

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The man is wearing a dark blue baseball cap and a dark t-shirt, and is holding a fire hose. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a dark blue top. They are standing in front of a red fire truck. The background is a fire station with various equipment visible. The title text is overlaid on the image.

THE ONE WHO
*Promised
Forever*

TARA GRACE
ERICSON

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To my parents, on their 40th anniversary.

*Thanks for showing me God's vision for sacrificial love and
enduring marriage.*

“I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten...You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.”

JOEL 2:25-26

CHAPTER

One

REBECCA WELLS

Technically, I wasn't crashing the wedding. The invitation had been addressed to both of us. Just because my husband had moved out on me and my boys didn't mean I couldn't come.

I stood anxiously at the edge of the barn, scanning the large space for Nathan. I felt silly, a bit like a little girl playing dress-up. I'd curled my hair, dug my likely-expired makeup out from under the bathroom sink, and was wearing high heels for the first time in probably a decade.

But Nathan was here, and I was going to find him.

The groom, Bryce Storm, was a captain at the Minden Rogers Fire Department, same as my husband.

I'd always taken such pride in answering the inevitable question about what my husband did for work. Mommy and Me groups or playground meet-ups always went there eventually. And I loved seeing the admiration held for my husband due to his work.

They saw the bravery and service that came with the position.

Usually, these days I just saw the long shifts where I was essentially a single mom and the emotional baggage Nathan carried from the horrors he'd witnessed. And, of course, the times he'd chosen to be at the station instead of at home with us.

I took a deep breath, searching the room until I spotted him. Dim twinkle lights and white fabric softened the edges of the rustic barn. Flowers decorated nearly every flat surface, and the lingering scent of the buffet dinner mingled with the musky smell of sweaty men who'd been forced to wear suits in the August Indiana heat. There, through a momentary gap in the bodies on the dance floor. He was sitting alone, drink in hand.

Handsome as ever. His clean-shaven face—a requirement of the job and the face masks they wore—highlighted a strong jaw and smooth skin. Dark shadows under his eyes and a bored expression made me think he was completely disinterested in the swirling party happening around us.

I walked across the room, his eyes meeting mine as I drew closer.

When I was close enough to hear him, his words rose above the music. “What are you doing here? Where are the boys?”

I tried not to flinch at the harshness of his voice. He hadn’t been expecting me; it wasn’t that he hated me. At least, that’s what I wanted to believe.

“I’m here to see you,” I said, rolling my shoulders back, forcing a confidence I didn’t feel. “The boys are with your parents.” Nathan’s parents lived in Minden too—only about seven minutes from our house. Since he’d moved out of our home three weeks ago, he’d been living with them.

So close, but so far away.

He raised his eyebrows. I instantly knew what he was thinking. Of course I did—we’d been married for over nine years. His parents hadn’t told him they’d be babysitting, but that’s because until early this afternoon, they hadn’t known either.

I hadn’t planned to come here tonight. It was humiliating enough that everyone in town knew about our situation. But he and I needed to talk, and he’d been avoiding me, other than the bare minimum contact. I was done with sitting in my dark house, feeling sorry for myself. I needed answers. And a chance to convince him not to make the biggest mistake of his life.

The music transitioned from the upbeat group dance song to a slower ballad as the DJ invited everyone to find a partner.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s dance.” I held out my hand, holding my breath and praying that he’d accept it. If he rejected me here in front of everyone, I didn’t know if I could

take it. I thought I'd been broken three weeks ago when he moved out, but I'd been managing. I surprised myself with this ability to just keep moving, despite the tears that never seemed to stop and the questions that never stopped looping through my mind.

He stood, my heart catching at the full sight of my husband in a suit and tie. He was so handsome, it almost hurt. He wasn't the same eighteen-year-old boy I'd married. He was taller and broader. His lanky frame was now corded with muscles honed day after day in the gym and on the truck, pulling hose lines.

He took my hand and led me to the dance floor. Stepping into his arms was as natural as breathing, like slipping into a favorite T-shirt. Despite the way my heart seemed to feel hollow after the last three weeks, physically, my body knew his. It was our hearts that were strangers. We'd barely talked since he moved out. Text messages were the extent of it, and they were nothing more than logistics about him seeing the kids.

At least he hadn't been lying about staying involved with them.

"You look beautiful," he said, his voice no more than a whisper in my ear as we danced.

My heart swelled with hope. It had been months since he'd complimented my appearance. Maybe he wasn't as unaffected as I thought. "Thank you."

"You really shouldn't have come tonight."

I looked up at him, my eyes trailing the skin of his sharp jawline. I'd spent all week building up the courage to come to the wedding tonight, thinking about what I would say when I had him essentially trapped.

But now, all those carefully planned statements about the mistake he'd made and my anger about how unfairly he'd treated me disappeared.

In their place, I could only manage one question, my courage to do any more than that was failing, crumbling to the

dance floor along with my resolve to stay emotionless. “Why?” I choked out through the tightness in my chest and throat. My voice cracked on the word, and I hated myself for showing that weakness. I had to be tough. It was the only way to survive this.

There were a thousand questions in that one word. I wasn’t asking about tonight, and he knew it. Nathan’s gaze softened. “Come on, Rebecca. You know why.” His voice was gentle though his words cut sharply.

I shook my head, denying his assertion that I knew. That I could possibly understand how he could turn his back on our family.

Well, I corrected myself. Not our family. Just me.

That was the devastating, spiraling dark truth that had been consuming me for three weeks. Nathan had left *me*.

I’d given up everything for him. Foregone college when we got pregnant as barely more than kids ourselves. My body, my hobbies, my dreams. I’d set aside all of it to be his wife and to mother his children.

“How can you say that? I don’t *know* anything. You’re my husband,” I said through the gasping breaths that I knew meant I was on the verge of a panic attack.

“Not for long,” he said quietly.

“How could you walk away from that?” It wasn’t until after I had spoken that I registered what he said.

Sparks danced around the edges of my vision and the sound of the music grew strangely muffled. I barely noticed as he led me off the dance floor, quickly finding a side exit I’m not sure I’d even seen. He lowered me to a wooden bench that ran along the exterior wall of the barn, gently pushing my head until it was lowered between my knees.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Tell me five things you can see.”

I shook my head, rebelling against the way he was *managing* me. Like I was some stranger who had called 911. “I’m okay,” I insisted, though I knew it was a lie. What was

one more lie between us? Add it to the mountain of “I’m fine” responses from me and “I love you’s” from him.

Lies.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. My heart still raced, but at least the air seemed to actually fill my lungs this time.

“Tell me,” I said, my elbows were on my knees, my head still lowered. “Tell me why you’re doing this. I have to know. Until then..” I paused, not sure what I was going to say. “I’ll never be able to move on,” I finished, glancing up at him. It wasn’t exactly accurate. The truth was I’d never be able to move on. I’d known when I was seventeen years old that Nathan Wells was it for me.

His brown eyes studied me, searching for something. Finally, he leaned back against the wall. “Rebecca, we haven’t been happy for a while. We both know that. It was time to call it and give us both a chance to live a better life.”

A better life.

The phrase echoed in my mind, swirling with possibilities. Our family was everything I ever wanted. But it wasn’t enough for him. “Is there someone else?”

I saw the anger flash in his eyes, then it disappeared. “No. I’ve never been unfaithful. How could you think that?”

I stood up, whirling around to face him from higher ground. “Forgive me for assuming that you just might not be the man I thought you were. You’re right, you’ve never been the kind of man I would consider a cheater. But I also *never* thought you’d turn your back on me instead of fighting for our marriage.” I stepped closer to him, my finger pointed at him accusingly. “So what the heck do I know? I thought we were going to be together forever. Better or worse, remember? I sure do.”

Nathan stood, my finger brushing his chest as he did. “I remember,” he said firmly. “I remember the rest of those vows, too. To love and honor and cherish. You want to get hung up on me leaving?” His eyes were on me, unrelenting in their assessment. Frustration rolled off him in waves. “Maybe we

need to look at where we *both* failed to do the rest of it. The way I see it, I'm not the only one who gave up on this marriage. I'm just the one who refused to be nothing more than roommates anymore."

I stood planted as I watched him walk away, jerking the tie from around his neck, my mouth open in shock.

CHAPTER

Two

NATHAN WELLS (1 YEAR AGO)

The boxes were stacked near the edge of the front porch, a soft plastic package balanced on top. I don't know why the delivery person couldn't set them a little farther back, where perhaps the entire neighborhood couldn't see we had a delivery, but they didn't.

Not that anyone was going to steal things off our porch in Minden. Mrs. Moberly down the block would have the Minden Rogers Police Department over in a flash. Still, I'd rather everyone not see just how many things showed up at our doorstep every day.

Of course, if we didn't get quite so many deliveries, it wouldn't be as big of an issue. What was it this time? There were so many order confirmation emails, I barely kept track of them anymore.

With a sigh, I grabbed the packages and carried them inside. The couch called out to me from across the living room, my body desperate for sleep after the twenty-four-hour shift had stretched closer to thirty. It was already past 2 pm though. At this point, I just needed to stay awake as long as I could. Otherwise, my schedule would be out of whack for days.

“Bex?”

Had her van been outside? I wasn't sure. I barely remembered the three-block drive home from the station, and that was never a good sign. I checked my phone. There it was, a text from Rebecca from four hours ago. I winced as I read the chain of messages that I had somehow missed after the shift change.

Becca Boo: Don't forget! We're going to the children's museum in Indianapolis today. Leaving at eleven and hoping the boys will nap in the car on the way.

Becca Boo: When are you coming home?

Becca Boo: We're leaving in fifteen minutes!

Becca Boo: I guess I'll see you when we get back.

My groan split the silence of the empty house. Becca was going to be really upset. My excuses were feeble, but that didn't stop them from immediately lining up in my mind, preparing to defend me later.

I ran a hand over my face, the rough stubble of a two-day beard scraping against my palm. I typed a reply.

Nathan: Sorry I missed it, but the station was crazy.

I hesitated over the send button, then deleted the entire thing. I tried again.

Nathan: Hope you're having a good time.

Nope. I deleted that one too. It didn't sound like I was sorry at all. And I was. I'd really messed up. What else was new?

Nathan: I'm so sorry, babe. I screwed up. I hope you all have fun. I can't wait to hear all about it.

Even though I did feel like I needed to stay at the station today when Eli asked me to cover the first part of his shift, it was on me that I had totally forgotten about our plans. And I shouldn't have done it without letting Rebecca know and making sure it was okay. We probably could have pushed the trip to tomorrow, although the whole point of going today was that Friday would be less crowded than Saturday.

I waited, hoping she would reply and reassure me that it was okay. As I expected, her response—when it arrived two hours later—was rather chilly.

Becca Boo: Sorry you missed out. The boys would have loved to have you there.

Becca Boo: We're headed home. See you in a few hours.

I read her text a dozen times, wishing she'd at least sent me one of those dumb emoji pictures she used so much. A kissy face or even a sad face. The boys would have loved to

have me there. Not her though. It was probably easier for her that I wasn't.

While I waited for them to get home, I started a load of laundry and set out some hot dogs for dinner. At least I would try to make things a little easier for Rebecca tonight, since she'd been dealing with the boys on her own all day—in public. Our boys were well-behaved but also perfectly normal... which meant they often forgot their manners and their inside voices.

Rebecca would be tired and probably more than a little grumpy after handling this trip without me. Maybe we needed some time alone. It had been ages since we had a date. I sent a text to my mom.

Nathan: Can you watch the boys tomorrow night so we can have a night off?

Mom: Sorry sweetie, we're meeting up with Norm and Ruth for dinner in Greencastle. Next time?

I sent her a thumbs-up and tugged my lips to the side, capturing the inside of my cheek with my teeth. So much for that idea.

When the garage door opened, I slipped on a sweatshirt and made my way out to the car to help everyone unload. In a flash, Alex ran past me.

"Gotta pee!" he yelled as he rushed inside. I stifled my smile at the seven-year-old's antics.

I met Rebecca's eyes through the windshield. Her hair was disheveled, and I saw what looked to be a coffee stain on the front of her shirt. She raised an eyebrow at me.

"I'm sorry," I mouthed as I walked to the passenger side to get out Lincoln.

"Did you have fun, Link?" I turned my attention to the four-year-old sitting in the back seat, unable to unbuckle himself.

"We ate at Chick-Fil-A!"

I chuckled. “World-class children’s museum and we’re mostly excited about the fast food?”

Lincoln slid out from under my arm after I unbuckled him, disappearing into the house. The front door slammed and across the car, I saw Rebecca unbuckling Joey, who was rubbing his sleepy eyes. “Did it go okay?” I asked her as I grabbed toys and trash from the floorboard under his car seat, wincing at the half-eaten, crusty cheese stick I found against the base.

Rebecca ignored my question and focused her attention on Joey.

Inside, Bex glanced at the hot dogs and mac and cheese on the stove. It was a peace offering of sorts. I didn’t want her to have to cook after being gone all day.

“Did you even look at the meal plan? We need to eat the leftover soup from the other night before it goes bad.” She stirred the mac and cheese, adding a touch more milk from the gallon still sitting beside the stove. Of course, mine wasn’t quite right, was it? I leaned back against the counter, feeling defeated. “Oh. I didn’t see that. I just thought I would fix something so you didn’t—”

She turned toward me and interrupted in a weary voice. “How could you, Nate? We’ve had this planned for weeks and you just... forgot?”

“I said I was sorry.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, too. Because those boys deserved to have their father there today, and I didn’t have any answers for them. The whole time they were playing in the firehouse area, all they could talk about was how they were *just like Daddy*.”

Heat rose in my cheeks and my stomach pitched. If I could just go back and tell my little brother that today wasn’t good... But then his shift would have been short-handed, and I hadn’t wanted that. I might not have remembered our plans, but I also would still have had to cancel. I couldn’t undo the past. It wasn’t as if I wanted to miss out on the day trip to Indy.

“I’ve got responsibilities at the station! I’m a leader there. People count on me.”

Rebecca stared at me, nodding slowly. Her jaw clenched and her lips pressed together. “I think you forget that people count on you here, too.” With that parting barb, she walked out of the kitchen.

I tipped my head back, eyes drifting to the ceiling. Ouch. I’d never forgotten for a moment that my family relied on me. How could I when I was the only one bringing home a paycheck? My eyes landed on the pile of packages again from another one of her mini online shopping sprees.

The boys all seemed content in the living room, so I figured dinner could wait another minute. I lifted the skinny straps and the dress hung from my fingertips. It was deep red and slightly shimmery. Why did she even need a new dress? It’s not as if we went anywhere. My eyes flicked to the paper that had been in the box. Sixty bucks? I shook my head.

I set aside the clothes and broke down the boxes, along with the ones Rebecca had stacked by the back door instead of breaking them down herself. The water for the bathtub started and I glared at the bathroom door. Rebecca liked to disappear with a book for an hour when she was stressed or upset. Something about those fictional, perfect men was preferable to me, probably.

My gaze slid over the pile of new clothes on the counter. That would be a fun conversation to have later. Always fun to tell your wife to stop shopping.

For now, I had a feeling I was on dad duty for the rest of the night.

I ran a hand over my face, trying to wipe away the anxiety and unease from the argument with Bex.

“Boys! Dinner!”

CHAPTER

Three

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

Well, that certainly could have gone better.

I stomped across Storybook Barn's gravel parking lot toward my car. I don't know what I expected when Rebecca showed up at the wedding looking like that. I hadn't been lying—she was stunning. I'd always thought so, even in her baggy sweats and stained T-shirts. But seeing her all dressed up had nearly brought me to my knees. Her curves looked amazing in that shimmery, red dress with impossibly thin straps.

And those heels. Have mercy.

Being physically attracted to my wife had never been the problem.

The problem was that, no matter how much I wanted her, she was distant and disinterested. Over the last two years, it had become very clear that she didn't want me. Not physically. Not as an equal partner. Not even as a friend.

She wouldn't say the words, but her actions spoke loud enough.

I thought moving out was the hardest thing I would ever do, but it had nothing on watching my wife unravel when I affirmed my decision. The urge to pull her into my arms and promise never to leave her or let her down had been nearly overwhelming. But I couldn't do it. Because as hard as this was, I knew I'd always let her down. I'd tried to be everything that she wanted me to be, but I'd always fallen short. And I was so tired of failing.

Bugs hitting the windshield sounded like a rain shower as I drove to my parents' house, fighting the blurry fatigue until I pulled into the driveway. There were balls and scooters in the driveway, evidence that the boys had been playing here this evening. I parked and climbed out, grabbing a kickball, a bat, and a bubble wand on my way to the garage. I tidied the rest of

the driveway, enjoying the quiet of the twilight. The late-August sun had barely set, even though it was nearly ten o'clock.

I was guessing the boys were sleeping here tonight. My shift started tomorrow morning, but I wasn't in a hurry to go inside. My bed was waiting, but so were my parents. No doubt hopeful that Rebecca had been able to convince me to come home.

Maybe in another world it would have worked. We could have danced the night away before coming home to an empty house, fallen into bed together, and worked all night to uncover the spark buried underneath the ashes of our marriage.

I exhaled deeply, dismissing the fantasy as nothing more than that.

Rebecca was a great mom, a wonderful woman. But she didn't love me. Even if she said she did. I could see it in her actions. The small criticisms, the questioning, the thinly-veiled commands delivered as suggestions. It was obvious in the way she undermined my parenting, complained about my work hours, and dismissed my efforts to connect with her.

She might not admit it, but I hadn't walked away from my wife. I'd walked away from someone I barely knew. She just also happened to be the mother to my children.

I glanced back toward my parents' front door, my thoughts turning to the boys. I had never understood sacrifice until they came. People thought my job made me selfless, but it had nothing on the demands of parenthood.

Alex had turned eight last spring, and Lincoln was five and a half, which was an important distinction we never dared to forget to mention. And Joey was two. Three boys. Three *rowdy* boys.

A smile tugged on my cheek. Maybe if I went in now, I could catch my oldest before he went to bed. Their grandparents always let them stay up too late. School was starting next week, and most of the communication I'd had with Rebecca over the last three weeks had been about the

details of the various “Meet the Teacher” nights and end-of-summer picnics and parties. Nothing beyond the most important information. After she’d stopped sending me frantic messages the first few days, which I ignored, it had been a good system.

I rolled my shoulders back and walked inside.

“Dad!”

Alex was on the couch, his Pokémon pajamas on and a bowl of ice cream sitting on his lap. Lincoln was next to him, face smeared with chocolate sauce. My smile widened at the sight of them.

The hardest part about leaving my marriage was knowing how it would feel to the boys. As many times as I reassured them that I loved them and that it wasn’t their fault, I knew it would be an uphill battle to make sure they believed it. I had enough friends who had divorced parents to know they would take it personally. But I would keep fighting.

“Hey, kiddo. What are you still doing awake?”

“Gramma gave us ice cream!” Lincoln yelled.

I shushed them both. “I see that,” I said through a chuckle. “Don’t wake up your brother,” I said.

“Sorry, Dad. Did you see Mom?” Link’s eyes widened on his chocolate-covered face.

“Yep, I sure did.”

He bounced up and down in his excitement. “Did you talk to her?”

I saw the hope in his eyes and my heart sank. What had Rebecca said about tonight?

My mother chimed in, carrying in a washcloth from the kitchen. “Your mom just wanted to celebrate with her friends, Link. She told you that.”

I gave my mom a nod of thanks. At least Rebecca hadn’t made it seem like she was going to convince me to come back.

Not that she had tried. My mom wiped the chocolate from the boys' faces and took their empty bowls.

“Off to bed with you two,” she said from the kitchen as she placed the dishes in the sink. “Say good night and go brush your teeth.”

“But Dad just got here,” Alex argued quietly. He didn't seem like his normal, happy self. Maybe he was just tired.

I smiled. “I'll see you in the morning before my shift, okay?”

His disappointment was obvious, but he nodded. “Can I show you my new cards?”

“Can't wait,” I said honestly. I had no idea what he loved about the cards so much, but he could talk about them for hours. I turned to Lincoln, his suddenly blank stare revealing just how tired the five-year-old was. “I'll see you in the morning, okay, bud?”

He nodded and they both came for hugs from me and their grandpa before trudging upstairs to brush their teeth. My mom followed them. I laid my suit jacket over the back of the couch and sat heavily in the corner of the worn-down sofa. Dad grunted at me, and I restrained the urge to roll my eyes. That was the extent of most of our communication since I'd arrived with a suitcase in hand.

When Mom returned, she picked up a handful of toys and tucked them away. I hadn't even noticed them, and I felt a twinge of guilt. It felt so much like something that would happen with Rebecca. Though Rebecca would have sighed and rolled her eyes passive-aggressively at me before passive-aggressively picking them up.

“How did it go tonight?” Mom asked.

I ignored the question behind the question. “The wedding was nice. Bryce and Krystal seem really happy. The reception was nice. Bloom's Farm has really done a nice job out there.”

Mom glared at me. “And Rebecca?”

“She was there,” I confirmed. “We danced.” I saw the hope in Mom’s eyes, and knew I had to extinguish it. “Then we fought.”

“Oh, Nathan.” Mom’s weary tone brought my guilt to the surface.

“You’re a darn fool,” my dad said.

Mom and I both turned to him. Three weeks I’d been living with them, and Dad hadn’t said a word. Mom had been trying to be silently supportive. I knew she’d been praying, but I was pretty sure our marriage was beyond prayer.

“Harold,” she said with a warning in her voice.

I held up a hand. “No, it’s okay. If Dad has something to say, I want to hear it.” I could feel my shoulders tightening.

My dad pulled his reading glasses from the bridge of his nose and set the latest Marcus Warner novel on his lap. “I’ve been biting my tongue, hoping you would come to your senses and work this all out. But you’re as stubborn as a blasted mule, aren’t you?”

