. He’s more motivated about his art. He’s working out and running almost every morning. I think dating is the next step, don’t you?”

No. Absolutely totally fucking not.

Jaw clenching, I say, “I think what your dad does isn’t my business. I’m just excited to see Kelley.”

“Will you take some videos for me of him singing?”

“Sure. I’ll text them to you while I’m there if I have a good enough connection.”

She looks sad. “I’m bummed I won’t get to see him live. I thought we’d be screaming Kelley’s name together all night.”

“That’s a sentence I don’t ever want to hear again,” Alex says, leaning against the doorframe with a smirk. “Is that what you’re wearing?” He nods toward Lily. “I was expecting something a little darker from you for a rock concert.”

My breath catches a little. Alex looks hot as hell in a tight hunter-green shirt with the sleeves pushed up, dark wavy hair touching his shoulders, jeans, and black motorcycle boots. His late nights in the basement blasting rock music and lifting weights are paying off. He’s totally droolworthy.

“She’s not going,” I inform him, dragging my eyes from his wide shoulders.

His brow creases. “What happened? You’ve been excited about this for weeks. Kelley got us backstage passes.”

Lily’s shoulders sag. “I know. I just don’t feel good.”

“Maybe we should stay home with you,” he says. I can’t help but smile. He tries so hard to be a good dad.

“God, no. It’s nothing that serious.” She flops back onto the bed dramatically. “Just girl stuff. I want you guys to go and have a good time.”

Alex and I look at each other. I’m sure the thoughts running through his head are the same as mine: we don’t want to go without Lily, but we also don’t want to disappoint Kelley. And now, we have an unexpected night alone together that’s way too tempting to pass up.

“I don’t want to let Kelley down,” Alex says. “Tonight is huge for him.”

Lily waves her hand at us. “Please go. Both of you. I’m totally fine. I won’t be upset at all. I swear.”

“You’re sure?” I ask skeptically. Her behavior seems very odd to me, almost like she’s trying to get rid of us or hiding something. I’m not sure what to think.

“Yes!” she says. “But you better bring me home a T-shirt.”

“Done,” I promise.



Alex is quiet when we get in his car. He holds the keys in his hand and looks up at Lily’s bedroom window.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, putting my seat belt on.

“I dunno... I have a weird feeling.”

“What kind of weird feeling?” I wonder if he’s having second thoughts about driving at night in the dark.

“About Lily. Something doesn’t seem right. She’s been looking forward to this concert for weeks. Didn’t she even buy a special outfit?”

I nod. “We went shopping together. She bought a black leather miniskirt and a leopard print blouse. I think there was a scarf, too.”

“She didn’t look sick. She’s never sick.”

“She told me she had bad cramps.” It’s a valid reason. I get wicked bad cramps myself, sometimes. Although, in the entire time we’ve been friends, I’ve never heard Lily say she does, too.

I don’t share this with Alex. If I let on that I also think Lily is acting strange, it will only make him worry more.

His mouth quirks to the side as he starts the car.

“She’s crazy about Kelley,” I say. “And Seven Shot is one of her favorite bands. There’s no way she’d miss this unless she really felt like crap.”

“You’re right.” He reaches across the car and touches my face, brushing the pad of his thumb across my cheek. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I turn to kiss his fingertips. “I was thinking the same about you when I saw you in the doorway upstairs. I don’t know how Lily didn’t notice my eyes practically falling out of my head looking at you.”

He chuckles. “It sucks Lily isn’t with us, but I’m looking forward to having you all to myself for the night.”

I smile. “I wish it could be a real date.”

“I do, too. But if Kelley—or someone else we know—sees us, I’ll never hear the end of it. It could get back to Lily or your parents...”

“I know,” I agree. “But we can still enjoy the night together. I’m happy just being with you.”

He doesn’t back out of the driveway. He stares down at his hand for a few moments, then says, “Since it’s still kind of a

date, I should do this.”

He pulls off his wedding band and puts it in the console between our seats.

I feel like the air has been sucked out of my lungs. “Alex... you don’t have to do that. It doesn’t bother me.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to.”

A strange, unsettled feeling sinks to the pit of my stomach as we head toward the concert. I glance over at him, at his hand on the steering wheel, his finger bare with a pale strip of flesh where the ring was. I realize I’m upset that he took the ring off. I want him to put it back on and never take it off.



The concert is at an outdoor venue two hours away. Three other bands are playing besides Seven Shot, but they’ll all be performing Seven Shot songs because this is a tribute to Dylan King. The area is already jam-packed with people. I hold on to Alex’s arm as we make our way through the crowds, hoping we don’t run into anyone we know.

The first thing we do is stand in line for twenty minutes to buy three T-shirts. I make Alex hold one up so I can take a picture and text it to Lily.

“So, there’re no chairs?” I observe out loud as we head toward the stage with the rest of the crowd.

“Nope. We can sit in the grass over there,” he nods to an area to the left of the stage.

“I’m glad I didn’t wear a skirt.”

He glances at me with that damn sexy grin on his face. “Me too. I’d have to kill every guy here for looking at you.”

I give him a quick kiss on the cheek. His stubble tickles my lips. “Do I sense a jealous streak?”

“Maybe a little one.”

I might have a little streak myself. Alex seems utterly oblivious to the women checking him out, but I definitely notice. Something about the eye patch is sexy and attractive in that bad-boy way women love.

I check my phone to see if Lily sent a funny reply to the T-shirt picture, but my message to her still shows unread.

“We should’ve brought a blanket,” Alex says when we pick a spot to sit.

“I don’t mind. The ground is dry.”

I think little cartoon hearts burst out of my chest when he lays his new T-shirt on the ground for me to sit on.

“Can you stop being so perfect?” I tease when he sits next to me. “Especially in public. You’re making all the other guys look bad.”

Just as the sun sets, a gorgeous woman walks across the stage and takes the mic. The crowd erupts in cheers, throwing their hands in the air.

I lean closer to Alex. “Who’s she?”

“She’s Dylan King’s wife.”

“Oh!”

She proceeds to talk about her late husband—his legacy and how much she misses him. How he lives on in his music and how grateful she is to all the fans for their love and support. My heart breaks for her when she chokes up. The lead guitarist joins her center stage and takes the mic from her. He gives his own heartfelt speech, then tells the audience that for the first time, they’ll be playing with a new singer—a guy they found singing their songs in a club in a tiny town in New Hampshire who blew them away with his vocals.

The crowd cheers again. I’m in awe at the sea of screaming people.

“This is wild,” I say. “Kelley’s gotta be so nervous.”

He nods. “It’s a far cry from the Possum’s Den.”

Kelley appears from the side of the stage and runs to the center. I can't see him well from where we're sitting, but the huge LED screen suspended from the side of the stage shows us a close-up of him.

He's smiling from ear to ear.

When he starts to sing, I hit record on my camera and take a five-minute video for Lily, panning out to show her the huge crowd.

Me and Alex stand so we can see better. Kelley's deep, raspy voice is a force. It lassos the crowd, pulling them in. It's unbelievable how much he sounds like the original singer. He owns the stage like he was born on it, sauntering from one side to the other, belting out notes that vibrate down to our cores.

Five songs later, I finally hear from Lily:

LILY:

OMG. He looks and sounds amazing. I wish I was there!

We miss you! I hope you're feeling better.

"He sounds fucking awesome," Alex yells.

"He looks incredible up there!" I yell back. "I can't believe that's our Kelley!"

The stage lights dim, and the crowd roars at the first notes of a piano solo—the intro to their most popular ballad—a heartbreaking love song. Kelley cups the mic in his tattooed hands, eyes closed, sweat on his brow. A hush falls over the crowd. This moment could make or break him. It's the song everyone wants to hear. If he fails to do it justice, it could be disastrous. Shivers run down my spine hearing the first verse. Alex hugs me from behind, and I lean back against him, swaying to the music together. Being in his arms always feels like heaven.

Kelley completely nails it. The sheer emotion in his voice has moved me—and probably everyone else—to tears. He's totally embodied the heartache and anguish of the lyrics.

When the song ends, the audience goes completely apeshit, clapping and screaming.

“I think we just witnessed a star being born,” I say to Alex.

“I think you’re right. Let’s see if we can get backstage.”

We find Kelley surrounded by at least twenty people waiting for his autograph. It’s surreal. He breaks away for a few minutes to talk to us. Adrenaline is radiating from him. We hug him and tell him how proud we are. His bright-blue eyes are lit with excitement and disbelief. People begin to pull him in ten different directions, so we say goodbye to let him enjoy this amazing moment.

“Something tells me Kelley won’t be a landscaper much longer,” Alex comments as we walk back to the grassy area we were sitting at earlier.

“He deserves it. You’d never be able to tell that was his first performance in front of a big crowd.”

“I’m not really a big fan of the other bands that are playing. How do you feel about grabbing some snacks and going home early to watch a movie with Lily? I’m willing to endure a cheesy horror film for her. I feel bad she’s spending the night alone when she doesn’t feel good.”

“Say less. I don’t think my ears can take any more. They’re still ringing.”

When we get to the car, Alex unlocks the door, then pushes me against it, caging me in with his arms against the window on either side of my head.

A little gasp escapes from my throat.

His face is inches from mine. “Hi,” he says in a low voice.

“Hi...” I breathe.

He grins. “I’ve been thinking about you.”

“I’ve been thinking about you, too.”

Winding a lock of my hair around his finger, he says, “I like the little heart-shaped sprinkles you’ve been putting on my latte every morning.”

I smile and feel my cheeks heat. “Just a little something so you don’t forget about me.”

“There’s zero chance of that.”

“Good.”

“I really want to kiss you before we go back home.”

Heart fluttering, I reach up and wind my arms around his neck. “Do you?”

His body presses against mine. “More than anything.”

My gaze drifts to his full lips. “Then you should.”

Without further encouragement, he cups his hand behind my neck and pulls me to him. His mouth covers mine, open and warm. Soft at first, then deeper. Possessive. We sigh into each other as if we’ve been holding our breath since the last time we kissed. His tongue slowly sweeps against mine. My knees begin to wobble, causing me to tighten my arms around him and press my body into his as our tongues slowly dance together. A low moan sounds in his throat.

I wonder if all men kiss this way. So deep and sensual, stealing breath and balance, making time stop.

I don’t want to ever find out.

His other hand grasps my waist, then slowly travels down over my ass. It rests there for a moment, fingertips digging into the thin denim before skimming farther down to the back of my thigh. My body instinctively knows what he wants. Lifting my leg, I curve it around his waist. He sinks into me, hips grinding, and kisses me deeper.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he whispers, raining kisses across my jawline.

I’m not. If I were perfect, I wouldn’t be trapped in an eighteen-year-old forced to be in a secret relationship that entails heart-shaped candies, late-night text messages, and kisses in dark parking lots.

But imperfect is the only way I can have him, so I’ll take it.

He kisses his way back up to my lips, then pulls away slightly to gaze into my eyes.

“I adore you, Penny.” The hoarseness in his voice makes my chest ache. “You mean the absolute world to me, and you make me happier than I ever thought I could be. You know that, right?”

I nod, unable to squeeze words past the lump in my throat.

“You deserve so much better than this.” His voice is low, rough with regret and longing.

“*We* deserve better than this,” I correct. “Together.”

“I’ve been trying to think of ways to make us a little more acceptable.”

I lean my forehead against his. “I don’t care what other people think.”

“I don’t want to either, but I have to. I’ve known you since you were six. You moved into my house when you were seventeen. It looks bad. I used to teach art to little kids. It’s a small town. I don’t want people—especially your parents—to think I was doing inappropriate things with you or anyone else.”

“I wouldn’t want anyone to think badly of you. Ever.”

“And then there’s Lily. I don’t know how she’d feel about us being together. She might think I’m a pig. She might think you pretended to be her friend just to get close to me.”

My blood goes ice cold. “Oh no,” I gasp, tears prickling my eyes. “I never even thought of that.”

“I’m trying to think of everyone. Not just us.”

“It would kill me if Lily thought that, or if I became a reason for her to push you away. All I want is for you two to be happy.”

“*You* make both of us happy.”

“I can’t choose between you...”

“I’d never want you to do that.”

“What are we going to do?” I ask tearfully. It all feels hopeless.

“We’ll find a way, baby.”

His lips meet mine again, soft and slow enough to make me feel like I’m going to melt into the car. He gathers me up into his arms and hugs me tight against his chest, with his face buried in my hair. I nestle into his shoulder. His shirt is soft against my cheek, his scent familiar with each breath I take. He hugs me—longer than he kissed me—then slowly pulls away.

“I had a great time with you tonight,” I whisper.

“I promise someday we’ll have real dates. Dinners. Day trips. Vacations. Late nights lost in each other. Mornings under blankets...” He leans down and touches his lips to mine. “It’s all I want. All I think about. Please believe that.”

I do believe him. I can feel it in my heart that somehow, some way, we will be together.

Chapter 31



PENNY

We arrive home with a bag full of Lily's favorite snacks.

"Guess what, favorite daughter," Alex yells when we walk inside the house. "We came home early."

"I'm gonna go upstairs and change," I say. "We'll be right down."

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me back to him. "Shh..." He brushes his lips across mine. "'Til next time," he whispers.

Smiling, I go up to my room and change into yoga pants and a T-shirt.

"Lily?" I call out from my bedroom door.

Her light is off. I quietly enter her room to see if she's sleeping, but she's not there.

"Lily?"

She wasn't in the hall bathroom when I passed it on the way in here. I flick on her bedroom light. The T-shirt and pink pajama pants she was wearing earlier are on her bed. Frowning, I peer out the window. Her car is in the driveway.

I go downstairs, thinking she must've come down while I was changing. Alex is standing in the kitchen eating a bag of Cheetos.

"Is she down here?" I ask.

He swallows and licks his lips. "No. Isn't she upstairs?"

I shake my head. "No."

Forehead creasing, he tosses the bag on the counter and opens the door to the basement. “Lily? You down there?”

Silence.

We blink at each other. “Maybe she went out to the barn?” I suggest.

“I’ll go check. Call her phone.”

I call her mobile as he goes out the back door. It rings and rings, then goes to voice mail.

“Hi, Lily, it’s me. We came home early, and, um, we can’t find you.” I let out a little laugh. “Call me. Or meet me in the living room. I don’t even know if you’re here. Okay, I love ya. Bye.”

“Any word?” Alex asks when he returns.

“It went to voice mail. I left a message.”

“Where the hell is she?”

“Good question. Let me text her.”

When I open my message app, I see the last text she sent me was hours ago, replying about Kelley.

hey, where are you? We’re home and can’t find you.

“Did you check the pier?” I ask.

“Yeah. She’s not out there. I checked her car, too.”

I feel helpless when he starts to pace the living room.

“Was the front door locked when we got home?” he asks.

“I’m pretty sure it was. You used your key to get in.”

“What about the back door?”

“Yes. I saw you turn the lock when you went outside.”

He shoves his hand through his hair. “Where the fuck is she?”

“Let’s try not to get upset. I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Do you think she went out with someone? Who does she hang out with?”

I shrug. “Just me, as far as I know.”

“Who’s she always texting?”

A few weeks ago, she casually mentioned a guy she was talking to, but she was super vague about him, only telling me he was cute and had a fossil collection. I assumed she met him online, but I really don’t want to rat out my best friend if she’s on a date with him.

“I really have no clue. She’s usually pretty vague about things going on in her life, and I don’t pry,” I reply. “She talks when she’s ready to talk.”

“It’s almost midnight.”

“She *is* eighteen, Alex.”

He stops pacing to look at me. “What does that mean?”

“She’s technically an adult. Like me. She doesn’t have a curfew.”

“I know, but she’s never gone out without telling me before. She didn’t leave a note, and now she’s not answering calls or texts. Don’t you think this is all unlike her? Especially when she ditched the concert because she was sick.” His eye suddenly goes wide. “Do you think she called an ambulance and went to the ER?”

The fear on his face makes my heart hurt.

“Alex.” I touch his arm. “I think she’s fine. She only had cramps. That wouldn’t send her to the ER. She would’ve called us.”

That barely fades the worry from his face. “I told you I had a weird feeling.”

“You did, but I think we should just calm down and not jump to conclusions.”

Where the hell did she go? Seeing Alex distraught is agonizing. I can’t believe she’d just disappear like this. She

knows how much he worries about something happening to her.

I manage to keep Alex somewhat calm for another hour and a half when suddenly headlights flash in the driveway. I grab his arm when he jumps up from the couch and pull him back down.

“Alex, let her come inside and explain. Don’t fly off the handle.”

He lets out a sigh. “I don’t know how to deal with this.”

Lily comes through the front door wearing the outfit she bought for the concert. My heart sinks at what this means, and I brace myself for the fight I’m sure is coming.

“Where were you?” Alex barks. “It’s almost two a.m. No calls, no texts. We’ve been worried out of our minds.”

The way he says *we* make me light-headed.

Lily shrugs. I notice her always-perfect eyeliner and lipstick is smudged. “I went out with a friend and lost track of time. I thought I’d be home before you.”

Alex’s brow creases with suspicion. “I thought you were sick.”

She looks down at her shoes.

“Did you lie to us?” Alex asks.

Us.

She nods somberly.

“What the fuck?”

“I called and texted you,” I remind her.

“I’m sorry. I had my phone on do not disturb.”

“What the fuck?” Alex repeats. “Why?”

“I just wanted some privacy.”

“Okay,” I reply, trying to stay neutral. “Totally understandable.” People don’t have to be connected to technology twenty-four seven. It’s okay to want a break.

“Why lie to us?” Alex asks. “Why pretend to be sick at the last minute? You could’ve just told us you wanted to go out and that you’d be home late.”

“I just didn’t want to talk about it.” Frustration rolls off her. “Why am I being interrogated?”

“Because I’m worried about you. Who dropped you off?”

“Just a friend.”

“What friend? The prom twin guy?”

Lily lets out a clipped laugh. “Hell no.”

Alex looks at me like I might have an answer. “I don’t understand what’s going on here,” he says. “Why all the vague secrecy?”

“Can you just drop it, Dad?”

“I’m not gonna drop it, Lil. I want you to tell me what’s up.”

“Maybe we should all just go to bed. It’s late—” I suggest, hoping to defuse them.

Alex ignores me. “I smell alcohol on your breath, too.”

I look at Lily in surprise. When we hang out together, we always drink iced teas, lattes, and water. She’s never hinted at wanting to drink alcohol.

“I had two beers and one shot. It’s not a big deal.”

I can feel Alex’s body tense next to me. “You’re not old enough to drink.”

She sighs and looks up at the ceiling. “I’m sure you drank before you were twenty-one.”

“That’s not the point. The point is you haven’t been yourself the past few weeks and I want to know what’s going on. You’re hiding something.”

“Fine.” She kicks off her boots. “I was on a date. Okay? Can we move on now?”

Ah. She must’ve been with the fossil dude, I conclude. But why didn’t she tell me? I thought we told each other

everything.

Well, almost everything.

“Why was that so hard?” Alex asks. “Why didn’t you just tell me that earlier instead of staging a fake sickness and sneaking out?”

“I didn’t sneak out.”

“Who is he? Why didn’t he walk you to the door?”

“You’re so old-fashioned. He’s just a guy.”

Alex turns to me again. “Did you know about this?”

I feel like a deer in the headlights. They both keep including me in their *we* scenarios. “No,” I say.

Lily shakes her head. “Why are you dragging her into it? You’re acting crazy.”

“I’m not acting crazy. I’m just trying to figure out who the hell my kid was with all night and why she’s lying to me.”

“It was the limo driver,” she finally admits.

My brain whips around in confusion. “The limo driver?” I repeat. “From prom night?”

“Yes. His name is Jeff.”

I vaguely remember him. I don’t think we said more than two words to him. But, now that I’m thinking about it, Lily did disappear twice alone during the prom to smoke a cigarette. She was gone for almost half an hour each time. She must’ve been talking to him out in the parking lot.

“I remember him now,” I reply. “He was cute. He reminded me of the guy from—”

Alex interrupts me. “I remember him, too. I tipped him in the driveway before you guys left. How old is he?”

Lily chews her lip. “He’s not that much older than me.”

“How much older?”

Her eyes squint. “He’s twenty-six.”

Standing, Alex says, “No. No fucking way are you dating a twenty-six-year-old guy.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s going to be fucking buried behind the barn, that’s why!” he bellows.

“Dad, calm down. He’s really nice.”

“Really nice? What’s a twentysomething guy doing with an eighteen-year-old girl?”

Our eyes meet across the room, and I see it written all over his face.

The irony.

The guilt.

The hypocrisy.

My heart drops. There’s no way he can expect Lily to accept us as a couple after this tirade.

“I’m gonna guess he’s the one who gave you the alcohol, right?” Alex continues.

Lily says nothing.

I can see Alex’s teeth grinding. “I don’t want you seeing him again. I don’t trust him. You’re too young to date someone that old. Especially for your first relationship.”

She glares at him with fiery daggers in her eyes. “I’m eighteen. I can see whoever I want.”

Alex crosses his arms. “Not while you’re living in my house.”

My chest constricts. He knows she has nowhere else to go. Her limited work hours won’t be enough to cover an apartment while she’s going to school.

Unless I go with her.

“Actually,” Alex continues. “I’m gonna call the limo place on Monday and tell the manager one of their drivers is a pedophile. He shouldn’t be trying to pick up high school kids that he’s driving to their fucking prom.”

Lily's face contorts with horror. "Dad! Seriously? He's not a pedophile! He'll lose his job. You can't do that."

"Watch me."

My head swims with conflict. Part of me agrees with Lily—it's not a big deal. She needs to make her own mistakes. But then another part of me is irrationally protective and wants to ground her for a month and protect her from all the evils in the world.

"You're being an asshole," Lily seethes. "He's the first guy I've ever had a connection with."

"Yeah, because he's telling you everything you want to hear. You've only known him for a few weeks, now he's got you lying, sneaking out of the house, and drinking. What's next?"

"Lily," I say calmly. "You really wanted to go to the concert. Why didn't you bring him? We could've met him, and then your dad wouldn't be having a fit right now."

Her lips press together. "I did ask him to come. He wanted to be alone with me."

"What a surprise," Alex throws in. "If he was interested in a relationship, he wouldn't mind meeting your father and best friend. He's done."

She sneers at him. "You can't tell me what to do. You've been in my life for like ten minutes."

I wonder if she saw the flash of hurt on his face. I definitely did.

His jaw clenches. "Sorry, Lily. My house, my rules."

"Screw your rules. We'll move out." She throws her bag over her shoulder and heads for the stairs. "I wish you had died and not Mom," she mumbles.

A blinding light flashes behind my eyes, and I feel a sudden rage so intense that it momentarily stuns me. "Lily! Don't you dare talk to your father that way!"

Her head snaps around to look at me. “What the hell, Penny? Whose side are you on?”

I blink at her. I have no idea why that came out of my mouth. It’s something a mother would say—not a best friend. My head throbs in unison with my pounding heart.

“I-I’m not on any side,” I answer, fighting off a wave of dizziness. Ugh. I absolutely refuse to have one of my weird episodes right now.

Shaking her head, Lily storms up the stairs. A few seconds later, the house shakes with the slamming of her door.

Alex and I look at each other. All I see on his face is heartache and defeat.

And I’m torn... aching to comfort him, but also needing to go to my best friend.

I’m in a tangled mess.

Chapter 32



ALEX

I've got a full day ahead of me today, but before I head out to the studio, I decide five days is long enough to let my daughter hide in her room holding a raging grudge against me.

Despite the family discord, my creativity has been soaring. Penny's idea of having customers commission projects with their own items has really taken off. I've had to limit those orders to four per month, and now I have a waiting list that's stretching out to two years.

I've been working on a new experimental project—a woodland series of sculptures. Instead of working with recycled trash, I'm using elements from nature like hollowed-out tree stumps, branches, moss, rocks, abandoned bird nests, and leaves mixed with wire and polymer clay. I create forest scenes inside the stump, with sculpted critters, ghosts, birds, faeries, and tiny cottages. I finally gave in and replied to the art agent who's been hounding me, and when I showed her pictures of the first completed woodland scene, she went wild and begged me to create more for an exhibit she booked for me early next year.

My very first exhibit. It's fuckin' surreal.

It's a scary shift when something that's been therapeutic for me my entire life has suddenly become my job. If turning my art into a career gets to a point where all the joy and reward is stripped from it, I'll quit and go back to creating only for me. I won't trade passion for a stress-filled paycheck.

Speaking of stress, here I am in the hallway, knocking on Lily's door.

"Lily?"

"Go away."

"Enough bullshit. I'm coming in."

I open the door to find her sitting on her bed with her laptop on her lap. I'm not surprised when she doesn't look at me when I walk in.

"What do you want?" she asks, eyes still glued to the screen.

"You've avoided me long enough. We're going to talk."

"I have nothing to say."

I grab her laptop, shut the lid, and toss it to the side. "I do."

Sitting on the edge of her bed, I look around her room. She's got really cool black-and-white paintings of ravens and black cats hanging on the walls.

"I like those." I nod toward them.

"Penny painted them for me."

I smile. "I didn't know you liked cats. Do you want one? We could go to the shelter."

"I'm allergic," she says bitterly. "Something you'd know if you'd been around."

Nodding, I say, "You're right. I'm sorry I missed so much of your life. But I'm trying to make up for that."

"By ruining it? Thanks."

I wonder if Bri acted like this when her parents were dead set against her dating me. I hate to admit it, but now that the shoe's on the other foot, I can relate to why her parents were so worried about her.

"I'm not trying to ruin your life, Lily. I'm trying to protect you. I know you think I suck, and you're probably right. But whether you want to believe it or not, I love you. I've loved

you from the moment your mom told me she was pregnant, and I never stopped.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know I don’t. But it’s important to me that you hear it. Because I think under that little piranha attitude of yours, you want to be loved.”

She shrugs and picks at her nail polish.

“You can’t keep ignoring me, Lily, and you can’t just hole up in your room every time something happens that you don’t like. You keep reminding me you’re an adult now. Then you gotta act like one.”

“You’re not exactly Mr. Maturity yourself.”

“Hey, I’m not gonna deny it. But I’m working on it.”

I wish she’d let her guard down and open up to me. Even when things are good between us, there’s still that underlying degree of anger in her, simmering just below the surface.

But I also understand that in her eyes, I abandoned her. And in a way, I did. Maybe history really does repeat itself, and I was destined to abandon Lily just like my parents did to me. If my parents suddenly came out of the woodwork wanting to be in my life, I’d tell them to fuck right the hell off.

“Look, we have to talk about what happened the other night.”

Finally, she looks at me. “I’m sorry I lied to you, okay? It was stupid.”

“Glad we agree on that. I don’t like that you felt like you had to lie to me, though. I want us to have the kind of relationship where you can tell me anything.”

“If I told you the truth, you wouldn’t have let me go.”

“Not if I knew he was eight years older than you.”

She sighs. “Why does that even matter?”

This is tough. How the hell can I sit here talking about honesty and dating age-inappropriate people when I’m doing

the exact same fucking thing? I feel like a hypocritical asshole.

But, I think it's different. I know my feelings for Penny are real. We've had a connection for years that's slowly grown based on friendship, trust, and love. I'm not interested in dating a young chick just to have fun and get laid, which I'm sure this Jeff asshole is doing. I don't think he cares about my daughter at all.

Lily is beautiful and unique, but she hides her shyness and insecurities behind makeup and attitude. I'm not stupid. I'd bet money that little douche was drawn to her looks and easily saw through her, figuring out that all she wants is to be loved and wanted. That just saying the right things, and making the right promises, would probably have her wrapped around his finger.

"Most men going after younger girls don't have the best intentions, Lil."

"What if I don't care about his intentions? He makes me happy."

"You should care. Does he take you out to dinner? Has he met your friends and family? Have you met his?"

"We're not getting married, Dad. We just hang out."

"And do what? Drink? Get high? Have sex?"

Her cheeks turn bright red.

"That's not a relationship. And it's not a path you should be going down at eighteen years old. You'll never expect better if you settle for this kind of bullshit now."

"Maybe I don't want better."

"Then that's sad. Because you deserve better. You deserve to be with a guy who loves you and treats you like a princess."

She scoffs. "Why? To get my heart broken? Look what happened to you. And to Grandma and Grampa. Love doesn't last. No thanks."

I see her point. She's been surrounded by relationship failures.

“Ya know what? I’m still grateful for every moment I spent with your mom. Loving her and being loved by her was that good. It was worth it. She taught me what love really is.”

“And that’s why you’ve been single ever since. Because you’re afraid of getting your heart shredded again. I’d rather avoid it altogether and at least just live my life, unlike you.”

“I wish you didn’t feel this way. I don’t want you to settle for jerks who are gonna treat you bad.”

“My grandparents didn’t want Mom to settle for you, but she did, and you didn’t treat her like shit. Why are you assuming Jeff is going to treat me bad just because he’s older? Don’t you think guys my age are idiots who sit around drinking, getting high, and trying to get laid, too?”

I can’t help but agree with that. “Some, but maybe not all of them.”

“So what do you expect me to do, become a nun?”

“No, I’d just rather see you focus on school and date someone who inspires you to be a better person, not someone who’s got you lying, sneaking around, and drinking. You’re so much better than that.”

She huffs out an aggravated breath. “Whatever. Can you just go? I’m done talking.”

“Will you promise me you won’t see him anymore?”

Pinning me with her dual-hued eyes, she says, “No. I have a right to do whatever I want and see whoever I want. If you don’t want me here, me and Penny will move out. We can probably get a cheap little studio in the mills downtown. I don’t care what you think about Jeff, I’m not giving him up just because years of guilt are trying to make you be a good father now. Forget it.”

Fear zaps through me like a lightning bolt. If she moves out, my chances of building a better relationship with her will dwindle even more. She’ll drift further and further away from me.

And she’ll take Penny with her.

I'll lose both of them, and my heart will be broken once again in two completely different ways. I'm not ready for that.

"I'd rather you stay here where you have a nice, safe, free place to live and have a chance to get on your feet. I don't want you struggling with bills every month. And I don't want any more lies about where you are."

"Then you're going to have to just let me live my life."

My jaw clenches. My daughter is using my fears to emotionally blackmail me, and I hate myself for being too weak to put my foot down.

She falls back against her pillows and picks up her phone—a sign she's done with me and I'm being dismissed.

Chapter 33



ALEX

I close Lily's door behind me and lean against it. I blow out a breath.

That talk went to hell.

But, I said what I had to say. With any luck, some of it will sink in when she's done being mad at me. There's nothing else I can do.

On my way to the barn, my phone vibrates with a text:

KELLEY:

You around? I was gonna stop by.

Come on over. I'll be in the studio.

While I've got my phone out, I send a message to Penny:

Good morning, little darlin'. How's my favorite person today?

PENNY:

I'm good! :-) Someone just brought in a sugar glider! It was so cute. How's your morning?

I'm sure it wasn't half as cute as you. ;-) I'm just about to attempt making something cool out of an antique silverware collection while I wait for Kelley to get here.

PENNY:

I can't wait to see! Lily said she's working at the diner 'til midnight, so she won't be home for dinner. How do you feel about a picnic on the pier?

I smile at the screen She always cheers me up, no matter how shitty my day is.

I feel like I might be crazy about you. Can't wait to see you. Xo

Guilt festers in me like poison. Jeff is eight years older than Lily, and here I am sending smiley faces and kisses to a girl twenty-one years younger than me.

It's different, though. No matter how hard I've tried to fight my feelings for Penny, it doesn't work. It feels as incomprehensible as sawing off one of my own limbs, detaching something I need to make me whole.

I don't even know how—or when—things happened with Penny. I feel like it was always there, bundled up in a little cocoon, and then one day, it emerged, fully formed, full of love and life, a natural part of my life.

Another other half.

I still sometimes think Brianna sent her to me, sprinkling her with clues I couldn't miss—the same color eyes, the similar hobbies and talents, the red hair—her favorite color. But if she did send her, why? To be a friend...or something more?

After staring at the cutlery collection for a good twenty minutes, I finally come up with an idea. If I bend the spoons and forks and snip off some handles, I can form them into little birds. I'll make a standing tree with outstretched branches out of wood and fasten the silverware birds to the branches.

As I work, something brushes against my ankle. I look down to see a small, black, fuzzy animal at my feet. I jump back, thinking a baby skunk got in the barn. It bounces toward me, tiny, curled tail wagging.

It's not a skunk.

It's a black Chow puppy.

Shocked, I immediately kneel on the ground, and it wiggles its way onto my lap.

My chest feels like it's going to explode with bittersweet emotion when the puppy starts licking my face. I'm slathered in puppy breath. It's adorable and brings back so many memories of Cherry at this age.

"Kelley!" I yell. "Get your ass in here."

He saunters through the door with a big shit-eatin' grin on his face.

"What the heck is this?" I demand with a wry smile, holding the puppy.

"A gift."

"Are you insane? I don't need a puppy. I have so much fucking work—"

"Shut the fuck up, Fox. You know you're already in love with it."

I stare at the puppy's jet-black eyes. It stares back at me with its purple tongue hanging out. He's right. It took two seconds for this little furball to own my heart.

"You're crazy, man. You know that?" I say.

"I know how much you miss Cherry. And I'm gonna be gone for a while, so I figured you needed a little friend to remind you to keep your shit together."

I cradle the puppy against my chest. It smells like baby powder. "Gone? Where are you going?"

A wide grin spreads across his lips. "Just on a world tour with Seven Shot."

I almost drop the puppy. "Holy shit, you're serious?"

"Yup. I had a meeting with them a few days after the concert. It's wild, man. I can't even wrap my head around it."

“I’m so fucking proud of you.” I gently put the puppy on the ground. “You owned that stage. And your voice? Fuckin’ killer. Everyone there was talking about how you sound exactly like Dylan. It was almost eerie.”

“I’m not even tryin’ to sound like him. My voice just sounds like his.”

“When do you leave?”

“Two weeks. One of my guys is gonna take over my jobs while I’m gone, and we’ll see what happens from there.”

“Dude, you aren’t going back to landscaping after this. I think you hafta get that through your head.”

He shrugs with a glimmer of doubt in his eyes that seriously shouldn’t be there. “Who knows? I’m just taking this ride day by day.”

“You better not forget me when you’re famous.”

His eyes land on the beginnings of my project. Rubbing his chin, he says, “Are those birds made out of forks and spoons?”

“Yeah.”

“Crazy cool. Is this for the exhibit?”

“No, this is a commission.”

“I love it. I don’t know how you come up with this stuff.”

“Thanks.” I watch the puppy pounce at an old shoe. “I can’t believe you got me a puppy.”

“Isn’t he cute? He’s nine weeks old. I’ve got everything you need in my truck. Food, a crate, toys, dishes, his papers. And you wanna know the coolest thing? He’s related to Cherry. Like a distant cousin.”

I turn to look at him, convinced he must be joking. “No way. Are you shitting me?”