My eyebrows lifted. “Gee, Dad. Tell me how you *really* feel.”

He sighed. “I didn’t raise a quitter.”

My back straightened, my body reacting to the insult, as if I were preparing to fight, but my dad was still speaking.

“Nobody ever said marriage would be easy. You and Rebecca need to work through this. Those boys deserve better, and underneath all the hurt and anger and disappointment you’ve handed each other over the years, there’s something stronger that will keep you together if you find it.”

I shook my head, immediately denying his words.

“I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but it’s true. I don’t think either of you truly want this marriage to end. Rebecca sure doesn’t, judging by the way she acted tonight. And if you walk away from her, then you’re not the man I raised.”

With that, Dad must have finished, because he slipped his reading glasses back on and tipped up his book. I flexed my hands to release the tension and anger I felt.

“It’s not that easy,” I protested.

His voice held a hard edge. “It *is* that easy. You have a choice. You fight for your marriage. You get counseling. You have the hard conversations and work to be better for each other!”

I don’t think I’d heard my father so riled up about anything since the time my brother, Elijah, was caught under the bleachers with a girl. And not just any girl – Carla Putnam. The grudge between our families had lasted decades, and my dad had nearly had a coronary when Elijah crossed that line. Not that anyone would tell us what the grudge was about.

My words were quiet compared to his outburst. “I can’t give her what she expects,” I admitted. “I’ve tried, really. But it’s never enough.”

Mom made sympathetic noises, but I ignored them. I stood, ready to be done with this conversation. Mom and Dad could join the ever-growing club of people disappointed in me. Rebecca was no doubt the president, but she was hardly the only one I’d let down.

I could see it when I was at the station or around town. People viewed the separation as my fault. And I would let them, because I wouldn’t want Rebecca to have to deal with the withering looks. Eventually, people would move on and accept that we were better apart.

I made it to the base of the steps before my dad’s voice stopped me.

“It’s never too late to fix this, son. Just... don’t give up on her yet.”

I couldn’t respond. Instead, I lifted my heavy feet and climbed the steps to my childhood bedroom, knowing I’d dream of Rebecca in that little, shimmery red dress.

CHAPTER

Four

REBECCA

I'd fallen into an exhausted sleep, still in my dress from the wedding, at about four in the morning. I'd dissected every single word Nathan had said last night outside the barn, searching for insight, and working through my anger at his accusations. He thought I'd given up on our relationship?

It was absurd. He was the one who'd walked away.

But his comment about being roommates? Yeah, that felt a little too spot-on.

We'd been just sort of existing for a while. It was a phase, right? The kids were exhausting. What was I supposed to do?

I rolled my eyes, staring up at the ceiling. If some of the Christian women's books I'd read were right, I should have greeted him at the door in lingerie and made sure dinner was on the table. Well, his shift ends at eight in the morning, and seducing your husband isn't exactly high on the priority list when you're perpetually running on four hours of sleep each night.

I groaned. Making excuses again.

The fact of it was that Nathan had moved out. Not me. Why should I have to be the one to fight for this marriage? Was it too much to want him to fight too?

I sighed, rolling over and reaching for my phone. A message from Nathan's mom let me know that she would drop the boys off at home around lunchtime. I glanced at the clock. It was already almost ten.

If I hurried, I could make it to the farmer's market and pick up some produce before it shut down. My boys had been surviving on frozen pizza for three weeks. But with school starting tomorrow, we needed to get into some better habits. Maybe this new school year would be a fresh start for me, too.

Alex seemed so grown up – a third grader! How had that happened? And Link was not far behind, starting kindergarten this year. That would leave me and Joey together during the day.

Eventually, even my two-year-old would start school. I'd always assumed I would wait to get a job until then, but with Nathan leaving, perhaps I should start looking sooner rather than later.

I didn't even know where to begin.

Pushing that particular problem to the back of my mind for later, I made some coffee and took a shower. I had two more hours without the boys, and I was going to enjoy it.

I turned on the sermon from the church in Terre Haute. Usually, Nathan and I attended the Baptist church here in Minden, but it was easy to find excuses not to go. When he was on shift, it felt like too much work to take all the boys myself.

I supposed I needed to get used to that. The alternative was never making it to church, and I had a feeling I was going to need the Lord more than ever. Despite our inconsistent attendance, the ladies at church had really come through for me in the last three weeks with meals and offers for babysitters. One woman's husband had even volunteered to come mow my lawn.

I took my coffee to the back patio, a rare luxury to enjoy the space and my drink without interruption. I glanced at the grass and realized that it was time for the lawn to be mowed again. I should probably do it myself this time.

I suppressed a scoff. It wasn't as if I didn't know how to mow; it was just that I hadn't needed to in years. The thought made me sigh. How many things was I now going to be responsible for on my own? I had felt like I was carrying the weight of our household on my shoulders, but now that I was faced with the reality of truly being on my own, things looked different.

Nathan might not have helped much with dishes or laundry or grocery shopping, but he had contributed. I bit my cheek in response to the twinge of guilt. Had I appreciated the way Nathan always took care of the lawn and trimmed the bushes? Had I said thank you for the times he cleared wasp nests from the mailbox or stowed my Christmas decorations in the attic?

Or did he feel the same as I did so often—unappreciated and overlooked?

I stayed on the patio until the sun grew too hot. Then I went inside and tried to tidy up. Staying on top of the mess seemed impossible with three young boys constantly undoing my efforts.

I picked up stray underwear and action figures and half-eaten bowls of snacks, trying my best to restore order to the house before my mother-in-law saw it. She had been nothing but kind, but I couldn't help wondering what she thought about the situation. Did she blame me?

It didn't seem likely that she would blame her son.

I grabbed the soccer ball from the corner of the living room, where Alex insisted on practicing his dribbling, despite the number of times I'd instructed him to play outside. This was his fourth year playing soccer and had taken to coaching his little brothers on how they should kick.

By the time Patty arrived, the house felt a little more under control. I'd even managed to take a shower and wash the hairspray and last night's makeup off. She walked the boys inside, fast-food containers in hand.

I raised my eyebrows in feigned excitement. "What's all this?"

"Grandma got us Happy Meals!" Lincoln yelled, jumping into the air with a raised fist.

I laughed. "Wow. That's pretty awesome. Did you tell her thank you?"

Patty laughed, tucking her chin-length gray hair behind her ear. "They sure did. You're doing a great job with these boys, Rebecca. I hope you know that."

The unexpected tug of tears rose in my chest, and I glanced away. After my mom died, I'd hoped that my relationship with Patty would be deeper, but it had never really happened. Still, hearing her praise my efforts as a mother soothed my soul in a way I didn't realize it needed. After all, she raised Nate into the man I loved. Of course, I wanted her approval. I just expected not to receive it. "They're pretty great, aren't they?"

"We had a great time." She leaned in close and whispered, "They were all up before six playing with Nathan, so they might be tired."

My chest tightened. I was glad they'd gotten to see their dad before he went to work, but I missed those early-morning wrestling matches in our living room, even though I'd always rolled my eyes at their rowdiness.

"Thanks for the heads-up," I said, grabbing ketchup from the fridge for the french fries. The boys scrambled into their chairs and started pulling their food out of the boxes. They chattered excitedly about the toys.

"Mom, are there onions on this?"

"I'm not sure. Just eat it," I say to Alex.

Patty shouted over the chaos of the table as the kids dug into their food. "All right, boys, I'm going to head home. Be good for Mom, okay?"

A chorus of good-bye's echoed, then they quickly became distracted by comparing which toy they got in their meal.

Patty put her hand on my shoulder as she headed for the door. "Don't give up on him yet. We're praying for you. And we're here for you and the boys, whatever you need, okay."

I just nodded, unable to find any more words through the thickness in my throat.

CHAPTER

Five

NATHAN

Working at the fire station had been an unexpected fit for me. I applied on a whim, looking for a job that could support Rebecca and the little family we were starting. Barely out of high school, we'd gotten our fair share of judgmental looks when we got married. Then even more when we announced we were pregnant a few short months later.

No matter how crazy it had seemed, I'd never regret my decision to marry her. Even as the years passed, and our immature love faded into a monotonous routine of logistics and duty.

My mind wandered as I worked through the papers that had been left behind for me. With much of the department tied up with the wedding, several of the volunteers had stepped up to fill in. But while they knew how to handle calls and make sure the station didn't fall apart, they couldn't do everything. I'd been a captain at the Minden-Rogers Fire Department for two years now. I still filled with pride at the accomplishment. I might be young, but the firefighters — and the chief—respected me. I'd earned that.

Even Bryce and Jake, with as much flack as they gave me for my uptight ways, respected my opinion. I glanced up from my desk as the alarm sounded. A fire call on a Sunday afternoon? I rose, heading out to the garage, pleased to see Dylan, Mac, and Burns already on their way. I listened for the address over the radio, my heart stuttering when my street was announced. Then, it relaxed when the number wasn't mine. Well, Rebecca's, I mentally corrected. It would take more than a few weeks to stop thinking of the little three-bedroom house on Elm Street that we'd purchased seven years ago as mine.

The fire was three houses down from ours, and I hurried with my turnout gear. Mrs. Moberly was a sweet older woman who lived alone. I said a quick prayer that she was all right and climbed into the front seat of the engine. Mac was already

pulling out of the garage, lights and sirens interrupting the otherwise quiet afternoon.

It was mere blocks to the address, so we were there in a flash. I immediately went into scene management mode, instructing Dylan and Burns to pull lines to the hydrants. There was smoke visible, but the structure wasn't fully involved.

No sign of Mrs. Moberly with the smattering of neighbors standing on the sidewalk. Her familiar white sedan was in the driveway. I frowned and spoke into the radio. "Occupant status unconfirmed. Possible elderly woman inside. I'm calling for more hands and we move in after my 360."

I hurried around the building, verifying the status of the fire from all sides, all while talking with emergency services and requesting a volunteer alert. As I circled back to the front of the building, my eyes caught on Rebecca, her hands around the front of Alex and Lincoln. Worry creased her eyebrows as she watched smoke rise from Mrs. Moberly's house. I knew she was praying.

I turned away, speaking into the radio. "We enter from Alpha side. Right through the front door, boys. Dylan, you take the nozzle. Bedrooms are off the living room, toward Beta side." I knew because I'd helped the elderly woman change her smoke detectors last year. Has she been able to change the batteries? I should have made sure.

I pushed away the guilt. It wouldn't help now.

As much as I wanted to be the one entering the house to find Mrs. Moberly, I knew my job as captain was to run the scene and make decisions. But I was going to give my guys everything they needed to find her.

Dylan and Burns pushed through the unlocked front door, line in hand. I listened to the updates from Dylan, waiting to turn on the water until he needed it. The line would be heavy once it was filled with water, so it was better to let him find the fire first.

"Fire is contained to D side," he said. "Kitchen."

I pictured the interior of the house and imagined where they were standing. “Any sight of Mrs. Moberly?”

“Negative. Give me water. We can put this out and find her.”

I turned on the pump and watched the hose inflate on the grass. “Wet stuff on the way,” I confirmed. “Keep your eyes peeled. She’s almost eighty.”

“Roger that.”

I waited for another update, breathing through the impatience. A truck pulled in—one of the volunteers. I gritted my teeth, feeling like I would crack my molar. I couldn’t send him in alone. Pairs. Always in pairs.

Todd Flynn was already in his turnout gear—excellent. “What have we got?”

“Kitchen fire. Suspected one inside. They’ve got water on it, and we’ll send you in to search as soon as someone else gets here.

Just then, another pickup rolled up the street. I recognized Luke Brand and said a prayer of thanks.

“Fire is almost out. Looks like a pot of something on the stove went up and caught the cabinets. Maybe soup?”

I rolled my eyes at the unnecessary speculation from Mac..

Todd and Luke went in the front door after donning their SCBA masks and air tanks from the engine.

“Come on, Mrs. Moberly. Hang on,” I spoke quietly to myself.

The report came from the team inside. “We’ve got her. Unresponsive. No vitals.”

I grimaced, grabbing the bag from the ambulance that Mac had driven. We always tried to bring an ambulance and an engine on a fire call, just in case. But I always hoped we wouldn’t need it.

Todd and Luke came out carrying Mrs. Moberly's body. They gently laid her on the grass in front of her house. I could tell she was already gone. The ashen color of her skin and the slack of her muscles told me that Mrs. Moberly had likely passed before the fire even started. Probably why a pot had been left unattended long enough to catch fire.

Despite the smell of smoke and ash, the faint scent was death was enough to confirm my eyes hadn't played tricks on me. Still, I checked for vitals and stimuli response. Nothing.

I told my guys to grab the gurney and told emergency services to notify the police. We loaded Mrs. Moberly onto the gurney and into the back of the ambulance. The fire would have to be investigated, which meant they would need an autopsy.

After Mrs. Moberly was out of view, I helped the team pack up the engine while we waited for the police department to arrive. I saw Rebecca, still waiting on the sidewalk, and walked over. Alex and Linc were nowhere to be seen.

"Is she...."

I nodded, ducking my gaze from the pain in Rebecca's.

"I'm sorry," she said.

My eyes pulled up to hers sharply. Why was she sorry for me? "You knew her better than me," I said, confused.

"I know. But I know how hard it is on you to lose someone on your watch." Her dark-brown eyes swam with emotion and sympathy. My mind flashed back to the early days of our marriage and the first death I'd seen as a rookie firefighter. I hadn't eaten for two days, until Rebecca coaxed me to. I'd laid my head on her lap, and she'd teased my hair with her fingers as I tried to explain the turmoil in my chest at what had happened.

I exhaled, releasing the hold the memory had on me. "I can't be sure yet, but I think Mrs. Moberly passed away before the fire. They said she was in her bed."

Rebecca's eyes filled with tears and she nodded. "I'm glad to hear that. Does that make it easier? For you?" Her question

was soft and sincere. For a moment, it sounded like she cared.

I shrugged. “Maybe. She’s still dead, so it is what it is.”

I nearly winced at my own callousness. I felt the shock ripple through Rebecca at my harsh words. She swallowed and the emotion left her eyes, replaced with a familiar coolness. “Okay, then. I better get back to the boys.” She twisted her hands together in front of her.

“First day of school tomorrow, right?”

Her eyebrows raised. “Yeah...”

I nodded. “I’ll be here in the morning after my shift. I’d... I’d like to come to drop off with you.”

She hesitated, like she was trying to find a way to refuse my request. I felt panic begin to rise in my chest. If she tried to keep my boys from me...

“Okay. We’ll wait for you. But we need to leave by 8:15.”

I relaxed at her agreement. The timing would be tight, but I’d make it. I’d just have to make sure Jake knew not to be late.

“I’ll be here,” I confirmed. She simply nodded and turned back toward our house. Her house, I reminded myself. Not ours. Not anymore. No matter how many times I slipped up and forgot.

CHAPTER

Six

REBECCA (8 YEARS AGO)

I kicked Nathan's shoes to the side so I didn't trip over them again. I'd bend over and put them away, but my eight-month pregnant belly made that far more effort than it was worth. He'd just leave them out again.

My eyes slid across the living room to Nathan. He was laying on the couch. Some big golf tournament was on, but his eyes were on the ceiling. His expression blank. One arm was flung across his forehead, pushing back the messy tendrils of his hair.

My heart cracked a little further. I hated seeing him like this.

We'd been so grateful for the job at the fire department. Nathan was still a rookie, but in just a few months, he'd be done with his probationary period. He'd excelled at the online firefighter academy, and even though the weekend onsite classes had been a drag, we'd managed.

He'd come home from his shift the other day and he'd been withdrawn and distant ever since. I was starting to freak out a bit. I'd been able to get a little information from the small-town information mill. But beyond the fact that there had been a car accident and that a child had died... I didn't know the specifics. And Nate wasn't talking.

He also wasn't eating.

I waddled to the kitchen, looking for something in the fridge that might entice him. I picked up his phone on the counter, but the only notification was a text I had sent him this morning when I woke to his spot empty. One he apparently hadn't even opened, since the notification was still there on his home screen.

Beloved Bex: Come back to bed! I'm not done cuddling you.

I settled on mac and cheese. That was comfort food, right? While it cooked, I prayed fervently for him. Since he became a firefighter, I'd been praying for him constantly. But I'd been focused on his safety. I never considered how he would deal with the tragedies he would see.

When the food was ready, I left it on the stove.

I sat down gingerly, in the empty space near his head. Well, as gingerly as my suddenly-carrying-a-giant-beach-ball-under-my-shirt body would allow. He adjusted, moving his arm to his side and shifting his weight to make more space.

I brushed my fingers through his hair. "I'm worried about you," I said quietly.

His eyes fell closed. "I don't know if I can do this, babe."

The anguish in his voice was like nothing I'd heard from him before. Nathan was my goofball. Carefree and charming. He made me laugh all the time. Just a few weeks ago, I'd even peed my pants. Admittedly, that had been an unfortunate combination of too much lemonade, laughter, and an ill-timed kick to the bladder from the baby I carried.

"Talk to me," I urged him. "I'm here."

He didn't say anything for a long time. He scooted up, so his head was on my lap, and I could see his eyes. "He was just a kid. Three, maybe four. He was still holding his teddy bear, Bex." His voice broke on the words, and my heart broke for him and what he'd seen. And for the family that lost the little boy. My arm came around my belly, as though I could physically protect my unborn child from any sort of tragedy.

"I just keep seeing him there—in the road. There was so much blood. It didn't seem possible that it was all from someone so tiny."

A whimper of sorrow and sympathy escaped from my throat. I ran my hand along Nathan's cheek, caressing his face with my thumb as I looked down at him. "I'm so sorry. There was nothing you could do, right?"

He nodded. "I tried." He pressed his eyes closed. "I tried so hard... There was just too much damage. It happened so

fast when we got there. I held him,” he said, staring at the ceiling. “While he died, I held him. And the worst part? His sad excuse for a mother was totally fine. Guess she remembered to put her own seatbelt on, even though she was high as a freaking kite. If he’d been buckled in his car seat... he would still be alive.” Nathan’s face was angry now. “How is that even fair?”

“It’s not fair,” I assured him. “It’s not fair at all. It’s awful. I’m so sorry you couldn’t save him.” I searched for something to reassure him. I couldn’t fix this. No one could. But he needed to see that what he did mattered. “But he didn’t die alone and you were there. That means something.”

His eyes were red, but there were no tears. Nathan had shed a tear or two when we got married, but I hadn’t seen him cry since. He kept it all bottled so tightly inside.

“You did everything you could,” I said again.

He nodded, but he stared at the ceiling again.

I chewed the inside of my lip, considering my next words. “Have you asked any of the other guys? Or the chief?”

He shook his head, a wry smile on his lips. “I’m sure I could. But I think I just need some time.” He turned to me, his lips briefly resting on the baby bump before he placed his hand there and let his gaze fall on the swell of my abdomen. “I just need to be here with you and remind myself that there are no guarantees in life. It’s a good reminder to be grateful for everything we have, isn’t it?”

Tears filled my eyes. “Yeah. That’s a good way to look at it.”

The baby took the opportunity to aim a strong kick directly toward his father’s voice. The obvious movement makes us both laugh, and Nate’s warm hand rubbed my belly.

He whispered to my stomach, “I love you, little man. And we’re going to take such good care of you.”

My heart swelled with adoration and love for the incredible man I married. The father of the child I carried.

I should have realized that his job might be difficult at times. But I would do everything I could to be his safe place, where he could be grateful for the blessings of our little family and safe from the darkness he would face as a firefighter.

I teased his hair with my fingers as he continued trading nudges with the baby inside. Silently, I promised I would take good care of them both. That was my calling, and I wouldn't fail.

CHAPTER

Seven

REBECCA (PRESENT DAY)

“Do you have your water bottle? Backpack?”

“Got it, Mom.”

I looked at Alex again, his hair carefully styled with gel. Gone were the days when he didn't care at all about his clothes and hair. He was nine, and while I prayed he was still years from caring what the girls thought, he'd decided that he needed styled hair and stopped wearing clashing colors.

His little brother, on the other hand, had no such qualms. I stifled my smile as I surveyed his outfit—red shorts and his favorite orange tiger shirt. I didn't have the heart to make him change. The first day of kindergarten wasn't the time for me to make him second-guess his decision-making.

“How about you, Link? Are you sure you have everything?”

He ignored my question. “When will Dad be here?”

“Soon, sweetie.” I glanced at the clock. It was five after eight, and I was itching to load the boys in the car. I hated being late, not that we would be. If we left now, we were likely to be the first car in the drop-off line.

As long as Nathan got here soon, we would have plenty of time to drop Alex off from the car line and then park to walk Lincoln in for his first day.

I checked my phone to make sure he hadn't texted. I trusted that Nathan would do what he could to show up this morning. But nine years as a firewife had taught me that there were some things we couldn't control. A call just before shift change could mean his returning home at closer to noon.

The sight of his truck pulling into the driveway made my heart catch and my anxiety fade. He made it. Nathan got out of the truck as the younger boys ran out to him. Sometimes, I was ashamed of the way I envied their adoration of him.

Alex, on the other hand, stayed close to me as we stepped outside to greet him. As the oldest, he understood more about what was going on and, no doubt, he blamed his dad to some extent. I could see the division warring on his face.

I nodded toward his dad. "It's okay, Alex. He's still your dad, and you can be excited to see him."

Alex frowned. "I played with him yesterday... but I'm still mad at him," he admitted, and my heart squeezed painfully. How did I reassure my nine-year-old that he didn't need to be angry at his father when I found myself fighting those same feelings more often than not?

"That's okay," I said instead. "You're allowed to feel however you feel. And one of the hard things about growing up is that you might feel more than one thing at a time."

Confusion wrinkled across his little forehead. "What do you mean?"

I wrapped my arm around his shoulder. "It means you can be upset that your dad moved out and still happy to see him when he comes by. It can be confusing, but it doesn't mean your feelings are wrong."