“I’m serious.”

“How do you even know that?”

“Lily and Penny found Cherry’s original papers in your kitchen drawer, and I got in touch with the woman you got her

from. She was amazed Cherry lived so long. I showed her photos when I picked the puppy up. You should get in touch with her, she'd love to hear from you."

"I'll do that. That makes him even more special to me." I give Kelley a quick hug. "I don't know how to thank you."

"I just don't want you to miss me too much," he jokes. "But don't worry, I'll be at your art show next year, no matter what."

We take the puppy outside to let him run around in the grass. He's the cutest thing I've ever seen. Penny and Lily are going to love him.

"It'll be cool to have a dog in the house again," I tell Kelley. "The house feels so quiet. Maybe he'll get Lily to come out of her damn room."

"Everything okay with her? I was surprised she wasn't at the concert."

I sit on the ground to play with the puppy and give Kelley a quick rundown about Lily and the limo driver.

"You're not gonna like what I have to say," he says after a few moments of deep thought.

"Lemme guess, Dr. Kelley has entered the chat."

He laughs. "Damn right. Here's what I think. She's got daddy issues. Among other things."

I blow out a sigh of extreme denial. "Dude, come on."

"I'm serious. She has a fear of abandonment. She's insecure. Now she's getting involved with toxic, older, avoidant guys. Showing destructive behavior. I think all she really wants is to be loved, but she's afraid of getting attached."

Every word pummels my chest like a bullet. This is my little girl. The little bean me and Brianna stayed awake late into the night talking about and planning for. The daughter I vowed to cherish, protect, and give the world to. I wanted her to grow up surrounded with love and happiness. I wanted to be her best friend and her hero.

But what was I? The guy who spiraled into an alcohol-fueled depression, too weak and lost in grief to fight for her. I let her down. I set her on this path.

“I want to tell you to go fuck yourself, but I think you might be right.”

The puppy stretches out next to me. Stroking his cottony fur is calming. He feels so soft, clean, and innocent. So easy to love. My throat tightens, knowing I’ll spend years loving this dog with every molecule of my being, and someday, he’ll become old and fragile. His onyx eyes will become cloudy. He’ll stare at walls and walk in circles. He’ll take a huge part of my heart to his grave, just like Cherry did.

But as much as that’ll hurt, I’m willingly signing up for all of it again. Because I already know the moments of love are gonna be worth it.

“I don’t know how to fix this,” I finally admit. “It’s like we’re stuck in a vicious circle. Lily will end up being just as messed up as me.”

“That doesn’t have to be true. Things get better. Look how good you’re doing now. Your career is going great. I think you’re happier than I’ve ever seen you.”

I wish I could tell him I took his advice and let myself love again. But then I’d also have to tell him I’m a hypocritical asshole. Although he probably wouldn’t even be surprised. He called this thing between me and Penny years ago.

“Things would be great if I wasn’t so worried about Lily.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, man. She’s just figuring shit out.”

“I hope so. I just want her to be safe and happy. And I want her to like me.”

“C’mon, Fox. Nobody likes their parents at her age. Don’t take it personally.”

I wish I’d had parents to like at her age.

Kelley kneels down in front of me to play with the puppy. The necklace he’s wearing swings across the front of his shirt—a silver star with a blue stone in the center. Even though he’s

had it on every day since I've known him, something about the way the sun glints off it today snags my attention.

Riveted, I stare at it, completely captivated, as a memory slams to the front of my mind.

Me. Holding Brianna in my arms, as she slowly slips away from me in the blood and snow on the side of the road. I saw a shooting star, and I did what Bri always did when she saw one...

I made a wish.

"I wish we had more time," I whispered into her cold ear. *"We have so much more to do together. I have so much more love to give you. Come back to me. I promise I'll never let anything hurt you again..."*

Reaching out, I grab Kelley's necklace and clench it in my fist. The thin chain breaks.

Kelley's face recoils as if I've just kicked him. "What the hell are you doing?"

I hold the necklace up. The star dangles between us. Shiny. Spinning. Just like it was when he was crouching over me. I didn't see a shooting star that day on the side of the road. It wasn't even nighttime. And we were in the middle of a snowstorm. The sky wasn't even visible.

There was no star. There was just—

"This..." is all I can say.

My brain wrangles with disbelief as the memory falls into place. Kelley was there. But how could he be? I've gotta be wrong... if he was there, he would've told me.

"What's wrong with you?" He snatches the necklace out of my hand. "My mother gave it to me the day they adopted me. It's my birthstone."

"I've seen it before..."

"No shit. I never take it off. Until you just fucking broke it."

My heart pounds, galloping like a wild horse as long-buried memories of that day grow even clearer. I didn't just see the star. There was also a muffled voice telling me to hold on.

A familiar voice that's crawled out of the recesses of my mind.

Kelley was there. And he never told me.

"You were there." I force the words out over the rage, confusion, and disappointment that's throttling through my chest. "You were fucking there."

His face falls, his complexion turning ghastly white as he sits back on his heels.

"Alex..." He inhales a deep breath.

"Tell me my head is fucked up and you weren't there, Kelley."

Silence swells between us, so thick it could be cut with a knife.

Finally, he swallows and runs his tongue nervously along his teeth. "You're not fucked up," he says quietly. "I was there."

The ground suddenly feels squishy beneath me. Like I might fall through and get swallowed up like quicksand. "How the hell is that possible?"

"I don't even know where to begin—"

My brain can't unpack this fast enough. I can't grasp any logical explanation of why he would be there and why he never told me.

"Start at why the fuck you were at the scene of the accident!" I roar, needing an answer. The puppy whimpers beside me and hides his head under my leg.

"My father was driving the truck that hit you. I was in the cab with him. I used to go on trips with him sometimes to keep him company. He was killed on impact." His eyes well up and he takes a long breath. "I saw your car go over the barrier. I

called 9-1-1 and climbed down there. It was..." He closes his eyes for a long moment, his breaths deepening. "It was bad. I did everything the operator told me to do while we waited for the ambulance. You lost consciousness right after I got to you. Your head and face were pouring blood."

Yeah. That would've been the branch that impaled my eye. Or the window that cracked open the side of my head.

My heart pounds as he continues.

"There wasn't anything I could do to help you. My collarbone and arm were broken. All I could do was wrap my jacket around your head and face and apply pressure."

His voice echoes in my head like a fever dream. I feel sick trying to process the fact that Kelley was involved in the accident that took my wife and ruined my life.

And his father caused it.

And he's kept this from me for almost eighteen years.

Feelings of betrayal, denial, and disbelief come at me in waves, all battling one thought that keeps rising to the top—he's my best friend. He helped me through the most horrific time of my life.

I can't ignore he was also the one who called 911. He might've saved mine and Lily's lives. We all could've died in that ditch if Kelley hadn't climbed down there and called for help.

But he still *never told me the truth*.

I stare at him. "Your father killed my wife?" My voice is cold, filled with accusation.

His expression twists with pain. "It was an accident. He was *always* a safe driver. We hit a patch of ice on the turn and he couldn't get the truck under control." He shakes his head slowly. "It was a fucking freaking accident."

"And the night at the bar, when you drove me home? I'm supposed to believe that was just a freak fucking coincidence?"

Did he plan our meeting? Was our friendship some kind of guilt-infused mission to make him feel better?

“I recognized you when you threw the beer bottle at me. You were a mess.”

Of course. No surprise there. I’m always in some state of mess.

“So, what? You felt so guilty that your old man destroyed my life, that you’ve been pretending to be my friend ever since? What the fuck?”

“I don’t feel guilty, Alex. It was an accident. And I never *pretended* to be your friend. I *am* your friend.”

“My friend?” My voice deepens to a growl as my disappointment in him grows. “How the hell can you be my friend when you’ve been lying to me for eighteen fucking years?”

“I didn’t lie to you.”

“Really? What the fuck do you call it?” He reeks of betrayal and omission. This isn’t just a little misunderstanding. This is a massive detail to hide from someone for over a decade.

Kelley has been like a brother to me—the one person I thought I could trust no matter what.

Now he’s totally pulled the rug out from under me.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. “All this time, you never mentioned your father. You never admitted you lost someone, too. Never thought to say, *Oh hey, Alex, by the fucking way, my dad was driving the truck that fucking hit you.*”

“I should’ve told you. You’re right. But it never felt like the right time. I didn’t want to ruin our friendship.”

“*Any time* would’ve been the right time. You’ve been deceiving me for fucking years. What the hell kind of friendship is that?”

He puts his face in his hands for a few seconds, then slowly looks up at me, torture shadowing his crystal-blue eyes.

Whatever he's feeling, maybe he deserves it.

I never read about the accident in the paper or online. I never tried to find information about the driver. Maybe I was afraid I would hunt him down and kill him with my bare hands if I knew his name.

Now that I know, it's so much worse than I ever could've imagined.

"Every second of the accident haunts me every day. When I drove you home from the bar that night, I saw how bad you were doing. I went into a major depression after my dad died. I was in grief therapy for months. I could barely function. But I also had family to help me. They kept picking me up. You had no one. It seriously gutted me. I wanted to help you." He smiles weakly. "I guess I felt like maybe there was a reason our paths crossed again, like I was supposed to be in your life."

Me and Kelley have had countless heart-to-heart talks. I bared my soul to him a thousand times. He pulled me out of drunken, near-suicidal depressions more times than I can count. I'd probably be dead without him. But he also knew I blamed myself for the accident. He knew I agonized over what I could've done differently that day to somehow change our fate, and yet he still never admitted that he knew the truth.

As much of a friend to me as he's been, how the hell am I supposed to forgive him for that?

"You knew I blamed myself. You could've taken that off me if you'd told me the truth."

He nods slowly. "You're right. I fucked up. And I'm really sorry, Alex. You have no idea how much that's been bothering me."

"Bothering *you*? Are you fucking kidding me? How the fuck do you think it felt to me?"

"I kept telling you the accident wasn't your fault."

I let out a sick laugh. “Yeah, you did. But you failed to mention that you actually knew whose fault it was, didn’t you? Or that you were there, holding my bloody skull while my wife was dying.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve told you. I was just a kid, Alex. I was going through my own shit, too.”

“Which I guess if we were friends, you would’ve shared that with me instead of me always being the fucked-up one.”

“I didn’t want to unload my problems on you.”

“I don’t know what the hell to think, Kel. This is all seriously fucked up. I’ve always thought of you as a brother. I’m closer to you than I am to Mikey, and I’ve known him my entire life. But now? I don’t even know if this friendship is real. The fact that you hid this from me for eighteen fucking years is totally fucking unacceptable to me.”

“I get it. But I can’t change the past. You know damn well I care about you. You’ve been like a brother to me, too. I just bought you a three-thousand-dollar puppy to cheer you up. I’m sorry, man. I know it was wrong. But I never meant to hurt you. And ya know what? I needed our friendship just as much as you did. You helped me in ways you don’t even know.”

“Answer me this... if I hadn’t had this flashback over the necklace today, were you ever gonna tell me?”

He stares at me, and I can see the struggle in his eyes. “I honestly don’t know,” he says in a low voice. “I always hoped to, but I don’t know if I ever would’ve gotten the guts to do it. I’ve always been too afraid of this happening.”

I’m so fucking torn. He’s done so much for me over the years. He’s always been there, night and day, no matter what I needed. And he might’ve been the only thing that saved me and Lily that night. I just don’t know if I can move on from this. He’s become a walking reminder of the worst day of my life and I’m not sure if I can deal with it.

“Well, it’s happening,” I say. “I need you to leave.”

“Alex—”

“Just go. I need some fucking time to sort this shit out in my head.” I pick up the puppy and stand. “And take this with you.” I thrust the dog against his chest. I can’t accept an expensive puppy from him now, and I’m in no state of mind to be caring for something that’s going to need constant attention.

My heart feels like it’s being ripped open when those two little black, woeful eyes look up at me.

Kelley’s face falls as he wraps his arms around the puppy. “Alex, come on. Don’t do this. I’m leaving soon—”

“Good.” I head back toward my studio. My feet feel like they’re encased in lead. “Enjoy your tour. Send me a fucking postcard.”

I’m done.

Just when I thought life was getting better, I get another knife through the heart.

Chapter 34



ALEX

It's crazy how fast things can change.

How one conversation, one text, one phone call, one drive across town, can kill your mood. Derail your day. Destroy your entire life.

Or, if you're lucky, they can change your life in amazing ways.

I'm constantly reminded that the only moment we can count on—the only moment that's real—is the one we're in.

Earlier today, my creative juices were in full swing. I had a best friend. I had dinner plans. I unexpectedly had a puppy.

Suddenly, it all went to hell. Now I'm staring at a bunch of forks and spoons on my workbench, wondering if my bird and tree idea is dumb as shit.

Fuck it. I can't let all the drama in my life drag me down. I might think Kelley is a dick right now, but the advice he's been doling out for years is still top notch.

I stay laser-focused for the rest of the afternoon, throwing mental blocks up left and right every time I start worrying about Lily, Kelley, and the situation with Penny.

At three thirty, I call it quits and take a shower. I put on my new, fancy snakeskin eyepatch.

I figure since I've got this scar plastered on my face I might as well make it look cool.

From the kitchen, I send Penny a text:

I'm making dinner for our picnic

PENNY:

You don't have to do that! I was going to.

Let me spoil you a little, please

PENNY:

okay. :-) I'll be home at six. I've been thinking about you all day. xo

Tell me what you've been thinking about, but tell me Penny-Poem-Style ;-)

PENNY:

LOL you want me to improv?

You can do it

PENNY:

The only home I've ever known is in your arms /
With the echo of your heartbeats whispering my
name / You are my favorite book, your frayed
pages filled with moments I want to read a
thousand times / And I wish, and I hope, and I
wonder...if you feel the same

Amazing how words can tiptoe across your flesh and make your pulse soar.

I read her little impromptu poem six times. Her voice is crystal clear in my head, softly saying words that pull me in deeper and deeper. She always knows how to say and do the right things.

I take a screenshot and save it in my favorites so I can read it again later.

Utterly beautiful. You can stop wondering. I feel the same. 1000%.

PENNY:

That makes me happy. I have to go, the phones are ringing like mad. I'll see you tonight. xo

Two seconds later, I realize I don't know a damn thing about romantic picnics. A quick web search shows me images of baskets, blankets, fancy pillows, wine, crystal glasses, flowers, and candles. Lots of candles.

Whoa. I had no idea there was so much *fluff* involved. Good thing I checked or I would've thrown an old beach towel down and used the red plastic cups me and the guys use at barbecues.

My options are severely limited since Penny took my car to work today, so I rummage through the kitchen cabinets and drawers trying to find anything even close to the web pictures.

I score a heart-shaped cookie cutter in the back of the kitchen drawer and quickly cut slices of bread, deli meats, and sliced cheese into hearts. I throw a salad together in a big wooden bowl that I didn't even know we had. I jog to the pier with a throw blanket I found in the linen closet and two throw pillows that used to be in the nursery. The only basket I can find is an old planter in the shed that's now filled with dirt and bugs, but we have a little vintage wood box in the kitchen that's filled with fruit, which scatters across the kitchen table when I empty it. A brief stab of sadness pierces my heart when I grab two wineglasses from the little cabinet over the refrigerator. They haven't been touched since my and Bri's last anniversary.

I pick wildflowers from the field and put them in a blue ceramic vase I found months ago during one of my trash raids. As a finishing touch, I add a few flameless candles that I steal from the living room mantel.

Pain digs into my chest while I stand at the edge of the pier. Penny deserves better than to be in a hidden relationship, like a dirty secret. And if Lily finds out, she's going to feel exactly how I feel about Kelley right now—totally betrayed. I'm really no better than Jeff or Kelley.

I've played out hundreds of scenes with Lily in my head, trying to imagine how the conversation could go, and every one of them ends with screaming and slamming doors. Not one of my scenarios ends with Lily giving me and Penny her blessing.

The same goes for any scenario with Mrs. and Mr. Rose. The only reason they let Penny move in with me was because they felt she was safe here. I've completely obliterated their trust, and it makes me feel like pure scum. If the situation were reversed, I'd be in prison. I'd never accept a man twenty years older getting involved with my eighteen-year-old daughter. I can't even deal with one *eight years older*.

The alternative is to end things with Penny. My brain says that's the right thing to do. She's too young for me. And she's too threaded into my family and my life to risk a messy scandal or heartbreak.

But my heart says no fucking way can I let her go. My soul screams *she's the one*.

There's no way out of this vicious circle without hurting someone.



At five forty-five, I go outside to wait for Penny.

Six o'clock comes and goes.

My mind takes advantage of the lull and steers back to Kelley. Again, turmoil swirls up in me like a cyclone. My head is completely fucked up over the whole thing. I want to be furious. I want to pin the blame on him and let it feed my anger and grief because that's always been my comfort place. But gratitude for Kelley keeps slithering out like a snake. He left his dead father's side to climb down the hill in the snow to help us, even though he was hurt and probably in shock. Not many people would do that. In many ways, he was a hero.

But he still lied. He still let me blame myself. I've always thought of Kelley as unapologetically and brutally honest.

Even if it hurts, he tells it like it is. Finding out he hid the truth about something so monumental cuts deep.

I shove him back out of my mind and stare at the picnic food with my stomach growling, wondering if I should put it back in the refrigerator. It's now six thirty, and the salad is starting to look sad.

Worried, I check the tracking app that me, Penny, and Lily share. I see she's still at the vet's office. Maybe she's tied up with a pet emergency.

After five minutes of internal debate over how clingy I'm gonna look, I send her a text.

Just making sure you're ok.

Ten minutes later, the message is still showing as unread, but her location dot is moving toward the house in the app.

Relieved, I sneak half a heart roast beef sandwich and down it in two bites.

When I finally hear her pull into the driveway, I walk out to meet her, but stop short when she comes around the front of the car.

She's holding a leash, and on the end of the leash is the little black ball of fur.

Without a word, she encircles my waist and rests her head against my shoulder.

"I know you're mad and upset," she whispers. "You have every right to be. But this little guy is from all of us. He's had your name on him since the day he was born. Please let him stay."

A knot of emotion constricts my chest, squeezing my heart. I hug her tight and kiss the top of her head. Holding her is like being under the covers on a chilly day. I'm instantly wrapped in familiar warmth and comfort. This feeling of closeness came slowly with Brianna. It took at least a year for my walls to crumble, for my apprehension to fade. But with

Penny, there was no beginning of trust, security, and intimacy. It was as if it was there long before we met.

I shouldn't compare then and now, but my mind wanders there often.

"Kelley was waiting for me when I came out of the office. He told me everything. He's really upset—"

I pull away to look at her. "*He's* fucking upset?"

"I agree he should've told you, but I think we can both understand how the fear of losing someone can make us keep secrets we'd rather not keep."

The truth of her words slowly sinks in as I stare into her eyes. Today, they remind me of the grass after a summer rain. My anger fades, shifting to more of a confused disappointment.

"True..." I reply, chewing the inside of my cheek. "But that doesn't fix things."

"Of course it doesn't, but hopefully you guys can move past it. Everyone makes mistakes. You can't forget he's been a really good friend to you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Has he? Or was it all out of guilt?"

"Alex, I seriously doubt he pretended to be your friend for eighteen years. Who has time for that kind of dedicated deception?"

"Who knows? Maybe he needed a hobby."

"Stop it." She shakes her head with a little laugh. "You know him better than that."

"I don't want to talk about him anymore." I grab her hand and thread our fingers together. "Let's go have our picnic."

"What about this little tumbleweed?" She holds up the leash.

I look at the puppy sitting patiently at our feet. "I guess he's crashing our date."

I take the leash from her and we walk to the lake, laughing at his silly, bouncy bunny hops through the dandelions.

“Wow! Look how amazing this all is!” Penny exclaims when she sees my picnic setup. She launches herself into my arms, almost knocking me off the pier and into the lake. The puppy barks and wags his tail at us.

“It’s just a blanket and pillows,” I say, relieved I didn’t screw up the aesthetic. “And lettuce that checked out about half an hour ago.”

“The flowers and the vase are beautiful. I’m so sorry I was late. Kelley put all the puppy stuff in the car and then he really needed to talk—”

Every time I hear Kelley’s name, I feel sick to my stomach.

“Don’t apologize. We can pick out the wilted parts.” I kneel on the blanket and tug her down with me.

Her eyes light up like fireworks when she pulls the cloth napkin from over the food. “Heart-shaped sandwiches?” She flashes a smile that sends my heart into a backflip. “I can’t believe you did all this. It’s so romantic.”

“Not bad for my first time, huh?”

She opens her mouth to reply but pauses, staring at me, lips parted in a way that’s so cute, it makes me want to kiss her.

“You got a new patch.” Her dreamy expression nearly melts me.

“I thought I’d switch it up so you have something different to look at.”

“I love it,” she whispers. “It looks really hot.”

She leans across the spread and touches her lips to mine. I capture the back of her neck with my hand and kiss her deeper, coaxing her lips open with my tongue. She tastes faintly of cinnamon. She once told me she watched a movie where someone got trapped in their car for two days and the only thing they survived on was a bottle of water and a pack of

candy. Now, she leaves water and a tin of cinnamon mints in the console of my car.

“I’m glad you like it.” I move my hand to her cheek and touch my nose to hers. Our lips meet again. Soft, infused with a longing that’s getting harder and harder to resist.

But I do, as much as it fucking sucks.

Reluctantly, we pull away and reach for sandwiches.

“Have you picked a name yet?” Penny asks, reaching for another half-heart turkey and Swiss.

Between us, the puppy is falling asleep with his head up. His little stub nose nods down every few seconds, then jerks up, only to nod down again.

“Not yet. I have to spend a few days with him and see his personality.”

“He’s very sweet and well behaved. Me, Kelley, and Lily visited him when he was six weeks old. He was so tiny. I took pictures. Now that the cat’s out of the bag, I can send them to you.”

“I can’t believe you guys kept this a secret from me for weeks.”

She swallows and studies me. “Are you happy? The timing with Kelley is awful, but you’re happy about the puppy, right?”

I’ve been devoured by regret since the moment I told Kelley to take the dog back.

“I am,” I reply. “When I saw him with you, it turned my whole day around.”

“I’m glad. We were a little worried it might be too soon after Cherry.”

I stroke my fingers across the puppy’s forehead. He’s so deep in sleep he doesn’t stir. I wonder if he’ll sleep at the foot of the bed with me like Cherry did when she was young. I wait for that thought to immediately awaken guilt, for it to wade from the shadows like a monster to mar my happiness, to

whisper in my ear, accusing me of betraying—*replacing*—Brianna and Cherry.

But I realize I no longer believe those things.

There are no replacements. There is only moving on and taking our memories along for the ride like hitchhikers.

“Nah,” I say, pouring pink lemonade into our wineglasses. “I think the timing’s perfect.”

“Cherry would want you to love another dog.”

I give a short nod and change the subject. “I tried talking to Lily today.”

She grimaces. “How’d that go?”

“Not well.”

“I think she’s still mad at me, too. She keeps accusing me of taking your side, which I’m not. I don’t like this Jeff guy. She’s been different since she started seeing him. She keeps saying how happy he makes her, but she doesn’t seem happy. We used to stay up and watch movies or talk about our favorite books, but now she doesn’t want to do anything. She just wants to sit in her room by herself and text him. He drives for a living. How the hell is he texting so much?”

Puffing out an aggravated breath, I say, “Good question. I wish she wasn’t so hung up on him. Talking to her went in one ear and right out the other.”

“I feel like I really have no room to talk,” she says. “I’m keeping secrets from her, too. But I don’t understand why she’s being so closed and distant just because she’s all into Jeff. Even though I’m totally crazy about you, I still want to spend time with her, and get out of the house and have fun. Unlike her, I’m not hiding in my room pretending the rest of the world doesn’t exist. I’m not letting my situation with you, as unconventional as it is, negatively impact my life.”

I stare at her, assessing if that’s really true. I’d hate it if our feelings for each other were causing her anguish at a time in her life when she should be the happiest.

She cocks her head at me as she sips her lemonade. “Alex, I know what you’re thinking. Don’t worry. I’m happy.”

“Are you, though? You should be dating, going out, seeing the world.”

“If I wanted to date someone, I would. I decided all on my own that the only relationship I want to explore is one with you. And even though it’s not everything we wish it could be right now, I’m happy. I love every moment with you. I love living here with you and Lily. I love my job. I love this little town. I love my drawings and my poetry. I love me and all the choices I’m making.”

I wonder how I managed to attract not one but two incredibly confident women in my life.

“I’m just not digging the secrets and lies. I don’t want any of us living like this.”

A flicker of fear darkens her eyes, which were shining bright as stars just a moment ago. “Do you want to stop spending time with me? If you’re not happy—”

“No. You make me happier than I ever thought I could be.”

Her nose scrunches. “I think we should enjoy our picnic and not worry about anyone or anything else for the rest of the day. Things have a way of working themselves out. We just have to believe that what’s meant to be will be. And we have to focus on this adorable little chunk of fur.” The puppy looks up at us and yawns. “He’s a new beginning.”

“I’m impressed he’s sitting here so good and hasn’t taken a dive into our food,” I say.

“Was Cherry this calm as a puppy?”

I try to think back. It was so long ago, and bad memories have a way of taking over all our good ones. But I find those memories. They slowly uncurl like pages of an old photo album.

“She was. She loved to just be with us. She’d follow me to the barn every morning, then follow me back to the house. Every night, she’d sit on the couch with Brianna, with her

head on her lap. Chasing the ball was her favorite thing. She'd chase it and bring it back all day long if we let her. Me and Bri would sit in the grass and laugh while Cherry would run back and forth with the ball in her mouth, doing this little happy trot she did. When we talked to her, she'd look right at us, and I swear she understood everything we were saying." I run my hand down the puppy's back. "I noticed right away this little guy has that same soulful expression she had."

"It's so cool you noticed that. That's why we picked him. We saw it, too."

"He's perfect."

When I pick him up and cradle him against my chest, he climbs up and nuzzles into my neck and under my hair.

Penny breaks out into a huge smile. "You look so cute holding him. I can't handle it." She pulls out her phone and takes a bunch of pictures. "Did you ever want another baby?" she suddenly asks.

The question throws me off guard. "Honestly, I never thought about it again after I lost Lily. I stopped thinking about the future, babies included."

She pulls one of the throw pillows onto her lap and fingers the tassels. Her nails are sparkly teal, perfectly shaped, equal length. She does them herself every Sunday afternoon. The scent of the polish drifting through the house has become part of our home.

"Do you think about the future now?" she asks.

Every day. Every night. Even though I fight it with everything I have.

I pull a cucumber slice from the salad bowl and bite it in half. "I try not to. It scares the shit out of me."

Understanding sits on her smile. "The future's going to happen whether you're scared of it or not."

Chuckling, I nod and say, "You're right."

"Tell me what you want in this future that you're scared of."

I place the puppy on my lap and turn to her. She looks so gorgeous with her hair up, long loose waves framing her face that my brain stutters.

“Do you really want to know?”

A teasing, slightly mischievous smile spreads across her face. “I want to know everything you wish for and dream about, Fox. How else will I make them come true?”

Her subtle flirting makes me want her so fucking bad.

“Is that what you want to do, darlin’?”

“I see you’re trying to buy time before you answer the question.”

I toss my head back and let out a laugh. “Little smart-ass. Always calling me out.”

Still smiling, she holds a grape to her mouth. The way her lips wrap around it deflates the air from my lungs. I’d sell my soul to the devil to see her lips pursed around my cock that way.

“You love it,” she says, biting into the grape. The juice wets her lower lip. I fight the temptation to lick it off.

“I do.” Grinning, I release a long sigh. “I want what I’ve always wanted. A happy family. A successful career. Stability. A contented mind and heart. To love and be loved unconditionally. To sit on that fucking porch when I’m eighty, still holding hands with the love of my life.”

Her glittering gaze settles on mine. She’s wearing a familiar expression I’ve seen countless times since the first day we met—a hint of expectancy, like she’s waiting for me to remember something.

She says softly, “Can I be the one on that porch with you when you’re eighty?”

Words lodge in my chest, afraid to come out. Saying them means letting go of what was and moving on to what can be.

“I was hoping you would be. I can’t imagine being with anyone else.”

We reach for each other's hands at the same time. I bring hers to my lips and kiss it softly. Behind her, the sky shifts from blue to orange. She looks ethereal in the glow.

“Things will work out, Alex,” she declares softly. “I promise I'll always be here with you.”

Chapter 35



ALEX

After our picnic, we brought the puppy and his careful of belongings into the house. We fed him dinner in his tiny dish and showed him his pile of toys. I had to smile when he immediately went after the tennis ball.

Penny and I said good night in the dark hallway. She had one foot on the stairs on her way to her room when I backed her against the wall for one more kiss. She smiled against my lips and clenched my shirt in her hands to pull me closer. The puppy tugged at my shoelaces, letting out adorable squeaky growls. We laughed, our bodies perfectly pressed together. The house sighed with happiness. I could feel it emanating from the walls and floors. It loved being a home, holding love. I could sense its drafty discontent when Penny went upstairs alone.

I felt the same.

I need to fix this.

Life can't be cruel enough to take my wife away and then dangle impossible love in front of me.

But actually, life is exactly that cruel.

The puppy follows me to the back door. I take him outside for a walk under the moon, and he sticks right by my side like a shadow.

And just like that, he had a name.

I turn my face into the cool breeze. My bed is calling me, but so is Penny. I don't trust myself to go upstairs when she's

in the next room, only five inches of wall separating us. Not when her perfume is still on my clothes and my cock is still twitching over how her curvy body felt against mine.

“C’mon,” I say to the puppy. “We’ll have our first late-night work session.”

Shadow goes straight to Cherry’s old bed in the corner of the studio. I’ve made a hundred excuses for not throwing it away, and now I’m glad I didn’t. Shadow doesn’t care how old and ratty it is. He’s curled himself into a ball on it, claiming it as his.

I don’t want to seem like an ungrateful douche, so I take a picture and text it to Kelley.

I’m still pissed, but thank you. It’s nice having a little partner in crime again while I work. He’s exactly what I needed.

KELLEY:

I know.

You’re still an asshole.

KELLEY:

I know.

With a laugh, I toss my phone on the workbench, turn on some tunes, and get back to carving the tree for my silverware birds.

A little after midnight, Lily’s headlights flash across the windows. I hope she’ll see the lights on in the studio and come talk to me, but that hope is snuffed out fast when I hear the front door opening and closing moments later.

She probably gets her grudge-holding skills from me.

I take a break to walk the puppy around the yard. I tell him how Cherry used to sit on the porch at night and listen to the frogs and crickets and that he’ll get to do that, too. His black eyes gleam as if he understands every word. On the way back

to the barn, I glance up at the house. Lily's window is dark, but Penny's has a faint blue glow. She's been up late every night for the past two weeks working on poems and artwork that she wants to submit to a publisher. I worry she's putting a lot of stress on herself, but I also understand the need to get things as perfect as they can be.

Hours later, I'm engrossed in my work when the barn door slowly slides open behind me. The puppy lets out a small bark that sounds like *bruf*.

Her giggle sends an instant flash of heat through me.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" I ask, turning to her. Oxygen is sucked out of my lungs when she comes into the full light. She's wearing a white, off-the-shoulder sweater that reaches just above her knees, white knit knee socks, and black high-top sneakers. She holds my gaze as she crosses the room and lifts herself up to perch on my workbench. I try to shove away the memory of her doing the same thing at seven years old, wearing little pink work boots. Her lips curve to a slow smile when she catches me staring at her.

"I couldn't sleep," she tells me. "I couldn't stop thinking about you. I miss sitting out here with you."

The tone of her voice is once again stripped of its young sweetness, replaced with a mature, raspy edge that's sexy as hell.

"I miss having you here. Is Lily—"

"Asleep? Yes."

Even though Lily knows Penny has been hanging out in my studio for years, it suddenly felt less innocent after our first kiss. The friendship line wasn't just crossed; it was totally mowed down. The worry of Lily getting suspicious put a stop to the nightly visits.

But that's not to say that every night since I haven't hoped she'd sneak out to see me.

She picks up a little silver spoon bird and smiles at it in her hands. "These are so whimsical. I love them!"

“Thanks,” I say on my way to the newly installed sink in the corner to wash my hands.

Placing the bird back with the others lined up on the bench, she asks, “Will you make me something like them someday?”

“I’ll make you anything your heart desires.”

Pink colors her cheeks. “Will you make me the happiest girl in the world?”

She parts her legs as I approach her, then grabs my shirt to pull me between them. Her sweater bunches up to her thighs, revealing a glimpse of white panties. I stifle a groan and touch her chin, lifting her face to mine.

“That will always be my number one goal,” I promise.

She smiles and tightens her thighs around me. “I love it when you say things like that.”

I move my hands down the length of her long legs to her sock-covered calves. “Did you wear this adorably sexy outfit for me? You didn’t have this on earlier.” My gaze flits downward, taking in her bare shoulder and the outline of her nipple poking through the thin knit sweater. Not a bra in sight. My cock throbs.

“Do you like it?”

I push her hair behind her shoulders, exposing her neck for me to kiss. “I forgot how to breathe when you walked through the door,” I whisper against the soft pulse at her throat.

“Good,” she whispers back.

Her arms wrap around my shoulders as I drag my lips up to her mouth. The scent of her vanilla body wash clings to her warm skin, making me want to eat her like dessert. A jagged breath escapes her when our lips meet. I grasp her hips as we kiss deeper, our tongues dancing and teasing, seeking more. She clenches her thighs tighter around me and presses herself against my cock. I’m nearly driven wild by the feel of her warmth behind her thin panties. Grasping her hair, I pull her head back and deliver a trail of wet kisses from her mouth to

her shoulder, pushing the wide neck of her sweater down to uncover one perfect, full breast. Heat courses through me like lava as I cup her in my palm. The stubble on my chin lightly scrapes across her flesh as I lower my face to circle her nipple with my tongue. A gasp edges past her throat. Her hands shoot from my shoulders to cradle my head as I pull her between my teeth, sucking the pink bud until she's panting and threading her fingers through my hair. Her nails on my scalp send jolts of ecstasy down my spine.

I want her crazy for me. Scratching, biting, grinding. Loving. I want to feel everything.

Releasing her breast, I travel back to her mouth, gently licking and nipping along the way as I shove my hands under the hem of her sweater to pull her panties down. Stepping back, I slide them over her feet and toss them onto the workbench. As I move between her spread legs, I'm caught in her gaze, her green eyes fiery with want, glittering like gems. I lower myself onto the wooden stool just behind me and slowly slide my hands from her ankles up to her outer thighs. Her pussy is on full display, just inches from my face, pink, shaved, and glistening.

Fuck. My cock aches and throbs for her in the prison of my jeans.