Nathan was looking our way, and I could see the questions on his face. "Do you want to go say hi?" I asked Alex.

He squeezed my hand. "No, I want to stay with you."

Oh, my sweet boy. "Okay. Well, let's go together, then."

He held my hand as we crossed the walk to the driveway.

"Hey, bud. Are you ready for third grade? That's a pretty big deal."

Alex gave a timid smile. "Yeah, I think so."

Nathan's eyes met mine, and I shrugged, trying to communicate wordlessly about the struggle our oldest son was having. It would take more than a few words in the driveway to explain.

"Let's take your pictures and then we'd better go." I infused as much enthusiasm as I could into my voice.

Joey was acting crazy during all the photos and making monkey noises. I couldn't help but laugh, my eyes watering as I was overcome with joy and gratitude that these beautiful, healthy, fun boys were mine.

"Okay, monkeys! Into the car with you," I said through my laughter.

In a practiced choreography of cooperation, we got the boys buckled into car seats in my van, Nate helping Lincoln with the buckle of his new booster as I buckled in Joey. I moved toward the driver's seat and startled when Nathan was already there, reaching for the handle.

"Oh," I paused, my face flushing. "I didn't think—"

"Sorry," he said gruffly. "Habit. Guess I'm just used to driving when it is all five of us." He left the door open and walked around to the passenger seat.

I inhaled, ready to tell him to come back and drive like he usually did. But I shook away the instinct. He was tagging along on school drop-off. This wasn't like before, even if my heart ached for it to be.

The drive to school was awkward. Normally, I supposed we would be chatting about plans for the week, working out the logistics of things for when Nathan was on and off shift.

"What are you most excited about for school, boys?" I asked, desperately trying to break the silence. Perhaps I should be ashamed of using the kids as my shield, but to some extent it seemed like we'd both been doing that for a while.

"Nothing," came Alex's cranky reply. He sounded so much like his dad, I had to bite back a smile.

I looked at him in the rear-view mirror and raised my eyebrows. "Nothing? Not even being in class with Jameson? Or being old enough to join the robotics club?"

Alex rolled his eyes, and the hint of a smile told me I had hit the mark. "Fine. Yes," he admitted. "But nothing else."

I ignored his disrespect and turned my attention to Lincoln. Nathan beat me to it. "What about you, Link? What are you

excited about?”

Lincoln was bouncing around in his car seat. “I don’t know. Everything, I guess. Did you know Missy is in my class? And my teacher told me that we get two recesses every single day. Isn’t that awesome?”

Nathan acted suitably impressed. “Wow! When did she tell you that?”

“At Meet the Teacher night,” I replied. “You were on shift that day. Sorry.”

He nodded, but I saw the tick in his jaw.

It had always bothered him to miss things because he was working. Sometimes, he was able to switch shifts with people, but more often than not, he claimed it didn’t look good for the captain to be moving things around so much.

We waited in the car line and dropped Alex off at the rear entrance, where the third and fourth graders were supposed to enter. Then, we drove around the building to the front doors. There were no parking spaces left. Apparently, every new kindergartener was being walked into class by their parents.

I parked on the grass, creating my own spot like several others had already done. Then I helped Lincoln out while Nate got Joey out of his car seat. Lincoln squeezed my hand, holding onto his Spider-Man backpack with the other. “You ready for this, Linc?”

He nodded, but the smile he’d worn all morning had faded into a worried expression.

Nate came around the van, Joey on his hip. Our two-year-old had taken his dad’s MRFD baseball hat and proudly wore it himself, leaving Nathan’s smashed hat hair on display for everyone.

He didn’t seem to mind.

Nate handed Joey off to me and knelt in front of Lincoln, placing one hand on his son’s shoulder. My heart squeezed as I watched him reassure our son that he was going to have a great day and that it was okay to be a little nervous.

“You’re so brave, Daddy. How come I can’t be that brave? I get too scared.”

Joey was squeezing my cheeks, and I made him laugh by letting the pressure pop out all at once. It kept him distracted while my focus was completely centered on the conversation happening near my knees.

Nathan looked around before whispering loud enough so I could hear. “Can I tell you a secret?” Lincoln nodded solemnly. “Being brave doesn’t mean you don’t get scared. Being brave just means that you decide to do things even when they are scary. You know what else? The thing that helps me be the bravest is knowing that God is with me every step of the way.”

“He is?”

Nathan nodded, his eyes completely focused on his son. “Yep. He promises to be with us. Which means we can be brave.”

“What if I don’t make any friends?” Lincoln’s voice was so timid and worried.

“Oh, sweetie,” I said, my heart splitting wide open at his rare show of vulnerability.

Nate was there with a much better response, while my tongue was tangled and I fought the urge to pull Link in for a crushing hug. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about. You’re an awesome kid, and besides, you already know Missy, right? So you’ve already got one friend in the class.”

That reminder brightened Lincoln’s expression, and Nathan pulled him in for a hug. I blinked away the tears that gathered in my eyes at the exchange.

I would never admit to anyone else that the anger and frustration of knowing Nathan walked away from me had made me consider punishing him by keeping him away from the boys. The thought filled me with shame now as I watched him so tenderly walk our five-year-old through this milestone. It would certainly devastate Nate not to be a part of his kids’ lives, but it would also be a horrifying thing to do to them.

And I couldn't do that to them, as much as I felt the urge to lash out at my husband for the hurt I was feeling.

Together, we walked Lincoln to his classroom. He dutifully hung his backpack up in the little cubby with his name displayed above it. He hugged us both—and his little brother—before running off to see Missy and another friend he recognized from church.

Joey laid a hand on my cheek. “Mama sad?”

I smiled tightly. “No, sweetie. I'm happy for Lincoln. It can just be hard to watch your little boys grow up so fast.”

“My still small, Mommy,” he said, tucking his head on my shoulder. I gave him a squeeze.

“For now,” I said, a whisper to myself.

We walked back through the maroon and white hallways toward the front door. I let Joey down between us, and he walked in his joyful, bouncy way.

“Thanks for letting me come this morning,” Nate said as we stepped outside.

“Of course,” I said, forcing my voice to be cheerful to disguise the pain sitting underneath. “You're their dad.”

Nate sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I know. I'm just... I know this is hard for you.”

I nearly broke at his words, and I couldn't hold back my retort. “And what? This is just *easy* for you?”

“No, of course not. Come on, Bex. I don't want to fight.” His gaze shifted to Joey and my cheeks flamed. No, I didn't want to fight either. Well, I did. Just not in front of the boys.

I took a deep breath, stuffing my anger inside. I held Joey's hand, keeping us still for a moment so I could meet Nathan's eyes. “You're right. We shouldn't fight. If you insist on leaving me, then we'd better get used to this, right?”

I held his gaze, refusing to back down. He looked away, and I could see the pain in his eyes. Why was he doing this?

“You can still come back,” I whispered. I could hear the desperation in my own voice. As much as I hated my weakness, I had to let him know. I would forgive him.

For a moment, I held my breath, hopeful that he was going to admit he’d been wrong to leave. But I saw the moment his resolve returned. The emotion in his eyes disappeared, replaced with a coldness I hated.

He shook his head. “No. This is better for everyone.”

I scoffed. Foolish of me to hope. Nathan was the most stubborn man I’d ever met. “Better for everyone? Or better for you? Because it sure as heck isn’t better for the boys. And as much as I want to hate you right now, it’s not better for me either. You’re fooling yourself if you think this is what I wanted.”

CHAPTER

Eight

NATHAN

I should have known better than to try to talk to Rebecca when I was running on three hours of sleep. It had enough trouble controlling my emotions around her, but when I was tired? It was everything I could do not to unload nine years' worth of arguments on her in the school parking lot.

Rebecca had seemed so certain when she said that it wasn't better for her for us to be apart. Did she really feel that way? It had been almost four weeks and all I'd gotten from her was anger or apathy. I figured her pride was bruised, based on what she'd said at the wedding. That she needed to understand why I left in order to move on.

But today was the first time she'd really said she disagreed with the decision. My dad's words came back to me. Could we really fix all the broken things in our marriage? He made it sound so simple, even as he admitted that it would be hard.

Simple. Not easy.

We rode home in silence, except for the chattering from Joey, blissfully unaware of the tension between us. When we got back to the house, I helped get Joey out of the car seat.

"Daddy come play?"

I glanced at Rebecca, trying to decipher her thoughts on the matter. "I'm sure Daddy is tired, sweetheart."

"I could stay for a bit," I offered, not sure why I did. I was tired, like she said. Maybe I was just a glutton for punishment. Or maybe I wanted to see if there was even a hint of a chance for us to talk without fighting.

Rebecca shrugged. "Sure. Whatever you want."

Well, that wasn't exactly a warm and fuzzy welcome. Not that I deserved one.

She went inside, leaving Joey and me on the front lawn. “Lead the way, big man,” I said.

He climbed the front steps, holding on to the rail, which wobbled under the weight. I frowned. Had that been loose when I moved out?

“You go inside, buddy. I’ll be right there.”

I jogged back to my truck and pulled my toolbox from the back seat. In a couple minutes, I had tightened the bolts that fastened the black iron handrail to the concrete steps.

I tucked the socket wrench back into its case.

“What are you doing?”

I glanced up from my kneeling position and saw Rebecca leaning against the doorframe. She had a sweater wrapped around her and she was holding a coffee mug between her palms.

I cleared my throat, suddenly uncomfortable. “I, uh, noticed that the railing was loose. Didn’t want anything to happen to you or the boys.” Had I overstepped?

But Rebecca flashed a hesitant smile. “That was really thoughtful. I... Thank you for taking care of it.”

A warmth spread through my chest at her appreciation. I hadn’t done it to earn her praise, but it sure felt good. She didn’t usually say thank you.

“No problem at all. Is... Is there anything else you want me to look at?” The question came out awkwardly as my tongue threatened to tangle in knots.

Rebecca shook her head. “Not that I can think of. Why don’t you come in? I’ll make you a cup of coffee, and I think Joey wants to build LEGO with you.”

I hadn’t been inside our house in over a month. It felt like nothing had changed though I wasn’t sure why I thought it would. It should feel different, right? Since it wasn’t mine anymore.

I sat on the living room floor and started slowly stacking the large LEGO bricks with Joey. Rebecca brought me a steaming cup of coffee. I could smell the vanilla creamer we both preferred.

“Thank you,” I said.

I sipped my coffee and glanced around. The house wasn't neat. It usually wasn't, with three boys leaving things everywhere all the time. But I noticed a few other things. The garbage can was almost overflowing in the corner of the kitchen. A stack of dirty dishes filled the sink.

Guilt washed over me. I'd been living with my parents. My mom had drawn the line at doing my laundry, but I hadn't cooked or washed dishes since moving out. And here Rebecca was, still responsible for everything she had done before and then some.

I knew I hadn't helped around the house as much as I probably should have, but the realization that everything was falling on her shoulders made me feel like a jerk.

“We're fine,” she said.

“What?”

“I see you looking at the house. I know what you're thinking. But if you don't want to be here, then we don't need you. We're fine. I'm fine.”

“Rebecca,” I said, my voice gentle. “I can still help.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like you always helped before? The dishes in the sink are nothing new. I just always made sure they were done before you got home. I am more than capable of taking out the trash, too. I did it plenty when you were on shift.”

“You don't have to do this all alone,” I said.

Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say because there was fire in her eyes when she responded. “Really? Because last I checked, I don't have a partner anymore. I don't want your pity, Nate. If you wanted to help, you would have done it

while you lived here. If you wanted to help, you would have stayed.”

She'd always known how to use words like arrows, especially when she was angry.

“You're right. I'm sorry.”

That seemed to take the wind from her fiery sails.

“What?”

I shrugged. “You're right. I should have done more when we were together. I always felt a little guilty that I didn't, but then anytime I made the effort to do something, I only felt like it wasn't good enough. So eventually, it was easier not to try.”

Her jaw ticked. “Oh, so this is my fault?”

I exhaled deeply. “I'm just telling you how I felt, Bex. Trying to explain why I probably didn't help as much as I could. There's more than enough blame to go around.” My mind flipped to the hours she spent on her phone or the way I felt undermined when she contradicted me in front of our kids.

Yeah, plenty of blame on both sides. But I always seemed to take the brunt of it. And I was done with that.

She bit her lip, and I could see her fighting back words.

“I should go,” I said before her words burst through. I wasn't going to hash this out now. Not when we were both tired and emotional. Maybe I needed to explain things more fully to Rebecca. She was right, she deserved to understand. But that didn't mean I was changing my mind.

Whatever happened from here—the awkward exchanges and the logistics of coparenting—it would be better than the constant weight of disappointment and ache for approval. It would be better than the way we both tore each other down, lashing out in exactly the right way.

If I ended up back there, I wasn't sure I would find my way out. It had been slowly crushing me for years, and Rebecca deserved a man who could meet all of those expectations. That clearly wasn't me.

She didn't argue as she led me to the door. I hugged Joey, soaking in the sweet feel of his tiny body in mine, then stepped outside with a nod to Rebecca. I gave the newly-reinforced railing a good shake as I walked down the steps to my truck. It felt solid, and I was satisfied that I had fixed the problem causing it to wobble.

If only fixing our marriage would have been so easy. Instead, it felt like the entire foundation had crumbled and there was nothing left to stand on.

I texted Rebecca later that day.

Nathan: We do need to talk. Not fight... but talk.

Nathan: Maybe we can have my parents watch the kids one afternoon this week and we can sit down like adults and talk through this.

Rebecca: Maybe we have someone there with us?

I frowned.

Nathan: Like a mediator?

Rebecca: I guess. Just someone who can keep us from losing our temper or whatever.

I know she said "keep *us* from losing our temper" but I immediately felt like she was throwing a stone at me. We both knew that I'd lost my head on more than one occasion. I stuffed down the impulse to get defensive.

Nathan: No way am I signing up to get ganged up on.

Rebecca: Someone neutral. Pastor Justin?

I bit my cheek. I'm sure Justin would have thoughts about my decision to leave, but I trusted his judgment and that he wouldn't take sides.

Nathan: That'll work.

CHAPTER

Nine

REBECCA

I glanced around the small circle of women that had gathered in my living room. It was a regular thing, almost every Wednesday night since Nathan left. It started as an emergency SOS and turned into the highlight of my week.

After the boys went to bed each Wednesday, the group came over. Sometimes, they brought meals, sometimes, they brought tea and cookies. But every week, we prayed. Well, mostly they prayed, because my heart was too broken to say much.

I played with the hem of my blanket and tried to explain to the group how I was feeling. So much had happened since last Wednesday. “I’ve seen Nathan more in the last five days than I have in the last month before that. I found him at the wedding, but whatever grand plan I had to win him over with my high heels didn’t work. We just ended up fighting outside the barn.”

“And then?” Monica asked. Monica’s boyfriend, Jake, was another firefighter, and she was one of my closest friends. She and Carla were my go-to girls when I needed to vent.

“He came with me to drop Link off for his first day of kindergarten, and then stuck around to play with Joey.” I didn’t mention that he’d also fixed the handrail. Any warm, fuzzy feelings I had about my husband’s small act of service had disappeared when we’d argued about dishes and garbage. As much as I claimed we didn’t need him, I still felt like I was drowning. At least someone had come and mowed the grass while I was at Mommy and Me Music classes with Joey yesterday.

Had this all just been brewing under the surface and I was just oblivious to it?

“How did that go?” Ruth asked. The older woman was about my mother’s age. Everyone in Minden knew Miss Ruth. She’d been entrenched in Minden since before I was born,

volunteering for every cause and helping anyone who needed it.

I sighed. “It was fine for a bit. A little awkward, but not terrible. Then there was more fighting.” I shook my head. “I’ve never had such a hard time biting my tongue, ladies. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. Every time he says something, I immediately want to challenge it.”

“And it wasn’t like that when you were married?” The question came from Carla.

I shook my head. “Not really. We really didn’t fight that often. If I got mad, I usually just took my frustration and channeled it into whatever needed done. And Nathan would just escape into whatever video game or book he was in the middle of. Or disappear to the station for a few hours. It’d blow over and then we’d be okay. Until the next time.”

Ruth exchanged a glance with Chrissy.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong with that?”

Chrissy spoke up. “Sounds to me that you both probably have a lot of festering resentment that was never dealt with. The silent treatment doesn’t solve anything. You have to talk to each other.”

I sighed. “Well, apparently, every time we do that, we just fight. Maybe Nathan was right to leave. We can’t seem to get on the same page.”

Chrissy replied with a shake of her head. “That just tells me that there is hope. If you can get all of this out into the open and actually communicate about it, then you can both figure out how to work on the marriage together! When Todd and I had problems, it was because we weren’t telling each other the whole story. Both of us kept hiding our feelings and motivations, and it was just a recipe for disaster.”

I leaned back into the couch. “This is crazy. How can we have been married for nine years and not know how to communicate?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not too late to figure it out,” Chrissy reassured me.

“Well, we have a meeting with Pastor Justin tomorrow,” I said.

Quiet exclamations of surprise and pleasure filled the little circle.

Miss Ruth smiled warmly. “That’s fantastic. This is what we’ve been praying for! How did you get him to agree to that?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t as optimistic as Miss Ruth about the upcoming meeting. “He said we needed to talk, and I said we needed a neutral third party so that we didn’t just fight.”

“Ohh, ladies, we have something big to pray about tonight. I’ll start.” Miss Ruth didn’t wait, she just bowed her head and started praying.

The tangle of anxious knots in my stomach slowly started to release. I took a deep breath. I could do this. I could talk to my husband. I could listen to him without biting back.

I had to. My marriage depended on it.

After the prayer, we continued chatting. I tugged at the throw blanket around my legs. “Honestly, I still just don’t understand. I thought we were happy. Most of the time, I was happy,” I said, my voice cracking as I searched the room.

Monica pressed her lips together. “Yeah, but, Rebecca... was *he* happy?”

I scoffed. “Apparently not,” I quipped, hearing the acid in my words.

Monica gave me a kind smile. “I’m not saying this is your fault. I just think that if, at the meeting tomorrow, you can figure out what has been going on in his head, it’ll give you a chance to understand why he thought he had to leave.”

In my mind, I pushed back against the idea. He didn’t have to leave. He made a choice, and part of me thought I would never forgive him for it. But Monica was right. I needed to understand why. And if it meant I had to duct tape my mouth shut for tomorrow’s meeting, then I would do it.

“Thanks, friends. I don’t know what I would have done without you the last month.”

I absolutely believed that the Lord could save our marriage. He had the power to soften human hearts, bend the wills of peasants and princes, right? If God would just change Nathan’s stubborn heart so he chose to stay. That was my prayer.

Whatever was going on with my husband—this mid-life identity crisis or mental breakdown or whatever—that was what I needed the Lord to step into. The alternative was the collapse of our marriage.

Nate’s vague words kept rolling around in my mind about how we’d both fallen short of our vows. Each time I thought about it, I bristled. I hadn’t been the one to leave. Why should I be the one to change?

CHAPTER

Ten

REBECCA (SIX MONTHS AGO)

I rifled through my closet, looking for something to wear to church that didn't make me look pregnant or like the mom from a 90s rom-com. I'd stopped breastfeeding Joey over nine months ago, but my body hadn't gotten the memo that it could stop preparing me to sustain both of us in a famine on the prairie like some homesteading farmwife in the 1800s.

I sucked in my belly and tried to latch the jeans. The brief victory of success was quickly replaced with disappointment as the soft flesh of my stomach ballooned over the waistband, my stretch marks seeming to swell and darken like this was their moment in the spotlight.

I groaned in frustration and peeled off the jeans, nearly tripping as I turned completely inside out to get them off. I'd tried buying clothes, but going to an actual store was nearly impossible. I certainly wasn't going to bring the boys along, which meant I needed to do it on Nathan's days off. Except, he spent a lot of time at the station, even on his days off. And if he was home, I felt guilty for not spending time as a whole family.

So far, online shopping seemed to be a frustratingly slow process of receiving packages, trying everything on, and then returning 90% of it. Besides, Nathan had quickly grown frustrated at seeing the endless packages on our doorstep.

Maybe it was vain, but I couldn't help but feel frumpy and unattractive. I'd hoped new clothes would help with some of that. Maybe even entice Nathan to take more than a passing interest. But his irritation with the new clothes usually surpassed any fleeting glance of admiration when I tried them on.

I turned away from the mirror and grabbed the same green floral print dress I wore to church twice a month. I didn't even

look in the mirror. I knew what I would see. Big hips, tired eyes, and a dress that was fine. Not great. But fine.

“You look nice,” Nathan said as he came out of the shower, his towel slung around his hips. My eyes trailed along his frame, following a bead of water as it slid down his collarbone and over the muscle of his pec before disappearing into the fuzzy edge of the dark-gray towel.

I rolled my eyes, dismissing his compliment. Awesome. I looked “nice.” Meanwhile, I was married to the man most likely to be put shirtless on the cover of a firefighter calendar if we didn’t live in the most conservative small town ever.

I never felt quite as wide and squishy as I did when I was standing next to Nathan and all his sinewy, muscled glory. I shoved away the insecurity and pulled my hair into a low bun, hoping the change from my usual messy topknot was enough to qualify as ‘put together.’

After wrangling the three boys into button-downs and jeans—church was practically the only time they wore anything other than athletic shorts or sweatpants—I cleared the dishes from breakfast and wiped the sticky jelly spot from the table.

“Socks and shoes!” I yelled, hitting the button on the coffeemaker, hoping I would have time to make a cup in a to-go mug without making us too late for church. There was late for church, and there was *too late*. Late for church meant walking in the door at just after 9 and making it into service before the first worship set ended. That was a good morning for us.

Too late for church meant having to knock on the door because they’d already locked it, assuming that anyone who was going to be there for that service had already managed to show up. That was humiliating, and though I hadn’t ever decided just to skip church entirely because of it, I’d certainly been tempted.

“Can I wear sandals?” Alex’s yelled question came from the living room.

I rolled my eyes and called back, “There is snow on the ground!” It was February. Why my child thought he could wear sandals was beyond me. I popped in the coffee pod.

“So?”

I pressed a hand to my forehead. “No, you can’t wear sandals.” I groaned as the coffeemaker beeped at me to add water to the reservoir.

“Aw. Why not?”

Nathan’s booming voice came from the living room. “Just put on your shoes, Alex!” He was in the kitchen then, two shirts on hangers in his hands.

I winced. “Probably didn’t need to yell at him for that,” I suggested quietly as I filled the water tank with a glance at the clock. Four minutes to target launch.

Nathan sighed. “Just trying to help, Bex.” He held up the shirts, one brown and one blue. “Which one?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I dressed all three of the little boys and myself. Am I supposed to dress you too?”

Nathan flinched and clicked his tongue. “Nevermind, then.” He whirled back to the living room.

Guilt washed over me. It was a simple question. Why had I reacted like that?

I set the reservoir back into the coffeemaker, celebrating when it kicked into action. I needed coffee, that was all.

“I like the blue one!” I yelled over the noise of the boys playing keep away from Joey with a mini soccer ball. “All right, boys. Time to load up!” I pressed the lid on the travel mug as the last few drops came out of the machine. Nathan usually handled breakfast for the boys while I showered, which was great. But it meant he was the last one out the door. I couldn’t help but wish he had just a little more urgency when I saw him fiddling with his hair gel for five minutes while I was tracking down lost shoes and helping little hands with buttons.

I got everyone buckled, started the van to get it warmed up, and settled into the passenger seat of the van, waiting for Nathan to come and drive us to church.

Finally, he jogged out of the house and climbed in the front seat. “Everybody ready?”

“Yeah!” came the chorus from the back seat.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” I said.

He nodded in response. “Okay.” Then he turned his attention to the back seat. “Let’s hit the roll!” he said.

“That’s not how it goes,” Lincoln cried out through his giggles. “Daddy, do it right!”

“Oh, sorry. Let’s roll the road!” More giggles erupted from the back seat. Nathan drove and chatted with the boys on the way to church, his multi-tasking skills pretty impressive.

When we got inside, we dropped the boys off in their classrooms, splitting up to get them to the right places as quickly as possible. We weren’t *too late*, but we weren’t on time.

I waited for Nathan in the lobby outside the sanctuary, saying a quiet hello to a few people as they walked inside. I saw Nathan walking down the hallway, his smile broad as other men shook his hand or clapped him on the shoulder and said a quick hello.

The smile he gave so easily to others disappeared when he got close to me. “All good?”

“Yep. Not even too many tears today,” I said. Joey’s separation anxiety had been a big challenge for the last four months. Every single week was a complete meltdown as we dropped him off.

I held out my hand, but Nathan reached for the door to the sanctuary and opened it for us. He let me walk in first, but he didn’t take my hand. Not while we found our seats and not during service.

I could barely hear the sermon for all my thinking about whether I should make the first move and grab his. But if he

pulled away... Where did that leave me? I had apologized, but I shouldn't have to grovel. Maybe he just needed time.

Or maybe he was just being his usual stubborn self, trying to make me feel worse. It had been one little snarky, uncaffeinated comment. Not like I had done something awful. He just needed to get over it.

I crossed my arms and refocused on the sermon. Pastor Justin was talking about forgiveness? Oh good, maybe Nathan would be listening and take it to heart.

CHAPTER

Eleven

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

Parked in front of the small white church, I hung my head toward the steering wheel. What was I even doing here? For weeks, everyone had been trying to convince me that I'd made a mistake. The guys at the station, my parents, even Gladys Pinkman at the bank had pursed her lips at me and went on and on about how her daughter Trina was better off alone than with someone who would give up on a marriage.

None of them had convinced me to change my mind.

Surely, Pastor Justin wouldn't be any different. But in the back of my mind, I wondered if it would be. I respected him and his opinions. And I was worried he'd be able to unlock some buried conviction about my actions.

I kept telling myself that I didn't want him to change my mind.

And yet, here I was, preparing for a meeting between my pastor and my wife. Estranged wife, I corrected myself.

This wasn't counseling. At least that's what I kept telling myself. When I talked to Justin on the phone, I made that very clear. He was just supposed to listen and help Rebecca and I say what we needed to.

I could do this. I wasn't going to let us fall back into the torturous routine that had become our normal. Even if this conversation would be hard, I had to see it through. I couldn't go back to operating in the constant state of anxiety, tension, and depression that had become normal.

Once we got the divorce finalized, I would be able to breathe again.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel for a moment and then climbed out of the truck, just in time to see our van pull in a few spots down. *Rebecca's* van, I corrected myself again.

I crossed the parking lot and reached for her door. I paused, my hand hovering just above the handle, my eyes glued to it. Then I lifted my gaze and found Rebecca's eyes on mine, full of questions behind the window.

What was I thinking? Pushing aside my frustration with myself, I grabbed the door and opened it. It would have been weird not to finish the motion at this point. I would have opened the door for any woman, I told myself.

"Thank you," Rebecca said, her voice soft and lyrical. I saw the questions and a hint of fire in her eyes, but she didn't ask about my sudden chivalry. I shut the door behind her, feeling completely off-balance. I was never going to survive this meeting.

When we got to the front door of the church, I opened it. Rebecca stepped forward slightly, but I quickly walked inside ahead of her, ignoring the way her body stiffened. I needed to remind myself where we stood. We weren't together. I didn't need to open her door.

So why did I immediately feel a wave of guilt?

Rebecca deserved to have her door opened for her. She deserved a man who thought to bring home her favorite flowers and rubbed her feet after a long day and did the dishes without being asked. But I wasn't that guy. I didn't notice the dishes or her tired feet. I wasn't even sure I knew her favorite flower. What a great husband I had been.

Pastor Justin was waiting for us in his office and ushered us into a small grouping of chairs across the room from his desk. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, which was a bit different than his usual dressier clothes on Sundays. "How are you guys doing today?" he asked. His cordial smile revealed no animosity or judgment, I noticed with relief. I was getting pretty tired of the subtle disapproval I saw in the faces of guys at the station.

"Tired," I answered honestly. I'd gotten off shift at eight this morning and managed to grab a few hours of sleep before heading here. I leaned back in the chair.

“And, Rebecca? How are you?”

“Nervous,” she said softly.

Justin smiled. “No need to be nervous. We’re just talking, right?”

She shrugged. “That’s the idea. I’m just...”

I didn’t move a muscle, but my breath caught as I waited to hear what she’d say.

“I’m afraid I’ll find out something I don’t want to know,” she admitted.

Justin hummed as though he understood exactly what she meant. Meanwhile, I was beyond confused.

“What do you want to know?” Justin asked.

Rebecca’s eyes slid toward me. “I want to know why he left.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Justin’s raised finger made me pause.

“And what are you afraid of hearing?” he asked.

“That it’s my fault. Or that... there was someone else. I don’t know,” she added quickly before I could interrupt and dispel that thought for the second time. “Without any information, my mind has been filling in some pretty crazy ideas.”

“That’s totally understandable. How about I pray for us before we begin, and we’ll try to untangle some of what’s happening here?”

I sighed, frustrated that I hadn’t gotten to even say a single word. This was not a good sign for how this meeting was going to go. I barely listened as Justin prayed, my knee bouncing in agitation.

Justin ended the prayer and looked back up at both of us. “Let’s set some ground rules, okay? I find that helps the most in conversations like this.” He waited for us both to nod. “First off, no interrupting. You need to let each other finish their thought before jumping in. Second, we’re not going to yell or

insult each other. And third, we're going to acknowledge that how someone intends actions and words is not always the same as how someone receives those actions and words. But just because you didn't mean to hurt someone doesn't mean that the emotion isn't real or valid, okay?"

I nodded, though I wasn't exactly sure what he meant by that. I guess I'd see if we got there. In the chair next to me, Rebecca nodded too.

"Great. Then let's get started." Justin looked at me, his hands steepled under his chin. It felt like the action of a far older man than Justin, who was barely older than Rebecca and me. "From what I understand, you were the one who made the first decision to move out and begin the separation process, is that right?"

I nodded again.

"Can you tell Rebecca why you felt like you needed to do that?"

I inhaled sharply, my eyebrows jumping in surprise. I straightened in my chair. "Wow, okay. Straight to the hard stuff, I guess."

Justin smiled tightly but didn't say anything. The silence stretched on for a moment while I tried to compile my thoughts.

How could I explain what I'd been feeling and thinking?

I exhaled, focusing on Justin. "I guess I was—"

"Can you tell Rebecca?" He pointed with his head.

I turned slightly so I was facing her instead. Her fingers were twisted in the folds of her skirt, her eyes wide and curious as they focused on me. Sadness flickered in them. She'd cry before the meeting was over, I'd bet every dollar of my MRFD pension on it.

I blew out another heavy breath. "Rebecca... I fell head over heels for you when we met. You were everything I ever wanted in a woman. And here we are ten years later..." I trailed off, not sure how to say what I wanted to say.

Her eyes fell to her lap.

I glanced at Justin, who nodded back at me. “Go ahead,” he said.

“The last few years, we’ve been nothing like that young couple who fell in love. We’re basically roommates – and not good ones.” I searched for the words. “There’s all this pressure on me. I’m tired of living with this soul-crushing feeling where I am constantly pushing and pushing myself but never doing enough. It feels like I’m always letting you down. I’m tired of feeling like a disappointment to you and trying to make myself care enough to try again the next day. It makes me hate myself. And it makes me want to hate you.”

I closed my eyes at some point during the admission, afraid to see the disappointment and denial that I knew would be there in my wife’s eyes. I knew to expect it, because I’d seen it on her face what seemed like every day for the last two years.

I expected her to jump in. To dismiss my concerns or push back against my words. But the sound of her voice never came. Cautiously, I opened my eyes. I found Rebecca looking at me with wide eyes, her hand over her mouth, as though restraining herself.

I couldn’t help it. My lips twitched as a smile threatened to overtake me. “What on earth are you doing, Bex?”

She shifted her hand down slightly, uncovering her mouth. “I promised myself I would make sure you were done talking before I said anything.” Then she moved her hand back up.

She shouldn’t be this adorable. It was hardly fair.

I schooled my features and ignored the urge to fill the room with my laughter. I wasn’t supposed to find her endearing.

“Well, I’m done. So go ahead and say what you want.” I made sure there was no trace of humor in my voice.

Slowly, Rebecca uncovered her mouth. She took a deep breath. “I guess... I had no idea you felt that way. You say there was so much pressure, but you never expressed that to

me. How was I supposed to know? Was it so hard to care? You had to force yourself to care each day? What does that say about us?"

"That's not what I meant," I interjected.

"That's what you said!"

"Timeout." Justin held up his hands in a T shape. "Let's talk about that. Nathan, what did you mean by being tired of trying to make yourself care enough to try?"

I ran my hands over my face. "I don't have to force myself to care about you and the boys. That's not the case at all. You all are the most important thing in the world to me. But trying to make myself care about all the responsibility or your disappointment... that was harder."

"I still don't understand," Rebecca said gently.

I shifted in the chair. "Like... Say I come home from my shift. I grab some water and notice the dishes on the counter, so I load the dishwasher and go to sleep. But I don't notice the trash can overflowing. When I wake up, I get a lecture or a snide comment about the trash. So maybe the next time, I just ignore the kitchen completely and go straight to bed." I shrug. "I know it's stupid, but I just feel like if what I try to do isn't enough, then I might as well not do anything. After enough of that, there's no motivation to try to care."

Rebecca leaned back as though she's been struck. My eyes shifted to Justin and I wrung my hands. "I should go. This isn't going to work."

"Don't go." Rebecca's plea freezes me in place.

"She's right," Justin said. "We're just getting started. Let's see where it goes. Rebecca, how do you feel when you hear that?"

Rebecca's dark-brown eyes met mine. "I'm so sorry I made you feel like what you were doing wasn't enough." She shook her head. When she looked back at me, her eyes were shiny with moisture. "You've always... You do so much. I just... I think I've just been in survival mode the last several

years. No matter what, I feel like I'm drowning. Like I'm failing at everything and frustrated that I can't keep up."

My heart sank. "What? Oh no, Bex. You're doing amazing. You have kept our entire household running single-handedly for as long as I can remember. Somehow, you keep up on laundry and cooking and cleaning the house and still manage to play with the boys. I can't live up to that... Sometimes, I would dream about coming home to a chaotic mess, just because it would reassure me that you weren't perfect. It would validate my own inability to do everything right."

Rebecca scoffed. "I'm far from perfect, Nate. You know that."

"I know. But you've never cracked under the pressure. And I feel like that's all I've done. I run into burning buildings and help little old ladies change their smoke detectors. I held my hand over a wound and held the bleeding off long enough that the person survived. But I can't make my wife respect me."

"What on earth makes you think I don't respect you?" Rebecca's voice rose over my final sentence. There was the emotion I'd been expecting this whole time.

I quirked an eyebrow at her. "I'd think it was obvious."

"This is crazy," she argued.

I sat up in the chair, leaning my elbows on my knees. "Nothing I do is ever good enough! I hear you talking to your friends, complaining about the nights I'm gone or how the upstairs bathroom sink leaks. And when I'm home, you spend more time on your phone or playing with the kids than you even look at me. When I offer an idea, you shut it down almost immediately." I was on a roll now, all the complaints I'd had bottled up finally came spewing out.

"When I try to do something, you criticize my efforts. And when I fail, well, your disappointment is so obvious, it makes me want to punch a wall. But then I'd have to fix the hole and that turned out so well last time." I shook my head, my lips in

a twisted smirk. “We both know you look at that awful patch job every time you walk through the hallway.” I pulled my eyes to hers and confessed the hardest part. “You used to look at me like I hung the stars, Rebecca. You used to walk into church on my arm like you were proud to be seen with me. I don’t know when it changed, but it did.”

Emotions warred across her face. Denial, shock, anger, sorrow.

I pressed on, fighting the heat in my throat and behind my eyes. “I’m not saying all this to make you feel bad. I know that I could have been better and done better, but it’s too much for me. Maybe a better man could handle all of it, but I’m just shutting down under the pressure. I can’t even get angry or defensive. I’m completely numb, Rebecca. And I just feel like... you should be with someone who is worthy of you.” I hung my head in my hands, unable to hold it together for a single additional word.

CHAPTER

Twelve

REBECCA

My husband covered his face with his hands, but the anguish in his expression would linger in my mind. My mouth flapped open and closed, like the fish Alex caught from the dock the last time we went to Racoon Lake. I was completely off-kilter, and the room seemed to spin around me as I tried to process what my husband said.

There was so much I wanted to argue with. So much I wanted to deny, but then again, shards of truth had stung sharply as he explained his feelings. He might have left, but maybe this situation we were in was *my* fault.

My pulse skipped as my heart squeezed painfully. I tried to take a breath, but it came too shallowly. I tried again, but no matter what I did, I couldn't seem to fill my lungs.

"I need to go." I forced out the words as I stood, rushing from the room as quickly as I could, barely seeing the furniture I stepped around. I shoved the door open, stumbling down the hallway, my hands on the wall to keep me upright as I fought for air. I had to breathe. My boys needed their mom, so I couldn't fall to pieces now.

Distantly, I heard the sound of Nathan calling my name. Then, his strong arms came under my shoulders.

"You're okay, I've got you. Slow down." He lowered me to the floor in the hallway of the church office. "Breathe in slowly... one, two, three, four, five. Now out. One, two..." He kept counting, and I slowed my breathing to match his steady rhythm.

Minutes passed as we sat there, Nathan's steady voice counting to five over and over until my breathing returned to normal. Tears covered my cheeks. The panic attack eventually subsided, but the guilt and horror at Nathan's confession was still there.

“How are you feeling?” His voice was gentle and tender with concern. My eyes fell closed. I didn’t deserve his concern. Not when I was forced to face all the ways I’d slowly been crushing my husband under my criticism, demands, disinterest, and dismissal.

“I’m so sorry,” the words tore through my sobs.

“Shhh, it’s okay, sweetheart. Anxiety is perfectly normal.”

I shook my head, but I couldn’t correct him while my body was still out of control. I couldn’t explain that I wasn’t sorry about the anxiety attack, although it had totally disrupted our meeting just when we were finally making some progress.

No, I was sorry for my part in all of this. Here I was for the last month, laying the blame for the breakdown of our marriage solely at Nathan’s feet. When, in fact, he’d been trying and trying without my noticing.

I thought about trying to say more, but each time I did, the tears returned. I gave up and just let the silence continue. I don’t know how long we sat on the rather grimy linoleum floor of the office hallway. But Nathan’s arm was around my shoulder, and somehow, my hands were cradled in one of his. My head slipped comfortably onto the familiar spot between his chest and shoulder where it fit perfectly. The clean, ocean scent of his soap seemed to concentrate there, and I had to restrain myself from turning my nose into his shirt to immerse myself in him.

I expected him to move, to create some distance between us.

But Nathan was as patient as anyone I’d ever met, and he seemed in no hurry to rush the moment.

I stared at my hands in his, the contrast of my smooth hands and polished fingernails with his dark, calloused skin and ragged, broad nails. I took a breath, gathering my courage. “I had no idea you felt so…” I searched for the right word, finally landing on, “diminished.” He shifted his weight and pulled away. I squeezed his hands in a wordless plea not to leave. He stilled.

I continued. “You’re the best man I’ve ever known, Nathan. I don’t know if it is too late for us or not, but you should know that I’ve never been anything but proud of you. Proud to be your wife and thankful that you were my partner in this crazy journey.” My voice fell to a whisper. “I’m so sorry I didn’t show that with my actions or my words.”

My eyes drifted up to his and found them locked in on me. His jaw tightened and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Then, he nodded and pulled away. His knees cracked in the silence as he stood.

I waited for one of his usual funny lines about sounding like Pop Rocks or bubble wrap or a glowstick. But it never came. When had he stopped telling silly jokes to make me laugh? Had I rolled my eyes at them one too many times or made him feel juvenile? I couldn’t remember. But I missed them all the same.

To my surprise, he held out a hand. I took it and stood up. The motion brought me close to him, our chests nearly touching. My head tilted up to look at him, my eyes catching on his strong jaw.

What if I just pressed a kiss to that spot, just where his chin met his neck under his ear? Would it feel just like I remembered? I inched closer, pressing up onto my toes just a fraction of an inch. My hand was still clasped in his.

He stepped back, the distance between us suddenly feeling more like a mile stretch of country road instead of three floor tiles. I flushed with embarrassment. Did I think I could simply undo years’ worth of damage with a three-sentence apology? Did I want to?

I thought back to the accusation at the wedding. He said we’d both become no more than roommates long ago. Perhaps I hadn’t made Nathan feel appreciated, but when was the last time I felt adored or desired? Maybe the truth was there was more than enough blame to go around.

The real question was whether we could find a way to move past it.

Nathan rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “What do you think... What do you think caused it?”

My gaze slid to the floor, where his sturdy black boots disappeared under dark jeans. “I’m not sure.” I lifted my eyes. “I think it was the realization that this,” I waved a hand between us as a hint of a cynical laugh escaped, “our separation, I mean, had a lot more to do with me than I anticipated. I’ve been so convinced that this was your fault. Hearing you point out all the ways I’d failed you was... difficult to hear. After I have some time to think about it, I’ll be more ready to talk again.”

He shifted his weight, creating more distance between us. “What else is there to talk about though? Now you know why I left, so can’t that just be the end of it? You’ve got closure or whatever.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

I took a breath and resisted the urge to call my husband an idiot. I kept my words calm and measured. “From what I heard, you left because you think you’re not what I want or deserve.” I stepped closer. “But you couldn’t be more wrong, Nathan Wells. And I intend to show you exactly how much I want you and appreciate you.”

“It’s too late, Rebecca. We had our chance. But we bring out the worst in each other, and I don’t want to live like that anymore.”

My heart sank. It couldn’t be too late. Not when I wasn’t done. It was never too late for God to fix the broken, right?

“Can we...” I stumbled on the words. If he said no, it was another rejection, and I wasn’t sure my heart would survive that. But I had to ask. “Can we at least have another meeting like this? I’d like us to finish what we started. And hopefully next time, I won’t have an anxiety attack.”

He sighed. “I don’t know, Bex. I really don’t think—”

“Please, Nate. Ten years together... We owe it to each other to make sure it’s really over, don’t we?”

His jaw ticked. “It is over. No matter how much you or my dad or anyone else tries to convince me otherwise.”

We'd been happy. We'd promised each other forever, and I wasn't ready to give up on that promise. I just needed to remind Nathan that who he was hadn't changed that much from the nineteen-year-old man I married. I believed he was still good and honorable.

I just wasn't sure he believed it, too.

"Please?" I said again.

"Fine," he finally agreed. "During my next days off, we can talk again. But we're just clearing the air, Bex. It's not going to change anything."

If I had any tears left, I'm sure I would be crying. But I was spent. I watched him walk away, my heart torn to shreds with the finality in his words. It was just like he'd been saying for weeks. I couldn't change his mind.

But I had to believe that God could.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

REBECCA (10 YEARS AGO)

Nathan thought he was being sneaky, but he couldn't fool me. He had something up his sleeve, and every time I let myself think about what it could be, the butterflies in my stomach went wild. But come on! He suggested that I dress up for our picnic! As though it wasn't the least bit suspicious. I bit my lip to hide my smile. Something about today was special.

Sure, we weren't in high school anymore, and we'd talked about the possibility of getting married. Everyone else seemed to think we were too young, but I knew he was the one.

"Come on, let's go!" Nathan hurried me out of the car, his smile stretching across his face. He picked up the picnic basket and pulled a crinkled gift bag out of the trunk.