Her chest rises and falls as she lies back on the bench top, pushing tools and sketches out of her way. Grabbing the neck of her sweater, I tug it down to her waist, uncovering both breasts, firm and upright. Sucking in a breath, I palm them, brushing my thumbs across the peaked tips. She arches up into my hands, breathing my name.

"Do you want me to fuck you with my mouth, little darlin'?" My voice is low and coarse with pent-up desire. "Or should we stop?"

"No," she breathes out desperately. "Please don't stop."

I lean into the apex of her thighs and press a soft kiss directly over her clit. I leave my mouth there, exhaling hot breath against her. My cock almost explodes when her lips quiver under mine. She's utterly still and quiet as I gently

sweep my tongue over her pink flesh. When she starts to press herself urgently against my mouth, I thrust my tongue between her folds. Letting out a delicious moan, she spreads her legs wider, inviting more. My tongue delves deeper through her opening to caress her inner walls as I run my hands over her thighs.

“Alex...” She breathes, her head lolling to the side. “That feels so good.”

I respond by moving back to her swollen clit, sucking it between my lips, flicking my tongue over it. When I gently slide my middle finger partially into her, her entire body tightens, then slowly relaxes as I push it all the way in to the knuckle.

“Oh, God,” she gasps.

I look up at her and almost lose my mind at how fucking gorgeous she looks—long legs, perfect curves. Her hair a messy mane around her face, clothes disheveled, head thrown back, her hands clenching the edge of the old wooden bench.

My body is literally shaking from wanting to sink myself into her.

“Are you okay, baby?” I ask in a raspy whisper.

“Yes....” She pants, squeezing her thighs around my head. “Don’t stop...”

Grinning against her sex, I dive back into her, devouring her with my mouth while fucking her with one, then two fingers. Her tight pussy clamps around me as she grinds herself into my face. It’s delicious torture, bringing her to euphoria while restraining myself from filling her with my cock.

It’s been so damn long since I’ve felt a woman wrapped around me. Since I’ve felt loved and wanted. I want Penny to be the one to end that. Only her—ever.

But not here like this. And not without a promise of forever.

Little mews start to escape her, and I know she's close. I rise from the stool and bend over her, capturing her mouth with mine, kissing her wildly with my fingers buried deep inside her. She's so fucking wet and ready. Her arms and legs wrap around me like a vise. She kisses me hungrily, not shying away from her juices still wet on my lips and face, while shoving her hands under my shirt to touch my flesh. Her entire body quakes and trembles as she cries out my name.

Nothing has ever made me feel more alive than hearing my name on her lips.

My heart pounds, echoing in my ears. I hold her tight, feeling as if a massive wall just came crumbling down inside me.

Chapter 36



ALEX

I pull her into my arms and kiss her softly until her limbs stop trembling and her breathing calms. She winds her arms and legs around me and hugs me with her entire self. My heart soars. I never want to let her go.

Blissful moments tick by before she lets out a deep, contented sigh and looks up at me with glazed, hooded eyes.

I kiss the tip of her nose. “You doing okay?”

“I think my brain is mush,” she says with a sleepy smile. “That felt even better than I imagined it would.”

I brush her hair from her damp forehead and broach my question carefully. “You don’t have to answer this... but I’m just curious if that was—”

She fixes the neckline of her sweater, covering her chafed breasts. “The first time a man has licked me? Of course.”

“I’m honored you trusted me enough to be your first.” I lean closer and softly press my lips to the little raised scar on her forehead.

“And you’ll be my last,” she replies with confidence beyond her years as she slips her panties back on. “I’ve been fantasizing about you since I was twelve years old.”

I nearly choke on my tongue. I had no idea twelve-year-old girls thought about sex in any way. “Really?” I force out. “Are you serious?”

Nodding, she says, “My feelings for you aren’t new, Alex. Ever since I was little...” She pauses and breathes in like she’s

grounding herself. “I knew someday we were going to be together. I can’t explain it. I just knew with every single cell of my being that you were mine, and I was yours. I’ve just been...” She stares off behind me, suddenly a million miles away. “Waiting,” she finally says, turning her gaze back to me. “I’ve been waiting.”

I hold her face in my hands and give her a tender, lingering kiss. I want her to know—to feel—how much I care about her. I don’t want her to ever doubt my feelings for her. “I hope the wait was worth it because I’m falling crazy, madly in love with you.”

A faint gasp rises from her throat.

“And I was thinking...” I reach for her hand that’s adorned with the ruby ring. “That maybe this could be a different kind of a promise ring now. A promise that I love you, and I’m going to do whatever I can for us to be together—really together in every way, not in secret—someday soon, hopefully.”

Her silence has my insides shaking like a leaf. I can’t believe I’m taking a huge leap of faith by promising my love to a woman almost half my age. But she captured my heart a long time ago. She helped me heal. She showed me happiness again. She inspired and motivated me endlessly. She showed me that I’ll always love Brianna but that I can also move on and love again—without guilt.

I can’t imagine a future without her.

“Shit,” I say nervously when she continues to stare at me quietly. Her eerie silence and blank expression are unnerving. My heart is threatening to shrivel back into the dark hollow of the last eighteen years. I’m beginning to wonder if I read this whole situation between us wrong.

As I search her face, her eyes widen, dark and glassy like an owl’s. She runs her hand through her hair, pausing to rub her temple, then shakes her head as if she’s trying to clear it.

“Penny? Am I scaring you away?” I let out a clipped laugh. “I never thought I’d feel like this. Is it too soon?”

Finally, she lets out a shaky sigh and touches the center of my chest with trembling fingertips.

“I’m not scared,” she says. “Are you?”

“Sometimes. A little.”

She smiles. “I’ve been in love with you forever, Alex. Your heart is safe with me for eternity. That’s my promise to you.”

Her words set off a string of déjà vu sensations in my head, but they’re quickly forgotten as soon as she cups the back of my neck and guides my mouth back to hers. She kisses me so softly, so intentionally filled with love, that it lulls my soul. I feel as if I’ve slipped into a dream and I’m almost afraid to breathe because I don’t want her to stop making me feel this way. Closing my eyes, I silently thank the universe for not giving up on me.

Happiness and love have found me again.

“But you said it wrong,” Penny says with a bemused smile when she pulls away. The tone of her voice has shifted again, and her eyes have taken on a startling, greener hue. “You’re not supposed to say you’re falling in love with me. You’re supposed to say, *I love you like the stars love the moon. Endlessly, for shining light in the dark and guiding my heart to a safe place.*”

A shudder zips down my spine, scattering goose bumps over my skin. Cocking my head at her, I narrow my brows.

“What did you say?” I ask.

“I said—”

Quickly cutting her off, I shake my head in frustration. “I heard what you said. *Why* did you say it?”

She pales. “Because it’s what you’re supposed to say.”

I feel as if an icy hand has seized me by the throat. Her words, her ashen face, and the sudden loud static in the air surrounding us have engulfed me with unease.

“How do you know that, Penny?” I ask suspiciously. There is absolutely no way she could possibly know I once said those words.

Twenty years ago. Before she was even born. To Brianna.

Penny’s bottom lip quivers under my expectant stare. Her voice wavers. “You know why. I was there.”

A feeling settles over me that I’ve never felt before. It could only be described as walking into a pitch-black room and suddenly plummeting through the floor, falling endlessly.

“No, Penny,” I say evenly. “You were not.”

She clutches the sides of her head and screws her eyes shut as if she’s trying to lock the world out. Her beautiful face contorts with anguish.

I gently touch her arm the way I’d approach a frightened animal. “Penny—”

“Stop calling me that,” she whispers. “That’s not my name.”

Intense confusion washes over me like a tidal wave. I search her eyes, looking for the happy, confident, playful woman who was here just a few minutes ago. “What’s going on?”

She jumps off the bench and begins to pace frantically in a small circle. Round and round. When I can’t stand to watch anymore, I grab her and pull her to me, holding her arms at her sides.

“Penny, tell me what’s wrong.”

Her eyes are manic, shifting back and forth in their sockets. “I’m not Penny. I’m Brianna. Can’t you see me? I’m Brianna.” She lets out a sob that makes my heart drop. “I don’t want to be the other one anymore. You promised we’d be together forever. We promised *eternity*. But now you keep saying *someday*. We’re *married*, for God’s sake!” The despair in her voice escalates with every word.

I drop her arms as if they’d just burst into flames. I feel like I’ve been thrust into a *Twilight Zone* episode. “What the

hell are you even saying?" I demand. "Why are you acting like this?"

"I'm not acting like anything. I just want you to believe me." Frustration pitches her voice even higher.

Deep in my heart, where grief still lingers and ignores logic, I want to believe her. But what she's saying is impossible. I'd be crazy to even consider such a thing could be true.

"You are *not* Brianna."

She stares at me defiantly. "Yes, I am. You know I am. You can feel it. You've *always* felt it."

I slam my fist onto the workbench, sending the antique silverware flying. She's tearing me apart, slicing open old wounds, twisting reality and fantasy into a pretzel. Pain shoots through my chest like shrapnel. I can't breathe.

"Why are you doing this?" Desperation thickens my voice. "Why are you trying to hurt me? You know you're ripping my fucking heart out acting like this."

Tears shimmer in her eyes. "I'd never hurt you. I love you, Alex. I just want our life back," she chokes out on a sob, swiping her tears with her palms. "I don't want to wait anymore. I—"

I put my hands up between us and step back. "I don't know what's happening to you. I thought things were good between us. I thought we were on the same page. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. But you have to stop with this Brianna shit. It's killing me."

"I can't stop," she persists tearfully. "Don't you remember? You asked me to come back. You *wished* for it! Why do you think I'm here? I exist for *you*. To love *you*. To finish our life together like we were supposed to."

Her teary eyes stay riveted on mine, and my blood goes ice cold as realization floods through my veins. She's telling the truth. Or at least, her truth. She believes every word she's saying. It's undeniable, clear as crystal, in the heartbreaking

sincerity of her voice. In the quiver of her chin. In her shaky breaths. In every tear that's spilling down her cheeks.

Penny. Doesn't. Lie.

Penny always tells me the truth, even if it's largely unbelievable, like her memory pictures. I promised her a long time ago I would always believe her. And while I know what she's saying can't be true, I believe that *she* believes it.

My heart feels like it's being obliterated in a trash compactor. I can only think of one logical explanation for Penny's strange behavior over the years. Her mother even hinted at it when Penny was little. She must have a mild mental illness, something that makes her believe in fantasies and dreams. Something that made her want to be the love of my life. Not as herself, but as someone who was here first.

I may have even unknowingly contributed to it. I built up a fairy tale in her mind by sharing so much of my life with Brianna. Penny has always had such an open, vivid imagination—especially when she was younger. Maybe she subconsciously inserted herself in the role of my wife, envisioning herself as Bri, and brainwashed herself into truly believing she was her. Tonight we were closer emotionally and physically than we've ever been. I'm no doctor, but it seems like the emotional overload of it all triggered her, causing her to spiral.

And now I don't know what's real. I don't know if *she* knows what's real. I'm terrified of harming her even more than I may already have.

Swallowing hard over the knot in my throat, I say, "I think we should go inside and call your mother, Penny. I'm really worried about you, and I don't know what to do to help you. You're not thinking straight. Maybe if you talk to your mom, or go home for a few days, you'll feel better."

I'm sure I'll receive the wrath of the Roses if they find out I'm involved with their daughter, and rightfully so. But all I care about right now is taking care of Penny.

"*This* is my home," she says.

The twisted web is slowly untangling.

She does live here. But in her mind, does she think this is a house she bought and lived in with her husband? Or does she know that she's staying here temporarily as a friend?

"It is," I agree carefully. "You live here with me and Lily. But right now you're upset and I want you to be happy again." I reach for her hand. "Come inside with me," I continue softly. "You can put your favorite cozy clothes on, I'll make you some tea, and we'll call your mom together."

Instead of taking my hand, she grabs on to my arm, clinging to me. "Alex, please. I don't want to talk to anyone. And I don't want to leave. This is our home. I love you." Her eyes blur with pooling tears. "Please smile at me." Reaching up, she brushes her thumb across my lips. Exactly like Brianna used to. Her special little love touch.

My heart completely freezes. For a crazy brief second, she almost has me convinced.

I turn away from her touch. "Don't do that."

Her face falls. "You love when I do that—"

"Penny!" She flinches at my rising voice. "Please, stop. Whatever's going on, it's not normal. You're scaring me. We need to get you help."

"I don't need help!" I watch in horror as she pulls at her hair, yanking beautiful red strands out in handfuls. "I want my life back...I wasn't ready yet... I want you and the baby and Cherry and my house... *please*."

She falls to the floor and rolls onto her back, sobbing uncontrollably. "My head hurts so much...I just want to be me again, I just want you to love me again," she cries hysterically.

"Penny, I *do* love you. Please don't cry. I can't stand seeing you like this. Come inside with me and we'll talk..."

My heart lurches when I realize she's not just sobbing, her body is convulsing. Her rib cage is heaving in and out with alarming rapid breaths, her limbs are shaking. Something is seriously wrong.

Quickly kneeling next to her, I take her hands in mine to stop her from pulling on her hair. “Penny... it’s okay,” I say. “Just try to calm down...”

I don’t know what to do. I feel like I’m having a breakdown myself. Just minutes ago everything was perfect. We were happy. We were falling in love. She was everything I dreamed of and wished for. I promised to make her the happiest woman in the world.

I’m cursed.

“Oh my God... what’s going on?” Suddenly, Lily is there, her eyes wide as she takes in the scene that must look sketchy as hell. Penny, half-dressed on the floor, crying. Me, kneeling over her with my hair a mess and clothes askew.

“Call 9-1-1.” I pull my phone from my pocket and toss it to her. “I think she’s having a seizure.”

“I don’t want to die again,” Penny cries, grabbing at my arms. “Please don’t let me die. I don’t want to do this again.”

Fear pounds in my ears. “You’re not going to die,” I say softly. “We’re going to get you to the hospital.”

Her face twists with terror. Her nails dig into my flesh. “Please don’t make me go there. That’s where I died... please...”

“What is she talking about?” Lily asks in between questions from the 9-1-1 operator.

“I don’t know. I think she’s hallucinating.”

Lily crouches down next to us with the phone at her ear. “Penny, can you tell me what happened? Do you know where you are? Did you have one of your episodes?”

Penny sobs, rolling her head back and forth. “I’m not me anymore,” she whimpers. “I’m lost...”

“You’re right here with us,” Lily says in a soothing tone I’ve never heard from her before. “Take deep breaths. The ambulance is coming.” Into the phone, she says, “Yes, she’s breathing, but very heavily. She’s crying.”

I can't think straight. My mind muddles with mounting worry and confusion as flashbacks drag me to that horrible day on the side of the road. I squeeze Penny's hand in mine. "I'm here," I whisper. "You're going to be okay."

"No," Lily continues with the operator. "She doesn't drink or do drugs. Ever. Yes, I'm sure." She raises her eyes to question me. "What happened? What was she doing out here?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. She came to talk, and all of a sudden, she started crying and saying all these crazy things. She's not making any sense."

Hating myself for lying, I stand and grab the picnic blanket I draped near the door earlier.

I cover Penny with the blanket just as the ambulance arrives. I stay by her side, refusing to let go of her hand, only speaking when questioned. She clings to my hand, her wild eyes riveted to my face. When they load her into the back of the ambulance, panic races through me. The last time someone I loved was put into an ambulance, they never came back.

"Alex!" Penny shrieks and bolts upright on the stretcher as the EMT climbs in with her. "Please don't let me go!"

My heart cracks. "I'm going with her," I say. "Let me just get my coat—"

"No," Lily grabs my arm. "It's better if I go. I'm her best friend. I know everything about her. I'll call her parents on the way."

I stare at the ambulance with cold fear coursing through my blood. I can still hear Penny's cries as the EMTs lean over her. "Lily, she needs me. I can't just let her go, she's scared. She—"

"Dad." Her eyes narrow in on my neck, then to the front of my shirt. "I think it's best if you stay here," she says firmly. "You should take the puppy inside and get cleaned up. It's late. I'll take care of Penny."

I can't read her face. I can't tell if she knows something was going on between me and Penny, or if she's just trying to calm me down.

“I’ll call you,” she says as she gets into the ambulance.

Gutted, I stand in the driveway and watch the ambulance drive off with the two most important people in my life. *Again.* Minutes pass before I force myself to go back to the studio. Numb, I stare around the room—at the stool I was sitting on earlier—lost in Penny and dreaming of new beginnings. At the blanket where we laughed and ate heart-shaped sandwiches, at her favorite spot on my workbench.

Also Brianna’s favorite spot.

Could it be possible?

A chilly breeze whispers over my skin and threads through my hair.

I rub my arms. *No.* It’s not possible. People don’t come back, no matter how bad we want them to, no matter how much we wish for them, no matter how much it hurts. The hand of death closes a door and locks it forever.

I grab Shadow’s leash and take him inside. In the bathroom mirror, I see what Lily saw. Lipstick on my face and neck. Smear on the front of my shirt.

Fuck.

After a quick shower, I replay every moment, every word Penny and I shared today. I have no idea what the hell went wrong. Everything was perfect, until it wasn’t. Could Penny really have had a mental breakdown? Does it happen that fast, without warning?

If she isn’t suffering from some kind of delusion, then what happened? Is she jealous of Brianna? Did she think I’d love her more if she managed to convince me that she’s really my dead wife?

That’s absolutely insane.

How could she know so many intimate, private things about me and Brianna? I suppose she could’ve found an old diary of Brianna’s somewhere in the house. Her things are everywhere—in drawers and closets, just as she left them.

I can’t make any fucking sense out of this.

Kelley would tell me this is what I get for getting involved with an eighteen-year-old girl. He'd tell me her emotions aren't fully developed yet. How she's unable to handle a serious relationship, especially with a widower. I can literally hear his voice in my head. But I don't think age has anything to do with this.

I know Penny. She's not a liar, or a manipulator. She doesn't exaggerate or create drama for attention. Her tears, and the devastation I saw in her eyes and heard in her voice earlier were real. The fear and emotional frustration coursing through her were real. And as confused as I am right now, I know Penny cares about me. She would never, ever play with my heart or dig up my grief. That much I know for sure.

The sound of my phone jolts me abruptly out of my thoughts. It's Lily.

"How is she?" I ask immediately. "Is she alright?"

"They sedated her, and they're running tests. MRI, CT scan, EKG. The whole gamut."

"Shit. I don't know what happened, Lil. I'm so fucking worried about her."

"I know," she says, and again, I have to wonder if she knows Penny and I are more than friends. I'm sure she saw the lipstick all over me, and she knows Penny doesn't normally wear sexy outfits—especially out to the barn to help me or to work on her paintings. "I called her parents, they're jumping on the next flight out. I also called Aunt Kirsty, she's on her way here to sit with me."

"I can be there in fifteen—"

"I think it's best if you don't come. The doctors won't let you see her. They won't even let me in her room right now. She's really confused. For some crazy reason, she keeps saying Mom's name. Do you have any idea why?"

"No. I'm just as confused as you are."

"I think seeing you might make her worse. I hope she doesn't have a brain tumor. Her behavior for the past year has

been really odd. The headaches, the dizziness, random conversations, now these hallucinations...”

“Jesus Christ, she doesn’t have a brain tumor, Lily.”

“Well, they’re checking for one.”

My stomach sinks like an anchor. Penny has to be okay. I can’t imagine a world without her beautiful, special soul.

“I’m going to stay at Aunt Kirsty’s for a few days,” Lily informs me. “Her condo is closer to the hospital.”

The anchor sinks even further. “I’d rather you come home. This whole thing has me unsettled.”

“I already told Aunt Kirsty I’d be staying with her.”

After a few seconds of silence, she asks, “Are you okay, Dad? You looked pretty messed up when I found you with her.”

“Yeah...” I clear the emotion from my throat. “I was just really worried. It all happened so fast.”

“Why was her lipstick all over you?”

Oh, fuck. “She collapsed and was thrashing around. I had to grab her and hold her.”

My heart pounds as silence bloats between us. I’m terrified she’s ended the call and will never speak to me again.

“Lily?”

“I’m here.”

I wait with my heart in my throat for the axe to fall.

“You should try to get some rest, Dad.” Relief washes over me. “Chill out with your puppy. That’s why we got him for you, to cheer you up and keep you company.”

I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. That’s how people see me—as someone who can only find lasting comfort and companionship with a dog. They’re probably right.

“Call me right away if you hear anything from the doctor, okay? Or if anything changes.”

“I will.”

I end the call and stare at the wall, overwhelmed with confusion and helplessness. I’m worried sick about Penny. I should be at the hospital with her, comforting her and getting answers from the doctors. But I can’t do that without getting on Lily’s already suspicious radar. She was adamant that I stay home and I’m still not sure if that’s because she knows the truth and is trying to keep me away.

Shadow appears at my feet with a tennis ball that’s almost bigger than his head.

“Where’d you find that?” I stroke his ears. “Not such a great first day, huh?”

He follows me as I walk through the dark house. I stand in Lily’s doorway, remembering when it was a nursery full of hope. How it was empty for so long. How suddenly Lily was here.

And how now she’s not.

I drift to Penny’s room. Her sketchbook is on her bed, open to an unfinished drawing of a red cardinal in the snow. It looks strangely familiar. I shift my gaze to the vase and flowers from our picnic on her nightstand. Tomorrow, they’ll be dead.

I ache to hold her in my arms. To tell her that yes, I love her like the stars love the moon. *More* than the stars love the moon.

I love her for her, and I don’t want her to ever be anyone else.

Downstairs, the silence is screaming from the living room where we’d all sit every night, talking and laughing. And from the kitchen, where Kelley made me dinner for months.

Ironically, I’m exactly where I never wanted to be again. Alone, with only my dog, not knowing if the people I love will ever return.

I wander back to the bedroom and stare at the edge of the woods from the window. Penny’s Path, is what I used to call it.

I'd give anything to see her emerge from the trees, smiling, wearing one of her silly little hats.

She'd say, "*Here I am again...*" And I'd say, "*There you are...*"

The house is quiet. It's watching me. It recognizes me.

I'm the ghost here. I always have been.

Chapter 37



PENNY

“So, what are you in for?”

I raise my eyes from behind my book to smirk at a young girl with pixie-cut platinum hair who just entered my room. My attention goes straight to the silver ring in her nose and the faith tattoo on the side of her neck.

“How many times have you used that line?” I ask her.

“You’re my third roommate. Math it up yourself.”

My brows curve up. “How long have you been here?”

She sits on the twin bed across from mine and leans back against the maroon-padded headboard, mirroring my exact position.

“Too long,” she answers, blue eyes cast toward the ceiling. “Way too long.”

I close my book and put it on the nightstand. “Well, I won’t be here very long.”

Cackling, she says, “That’s what the other two said. Let me guess. There’s been a misunderstanding, and you’re not supposed to be here. Your doctor is an idiot and your parents are assholes. You have no idea why you’re here because you’re not crazy at all. You were just having a bad day and no one would listen to you, and now it all seems fuzzy, doesn’t it? Like a big, strange, horrible bad dream. Oh, and you thought this was some kind of Airbnb and you’d be getting your own private room.” She casts a side-eye glance at me. “Am I right?”

Her accuracy is just as terrifying as the headless stuffed teddy bear seated on her pillows.

“I’m Londyn, by the way,” she adds when I don’t respond. “And you’re Penny Rose, all the way from a teeny-tiny town in New Hampshire. I’ve never been to the East Coast. Is it really as cold as it looks in the movies?”

“Colder, actually.”

She shudders. “We won’t be going there, Shithead,” she says to the bear. “I’m not going to walk around with hard nipples four months out of the year. Screw that.”

“It would probably be closer to five months, to be honest.”

“Noted.” She rolls on her side and props her head up on her arm to stare at me. “You still haven’t told me what your damage is.”

“Don’t you know?” I smile sweetly, not ready to let my guard down. “You seem to know everything else about me.”

“Unfortunately, the roommate info card doesn’t show diagnosis or any other juicy information.”

I breathe out a sigh and try to ignore the fact that the windows don’t open in this place. “I guess you could say it was a case of mistaken identity.”

She makes an impressed face. “Nice. What kind of pills are they giving you for that?”

“Tiny white and blue ones.” I arrived at this so-called tranquil recovery center in California over a week ago, but this is the first time Londyn has been in our room. “Have you been in solitary?” I ask.

Her eyes roll. “This isn’t prison, Rose. We don’t have solitary. My parents signed me out for a vacation to remind me they still love me. They took me to their new beach house for a week of sand stuck in my ass and barbecued animal carcasses.”

“That sounds nice. The beach house part, I mean.”

“I guess. What does it say about me that I’d rather be here?”

I ponder that for a moment. “I think it says you feel safe here.”

She appears satisfied with that answer. “Is that your real hair color?”

“It is.”

“I’m jealous. It’s a fabulous color.”

“Thanks. I like yours, too.”

“It’s from a box. I usually change it every two months. I get bored easily.”

She stands and straightens her comforter, smoothing all the wrinkles until it’s perfectly flat. “It’s almost two o’clock. Do you want to join me on the veranda for yoga? There’s usually eight of us.”

“I’ve never done yoga before.”

“There’s an instructor. Just follow along. All of us suck at it, so no one will notice if you do, too.”

Shrugging, I follow her, hoping it will at least help pass the time and make me appear calm and normal.

Not—as they tell me—in the midst of suffering from a *possible delusional disorder*.



After yoga, there was daily group time, then dinnertime. After that, we watched a movie in the TV room, took our nighttime meds, and went to bed. If it were up to me, I’d only venture out of my room for food and the required private and group sessions, but that’s not allowed.

Before my unfortunate meltdown, I was an energetic, upbeat, and social person. I was never a hit-the-snooze-button type. I woke up refreshed and happy every morning. But ever since my stay at the hospital, I’ve felt like my head is stuffed

with cotton. Everything seems like I'm looking at it through a smudged lens, hearing it through muffled speakers. Observing it all from off to the side somewhere and not really living it. And I'm so incredibly tired. All I want to do is sleep, and doing so doesn't diminish the exhaustion at all.

I'm also incredibly, painfully homesick.

I miss Lily.

I miss my job, my coworkers, and picking the cutest pet of the day.

I miss the cozy blanket on the couch.

I miss the moss and leaves and the worn stone path etched into the grass leading to the barn.

I miss the sparkly dust fairies that float in the sunlight through the barn window.

I don't miss Alex.

No, that word doesn't even come close to describing the intense, never-ending ache that lives in my heart or the longing that consumes me every moment of the day and night. It's as if he was carved out of my being, and now I'm left with a hollow space that echoes with his voice.

It has been decided by my doctor and my parents that while I recover from my alleged fixation, I should take a break from Lily and Alex. Exhausted and numb from the medication, I'd agreed.

Now I wish I hadn't.

Thankfully, my parents and Lily are all unaware that me and Alex are in a relationship that stretches far beyond friendship. By the time my parents arrived at the hospital, I'd been sedated enough to stop insisting I was Alex's late wife. While Lily witnessed some of my rambling, she believed I was experiencing a temporary delusion. Due to the fact that her father never stops talking about his dead wife and her stuff is all over the house, no wonder her poor best friend was confused after she hit her head.

That's what I heard her telling the doctors.

I don't recall hitting my head at all, but somehow, the spot above the scar on my temple had started to swell and bleed right before the ambulance arrived.

What happened that night is a mystery to me. I was fine—ecstatic, even. The picnic was wonderfully romantic. My first orgasm with Alex was freakin' amazing. And then, the moment I've been wishing for forever came. That beautiful, talented, sweet, caring, sexy-as-hell man told me he was falling in love with me. And I remember thinking all my dreams were coming true. My heart had jumped with excitement, and it didn't come back down.

It got stuck.

And then, out of nowhere, while I was waiting for my heart to get unstuck, it felt as if a switch flipped in my head.

It was like someone else slid right into me. Their body lining perfectly with mine, their hands in my hands, their head in my head, their lips in my lips. Everything became blurry and distorted. Words came out of my mouth in an odd voice that confused me just as much as they confused Alex.

I'm Brianna.

It wasn't the first time I've felt that other girl trying to slip into me like a shadow. She's been there for a long time, at the edge of my memories, tickling my skin, whispering in my ear, like an old friend. I liked her. Her presence became normal to me. I went about my life with her tucked in the back like an old postcard. Until apparently she wanted more.

I'm Brianna.

What if it's true? If she's me. If I'm her. If we're one.

Maybe it's okay. Maybe it's not a bad thing at all.

But I wonder... is her hope to merge with me, or take over completely? That's the question that keeps me up at night. Or at least it tries to, but it loses against the current of drugs that pull me into the endless ocean of sleep.

During my initial daily sessions, I asked the doctor if it—me being Brianna—was possible. Desperate for help, I told her

every strange memory I've had—even ones I had as a baby. I told her all about the strange feelings, the memory pictures, how I escaped the house as a little girl, I told her about the things I just knew that I had no way to know. She smiled a smile that was meant to be comforting, kept nodding, then said *absolutely not*. She prescribed a pill, which chased the Brianna-shaped shadow back into the dark. I told her I couldn't stop crying because I wanted to go back home to Alex and Lily, and she gave me a pill for that, too. Days later, I told her I felt lost and confused, and my brain was fuzzy. I told her I couldn't paint or write anymore. Another pill was added. Every day, I forget a little bit more about Brianna, and the little house on the lake, and Cherry, and about Lily and my Alex.

Every day, I feel myself fading away into the abyss along with them. Penny is starting to seem just as unreal as Brianna. I keep wondering when the pills will start to work. When will I feel better again and go home?

If I let myself forget for a little while...just enough to not be delusional...will I remember again when I'm better? Will I be okay then?

Shivering, I pull my blanket up over my shoulders. It does little to comfort me. The fabric is stiff and infused with the scent of bleach. It gives me a headache. I touch my ruby ring and idly spin it around my finger. If I listen closely, I can hear our voices clawing through the fog.

"Promise me you'll never leave me. It would kill me."

"I promise, Fox. I'm yours for eternity."

"Eternity is a long time. Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. Nothing could ever take me away from you."

I have to get better. I have to get back home to Alex and Lily, where my heart belongs.

Chapter 38



ALEX

Kelley once told me grief is like a stray cat. If you feed it, it won't go away. It might even bring its friends so they can all chow down at your expense.

He was right.

After Bri died, I served my heart and soul to grief on a silver platter. It took me years to close the door. Every now and then it shows up again, rubbing against me, wanting a nibble, but I learned to resist.

But when Penny went away, the stray-cat army of darkness barreled in, screaming, starving, begging, and crying. I caved. I let grief and all its little friends in, and we wept and we partied and we agreed that life sucks. Love sucks. It all sucks.

All I wanted to do was numb the pain.

Looking back—which I do daily—I think I fell in love with Penny the only way I could ever have fallen in love again, with tiny, slow, unwitting, innocent steps. With us, there were no expectations, no pressure, no worrying, no awkward chitchat. We unknowingly created a safe place of friendship and trust that grew into more without us even realizing it was happening. I think that kind of love might be the best kind. Not like when you meet someone new and there's an immediate attraction, and you think to yourself, *I want that person*. They become a target that you're trying to hit. It's a game, in many ways. Can I win this person? What do I gotta do to impress them? Do they like me, too? Do we have

anything in common? Are they gonna hurt me? Let's roll the dice and find out.

There was none of that with Penny.

Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing there was a ticking time bomb hiding under the surface, just waiting to explode and blow us to pieces.

She was ripped out of my life way too abruptly, leaving me with a different brand of grief. My chest aches constantly for her. I see her in my dreams every night—her red hair threaded through my fingers, her beautiful smile full of promises, her green eyes telling me a thousand stories. It's driving me crazy that I can't be there and take care of her. I want to be part of her recovery, but instead I'm shut out like a stranger, asked by her mother—via a polite text message—to cease contact until she's better. I don't even know what the hell "better" entails. All I know is I feel useless. I can't push to see her because it would look sketchy as hell if her best friend's father was flying across the country demanding to visit her. And I admit—I'm afraid everyone will accuse me of the same thing I've been accusing myself of—that I did something to cause her meltdown.

All I can do is wait, hope, and reread the one text message I've received from her in the two months she's been gone. It arrived after her first week of being in the recovery center.

PENNY:

Alex, I'm so sorry I hurt you. I'm scared, and I wish I could go home. I don't know what's going on with me, but I'm trying to figure it out. My parents and Lily don't know about us, so please don't worry. There's so much I want to say, but I'm too tired and I have such bad brain fog. I don't know how you feel right now, but I'm still wearing my ring. I hope we can be together again without me being so confused. I might be here for a while, and I'm not supposed to talk to you or Lily or anyone else from home until I can sort out my head. I can talk to you when I'm better, though. I wanted to write you a poem, but my brain can't seem to make beautiful words anymore. Will you take pictures of the puppy for the shed so I can see them when I come back? Please don't be sad. You are amazing. Keep going forward, and I'll catch up and find you again. I love you, Fox. xo

I felt my heart crumbling. I didn't understand what happened to my sweet, confident, beautiful, creative girl. Confusion weaved through her words like a thorny vine. My Penny is lost in her own mind and I'm terrified she'll never find her way out.

I ignored Mrs. Rose's rules and texted Penny back immediately.

We will always find each other, little darlin'. You know where I'll be. Rest, and feel better. That's all that matters. I love you. I'll always love you. No matter what. Please hold on to that, believe in it, let the ring remind you every day. I promise we'll get through this. xo

After her text, I spent most of my time feeding the previously mentioned grief and depression. I drank too much and slept too little. I took up smoking weed because it calmed me enough to work. Disgusted, Lily moved out. I was on a fast track to destruction when Kelley showed up at my door—unannounced and uninvited. Apparently Lily texted him a picture of me passed out on Cherry's grave, with Shadow sleeping on my chest. I don't even remember being there, but I'm ashamed that Lily saw me that way. I never wanted her to

see the fucked-up part of me, but I gave her a front-row seat until she up and left.

“I don’t care if you hate me,” Kelley said, pushing past me through the front door. “Your kid is worried about you. *I’m* worried about you. I know you’re upset about Penny moving, but you can’t fucking do this again.”

Penny moving. I wish it was that simple.

“I don’t hate you.” I’d already decided a while ago to forgive him. I liked him too much to stay mad at him.

“Good.”

“I love her,” I blurted out.

His mouth fell open like a hooked fish. “What?”

“I’m in love with her.”

He slowly shook his head with an ironic smile. “I knew it. I fucking knew it.”

“Congratulations for always being right.”

“I don’t want to be right. Are you out of your mind, Fox? She’s fucking eighteen years old. She’s your daughter’s best friend. You’ve known her since she could barely reach the doorknobs. I have socks older than her, for fuck’s sake.”

“Shut the fuck up, Kelley. I know how old she is.”

“You mean how old she isn’t.”

I pushed my hands through my hair. “I don’t know what to say. I can’t explain my feelings for her. Don’t you think I’ve tried to ignore it?”