"What is that? Give it to me." I giggled, reaching for the sad looking bag, opening and closing my fingers eagerly. I was slightly disappointed, because I'd been hoping that the gift he'd offer me today was much smaller.

As in, one that could fit on my finger.

But I liked a birthday present as much as the next girl. He pulled it to his chest. "Ah-ah. Not yet, my love."

My heart skipped. Of all the sweet words Nathan used, *my love* was my favorite. I was in his phone as Beautiful Becca, and I truly believed he saw me that way. But when he called me 'my love' it marked me as *his*. Precious and treasured.

He refused to hand me the picnic basket as well, somehow managing to hold it and the gift and still reach for my hand. It definitely seemed like our "impromptu" trip to Indianapolis wasn't quite so spontaneous. We were parked at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, but Nathan didn't lead us inside. Instead, he led us to an opening in the hedges and took us down a trail through beautifully manicured gardens.

The summer sun hadn't quite burned away the cool of the morning, since Nathan had insisted we leave Minden so early. The glory of the gardens was on full display. Everything was neatly trimmed, with colorful blooms and unique greenery unwinding before us as we meandered through the garden.

My anticipation grew steadily with each new portion of the garden we entered. Finally, Nathan pointed to a grassy, shaded area, and we left the sidewalk for the soft, green bed of grass that stretched out before us. The spot he chose had a view of a large fountain, but was surprisingly private, with trees on three sides. The gardens weren't crowded today, but they also weren't empty.

I folded my legs under myself on the old quilt Nathan laid out and pressed my lips together. I would be patient, even though I was positively dying to see what was in the gift. If Nathan wasn't going to propose today, I didn't want to spend the whole time pouting.

"Do you want your present now? Or after lunch?"

"And here I thought you knew me..." I raised an eyebrow at him.

He chuckled. "All right then. Present it is. Close your eyes."

I closed them obediently, resisting the urge to peek. Whatever this surprise was, I didn't want to ruin it for him. He'd gone through a lot of effort. He made me feel so special.

He placed the bag in my lap. It was pretty heavy and whatever was in there didn't stand up nicely, causing the bag to tilt toward my chest.

"Okay," he said. "You can open them."

I opened my eyes and flicked my gaze from the bag to him and back again.

"Go ahead. Take it out."

I reached in, my fingers finding the sharp, hard edges of something close to the top of the bag. It slid out easily, pieces

of tissue paper falling away. Nathan grabbed them before they could fly away in the breeze.

I was looking at the back of a frame of some sort, but there was a paper taped to it. A letter. My eyes welled with tears before I even started reading.

REBECCA, *my beautiful beloved,*

I'm not a man of many words. You know that better than anyone. When I tried to think of how to tell you how much you mean to me, I knew I'd never get the words out with as much depth and elegance as you deserve.

So a letter will have to do.

I love your smile. I could listen to you laugh for hours. You're the most genuine, generous, and thoughtful person I know. You make every day we spend together better. And you make me better, too. I've spent years trying to convince myself I could do it on my own. But you made me realize that I don't want to.

I know we've been dating for less than a year, but there is no doubt in my mind that God made you specifically for me. And me for you. My heart is yours, Rebecca Lynn Pfeiffer. It will always be yours.

We've made a lot of memories since we became friends, and I wanted to remind you of some of them with this gift. But I can't deny that my heart is focused on the future. Our forever.

Turn this frame over for some of the memories we've made together.

FOREVER YOURS,

Nathan

THE TEARS WERE ROLLING down my cheeks from the sweet letter. He'd actually typed it up. He swirled his finger when I looked at him, wordlessly telling me to follow the instructions. I turned the heavy frame over in my hands, not really sure what I would find.

The large frame was divided into nine smaller sections. A three-by-three grid filled with photos of us. Prom night. A youth group scavenger hunt. A selfie I'd snapped while he drove us to the MercyMe concert and we sat in construction traffic for an hour. Photo after photo telling the story of our relationship.

The middle frame made me gasp.

That frame didn't hold an image. Instead, simple white paper with big letters printed on it filled the space. My heart cracked. He'd typed that out, too.

Will you marry me?

I looked up at Nathan again, but he wasn't where he'd been a moment ago. Instead, he was to my left side. On one knee, with a tiny black box held open between his fingers.

"Rebecca." My name sounded raspy and desperate on his lips. "I love you so much. I promise to love you forever if you'll let me. Will you marry me?"

I barely took time to set down the large picture frame before I launched myself into his arms. "Yes! Of course my answer is yes."

He lost his balance and rolled us both gently to the blanket, far more gracefully than my exuberant response warranted. We laid on our sides, his arm wrapped gently around me. There was nothing in this moment outside of the two of us, our eyes focused entirely on each other.

"So, I take it you want this?"

He brought the ring box closer so it was in view.

I nodded eagerly, which made him laugh. He leaned up on one elbow, pulled the ring out of the box, and slipped it on my finger.

He held my hand and his lips captured mine in a sweet kiss. He cradled my cheek with his hand, trailing it down my neck. The thrill of such intimate contact rushed through me. He was going to be my husband. I was going to marry Nathan!

“I love you,” he whispered.

“Forever?” I asked.

“And ever,” he confirmed.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

I took out my frustration on the flower beds in front of Mom and Dad's house. While the work was keeping my hands busy, it left my mind plenty free to relive Rebecca's words from the other day repeatedly.

I don't know what I expected when I explained how I had felt the last several years, but it hadn't been for my wife to break down and have a panic attack. And it definitely hadn't been for her to apologize, invade my space, and make me question whether things were really beyond repair.

Now I was a little nervous. Rebecca seemed quite determined to prove me wrong. Hearing her say the words had come as a shock. I wasn't sure I quite believed them. But there was still the other half of it. It wasn't just that she didn't respect me. It was that she shouldn't.

Two sides of the coin. Even if she were able to contradict me less in front of our kids or hold her tongue about my flaws when she was talking to her friends, it didn't fix the root of the issue. Even if she didn't criticize my efforts, they still weren't good enough.

And she couldn't fix that.

I used two hands to pull out an especially stubborn weed, wincing when a thorn dug into the fleshy part of my thumb even through the gloves I wore. I tossed the offending plant into the growing pile of discarded weeds in the wheelbarrow. That was pretty much everything. The flower beds and porch would be ready for pumpkins and mums in just a few weeks.

Rebecca always liked to buy way too many seasonal plants for our front step, too. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. No doubt the planters at our house needed attention, too.

My phone rang and I pulled off my dirty gloves and pulled it out of my pocket. I leaned back on my heels, still kneeling

near the flower beds. Pastor Justin's name displayed prominently on the screen as I freed it from my jeans.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Nathan. It's Justin. Do you have a minute?"

I leaned back, slipping my feet out from under me and sitting in the grass. "Uh, sure. What's up?"

Trepidation filled me. The mediation session had gotten pretty heavy, and I'd admitted a lot of things I didn't plan on.

"I wanted to chat with you a little more. I know you mentioned that you weren't interested in marriage counseling," he said.

Oh boy, here came the guilt trip.

"I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of counseling on your own. Some of the things you mentioned—apathy and anxiety and general lack of interest... It sounds like maybe your own mental health could use some attention. I think it could help your marriage to address some of it, but either way, I think it will help you in the long run."

I stared at a discolored brick on the corner of the house.

"I don't need therapy, Pastor. I'm good."

"Look, Nathan... I'm just gonna be real with you. Guys who are *fine* don't just leave their family. You've got a hard job, a lot of responsibility at work and at home... and I'm just suggesting that you find someone to talk about it with you. One-on-one. Someone you can be honest with, without judgment, if you don't feel like you have that with anyone else right now."

I heard the unspoken insinuation in his words. I didn't feel like I could be honest *with Rebecca* without being judged by her right now. And he was right. How could I tell her that I felt anxious at the idea of coming home after my shift? What good could come from that conversation?

"I'll think about it," I said, eager to get him off the phone. I needed to end this conversation before I did something stupid like agree to get therapy. At the station, Chief Bergman was

always mentioning the counseling available free through the Firefighters Association. But I didn't know a single guy that had taken them up on it.

What kind of man needed to talk about his feelings with some shrink? It wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't take away the memories of the deaths or broken bodies or the screams we heard in our nightmares.

So what was the point?

I had to put one foot in front of the other. Show up each day and help the people I could. That's what made me a good firefighter. A good captain.

After I got off the phone with Justin, I swiped a bottle of water from my parents' fridge and drove to the house. I was going to mow the lawn for Rebecca. I did it last week after the first day of school, but it was already too tall. The storm that had come through last weekend and the sunshine of the last few days meant it needed another trim. Had Rebecca even noticed the last one? She hadn't said anything, but we hadn't exactly talked a lot.

After working on my mom's planters all morning, my eyes were drawn to the ones on the front porch. I hadn't even noticed last time I was here, but the petunias and geraniums we'd planted this spring had clearly been neglected. Their scraggly brown stems hung over the edge of the planters.

A splash of guilt hit me. No doubt Rebecca had forgotten the plants after I left. I remembered how pleased she'd been when we spent Memorial Day with the boys, letting them use their tiny shovels to carefully dig holes for each little seedling. I could still taste the fresh lemonade she'd brought us when the planting was done, and we sat on the porch watching the boys play catch in the yard below us.

I rubbed my chest absently as the memory faded. Why had I not appreciated that at the time? Why did it feel like I was miserable all the time? I hadn't been. Not really.

I climbed out of the truck and slipped my gloves on. The least I could do was clear out the dead plants and make room

for new ones. Maybe I could even run to Bloom's Farm and get some mums and pumpkins in a few weeks. It would be a nice surprise for Rebecca.

For the boys, I mean. They'd like to help plant some new flowers.

I didn't need to surprise Rebecca, so it would be for the boys.

After I finished cleaning up the planters, I pulled the mower out of the garage and ran it through the overgrown lawn. I trimmed the edges and blew the clippings off the driveway.

Just before I left, I pulled the garbage can to the edge of the street for tomorrow's pickup.

I left my old house with a smile on my face. It felt surprisingly good to take care of those things for my family. I tried not to think about the last time I'd mowed before I moved out. I'd felt so much resentment and frustration. But I couldn't avoid the spiral.

"Do you think you could mow tonight or tomorrow?" Rebecca had asked. "The boys are having a playdate on Friday."

I'd just woken up from a nap the afternoon of my first day off shift.

"I'll get to it!" I snapped at her. I'd already noticed the overgrown weeds when I pulled in that morning, but with four calls the night before, I hadn't slept a wink. I didn't need her nagging to remind me that the lawn was my responsibility.

She had pressed her lips together and left me alone. And I'd mowed with a surly attitude after dinner that night. Looking back, I didn't hear the nagging tone I had been so defensive of.

I parked the truck at the park and hung my head. How many other instances where I felt badgered or criticized were really about my own attitude instead of Rebecca's? How much had my own apathy or anxiety pushed us to the limit?

My eyes lifted to the field in front of the parking lot, drawn to the group of kids chasing soccer balls across the open space toward a tiny goal. The familiar brown ponytail caught my eye. Rebecca was there, clearly struggling to keep Joey from trying to join Link's soccer practice.

I hopped out of the truck and was halfway to her chair before I thought it through. Would she want my help? I hesitated. Maybe I should just go.

"Daddy!" Joey yelled my name and tugged free of his mom's hand before running as fast as his little legs could carry him. I winced as he ran, waiting for him to trip and faceplant in his little sandals. He made it to me without incident though.

"Hey, squirt," I said with a laugh. I picked him up and lifted him high in the air as I spun around. "Are you giving your mom trouble?"

"Always," Rebecca's exasperated voice came from behind me.

Tucking Joey onto my hip, I turned toward her.

"Hey. I didn't realize you'd be here. I was just parking for a sec and saw you..." I trailed off. I didn't want to make her feel bad about struggling with the boys. It was understandable.

She laughed. "Saw me trying to convince this one that two-year-olds can't play on the five-year-old team? Yeah. He's not a big fan of that stance. They moved practice to today because of the storms headed here tomorrow night. The fields will be a mess tomorrow," she explained.

I nodded. "What do you say you and I go play on the playground while Link finishes practice?"

Rebecca's grateful look was enough to let me know I was doing the right thing. I knew how difficult it was to wrangle the little ones for practices or games.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

REBECCA

After the fiasco that was soccer practice, I took the boys back home. My eyebrows lifted at the site of my freshly cut lawn. It hadn't even been that overgrown this time. Shame burned in my cheeks. I hated that I needed someone, but I was also grateful for whichever one of their husbands had taken the time this afternoon to clean things up. And it looked like whoever it was had pulled my trashcan to the road as well.

I had never been so glad to make it to trash day. After two consecutive weeks of forgetting to pull my trash cans out to the curb, the situation was getting desperate. It wasn't helped by the fact that we had ordered pizza from the gas station and takeout from the bistro far more frequently than I preferred. The takeout containers alone could probably fill our blue trash cans. And the summer heat meant I was starting to smell the bins from around the garage.

I ushered the boys inside and flipped on the oven. Chicken nuggets would have to do, since I was too tired from soccer practice to do anything else. I hadn't expected to see Nathan there, and while I was grateful for his help with Joey, it had also thrown me off. I needed to mentally prepare myself to see him. Otherwise, my heart tended to react in strange ways. Like it momentarily forgot the current status of our relationship and was all too eager to jump back into his arms. But I couldn't do that. He had left, and he didn't want me anymore.

Except... sometimes when he looked at me, I felt like he still cared. And darn if that wasn't confusing as heck.

It was probably my imagination. Sleep deprivation and too much caffeine. Because Nathan had made it very clear that he was no longer interested in our life together. And I just needed to accept that.

"What's for supper?" Alex asked, interrupting my distracted thoughts.

“Chicken nuggets,” I said. “Go take off your shoes and change your clothes.” He was still wearing his soccer cleats and grass-stained shorts.

“Aww, can’t you make mac and cheese?”

I puffed in frustration, then filled with shame. How was it possible that even macaroni and cheese from a box felt like too much work?

I was such a bad mom.

I shut my eyes for a long moment, contemplating my options. When I opened them, Alex was still in front of me. “Go change your clothes. I’ll start the water. Do you want to dump in the noodles?”

His wide grin—so much like the one I used to see from his father, but that hadn’t made an appearance in far too long—eased the ache in my heart just a bit. I would do anything for these boys. I could. I would be strong for them.

My newfound resolve was severely weakened by the time bedtime rolled around. I was used to handling bedtime on my own, both from when Nathan was on shift and since he left. But there was something demoralizing about doing it alone.

Every. Single. Night.

It was the time when I missed Nathan most of all. It was amazing how much that extra pair of hands, even if they didn’t do what felt like the bulk of the work, made a difference in how smooth the process of getting all the boys bathed, brushed, and tucked in was.

It was also the time my kids asked about their dad the most.

“Will Daddy come home tomorrow?” Lincoln’s sweet words caused the lump in my throat to swell.

“No, sweetie. I’m sorry. I... I don’t think your daddy will be coming home. You will still get to see him though.”

I could see my five-year-old struggling to hold in his emotions. He nodded, and I reached my hand across the

comforter to brush his cheek. His face cracked, the tears escaping.

“Why doesn’t he want to be our daddy anymore?”

And there went my heart, crumbled to pieces at the pain of my little boy. “Oh, baby. Your daddy loves you. I know it feels hard to understand right now, but sometimes mommies and daddies don’t do a good job of loving each other. But that doesn’t mean we don’t love you.”

Lincoln sniffled and let me hold him, an occurrence that was less and less common the older he got. Eventually, he settled and I tucked him in. Then, I moved on to Alex, who had already brushed his teeth and said his own prayers.

“We don’t need Dad,” he said.

I was sure my face betrayed my surprise, but I kept my voice calm. “What do you mean?”

Alex sat up, revealing his Super Mario pajamas. I had worried they were too juvenile for him, but I was secretly pleased when he declared he wasn’t too old for the character print. “If it is too hard to go to soccer practice, I don’t have to play. We don’t need Dad to show up to help. Why did you even call him?” His question sounded almost accusatory.

“I didn’t call him, sweetie, but I wish I would have. I would never ask you to give up something you love just because it is inconvenient for me. Your dad just happened to be at the park and saw I could use an extra hand. It was nice of him,” I explained. My oldest son clearly struggled with his torn loyalty.

“Well, I don’t want you to be sad, Mom. And seeing him makes you sad,” he added with a shrug.

I breathed through the vice grip that seized my heart at his simple assessment. “It’s not that simple, honey. I know that’s not what you want to hear. But I need you to trust me. I love you so much, and so does your dad. Him being gone makes me a little sad right now, but that doesn’t mean you need to shut him out, okay?”

Alex gave me a begrudging nod. I kissed his forehead and smoothed the blankets.

“Good night, kiddo.”

“Night, Mom.”

I glanced longingly at the couch on my way to the kitchen. I would love to snuggle up in the corner and crack open a book or turn on a Faithmark movie. But the dishes wouldn't do themselves, and if I left the clothes in the washer for any longer, they were likely to get musty.

So, I bypassed the couch. I turned on the kettle for some tea and let it heat while I loaded the dishwasher. Halfway through loading the dishes, my phone rang, and I whirled around, looking for it. Where had I set it down? I'd been moving nonstop since we got home from soccer, I didn't even think I had looked at it. It was pretty unusual for me, actually.

Nathan had grown irritated on more than one occasion when he felt like I was ignoring him or the kids in favor of my phone. Maybe both of us were a little too quick to be critical of the other.

I followed the noise and found my phone propped against the utensil crock near the stove. I frowned when I saw Nathan's name and picture on the screen.

“Hello?” I asked, my tone filled with apprehension.

“Hey,” he said, his tone low and smooth. It wasn't fair how he seemed so unaffected, when my heart had started racing the second I saw his name. “Is now an okay time to talk?”

“Umm, I guess? The boys are already in bed, I'm sorry. Did you want to—”

“Actually, I was calling to talk to you.”

My eyebrows flew to my hairline. “You were?”

A short chuckle rolled across the line. “You sound so surprised.”

I blew on my tea to cool it. “I am surprised,” I admitted finally. “I didn't think...” I paused, searching for the words. “I

didn't think you really wanted to talk to me."

The line fell silent, until Nathan's muffled groan broke through. "If only you knew how untrue that is."

I had no idea how to respond, so I didn't.

The silence stretched on. I couldn't bring myself to end the call though.

Finally, Nathan cleared his throat. "Today at the park, Joey climbed the entire rock wall on his own. I... I didn't realize he could do that. He's so little, isn't he?"

A small smile spread across my face. "He's determined to do everything his brothers can do, I think. Oh, and he tried to make coffee this morning," I said with a laugh. "I caught him just before the coffee pod started melting in the toaster."

"You have to remember to unplug the toaster! I told you that last time."

I stiffened, chastising myself for getting too comfortable. Foolish of me to think for a second that we could just enjoy our child's antics without turning it into a lecture or a fight. "It was fine," I said through my clenched jaw. "He was alone for less than a minute. I just thought it was a funny story. Never mind."

He groaned, and I imagined he was running his hand over his face the way he did when he was exasperated. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like you weren't responsible. It was just... firefighter instinct. Unfiltered caveman thoughts." His voice deepened. "Me protect. Fire bad."

His caveman impression softened the hard edge that had appeared when I felt criticized. Trying something new, I tried to explain my feelings a little more. "It's okay. I know you weren't necessarily calling me a bad mom. It just feels that way sometimes when you get snippy and correct me like that."

"Caveman sorry," he grunted, still in character.

A giggle slipped through my lips. "You're ridiculous."

"It's nice to hear you laugh..." He trailed off, a weighty silence falling over our conversation once more. "I miss you

so damn much, Rebecca.” His voice broke on the words.

My hands shook as I set down my mug. I leaned my elbows on the counter, resting my chin in my hands. I squeezed my eyes closed and whispered a desperate plea. “Then come home, Nate.”

“I want to, Bex. I just... I can’t go back to how things were. I can’t be the guy you want me to be. And it’s killing me.”

Tears were rolling down my face. “You’ve always been the guy I want. Nothing is going to change that.”

“I want to believe that... I wonder if—would you be all right if we...”

I felt like my heart was walking a tightrope, waiting for him to untangle his words. I held my breath.

“Maybe we could spend some time together?” His voice was high and uncertain.

I waited for more, trying to understand exactly what he wanted, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Nevermind. It was a dumb idea. I’ll let you—”

“Nathan, stop.” I took a breath, letting my smile spread across my wet cheeks. “I’d like that very much.”

CHAPTER

Sixteen

NATHAN

“I’d like that very much.” Rebecca sounded sincere—and a little a surprised.

Breath whooshed out of my lungs. “Really?”

She laughed, and the sound was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard.

“Yes, really.” For the first time I could remember, I felt the tug of hope in my chest. Rebecca wanted to spend time with me.

“Maybe my parents can watch the boys and we can go have dinner?” I felt like a teenager asking out my crush for the first time. Except teenagers didn’t have to worry about arranging babysitters for their three kids.

“I’m free except Wednesday night. And Tuesdays. Small group,” she said.

Of course. Small group. The same group we had both attended together for years. I had stopped going when I left her. No one in the group had pushed me out, but I couldn’t help but feel the disapproval and judgment from them. In the split, Rebecca had gotten the house, the van... and the friends.

But none of that was enough to make me really question whether I was making the wrong choice. In the court of public opinion, I knew I would be the guilty party. I could deal with that, if it meant that Rebecca and I would both be happier in the long run.

If Pastor Justin was right, it was possible that my own anxiety and depression had less to do with Rebecca and more to do with me... I’d been turning over his words in my head all day. I owed it to both of us to see if I could figure it out and salvage what was left of our relationship.

I’d rebuild it brick by brick if I needed to.

Because as much as everyone in town thought I was a quitter who had given up on my marriage, if there was a hint of something there worth fighting for, then I would. I just hadn't been able to see it. Holding Rebecca in my arms in the hallway at church last week was like a glimpse of light through the clouds of apathy and hopelessness. One I had immediately turned away from, a little afraid of letting myself want that light for myself.

“Okay. How about Saturday night?”

“Sounds perfect,” she said.

I grinned, loving the way I could hear the smile in her voice.

“It's a date,” I said, a deep satisfaction rolling through my chest. A date with my wife. Who would have thought?

Back at the fire station the next morning, I steeled myself before dropping my bag in the rec room. I grabbed my notebook for the meeting. With Bryce Storm and Jake Barrett on A shift before mine, I couldn't help but get tense at every shift change meeting.

They were good guys, and I trusted them with my life. But they were still in their little newlywed and dating cocoon of happiness. In their mind, I was an idiot for leaving my wife. But nine years into marriage looked a lot different than two weeks. And it certainly felt different than dating.

They didn't have the stress of kids or the financial pressure to feed five mouths every week. They didn't understand what it was like to do everything you could think of trying to earn approval and then... not get it.

I waved half-heartedly to the two of them, not surprised that they were sitting next to each other, whispering like schoolgirls. I saw that my team, Dylan and Carter, were already there. I looked for Burns, my probationary firefighter. My jaw tightened when I didn't see him.

Chief Bergman appeared in the doorway, cup of coffee in hand. “Let's get on with it. These boys are ready to go home.”

I nodded, taking control of the meeting. As the incoming captain, that was my role. I focused my attention on Bryce. Most of the meeting would revolve around the two of us exchanging updates, along with a few notes from the chief or the other firefighters.

Bryce walked through the calls they handled yesterday while I made notes.

I couldn't fight my smile when Bryce mentioned the call they had where PFF Matteo didn't realize the patient with gastrointestinal distress was in a wheelchair.

Matteo groaned. "I was focused on his stomach! I said I was sorry." He hung his head.

"You asked a double-amputee *if he could walk* to the ambulance," Bryce said with an incredulous grin. "

"And here I thought you were *on a roll*, Probie," I said with a smirk.

"Holy smokes. Did you know Wells had a sense of humor?" Jake asked the room with wide eyes and mock surprise.

I rolled mine in response.

"I'd heard rumors, but I chalked it up to urban legend," my lieutenant, Dylan, quipped. "What about you, Mac?"

"I'm going to write this down," replied Carter.

I bristled immediately, but then realized I didn't mind the ribbing. I decided to play into the joke instead of getting angry. "Whoa, I didn't realize you could write, Mac. Congratulations."

An outburst of surprised "ohhhs" filled the room as the crew laughed at the insult. I stifled my grin, disproportionately pleased with my retort. Bryce and Jake were looking at me like I'd grown two heads, but Matteo, Dylan, Mac, and Chief Bergman were still howling with laughter.

I smiled and shook my head. "All right, all right. Let's wrap this up."

After the meeting, Bryce pulled me aside. “Hey, man. It’s... it’s nice to see you like this. It’s been a while since we had Nate the Great around.”

I lifted one corner of my mouth in a half-smile. “Geez. I’d almost forgotten that lame nickname you came up with.”

Bryce mocked his offense. “Lame? That’s poetry, my man. B Team Dream Team, remember?” He reached out his hand and we did the dorky, complicated handshake I hadn’t done since Bryce moved off my crew to lead A shift. I messed up the ending and we laughed our way through an awkward finish.

“All I’m saying is that it’s nice to see you loosen up a bit.”

“Thanks,” I said. I hesitated... “Have I really been that bad?”

Bryce’s eyebrows rose. “Well, let’s just say that you haven’t been much fun to be around. I hate to ask this, but are you really that much happier after you know...leaving Rebecca and the kids?”

My smile fell and I shook my head. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no.” I rolled my shoulders. “I’m actually taking Rebecca on a date this weekend.”

Bryce’s easy smile spread. “Seriously? That’s great, dude. So that’s what’s got you all smiles, eh?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. We’re still just seeing where it goes. But it feels good, you know?”

Bryce clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, man, I’m happy for you. Krystal and I have been praying for you. I know it’s been a little weird, but I want you to know... we’re really trying not to pick sides here. We’re on team Nate *and* Rebecca, you know?”

I nodded in response, worried that if I tried to respond, I would only end up crying, and that was the last thing I wanted to happen at the fire station. I’d never live it down. Finally, when my emotions subsided, I replied. “I really appreciate that. It has definitely felt a bit like everyone was there to support her... Kind of like no one really cared about me.”

Bryce shook his head. “Aw, man. I’m sorry it felt that way. We’re all just a bit caught off-guard, I think. And trying to figure out the best way to support both of you. It’s way easier to pick out those tangible things that she needs—you know, help with the kids and all that. But what do you need?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “I don’t know. A friend?”

Bryce’s eyes shut briefly. “Shoot, I’m sorry. I’m an idiot, aren’t I?”

“Well, yeah. But not because of this,” I joked. Thankfully, he laughed and the tension was broken.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got an appointment, and I need to hit the hardware store. Other than that, nothing.”

“Want to grab lunch?”

I considered it. Was I really prepared to get lunch with Bryce? Sure, we’d been on the same crew years ago. But since then, we hadn’t really hung out much. He was a captain, same as me. But by all accounts, he was far more fun. I knew my reputation around the station.

Stodgy and uptight Captain Wells.

I took my job seriously, and I didn’t think there was anything wrong with that. Of course, it felt good to joke around with the guys this morning.

“Wells!”

I turned to find Chief Bergman summoning me to his office.

Glancing back at Bryce, I said, “Lunch sounds good. I’ll reach out in the morning.”

In the chief’s office, I pulled up a chair. Danny Bergman was an interesting guy. He was as solid as any guy I’d ever met. Calm under pressure and authentic in his relationships. I’d tried to talk to him a few times about what was going on with Rebecca and me, but in the end, I think I was afraid he

would try to talk me out of leaving and I would feel pressured to agree with him.

But I didn't know what he wanted to talk about today. He'd been out of town for vacation and meetings a lot lately, so it really could be anything.

“What's up, Chief?”

He leaned back in his chair and propped one ankle up across his knee. He held a MRFD mug between his hands and a navy-blue ballcap with the same logo covered his shaved head.

“I'm hearing a lot of things, Wells. So, I figured we needed to sit down so I could hear it from you.”

I tensed and my eyes dropped to the notebook I was still holding from the shift change meeting. “What do you want to know?” I asked quietly. Part of me wished I could just tell my boss to mind his own business. If I did, I'd get a disapproving look and the chief would probably drop it. But I respected the man too much to do that.

I said I wanted a friend, right? So why was I always so tempted to shut anyone out who attempted to be one?

“Just tell me what's going on in that stubborn head of yours. Eli tells me you left Rebecca and the kids and are living with your parents?”

I rolled my eyes and shifted my weight back in the chair. My younger brother Elijah was on the shift after mine. That ten-minute shift change meeting was honestly the most I saw him usually. Apparently, that hadn't stopped him from spreading my business around the station.

“It's complicated,” I said, preparing to defend myself.

Chief held up his hand. “Look, most of these guys around here haven't even been married long enough to realize what it takes. You don't want to talk to them about it, that's fine. Shoot, if you don't want to talk to me about it you don't have to. All I'm saying is that I know a thing or two. I've got two divorces under my belt and a marriage that is so different from those it's like night and day.”

The chief was in his late forties, and I knew that he and Marcy had been together for more than ten years. I'd heard the guys mention she was his third wife, but he never really brought it up.

“Not exactly something I broadcast, you know?”

I nodded. After the way I felt walking around town these days, I probably wouldn't tell people either. “What happened?”

Chief clicked his tongue and shook his head. “We were young and selfish. I'd like to say I tried, but I didn't. Not really.”

“Why not?”

He sighed. “I was caught up in my own happiness. I wanted to conquer the world, you know. It felt like we were on completely different pages.”

I frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“I was always focused on what they were doing wrong. And I never stopped to consider that I was hurting them just as badly as they were hurting me. And by the time we were done, it was too late to change things.”

I didn't know what to say to that.

Chief sipped his coffee before setting it down and leaning forward. “You didn't ask, but here's what I see.”

I braced myself. What did the chief think of me? Did he think I was being selfish and cruel to leave my family?

“Guys like us? Most men, if we're being honest, are looking for purpose and fulfillment. We're looking for respect and honor. Identity. Don't you think?”

I shrugged. “Sure?” Wasn't everyone looking for those things? I had no idea where he was going with this.

“When you're a family man, you look to your family for those things, right? It sounds noble—living for your wife and kids. But... when we don't get what we are looking for from them? Sometimes, it's hard to feel like changing diapers and

lightbulbs is really *it*. I don't feel deeply satisfied or important doing that, right?"

Chief was looking out the little window in his office that looked toward the trees and the creek behind the station. "So, we come here. Work gives us more of that feeling. People respect us and look up to us. The ranks give us something to work toward and people to lead who value that leadership. We feel important... fulfilled."

I nodded along. Yes, that was exactly how I felt about my job. It gave me so much satisfaction to be a firefighter. And being captain? I'd worked so hard for it, and I thrived under the extra responsibility.

Then, Chief Bergman met my eyes. "But sometimes the dragons we're supposed to slay for our wives are dirty diapers or a mountain of laundry. They aren't any less important. Shoot, they're probably more important."

He drank his coffee. "Here's the thing, Wells. Work isn't the thing either. Eventually, you have to come face-to-face with the reality that you'll never find deep enough purpose or identity from this job—any job. Or a family. Even the perfect family or perfect wife can't give you that. Being the best firefighter in the state with medals and recognition won't give it to you. Even if you were the best husband and father who never made a mistake, you would still be searching."

I stayed silent, not sure how to respond. What was he trying to say? We were just out of luck, trying to find purpose and identity in life? Honestly, that wasn't so far from what I'd felt lately. That didn't mean I wanted to hear it laid out so plainly by a man I respected like Chief Bergman.

"Okay, great pep talk," I said sarcastically. I put my hands on the armrest of the chair and started to push myself up to standing.

"Not so fast, Wells. You'll miss the important part."

I collapsed back into the chair. Whatever he had to say, apparently I was going to be forced to listen.

“The truth is that if we are looking anywhere other than the Lord for purpose and fulfillment and ultimate satisfaction, we’re going to be disappointed. That’s the difference between my first two marriages and this one. It’s all about where my foundation is.”

I pressed my lips together and stared at him. I probably looked like some sulky teenager in the principal’s office. I heard what the chief was saying, but I was already a Christian guy, and it hadn’t saved my marriage.

The alarm rang in the station, and I stood. I’d never been so grateful for an emergency call. “Thanks, Chief. Duty calls.”

He sighed. “Yep, go. But I’m here if you need anything.”

CHAPTER

Seventeen

REBECCA

I took a leisurely stroll through the farmer's market, eyeing which stand had the best produce. It was no surprise that Bloom's Farm had a full display of vegetables, plus apples from the orchard, all displayed in cute wooden bushel baskets with chalkboard signs displaying prices. The red-checked tablecloth was the final touch and made their table inviting, with the green veggies popping against the background.

The farmer's market was held in the Minden City Park each Saturday morning during the summer and fall, with vendors from all around selling everything from produce to crafts, with the occasional food truck stopping by. Since Nate's parents took all the boys after their Saturday morning soccer games, I decided it was a nice chance to enjoy the market without the kids though I could already feel the sun starting to burn away the cool of the morning. I got a refill in my travel mug from the B&J Bistro coffee truck, but as the sun warmed my back, I wished I'd gone with iced coffee instead of my usual hot.

I searched for familiar faces behind the stands, but it seemed like Bloom's Farm had sent some of their employees. It wasn't unexpected. Poppy Bloom had come a long way from her farmer's market stand. It was hard to believe she now lived in the White House as the First Lady of the United States. Gone were the days when Poppy or her sisters were usually found making change behind the counter and catching up on local news.

I bought some apples and sweet corn, beans, peppers, and tomatoes. The boys would turn up their nose at everything but the corn on the cob. I'd have to decide later if I was going to push the issue.

"Hey there, Rebecca."

I grabbed my change from the worker and craned my neck toward the voice. Monica smiled at me, her hand tucked around the elbow of Jake Barrett. Despite dealing with her own recovery from a car accident and amnesia, she always had a smile on her face and was the first one in line to help anyone who needed it. She was a big reason the Wednesday prayer group at my house had been established.

I put on a smile, trying not to feel self-conscious that I was here alone. “Hey, guys.”

“Where are the boys?” Monica asked.

I smiled automatically, like I always did when someone asked about my kids. I couldn’t help it—they were amazing kids. “They’re with Nate’s parents. Alex had a soccer game this morning, and now they’re going swimming out at Andy’s Lake and then staying the night.” The private lake sold memberships so people could go swim, camp, and fish there.

“So you get a little alone time? That’s great.”

I smiled, but my heart wasn’t in it. I should be enjoying this, right? Instead, I found myself wishing I was walking through the market with Nathan instead of on my own.

“How are you two doing?”

Monica and Jake looked at each other with so much tenderness and joy that it made my eyes sting. “We’re good,” Jake answered for them. He glanced at the floor. “Look, about Nate...”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to say anything. I think...he needs you guys. Just be his friend, okay?”

Jake nodded. “I heard the two of you have a date coming up?”

I blushed and tucked my hair behind my ear, suddenly self-conscious. “It’s tonight. Sounds crazy, right?”

“It’s wonderful,” Monica said. “We’ll be praying that the two of you can really reconnect.”

I smiled. “Thanks. That’s what I’ve been praying, too.” As hard as it was, my prayer group friends had been so sweet

about supporting me while still praying for redemption in our marriage. At first, I'd been frustrated because I just wanted to be angry, and I wanted them to be angry with me.

And they were, but Miss Ruth had said something the very first week that Nathan left, and it had stuck with me ever since. "It might feel like Nathan's the enemy right now. But he's not the one ultimately trying to destroy your marriage. We need to fight against our true Enemy and pray that Nathan will find his strength in the Lord to stand against him too."

Of course... when I was fighting with Nathan at every meeting since then, it was a lot harder to keep that perspective. I was finally feeling like maybe Nathan wasn't the enemy though. So, we'd keep praying. And I'd keep fighting.

When I got home after my stroll through the farmer's market, I took a shower. It was still three hours until my date, but I found myself full of nerves and anticipation. I shouldn't be so nervous to go on a date with the man I'd slept next to for nine years, but my heart didn't seem to get the memo.

I stood in front of my closet, wrapped in my robe and staring at my clothes. Nothing seemed right. I tried on four dresses, finding fault with each one as my frustration and anxiety kicked up a notch. Jeans? No, it was too hot out, the sweltering August heatwave in full force.

I picked up my phone and dialed. "Carla, are you busy? I need your help."

"What's up?"

I laid back on my bed and curled on my side. "I'm going to dinner with Nathan, and I have nothing to wear."

Carla laughed. "Oooh, I'm on my way. Don't move."

When Carla arrived ten minutes later and let herself in, she found me stress-eating Doritos and guzzling a can of Diet Coke I found buried in the back of the fridge.

Her eyebrows flew skyward. "Well, I was going to ask how you were doing, but I think I get the picture."

I groaned. “I’m an absolute mess. What was I thinking? I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Yeah... that’s not the nerves. That’s the fake cheese dust and the bubbles.”

Just then, I burped loudly and slapped a hand to my mouth.

Carla stifled a laugh. “Feel better?”

I nodded, and we both dissolved into laughter. My side and my cheeks hurt by the time the giggle subsided. I looked at my friend. “What if it doesn’t work? What if... what if we hate each other after all this time? Or there’s no chemistry and it’s like going on a bad first date?”

Carla just shook her head. “Not possible. You’re not strangers. It’s not like all that history goes away, you know? Trust me, I know bad first dates.”

“Oh yeah. Whatever happened with that guy... Trent?”

She waved her hand. “Nothing. He was a total weirdo. The date was super awkward. And he kept getting texts from other girls. That was like a month ago, anyway. I’m over it.”

“I’m sorry. You’ll find the right guy sometime.”

Carla shook her head, and a hint of color appeared in her cheeks. “Enough about me. We should get you dressed. I brought some clothes, just in case, but I bet you have great options in your closet.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to decide if there was something she wasn’t telling me. Carla was usually an open book about her dating prospects. “All right, let’s go make me beautiful so I can make my husband fall in love with me again.”

“Pssh. I saw the way he looked at you the other day at the soccer game. That man is still in love with you. He just needs to admit it to himself.”

I blushed but shook my head at her words. It certainly didn’t feel like I was loved by Nathan these days. I felt a bit like I was a tortoise someone got as a pet before realizing the

animal would outlive them and was now provided for and tolerated out of obligation.

Which made me question all over again why I was fighting so hard. Basically, I was a hot mess.

With Carla's help, I landed on a pretty floral print skirt with a pale-pink shirt tucked into it at my waist. I'd lost ten pounds since Nathan left—probably a side effect of not eating when I was too busy crying. Maybe not the best way to lose weight.

I fixed my makeup and curled my hair, much like I had just two weeks ago before the wedding. I said a quick prayer that we wouldn't end up fighting again like we had that night. I'd gone in with such high hopes to win him back that night, seduce him even. It was obvious now that there was so much that had been left unsaid for so long, we weren't ready for that.

Tonight wasn't about convincing him to come home. Wandering through the farmer's market today, I'd realized that I had to stop trying to do that. Nothing I did or said would make Nathan ready to return. But I could reconnect with him and include him as part of our family, even though he wasn't living here.

And I would keep praying for him.

I knew I still had a lot of things to work on too. And I was going to work on looking for things about Nathan to be thankful for, instead of griping when he didn't meet the expectations that were too high or entirely unspoken. I could do that while we were separated.

But I was done begging him to come home. Honestly, I didn't think my pride could take one more rejection. I took one last look in the full-length mirror in the closet and smoothed the nonexistent wrinkles of my skirt, taking a deep breath.

It was just a date.

But it sure felt like it could be the start of a new chapter.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

NATHAN (12 MONTHS AGO)

I reached across the center console for Rebecca's hand. "It feels like forever since we've been out."

She laughed. "Yeah, it really does. Are you sure your parents are up for this? Joey is only a year old, and he still wakes up almost every night... Maybe we should just pick them up after dinner." Her expression morphed into one of worry.

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. Tonight, you're all mine."

I'd been looking forward to this all week. A night alone without kids? I think we'd forgotten what that was like. And I intended to become *intimately* reacquainted with my wife.

We needed this.

I needed this.

We had dinner at the bistro. Nothing fancy, but the dinner specials were a step up from the burgers and fries at Bulldog's. Plus, Rebecca looked so pretty in the candlelight. She had her hair down, and I loved the way it spread across her shoulders in soft waves. It was almost always pulled up at home.

"Chief Bergman is thinking we'll add a couple more probationary firefighters in the next year. He wants me to mentor one." Pride filled my voice. It would be my first probie as a captain and felt like a big responsibility.

Rebecca nodded. "Do you think you'll have to work extra hours because of that?"

My heart sank. Would it kill her to be excited for me? This was a big opportunity. The flatbread pizza turned to ash in my mouth as I lost my appetite. "I'm not sure," I said. I was already at the station far more than any of the other firefighters. "He'll be on my shift, so it should just be on the clock."

Rebecca hummed an acknowledgement and took a bite of her food.

I leaned back, frustrated at her response. The rest of our food came, and we talked about trivial things. I barely ate my food.

“You going to eat that?” Rebecca asked, pointing to the last piece of the gorgonzola, pear, and chicken flatbread. I knew she’d already had four of the seven pieces, but I shook my head, my lips lifting in amusement. She’d always eaten just as much as me. “Still eating for two? I thought you were done nursing?”

Her eyebrows flew up. It was meant to be a joke, but the words landed with a barb.

She leaned back from the table. “Oh shoot. I’m sorry, Bex. I was just joking. Go ahead and eat it.”

“It’s fine,” she said. But I knew it wasn’t.

I’d messed up. Surprise, surprise.

It felt like that was all I did these days. Say the wrong thing. Do the wrong thing. Forget to do something entirely.

“I really am sorry, Bex. You can eat the pizza.”

“I don’t want it anymore,” she said, successfully making me feel like a jerk.

“I love you,” I offered optimistically. As though saying those words would undo the damage I’d just caused.

“Love you, too,” she said. But her smile was half-hearted.

I changed the subject, asking her about the crazy outfits Alex had worn for Spirit Week at school. I was determined not to let my smart mouth ruin our night. This was our first night alone in over a year and I was not going to waste it.

I don’t know why I said what I did. I loved Rebecca’s curves. She was the most beautiful woman in the world to me. And I’d just have to show her tonight exactly how much I loved her body. In fact, I was looking forward to it.

2

REBECCA

Still eating for two?

I wanted to die. I'm not sure it was possible to feel more mortified than I did at that moment, when my husband called me out on how much I was eating.

My face grew warm just thinking about it, and I was thankful for the darkness of the car as we made our way back home. He said he was joking, but I could hear the ring of truth in it. It was time for me to shape up. Get that pre-baby body back, right? That's what all the blogs and videos on my social media said.

My husband wouldn't desire me if I didn't. Then, it would be my fault if he cheated.

Super. Another opportunity for me to fail.

His hand reached across the console, and he trailed his fingers up my thigh. My fat, cellulite-loaded thigh.

I pressed my eyes shut, trying to concentrate on the sensation. If I could just get out of my head, maybe we could have a good night. We had the house to ourselves. We *should* make love tonight.

Nothing like the pressure of obligation and expectation to make for a romantic evening. And nothing like an insensitive comment from your husband to bring every insecurity and self-critical thought about my postpartum body to the forefront.

Could I still get away with calling it my postpartum body if it had been a year since I had a kid? Or did I have to accept that this was just my body now?

No qualifier.