His stare practically pinned me to the wall. “Have you?”

“Of course I have.”

“Who else knows about this? Lily? Her parents?”

“Nobody. Just you. If Lily found out she’d hate me even more. I’m losing her, and it’s killing me.”

“Then get your head out of your ass. You told me years ago all you wanted was to be a good father. Then fucking do it.

Stop obsessing over Penny.” His lips press together. “You never should’ve let her move in. You had to know these feelings were there then, right?”

“To a degree, yes.”

“That’s fucked up, Alex.”

“I know it is, but nothing is going to change my feelings for her. Believe me, I’ve tried. She makes me happy. Don’t I deserve to be happy?”

“Of course you do.”

“Then, if there’s a way she and I can be together, I want a life with her.”

He sighed. “That’s gonna be a long, uphill battle, Fox.”

“Trust me, I know. It feels even more impossible now. I don’t know what happened the last time we were together, it’s like she had a major meltdown. It came out of nowhere, and she’s mentally not okay. She didn’t just move to California, Kel, she was taken to a recovery center by her parents.”

His eyes narrowed. “What kind of recovery center are we talking about?”

I broke down and told him about Penny’s episode and all the bizarre things she said. How confusing and strange it all was. I was relieved to finally come clean. By the time I finished, his face was a map of shock and horror.

“This is some crazy shit, Fox. The more you tell me, the worse it is.”

I follow him to the kitchen, where he proceeds to raid my refrigerator. “I don’t know what the fuck to think. Penny always seemed so smart and levelheaded. I can’t believe she snapped.” He bites into a mozzarella string cheese, and it was like nails on a chalkboard watching him eat it wrong without peeling the cheese. “If you guys are in love, great. I’ll force myself to accept it if she makes you happy, even though the age difference makes me fucking squirm. But her babbling about Brianna is weird as hell and a big red flag. Do you think

she's obsessed with you and Bri? Like that *Fatal Attraction* movie?"

"No," I said adamantly. "You know Penny, she's not like that."

"True, but ya never know. I've met some crazy chicks on the road. I'm glad she's getting help, it sounds like she's where she needs to be. But if you really love her and want to be with her? You gotta get your shit together. You can't be like this when she comes back. The chick obviously needs stability, and so do you, for the record. You're not going to be good for her, or for Lily, if you stay on this path. I love Penny, but you better make sure she's mentally stable before you get involved, or you're gonna get your fucking heart broken again."

"That won't happen," I countered.

"It already is."

I didn't know what to say to that. I refused to believe it.

"Do you think it's possible..." I asked tentatively, straightening my eye patch. "That maybe what she was saying could be true? That she could be Brianna in some way?"

He stared at me for a long time. So long that I started to worry he'd been suspended in time. Finally he said, "No. Fuck no. What I *do* think is if there's any part of you that's hoping Penny is Brianna, then you're not ready to move on. Penny can't replace Brianna. Maybe she thinks she has to, and that's what made her break. Who knows? But if you can't see Penny for Penny, it's game over."

I was taken aback. Did I make Penny believe she wasn't enough?

"I don't wish Penny was Brianna. But there's a lot of little coincidences and similarities between them that's hard to overlook."

"If you stare at anything long enough, you'll start seeing what you want to see," he said as we headed to the living room.

I nodded slowly and lowered myself into my favorite chair. “You’re probably right.”

“Alex, stop trying to resurrect the dead and make sure Penny does the same. All that shit aside, you have to stop drinking and wallowing. Focus on your work and your kid. You’re too old for this bullshit.” He’d kicked off his shoes and crawled onto my couch with his eyes already closed, pulling the throw blanket over him. “And so am I.”

Before I could say anything else, he was out like a light.

He stayed for three days, and then he caught a red-eye back to LA. It wasn’t until he was gone that I realized I never asked him how the tour was going, and if he was happy being a rock star. I didn’t tell him I was worried about the dimness in his blue eyes.

I am a shitty friend, and I’m becoming an equally shitty father.

Kelley is right. I have to do better.



Two weeks later, my phone vibrating wakes me in the middle of the night. The fluorescent hands on the old clock on the nightstand tell me it’s three a.m.

“Lily?”

Crying. Gasping. The last sounds any father wants to hear on the other end of a phone call from his daughter.

I sit up and reach for my sweatpants on the floor. “Talk to me, sweetheart. What’s wrong?”

“He-he left me here...” The shakiness in her voice is like talons shredding my heart.

“Who left you where?” I’m already crossing the room, stepping into my boots.

Her sobs fill my ear. “Jeff. We were at a bar playing pool and we got in a fight.” A train sounds in the background. “And

he just left me here. I thought he was just being a jerk and would come back.” She sucks in a breath and whimpers. “But the bar closed a while ago and I’m here all alone in the dark parking lot and I’m scared.”

My blood goes hot with anger, pulsing through me like lava. “I’ll fucking kill him. Tell me where you are. I’m leaving right now.” I snatch my keys from my dresser and rush downstairs.

“I-I’m not sure. I wasn’t paying attention when he was driving here.”

“What’s the name of the bar?”

“Um... the sign says Fupagus Bar and Grill.”

I don’t recognize that name at all, and I’ve been to every bar in a twenty-mile radius.

“Do you still have the family GPS app on your phone?” I ask her.

She snuffles. “Yes. I forgot about that.”

“Hang on. Let me see if it shows me where you are.” I pull up the app and wait for the map to load. Her black dot is showing her at an address a little over an hour away.

“Shit. It’s going to take me an hour to get there.”

She cries harder. “I’m so scared, Dad. It’s pitch black out. What should I do?”

I bolt out of the house and run to my truck. “First, I just want you to take some deep breaths, okay? We’re going to stay on the phone ’till I get there. I’m on my way there already.”

“Please hurry.”

“I promise I’ll drive as fast as I can. Is there anything else around you? A gas station or convenience store?”

“I think there’s a little convenience store down the road.”

My teeth grind. I don’t know what’s the lesser of the evils—her sitting in a dark parking lot with no one around, or

sitting at a convenience store where unsavory characters will be traipsing around this time of night.

“I think you should walk down there and wait by the store,” I finally say.

“You’ll stay on the phone with me?”

“I promise. Do you still have the Mace in your bag?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to take it out and hold it in your hand, just in case. If you have long sleeves on, hide it under your sleeve.”

“Okay...” I hear the faint sound of the zipper on her purse. “I can’t believe he just left me here. Who does things like this?” Her voice cracks with new tears. “He just walked out of the bar and left me here. I don’t even know where the hell I am. I didn’t even want to go out tonight. I wanted to stay home and watch a movie, but God forbid he doesn’t hang out with his friends—”

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, itching to punch the shit out of him. I knew this guy was going to hurt her. “Lily. Let’s not think about that asshole now. Let me know when you get to the store.”

“I’m almost there. Should I go inside? It’s a tiny place.”

“Yeah. Get a bottle of water and a snack. If they have a magazine rack, just stand there and flip through some.”

“I’ll probably get kicked out.”

“That’s okay. I just want you to buy some time inside.”

For the next few moments, all I hear is footsteps until she announces, “I’m here. I’m going inside. There’s an older woman at the register,” she whispers.

“Good. If she says something, just tell her you’re waiting for a ride.”

I push the speed limit for the next forty minutes, grateful I’ve been sober since Kelley’s visit. If I was off my face right now, I’d be useless to my daughter. I’m exhausted, though— yawning every few minutes while trying to keep Lily from

panicking on the other end of the phone. She keeps bouncing between spurts of crying to snark-infused anger.

When I pull into the parking lot of the seedy store, she jumps into the car and throws her arms around me across the center console. The glimpse I see of her before she burrows into my shoulder is harrowing. Her hair is tangled, while her black eyeliner is smudged beneath her eyes and streaked down her cheeks.

Her words are muffled against the fabric of my jacket. “I’m so glad you came. I was so afraid you wouldn’t... I’ve been such a bitch to you.”

I pry myself out of her clutches to look her in the eye. “You’re not a bitch. And even if you were, it wouldn’t stop me. I haven’t exactly been Father of the Year. I’m sorry you had to see me so fucked up. I never should’ve let myself get like that again.”

“Can I come back home?” she asks, wiping her eyes with the cuff of her sleeve. “I don’t want to go back there. I don’t ever want to see that asshole again.”

My stomach sinks as I come to the conclusion she’s been living with Jeff, and not with Kirsty. Guilt shoots through me. If I hadn’t let myself sink so low again, I’d have known where my own daughter was living.

“Of course you can. It’s your home.”

I reach for the gearshift to reverse out of the parking spot, but she grabs my hand.

“Wait...” Her thin fingers tremble over mine. “I have to tell you something.”

“You can tell me on the way, it’s almost five a.m. I just want to get you home.”

She shakes her head, sending her tousled hair in a flurry around her face. “I have to tell you now.” The quiver in her voice signals a wave of dread straight to my gut.

“Lily—”

“I’m pregnant.”

My heart seizes from the unexpected blow, then gallops to life like a pack of wild horses.

I could handle the drama and aftermath of an asshole ex-boyfriend. I'd already prepared myself to endure weeks of Lily hiding in her room, blasting heart-wrenching music while painting her nails black and talking to me through her locked door. Hell, I've missed her so much, I'd welcome it now.

But my eighteen-year-old daughter going through an unplanned pregnancy and being a single mom while living with me is a plot twist I didn't see coming.

Exhaling a long breath, I let my head fall back against the headrest.

"I'm so sorry, Dad," she says softly.

My mind is whirling like a top, unsure what reaction to stop on. I've always had Brianna, Kelley, or Penny to give me advice and help when I needed it.

I'm scared shitless. I can't do this on my own.

Lily removes her hand from mine, and in that small action, I feel her slipping away from me already. "It's okay. If you don't want me there, I can—"

My daughter needs me. The daughter I couldn't fight for and care for when she was a baby. The daughter who grew up thinking I was an asshole who abandoned her. The daughter I wanted to love and cherish more than anything in the world. She's my perpetual, living link to Bri, and now, so is this baby. They're my heart and soul, my flesh and blood. They need me.

Suddenly, I'm not scared anymore. I *know* I can do this.

"Come home, Lily. I'll remodel the basement into an apartment for you and the baby. You can stay as long as you want. I'll take care of both of you."

Her eyes are still wet with tears when she turns to look at me. She blinks at me in disbelief. "You'd really do that?"

I grin. "Hell yeah. I'll start tomorrow. I can already see it—two bedrooms, a little living room, a bathroom. There's more than enough room."

She looks down at her hands in her lap, nervously picking her nail polish off. “I didn’t think this would happen to me. I’m so scared, Dad.”

I think I’d sell my soul to call Penny and get her on speakerphone right now. A dose of her sweet voice, her confidence, and her carefree laugh would chase all these fears away for us. I miss her like crazy. I know Lily does, too.

“It’s okay to be scared,” I say. “We’ll get through this together, Lil. I’m not drinking anymore. I’ve got lots of work coming in. I can take care of you and the baby for as long as you need me. I just want you both to be safe and happy. That’s it.”

Tears fall from her cheeks. “I thought you were going to be mad at me.”

I gently brush her hair away from her face and touch her damp cheek. “I’m not mad at you,” I tell her softly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She smiles weakly at me. “Can I tell you something else?”

I take a breath, bracing myself for another shock.

“Anything,” I say as I pull out of the parking lot. “Always.”

“You might be a mess sometimes, but you’re not the asshole Grandpa said you were.”

I let out a laugh and glance over at her. “I know.”

Being a grandfather at forty-one wasn’t on my bingo card, but I think I’m gonna be okay with it.

Chapter 39



PENNY 2026

I can feel my soul leaving my body.

I'm not dying. Although, actually, in a way I am. Slowly. Day by day. Breath by breath.

Not only has Brianna faded away, but I have, too.

I couldn't get my doctor to understand that I didn't hear voices in my head. I heard *one* voice—Brianna's. And my own, of course, but that goes without saying. I tried explaining that I wasn't crazy—I just saw memories in my head like mini movies, and sometimes those memories weren't always my own. I knew about patient-doctor confidentiality, so I told the doctor about my relationship with Alex. I explained how I felt like I was born loving him and how I searched for him when I was little. I told her how I only felt truly at home at Alex's house. I told her about the instant bond I had with Cherry and Lily.

All that must mean something, right? I didn't make it all up in my head.

Did I?

I thought Dr. Ripley would tell me it was okay and there was nothing at all to worry about—that these things happen sometimes and it's rare and beautiful and special and I can just go home and go back to my life. But she didn't. She pushed her glasses up her nose and told me in a very serious tone that I had a lot of work to do to get better. During our sessions, Dr. Ripley questioned all my beliefs, all my memories, all my little hopes and dreams, trying to make me rationalize why

none of them could be true. Then she gave me more pills and sent me back to my room.

For the past six months, I've done everything I'm supposed to do. I took the meds. I shared all my feelings. I did yoga and breathing exercises. I went to group therapy. I called my parents every night. But each day I felt worse. It was like I was on a raft in the middle of the ocean, drifting farther and farther away from land. I knew soon I'd be so far out that I'd never be able to get back to shore.

A week ago, Londyn found me in our pale-blue bedroom. She sat on the edge of my bed and poked my shoulder.

“Are you breathing, Rose?” she asked. “Your face has been jammed into your pillow for hours.”

I muffled out a reply.

She grabbed my arms and rolled me over onto my back. My hair was a web around my face, and my eyelids were too heavy to open. I didn't care.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“I want to go home.” My voice was foreign to me. Lifeless and echoing between my ears.

“Why? It's so peaceful here.”

It wasn't to me. I was never anxious or depressed until I came here.

“I was peaceful at home, Londyn. There's a lake and butterflies and rose bushes. There's a porch with rocking chairs. At night, there're owls that hoot and coyotes that sing. And the softest blanket.” I managed to open one eye to peer up at her. “There're no soft blankets here. And it smells like bleach. At home it smells like rain, smoky wood, oil and Alex. I miss his smell. And his smile. I miss him so much.”

Alex was starting to fade too, blurring away like a dream.

“Do you really want to get out of here?” Londyn asked.

“Yes. More than anything.”

“Then tell them what they want to hear.”

I forced my other eye open to scrutinize her. I couldn't always believe everything Londyn said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You have to stop telling them everything you're thinking and feeling."

"But isn't that how I'm going to get better?"

"Obviously not, Rose, because they think you're batshit crazy."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Tell them you realize it was all a fantasy you made up. Tell them you see now that none of it was real. You have to be convincing, though. You don't want them to see that you're just saying the right things to get out. The doctors are smart. Are you a good actor? Can you do that?"

I swallowed past the nervousness. "I think I can."

"I really don't want you to leave here, though. I like you. My last roomie used to talk in her sleep all night about giant cookies chasing her. When she was awake, she was constantly telling me the aliens were coming to get us and we had to wear hats so they couldn't find us. You're so normal compared to her, even if you think you're a dead person."

"I don't think I'm a dead person."

Her brow rose. "Yes, you do."

I sat up and combed my stringy hair with my fingers. "No, I don't. I think I used to be someone else who was alive before me, but I'm me now. It's different."

She tsk'd and shook her head. "See what I mean? That's not convincing enough. You still sound like a nutter."

"Well, what am I supposed to say, then?"

"Say as little as possible."

"Dr. Ripley doesn't like when I give short answers."

"Then you just say you were confused at the time, but now you see that none of that is possible. You're just Penny Rose."

Tell the doctor you want to live with your parents, get a job, save for an apartment, and be a productive member of society. Tell her you want to take some classes—for drawing and writing. Don't mention going back home to New Hampshire, that's where all the crazy lives."

I nodded. "Got it." Londyn's seen a lot of patients come and go. I suppose it's safe to assume she knows the ins and outs of how to prolong a stay—like she is—and how to become—or seem—well enough to discharge.

That night I stared out the window at the stars for a long time. I spend a lot of time staring at things now—the wall, the ceiling, a smudge on the floor. The book I started reading months ago is on my nightstand, with its bookmark still at chapter ten. I can't remember what the story is about. My sketchbook lay beneath it—all its pages empty.

My vision is distorted when I dial his number, the digits on my phone screen slanted.

"Penny," he says into the phone, and my heart springs up into my throat like it's hoping to escape my chest and hide in his.

"Hi...it's me."

"It's you." I can hear his smile. My favorite thing. "It's so good to hear your voice. I've been missing you like fucking crazy." His deep, emotional voice has the energy of a storm. Dark, rumbling, intriguing. It makes me want to run to him barefoot in the rain.

"I'm sorry it's been so long. Time is weird here."

My chest twinges at the sound of his comforter rustling, folding back. "It's okay," he says.

Silence hangs between us like a still pendulum. I don't know what to do to make it move again.

After a while, he says, "How are you feeling?"

"Um..." I gaze blankly out the window. "Okay, I guess."

"You don't sound like yourself, little darlin'."

My eyes close. The nickname is a comforting embrace. “I don’t feel like myself.”

The silence returns. I hate everything it says. “How’s Lily?” I ask.

“Good... have you talked to her recently?”

“No. But I’ll call her in a few days.”

“Penny, I really want to see you. Can I come there? I’ll fly out tomorrow. I don’t care if it’s only for ten minutes, I just want to see your beautiful smile again. I need to see that you’re okay.”

My stomach drops. I don’t want him to know I barely smile anymore.

I glance at my reflection in the window and it screams *no*. I can’t remember the last time I washed my hair. My face and body are bloated and blotchy from the medication. Anxiety washes over me, drowning me with overwhelming thoughts. I’d have to put nice clothes on. I’d have to smile. I’d have to talk and tell him about the past few months. He’ll want to know when I’m coming home. He’ll touch my face and pull me into his arms—a haven I long to be in. I won’t be able to let go.

But it all feels as insurmountable as climbing Mt. Everest right now.

My tongue drags across my dry lips. “I-I don’t think I’m ready to see you yet.”

I hear him inhale, sharp with heartache. A crack splinters across my heart. “Penny...I’m so worried about you. The last image I have of you is being taken away on a stretcher. It’s killing me. We didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“I don’t want a goodbye.”

“Neither do I, baby. That’s not what I meant. I just want to take care of you and make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m okay. The doctors are really nice, and I like my roommate.” I peer over at Londyn in her bed across the room. I can’t tell if she’s listening.

“I’m just not sure you belong there. I know I’m not a doctor, but this all seems drastic to me. You’ve been there for months. I want to understand what’s going on.”

“You know the things I said. About Brianna.”

“You said you thought you were Brianna.” He pauses. I envision him adjusting his eye patch, pulling it up and then laying it back over the scar tissue. “Do you really think that? You can tell me the truth. It’s okay.”

The urge to say *yes* almost doubles me over. The voice is there in my head now... *Tell him. Tell him.* But I’m terrified he’ll be like the doctors and think I’m having delusions. He might never want to see me again.

Remembering Londyn’s advice, I do my best to push my thoughts through the fog, forcing the right words to come out of my mouth. “No. I think it was because I hadn’t been sleeping much for a few days. I was only getting about three hours of sleep a night working on my submission. And I was overwhelmed with feelings for you. We had just fooled around, and then we were talking about love, and you said *someday*... and I think I felt like I wasn’t good enough, I was afraid you’d never love me as much as you loved her. I guess I had a meltdown. Looking back, it was silly and I’m embarrassed.” I swallow hard.

“Penny, I don’t ever want you to feel that way. It’s not a competition. Brianna’s my past. I want you to be my future. You mean the fucking world to me and I want to be with you. *You* have my heart. I only said *someday* because we have some hurdles. Like our age difference. And Lily. But none of that changes how I feel about you.”

Tears sting my eyes. I love him so much. All I want is to be with him, but he deserves the best version of me, not this confused, drugged-up, exhausted mess I’ve turned into. Right now, I’m not the girl he fell in love with. I don’t even recognize myself. I can barely force myself to get out of bed most days. All the good parts of me are lost, and I have to find them so I can get out of this place and back to my life. Back to

Alex and Lily and our little house. Back to my paintings and my poetry and the job I love so much.

My scalp tingles. Brianna shuffles in the corner of my mind. I sense her disappointment.

“I want to be with you, too,” I tell him. “But...I’ve been having seizures, and they’re trying to get my medication right. Remember, I had some of those weird episodes before? The doctor thinks they’re stress-induced.”

“Stress? Are they sure? You always seem so calm and happy.”

“Sometimes people are stressed inside and don’t realize it. I’m learning how to relax my mind. The doctors say it’s best that patients go through this alone so we don’t get distracted or influenced. I guess it’s kind of like an emotional detox.”

So much bullshit.

“Okay...” Uncertainty trails in his voice. “I hate this, Penny. I wish I could be there for you, but if this is the way it has to be for you to get better, then we’ll do whatever it takes. All I want is what’s best for you. As long as you’re happy and healthy, that’s all that matters.”

Biting back tears, I say, “I promise as soon as I’m feeling better and I complete the treatment program, we can see each other. We can pick up right where we left off,” I inject as much optimism into my words as I can. “Well, before I freaked out, let’s pick up there.” A little laugh bubbles out of me, but it sounds manic and not as cute as I’d hoped.

“Penny, promise you’ll call me if you need me. Anytime.”

“I will. And I want you to promise me something, too.”

“Anything.”

“Please stay focused on your art. It’s so important to me that you put your art first because I just know you’re going to be famous someday. Don’t forget, I was your first stalker. I know these things.”

He laughs. “Now you sound like you. I hate to disappoint you, but I don’t think I’m ever gonna be famous. You, though,

little darlin', you're gonna make it big with your drawings and poetry. So, I'll promise to stay focused if you do, too."

"Deal."

"One more thing...promise me you'll stay close to Lily. Even when she's trying to push you away."

"Done."

Closing my eyes, I listen to him breathing, matching mine to his.

"Penny...I'm not gonna tell you I love you over the phone. So get your cute ass out of there so I can say it to your face."

I smile for the first time in weeks. "I'm not gonna tell you I love you, either. I'll see you soon, Fox."

I end the call feeling hopeful and loved.

Little did I know it would be the last time I'd talk to him for a long time.

Chapter 40



ALEX - 2027

A long time ago, I envisioned a baby playpen in my studio. I wanted to be a hands-on father, not one who watched my kid when my wife was busy or needed a break.

That dream has sorta come true. But instead of Lily, it's my grandson who spends hours a day in my studio with me. He loves to watch me work, waving his arms and giggling. He's the happiest baby I've ever seen. I talk to him nonstop, and his big brown eyes never leave me.

Lily named him Brian, after her mom. He's one of the best things to ever happen to me. I love him like crazy.

I didn't want Lily to put her life on hold because she was a single mom. I've got no problem spending the day with the baby while she goes to cosmetology school and works her part-time job. Jeff, the father of the baby, is as useless as a one-wheeled bicycle. He has zero interest in his son and would rather get high, play video games, and ride his motorcycle than step up and show some responsibility.

He needed to be taught a lesson for abandoning my daughter in a dark parking lot, though. Me and Mikey stole his motorcycle, we took it apart, then I made a huge dick sculpture out of the pieces. My only regret is I didn't get to see his face when he found it on his front lawn.

At exactly five p.m., Shadow's black furry ears perk up, and he lifts his head from the dusty floor. Lily's car has just pulled into the driveway.

“Let’s go see your mom,” I say, lifting Brian from his playpen. His little fingers wind around my hair as I carry him outside with Shadow trailing behind me.

“How’s my little man today?” Lily beams as she meets us at the edge of the driveway. Brian changed her in so many ways. There’s almost always a smile on her face now. She even wears pastels sometimes.

“The usual. Laughing, pooping, and napping.” I trade her the baby for a plastic bag she’s carrying. “Something smells good, what’d you get?”

“Subs. Steak and cheese for you, tuna salad for me.”

“You must’ve read my mind. I’m starving.”

Lily puts the baby down in his crib in the living room while I set the table. The floor groans beneath my boots, not letting me forget how I bit the bullet last week and ripped up the linoleum—my first step in remodeling the house. I was surprised to find hardwood underneath. This weekend, I’ll sand and stain it. That had been the plan since day one. I can still hear Bri’s voice echoing through the walls, sucking me back in time to the day we moved in. Clutching the house keys in one hand and my hand in the other, she’d dragged me from room to room, telling me all her decorating ideas with breathless excitement that was contagious. She had a vision, and as a guy who never had a real home, all I wanted was to make her dreams come true and live in that vision with her.

But, like me, the house has sat stagnant for years. Growing older, slowly deteriorating, never changing, just witnessing life move on all around it.

Penny’s absence and the baby’s presence suddenly changed all that for me. It was like an invisible hand came out of nowhere and slapped the shit out of me. Something inside me finally snapped.

Life is too short to be sad and spent waiting for things to change. Because the harsh truth is that things don’t change or get better unless you put in the effort to actually make them

better. No magical life fairy is going to come and sprinkle gold dust on our asses to fix us.

I have love now. Maybe not the love I thought I'd have, but I have it with Lily and my adorable little grandson. And, of course, my dog.

"I stopped by the paint store on the way home," Lily says, sliding three miniature squares of paint colors across the table. "These are my favorites for the kitchen walls."

I swallow a mouthful of shaved steak and point to one. "I like this one."

"Me too. It's called eucalyptus."

"Looks like light green to me."

"That one was Penny's favorite, too."

Hearing her name has a visceral effect on me. My heart throttles against my rib cage. I forget how to chew. I completely stop breathing.

Forcing my food down my throat, I ask, "How do you know that?"

"She called me while I was at the paint store. I haven't heard from her in weeks."

That must be nice. I haven't heard from her in over a year.

I want to ask a thousand questions. *Where is she? How is she? How did she sound? Did she ask about me?*

"How's she doing?" I ask nonchalantly. My jaw tenses over the words.

Lily nods vaguely while she picks the lettuce off her sandwich. "What part of no lettuce is so hard to understand?" she says. "Penny's okay, I guess. She sounded tired and a bit distant. I wish she was here; she'd love the baby. I think we could cheer her up. I really miss her."

Me too, I miss everything about her. Her smile. Her laugh. Her voice. Her gentle touch. Her little smart-ass comments. The way she looks at me. Her creative mind. The way the

house feels with her in it. The taste of her lips. The way she makes me believe there's a tomorrow.

I can't stop myself from prodding Lily for more. "So, is she living with her parents now or in her own place?"

Lily shakes her head and wipes her mouth with a napkin. "No, she's still at the rehab place."

"Are you serious?" My voice rises with shock. "I thought she was out of there."

"Not yet. She said she'll probably be going home soon, though."

Is that why she hasn't called me? Because she's still there? *Emotionally detoxing?* And here I've been envisioning her sitting on the beach in California, writing poetry, wondering if she forgot about me, and telling myself it's okay as long as she's better.

"She's been in that fucking place for over a year," I say.

"I know. She hates it."

I don't like any of this. This whole situation seems totally off to me. I want to fly out there and bust her out of that place.

"Why is she even there? Don't you think it's fucked up? Penny's not mentally unstable."

"I really don't know, Dad. She wouldn't be there if she didn't have to be. Her parents really pushed for it. Something about her having delusions and doing weird things since she was a little girl. Penny really doesn't say much about it, and I don't want to pry for details. I try to keep the conversations light."

"I just don't get it. I've known her since she was a little kid. She lived with us. She's always been totally fine."

"Well, she did have those few times when she freaked out for no reason and almost passed out. I guess it was serious."

Those episodes were strange, but I'm having a hard time accepting that they'd warrant an extended stay in a mental

health hospital that's basically disguised as some kind of relaxing spa retreat.

Unless she told the doctors what she told me that night—that she thinks she's Brianna.

Saying crazy things like that would be enough to get her locked up forever.

But my mind wanders...what if...what if she's telling the truth? What if, by some twist of fate, there's a possibility that what Penny feels is real? What if my grief-infested wishes and prayers really came true, and Bri's soul was sent back in the form of a little redheaded girl who grew up to love me? If that were true, then she shouldn't be in that hospital at all. She should be living the life she was gifted.

My chest tightens. Is it possible?

But every time I come close to believing, reality comes in like a tornado, whirling around me, pulling me off the ledge, away from the chasm of fantasies and dreams. Reincarnation isn't real. It's a plot for books and movies—nothing else. If it were real, people would be screaming about it from the rooftops. We'd be hearing about lost loved ones returning from the dead every day. It'd be all over social media. I've never heard of one instance of it. Not one. If Penny thinks she's reincarnated, then she needs help to get a grasp on reality again so she can get the hell out of that place.

Lily eyes me from across the table. Thank God she can't read my mind.

"I've always felt like there's something kinda different about Penny," she says.

"Different how?"

"It's hard to explain. She seemed familiar in a way. The first time I met her, I felt like I'd seen her before in a dream."

Penny has always seemed unique to me. Magical. A bit psychic. And yes, familiar.

Intrigued, I ask, "How exactly did you two meet? I don't think you've ever told me." I've always wondered if it was a

wild coincidence that Lily and Penny became friends.

“She just randomly came up to me the first day of school. I was pretty rude to her, as per my usual, but she insisted on attaching herself to me. I was really surprised when we walked home together to find out you knew each other. It weirded me out at first.”

“Weirded you out how?”

“I suppose because I was jealous.”

I cock my head. “Jealous? Why?”

“Because you’re my father and I didn’t know you at all, but then here’s this girl my age who knew everything about you. She has all sorts of things in common with you. There was, like, this energy between you two, like that weird bond twins have. I wanted that closeness with you. But she was nice to me, so after a while, I didn’t care. I seriously have no idea why she wanted to be my friend. She was gorgeous and popular and I was a total outcast, all weird and antisocial. But regardless, she became my best friend and I love her to death.”

“You’re not an outcast, Lily. Everyone has different personalities.”

She smiles, showing off a row of perfect teeth, straight, like her mom’s. “I know that now. I was just so grateful for her friendship back then. School would’ve sucked without her. Penny made me feel special. That’s why I hate hearing her sound so despondent now. She always had a way about her, ya know?” A sad wistfulness glimmers in her eyes, and I’m struck by how beautiful she is. I can’t believe she’s part of me.

“Yeah,” I agree with a smile. “I know.”

What made Penny gravitate to Lily? Did she sense on some level she was my daughter? Or was it just a coincidence?

“No matter what, I’m not going to give up on her, Dad. I keep telling her that when she’s ready, she can come back here. She can even stay in my old room if she wants to since it’s empty now. That’s okay, right?”

My heart lifts on an elevator of hope. “Of course, if that’s what she wants.”

I wonder if Penny comes back, if there might still be the chance of an *us*, if I haven’t been emotionally detoxed into oblivion. I wonder if Lily could accept us as a couple. If we could all be a family.

I want that more than anything.

Lily continues, “I can’t wait for her to meet the baby. I told her what you did to Jeff’s bike, and she laughed, like *really* laughed. She never liked him, either.”

I stand and clear off the table.

“Nobody does. He’s an idiot.”

Laughing, she says, “Speaking of, I heard from the lawyer today. The child support will start coming out of his paycheck next month.”

“It’s about fucking time.”

“And Jeff wants it in writing that he doesn’t want any visitation or any contact with the baby.”

Anger flares my nostrils. “What a fucking douchebag. But ya know what? Brian’s better off without him.”

“I agree. I’d be a wreck leaving the baby in his care. He’s way too immature to take care of a tiny human. He can barely take care of himself.”

After what I went through, I’d never want a parent separated from their child, but if Jeff doesn’t want to be in Brian’s life, then he shouldn’t be. It’s that fucking simple.

Glancing at her phone, Lily says, “By the way, you reached half a million followers today.”

I groan. “Fucking Kelley. Remind me to kick his ass.”

“You’re gonna have to make another video, hot garbage man,” she teases, waving her phone at me. “Your fans are literally begging.”

A month ago, Kelley was visiting for a few days while I was in the middle of a commissioned project. The client wanted something raw and different, made from his childhood toy collection. He told me he had a bad life growing up. I could totally relate. I got the bright idea to set the sculpture on fire with my blowtorch and let it burn just long enough to char it. Kelley thought it would be fun to film it, mostly because he was convinced I was going to set my hair on fire. I didn't, but he uploaded it to his social media page, which has close to two million followers since he's famous now.

Apparently, millions of people like watching a sweaty, shirtless guy with one eye and long hair light something on fire while listening to the latest Seven Shot song. The video went viral. It earned me my own little social media page as the #hotgarbageman and two thousand followers; it blew up overnight.

Since then, I've been inundated with new commissions but also flooded with messages from women. They comment on all my art posts. Most are nice, but some step *way* over the line with their eggplant and fire emojis. I let Lily respond and delete now. She thinks it's funny.

But later that night, when I'm lying in bed checking my emails from my phone, a notification comes through for a new comment on my social media app. I tap the little alert message, and it brings me to the comment.

It's just a wilted rose emoji. Curious, I click to view their profile. It's empty. No profile picture, no bio, and no followers. They're only following one account—mine. At first, I think it's a scam account.

A slow smile spreads across my lips when I see the username, LittleDarlinStalker.

She hasn't forgotten me.

Chapter 41



PENNY

I bought a teddy bear hamster and named her Lint.

I've never had a pet of my very own. Even though I learned from working at a veterinarian's office that impulse buying a pet is never a good idea, and it's equally bad to buy from a pet store, I couldn't help myself. I was at the pharmacy picking something up and then wandered into the pet shop next door.

That's where I saw the very tiny and very fuzzy, apricot-colored hamster. She was in a small wire cage, running on a dirty plastic wheel. Just running and running and running. Running her little heart out but going absolutely nowhere. Every few minutes, she'd jump off the wheel and run around in a circle in the middle of the cage, then jump right back on the wheel. No matter what she did, she was still going nowhere.

Never have I ever related so much to another living thing in my life.

Two hours later, I was setting up an epic hamster village in a seventy-five-gallon aquarium in my bedroom. I added a tiny sandbox, a wooden bridge, four ceramic mushroom-shaped houses, hills, underground hideouts, a hollow log, chew sticks, tunnels, and a wheel. What I really needed was to see Lint get off that wheel and stop going in circles. I wanted to see her enjoy this little world I built for her.

I needed her to inspire me to do the same.

“Oh God, tell me you didn’t buy a rat,” my mother says from my doorway.

“I didn’t buy a rat,” I reply, still kneeling on the floor in front of the hamster enclosure. My head swims with vertigo.

I can feel her eyes drilling into my back. “It’s not a tarantula, is it? Because I’ll faint if I see it.”

“No, Mom. It’s a teddy bear hamster.”

“So it’s a *furry* rat?”

Sighing, I turn to face her. The motion almost makes me tip over. “She’s not going to bother you. There’s no way for her to get out of her cage.”

“Okay. As long as it makes you happy. It’s good to see you doing something creative. Dinner will be ready in an hour. I’m making your favorite—veggie stir-fry. You need to eat.”

Nausea immediately surges in my stomach, threatening to vault the single piece of toast I had for lunch onto the beige carpet.