Just my almost-thirty-year-old, carried-three-babies body. Complete with stretch marks and wrinkles and a disturbing

number of gray hairs, considering I haven't even hit the big three-oh. Oh, and the flabby underarms I couldn't stop jiggling after I put on my sleeveless top for tonight.

I closed my eyes and tried to get out of my head.

I tried to focus on his hand. Nathan's strong, warm hand on my leg.

I forced myself to breathe and not push his hand away, even though I wanted nothing more than to shift in my seat, cross my legs, and stare out the window. Because what kind of wife turns away her husband from her bed on date night?

At home, Nathan tried to be sweet and attentive to get me in the mood, but my heart wasn't in it. I was too self-conscious about what he was seeing when he looked down at me. Or I was hung up on the spiral of how my not being more excited about having sex was just another way I was utterly failing at this whole thing.

After we were done and both lying in bed on our phones again, not talking, I tried not to read too much into it. Maybe he didn't enjoy it or maybe he thought I wasn't attractive. Maybe I was still angry and I didn't care if he did anyway.

They say sex is supposed to be this deep, unifying thing in marriage, but it felt like we'd been totally missing the mark. Whether it was getting interrupted by the kids, being too tired, or not interested... We'd been completely out of sync.

And tonight was supposed to be the night, but that didn't work out either.

Nathan put away his phone. Then, he rolled toward me and kissed me. "I love you," he said, a soft smile on his face. "Good night."

"Good night," I said. Then I pulled up my latest romance novel on my reading app.

I bet the hero in this story didn't make fun of the heroine for eating the last slice of pizza. The man next to me was snoring within minutes.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

I felt a bit like a teenager showing up for prom, carrying the small bouquet of summer flowers I'd picked up from Shauna at the flower shop on my way here. I was wearing a new button-down, and I'd put gel in my hair. I even put on cologne, something I hadn't done in I didn't know how long. But when I'd pulled the gray glass bottle out of my toiletry bag, I remembered the way Rebecca always hummed with satisfaction when she hugged me while I was wearing it.

And I thought maybe...

I shook my head, clearing the ridiculous thoughts. A bit of cologne wasn't enough to erase the hurt feelings on both sides of this relationship. But it also couldn't hurt.

I knocked on the front door, the yellow painted surface warm in the sunlight that shined on this side of the house late in the day. I'd been worried the color was too bright, but Rebecca had insisted we needed something happy.

And she'd been right. The bright color had transformed the front of the house, making it cheery and welcoming. She had squealed in delight when I brushed the first strokes onto the door, covering the awful beige that it had been. She'd been holding Alex on her hip, keeping him from trying to "hewp daddy" like every little not-quite-two-year-old wanted to.

I blinked away the memory as the door opened. Suddenly, I was face-to-face with the Rebecca of today, not Rebecca of six years ago. She looked... guarded, but gorgeous.

"You look beautiful," I told her, letting my admiration color my tone. "Here, these are for you."

"Lilies," she said with a soft smile. "My favorite. Here, come on in while I put these in water."

I followed my wife into our home, feeling out of place. Without the kids here to distract us, it felt... foreign.

Unwilling to simply stand in the entryway, I followed her to the kitchen. She set the bouquet on the counter and disappeared into the laundry room. I wasn't sure what that was about, but she would need a vase. They were above the fridge, so I got one down and began to fill it with water. Rebecca came out from the laundry room with a step stool under her arm.

She stopped short. "Oh," she said with a chuckle. "Thank you."

"Sorry, I should have said something," I tried to explain.

"No, no. It's fine. I should have just thought to ask you." She leaned the stool against the cabinet. "I'm afraid I've gotten pretty used to grabbing this step stool more than I used to."

I flashed a tight smile. Getting things off the top shelf used to be my job.

It could still be your job, dummy, my inner life coach scolded helpfully.

"Here," I said. "Do you want to cut them to length?" I handed her the vase.

She looked at the arrangement and the vase. "Umm.. no. I'll just do it later."

"I don't mind," I said, reaching for the drawer with the shears. "It'll take two minutes, and then they'll be here waiting for you when you get home. To remind you of me," I added with a wink.

Her laughter made me swell with pride. She began trimming stems, and I mixed the little packet of flower food into the water. We found an easy rhythm working at the counter, and I found myself scooting just a touch closer when my hip nudged hers, hoping my body would brush hers again.

Before I was ready, the flowers were arranged.

"I'm going to put these in the bedroom," she said. "Otherwise, Joey will dismantle them." While she was gone, I discarded all the stems, leaves, and plastic packaging into the

trash. It wasn't quite full, but full enough, so I pulled the bag out and replaced it.

"What are you doing?" Rebecca's voice stilled my hands for a moment as I tied the red handles of the trash bag into a knot.

The guarded look on her face was back. I wasn't trying to make some big statement or anything. I was just taking out the trash. "Just taking care of this on our way out. Come on, let's go." I held my empty hand out to her, a tiny thrill of pleasure running through me when she took it.

I dropped the bag in the larger, blue trash bin by the garage and walked Rebecca to the passenger side of my truck.

"You really do look lovely, Rebecca." I opened the door and helped her up before circling to the driver's side. It was warm in the truck, despite the A/C I had pumping in here just a few minutes before.

"Where are we going tonight?" she asked.

I smiled. "I made reservations at Harvest."

I glanced at her to gauge her reaction, and I wasn't disappointed. Her eyes widened and her mouth parted in surprise. "No, you didn't," she said.

I laughed. "I am many things, Rebecca Wells. But I am not a liar."

She covered her face. "No, no. I didn't mean it like that. But are you serious? Harvest? That's so *expensive!*" She whispered the last word, and the redness in her cheeks was the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

"It is. And the portions are tiny, and I've never heard of half the ingredients they use. But I know you've talked about us going. I should have taken you before now. I'm sorry."

"We don't have to go there, Nate. We can just go to the bistro. Seriously."

I shook my head. Tonight, I wanted to do something to show Rebecca that I wasn't done trying. And I was really hoping she would take my small efforts and appreciate them. I

wanted to treat her like she deserved. I'd been convinced for too long that I couldn't be the one to make her happy. But more and more, I'd been thinking that maybe I could. If I was willing to put in the work.

"Are you sure?" she whispered again, the pink of excitement still on her cheeks. She had no idea how sexy she was.

"Absolutely sure." I turned toward her. I nearly reached for her hand, but instead I gripped my armrest. "I know this won't fix everything, but I know that I quit trying a long time ago." She tried to disagree, but I kept talking. "And it doesn't really matter why—just that I did and I shouldn't have. So, let's go have a crazy delicious, overpriced dinner and see where it goes."

Rebecca pressed her lips together. "Okay, let's go."

Harvest Restaurant was a fancy farm-to-table place outside of Greencastle. They were always booked, and their menu changed weekly. Apparently, they were good enough that folks drove all the way from Indy to eat. I tried to keep that all in mind, but when I saw the menu prices, I had to swallow my gasp.

Sixty dollars for a burger? And what on earth was glazed cipollini? I was so far out of my element. But one glance at Rebecca and her quiet awe and excitement about the restaurant had me biting my tongue.

"Oh my word, this looks incredible."

"You look incredible," I replied, drawing that blush back to her cheeks.

"Hush, you." But there was no bite in her tone. She looked back at me, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Let me guess... You're going for the burger."

I shifted my weight, self-conscious that she'd pegged me so easily. "You don't know me," I argued, but my smile betrayed me. "Well, maybe you do. I was either going to get the burger or the halibut."

Her eyes lit up. I laughed and held up my hands. “Okay, okay. I’ll get the halibut so you can try it. And let me guess... You’re going to try the wild mushroom stroganoff?”

Her smile spread wide, and her teeth caught her lip between them. “How’d you know?”

I shrugged. “Ten years together. I guess you pick up a few things. Appetizer?”

She shook her head. “No, we don’t need to. This is expensive enough.”

I skimmed the menu. She was right, but I knew that she would want to taste as many things as possible tonight.

When the waitress asked for our order, I let her order her own first. Then I ordered my halibut. “Also, we’d like to start with the crabcake, please?”

“Great choice, sir. Our chef is originally from Maryland, and you won’t find a better crab cake in the state.”

I looked at Rebecca, pleased at the way her smile filled her face. When the waitress left, I continued my perusal, admiring the way the candlelight highlighted her features and made her eyes sparkle.

“You’re really going all out here,” she said, her voice slightly breathless.

I reached across the table, searching for her hand. When her fingers caught mine, I felt like cheering. “I don’t want you to think this is some ploy or gimmick. I truly do just want to spend a nice evening with you. If that means you’d rather go to Taco Bell or Chick-Fil-A or the bistro in Minden, then we can leave right now.”

She sighed. “Thanks for saying that. Don’t get me wrong, I definitely want to stay. But I’m glad we’re on the same page. This doesn’t change things for us.” My smile faltered, but Rebecca kept talking. “Obviously, we can’t just go back to the way things were, right?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure where she was going with this.

She took a sip of water. “We need to take this one day at a time. Build trust again. See where things go, right?”

I tried not to wince. “Yeah. Definitely.” I pulled my hand away from hers.

“I mean, I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said. How I treated you... I know I need to work on that.” She gestured between the two of us. “This? This has never been our problem, right?”

I gave a half-hearted smile. “Yeah. It’s more the day-to-day stresses that bring out the worst between us.”

The server brought out our crab cake, and our serious conversation shifted. As we laughed and enjoyed the fancy food, I couldn’t help but wonder how we were supposed to determine whether the everyday stress was something we could do together. As much as it felt like Rebecca had dumped an icy glass of water when she’d said that this date didn’t change things... I had to admit that she was probably right. We both had a long way to go before we were ready to call our relationship reconciled.

Still, sitting across from my wife and watching the candlelight dance across her features while she laughed made me think maybe there was a chance for the two of us. That was a hope I’d long shoved away in the dusty corners of my heart.

CHAPTER

Twenty

REBECCA

Nathan walked me up the front steps of our drive, to the porch. My hand was intertwined with his, my heart swelling with just exactly how easy and right this felt.

But the doubt was there. Just how long could this last? Would I say something wrong and send him over the edge? Would he make a comment that would have our evening ending on a sour note?

I'd told everyone that everything was good between Nathan and I before he left. And there were days it absolutely was. Family outings where my heart was so full I swore I thought it might burst. Nights where Nathan and I stayed up late whispering under the covers, enjoying one another.

But I couldn't help but hold my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. For Nathan to grow agitated with the constant noise our boys made. Or perhaps it was my own need to control the situation, stepping in to discipline our children when I thought Nathan was being too harsh, which inevitably led to his withdrawal and my frustration.

It was only a matter of time before a beautiful evening like this came crashing down around us, wasn't it? That was why I'd pulled back from him at dinner, cautioning us to take things slow. If we were rebuilding a foundation here, then I wanted to be sure it was a strong one.

We weren't twenty years old anymore, so desperately in love that we could barely drag ourselves away from one another at the end of the night. Of course, that didn't stop me from wishing it was as simple as pulling Nathan inside and ending our date in our bedroom.

But it wasn't ours right now. And I wasn't sure I was ready to let Nathan back in to that extent. Not unless he was ready to come back entirely.

“Thank you for tonight. It was fun to just be us again for a bit.”

My gaze caught on the movement of his arms—his button-down shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows— as he tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear. His fingers trailed along my neck and collarbone. My skin broke out in goose bumps at the whisper of contact and my mouth went dry.

I pressed up to my toes and kissed him gently. Our lips touched for a moment before I pulled back.

He caught me around the waist and held me in place. He kissed me again. It was more demanding than mine had been, and I surrendered to the overwhelming sensation and emotion. My eyes fell closed, my body entirely focused on the feel of his warm mouth on mine and his strong hands supporting me. I sighed, melting into the embrace. This was home.

When we pulled apart, my eyes fluttered open. The shadows of the porch made it hard to read his expression, but my heart was racing at his sudden passion. Where had this Nathan been for the last six months?

“I should go,” he whispered. I pressed my swollen lips together and nodded. I wanted him to stay, but I knew that we weren’t ready for a night together. It would be enough to know that Nathan still wanted me physically. But I wasn’t honestly sure yet if he wanted the rest.

He had to accept the version of me that tried and failed to make homemade dinners every night. The me that was perhaps a touch too particular about the lights and the darks and the delicates being sorted properly in the laundry. I needed him to not shut me out when he was hurting and to listen with an open mind when I wanted to talk about something difficult.

I had to believe we’d get there. The other option was the dissolution of our marriage. Something I was pretty sure neither of us was ready to accept.

“Good night,” I said softly. I opened the door and left my husband standing on our front porch.

The house felt eerily quiet. It was like the night of the wedding, but entirely different. I couldn't believe what a difference three weeks had made. I'd left the wedding after our confrontation angry and frustrated and humiliated. And I'd spent my night in my house alone, sobbing into my pillows and yelling at the Lord.

I washed my face and snuggled into a blanket with a smile on my face. And when my mind drifted back to that kiss for the tenth time, I pressed the covers to my mouth to dampen the girlish squeal of excitement.

Looking for someone to celebrate with, I texted Carla.

Rebecca: Date night status: success.

Carla sent back a slew of celebratory emojis.

Carla: So what happens now?

Leave it to my friend to ask the exact same question I had been asking myself this whole time.

Rebecca: I'm not sure. I'm trying to take it one day at a time.

I didn't know where things stood. I had no idea how long it would be before Nathan was ready. And I wasn't about to bring him back prematurely and just wind up confusing the boys even more. Having their dad move out was hard enough. Any sort of back and forth would just be unfair.

So no matter how desperate I was to put our lives back together, we needed to be sure. My heart skipped a beat when I saw a text from Nathan pop up.

Nathan: The boys want to say good night.

Not exactly the romantic good night text I was hoping for, but I smiled nonetheless and hit the call button.

In seconds, the blurry video appeared with three faces trying to crowd into the screen. Joey was clearly fighting for control of the phone, while his brothers argued about holding it correctly.

“Hi, boys. Were you good for Mimi and Papa today?”

“Yeah! We got Happy Meals. Mine had a Transformer in it!”

“That sounds exciting,” I responded with forced enthusiasm. Lincoln had been talking nonstop about Transformers and autobots since school started, because—apparently—some of the other boys were big fans.

“It’s pretty late,” I said. “Were you up late waiting for your dad?”

“It’s not that late, Rebecca,” came Nathan’s defensive tone. Joey’s forehead filled the screen.

“It’s fine,” I reassured him. “I’m not upset at all. Just asking.”

“All right, boys, go brush your teeth while I say good night to Mommy.”

Suddenly, the video was filled with Nathan’s chiseled jaw and dark-chocolate eyes.

“I really wasn’t criticizing,” I said quietly..

His face softened. “Sorry,” he said. “Habit, I think.”

I nodded, but I felt tears welling up behind my eyes. Was I so awful to him that a single observation was enough for him to feel like I was attacking?

I heard yelling through the phone, and Nathan looked behind him. He ran a hand over his face. “I need to go, but... Can I call you back?”

I saw my own surprise on the tiny video in the corner that showed my face. He must have seen it too, despite the distraction of the boys I could hear fighting in the background.

“Can I?”

I nodded, and relief flickered across his face. He disconnected the call, and I stared blankly at the screen for a moment. He wanted to call me.

It seemed like ages before the call came through. The social media I’d been scrolling did a poor job of distracting me

from the impending conversation. Was he still upset about my comment? Or was it something else?

I moved my thumb to accept the call, and then realized that it was another video call. Hurriedly, I smoothed my hair and sat up straighter. No double chin while I'm talking to my husband, thank you very much.

I answered the call and was greeted by the sight of Nathan leaning against the headboard of the guest bed. He'd taken off the button-down he'd been wearing earlier, revealing the black undershirt. It stretched across his shoulders, and I could just barely see where the edges circled his biceps.

"Hey," he said. His voice was low. Intimate. I could almost imagine he was in the room with me. "Can you hear me? I don't want to wake the boys. I can step outside if I need to."

I shook my head. I didn't want him to go where it was dark. The view right here was especially good. "I can hear you. Did everyone go down okay?"

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "Yeah. I think so. Joey was thankful for darn near everything tonight when we said our prayers."

I laughed. "Oh yeah, he's been very thankful lately. What was it tonight?"

He looked up for a moment. "Oh goodness. Let's see... Dinosaurs. Trains. Happy Meals. Fireworks."

I giggled. "Happy Meals I get, after today's dinner. Fireworks is a new one though. I wonder what brought that up."

He shrugged. "Who knows. But we thanked God for fireworks tonight," he said with a chuckle.

Tears stung the corner of my eyes. I missed hearing Nathan pray with the boys. So many memories. My voice trembled slightly as I began to speak. "When Joey was still a baby, I remember putting him down in his crib and coming into the hallway. I would just lean against the door to Alex and Lincoln's room and listen to you praying with them. I'm not

sure I have ever been so in love with you as I am when I see how good you are with them.”

“Rebecca...” His voice held pain and a hint of warning. As though he didn’t want to have this conversation.

“I’m just letting you know. In case I haven’t told you enough. You’re a wonderful father.” I swallowed thickly. “No matter what happens—between you and me, I mean—I’ll always be glad that you’re their dad.”

I kept my eyes on the video of him on my phone, as though I could read his mind through the connection. He exhaled and nodded, looking away from the phone. “Thanks. I... I think I needed to hear that.”

“I mean every word,” I said again.

“You’re a great mom,” he said.

I shook my head, dismissing the compliment. I’d just raved about his fatherhood, so he felt obligated to say something nice about me. That’s all it was.

“I’m serious, Bex. You’re such a natural at it.”

I couldn’t help it. I burst out laughing. “Are you serious?”

His brow furrowed, and he looked at me like I was crazy. “Yeah, I’m serious. Why are you laughing? It all comes so easily to you. You just seem so content being a mom. I guess, I’m a bit jealous.”

I kept laughing. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard, Nathan Shepherd Wells! I feel like I’m struggling every single day. Being a mom is the single most frustrating, draining, challenging thing I’ve ever done. And yeah, it’s also rewarding and brings me a lot of joy, but I don’t usually feel like there is anything easy about it.”

“Really? But you always seem to know exactly what our boys need. You’ve got all these ideas for activities and traditions and like... how to discipline them at certain ages. The whole Fruit of the Spirit jar? They love it. You’re made to be a mom. And I’m over here struggling because Alex won’t listen to me when I get onto him.”

“Nathan, listen to yourself. You think I just come up with that stuff off the top of my head all the time?”

He shrugged. “I guess?”

I shook my head. How could I explain this to him in a way that would make sense? “You’re a firefighter... and you’re a really good firefighter. But you had to learn all of that, right? You went to the academy, and you guys still take classes and all that.”

He nodded.

“It’s kind of like that. Being a mom is my full-time job. I’m constantly learning, just like any other job. I’m reading articles and listening to childhood development experts and Christian family pastors about the best ways to train up your children.” I took a deep breath. This was the hard part—the discussions that had always threatened to divide us. “When I ask you to apologize to our kids for losing your temper...It’s because I’m learning to do that too. I’ve been studying, and to me, it makes sense that we need to lead by example and admit our mistakes so we can have conversations with our kids about why we all need Jesus.”

I waited for a moment, curious if he would say anything, but he didn’t.

“It’s not that being a parent isn’t your job, too. Obviously, it is. But I guess... I’m trying to make sure we both do the right things in our parenting.”

I could keep talking, but I pressed my lips together and resisted the urge to lecture him for twenty minutes. The seconds ticked by on the phone call timer.

Finally, Nathan broke the silence. “Can I be honest?”

“Of course,” I said. I forced myself to sound casual, but I held my breath as I waited for what would come next.

“If I had thought about it that way, or we had talked about it in that way, I feel like my attitude would have been way different.”

The breath I'd been holding rushed out in a whoosh. "What do you mean?"

"It always felt more like you knew exactly what we should do, and I was doing it all wrong." He tipped his head to the side thoughtfully. "I never thought about it like... It's like you were our research and development department. And we were both in operations using that info. Or we should have been."

I concealed my smile at the tactical language he was using to describe our parenting relationship. He wasn't wrong, it was just such a technical way to look at it. "That's one way to think of it," I said. "*Can I* be honest for a second?"

"Of course," he said immediately.

"I love being a mom," I said. "But sometimes... I feel like that's all I am. I don't know who I am beyond our kids anymore. And that really scares me sometimes." My voice was all but a whisper at the end of my confession.

"Oh, hon. I think that's normal... How can I help?"

His question was so sincere, I couldn't help but swoon a little. "I'm not sure... But I think I'm going to pray about it a little more."

"I'll pray for you, too," he said earnestly.

And yep... *suh-woon!*

I wanted to ask, but the question felt so intimate. I gathered my courage... "How... How can I pray for you, Nathan? What do you need?"

His head tipped back to the headboard and all I saw was the long line of his neck. "I don't know, Bex. I'm a mess. I think... I just need to figure out how I could have this picture-perfect life and not be happy with it."

The dagger I felt in my chest at his words nearly made me gasp for air. I'd been asking myself that same question... Why wasn't he happy? But to hear that he didn't know the answer was unsettling. Because how could we fix it if we didn't know the problem.

“I’ll pray you figure it out,” I managed to squeeze out before I fumbled through a meager excuse about needing some sleep and disconnecting the call. Then, I wept into my pillow, wondering how I was possibly supposed to make my husband happier, so he would come home. What more could I possibly do?

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

NATHAN (2 YEARS AGO)

I shut the dishwasher and leaned back against the counter, feeling the exhaustion in my bones. The appliance kicked on behind me, the rhythmic hum of the water inside breaking the silence.

Blessed silence.

I tilted my head, listening for the sounds of little feet out of bed or wails of hunger from the baby. But there was nothing. I flipped off the light in the kitchen and picked up my phone from the counter as I made my way to the living room. No sign of Rebecca, but maybe she was feeding Joey. Again. That would explain the lack of crying.