“I’m going to make a phone call, then I’ll be down,” I call after her as she disappears down the hall.

My finger trembles when I press Lily’s icon on my phone screen.

“Penny!”

The happiness in her voice instantly sweeps all my worries away like leaves caught in a warm breeze.

“Hi... I’ve been thinking about you a lot today. I bought a hamster.”

She laughs. “Um... do I somehow remind you of hamsters?”

I laugh with her and lean back against the wall. “Ignore my jumbled thought process. How are you? How’s the house remodel going? How’s the baby? Tell me everything.”

“We’re doing great. Brian is a total handful. He’s talking and walking so much more, can you believe it? He’s napping

right now, but I'll send you a video tonight."

My heart always twinges in an odd, bittersweet way when I hear about Brian. How can I miss a little person who I've never even met?

"He's growing up so fast," I say. "I can't wait to see the video."

"We painted the kitchen walls that pretty green color you liked. The floors came out gorgeous. The knotty pine is so pretty."

"I can't believe the previous owners put carpet and linoleum over that."

"Right?" I hear water running in the background. I recognize it as the sink in the kitchen. I can picture Lily standing there, rinsing a glass or washing her hands. "So, you bought a critter?" she asks.

"A hamster. Something about her just spoke to my heart. You should see this setup I made for her. I totally went overboard. You'd love it."

"You have to send me video and pictures. I think a pet is good for you. Shadow makes us so happy."

"I'm already obsessed with her. So, tell me more. What happened with that date you were getting ready to go on last time we talked?"

How long ago was that? Weeks? Longer? I pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping to remember, but the details refuse to emerge from the fog.

"Marcus." Her voice lifts with shy excitement. It makes me smile.

Marcus. Now I remember. He works for a cybersecurity company.

"It went soooo great, Penny. He brought me flowers when he came to pick me up."

"Very nice! I'm sure your dad was impressed."

“He was, but he tried not to show it,” she says with amusement. “We’ve been seeing each other every weekend, and we talk every night. You’d love him—he’s such a good guy. He calls me Beauty. He goes out of his way to spend time with Brian, too, which is so important to me.”

“I’m so happy for you, Lily. You sound really happy.”

“I am. I just miss you!”

My stomach tightens. “I miss you, too.”

“How are you feeling? Did you think about what I asked you? Will you come for a visit? I want you to finally meet Brian in person. And Marcus. And see all the remodeling me and Dad have done. And you have to see how big Shadow is. We can go to my favorite new restaurant...”

Her voice fades as invisible bugs of anxiety crawl through my brain. My palms grow clammy. Grinding my teeth, I stare at Lint. She’s sitting in the middle of the cage, utterly still with her little front paws tucked against her chest, surrounded by all her cool new things, looking completely unsure and overwhelmed.

This hamster is my spirit animal.

“Penny?”

“I’m here...my phone cut out for a second.”

“Will you think about coming for a visit soon? We miss you so much.”

“Yes, soon.”

“Are you feeling better?”

I glance at myself in the full-length mirror leaning against the wall next to my closet. Every day, I want to smash it when I walk by. My complexion is so pale it’s borderline translucent. Dark shadows live above my sunken cheeks.

“A little,” I answer.

The next few silent moments are filled with thousands of questions that I know she wants to ask. I wish I could answer

them, but how do I explain that I'm being buried alive under an avalanche of overwhelming thoughts and symptoms?

"Talk to me," she urges gently. "Tell me what's going on."

I let out a breath. "The withdrawals are awful, Lily. I feel so sick all the time I can barely function. It took me an hour to drive home from an errand today because I felt so nauseous and dizzy that I had to keep pulling over. It's usually a fifteen-minute drive. The brain fog is so bad that I can't put words together or focus on anything. I get horrible migraines, I have tremors and anxiety attacks. My entire body aches and I feel like there're bugs crawling all over me, even in my brain and my teeth. It's the worst feeling ever."

She gasps at the other end of the line. "Jesus, Penny, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. Can anything be done for that?"

"Apparently not. Months ago, when I first tried to get off the meds, I tried cold turkey, and that was a huge mistake. I got incredibly sick and ended up right back at Tranquility for weeks. I didn't know I couldn't just stop taking them. This time, I'm slowly tapering off them, but every day feels like hell. It's like I want to go back on the pills just to make it stop, but then I'll feel worse in different ways. The medication they put me on completely changed my personality. I can't write, paint or draw at all. They make me a total numb zombie. And don't even get me started on the weight gain and mood swings. Now I have terrible insomnia and when I do sleep, I have nightmares. I wish I'd never even started any of these medications."

"That's horrible. I can't stand the thought of you feeling so sick. I wish there was something I could do to help you."

"I do, too. I talked to my friend Londyn, she's been through this before and she said all I can do is ride it out and not give up."

"Do you think maybe if you were here, it would be easier? I know you don't feel overly comfortable there with your parents. If you came here, you'd have me and my dad. You'd have your little art corner in the studio. You could sit by the

lake and just enjoy the quiet. I'll do whatever I can to help you."

I close my eyes, squeezing them against the tears that threaten to fall. I want to go home. My heart is tethered there, always pulling me.

"I appreciate that so much, Lily, but I can't do that. You have the baby to take care of, and your dad's career is really taking off. I don't want to be a burden to you guys. I can't even work right now, I feel too sick."

I refuse to live off their generosity. And I refuse to let Alex and Lily see me like this. Vomiting, dizzy, shaking in the corner, chewing my fingernails, pacing all night, raking at my skin. I don't want little Brian—who knows me as Aunt Penny on video chat—to be scared of me.

Absolutely not.

"We love you," Lily says. "We don't mind."

We. Lily has no idea that me and Alex were—are?—also a *we*. An *us*. But what are we now? We haven't spoken in so long. Every time I get the urge to call him, I don't let myself. What can I possibly say to him? *Hi, I'm a fucked-up mess. How are you?* He still texts me a photo every night at midnight. A flower. The moon. Shadow. Always with the same words typed beneath. *Still thinking of you.* And I always reply. *Still thinking of you, too.*

It's limbo. And I hate every second of it, which is why I refuse to give in to this torture and go back on the medication. I'm determined to be me again. An even better me. I want to be a successful, independent woman. I want to be a good friend. And I want to be a woman who can love Alex without it being a secret and without being haunted by a voice and visions in my head.

"Penny." Lily's voice pulls me back. "We're here for you. We want you to come back home."

"I promise, as soon as I'm feeling better, I'll come back."

"I hope so. Please don't shut us out. You don't have to go through this alone. I could come out there—"

“No,” I say quickly. “That’ll be too hard with the baby. Just know that I really appreciate you. I’m sorry for being so difficult, I just don’t feel like myself.” My voice cracks and I have to take a breath to compose myself. “I have to go now, my mother made dinner. If I don’t force myself to eat some of it, she’ll be on me all night.”

“I’m calling you in a few days to check on you. I’m not letting weeks go by without talking to you anymore.”

“Don’t worry about me. In a few days, I’m sure I’ll feel better. I’ll talk to you soon. Kiss the baby for me.”



Every night, when I eat dinner with my parents, I feel like I’m going through an evaluation.

Tonight is no different.

I feel bad for my mom. She tries so hard to make my favorite meals every night, only to watch me take small nibbles and push my food around my plate like a five-year-old. It’s not just the constant nausea that’s stopping me from eating, it’s that nothing tastes good anymore. Everything is flavorless on my tongue, like eating cardboard.

“Honey, you really have to eat,” my mother says. “Do you want me to make you something else? I can make soup or grilled cheese...”

“No, this is perfect. I just don’t have an appetite. Everything makes me feel sick.”

“If you’re still feeling this sick, maybe it means you need to be on your medication,” my father says. “This isn’t normal.”

Putting my fork down, I stare at him, wondering why he decided to wait until I was having a medical crisis before he started to show any real interest in me. “You’re right. None of this is normal. I was fine before I went into Tranquility.”

“Penny, if you were fine, the doctors wouldn’t have recommended that you go there in the first place,” he says. “We wouldn’t have talked you into admitting yourself.”

“I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. I agreed to therapy. Which, to me, meant talking, not putting me on antipsychotic drugs. Do you know that two of the medications they put me on are for patients with severe schizophrenia?”

Impatience settles in the lines on his face. “The doctors wouldn’t have prescribed it if they hadn’t felt you needed it.”

“Really? I admit I was confused and overtired, but I’m not fucking schizophrenic. They made that diagnosis and started doling out pills before they even spent any time talking to me.”

“The doctors know what they’re doing. You were having delusions. You weren’t acting like yourself.”

“Yes, because I wasn’t getting enough sleep, and I had a few bad anxiety attacks. I haven’t had any so-called delusions at all since that day.”

My mother opens her mouth to speak but my father cuts her off. “Exactly. Because you were on medication to make them stop.”

“I’ve been off the pills for weeks and I’m not having delusions, Dad.”

“What if they start again? You’ve been severely depressed for months. You hardly ever leave your room. I was surprised to hear you actually went out today and bought a guinea pig.”

“It’s a hamster. And I’m depressed because the pills made me depressed. Trying to get off them is making me sick as hell, which is making me more depressed. I’m not going to stay on this endless carousel of pills and doctors while my life goes down the drain. None of it is helping me. It’s all making me worse. I just want my life back. I want to get through this horrible withdrawal phase and then I’m going back to New Hampshire where I was happy.”

My mother surprises me by nodding. “You’ve always been sensitive to medication. I don’t think what those doctors put

you on was right for you.”

“I think you’re making a mistake,” my father says, then throws a look at my mother. “I don’t agree that you should stop your medication, and I don’t think you should go back to New Hampshire alone. You should be here where me and your mother can keep an eye on you and make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m not a child.”

“No, but you’re in a fragile state and you shouldn’t be off by yourself.”

“I’ll be fine once this poison is out of my body. I was happy in New Hampshire. I loved my job. I was painting and writing every day. I had friends, and a life, and goals.”

And Alex. I had Alex.

His lips press together as he shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go back there. I never liked the idea of you staying behind. You were too young to be living with friends with no parental guidance at all. You can get a job here, go to college, and get back on track.”

“I don’t want to go to college. I’m going to take online classes.”

He sighs. “Then you can do that here.”

“I thought you and Mom were moving back to New Hampshire.” I look from him to my mother. “Wasn’t that the plan? When is that happening?”

“That’s still the plan, but things have been delayed with the company. We’ll probably be here for another year.”

My stomach plummets. “A year?” I repeat. “I don’t want to stay here for a year. I want to go back home.”

My mother reaches across the table and touches my hand. “I agree that Tranquility and their treatment plan wasn’t right for you. When you’re feeling better, I think you should go where you’re happy,” she says. Her eyes meet mine and I see a flash of understanding I wasn’t expecting. For once, I feel less alone here.

By the end of dinner, we'd reached an agreement. If I started to feel mentally off once the withdrawal period wore off, I'd tell my parents, and we'd pursue a different avenue of treatment here in California. But as long as I felt fine, I'd be going back to New Hampshire.

That night, when Alex sends me a photo of a dragonfly, I send him a poem in reply.

*Even on a dark and starless night, you are the shimmering
light that leads me home.*

Chapter 42



ALEX - 2028

It takes ten seconds for me to realize the sound coming from the living room is the doorbell. I've never heard it ring before.

"Dad! Can you get the door? I'm getting dressed!" Lily yells from her room downstairs.

Sighing, I grab my black blazer from the back of the kitchen chair and pull it on as I head to the front door, quickly flipping through my mental notes. I'm positive I'm supposed to be meeting Jillian at the restaurant, not here.

When I swing it open, my heart, mind, and dick aren't prepared for the tangle and wrangle of emotions that literally weaken my knees at the sight of her.

Little Miss Penny Rose is on my front porch, and she's all grown up.

Subconsciously, I register every new detail. Deep-cherry-red waves of hair skim the middle of her chest. Eyes the color of soft forest moss. Long legs in tight denim. Curves that could rival a winding road.

And that smile. That fucking smile. Undoing me in a hundred different ways since she was six. Just as adorable and mischievous, but now fuller, sultry, glossy with berry-tinted gloss.

Oof.

"Penny." My attempt to sound smooth crashes and burns. Her name comes hoarse from my throat, raspy with regret, denial, and longing.

My heart throbs as her tongue skims briefly over her top lip. “Alex.”

The mature confidence in her voice says so much.

The last time I saw her, my name wavered on uncontrollable sobs with tears pouring down her cheeks. I remember how she clung to my hand and fell to the floor, begging and crying incomprehensibly. I’ll never forget how I witnessed her soul crumble right before my eyes.

Or how I froze with fear and watched her being taken away from me, my heart shattering with hers.

And how it’s been killing me to be away from her ever since.

But that lost, fractured girl is nowhere to be seen in the gorgeous young woman standing in my doorway.

Lily’s recent words echo through my mind. *“She’s better now, Dad. Things are great. She’s coming to visit in two weeks.”*

I don’t know where to look. Not at those mile-long legs. Not at the pale skin of her throat encircled by a tight silver chain, or the dragonfly pendant hanging from it, just above the delicious valley between her breasts. Not at those eyes that’ve been holding me hostage forever. And not at the tiny ruby heart ring on her finger.

“Here I am again,” she says softly. I smile at the memory of her saying those same words to me in greeting over the years.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Here you are.” My response grants me a wistful smile. “Lily told me you were coming to visit.”

Interestingly enough, my daughter neglected to tell me exactly what day Penny would be arriving.

“She invited me to stay for a few days. If you’re not comfortable with that, I can get an Airbnb in town, or I—” At her feet is a suitcase and a tiny pet carrier.

I put my hand up between us. “Of course you can stay here. She misses you.”

“I miss her, too.”

Her gaze idles on me longer than it should, and I eat it up like a ravenous wolf. We don’t have to say the words. *I’ve missed you. I’ve missed you, too.* Four years and three thousand miles later, changed nothing.

Nada. Zilch. Zero.

The undercurrent of us is still there—still buzzing with buried secrets and longings that words are too weak to touch.

“You look so different,” she says with an intrigued tilt of her head.

I smirk. “That good or bad, little darlin’?”

Her nickname on my lips is like wearing an old sweatshirt on a cold day. Familiar and comforting. Undoubtedly mine. I never want to take it off.

She inhales a breath and bows her head. I resist pushing her hair away when it falls over her face. When she meets my eyes again, her cheeks are flushed in a way that makes my mouth dry. She purses her lips, quickly banishing the faint smile I caught a glimpse of.

“It’s good, Alex. Really good.”

I shove my hands in my front pockets. “You know what they say. Two eyes are better than one.”

She frowns and shakes her head a little. “Don’t say that. It’s not even your eye. You look healthier. Less tortured.”

I almost laugh. If she only knew the truth.

My new eye isn’t the only fake thing about me. I’ve become a master of mirage when it comes to looking like I have my shit together.

“I’m three years with no alcohol or weed. And lots of working out.”

I like the spark of approval I see in her eyes as they rove over my chest and biceps.

“It shows,” she says. “I’m proud of you.”

I nod. “You look different, too.”

“I’m two years off medication.”

Regret throttles through my chest. “Penny—”

“Penny! You’re here!” Suddenly, she’s wrapped up in Lily’s arms, and they’re jumping up and down, hugging each other like they’re in high school again and not twenty-two years old. I swallow back the words that were edging up my throat.

All that matters is the silly happy dance in front of me. Lily’s smile is beaming like a thousand-watt bulb. And Penny—the slow close of her eyes, the grip of her arms around my daughter, the contented sigh that she’s home. Loved and adored. It’s all that really matters.

As a father and a long-lost lover, I can take a back seat.



I’m a distracted mess at dinner; way too tempted to order a few shots of whiskey to drown Penny out of my head. But I’ve tried that before, and it didn’t work. Nothing does. Instead, I binge on cheesy garlic breadsticks, chewing ferociously, barely listening to Jillian, who, no doubt, is writing my behavior off as being a moody artist.

Funny how bad behavior is acceptable when you’re some kind of creative character. I’m constantly using it as a get-out-of-jail-free card.

“Do you want to come back to my place and unwind? You seem a little wired,” Jillian asks on the sidewalk after dinner.

I’ve been single too long to know what unwinding might get me into.

“Thanks, but I need to get home. We have family company...”

Jillian gives me an unoffended nod. “Are you sure you’re okay, Alex? Should I be worried?” A line appears between her eyebrows while she scrutinizes me under the moth-riddled streetlight.

“I’m not falling off the wagon.”

“Good to hear.” We walk across the dim lot until we reach our cars parked next to each other. “Everything else alright?”

“Everything’s great. Just thinking about work.” I tap the side of my head. “Too many ideas, too little time.”

“That’s what I want to hear. I’m here if you need to talk.” She opens her car door. “Thanks for dinner, think about the offer.” I nod at her over the roof of her car. “I’ll be in touch.”

I sit in my car until she pulls away. My dashboard clock glows. Nine thirty—too early to go home. Brian will be asleep by now and the girls will still be awake—sitting on the couch, eating ice cream or cookies, babbling about clothes, boys, and life.

Boys. As wrong as it is, I can’t stop myself from wondering if Penny has a boyfriend. My guess is the answer is no. She wouldn’t be here alone across the country, indefinitely, if she were dating someone.

To burn time, I drive around and end up parking on the side of the road where the accident happened. If it were daylight, I’d be able to see the two pieces of guard rails that are a slightly different color than the others. I’d also get out of my car, hop the rails, and climb down the steep slope to sit on the rock our car landed against. My frequent visits here are morbid, but grief is twisted like that. It takes a permanent seat in your soul, luring you to seek places of closeness to the one you lost. Their grave. Their urn. Their place of death.

It’s totally normal, they say.

But the truth is, I never feel close to Brianna in any of the usual places.

My heart knows she's not there. That's the thing with hearts; they can't be fooled or lied to. They always know the truth, and they always know where they belong.



It's close to one a.m. when I pull into the driveway. The lights in the house are off, except for the two small Tiffany-style lamps Bri put in the bedroom and living room windows years ago. I never turn those off.

The night is warm and clear; the sky dotted with stars like paint splattered on velvet. I follow the solar lights glowing at the edge of the path through the woods. Even in the dark, the shape of her is visible sitting on the end of the dock, staring out at the lake.

Exactly where I knew she'd be, no matter how long I avoided coming home.

Wordlessly, I sit next to her and hang my legs over the edge of the aged wood. My eyes close as I inhale her perfume, infused with the scent of bittersweet memories, midnight whispers, and sleepless nights.

"You're not supposed to be out here alone at night," I remind her.

"I knew I wouldn't be alone long."

I hate and love how well we know each other.

"Where's Lily?" I ask.

"Don't worry, Alex. She's asleep."

Tension crackles in the air. The faint lapping sound of the water against the pier and the symphony of crickets fill the silence between us. After a few minutes, she reaches out and fingers the lapel of my blazer.

"You look nice. Were you on a date?"

Grinning, I glance sideways at her. "There's my girl, always cutting right to the chase."

She grins right back at me. “Would you rather me be any other way?”

I shake my head and chuckle out at the water. “Nope.”

“So, were you?”

While she waits for me to answer, she leans back against the wooden beam at the corner of the pier and stretches her legs out. I mimic her, leaning back against the opposite beam and stretching my legs next to hers.

Leveling my gaze at her, I contemplate if I should walk through this door she’s opening or slam it shut and lock it.

I push my hand through my hair to grip the back of my neck.

“No,” I admit, kicking that door wide open. “I had dinner with my agent to talk about an offer. A television show wants to use some of my art. Apparently, the main character is an artist.”

She leans forward, eyes owl-like with excitement. “Wow, that’s amazing!”

I shrug. “We’ll see how it goes.”

“Alex, don’t be so casual about it. Your art is amazing. Lily told me about all the galleries, the private commissions, the magazine features. You know I’ve been following you on your page. It’s all so wild.” She moves her leg until it’s pressing against mine, leaving it there. “And very well deserved. Didn’t I always tell you you’d rise from the ashes?”

“The ashes ain’t so bad,” I mumble.

The toe of her pristine white sneaker nudges into my leg. “It’s not where you belong.”

“What about you? How’s your poetry and art going? Seeing anyone out in Cali?”

And the awkward asshole award goes to...

“I’m seeing lots of people,” she replies.

My stomach turns with a mix of jealousy and cheesy breadsticks. “Really?” I force out through clenched teeth.

“Yup.” Her lips curve, beautiful and coy. “Everyone I look at.”

I let out a laugh. “Smart-ass.”

“I’ve really missed you calling me that.” The wistfulness in her voice is a lasso around my heart. “Do you ever miss me?”

The dark, quiet space between midnight and sunrise is such an invitation for truths. I can’t bring myself to violate it with lies and bullshit.

“Honestly, Penny... I don’t know how I can miss you when practically every minute of my days and nights are invaded by thoughts of you. You never left.”

No one ever really leaves me. They all stay—my tragic, beautiful, lingering ghosts.

“Wow, Fox...” she says after a few silent beats. “I’m not sure if that’s incredibly romantic, or heartbreaking.”

I press my leg firmer against hers, needing to feel the heat of her body through our jeans. There’s been a perpetual chill in my bones since she left years ago.

“It’s both,” I reply.

“And now? Do you wish I’d just stayed in your thoughts?” The carefulness in her voice is like a hand slowly pulling the lid off a box of unknown contents.

Leaning my head back against the beam, I tilt my face up and sigh at the stars. “I really don’t know, Penny,” I admit softly.

She digests that for a few seconds, then with a lift of her chin says, “I didn’t answer your questions. My poetry and art books are doing better than I ever could’ve imagined. And I’m not seeing anyone out in Cali. I’m thinking about moving back here. This is where my heart is.”

Lily would be ecstatic to have her best friend back, and I think it would be good for her. But it might be torture for me—having Penny so close again, having to fight the never-ending war of hearts, confusion, and morals. Not to mention the things we've said. And done. The silent, subtle hints we've been sending each other with the pictures and poems. The little hearts and flowers on each other's social media posts. We've been doing this slow dance for a long time, but I have no idea where we stand.

"Penny," I say, low and tentative. "I'm so fucking sorry about what happened back then. I—"

She immediately cuts me off. "You don't have to apologize, Alex. That's not who we are."

"I do. I feel like I should've said or done something to stop them from taking you away and putting you in that place. I feel like the whole thing was my fault."

"Please don't worry about it. It's nothing a few years of therapy didn't fix." She lets out a sad little laugh.

"It's not funny."

"I never said it was," she says softly. "It's in the past, and I don't blame you at all. There's really nothing you could've done, and nothing you did made it happen. Our emotions were all over the place, it was right, it was wrong, it was overwhelming... and I was obviously a bit out of my mind."

I wonder if she believes that. So many times, late at night when insomnia is the only thing keeping me company, I've let my mind wander to places it should never go. Places she led me to when I was lost. A place where I tossed logic and diagnosis away, and I believed that everything she said that night might be true.

That she was my wish.

That Brianna somehow lived on through her.

That love never dies.

That life is not lost.

That Penny was one of life's magical mysteries.

“I’ve never believed you were out of your mind, Penny,” I tell her. “I think we both had a lot of feelings we were trying to process.”

It’s her turn to stare at the sky for answers. “I agree. I think feelings can be like toddlers. They can be messy, out of control, and driven by wanting things they aren’t ready to have. But they’re still vulnerable, and full of hope.”

An accurate analogy.

After a few minutes of silence and uncertainty, I give her foot a quick squeeze, then stand and hold my hand out to her. “It’s late,” I say, pulling her up to her feet. “You’ve been traveling all day; you should get some sleep.”

She holds on to my hand and stares dreamily into both my eyes. I hope she likes the prosthetic and isn’t weirded out by it. The familiar tingling buzz rumbles from my feet to my scalp. I focus on her fingers—long and soft. No longer the child’s hand that held mine so many years ago when I walked her home.

“He’s my Alex,” she’d said so matter-of-factly back then.

I guess I have been, in one way or another, ever since.

Reluctantly, I pull my hand from the warmth of hers. “I’ll walk you to the house.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, and we silently follow the path back home. “Aren’t you coming inside?” she asks when I open the back door and hold it open for her.

“Nah. I’m going to go do some things in the studio for a bit.”

Her misty green eyes rest on mine again as she grasps the edge of the door. The glint of the ruby ring catches my eye. I’m sure she’s never taken it off.

“I could keep you company,” she offers with a lilt of hope in her voice. “Like old times. I’d love to see some of your new work.”

Nothing would make me happier than to have her in my space again—my little partner in creative crime, my sounding

board, my eternal cheerleader. How easily we could slip back into our yesterdays. But the fear of saying or doing something to hurt her again holds me back. Not for the first time, I worry that while Penny might be my beacon, I might be her storm.

“Maybe another time. I kinda want to be alone.” My words come out colder than I want, but maybe that’s for the best.

“Okay.” Her shoulders sink slightly. “Good night, Alex. Thanks again for letting me stay here.”

“G’night.” Turning, I head to the barn, but can’t stop myself from pivoting around after a few steps.

“Hey, Penny?” I say, walking backward.

She pauses halfway through the door. “Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re here. Not just in my thoughts.”

She smiles and slowly nods before disappearing into the house.

I spin back around just in time to catch a shooting star high in the sky—a real one this time, not a pendant on a necklace. And once again, I’m not careful what I wish for.

Chapter 43



PENNY

Closing the door behind me, I lean back against it, pull in a deep breath, then slowly exhale.

My heart is racing. My limbs are trembling. My fingertips are tingling.

“It’s just nerves,” I whisper to myself. Just normal anxiety and butterflies from seeing the man I’m in love with for the first time in four years.

It’s totally normal. It doesn’t mean I’m having a relapse.

I’m fine.

I mean, what woman wouldn’t feel all jittery being around Alex Fox? He oozes sex appeal in a bad-boy way that women are inexplicably drawn to. The perfectly messy hair. The muscles. The charming smile. The quiet, brooding artist vibe. And those chestnut eyes. I always thought the eye patch was sexy, but looking into two hooded bedroom eyes made me feel like I was dissolving into a puddle.

Lily had told me about the prosthetic eye months ago over the phone, but I never expected it to look so real.

Or that staring into his eyes would render me breathless.

I also wasn’t expecting his words, which are still haunting me as I stand here in the kitchen, still using the door to hold me up. *Every minute of my days and nights are invaded by thoughts of you.*

I wanted to kiss him right then and there and forget about all the awkwardness and the politeness and the uncomfortable

gray area of uncertainty between us. I just want to go right back to where we left off that day in the barn—to kissing and talking together about a happy forever.

But as wonderful as that would be, I know it's not realistic. While time has the remarkable ability to heal, it also has the capacity to carve a deep abyss. A lot can change in four years, and I can't delude myself into thinking Alex is the same man who made promises to a girl on a ruby ring. *I'm* certainly not that same girl.

My feelings are the same, though. His...maybe not. Despite sitting so close to me on the pier and basically telling me he hasn't stopped thinking about me, he shot me down when I wanted to join him in his studio. And boy, does it sting my heart.

I grab a bottle of water and take it into the living room. Seeing my favorite throw blanket draped over the back of the couch is like running into an old friend. Curling up at the end of the couch, I pull the blanket over me. The scent of burning wood from the fireplace mixed with Lily's perfume and Alex's cologne clings to the woven fabric. Closing my eyes, I bring the blanket to my face and breathe in its comforting nostalgia. I wish I'd been able to take this blanket with me when I left years ago. I think it would've helped me through many sleepless nights.

Shadow jumps up on the couch and lays his head on my lap. I almost cried when he came trotting up to me earlier today. The last time I saw him, he was just a tiny, bouncy puppy, and now he's a big, poofy bear of a dog with a sweet, teddy bear expression and a personality to match. It saddens me that I didn't get to watch him grow up. As I run my fingers through his plush fur, my gaze wanders over the wall of photographs. I was fascinated with them when I was a little girl. Every time I entered the house, I stared at the black-and-white wedding photos, captivated by Brianna's veil blowing in the breeze and Alex's smile as he leaned in for a kiss.

I can hear the laughter, feel his lips on mine...

Goose bumps scatter over my arms.

Ripping my eyes from the photos, I shake my head and mentally correct myself. I heard nothing. Felt nothing. It's simply a photo—a beautiful snapshot in time—that I have absolutely no connection to.

The sound of the back door opening and closing, then the familiar thud of his boots, invades the silence.

“I thought you were going to bed,” he says quietly from the doorway.

I move the blanket away from my face to smile at him. “*You* said I should get some sleep. I never said I was going to.”

Laughing softly, he sits on the far end of the couch. Yesterday, three thousand miles separated us. Today, it's a cushion and a furry dog.

“I thought you were working.”

He shrugs and kicks off his boots. “I was going to, but I changed my mind.”

“I can go upstairs if you want your living room to yourself...”

“And disturb the king here now that he's all comfy sleeping on you?” he teases, petting Shadow's back.

“You've got a point. I might be trapped on your couch all night under this mound of floof.”

“That's a very real possibility. But even if you weren't trapped under my dog, I still don't want you to go upstairs. I'd rather spend some more time with you.”

My stomach flutters. “Oh.”

He turns toward me, bending one leg under him and resting his arm on the back of the couch, and I drink in this new version of him. The crisp T-shirt stretched over shoulders much broader than they were four years ago. The sinewy muscle of his arms. The way he brushes his fingertip across the left side of his forehead above his new eye—a motion that seems to have replaced straightening his eye patch.

“Tell me where you’ve been, Penny,” he says, and I’m immediately caught in the net of his soft, gravelly voice. “And I don’t mean in Cali or at that treatment place. Tell me where your mind has traveled. Tell me about your writing and paintings. Tell me what kept you away for so long. I want to hear what your dreams are now.”

A nervous laugh bounces from my throat. “That’s a lot.”

One dark brow arches up. “I’ve got time.”

My mind whirs like a pinwheel and lands on a random starting point. “It’s kind of funny,” I say. “While I was at Tranquility, I thought I’d do lots of writing and painting. The doctors really want us to use creative outlets to express ourselves; get the emotions out, and all that. But I couldn’t write or paint at all. I’d just sit there and stare at a blank page or canvas for hours. It’s like I was broken.”

He nods. “Been there. That’s the shittiest feeling.”

“It really is. Writing and drawing have always been the things that made me feel better. Not being able to find that comfort zone, especially when I needed it the most, was scary as hell.” I pause and run my fingers through Shadow’s fur. “But when I finally got my head together, it’s like a dam broke and all the emotions I went through just poured out into my art and my words. I finally felt alive again.”

Smiling, he says, “Nothing better than when that mojo comes back, huh?”

“Totally. I think I stayed up for seventy-two hours writing and sketching when the creative bug finally came back.”

“And now you have a book out,” he says proudly.

I nod, feeling my cheeks warm. “And now I have a book out. Which was totally unexpected.”

“It’s awesome. I have a copy on my nightstand.”

“You actually bought a copy? I would’ve given you one.”

“I actually bought three copies. You better sign one for me.”

“I’ll sign them all for you. But you didn’t have to buy them —”

“Of course I did.” His voice takes on a lower tone. “I want to support you.”

“I better not find thousands of copies hidden in your barn,” I tease. “I want to believe all my book sales were to actual stores and interested people.”

“I promise I only bought three. Your success is real.”

Shadow lifts his head, jumps off the couch, and settles near the hearth, leaving only the cushion between us.

“I noticed my favorite poem wasn’t in your book.”

I look away from the dog to meet his eyes. I’m surprised—and flattered—that he noticed.

“Which one is that?” I already know the answer.

“‘The Lovely Return.’”

That one is my favorite, too. “Because that one was for you. Not for anyone else.”

“I’m glad. That’s also on my nightstand.”

My brow rises. “Sounds like there’s a lot on your nightstand.”

He laughs. “I’m sounding a bit creepy, huh? I promise that’s all there is.”

“Are you sure? No vials of my hair? The last spoon I used?”

His hair falls into his face as he shakes his head and I love how it magically changes him from sexy to adorable. “Nothing else. I swear.”

“I have something of you on my nightstand, too,” I reveal. “Well, it’s usually on my nightstand. Right now, it’s in my suitcase.”

“Now I have to know what it is.”

“You might not like what it is. It’s a bit sad, but it’s also beautiful.”

I'm met with a crooked, curious grin. "What about me is sad and beautiful *and* fits on your nightstand?"

"It's a photo I took of you from the kitchen window the day Cherry passed. You were kneeling with her, and the snow was falling in slow motion that day. There's this little cloud of mist floating above you, and maybe it's just from your breath in the cold air..." I pause and wet my lips. "But it's in the shape of a dog. A shape very much like Cherry. And I guess I like to think it was her spirit going to heaven."

"Wow... how come you never showed it to me?"

My shoulder lifts. "I think I was afraid it might upset you."

"It might've when it first happened. But I'm okay now. The happy memories have overtaken the grief."

"I'll show it to you tomorrow. I can print a copy for you if you want one."

"I'd like that."

On the trail of that sentence, he reaches down and grabs my foot. My breathing stills as he unties and then slips off my shoe. Without a word, he does the same with my other shoe. His long fingers wrapped entirely around my ankle make my insides tremble.

I find my voice. "You don't have to do that..."

"You always liked to sit here with your feet up."

"I did." I stretch my legs across the cushion between us. My toes almost reach his leg. "I do."

He gently pulls the blanket up until it covers my feet. Such a simple, caring gesture, but still makes my heart squeeze.

"Comfy?" he asks.

I can only nod.

"Keep telling me more. I've missed your voice."

I've missed his, too. The deep timbre of it. The way it reaches into me like tendrils, calming me one moment and

exciting me the next. The way it echoes through my memories. Sometimes soft. Sometimes raw.

“I had a roommate named Londyn. She always called me Rose. I think you’d like her. She has zero filter and sleeps with a headless teddy bear named Shithead. She was a really good friend to me while I was there. Odd, but still a great friend. We’re still in touch. She’s out of Tranquility now and has a vlog.”

“She sounds very unique.”

I’ve been blessed with unique, authentic friends. “She is. How’s Kelley, by the way?”

“He’s great. Maybe I can get him to stop by while you’re here.”

“I’d love to see him.”

He smiles sheepishly. “Tell me more about you.”

I tilt my head. “Aren’t you bored yet?”

“Nope.”

“Tell me something about you first.”

“Okay.” He looks up at the ceiling, thinking. “I took your advice. I focused on my art. And Lily. And the baby.”

“Did great things happen?”

“Yes. Very great things happened.”

“I knew they would. That’s what you deserve.”

I watch his chest rise and fall. “I just wished you were here. Every day. Every time something happened, whether it was good or bad, I wished you were here to share it with me.”

“I wished I was, too,” I say softly. “But you wouldn’t have liked me the way I was.”

His hand closes around my foot through the blanket. “I would’ve liked you any way you were. Any version of you is better than *no* version of you.”

My vision blurs with tears. He morphs into a watercolor image. “Alex...”

His voice is low and raspy. “Don’t you know that, Penny? That we—I— would’ve been there for you no matter what? I would’ve taken care of you. Hell, I would’ve flown out there every fucking weekend just to see you.”

“And what about Lily? How would you explain that to her?”

“At that point, I would’ve just told her the truth and dealt with the consequences.”

“I wouldn’t want you to do that. I was a mess. You have no idea.”

He’s not swayed. “Messses are my specialty,” he says with his crooked grin.

“Lily and the baby needed you. This is where you belong. With them,” I counter.

“*You* needed me. I never bought that ‘emotional detox’ bullshit the doctors were feeding you.” He shoves his fingers through his hair. “Did *you*? Tell me the truth.”

“Not exactly,” I say slowly. “But there was more to it than that.”

“I just don’t understand. You’ve never wanted to be away from me, Penny. Except for that time you were mad at me for not having birthday cake with you and you held a two-year grudge. I’ve felt sick about that night ever since you left. I’ve replayed it over and over and over in my mind. Whatever I did to hurt you, scare you, or upset you, I never meant to. Looking back, I never should’ve let things go that far between us, and I’m so fucking sorry—”

“Alex...you don’t have to apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Anguish flashes across his face. “You were only eighteen. I was thirty-fucking-nine.”

The age topic immediately gets me frustrated. “I don’t care about our ages. People form emotional bonds—with other people, even with pets—that they have no control over. Our age doesn’t stop us from feeling emotions and building

relationships. We loved each other. As friends, as more..." I search for the right words. "As something I can't even explain."

He stares at me for a long time, and my heart beats in tandem with his breaths. "We did." His words waver with melancholy, and I wonder if he views our feelings as in the past, or if he was mimicking my use of past tense.

I swallow. "I still do." My voice is barely above a whisper.

I notice the subtle way his breathing deepens. The tic of his jaw. "So do I." He matches my whisper, and for a moment, I'm not sure I heard him correctly. But I can see it all over his face—his feelings are still there. Happiness surges through my veins. "But I want to understand what you were going through, Penny, and why you shut me out."

I blink at him as I try to rearrange the giddy smile off my face. How can I possibly explain the shit show my life has been for the past four years?

I finger the tassels on the blanket nervously. "I seriously don't even know where to begin."

"If you'd rather not talk about it, I understand. I won't ask again."

"I do want to talk about it. One of the reasons I came here was to talk to you about it in person and not over the phone. I'm so incredibly grateful that you and Lily stuck by me after all this time and haven't told me to just screw off. I turned into a shitty friend. I feel really bad about that."

"You're not a shitty friend, Penny. I know what it's like to go through a bad time and push people away. And I know how much it means to know that your friends are still there for you, no matter what."

I smile softly. "I've just had a hard time understanding all this stuff myself, let alone trying to explain it to someone else."

When he smiles back, my heart melts a little, and it takes me to the very first time I found him in his studio when I was a little girl. I remember being pulled inexplicably like a magnet

to his property, and how my breath had caught in my throat when I saw him through the crack in the door. When I approached him, he knelt down to talk to me. I remember thinking he had the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen and it made me feel like I was being hugged from the inside. It was the only way I could describe it in my young mind. From that moment on, all I wanted was to see him and his smile again, to feel that cozy, safe, warmth again.

I take a breath and try to give a condensed version of the past four years. "When I first arrived at Tranquility, they thought it was best that I not interact with anyone close to me for a few weeks. At that time, I was still confused, upset, and scared, and they had me on sedatives before I even walked through the door. So I basically went along with everything they said. I don't really remember much of what happened that night. I mean..." I glance away from him, my gaze landing on the wall of photos again. "I remember what happened between us, but I honestly don't know why I freaked out. I just suddenly felt confused and not really sure who I was, which I know sounds crazy, so I don't blame everyone for thinking that."

"I *never* thought you were crazy." His unwavering stance of being on my side makes me fall even more in love with him.

I sweep my gaze back to him. "That wasn't the popular consensus. The more I talked to the doctor about my childhood, the things I thought I saw and felt, things I drew, the way I gravitated to you and this house... the more pills they gave me. I got so tired, Alex. And so numb and depressed. I missed you, Lily, and being here so much. It broke my heart being away from you. Things were going so good between us, and then..." I let out a breath, unable to finish that thought. "Anyway, they kept increasing my dosages, and after a few months I couldn't feel anything anymore. All I wanted to do was sleep. Sometimes it felt like I slept for days, and other times it was like I was awake for days. The only good thing is that in my therapy sessions, we uncovered that I'd been having delusions and fantasies since I

was a little girl that was causing me to have panic attacks so severe that I was actually having mini seizures.”

His brows pinch together. “That’s what it was? Delusions and fantasies? So the things you said about Brianna and Cherry—”

“It was all just stuff I made up in my head. Kind of like imaginary friends that little kids have. Only in my case, my brain took it all too far.”

He rubs his hand over the stubble on his chin and looks at me with bewilderment. “Okay...”

“All that stopped, though, even *after* I was off the meds. I think talking about it all with the doctor helped, even though I was pretty argumentative and pissed off with her at first.” I pause, noticing the slight shake of his head. “I’m really sorry for freaking out that night and saying the things I said at the worst possible time. I know how much that must’ve hurt you.”

He continues to look at me with an odd expression on his face that looks sad and maybe even a bit....disappointed?

“I should’ve reacted much calmer,” he finally says. “The way you were acting scared the hell out of me. I was so fucking confused and worried about you. I thought it was my fault. I didn’t know what to do.” Regret flashes across his face and the tremor in his voice brings a tightness to my chest.

I quickly shake my head. “It wasn’t. You didn’t do anything wrong at all. That much, I’m sure of. I really need you to believe that.”

“I’m trying to, little darlin’,” He smiles weakly but somehow it still breaks my heart. “Go on. I want to hear more.”

“I’m not sure how much Lily told you, but the drugs completely changed my personality. I couldn’t focus on anything. I had a hard time remembering things. I felt completely detached in every way. I wasn’t myself at all and to be honest, I’d rather be dead than lose every part of myself in some drug-induced zombie fog.”

“Don’t even say that—” he practically growls.

“It’s true. They had me on antipsychotic meds, Alex.” I sit up straighter. “I was all messed up. And not from the delusions and fantasies. Those were the least of my problems. I got caught up in this vicious cycle of going on and off the meds. I felt sick all the time. I went from being overweight to practically anorexic. My hair was falling out. My skin got all blotchy and I broke out in random hives. I looked terrible. I felt terrible. Every part of my body hurt and I couldn’t stand to have anything touching me. I couldn’t function at all. It was pure hell. I have no other way to describe it. All I wanted was my life back. I missed you and Lily so much. I thought about you every day. Sometimes I wondered if I’d dreamed my life here, it felt that far away to me. I just couldn’t let you guys see me like that. Especially you. You never would’ve wanted me like that.”

“Penny....” he reaches for my hand across the blanket, igniting an inferno of hope in my heart. “I would’ve wanted you no matter what. Even though things were new between us, and we were figuring us out, I would’ve been there for you. I don’t give a damn what you look like. I care about *you*. Do you really think you being sick and going through all that shit would’ve scared me away? There’s no fucking way.”

When my hand begins to tremble, he squeezes it tighter. “I was scared,” I reply tearfully. “I had people telling me what to think and what to do. My whole life just went upside down.”

“I fucking hate that you went through that alone.”

“I do, too. But I don’t want to dwell on it. I just want to put it behind me and focus on now and the future.”

“Good.” He nods slowly. “I think that’s exactly what you should do.”

I can still sense a carefulness in him that tells me he’s afraid of doing or saying something to accidentally set me off. Clearly, my episodes have left him with a form of PTSD. I’m going to have to show him that he doesn’t have to tiptoe around me.

“I bought a hamster,” I say, resting my head back against the couch.

I love the little chuckle sound he makes. “I saw that.”

“We were both stuck in a bad place. And when I gave her everything she deserved, she flourished. She inspired me.”

My very favorite smile of his makes an appearance and I have to resist launching across the couch and kissing him. “I kinda love that story,” he says. “They say inspiration can come from anywhere.”

I believe that very much. “I missed being inspired. I don’t ever want to take it for granted again.”

“Come here,” he says quietly, tugging on my hand.

Heart racing, I let him pull me into his arms, where he turns me so my back is pressed against his broad chest.

“What are you doing?” I whisper as he pulls the blanket over us. “Lily is right downstairs.”

“Shhh...” He wraps his arms around me from behind and leans his head against mine. Nuzzling his face into my hair, his lips brush across my ear. “I’m going to hug you for every time you needed one and I wasn’t there to give you one.”

A tiny, whispery gasp of surprise escapes my lips. My eyes fall closed and I hug his crossed arms tightly over my chest. The rhythm of his heartbeat against my spine echoes within me, each pulse thrumming like a drum, punctuating a sense of pure contentment, security, and undeniable belonging.

“Alex...” I say softly. “Why are you so amazing?”

His voice is rough, all masculine emotion. “I’m not. I just want you to know how much I care about you. I can’t stand the thought of you being sick, scared, or in pain. I want to make it all just fucking disappear.”

“You do.”

I let myself relax in his arms, hoping with all hope that this is a new beginning for us. I slowly run my fingertips down his arm to clasp his hand, stopping when I feel his wedding band. I realize I should probably feel some tiny degree of jealousy that he’s wearing it, but I don’t.

Touching the ring, I tease, “Are you still trying to keep women away?”

His lips press against my temple. “All but one.”

My heart jumps with happiness. “I don’t know why, but I’ve always loved that you still wear your ring.” I gently slip the ring off his finger. The metal is scratched, most likely from years of working with his hands.

“It’s heavier than it looks,” I observe.

“Because it’s platinum. It’s a heavier metal than gold or silver.”

I turn it in my fingers. “Is there writing inside?”

“Yeah. An inscription.”

“That’s so sweet.”

He lets out a short laugh. “Well, they’re not our words.”

“What do you mean?”

“Years ago, I couldn’t afford new rings, and Bri kept saying she wanted rings that had a history. She thought it brought good luck. So I got our rings at an estate sale. The couple passed when they were in their nineties.”

“Wow. I love that.”

I bring the ring closer to my face, squinting to read the tiny engraved words. “*To you, I will always return.* Is that what it says?”

“Yeah. And Bri’s said, *For you, my heart beats.*”

My fingers tingle. “That’s so romantic. I wonder how many years the original couple was married?”

“A long time. Unfortunately, their love story didn’t bring us the luck Bri was hoping for.”

As I slide the ring back onto his finger, a wave of déjà vu rolls over me. The wedding photos on the wall suddenly seem to be pulsing with energy. Swallowing hard, I ignore the sensations and say, “Maybe that’s not true. I don’t think love can be measured or defined by time spent together. I think

what really matters is how deeply, how selflessly you love someone.”

“I hope you’re right.” He touches my chin and turns me to face him. “But this time, I want it all.” His lips touch mine, softly. Briefly. Leaving me wanting more. “I want the years together. I want all the anniversaries. I want that deep, wordless, can’t ever get enough of you, love each other at our best and our worst kind of love. I don’t know how, or even when I fell in love with you... but you captured my heart and I can’t see my future with anyone but you. That last night you said you were waiting for me. I’ve been waiting a long time for you, too, Penny Rose.”

The tip of his nose rubs against mine. I feel like I’m in a dream. My heart begins to dance to an erratic beat as I nod and swallow.

“What do you think of that?” he asks.

I drop my gaze to his full lips. “I think I feel the same.”

Cupping my cheek, he brings my mouth back to his. The kiss is soft, tentative, careful, searching. I can taste the fear and longing on our lips.

“I have to know something,” he asks shakily when we part.

“Okay...”

His eyes search mine. “Did you come back for me?”

My heart quivers in my chest like a butterfly slowly opening its wings. A warm shiver sweeps down my spine when I hear that soft, familiar voice emerging from the shadows of my mind again.

“Yes,” the voice whispers from my lips.

Always. Again.

Chapter 44



PENNY

For the first time in a long time, I've woken up every day this week completely calm and rested. Not with a jolt, clutching the blankets with my heart pounding with anxiety, and not with an ache of homesickness weighing on my soul.

To my right, Lint is also content in the cage Lily set up on top of the dresser days before my arrival. She's perched on a tiny log, nibbling on a pumpkin seed. We don't run in frantic endless circles nearly as much as we used to.

Lily offered me her old bedroom, but I insisted on staying in the room I lived in years ago. I wasn't surprised to see all my things exactly as they were the last day I was here. That's what Alex does; he creates time capsules. A safe place for memories to live—undisturbed, preserved. A silent, open invitation that whispers, *come back...everything is here as if you've never left...waiting, just like me...*

And it worked. Here I am.

Home.

I'm still trying to figure out exactly what that entails. Lily and I slid right back into our sisterly friendship as if no time had passed. She planned out the entire week for us and took me to her favorite stores, cafés, and restaurants, all in an effort to convince me these would become our new go-to places if I moved back here. Almost every night we've stayed up late watching movies like we used to. I've always loved gloomy Lily, but this happy, enthusiastic version of Lily is magnetic. I never would have imagined that motherhood could change her

so much. Or maybe it's also because she now has an awesome relationship with her dad, and a loving partner in her boyfriend, Marcus.

Yesterday, at Lily's prompting, I visited the veterinarian's office where I used to work. My old boss pulled me aside and offered me my old job back with the option to work full or part time.

The fragmented pieces of my life are slowly falling back into place.

And then there's Alex.

I've been spending so much time with Lily that I've hardly seen Alex much at all, other than when we all eat dinner together or pass each other in the hall upstairs. The physical and emotional chemistry between us lit up like a flame in the wind my first night here, but now we're not quite sure what to do next. How do we get through the "How and when do we tell Lily" dilemma without hurting her?



I'm met with a scene in the kitchen that's both chaotic and heartwarming. It's Saturday morning, and Alex is at the stove flipping pancakes like he was born with a nonstick frying pan in his hand. Lily is holding Brian against her hip while trying to set the table, and he's giggling wildly, pointing at Shadow, who's up on his back legs, front paws on the table, sniffing at a bottle of maple syrup. As soon as Brian sees me, he breaks out into a comical smile and holds his arms out to me.

"Can I take him?" I ask.

Lily smiles. "Of course."

Brian immediately wraps his little arms around my neck and lets me kiss his adorable, chubby cheeks. Earlier in the week, when we met in person for the first time, I knelt on the floor, and he ran to me, shrieking, "Aunt Penny!" He literally threw himself into my arms and didn't let me go for a solid five minutes. At bedtime every night since, he's begged Lily to

let me read to him, and I've been more than happy to do so. For an hour, he snuggles next to me against a mountain of pillows, pointing to the pictures on the book pages, babbling about all his favorite parts.

Spending time with a child is totally new territory for me, but I loved him instantly.

"You can put him at the table. He sits by the wall in his booster chair, so he can't feed Shadow," Lily says as she hands a large serving plate to her father. He takes it and stacks the pancakes, adding a thin pat of butter between each. I'm not sure when seeing a man cook became attractive to me, but here we are, me with quivering thighs in the middle of the kitchen.

I tear my eyes away from Alex to put Brian at the table, but he kicks his feet as I try to get him into his chair. Alex rushes over, gently taking him from me.

"He's a little difficult sometimes." He grins. "He likes to kick the shit out of us because he doesn't like sitting in the seat."

Laughing, I watch him get the squirming toddler situated. A pang of longing stirs low in my stomach and reaches up to clench my heart. I try to pinpoint the source of the longing and my cheeks heat when I realize it's Alex. Alex and a baby.

"He's going to want you to sit next to him," Alex says, then leans close enough that the tip of his nose brushes against the wave of hair over my shoulder. "I miss you," he adds in a low voice.

My next breath quickly catches in my throat. That smile of his when he returns to the stove is even sexier than I remember it being four years ago. I've seen glimpses of him on his social media accounts over the years, but he rarely shows his face clearly. Alex has always been good-looking, but the bit of fullness age has added to his face has only made him more attractive. He's all rugged man now.

And his arms. Holy moly. My fingers are itching to grip those biceps.

Oblivious to my blushing and the swarm of butterflies I'm internally battling over her father, Lily says, "Brian is a little ladies' man. You should see him with the girls at day care."

Alex ruffles Brian's hair. "Flirting is his superpower."

The difference in Alex and Lily's dynamic is like night and day compared to how it was four years ago. The guilt and anger that used to thunder between them like a tumultuous storm has been replaced with calm, loving teamwork. Raising little Brian together might have been unexpected, but it appears to be exactly what they needed.

"Dad, don't forget we have reservations for dinner tonight at seven," Lily says as we sit at the table.

"Got it."

Marcus is taking us all out to dinner tonight so we can meet and get to know each other. I'm looking forward to meeting the guy she's fallen in love with.

"We're going to get mani-pedis after breakfast," Lily says. "Marcus said he wants my nails to look really pretty tonight and bought us gift certificates. Isn't that sweet?"

Alex takes a sip of his coffee, eyeing Lily suspiciously from over the rim. "Marcus got a thing for nails?"

"He just likes how my nails look when I get them done."

I stare at my nails, which haven't seen polish in four years. "He really doesn't have to do all this," I say. "Dinner and manicures. It's expensive. We could've just grilled some burgers out back...he doesn't have to do all this just to meet me."

Lily is all smiles as she shrugs. "This is just how he is. He likes spoiling me and doing nice things for people."

Alex nudges my shoulder with his. "Let the kid spend money. He *should* be spoiling my daughter and treating her like a princess."

"I'd love him even if he didn't, Dad."

My teeth hurt as I watch Alex pour an ungodly amount of syrup onto his pancakes. “I know you would. I’m just glad you’re dating someone who treats you right.”

Lily turns her bright eyes on me. “Now we have to find someone for you, Penny. Marcus has a cousin who’s really good-looking. I’ve only met him twice, but he’s nice. I’m not sure what he does for work, but he drives a new Camaro.”

Alex scoffs. “Nobody with half a brain drives a Camaro in New Hampshire. That thing isn’t going anywhere in a foot of snow.”

“Seriously, Dad?” Lily laughs. “I don’t think his car matters.”

“You’re the one who just used it to describe him.”

“He and his car sound great,” I say, noticing the clench of Alex’s jaw. “But I don’t think I’m ready to start dating yet.”

My breath catches when Alex’s hand finds mine under the table, and he threads our fingers together. My heart immediately begins to gallop like an excited pony. I move my leg closer to his and rub my sock-covered foot over the top of his shoe. With my hand captured under his, he splays his long fingers down and squeezes my inner thigh, fingertips lightly massaging into the thin material of my yoga pants. I shift in the chair and try to look as normal as I can while Lily continues to talk about other guys she wants me to meet. She has this dream of us going on double dates together. I have no idea how we’re ever going to do that when the only man I want to be involved with is her father, who’s currently caressing my leg and making me wet right under the table two feet away from her.

“Look, Aunt Penny!” I turn my attention to Brian, who picks up his pancake with both hands and takes a huge bite out of it. “A steering wheel!”

Laughing, I reach across the table to wipe his cheek with a napkin.

“Can you watch Brian while we get our nails done?” Lily asks her father, forgetting about the hot cousin and his car and

other single men she might know. “He might get a little rambunctious in the salon.”

“Sure. How ’bout we take Shadow down to the park?” He throws a grin at Brian as he slowly withdraws his hand from mine, picks up his plate, and takes it to the dishwasher.

“Yes!” Brian squeals. “Can Aunt Penny come?”

My heart tugs as if it’s a puppet on a string. Suddenly, all I want to do is walk to the park with Alex, Brian, and Shadow to feed the ducks. I long to see if Alex gives Brian rides on his shoulders and pushes him on the swings. I want to buy hot dogs from the little truck and see Brian with ketchup on his cheeks. I want to toss the ball for Shadow and watch him chase it across the lush grass while Brian giggles and runs after him.

“No, honey,” Lily answers as my daydream evaporates. “Mommy and Aunt Penny are going to get our nails pretty, and you’re going to spend the day with Papa.”

Alex and I share a glance and a smile over the Papa nickname. I can’t believe he’s a grandfather...and Lily has a baby. As much as I love them with all my heart, an odd sense of detachment comes over me, with an out-of-place sadness that creates a lump in my throat.

Blinking back the sting of unexpected tears, I help clear the table and quickly lock myself in the upstairs bathroom, telling Lily from over my shoulder that I’m going to get dressed.

Upstairs, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My head is throbbing with an ache that matches my pulse, and I feel short of breath. But that’s not what’s really bothering me. It’s the voice I hear in my head.

You’re running out of time, it says. You’re losing them. Your life is slipping away.

Chapter 45



PENNY

“You look so pretty!” Lily exclaims as we meet in the living room. Brian is crawling across the floor, pushing a little metal car, making *vroom, vroom* noises.

I glance down at my pastel floral slip-style dress and adjust the sage sweater I layered over it. “Thanks...is it too short for dinner?”

Her dark bob sways around her face as she shakes her head. “Hell no. Your legs are gorgeous.”

“I’ve been walking a lot. I love that color on you, by the way. It really makes your eyes pop.” I nod appreciatively toward her fuchsia silk blouse, skinny black slacks, and heels.

“Is it too bright?”

“Not at all. You look amazing in bright colors. I’m jealous. I could never wear that with my hair color.”

“Shut up. You look good in everything.” She glances down. “Brian, please don’t drive your toys over the dog. That’s not nice.” Turning back to me, she says. “So, I’m going to drive over to Marcus’s and drop Brian off at his sister’s condo on the way; she’s going to babysit. You and my dad will meet us at the restaurant. I’ll probably sleep at Marcus’s tonight. You’re okay with that, right?”

“Of course.” My pulse quickens at the unexpected news that I’ll be spending the night alone with Alex. It’s been hard sleeping in the room right next to his, wondering if he’s lying in bed, thinking of me, while I’m lying in bed thinking of him. The secret touches we share are sweet and sexy, but we can’t

hide our feelings for each other from Lily forever. There's no way we can have a healthy relationship with this deceit hanging over us.

"I feel nervous," Lily says in a low voice as she pulls on a light jacket.

I look at her curiously. "Nervous? Why?"

She chews the inside of her cheek. "I'm not sure. Marcus has been acting a little weird lately."

"Weird how?" I cock my head at her, mentally preparing myself to give Marcus an earful if he's doing anything to hurt my best friend.

"Like smiling a lot, in a weird way."

I blink at her. "Smiling? Like, 'I'm going to hide in your closet and watch you sleep because I'm a psycho' smiling?"

"No, just happy smiling."

"Maybe he's just happy because he's so in love with you."

"I hope so. I think I have trust issues because of how that asshole treated me years ago."

"That's normal. But please, don't let it take away your happiness. The guy sent us to a salon and is taking us out to dinner. That's not exactly predumping behavior."

"I didn't say he was *dumping* me. I just feel like he's been a bit off and randomly busy for the past few days. Like the other day, he went out but didn't tell me where he was going. He *always* tells me where he's going."

I pull her in for a hug. "Don't worry, I'm sure everything is fine."

"You're right. I'm just being paranoid." Smiling, she waves her hand as if shooing her worries away. "I'll see you in an hour at the restaurant." She grabs a canvas bag off the couch and holds her hand out. "C'mon, Brian, we're going to Aunt Vicky's house."



I wasn't expecting Marcus to look exactly like Ryan Reynolds. I feel like this is information Lily should've divulged the first time she ever told me about him. *Definitely, Maybe* is one of our favorite movies—we've watched it at least twenty times together while bingeing on sweet and salty kettle corn.

After Lily introduces us in the restaurant lobby, we sit at a large table in a far corner and are handed menus in huge leather binders.

Alex weighs his menu in his hand. "Are we ordering food or studying for an exam?"

"Dad..."

"Penny, do you miss the California weather?" Marcus asks.

I sip my water. "To be honest, no. I really like the seasons and the snow."

When he smiles, he looks even more like Ryan Reynolds. "A true New Englander."

"Have you always lived here?" I ask.

"Yup. I was born and raised in Boston."

"How did you two meet? I don't think Lily told me." Or maybe she did when I was still meandering about in the brain fog.

Lily and Marcus smile at each other. They're so adorable. I just want to squeeze them.

"Why don't you tell her," Marcus says.

She leans forward excitedly. "He was one of the zombies I put makeup on for the haunted Halloween event. I thought he was really cute, but we didn't really talk much."

"Not because I didn't want to. I couldn't talk because you were painting blood coming out of my mouth."

Lily's eyes animate brightly. "After the show, he chased me through the pitch-black parking lot to my car and scared the shit out of me. I screamed and locked myself in my car."

Marcus puts his arm around her. "I wanted to get her number before it was too late, and I forgot I looked like a zombie."

I can't help but laugh. "That's the weirdest meet-cute I've ever heard. I love it. It's so *you*, Lily."

"Right?"

"You're lucky she didn't Mace you in the face," Alex adds.

"I still would've asked for her number." Pulling her closer, he kisses her cheek. "So, how did you two meet?" He raises his chin toward me and Alex across the table. "Lily says you have a history."

"In high school," I blurt out, buttering a piece of bread.

Lily laughs. "Um, I don't think that's possible, Penny."

A sharp pain zaps through my skull, and the warm, round roll falls from my hand. I have no idea why I said that. It just shot out of my mouth. Shaking my head, I force a laugh. "I thought you meant how did *Lily* and I meet." My hand trembles as I pick up my bread.

Alex's hand rests on my leg under the table, giving me a gentle, reassuring squeeze. "We met when she was a little girl. I used to teach a children's art class. When we realized she lived right around the block, she used to come over to watch me work. When she got older, she'd help me sort through the trash and come up with project ideas. She has a great imagination."

Marcus says, "That's cool. You guys are both killing it now. I don't have an artistic bone in my body, unfortunately. I wish I wasn't stuck behind a desk all day staring at a computer screen."

Alex agrees with a nod. "Trust me, it's not all that glamorous. At least you get a steady paycheck and health insurance. There were times I didn't make a dime for months."

“Those times are long gone, Dad. I was just telling Marcus last night you’re going to be in an actual TV show.”

Looking impressed, Marcus says, “Congrats.”

Surprised, I turn to Alex. “You have a part? You didn’t tell me about that. You said your *art* was going to be in a television show.”

He shrugs nonchalantly, like men do. “It’s just a side character. I’ll be on screen for like two minutes, and they want me to wear the eye patch. I probably should’ve just left this hole in my face. Everybody loves the eye patch.”

Lily looks at him sympathetically. “Don’t be silly, Dad. You look great. The patch drove you crazy with the band getting caught in your hair. And it gave you tension headaches. It had to go.”

I swallow my bread, loving the honey butter. “I’m with Lily. The pirate vibe was cool, but I think you look way hotter now.”

Marcus, and his Ryan Reynolds face, raises an eyebrow. He throws me a subtle grin that clearly says he knows I’m attracted to his girlfriend’s father.

Shit.

Thankfully, the waitress comes at that moment, distracting everyone from my awkward compliment. The rest of our dinner goes smoothly until dessert comes and Lily literally shrieks at her chocolate mousse, clasp ing her hands over her mouth.

“Tell me it’s not a spider,” I beg, launching into an inspection of my golden fried ice cream. But then I see it—perched on the tip of the pyramid-shaped cookie at the center of her mousse is a diamond ring. My jaw drops as Marcus kneels next to her and takes her hand.

“Lily Fox...will you make me the happiest guy in the world and marry me?”

My heart flutters with excitement for her. Alex and I grab each other’s hands, squeezing each other as happy tears spring

from Lily's eyes.

"Yes!" she says. "Oh my God, yes!"

As Marcus slides the ring onto her finger, the other patrons at nearby tables clap and cheer. Lily glows and cries happy tears as she throws her arms around Marcus. Alex and I stand to give them each a big hug before settling back into our seats.

"I don't even know what to say!" Lily exclaims, staring at the ring on her finger with her eyes wide as saucers. "I had no idea! My hands are shaking! Look how pretty and sparkly it is!"

"It's gorgeous," I agree, gazing at the pear-shaped diamond flanked by two dark gemstones. "You did good, Marcus."

Lily says, "It's perfect. Did you pick this out yourself?"

Her new fiancée nods. "Yup. I went to five different jewelry stores to find the perfect ring."

Lily drags her eyes away from her finger. "Dad, did you know about this?"

Alex lifts his glass, pausing to answer. "Yup. I submitted a list of demands when he asked my permission to marry you."

"It was more like a list of expectations," Marcus adds. "Which I'm more than happy to meet and exceed for you, Beauty."

Lily is swooning. "It's so sweet you talked to my father first. And Penny," she turns her smiling face to me. "You're going to be my maid of honor, right?"

My lips quiver as I smile back. "Of course I will."



"I can't believe our little girl is getting married," Alex says in the car on the way home. "Where the fuck did the time go?"

"Why didn't you tell me Marcus was going to propose tonight?"

“I wanted to, but he asked me to keep it a secret in case you accidentally slipped.”

I’m slightly offended. I’m totally capable of keeping a secret. “I wouldn’t have slipped. I guess that explains why he sent her to get her nails done today.”

“He knew she’d want them to look pretty so she could show off the ring and take pictures.”

I stare at the houses and trees rolling by outside the window. It’s how I feel about my life right now—everything whizzing by in a blur without really seeing it or enjoying it. “He seems like a good guy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look so happy.”

We stop at a red light and he turns toward me, gently pushing my hair from my face. “You okay? You seem a little off.”

Sometimes, I wish he couldn’t read me so well. “I’m excited for Lily. She deserves to be loved.”

“But...” He nudges as he drives through the intersection.

I look down at my hands, guilt creeping over me like a shadow. “But...I guess I’m a little jealous. I have this weird feeling, almost like I’m losing something.”

“I feel a little bit like that, too. Like I’m losing my little girl. I’m sure this won’t affect your friendship, though. She’ll always make time for you, Penny. She loves you.”

“I love her, too.”

He reaches for my hand and curls his around it. I love how we always instinctively hold hands without even thinking about it. Like it’s the most natural thing in the world to do. I’m surprised Lily hasn’t caught us doing it yet.

“And the jealousy?” he adds in his low, I’m-admitting-feelings voice. “I feel that, too. It’s hard to see people happy and in love when it always seems so totally out of reach.”

I don’t want to believe that love for us is out of reach. It might be behind a few little obstacles right now, but I’m sure that can’t last forever.

“I think we can be happy and in love, too, Fox,” I say hopefully.

He glances at me with a soft smile. “I do, too. It’s just—”

“Lily.” We say her name at the same time.

“You know her, Penny. You’ve talked about girl stuff with her. What’s your honest feeling about how you think she’ll react to us being together?”

I think about that for a moment, trying to envision her reaction. “It’s hard to say. My fear is that she’ll feel betrayed, like we’ve been sneaking around behind her back. Or she’ll feel totally appalled at the idea of her best friend with her father. It *is* a pretty big age difference. But, then again, now that she’s happy, it might not bother her at all. She might have one of those I’m in love, so I want everyone to be in love, stances.”

Alex chews the inside of his cheek. “She might. She doesn’t even curse out her fucking loser ex anymore. She says she doesn’t want to waste her breath on him. She wants to focus on positive things.”

“I’m just worried we could ruin her happiness. She’s going to be planning a wedding now. We’re both going to be huge parts of that. I can’t bear the thought of wrecking that for her or not being a part of her big day. I’d never forgive myself.”

He nods slowly. “I get that. I feel that, too.” My heart begins to sink in tiny increments, but then he says, “But we deserve to be happy, too. Lily loves both of us. She wants both of us to be happy. Even though she might not exactly love the idea of us, she should be able to accept it, even if she doesn’t like it.”

I don’t want my best friend to just accept us as a couple. I want her to be happy for me and for Alex. I want her to root for us like we’re rooting for her and Marcus. I want the four of us to be able to spend time together like we did tonight. I don’t want her to feel icky every time she’s around us.

“I don’t want her to decide to accept us from a distance. What if she never wants to see us together and will only see us

separately? I'd hate that, and so would you. It would divide us. We can't be a happy family like that, and that's what I really want."

That's all I want. *My family*. Happy and together.

"That's what I want, too."

My chest constricts with worry. "What if she gets so upset about us being together that she never wants to see me again at all? Or you? What if she doesn't want you to see Brian anymore? I don't know if I can live with that. Not just losing her, but also knowing I had a hand in destroying your relationship with her? I'd be devastated, Alex." I shake my head sadly. "I don't know what to think. It might just be an impossible situation."

"I don't want to believe that." His rough fingers tense in mine. "I just don't know how she's going to react. What do you want to do? Go back to being just friends?"

Shock and fear snap my head in his direction, whipping my hair around. "No. I-I don't want to lose you. Is that what you want? To be friends? I—"

I have to stop myself from saying anything else. I'm afraid if I say how I really feel—that I feel like I was born in love with him and can't imagine life without him. How I've never been able to feel anything at all for any other guy. That every single thought of my future includes him. That I'll sound unhinged *again*.

We pull into the driveway and he kills the engine. We sit in the dark for a few minutes with the sound of the car settling, filling the silence between us with its little dings and whirs.

His suddenly gruff voice startles me. "Penny, I'm not sure what the right thing to do is. This is gonna sound crazy, but I don't even fucking care anymore. I feel like right from the beginning we've had this weird unspoken connection. I don't even remember falling in love with you, but I did, in some quiet, slow way. Like with every breath I've taken since I met you, our hearts were growing together. Even while you were in California, it didn't waver. Not for a fucking minute. I didn't

tell you this, but Mikey tried to set me up with some girls. I went and talked to them at the bar so he'd leave me the hell alone, but I couldn't feel a fucking thing." He lets out a short laugh. "Actually, wait, I did feel something. I felt like shit. I felt like I was cheating on you. I couldn't wait to get back home, read all your texts again, look at your picture, and just wait." He takes a deep breath, as if he's relieved. "Because I've always known...I've always felt it in my fucking gut, that if I just wait, we're going to be together, we're going to be happy, and everything will finally be right."

My heartbeat vibrates in my ears. "Alex," I whisper. "I've always felt that way, too."

He shifts his body in the seat to face me, still holding on to my hand. "I've been wanting to say all this for a long time, but I always end up saying fragments of what I feel. I've been scared of saying too much, because you're so much younger than me. And because you're Lily's friend, and I'm afraid I'm going to scare you."

I stare into his eyes in the dim light. "You don't scare me, Alex. You've never scared me." I wish I could go back and erase that night I had a meltdown out in the barn. I've totally given him PTSD.

His voice softens and calms, and it feels like a caress, lulling my racing heart. "I don't know what it is, Penny. I don't know if we're soul mates, or twin flames, or whatever magical cupid-ass thing that pairs people together, but you're wrapped in my heart. You're threaded under my skin. I don't ever want anyone else, and I don't want to be friends. I just want *you*. I want to hold you, kiss you, make art with you, talk to you for hours, say nothing with you for hours, see you smile, wipe your tears, and live and die loving you. I know that all sounds crazy since we've never even had a real fucking date, but that's how I feel and I'm tired of trying to make sense of it. And as much as I love Lily and want to make her happy, I don't think I can live without you. At least not in any way that will even remotely fucking resemble happiness. *You* fill the void in my soul and in my heart."

My heart feels like it's going to burst. I've been waiting forever to hear all the words of his heart, and now I have them, and they're perfect. I let out a small, nervous laugh as I take some breaths and try to process it all. "I think that's the most you've ever said to me at one time."

He laughs, too. "I think you're right. I feel like I just ran a verbal marathon. But it feels good."

I reach up and touch his cheek, wanting to memorize his smile in this moment because he looks so, *so* happy.

"Thank you for telling me how you feel," I say softly, watching my fingers tremble near his lips. I ache to touch them, but hold myself back. "I feel the exact same way. I always have. I've been irresistibly drawn to you, like a little unstoppable magnet, for as far back as I can remember. I've always known that you're my guy, you're my love."

Capturing my hand, he brings it to his smiling lips for a kiss. "I love hearing you say that. You have no idea how much."

I do. Because I know that for most of his life, Alex believed he wasn't worthy of love. I want the chance to make him feel loved every single day, without hiding it from the world.

With careful thought, I say, "I think we should let Lily enjoy her engagement for a little while before we tell her about us. Just in case it does upset her and sends her off the rails. I don't want her to think back to her engagement and have it associated with something that upset her."

He nods and blows out a breath. "You're right. But we can't put it off for long, that'll just make it worse. And what about your parents? We have to tell them, too."

My stomach sinks, taking a chunk of my happiness with it. I hadn't even thought of my parents. "I'm really not sure what they'll say. Things between my mom and I are a little better. I feel like she'd be accepting of it as long as I'm happy. As far as my dad," I shrug. "Who knows? He's so wrapped up in his

work all the time, I don't think he has the energy or time to worry about my relationships."

"I don't think that's true, Penny. He's your father, he loves you."

"I know, but there's always been a wall between us. We've never been close. He's always treated me like I'm someone renting a room in their house."

"That can change. Look at me and Lily."

I won't hold my breath for any monumental changes between me and my father. "Maybe, someday..."

Gently pushing my hair over my shoulder, he leans in to plant a kiss just below my ear and says, "It's a beautiful night. Let's go sit under the stars for a while. It's my favorite place to be with you."

His breath against my ear sends a delicious shiver up my spine. "I'd love that. I'm just going to run inside real quick and use the bathroom. I'll bring Shadow out with me."

"I'll meet you out back. Maybe grab some of the candles."

Before I can reach for the door, he pulls me back and cups my cheeks in his hands.

"I love you, Penny Rose," he whispers. "I feel like I've been waiting forever to say it to your face."

My heart skips, stealing my breath. It *has* felt like forever.

"I love you, too," I whisper back

Chapter 46



ALEX

I walk toward the lake with a lightness in my soul I haven't felt in years. I couldn't be happier for Lily. She has what I've always hoped she'd have—someone who adores her and who treats Brian like his own son.

Seeing Marcus and Lily excited about starting their life together gave me a much-needed kick in the ass. For so long, wrestling with my grief over Bri and the loss of Lily as a baby, struggling to stay sober, and then fighting my feelings for Penny, has felt like a life-or-death swim against a heavy ocean current with no end in sight. It's been painful and exhausting, always leaving me on the verge of sinking and drowning in a dark abyss.

But when I think about it now, from the time she was my little gnome-like neighbor, Penny's always been there at the right time, pulling me from the water to float on a raft with her, making sure I saw the sunny shore in the distance.

She finds me on the old swing hanging from the tree limb near the lake. Wordlessly, she grabs the chains above my head and straddles me. Her thin dress rides up her thighs and I instantly feel the heat of her, pantyless, pressing against me.

I suck in a heated breath and grab her narrow waist.

A subtle shift has happened between when she left the car and when she climbed on top of me. I've seen glimpses of it in her often of the past few years. A new, sensual smokiness in her voice. A teasing glint in her eye. A sexy naughtiness that makes my blood run hot and my cock throb. Unexpected

moments of maturity beyond her years. But the thing that strikes me the most is her intimate familiarity toward me—a deep comfort that comes only with years of closeness with someone.

It's as if an invisible finger hit the fast-forward button on us, we skipped over the newness, and all the uncertainties that come with getting to know someone. But as inexplicable as that might be, I can actually feel fragments of real memories—memories of a growing closeness between us that were carved in my heart and soul. Like tiny, faded snapshots, just like the dusty photos hanging in the shed.

“Did you miss me?” she whispers with her face inches above mine. Her hair caresses my cheeks.

“Incredibly.”

I run a hand slowly up the ridges of her spine to cup the back of her neck, pulling her down to my lips. Our tongues and breath meet, infused with traces of spicy sweet cinnamon. Her hands slide link by link down the chains, and then they're threading through my hair. Her nails give me goose bumps as they graze over my scalp.

She kisses me with trembling lips. Or maybe mine are trembling. All I know is it feels like I've been waiting a hundred lifetimes to kiss her, and the fear that the universe will sense my happiness and snatch her from my arms is almost paralyzing. But still, I can't resist slipping the straps of her dress down over her shoulders. The warm breeze kisses her skin, and so do I, moving my lips to the slope of her neck. When my teeth nip at the soft spot below her ear, she lets out a small gasp, tilting her head back. I suck her flesh hard enough to leave a mark, then trail kisses to her collarbone, pulling her dress down until her strapless lace bra chafes against my cheek. I push the fabric to uncover her breast and drag my tongue over her creamy flesh, gulping the familiar lilac scent of her. Her nipple peaks as I circle it and tug it between my lips. She bows her head over mine, letting out a little moan of ecstasy that nearly undoes me. My hand skates from her hip to her bare outer thigh, nudging her dress up higher, then traveling farther to grab a handful of her perfect ass. She cups

my face in her hands, pulling me from her breasts to kiss my mouth with a hunger that sends another surge of blood to my cock. She presses herself down against me, and I can feel her delicious throbbing through my jeans.

I'm fucking dizzy with insane want for her as I move my hand between us, met with warm, slick folds.

"Alex..." she murmurs, leaning her forehead against mine and staring down into my eyes.

I press my palm against her, applying pressure to her clit as I slide a finger into her. She grinds against my hand, her breath coming out in short gasps against my face. Her eyes never leave mine while I insert a second finger and slowly finger fuck her. A bolt of lightning flashes across the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder. Fat raindrops start to fall, but she continues to ride my hand, her hands now gripping my shoulders. I'm struck with how stunning she is. Hair wild around her face, cascading down her shoulders. Bare breasts, bouncing with every thrust, gleaming milky white in the intermittent flash of lightning. Nipples hard and tight, begging to be licked and teased. Eyes misted with love, half-shut with desire.

I've found my heaven. I have no idea what I've done to deserve her.

"Let's go inside," I breathe as the rain pelts us harder.

She shakes her head. "No..." She's breathless with my fingers deep inside her. "Let's stay here. Let's make love right here. In the rain. In the grass."

I don't need to hear that twice.

Holding on to her, I stand. She wraps her legs around me, kissing my lips and cheeks as I carry her to a spot near the tree where there're beds of soft moss and grass. When I lie her on her back, I remove her shoes then kneel between her legs. She stares up at me with a sexy smile, then gathers my shirt in her hands, tugging it up over my head.

"You should never wear a shirt again," she whispers, running her fingertips over my abs. My muscles jump from her

touch, begging for more. “I love looking at you, Fox. You’re my favorite piece of art.”

Utterly lost in her beyond any chance of return, I grin down at her. “I won’t wear one if you won’t.” I give her a quick kiss on the nose before parting her thighs farther. I lower my head and slowly taste her, moving my tongue through her folds, from her entrance to her clit. I almost come on the spot when her toned thighs tighten around my shoulders. Another crack of lightning splinters the sky as she writhes against my mouth with her hands in the damp grass at her sides, raking through the blades. Every time I feel her tensing and building to climax, I pause, moving my lips to her stomach, to her breasts—licking, sucking, and biting all her delicate and rain-drenched places. Making her wait, quivering and clenching, until she begs me to come back, digging her heels into me.

Finally, she sits up, grasps the waistband of my jeans, and pulls me toward her. She presses her lips to my wet chest as she unbuttons them and tugs the zipper down. I catch her hand in mine.

“I don’t have anything with me,” I tell her, mentally kicking my own ass for not being prepared. I haven’t needed a condom since 2006.

Droplets of rain drip down her cheeks like teardrops as she studies my face. Her tongue skims across her lips. “Can you pull out?” she murmurs in a soft, sultry tone that sends my heart into overdrive.

I touch her face, swiping the raindrops with my thumb. “Of course. Or we can wait—”

I don’t want her to feel rushed, or worried. I want it to be perfect.

Her head is shaking before I can even finish the thought. “I don’t want to wait anymore.” Her eyes—my favorite hue of green—captivate me, filling me with memories and promises. “We’ve waited long enough, haven’t we?”

My heart begins to pound, and my veins buzz as blood rushes through them.

“Yes.” I lean down and cover her lips with mine. “We have.”

I quickly lose my clothes and shoes, and I’m back in the haven of her—the only place I’ve felt alive and happy for over twenty years. With the warm rain bathing us, we’re wrapped in each other’s arms and thighs, our mouths kissing with a fervor that burns beyond just physical need. I want to devour her. Drink her. Inhale her into my soul and keep her safe and loved for eternity. I never want another second to go by without her close to me.

Her touch pulls me back from the dreamlike state her lips were lulling me into. My cock throbs against her slippery, wet palm as she glides her fingertips over my shaft. Slow and tentative at first, like a cat mesmerized with a new toy, then fisting me, wrapping her hand around me, sliding it up and down my length.

My self-control is fading fast. “If you keep doing that, I’m gonna fucking explode,” I breathe out.

“Have you really waited twenty-two years to have sex?” Awe laces through her voice as she tiptoes her fingers up and down my length.

“Let’s just say I’m in a complicated relationship with my left hand.”

She flashes me a teasing smile. “Me too.”

Leaning back against the grass, she pulls me between her open legs. I’m inside her with one swift thrust. She clings to me, letting out a muffled cry, followed by a throaty moan that drips with sated contentment. It’s the same sound I’ve heard her make when she bites into her favorite food, only this is a thousand times better because it’s me. I’m the thing she’s losing herself in, the thing she can’t get enough of, the thing she loves.

Love.

I’ve almost forgotten what physical love feels like, but I feel it now as our bodies move slowly, perfectly, together like the gears of a clock. She touches me how I love to be touched,

wrapping one leg around my waist, her other hooked around my calf. One hand is tangled in my hair, holding me, not letting my lips leave her, the other grips my ass, guiding the rhythm of my thrusts.

“Are you okay?” I ask when faint mews drift from her throat. “Is this okay?”

Smiling dreamily, she says softly, “It’s perfect. *You’re* perfect. Don’t stop.”

She’s sweet, wet, and tight. She feels like home to my body and heart. It takes every molecule of willpower I can dredge up to not explode in her when she pulls me deeper into her, arches her back, and grinds her clit against my cock. I watch her eyes glaze over and drift closed. Her walls clench around me like a vise, and then she’s shuddering beneath me. Her beautiful face is illuminated blue by a sudden burst of lightning. Just as the thunder cracks and booms around us, I pull out. She’s right there, slipping her hand between us to wrap her fingers around my shaft as cum jets onto her stomach.

Feeling like I might pass out from euphoria, I lean down and kiss her like I’m a dying man, and she’s the only cure. She pushes my wet hair from my face and looks up at me dreamily. “That was amazing. My arms and legs are shaking,” she says with a little laugh. “And my toes are tingling.”

I smile, falling harder. “Mine too, sweetheart.”

Her voice is brimming with exhilaration. “The storm felt so perfect, didn’t it? I could feel the thunder vibrating through our bodies. And the coolness of the rain on our hot skin... I wish I could’ve taken a picture.”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Everything was perfect. And the image of you looking so breathtakingly beautiful is burned in my mind forever. I don’t need a picture.”

Grabbing my shirt off the ground, I use it to wipe the mess off her stomach.

“You don’t have to do that,” she says. “It doesn’t bother me.”

Cupping her cheek, I pull her to me and kiss her, longer and more softly than before. I'm still waiting to wake up. Or to have her whisked away.

"I love you," I tell her when I open my eyes and she's still there. "So fucking much."

She stares at me with a soft smile, then reaches up and strokes her thumb across my lips. Her voice is quiet. Careful. "Sometimes, you smile at me a certain way and I swear it makes my heart stop. I just have this urge to touch your mouth." Her cheeks flush a beautiful pink. "I know it's weird...I know you don't like when I do it..." She trails off, blinking with uncertainty.

I swallow hard and kiss the tip of her finger. "It's not weird," I say hoarsely. "And I love it."

I must have been destined to have women fall in love with my smile.

Or maybe I'm destined to be with one romantic soul who keeps finding me...

Wrapping my arms around her, I kiss the top of her head and hold her close. The storm has passed, leaving the night damp and muggy. Shadow rises from his spot under the tree and shakes his fur, flinging tiny droplets of water onto us. Our skin is sticky with sweat, cum, and rain.

I lower my head to whisper in her ear. "How 'bout a hot shower together and a movie in bed? I want you in my arms all night."

She turns, excitement blazing in her eyes. "In *your* bed?"

"Or yours, if that makes you more comfortable."

Any bed. Or floor. Or bed of rocks. I don't care as long as I can fall asleep with her.

Staring at the sky, she says, "Do you remember that day when I was little and I wanted to sleep on your bed and live with you?"

I laugh and hug her tighter, remembering the day she cut her finger on the rose bushes. She wandered around my living

room in awe, then ended up cuddling on my bed with Cherry, insisting she'd picked out the blanket she lay on—the same blanket that's still there. I remember how she told me she didn't want to leave.

I also remember how I really didn't want her to leave.

“I do,” I finally say.

She trails her fingers up and down my arm. “I've always wanted to be close to you, to be here with you.” Tilting her head toward me, she says, “I'd love to sleep in your bed.”

I carried her to the house straight to the shower, where we soaped each other up with body wash that made us smell like a damn bakery. After, we climbed into my bed to watch a movie, but we didn't make it past the opening credits before we were tangled up in each other under the blankets, whispering, kissing, and laughing.

As we drifted off together with her head on my chest, the past twenty-two years seemed to blur to the back of my mind like a bad dream.

Chapter 47



PENNY

Lily is moving out.

She told me two weeks ago—the day after she got engaged, to be exact. She’s moving in with Marcus, who has a cute little house across town with a beautiful, fenced-in backyard for Brian to play in. They’re going to buy a swing set and adopt a dog.

Lily’s living a dream she didn’t even know she wanted. Happiness crept up on her slowly, the way the shadows stretched across the lawn in the afternoon.

When she told me about the move, I was still coming down from the indescribable high of making love with Alex for the first time. My thoughts were consumed by him. They still are, but I’m doing my best to function, which isn’t easy. We’ve had to go back to pretending to just be friends until we tell Lily. He hides love notes in my bedroom, and we find ways to accidentally touch when we’re moving about the house. Late at night, when we’re sure Lily is asleep, he sneaks into my room to give me a long, soft kiss. Then, he’ll sit on the edge of my bed and play with my hair, twirling locks around his fingers, lightly touching my scalp. Woozy goose bumps will scatter over my skin, and I’ll drift off to sleep. He’d be gone when I woke, and I hated it.

I’m ecstatic for Lily, but also riddled with guilt. I hate keeping secrets. But as we get closer and closer to her move date, I feel something else... an irrational sense of loss deep in my heart. Even though I know I’ll still see her and Brian all

the time, I wish I had more time with them here, in this house, with all of us together.

In the midst of all these feelings, the voice started to whisper in my mind.

You're losing your little girl.

Lily is growing up, building her future, and you're...not. You don't have anything. You're just drifting like a ghost.

Swallowing back the lump in my throat, I try to focus on the real things around me like I learned in therapy. Lily moving around her cozy kitchen in the basement, filling a large cardboard box with her kitchenware. Alex sprawled on the living room floor playing with Brian, attempting to keep him occupied while Lily and I pack her things. I catch him leaning over to retrieve a toy that's out of Brian's reach, and the sight of his arm muscles flexing brings back memories of those arms wrapped around me. I wish he was hugging me right now, chasing the voice and the melancholy away—

“Penny?”

Flushing, I turn to Lily. She's meticulously wrapping glasses in bubble wrap. The corners of her eyes squint as she shoots me a glance. “Are you okay? You look a million miles away.”

I smile. “I was just wondering... doesn't Marcus have drinking glasses at his house?” It's a silly question, but I just need to hear my own voice.

“He only has three. I totally need to debachelorize his place. I have a set of eight.” She hands me a vase. “Can you wrap this for me?”

My hand shakes slightly as I take it from her. The handmade ceramic vase with the amber-ombré design used to sit on the upstairs kitchen windowsill, filled with wildflowers from the yard. Without having to turn it over, I know the initials BF are engraved on the bottom.

“You're taking this?” I hope she doesn't notice the tremor in my voice.

She nods. “Isn’t it pretty? I think I’ll put it in Marcus’s dining room.”

Alex’s playful voice comes from the living room. “It’s *your* dining room, too. You’re going to be married and living together now. So there’s no *his* this and *yours* that.”

Lily laughs and rolls her eyes. “*Our* dining room. Is that better?”

Alex looks satisfied. “Much.” He throws me an amused smile.

I carefully wrap the vase in a layer of torn brown paper bag, then reach for the bubble wrap.

But I can’t get my hands to wrap it any further.

Clearing my throat, I say. “Lily... this vase is really old. Why don’t we get you a new one? Something that matches your new dining room aesthetic.”

Her eyebrow shoots up. “Aesthetic? Have you been watching HGTV?”

I smile. “Maybe.”

“I like *that* vase. It doesn’t tip over. I think I’ll put some fake twigs and silk flowers in it.”

For some reason, that makes tears pool behind my eyes. I clutch the vase to my chest. “I think the vase should stay here. Maybe *you* should stay here, too. This is all happening so fast...”

Lily tilts her head sympathetically and comes over to hug me. “Penny... I promise this isn’t going to affect our friendship. I’ll still be coming over here. And I’ll come visit you when you find an apartment, and you can come to my house any time you want. There’s a guest bedroom, so you can sleep over.”

Embarrassment and despair roll through me in alternate waves. “I know.” I wipe at my eyes and smile. “I’m just being overly emotional.”

“It’s okay. I feel that way, too. I’m scared, nervous, and excited.”

Alex appears beside us. “You and Marcus can live here,” he suggests, and I can tell he’s only half joking. “We can avoid all this emotional drama.”

“Thanks, but that’s a hard no, Dad.”

He nods in my direction and grins. “You’re hugging vases now?”

“Lily’s taking it with her.” Reluctantly, I place it on the table. “I think I just grew attached to it. I loved seeing the flowers in it. Remember how Cherry used to sniff them?”

Alex’s lips press together as he looks at the vase. “That’s my favorite vase, kiddo. It was a gift,” he says to Lily. “Maybe that should stay here.”

Lily shakes her head with exasperation. “You guys are so weird. Fine, I won’t take it. I’ll get one at Pottery Barn.” She picks up the tape gun and closes the box filled with glasses and plates. “Actually, I have an idea I was going to talk to you about. Why doesn’t Penny move down here for a while? It’s such a cute little space.”

“Oh,” I stammer, completely taken by surprise. “I—”

When I first came back to New Hampshire, the plan was that I’d stay with Lily and Alex for a few weeks to make sure I wanted to move back here permanently. Then, I’d get a job and find a small place of my own. Marcus’s proposal and asking Lily to move in with him threw a bit of a snafu in that plan.

Lily continues. “It’ll cost you a fortune to rent an apartment in town and it’ll be even smaller than this one. You won’t charge her a lot, right, Dad?”

Alex looks equally thrown off guard by the suggestion. “I wouldn’t charge her anything.” He turns to me and smiles awkwardly, obviously just as uncomfortable as I am about continuing this we’re-just-friends facade. “You can stay here as long as you want.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Lily says excitedly. “And you can keep all my furniture. I don’t need it.”

Nodding, I force a smile to my lips that I’m sure looks completely batshit. “That’d be great.”

In a different scenario, it *would* be great. If I wasn’t in love with her father, and if an ache wasn’t feathering through my chest, cinching around my heart. The walls close in around me, and my insides begin to tremble— threatening to shatter the composure and confidence I brought with me to New Hampshire. I can almost feel a crack splintering me in half, and the voice and the memories are seeping in like an early morning fog.

What the hell is going on? This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. I’m not supposed to be living in a basement apartment in my own house, two floors from my husband. This is all wrong. All so terribly, horribly, wrong...

You’re completely fucked up, Penny. The delusions are starting again. You never should’ve gone off your meds. You’re going to lose Lily. And Alex. And Brian. And your mind.

“Lily, do you mind if I help you pack later?” I fight to keep my voice even. “I have a bad headache.”

“Of course. Now’s a good time to stop, anyway. I have to make Brian his lunch.” She gives me an empathetic look. “Can I get you anything?”

I shake my head reassuringly. “No, I’m fine. I’m just going to lie down for a few minutes.”

When I get upstairs to my little room, I sit on the bed and wrap my arms around myself, rocking slightly, afraid I’m going to hyperventilate.

This can’t be happening again. This isn’t my house. I’m not married. That vase isn’t mine. I don’t hear voices, or remember things I have no idea why I’m remembering.

I’m fine.

But I’m not.

Tears pool in my eyes and slowly trace a path down my cheeks. I hug myself tighter as my body quakes with fear.

My father was right. I shouldn't have stopped all my meds. I shouldn't have come back here. There really is something wrong with me. I—

My racing thoughts come to a slamming halt when there's a soft knock on the door.

I swallow hard and straighten my spine. "Come in."

I don't know if I want to hide or throw my arms around him when Alex steps in. He closes the door behind him and moves to lean against the small dresser across from my bed. I quickly wipe my damp cheeks with the back of my hand.

"Are you crying?" His voice is so soft and caring that it almost makes me burst into tears. "You really don't have a headache, do you?"

"No," I answer tearfully.

His gaze lingers on me. The air between us feels different, as if it's charged with nervous exhilaration, akin to balancing at the edge of a dark cliff. "I was watching you downstairs," he finally says. "You seemed really upset about that vase."

I release a short laugh and wave my hand dismissively. "I don't know why I was acting like that. It's just a vase. It's not even mine."

He cocks his head and his hair falls over his forehead, just above his eyes, making him look dark and intriguing. "Brianna made it in a pottery class she took. She gave it to me the day we moved into this house. She called it our housewarming gift. She used to put wild flowers in it almost every day, and then you started doing the exact same thing when you moved in."

I shrug as my skin prickles with nervousness. "It's a vase, that's what people do with vases. They put flowers in them."

Touching my chin, he lifts my face up, holding his fingers there, so I can't look away. His tone is low, close to a whisper. "Penny. Tell me what you were *really* feeling about the vase,

about living downstairs. I saw your face when Lily suggested that. You turned white as a fucking ghost.”

It’s all sitting on the tip of my tongue, waiting to rush out. To finally be heard. But I can’t. He’ll think I’m crazy if I tell him all the thoughts running through my head. And he’d be right.

“Alex...” My voice cracks and I have to swallow and take a breath. “I think I have to go back to California. I can’t stay here.”

“What?” His head pulls back, the word filled with shock. “Why?”

“The symptoms are coming back.”

His brows tilt together. “I’m confused. What *symptoms*, Penny? You’ve been fine, except for—”

“I’m not fine!” I yell, bursting into tears. “I’m not fine at all. The doctors were right, Alex. I’m having delusions and crazy thoughts again. I promised my parents I’d go back if they started again. To try new treatment—”

Kneeling in front of me, he takes my hands in his. “Whatever’s going on, we can figure it out together. *Here*. I don’t want you to leave.”

He blurs before the tears in my eyes. I cling to his hands, squeezing his fingers in mine as anxiety courses through me. “Something is really wrong with me, Alex. I thought I was better. I thought it was all a mistake, but I guess it’s true. Something is messed up in my brain.”

“Why do you think that?” he asks softly. “Tell me so I can understand.”

I shake my head. My bottom lip quivers uncontrollably. “I can’t...”

His eyes bore into mine. Searching. Pleading. All I want to do is love him and make him happy, but I’m responsible for all the despair and confusion I see on his face right now. It makes my chest feel like it’s filled with lead.

“You know you can tell me anything, little darlin’. I’m not gonna go anywhere. I’ll be right here with you, I promise.”

My heart palpitates, sending flutters of panic to my stomach. My chest heaves with deep breaths.

“Is it about the vase?” he urges softly.

I nod. Tears slip from my cheek and splash onto our clasped hands. A few nights ago, we were drenched in rain, but today, it’s tears.

“Just tell me what you’re thinking, Penny. Please.” Emotion makes his voice raspy. The weight in my chest begins to suffocate me.

“I think it’s mine,” I whisper in a tiny voice. “I think... *I* made the vase. I can see myself making it... like an old silent movie in my head.” Trembling, I slowly raise my eyes to meet his, and I see a flicker of something unexpected there.

It almost looks like hope.

His hands shake in mine, suddenly clammy. I wait for him to pull away and tell me to get the hell out. But instead, he lets out a long, careful breath. Then he reaches up to cup the back of my head, pulling me toward him until our foreheads touch.

“Okay,” he says quietly. “Listen to me. Will you let me help you? Can we try to figure this out together?”

“Really?” I squeak in surprise. “After hearing that, you don’t want me to go?”

“Of course not. I waited years for you to come back. I’m not letting you go.”

I shudder with a mix of relief and fear. “I’m just so scared. I don’t want to go back to California, but what if I’m losing my mind? What if I—”

“Shhh...” he soothes, gently squeezing the back of my neck. “I know you’re scared, baby. But maybe you don’t have to be. No matter what it is, we love each other, and we can get through it together, right?”

I nod rapidly, absorbing his words. “Yes. I love you with all my heart.”

I’m pulled into his arms, hugged tightly with his lips in my hair. “We’ll figure out why you feel this way, Penny. I promise. I’m not letting you go back to some fucking hospital and get fed pills again. There has to be a better way.”

Oh, how I hope he’s right. “I’m so scared something is going to happen to me. Or that I’ll lose you.”

He holds me tighter, whispering sweet words that calm my soul. When we finally part, he kisses my dried tears, pressing his lips against my cheeks, my eyes, then softly to my lips.

“Nothing is going to happen to you. And you’re never going to lose me.” He kisses the tip of my nose, like it’s a deal sealer. “In case you haven’t figured it out, I’m yours. Forever.”

Chapter 48



ALEX

I walked down to the lake with my mind reeling and my body shaking, like I just got zapped by a bolt of lightning.

There's not one part of me that believes Penny has some kind of mental disorder. But the alternative—something that's been trying to creep into my mind for a long time—is also unbelievable.

Maybe I'm the crazy one. Maybe years of grieving has made me insane.

I stare at the lake with Shadow for a long time before I gather the guts to pull my phone out of my pocket and call her.

“Hello?” she answers.

“Laura. It's Alex.”

Her silence when she hears my voice is a huge red flag waving in the wind.

Taking a breath, I say, “You asked me to call you if Penny started to act weird.” I turn to look back at the house to make sure Lily or Penny hasn't followed me out here. “She's acting weird.”

Laura Rose doesn't sound surprised as she sighs on the other end of the line. “I had a feeling she would.”

“What does that mean? Does she really have a mental illness?”

“Personally, I don't believe she does.”

That doesn't give me as much reassurance as it should. Petting Shadow, I wait for her to say more, but my patience runs out. "What do you *personally* think is going on? She's upset. She doesn't want to go back to Cali."

"Let me ask you something, Alex. Something I should've asked you a long time ago."

The serious tone of her voice sends a slither of dread up my spine. "Okay..."

"Are you in love with Penny?"

My mouth drops open. That's the last thing I expected her to ask me. I run my hand through my hair, preparing for her wrath. "I am. I tried not to be, but..." What can I say? "It didn't work. So, yeah. I'm very much in love with her."

More dead silence makes me wonder if she ended the call. She and her husband might be on the next flight out here to chop my balls up into little pieces. Not that I'd fucking blame them. I'd probably do the same if the situation were reversed.

"Laura?"

"I'm still here. I was just taking a minute to think."

As a parent, I can't even imagine what must be going through her head. "Nothing ever happened between us when she was underage. I'm sure that doesn't make you feel any better, but it's true."

"I wasn't worried about that, Alex. I could always tell you weren't that type of guy."

"What's going on with her? How can I help her?"

"Alex, I've tried again and again to talk about this with Ben as well as Penny's doctors since she was two years old. They refused to listen to me. They wouldn't see the things I was seeing. One of her doctors even suggested that I might be contributing to Penny's so-called mental illness. Everyone made me doubt my own instincts as a mother. But you... I think it's best if you see what I saw." I sit in confusion when she pauses. "There's something at our old house I want you to

pick up. I'm going to text the couple renting from us and ask them to leave it in the garage for you this afternoon."

Her bizarre crypticness only adds to my frustration and confusion. "What is it?"

"It's a box. I think it's best if I don't say anything about what's inside."

I let out a laugh. "Should I be scared? This sounds a little weird."

"I honestly don't know how you should feel. I'll text you when you can pick it up."

"And then what?"

"And then I'm going to let *you* decide what's going on with Penny because I think you're the only one who really can."



The box turns out to be an old steam trunk the size of a large suitcase. While the girls are inside, continuing to pack Lily's things, I put it on my workbench and stare at it.

"Should we open it?" I ask Shadow. He wags his curly tail and lifts his front paw.

"I'll take that as a yes."

There's no lock. Ominous smoke doesn't drift from the contents when I flip the latches and slowly lift the lid. I don't know what the hell I was expecting, but it wasn't stacks of folders and a bunch of USB drives. And six handheld can openers. Frowning, I pick up one of the folders and flip it open to see pages of children's drawings. I almost close it and toss it to the side, but then the hair on my arms and on the back of my neck stand up when I realize these aren't just random drawings. They're not of Penny and her family like most little kids draw.

There's a little white house with a fence and a barn. There are pages and pages of a man with shaggy dark hair and a

woman with long brown hair and big green eyes. In some photos, the woman has a circle drawn over her stomach, with a baby inside. Every single drawing has a red dog. The word H O M E is written in large, crooked letters across the top of several of them. Swallowing hard, I put the folder to the side and look through the others. They're all variations of the same scenes with the same people, but I can see the progression in her drawing talent. The details become more vivid and realistic. A chill shimmies up my spine when I see some of the figures labeled in small cursive writing. Alex. Me. Baby Lily. Cherry.

What the fuck.

What. The. Fuck.

My entire body is shaking like a leaf when I shove one of the USB drives into my old, dusty laptop. The file manager shows a list of video icons, and I click on the first one. A video starts, showing Penny at about two years old. She's sitting by a window in what appears to be a child's bedroom. She's sobbing and clutching a plush fox toy.

Laura's voice comes through the speakers.

"Penny, tell Mommy what's wrong."

"I want to go home now."

"This is your home. With me and Daddy."

"You're not my mommy and daddy. And you can't keep me here."

"We are your mommy and daddy. We love you very much. This is your room."

Penny glares at the camera and hugs the toy tighter to her chest. "It's not. This is a baby room. I have a house with a beautiful red couch. And a lake with flowers. I hate this house. It's cookie cutter. I'd never live here."

I can't help but laugh, despite the shock thrumming through my veins. She can't be more than two...how can she be talking like that? And with so much emotion.

I click to another video where Penny appears a little bit older. This time, she's sitting at their kitchen table.

"Penny, why do you keep sneaking out of the house?" Laura's voice asks.

"I'm not sneaking out. I just open the front door and leave."

"But why? Where are you trying to go?"

"I told you. To my real house."

"And where is that?"

Penny frowns in frustration. "I don't know. I just know it's not far. That's why I chose you to be my next mommy. Because you live by my house."

"I'm your only mommy, Penny."

Penny slams her little hand onto the table. "Stop calling me that! That's not my name."

"What do you think your name is?"

"It's Brianna."

"Your name is not Brianna. Your name is Penny Rose. You have to stop making up stories, and you have to stop running out of the house at night. You could get hurt, or lost."

"I'm not making it up!" Penny screams, kicking her feet. "My name is Brianna!"

My heart pounds against my rib cage.

This can't be real. This can't be real.

My hand shakes as I click another video and wait for it to play. This one shows Penny drawing at a small desk in her room.

"Who are you drawing today, Penny?" Laura asks.

Penny doesn't look up from her drawing. "My family."

"Can you tell me their names?"

Smiling, Penny points to the figures on the paper. "This is my husband, and this is me, and this is Baby Lily, and this is

Cherry Pop.”

“I see. And where are these people?”

“They’re at home waiting for me to come back.”

“What will they do until then?”

Penny is very matter of fact. “He’ll make art. That’s what he does. And Cherry will sit on the porch with her ball, because she likes me to throw it.”

“What will you do when you go back there?”

“Love them, of course. And I’m going to be an artist and photographer.”

“That sounds wonderful. And why do you keep taking things out of the garbage?”

“Because he needs them for his work. I especially like the can openers. They’re special.”

“Can you tell Mommy how old you are, Penny?”

“I’m four for now, but I was twenty-one.”

“And what happened to you when you were twenty-one?”

Penny sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. A tear puddles in her eye and slips down her cheek. “I don’t want to talk about that. It’s a bad thing.” Her voice is solemn, riddled with sadness, as she touches her temple.

I slam the laptop lid shut and begin to pace the room.

My head is spinning so bad I feel like I might throw up. Everything I just saw is crazy. Unbelievable. Bizarre as fuck.

But I can’t deny any of it. It’s all there, on paper and caught on video. A real little kid drawing my life. Talking about my wife. Knowing things she couldn’t possibly know.

I shudder when I realize that I think I’ve always known deep in my gut. I felt it. I felt Brianna’s presence in Penny, but I dismissed it. Buried it. Denied it. Because I could never let myself consider—or even say—the only explanation that’s been staring me in the face for years.

Reincarnation.

It sounds insane. A cheesy plot point.

But what other answer is there to explain Penny's behavior? When she started the drawings and talking about her life, she was too young to make up stories. Let alone know how to manipulate people. Her vocabulary in the videos is way beyond what her age should be.

I dig out the old pack of cigarettes that's been in my toolbox for years and light one up. I can't calm my mind down. It's racing with memories of Penny and all our talks. How I felt an instant connection to her when she was only six fucking years old. The strange buzzing that zips through me whenever I'm near her—what the hell is that?

The cigarette wafts smoke up into my face as I go back to the laptop and bang on the keys, typing *signs of reincarnation* and *real stories of reincarnation* into the search bar. I spend hours reading every article and watching every video. I scribble a list of common signs in my notebook.

Children talking about their death

Children looking for their homes and relatives

Children speaking in great detail about their past life

Nightmares

Birthmarks in places of trauma that caused death

My blood goes cold every time I read over that last line. Penny has that big, star-shaped birthmark on her temple. She's always touching it and trying to cover it up. Nervous adrenaline accelerates my pulse as I pick up my phone and call Kelley.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey. Where you at?"

"Um...." He pauses, and I wonder what it's like to have to think about where you are. "Vegas. We're doing a show here tomorrow."

"Wow. That's wild."

I can hear the smile in his voice. "Yeah, it's pretty cool."

“I got a question for you.”

“Alright. I’m listening.”

I rub my hand across my face. “When you saw Bri at the accident, did you see which side of her head was bleeding?”

“Jesus, Alex. I thought we agreed we were never gonna talk about this?”

We did. And we haven’t. “I know, but it’s important.”

“Why are you doing this to yourself again? You gotta let it go—”

“Kel, just answer me. I’m not sitting here fucked up. I just need to know which side of her head got hurt.”

He lets out a ragged sigh. “Lemme think for a minute. I just woke the fuck up.” I stare at the crayon drawing of Cherry while I wait for him. “It was her left. It was bad.”

I close my eyes against the pain for a long moment. I knew that was going to be the answer before he even uttered a word.

“You okay, Fox?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Great, actually.”

“Good. I’ll call you in a few days.”

“Talk soon. And Kelley... thanks. For being there that day, and since then.”

“Sure, man. Always.”

I glance back at my computer screen and read over the last paragraph detailing theories about why reincarnation happens. One is that the soul returns to a new life to finish unfinished goals and lessons, to have a second chance to live out their personal dreams.

It makes sense.

Bri’s life was abruptly and tragically cut short. She didn’t have the chance to pursue her goals. She never got to see her baby grow up. She didn’t get the happily ever after that she was convinced we’d have together. Our love, and our family, was the most important thing in the world to her.

We had dreams. We made promises. Bri wasn't the type to ever give up or break a promise. I know my girl, and I know she'd fight anything—even death—to come back to me and Lily.

She'd find a way to return.

Chapter 49



PENNY

The sound of his footsteps on the stairs pulls me from my book. I've been trying to read for hours, but my mind keeps veering off the page, wondering why Alex disappeared after our talk earlier and didn't return. Me, Lily, and Brian ate dinner, packed a few more things, then watched a movie—and still, Alex didn't come back into the house.

Every minute that ticked by hammered me with dread as I realized he must've changed his mind about wanting to figure things out with me. I can totally understand why. Whatever's going on with me can't be good. It kept me under a psychiatrist's care and on medication for years. Of course me having a setback would scare him off. What man would want to commit to that, not knowing if I might have a mental breakdown and start channeling his dead wife at any moment?

Ever since earlier in Lily's apartment, I've felt on edge, waiting for another strange, inexplicable emotion, thought, or vision to pop up out of nowhere. This must be what it feels like to slowly lose your mind. Not knowing what's real. Having uninvited thoughts waltz through your mind at any given time.

I peer over the top of my book to see him standing in my doorway, just watching me.

“Alex?” An uncomfortable amount of time has passed with him standing there, so incredibly still and quiet. I put my book down as he steps inside and sits on the edge of my bed. “I wasn't sure you were coming back.” I swallow nervously. “Not *here*, since this is your house. To me.”

“I was on the phone with your mother.”

My stomach plunges, dragging my heart with it as if they're tethered. “Oh.” I blink at the tears wavering in my eyes. “I guess you guys decided I should go back to California, then?”

Shaking his head, he takes a deep breath. “Hell no. You're not going anywhere.” My heart stirs at the love and the absolute sureness in his voice.

“Then what did you talk about?”

He holds my face in his hands and moves his thumbs across my cheeks as he stares at me with a dreamy expression I don't think I've ever seen on his face before. It puts a nervous smile on my lips.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask.

“I...” He blinks, casts his eyes down for a moment, then lifts his gaze back to mine. “I'm just so glad you're here,” he murmurs.

I smile. “I am, too. But what about earlier... the vase...”

“There's something I want to show you. That's what I was talking to your mother about. She thinks it's time that you should see it, too.”

Apprehension has entered the room. “See what, exactly?”

Leaning forward, he kisses me softly on the lips. “It's out in my studio.” He releases my face and stands, holding his hand out to me. “Come on.” The small grin on his face diminishes some of my worry and confusion, but I still can't imagine what him and my mother could've been talking about.

I slip on shoes and a hoodie, and we head out to the barn holding hands. Shadow follows us, frolicking in the dark.

“Is it a new sculpture?” I ask as he opens the door.

“No.”

I shove my hands in my sweatshirt pocket while he turns the lights on. Nothing interesting jumps to my attention, everything is in its usual place. I'm half expecting my mother

to pop out of the storage room to tell me she's decided to move back here to keep an eye on me.

"Come here." There's a vulnerable nervousness in his voice that tugs at my heart. When I reach him, he takes my hand, lacing our fingers together.

"I'm starting to get a little freaked out," I say. "What did —" My eyes land on the old trunk sitting on his workbench, which I'm sure is the one that sat in the corner of my parents' basement for years. I always thought my mom stored holiday wrapping paper and bows in it. My head tilts with confusion. "Is that my mom's trunk? What's that doing here?"

"I don't know how to start talking about this. I think you just have to do what I did; just look at everything."

I squint my eyes at him questioningly before opening the trunk, and my heart immediately springs up into my throat when I see the drawings. I sift through them slowly with trembling fingers. A few of them I remember, but not all of them. I had no idea I'd drawn so many. There must be hundreds of them. The earliest in crayon, which then graduated to colored pencils. But the details of the subjects in all of them is undeniable. It's Alex, Brianna, Lily, and Cherry. It's Alex's barn and his house.

I drew all of it. Over and over and over.

"Alex..." I breathe, but I can't form any other words. My heart is beating too hard, my mind is whirling too fast. "I don't..."

His hands rest on my shoulders from behind me, gently squeezing. "Are you okay?" he asks softly.

I nod.

"There're videos of you as a child, too, if you want to see them."

Swallowing hard, I nod again. I need to see it all.

He reaches around me to his laptop and clicks an icon. A video begins to play, and I watch childhood me. My heart hammers, and tears stream down my cheeks. When it ends, I

play the next one. Memories that were hiding in the dusty corners of my mind flood back. I'd forgotten so much of this, but now I remember. The homesickness, my mother's countless questions, the frustration that would build in me to the point of inconsolable tears. I wanted her to believe me so bad. I wanted to know why I always felt so lost and so out of place.

Now I know.

Over an hour passes of us silently watching the videos before I shut the lid of the laptop. "I can't watch anymore," I whisper hoarsely.

He hugs me from behind, resting his chin on my shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Yes..." I reach up to clasp my hands around his strong arms over my chest. "No...I don't know. I think I am."

I'm so overwhelmed that my mind feels numb, as if it took in too much, too fast, and then stalled. I turn in his arms and stare up at him. He's breathing heavily, just as I am.

"Wh-what does this mean?" My voice is shaky and sounds far away in my head.

He takes each of my hands in his. "I think it means whatever *you* believe it means."

A long breath shudders through my lungs. "I've been thinking things, and feeling things, and remembering things, and feeling so damn confused for my entire life. I used to believe it when I was a little girl. I was so sure, Alex. I knew who I was, and I remembered you." Hot tears slip down my cheeks. "And I was told it was wrong, that it was a dream... I was told not to talk about it. I was told it was all a fantasy I made up." I suck in a breath. "The closer I got to you, it was like it was all trying to come out. I don't even know how to explain it, but I was fighting so hard to get back. To me. To you. To Cherry and Lily. To our home. They made me believe I was going insane, that I didn't exist." I sob, shaking my head. "You saw the videos, I was just a little girl and I was so sad, and so adamant about being in the wrong place."

“I saw. It broke my fucking heart.”

“I wish my mother had shown me this years ago. It would’ve changed everything.”

He gently pulls me against his chest and strokes my hair. “It’s okay.” His deep voice soothes me. “Everything is going to be okay now.”

Is it? Can we really accept this—something so unbelievable? Can *he*?

I cling to him, feeling light-headed. My knees are weak with a myriad of jumbled emotions. “What does this mean to you, Alex? I have to know what you’re thinking.”

Staring down at me, he wipes my cheeks with the back of his fingers. All I see is love in his eyes. Not one shred of doubt. Emotion is raw in his voice when he finally speaks. “This is all so fucking surreal, I can’t make any sense out of it. I’m not sure what to think. But what I *do* know, no matter what, is that I’m in love with this beautiful soul in front of me. I always have been. I always will be. I don’t need proof or an explanation. I don’t care about anything except you and our happiness. I just need you. I need us.”

I go up on my tiptoes and kiss his lips, feeling as if a weight inside me is slowly liquefying and seeping into the floor beneath my feet.

“I love you,” I whisper against his lips. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.”

I bury my face in his chest, needing to be close to him and hear his heartbeat. His warm hands gently rub circles over my back, easing the worry and sorrow from me. When my breathing has calmed and the light-headedness has passed, I turn and close the lid of the trunk. “I can’t believe my mother had all of this for so long and never showed me. She just let me be confused and end up in that hospital. How could she do that?”

“I think she was scared and confused herself. When I talked to her, she really sounded as if she’s been battling

what's been happening with you for a long time. But it's like she was being brainwashed herself by your father and the doctors to believe that you were delusional. No one would believe her." I give him a skeptical look. "She admitted that's why she always let you come over here to see me and Cherry. She believed you, she just didn't know what to do about it. She felt scared and helpless."

I let out a sigh. "I don't know what to think. But I can't deal with my feelings about her right now. I need to process all of this first. My head is spinning."

He nods with understanding. "You take all the time you need. It's a lot for you to think about."

I smile and lean my head on his shoulder, wrapping my arms around him. All I want is to be close to him, and let this new, completely odd reality sink in. It's all so unbelievable and incredible. "Thank you for showing me the trunk, Alex. I don't know what to think, or how to explain it, but I suddenly feel such a massive sense of relief now."

His lips brush across my forehead. "You've been fighting a battle inside yourself for a long time. I'm sure it mentally exhausted you. Now you have an explanation."

I eye the trunk, feeling heartbroken for the confused little girl haunted by a life she loved and so desperately wanted to go back to and couldn't have. "Can we just put this stuff away somewhere?" I ask. "I'm not sure I ever want to see it or talk about it again."

He nods. "I'll put it in the attic. If you ever want it, you'll know exactly where it is." He studies me, worry in the lines of his face. "I want you to be okay, Penny. I want you to be happy and know how much I love you."

"I think I'm in a sort of shock. Can this be real, Alex?"

He leans back against his bench and crosses his muscular arms. "I asked myself the same thing, Penny. I was out here for hours today, watching these videos and looking at your drawings. I researched everything I could find on possible reincarnation."

Reincarnation. The word makes me shiver. “And?”

I need him to believe it with me. I love that he loves me, that he doesn't care if somehow I was Brianna in a former life or not. But I still want so badly for him to believe it; to feel it in his soul, like I do.

Nodding slowly, he says in a low voice, “Yes. I think it's real. I felt it for a long time, just like you did. I saw the signs—the things you knew, the way you talked, all your mannerisms. That little nose scrunch you do. I felt the pull to you. The familiarity. The closeness. I kept trying to deny it, because of your age, and because it was fucking crazy. I thought it was just grief playing tricks on me. But I felt it in my heart, and in my bones, the moment you showed up that day. I think my soul recognized you.”

Tears of relief and happiness brim in my eyes, and my heart feels like it might explode into tiny heart-shaped confetti. “I was so happy I finally found you.”

His dark, intense eyes latch on to mine. “I was, too, little darlin'.” He pulls me to him for a long kiss, his hand caressing my cheek as his tongue delves into my mouth. I wrap my arms around his neck, my body melting into his, never wanting to let him go.

My love.

My home.

“You're not moving into the basement,” he says when we come up for air. “In fact, I want to tell Lily tomorrow that we're together.”

My breath catches with surprise. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I don't want to hide our feelings anymore. I can't stand the lies and the secrecy. I can't stand being away from you.”

“She might be mad...”

“We'll work it out,” he assures me.

I swallow hard. “I don't want anyone to know about... the other thing.” I can't even say the word. I might not ever be

able to. “About me. Can that just be between us and my mother?”

“Of course. No one else has to know.”

I don’t think anyone else would ever believe it, even if I did want to tell them. Although, I might tell Londyn someday. She’d definitely believe me.

Alex brushes my hair from my face and lifts my chin. All I can keep thinking is, *This is my husband. The man I’ve loved through two lives. Who has loved me the same. Who waited for me without faltering. In every way.*

“This is your home, Penny. I don’t want you to ever leave. And ya know what? I think you’ll feel better now. If you have thoughts, memories, or feelings about certain objects or about me or Lily, you won’t feel scared and confused anymore. Now you know why. You have a connection to those things. Those are your memories and emotions coming through. And they don’t have to be scary. You’re allowed to let them in, let them be yours. Embrace them.”

God, I hope he’s right and the strange emotional episodes will stop completely. “Alex...” My voice shakes with overwhelming emotion. “I don’t even know how to tell you how grateful I am for you, and how lucky I am to have you. I could never get through this without you.”

He leans down to look into my eyes. “I vowed to love you and be by your side forever. I meant it.”

I smile and kiss him. “Speaking of vows, I’m really glad the ‘til death do us part’ part was a lie.”

My heart flutters when he smiles that beautiful, sexy smile that I love so much. The one I can’t stop falling in love with. “Me too. When we get married again, we’re leaving that part out.”

Chapter 50



PENNY

Lily is staring at us with her mouth open, beautiful eyes bulging.

We're standing a few feet away from her in the living room, gripping each other's hands like a lifeline. We probably shouldn't have told her about us while we were holding hands, but I didn't realize we were until the words were already out of Alex's mouth.

Her lip curls up slightly. "I knew it. I fucking knew it!" she yells. "I saw the glances, the smiles, the fucking lipstick all over you the night she went to the hospital."

"Don't swear in front of the baby," Alex says. I think we'll be referring to Brian as *the baby* until he's driving a car.

"Dad," Lily warns, "Don't even start right now."

My heart beats faster as she paces the room, shaking her head and mumbling to herself. She's mad, but I'm not sure *how* mad. Sometimes Lily can be overdramatic. Eyes blazing, she halts in front of us and stares us down.

"You're a bitch," she says to me, then turns to her father. "And you're an asshole. How dare you both lie to me and sneak around behind my back? And how you both freaked out when I was dating an older guy! We're best friends. We're family. How do you think that makes me feel?"

I feel the sting of her words. "I'm so sorry, Lily. We didn't want to upset you," I say tearfully.

Ignoring me, she turns on Alex. “She’s half your age! In fact, she’s the exact same age as me! You literally watched her grow up, Dad. You didn’t even watch *me* grow up. What the fuck?”

“I know all that. It’s complicated and hard to explain.” Alex’s voice is distraught. “But I’m sorry we lied to you.”

She crosses her arms and chews her lip. A small vein has appeared on her forehead. “You both suck. But ya know what? I always knew there was something between you two. I literally just said to Marcus the other day that you guys would make a great couple.”

“Then why are you mad?” Alex asks.

“Because you were sneaking around behind my back. That gives me the ick.”

Oh no, not the ick. “We really did want to tell you, Lily. You’re my best friend. I tell you everything.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Except that you’re fucking my father.”

Alex’s hand tightens in mine. “Don’t say that again.”

Her petite nostrils flare. “I think I can say what I want. I really want to hate you both right now.”

I touch her arm. “Lily, please, our friendship means the world to me...” My throat tightens with fear. If we lose Lily, I’ll never forgive myself. She’s not just my best friend. And even though I can never tell her that she’s so much more, it doesn’t change my feelings for her.

She sits on the couch and puts her face in her hands, her shiny black hair falling over her like a curtain. After a few moments, she finally looks up at us.

“Okay. I’m calmer now,” she says, shaking her hair back into place. “Here’s the thing. Penny, when we were in high school, you decided we were going to be friends. For whatever reason, which I still don’t understand, you changed my life. I was in a seriously messed-up place mentally and you pulled me out of that. You gave me confidence. You made me feel

special. And you really helped me and Dad learn to get along. I love you for all of that.”

Every word drives a bittersweet ache in the center of my chest. “Lily—”

She puts her hand up. “Let me finish.” She turns to Alex. “When I got pregnant, I was scared out of my freakin’ mind. I had no idea how I was going to take care of a baby and keep him safe. But you immediately stepped up to take care of both of us. You never judged me or made me feel like I made a mistake, and you never said I told you so about Jeff, even though you were right about him being a total asshole. You’re an amazing father and grandfather. So even though I’m really pissed at both of you, you both accepted me when I needed it, so now I’m going to do the same for you. The three of us are a family, and now we have Brian and Marcus. To be honest, I just can’t picture either of you with someone else.”

My heart skips as I realize that, on some subconscious level, Lily felt the connection, too, not just between me and Alex, but between me and her.

Her acceptance has me so relieved I can’t control myself anymore. I rush across the room, pull her off the couch, and hug her. “You have no idea how much that means to us. We wanted to tell you, Lily. We were just afraid of upsetting you. Especially after you got engaged. You’re so happy.”

“I want you to be happy, too.”

After she hugs me, she puts her arm around her dad. “I’m glad you’re not going to be living here all by yourself,” she says to him. “I was worried about that.”

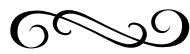
We share a smile over Lily’s shoulder. He’s beaming.

The last weight that’s been sitting in my chest melts away.

My family is together, and we’re happy.

Really, truly, happy.

Chapter 51



PENNY - SIX MONTHS LATER

A text message alert chimes from my phone as I'm walking across the parking lot to my car.

Yes, I finally have my first car. A small, white SUV that passed Alex's safety requirements.

As I buckle myself in behind the wheel, I dig my phone out of my purse and smile at the screen.

ALEX:

I miss you. When are you coming home?

I miss you, too. :-) I'm leaving work now. I'm going to stop at the café and get us some of that creamy chicken rice soup for dinner.

ALEX:

Mmm. Almost as yummy as you. :-) Hurry home, it's been nine hours and six minutes since I last kissed you.

That's way too long.

ALEX:

Damn right it is. xo

I find a parking spot at the traffic oval near the café, but I can't resist wandering into the antique store that just opened a few weeks ago. Now that Alex and I are officially living

together as a couple, I want to buy a few things to decorate the place and make it a little more mine.

A little more *new* me.

A wrought iron table lamp with a red tasseled shade catches my eye, and I put it in my basket. It'll match the living room couch and chair perfectly. I have the perfect spot for it on the end table where I keep my books. As I head to the register, my eyes land on a small metal toucan sculpture made of random metal household objects, with a can opener for a beak. I'm drawn to it like a beacon. I run my fingers over it, thinking I've never seen any other work similar to Alex's, so I have to buy it.

When I arrive home, Alex is in the kitchen with the table set. He's showered after working and is wearing one of my favorite Alex outfits—a white button-down shirt, mostly unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, and faded jeans that I love to run my hands over. Years of wear have made them thin and soft. And white socks on his feet. Something about a man in clean white socks is so attractive to me.

Before I can put the shopping bags down, he encircles my waist with his hands and backs me against the counter with a sexy grin on his face. He leans his body into the curve of mine, capturing my lips with his. We kiss soft, deep and long, like dinner isn't waiting and getting cold. I can feel him growing hard through the thin denim and can't resist pressing myself against him, slowly moving up and down over his bulge. My thighs tingle and my core clenches.

"I really missed you," he whispers, lingering at the corner of my mouth.

"And I missed you. You smell so good."

"I think that's the soup," he teases.

I laugh and close my eyes as his lips chase kisses down my neck. His hair tickles my cheek. "It's definitely you," I murmur.

Smiling, he returns to my lips. He's been on my mind all day. The image of him emerging from the shower this morning

with water glistening over his chiseled body and the way he kissed me goodbye with his hand gently and possessively on my throat has been running through my mind like a movie on repeat. I drop the shopping bags with a thud to the floor and run my hands under his shirt, my fingertips meeting with hard abs. My core flutters and heats when he groans against my mouth, and I undo the buttons of his jeans, teasingly slow. I'd mentioned a while back that I thought button-fly jeans were sexy, and he immediately tossed all his old zipper jeans and replaced them with button-downs.

I push his jeans and boxer briefs to his ankles and palm his fully erect cock. He's hot satin in my hand. Long, thick, smooth, and perfect, the tip moist as I close my fingers around him. His face tilts, kissing me deeper, his tongue sweeping mine. I watch his forehead furrow with desire in response to the tightening of my hand around him, tunneling his length.

Heart racing, I kneel in front of him, my lips already open and ready to take him in. His hands cup my cheeks as the head glides over my lips, then slams the back of my throat as I lean forward, my forehead pressing against his stomach.

"Holy fuck, baby." The low growl of his voice instantly makes my panties wet.

His cock is deliciously alive in my mouth. Pulsing with heat, growing harder and longer as I glide my lips up and down his length, pausing to suck the tip and swirl my tongue around him before swallowing him so deeply that my eyes water. He strokes my cheek with one hand, the other on the back of my head, applying gentle pressure, guiding me to suck harder, take him deeper.

"You're so fucking perfect," he murmurs in a breathless, low tone. "I'll never get enough of you."

I splay my hands over his ass, nails nearly puncturing his skin as I grip him in my hands, pulling him into my mouth. His hips thrust harder, and my core clenches with desire over the tightening of his thigh muscles. My name is a ragged moan on his lips as he shudders and releases. I swallow him, then

slowly move my mouth over his shaft, delighting in his shaky legs and his hand clutching my hair.

After a few moments, he pulls me up and crushes his lips to mine. “I love you so much,” he breathes. “You drive me wild...” He kisses me again. “You calm me.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “You make me so fucking happy.”

My heart soars. “I love you, too.”

“Your turn is after dinner.”

I can’t wait.

He pulls on his jeans, then hugs me close. I bury my face into his chest, kissing the thatch of soft hair there. We kiss once again, then part. I pick up the shopping bags and pull out the lamp.

“For the living room table,” I tell him.

He nods, a grin on his lips. “I love it. That tassel shade is very you.”

“And look what I found,” I pull out the toucan statue. “Maybe someone is copying your work, but I thought it was cute. I couldn’t leave it.”

He stares at it, a slow smile spreading across his face. “Holy shit.” He takes it from me and turns it in his hands several times. “I can’t believe you found this. After all these years...I never thought I’d see it again.”

My interest piques. “You’ve seen it before?”

He turns it over and angles the feet toward me. “Look.”

I study it quizzically, then notice two sets of initials carved into the bottom.

A.F. and B.F.

A familiar zap jolts through me, from my head to my heart, the first I’ve felt in a while.

“Alex....” I say softly. “Is this the toucan? The first one we—”

“The first sculpture we made together. You gave me the can opener.”

Warm shivers run through my body. *I remember.* This is why I kept collecting can openers when I was little. My mother kept buying cheap ones and my father would break them almost immediately, turning them too hard on cans of vegetables. I’d fish them out of the garbage and hide them in my room.

“I’m so glad it’s back home,” I say softly, touching its metal beak.

“Me too. I fucking hated that I sold it. I always regretted it.”

I kiss his cheek. “Maybe you can make another one to keep it company. We can put them together in my workspace.”

Alex has expanded my workspace in his studio from a tiny corner to a fifteen-by-fifteen area using freestanding metal partitions with cherry blossoms painted on them. He also put a beautiful vintage roll-top desk in the living room for me to write at, with a view of the lake for inspiration. I love how supportive he is and how he does whatever he can to make me feel like this is our home.

Still our home.

After dinner, we feed Lint and let her run around on the floor, then take Shadow outside and sit on the deck, listening to the frogs and crickets sing. Shadow brings us an old stick that we take turns throwing. We laugh at the funny little trot he does when he brings it back to us. When our arms grow tired and the lightning bugs dot the woods, we go inside, up to our bedroom. Alex crawls between my legs and works his magic with his tongue, not stopping until I’ve had three orgasms and beg him to stop, yanking him up to kiss me. Grinning, he props pillows against the headboard and leans back against it, putting his arm around me as I nestle against his side with my head on his chest. My favorite place—close to his heart. He reads the book from the nightstand to me. The one that was dusty, forever stuck on page two hundred and sixty-two. We started on page one.

He reads two chapters while I slowly move my fingertips over his chest, arms, and shoulders, tracing invisible shapes—mostly hearts—over his warm skin. At the end of the chapter, he places the bookmark between the pages and returns it to the nightstand. Sleep is trying to pull me under when I hear the nightstand drawer opening and closing.

His voice, soft and deep, rouses me. “I have something for you.”

My eyes snap open to find him sitting up next to me with a tiny wooden box in his hands.

I sit up, too, wide-eyed. “A present?”

I can’t get enough of the soft, sleepy huskiness in his voice. “Not really a present, but something I’d really love you to have.”

I smile. My chest is tingling with anticipation. “I can’t wait to see.”

“I didn’t make what’s inside, but I did make the box.”

I run my finger over the walnut grain. “It’s adorable.”

His long fingers flip the lid of the box up, and perched inside are two rings nestled in green moss.

My heart flutters like a hummingbird. “Alex...” I breathe.

He pulls the rings out and holds them between his fingers. “It’s a set I had made for you. One is an engagement ring. A new ruby with a halo of tiny diamonds and a diamond eternity wedding band. Rubies are meant to bring passion and protection, and diamonds represent strength and love.”

“They’re gorgeous,” I whisper, mesmerized by the gems sparkling in his fingers. “I love them.”

“You can’t wear the wedding band until we get married in the fall, but I wanted you to see how pretty they look together.”

Married. I get goose bumps thinking about it. Alex asked me to marry him just two weeks after we opened the old trunk of drawings and videos. We rarely talk about that, or the

surrealness of what it all means. We only want to focus on now. On us.

“I’m never going to take them off,” I promise. “I’ll wear the first ring you gave me on my right hand.” I still wear that promise ring every single day.

“I had words engraved in these for you.”

“Can I read them now?” I ask with excitement.

He nods, and I take the ruby engagement ring from him first. I tilt the ring in my hand to read the inscribed words.

“My darlin, my eternal love,” I read aloud, then shift my watery eyes to his. “I’m gonna cry. I love it.”

“Read the wedding band.” He hands me the thin band. When our fingers touch, the warm buzzing spreads up my arm straight to my heart.

Smiling, I squint at the inside of the band. Happiness lodges in my throat, barely letting my voice escape. “My wife, my lovely return.”

Tears streak down my cheeks. “It’s perfect,” I whisper. “I just...” I inhale a breath and smile. “I just love you so much, Alex. You, our home, our family, our life... it’s my fairy tale.” I touch his cheek and run my thumb across his lips.

He smiles under my touch and kisses my fingertip.

“I love you, little darlin’.” He leans forward, kissing my lips between each of the next three words. “Still. Again. Always.”

Epilogue



ALEX - TWO YEARS LATER

Waking up to Penny every morning is my favorite thing in the world. Seeing her next to me sleeping, so peaceful and content, with a new day for us to share, is a gift I'll never take for granted. Waking up alone, filled with emptiness, dreading the day ahead of me, is a thing of the past. Being with Penny has given me a second chance to love life again.

As she sleeps, I lightly brush her hair from her forehead. There's a tiny constellation of freckles there I've had memorized for years. I study the birthmark, something I can do only when she's unaware. It fascinates me. A scar that transcended time, death, and life. A star-shaped reminder that I lost Brianna but gained Penny. They are different, yet the same. A shared heart, a shared soul. Both of them seamlessly woven into me as far back as I can remember, as far forward as I can see.

We don't talk about it. It's one of life's mysteries that could drive us insane with endless questions and debates. There's no way to prove or disprove whether Penny was reincarnated. Yes, we have the stuff in Laura's box, which is safely hidden away in our attic. But all the proof Penny and I really need is what we've always felt in our hearts.

So, if you ask me if I believe that my wife was reincarnated, I would say yes a million times with zero doubt. I just *know*.

I kiss Penny's cheek. "I love you," I whisper and climb out of our bed, being careful not to wake her.

Shadow follows me downstairs to the kitchen, his nails tapping on the floor. He waits patiently at his dish until I fill it, then I make myself a latte with the new fancy coffee maker Lily and Marcus gave us for Christmas. It took me two weeks to figure out which buttons to press to get a fucking frothy concoction similar to the one I'd been drinking for years.

As the scent of coffee fills the air, I pull a package of sticky notes from the drawer under the island and write a note to Penny.

Good morning, my beautiful wife...

*Come see me when you're up and about so
I can kiss you.*

*Last night was incredible, you're so
fucking sweet and sexy. I still can't believe I'm
lucky enough to share life with you.*

*I love you more than a dog loves his butt
scratched.*

Me xo

I always end my notes to her with a cheesy, goofy line because it makes her giggle.

Shadow and I venture to the backyard to view the beginning of a gorgeous day. The sun is shining, birds are chirping. He watches me pick two red roses from the bushes and follows me back inside, where I put them in the amber-ombré vase on the windowsill. I stick the note to Penny's favorite teal ceramic cup and add a tea bag—the one with the little butterfly tag that sits on the rim of the cup. I place it next to the electric teakettle, then head out to the studio with my faithful fuzzy companion trotting at my side.

My current work in progress looms in the middle of the studio. It's a five-foot tall, chain-saw-carved wooden gargoyle commissioned by a local tattoo artist who lives and works out of an old Gothic church. The gargoyle will be holding a metal sign with the tattoo shop's name on it. Today, I'll be staining the statue black.

By midmorning, I'm halfway through when I sense her near me. I turn toward the barn door, and there she is—gorgeous, watching me, smiling, her red hair appearing to radiate in the backlight of the sun.

My heart leaps with relief and excitement, the same way it would if I hadn't seen her in a lifetime and she'd just returned. I've never told her, but the feeling strikes every time we're apart for more than an hour. I think there's still a part of me that expects to lose her, and I'm surprised when she returns.

Smiling, I put my brush down and wipe my hands on a rag.

“Do you really love me more than a dog loves his butt scratched?” she teases as I approach her.

“Ten times more.” I bow down to kiss her, and her lips taste of honey from her tea.

She peeks up at me from behind her hair and grabs my hand. “Good, because I need you to take me to the hospital.”

I suck in a breath. “Now? Holy shit...” I blink at her, frozen with surprise and excitement and an intense fear that's threatening to devour the first two.

Placing my hand on her stomach, she says softly, “Yes, now. I just got off the phone with Dr. Deborah. She said to head in. I texted my parents, they'll meet us there later.”

My heart is pounding. “She's really coming? Are you okay?” I rub my hand gently across her stomach. “Is she—”

Penny kisses my cheek, then lingers close to me. “We're both fine. Take a deep breath, sweetheart. We're all okay. I promise.”

I do as she says, pulling air into my lungs. “Okay.” I force an exhale and smile, trying to get my shit together. “Let's go

have ourselves a baby.”

Déjà vu creeps up my spine as I get Penny settled in the SUV, then run inside to get her overnight bag that’s been in the corner of the living room for weeks. Shadow stands by the front door with his ball in his mouth, his ears alert and twitching, sensing my excitement.

“We’ll be back soon,” I say, stroking his head. “And you’ll get to meet baby Juni.”

His dark eyes follow me, and his fluffy tail wags furiously as I lock the front door behind me. I rush to the car, and throw the bag in the back next to the baby car seat that I installed last month. Just to be sure it wasn’t forgotten. To make sure its absence didn’t somehow spawn a premonition.

“Are you okay?” I ask breathlessly when I get behind the wheel. “I didn’t forget anything—” This time, I’ll do everything right. I won’t fuck up. I won’t lose them.

She grabs my hand before I start the car and pulls it to her chest, placing it over her heart. “Alex,” she says softly. “I’m great. Juni is great. You’re the best, most amazing husband, and you’re going to be the most perfect, amazing daddy to our baby girl every single day of her life.”

I nod, my throat too tight to speak. Fear and grief. They never really go away. They root inside us like thin vines wound around our hearts and our minds, tightening at just the right moments to remind us that they’re still very much there, not letting go.

“I love you,” Penny whispers, her eyes so soft and mossy green, soothing my soul. “You won’t lose us. I promise you.”

“Thank you.” I lean across the car and press my lips softly to hers. “You’re my light, little darlin’.”

The sun shines on us from a cloudless sky as we drive the winding road to town. Holding hands, we drive past that horrible place where the guardrail has a seam that doesn’t quite match, where down below is a rock stained with our past, where a red cardinal nests.

Smiling, we make it to the hospital parking lot, where we're met by Lily, Marcus, and Kelley, who plant Penny in a wheelchair and usher us inside.

Five hours later, we bring Juni Fox into the world. I hold her tiny, delicate body in my hands. I watch her let out her first cry. I kiss her beautiful little head and whisper to her a million promises that I'll never break. I carry Juni to my wife and gently place her in her mother's arms. Tears of happiness slip down Penny's pink cheeks, and I kiss her softly as we stare down at our baby with her porcelain skin and fuzzy red hair.

"She looks like you," I say quietly. "She's the cutest thing I've ever seen."

"She's adorable," Penny breathes, stroking Juni's cheek. "I'm so in love with her. And with you." She looks up at me, her eyes swimming with so much love and happiness that I want to fall to my knees and thank the universe. "Alex... we waited so long for this. We finally have what we always dreamed of...we have Lily, and now we have Juni." She reaches up and brushes her thumb across my lips. "And look at your smile. I've never seen you look so happy."

Touching her cheek, I kiss her long and soft, with our baby falling asleep between us. They are safe. They are mine. "I've never been this happy."

I didn't think this level of happiness existed. But love prevailed.

The next day, we bring Juni home. Shadow sniffs her and immediately becomes her best friend, staying right by her at all times. I stand in the doorway of Lily's old bedroom, which has been turned back into a nursery. Penny has painted a mural of bunnies, chipmunks, and a red dog in a meadow of flowers. In her crib, Juni is sleeping under a mobile of twirling butterflies. She is a quiet baby with ocean eyes. I sense an old soul in her.

Down the hall, Penny is napping in our bedroom. I join her there. Without waking, she curls up against me, her face pressed over my heart. I gently stroke her hair as she sleeps.

Be careful what you wish for. Make it count.
Because you just might get it.

about carian cole

Carian Cole has a passion for the bad boys, those covered in tattoos, sexy smirks, ripped jeans, fast cars, motorcycles and of course, the sweet girls who try to tame them and win their hearts.

Born and raised a Jersey girl, Carian resides in beautiful New Hampshire with her husband and their multitude of furry pets. She spends most of her time writing, reading, vacuuming, and snuggling under soft blankets. Carian loves to hear from readers and interacts daily on her social media accounts.



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