I collapsed onto the sofa, absently skimming the notifications I got from dispatch through the volunteer app. It wasn't my shift, but I liked to know the basics of what was going on. Then there were no major surprises when I got to the station. My last message from Rebecca caught my eye.

Beautiful Bex: Be safe! Can't wait for your days off!

Unsure how long had passed as I surfed my phone, I looked around, searching for Rebecca. Still no sign of her. I stood, my stiff knees protesting the movement. I hobbled to our bedroom. She was pretty tired lately, so maybe she'd fallen asleep. But the bed was empty, the white linen bedspread she loved so much made up like a clean hotel room.

The door to our bathroom was closed, but the light was on and the shower was running. I stepped inside and my eyes flew to the shadowy shape behind the foggy glass shower door. Near the floor of the shower, my wife was huddled in a ball.

In two strides, I'd crossed the entirety of our small ensuite. I hesitated by the shower door, my hand on the handle. "Bex, are you okay?"

The shape moved. “I’m fine,” she said, “Just leave me alone.”

Yeah, not going to happen.

I opened the door and reached in to turn off the water. Rebecca looked up at me, her dark hair plastered to her forehead and shoulders.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “I’m okay. I just needed a minute. I’m okay.” She began to stand, so I grabbed a towel from the shelf and handed it to her. Words died on my tongue. I had so many questions. I didn’t know what was wrong. Which meant I definitely didn’t know how to make it better.

Rebecca wrapped the towel around herself. Her eyes were rimmed in red and puffy from crying. I tugged on the towel and pulled her into my arms. “I’ve got you. I’m here.”

She nestled her head on my shoulder, soaking through my T-shirt with her wet hair.

“I’m pregnant,” she said softly.

My hands, which had been rubbing her back through the dark-gray towel, stilled.

“You’re...”

“Pregnant,” she repeated, clearer this time.

I felt my knees weaken. Somehow, I managed to lower us both to the floor. My back was pressed against the toilet. It was probably filthy down here, but I couldn’t seem to care. Pregnant. Joey was only four months old. We’d barely even had time to fool around since he’d been born. How...?

Another baby.

Rebecca twisted from her position between my legs so I could see her face. Her hair was still dripping all over both of us. “I’ve been so tired... I thought it was just the usual stuff. Midnight nursing sessions and trying to entertain the older boys while making sure Joey gets his naps in. But this morning I threw up trying to fix eggs for breakfast.”

My mind was racing. We were barely making ends meet as it was. Diapers for Joey and Pull-ups for Lincoln. Seemingly endless snacks. Not to mention all the clothes and the medical bills. We'd just gotten the bill from the doctor for the last delivery. That was in addition to the bill we got from the hospital and the pediatrician who'd seen Joey during his first two days.

“Something just didn't feel right... So I took a test. We're pregnant.” She gave me a wan smile. “Nate, what are we going to do?”

I pressed a kiss to her wet hair. “We're going to...” I searched for the best way to finish that sentence. “Add to our chaos, I guess. And we're going to love these babies so much, love.”

More tears flooded down her cheeks and she nodded, sniffing as she snuggled deeper into my arms. The wet tile floor, with my back digging into the edge of the toilet seat, wasn't exactly the most comfortable place in the world. But Rebecca was in my arms. She was counting on me to be strong while she was clearly overwhelmed. A twenty-minute freakout session on the shower floor was evidence of that.

We'd be okay. I could just work harder. Maybe I could talk to the chief about taking on some extra shifts. Whatever it took to provide for my family, including the tiny little new life growing inside my wife, I would do it. This new babe was unexpected, but that didn't mean they were unwanted.

It still took some time to adjust to the idea though. We'd talked about being done after Joey was born. We'd even started talking about what baby things we would get rid of after he outgrew them, like the baby swing and the bassinet.

Two weeks later, I dismantled the little sleeper that sat in our master bedroom. Joey was getting too big for it, but it kind of felt nice to know I wasn't putting it away forever. I would tuck it into the storage room, until the next baby needed it. Bex guessed she was already ten weeks along, so it would be sooner than I would have even thought.

I finished the task, managing to fit everything into the carrying case after wrestling with the legs a bit. The door opened behind me, and I turned to find Rebecca coming out of the bathroom. She'd been having morning sickness more frequently. With each new baby, I was more and more convinced that if men had to be the ones responsible for bringing life into the world like this, the human race would have died out thousands of years ago.

I laid the folded bassinet on the bed and stepped closer to her, wanting to show her some measure of sympathy and comfort. I wrapped my arms around her waist from behind and lowered my face to nuzzle her neck. "Hey, beautiful," I murmured. "How are you feeling?"

"I lost the baby," she said. Her voice was flat, almost emotionless.

I stiffened. "What? Are you sure?" I tried to turn her toward me, but she stood firm.

"I'm sure. It... it's gone."

Words failed me and my mind went blank. What could I possibly say in this moment?

"Mommy! Can I have a snack?" Alex's always-too-loud voice came from the living room.

"I've got it," I said, trying to guide Rebecca to the bed.

"No, I'm okay. I'll get it." Before I could respond, she was out the door and teasing Alex about how many snacks he'd already had today.

I stepped backward, letting my knees buckle and landing heavily on the edge of our bed. The pristine white bedspread with coordinating pillows felt mocking and cruel. Rebecca had asked for the set for her birthday. I'd rolled my eyes, because one blanket was as good as another. But she'd claimed she wanted our bedroom to feel like a serene escape from the chaos of the rest of the house.

But there was nothing serene about my feelings now.

Nothing clean and perfect about what had just happened.

I'd just wrapped my head around the idea of another baby, and now that little life was just—poof—gone. I hung my head in my hands, gripping my hair tightly and tugging at the ends, as though the little pull of tension and pain would be enough to jolt me out of this stupor.

Rebecca's laughter filtered in from the living room, followed by Lincoln's toddler giggles as he said "More getchu! More getchu!" I knew he was begging for more tickles while simultaneously running away.

She seemed completely unaffected. But I wanted to rip this bedspread to shreds for the audacity it had to pretend that everything was still perfect. Because it sure as heck wasn't.

I twisted my hands in the crisp, white linen.

"Hey, can you come out and turn on the grill? I'd like to have dinner a little early so we can give the boys baths before bed."

I lifted my head to find Rebecca in the doorway to our room. Her eyes were wide, waiting for an answer. No sign of pain at all.

I shook my head. "Rebecca, how can you—"

She shut her eyes. "Can you just start the grill?"

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

Dylan perfectly positioned the vehicle in the bay of the garage, reversing into the spot just like he'd been practicing for months. The fire engine rumbled to a stop as he turned off the ignition. PFF Burns looked up from his phone, which he'd been staring at ever since we left the scene of the small kitchen fire on the northern outskirts of the district ten minutes ago.

I issued the commands to the team. "Burns, you're on post-use inspection. Dylan, I'd like you to handle the write-up for the call. Let's see if we can get your captain qualifications done in the next month or so." I smirked at him. "You know, in case I want to take a vacation or something."

Burns, my probationary officer, groaned his disapproval of my assignment as we all climbed out of the engine.

Dylan shrugged out of his coat. "Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it. You'd probably sit on the beach in your turnout gear. Do you even own a swimsuit?"

Dylan's assessment of my vacation skills weren't unfounded. The only time I ever took off over the last eight years had been a few days here and there when we had a new baby.

"Burns!" I yelled at the young firefighter just as he entered the station from the garage. He'd quickly removed his turnout gear, but he definitely hadn't done the inspection I asked him to. The last thing I wanted to do today was handle the confrontation I knew was inevitable with PFF Burns. The kid had a bad attitude and had ticked off just about every firefighter in the station by now with his overinflated sense of importance and unwillingness to be a team player. No matter how many talks I had with him, it wasn't making a lick of difference.

“Just taking a leak, *Captain*.” He tossed on my rank, but there was no respect in the word. Just arrogance.

I brushed a hand over my face and sighed.

“He sure is a smart aleck little punk, isn’t he?”

I grunted in response to Dylan’s question.

“You go ahead to my office and get started. I’ll make sure Probie does what he’s supposed to.”

I sent a quick text to Rebecca while I waited for him to come back. Our date had gone better than I even expected. Candlelight, soft music, good food—though, I’d eaten a snack when I got back to the house—and that kiss. My blood raced at the memory of our kiss on the porch.

Nathan: Hey beautiful. How is your Sunday going?

Rebecca: Almost time for baths and bed around here. How’s your shift?

Nathan: Just got back from a call, but nothing major. Want to talk later?

She didn’t respond right away, so I tucked the phone back in my pocket and went searching for my firefighter. I found him already laid back in a recliner in front of the big screen, the Indianapolis Colts preseason game on the screen.

I whistled as loudly as I could, and he jerked his head toward me.

“Up!” I commanded. “Now!”

“Come on, Cap. Just let us take a break.” He gestured to the TV.

“The only one I see shirking their responsibilities right now is you, Burns. Dylan is doing the call report. Carter is running the inspection on the ambulance. And you’re sitting here on your butt. Do you even want to be a firefighter? Because you sure don’t act like it!”

Burns hung his head. Maybe I was finally getting through to him. But when he looked back up, there was anger in his expression.

“You know what? Screw you, man. I thought I wanted to be a firefighter. But not if it turns me into some uptight, no fun loser who has to make his entire life about his job because he can’t even keep his marriage from falling apart.”

I reared back from the venom in his words.

“I quit. Do your own inspection.” He ended the outburst with a string of curse words and stomped to the bunkroom. Duffel bag in hand, he charged out of the station. I stood there and watched him go without taking even a single step to try and stop him.

Burns slammed the door behind him. The guy could throw a tantrum, I’d give him that. He’d give Joey a run for his money.

I ran my hand over my scalp and down my face. My eyes were closed while I called out, “Change of plans, Dylan! I’m going to need you to do the inspection while I do the report.”

“Yep. On it, Cap.”

At least someone on my team knew how to follow orders. The most important thing was that we were prepared for the next call, and it could be at any moment. Dylan understood that. Where had I gone wrong with PFF Burns? He’d been here for six months, and I’d been doing my best to turn him into the firefighter I knew he could be.

He was my first probie I was assigned as captain. It felt like a black mark on my reputation that he washed out. I’d already spent hours replaying our interactions, trying to figure out what I could have done differently. Was I too hard on him?

Did I let the other guys razz him too much?

Mac came in from the garage.

“Done?”

He nodded. “Bus is good to go.”

“Thanks, man. Burns just quit, so we’re short-staffed if we have more calls.”

He only grunted a reply. As a mostly volunteer department that covered a pretty large fire district, we were used to operating without a full team. I left Mac on the recliner Burns had vacated and went to the tiny captain's office. It would only take five minutes to get the report done for the call. Then maybe I'd sit and watch football with the guys.

I checked my phone. Still nothing from Rebecca, but I knew that handling bedtime was like trying to finish the last mile of a marathon. You couldn't focus on anything but making it to that finish line. And some nights at bedtime, the line kept moving after you thought you'd crossed it.

I wrapped up the paperwork and settled in on the couch. Despite the primetime matchup between the Colts and Bears, my mind was jumping around everywhere else. PFF Burns' dramatic exit. The date with my wife last night. That kiss. The hot and cold treatment I was getting from Alex. I didn't know how to respond other than to reassure him that I still loved him and would be there for him.

I hadn't said anything yet, but I had to admit that I was feeling more optimistic that Rebecca and I could work things out. I was making an effort. I hoped she could see that.

She hadn't said anything about the yard, which admittedly had bugged me a bit. I was starved for affection and appreciation. But what the chief had said about slaying dragons had really stuck with me. I would slay the dragons my wife needed me to, even if I didn't get recognition for it.

That was decided. I was going to go back tomorrow and plant the mums on the porch. I knew she'd be at Mommy and Me Music at the rec center in Greencastle in the morning. After I had a meeting with Chief Bergman about PFF Burns. Former PFF, I corrected.

The sting of failure wouldn't leave. I couldn't shake the feeling that his poor performance and eventual walking out on the job reflected on me. I should have found a way to get through to him. I was so wrapped up in my own junk lately. I'd missed the signs that he was on the edge. If I'd been

paying attention or had more one-on-ones with him, maybe we could have salvaged this.

Maybe I didn't deserve to be a captain. Chief should probably give it to someone who could keep their life and their team from falling apart.

Rebecca: Phew. Done with bedtime. Your kids are ornery.

The hint of a smile played on my lips.

Nathan: *My kids* tonight, are they?

Rebecca: Definitely. My kids definitely wouldn't jump off the top bunk into a pile of pillows and blankets.

My smile grew bigger, though I couldn't ignore the very real concern that it sounded dangerous.

Nathan: I hope it was a big pile... I don't want to have to come handle any broken bones.

Rebecca: Yeah, already shut that down. Pretty sure they got the point.

I sighed, wishing I could be there to joke about their chaos together.

I pressed the call button before I realized I was going to. But when she answered, my entire body relaxed, releasing some of the tension I'd been carrying all day.

"Hey there."

I smiled, getting up from the couch and finding some privacy in the bunkroom. "Hey. Sorry, I didn't want to text all night."

"Doesn't bother me at all." Her tone was light and flirty and made my pulse skip.

"I miss you," I said after a beat of silence.

"Yeah. Me too."

I pressed my lips together, unsure if I was ready to admit what I was about to say. But I wanted her to know. "I'm going to counseling." The confession hung in the air for a moment. I

waited, trying not to feel anxious about how she might respond.

“Really? Wow... that’s really great, Nathan. I’m proud of you.”

Warmth spread through my chest and into my arms at her praise. Such simple words, but they meant the world. “Thanks, love.”

The word slipped out, but it felt awkward on my tongue. I’d stopped calling her that sometime... I wasn’t really sure when. “Umm, I should probably get some sleep. Never know when the alarm will ring and all that.”

I sounded flustered. Heck, I was flustered.

“Sure. I hope it is... nice and boring there tonight.”

Like the experienced firewife she was, Rebecca knew not to say the Q word. Only fools commented about how *quiet* things were. I usually avoided even thinking it. Because the moment you did, you’d get a call for a two-alarm fire or a four-car pileup.

“Thanks. Me too. Good night, Bex.”

“Good night, Nathan.”

The words were there, begging to jump off the tip of my tongue. I love you. In ten years, we’d probably said those words ten thousand times. I’d even said them in the weeks before I left... But they hadn’t felt especially true.

Tonight, I felt like I didn’t have the right to say them.

But I wanted to. And that felt like a victory in and of itself.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

REBECCA

Job searching sucked.

In high school, all I'd done was walk into the hardware store and talk to Hank. He'd ignored me for a second before growling and smashing his keyboard. Then, he asked if I knew how to use a computer and hired me on the spot when I said I did.

Now, it was all "You need to apply online" and "We're looking for more experience." Well, I didn't think the experience they were looking for involved diaper changes and creative ways to teach the alphabet.

Maybe it would help if I had any idea what I even wanted to do. But if I was being honest, my heart wasn't completely in it. A big part of me wanted to stay home with Joey and be home when Alex and Link got home, waiting with a snack to hear about their days.

But I also wanted something else, too. Was it possible to have both?

"Here's the application. We do open interviews on Thursday afternoons."

I raised my eyebrows. "What are open interviews?"

The lady behind the counter popped her gum. "Just come when you can and our manager will, like, interview you. Duh."

"Oh. Okay."

Even the sixteen-year-old with purple hair thought I was dumb.

When I was back in the van, I put the application in the passenger seat. At least I didn't have to apply online for that one. But while the hourly wage proudly displayed on the sign looked promising, and a signing bonus to boot, I didn't think

fast food was the answer to the “finding my identity outside of motherhood” I was looking for.

I’d skipped Mommy and Me Music class this morning to do some job searching. Joey was hanging out with Carla. I probably could have asked Nathan. Today was his day off. But I also didn’t want him to know I was looking for a job. He’d probably just feel like I was trying to make him feel guilty, and that wasn’t my intention.

If we didn’t end up together, I definitely needed a job. But even if he came home... I might still want to do something. Was that crazy? After eight years of being a stay-at-home-mom, was I selfish to want more? What did that mean for Joey?

I worried over the thoughts the entire drive home.

I noticed the grass clippings first. There weren’t many, but they were scattered in front of the driveway on the road. Someone had cut my lawn again. And oh... were those new mums in the planters out front? It was barely September, but having the old dead skeletons of the annuals I’d managed to kill this summer replaced with something vibrant and cheery was exactly what I needed.

Who would have done all this? I took a picture and sent it to Monica.

Rebecca: Was this Jake? It looks amazing!

Monica: Not sure. He didn’t mention anything to me.

I would have to find out who kept handling my landscaping. Maybe it was Charlotte’s husband, Luke. He did own a landscaping company, after all. It probably took him ten minutes to zip around my teeny yard on that fancy zero-turn-radius machine he used.

That had to be it.

I smiled, running my fingers across the full blooms of the bushy yellow and orange mums in the planters by the front door. It made the yellow front door look even better than usual. I needed to make Luke cookies.

I dropped my things on the kitchen island, adding it to the already overwhelming and overstimulating pile of stuff that seemed to accumulate there. Endless papers from kindergarten and third grade. Coloring book pages. Empty dishes and packages from my last online shopping impulse.

Buried under the mess was a three-wick candle I only lit when the counter was cleared. I'd had it for close to three years and there was still more than half the wax remaining, if that didn't say everything about the normal state of the kitchen island.

I glanced at the clock. It was almost one and Carla should be bringing Joey back any minute. The cluttered surface begged to be cleared. My legs, on the other hand, begged to sit.

I didn't listen to them. I'd grown pretty good at ignoring the protests of my muscles and pushing through. I was making good progress when Carla opened the door. Joey's limp body rested against her shoulder. She pointed toward the hallway and mouthed, "Should I put him down?"

A moment later, she was back. Not a peep from Joey during the transfer to naptime. What a pro. Carla was going to be a great mom someday.

"How did it go?" she asked, pulling up a seat.

I shrugged, scrubbing at a stubborn sticky spot on the counter. I was using a baby wipe, which tended to be the most easily accessible cleaning supply around the house. As long as you stretched the definition of "cleaning supply."

I shrugged. "It was fine. Lots of dead ends. Lots of online applications."

"Sounds about right. Any good leads?"

I tipped my head back and forth. "There's one I'm kind of excited about... but I don't know if I would even get it. I'm probably not what they are looking for."

Carla frowned. "What is it?"

I took a seat by her at the table. “It’s a Christian bookstore—Redeemed. It’s down on the square, where that cute little antiques store used to be. We have to go sometime. It’s incredible. I think I could spend hours in there.”

Carla was grinning. “Sounds awesome, Bex!”

“They’re looking for someone to open in the mornings and work during the day.”

“Oh, that could be good with the boys’ schedule, right?”

“I don’t know...” My doubts and insecurities crept in, like they had every time I thought about the job since I stopped into the store on a whim. “I’ve never worked retail. What do I know about doing all that? There’s probably someone else who would be better.”

Carla leaned in. “I’m going to say this with all the love and kindness I can because you’re my friend and I think you’re the most wonderful human. But that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

My mouth fell open and a laugh escaped. “What? Why?”

“Girl, you are amazing! Any store would be lucky to have someone who can handle chaos and multi-tasking like you. So, I’m not going to let you talk yourself out of the position before you even try for it.”

I rolled my eyes at her dramatic reaction. “Come on, be serious.”

“I am dead serious. There might be someone better—but you let the manager and the Lord figure out who to give that job to, all right?”

My lips tugged into a reluctant smile. “Yeah, okay. You’re right.”

Carla got herself a glass of water, the way only friends who’ve spent a lot of time in your home know to do without asking. “Okay. So, I’m not asking this because I don’t think the bookstore is a good fit—I do. But are you sure you want to get a job?”

I rested my chin on my knuckles. “I don’t know. I feel like I need to do something. Even if Nathan comes home or pays enough child support that I don’t have to work... I’ve been floundering for a while. Like, I don’t even know who I am outside of being a wife and mom.”

“You think a job will help?” She slid back into the chair across from me.

“You think it won’t?”

“Look at it this way...If I came to you for advice and said I felt like I didn’t have a purpose or identity because I’m not a wife or mom, what would you say to me?”

I sat up straighter. “Umm, I don’t know.”

“Would you say it’s my job? I work at a gym and teach aerobics classes for minimum wage. Not exactly foundational-level identity building there.”

“Come on,” I said, rolling my eyes at her.

“I’m serious,” she said with a smile. “Listen, I know who I am. And you can be sure it’s more than the girl who wipes the sweaty yoga mats clean. Just like you’re more than the mom who changes the diapers or makes the dinners. And if you get the job, you’ll still be more than the worker at the bookstore too.” She leaned in. “The way you see your value—at root level—has to come from who you are to Christ. Otherwise, you’ll spend all your time trying to earn your worth through what you do and create a purpose for yourself. But you’re already infinitely valuable, friend. You have an identity as a Daughter of the King.”

I swiped at the moisture under my eyes. “How’d you get so wise? Aren’t you like, twenty-one?”

She gave me an exaggerated glare. “Twenty-five, thank you very much. I’m not *that* much younger than you. I just didn’t start having kids before I could legally order drinks down at Bulldogs,” she grumbled. “But if I don’t get on that soon, I’ll be working until I’m eighty to pay for college.”

“You’ll find someone,” I assured her. I knew it wasn’t guaranteed. After all, God didn’t promise everyone a husband

or a wife. But we'd had that conversation enough that I knew Carla understood, even if she didn't like it.

“What if... I did, but I can't have him?”

Warning bells went off at full volume in my head. “What do you mean?”

She waved her hand at me. “It doesn't matter. It's a long story, and I'll tell you sometime. I should probably go. I work the closing shift tonight.”

I frowned at her. “I'm not letting this go, you know.”

She gave a half-hearted smile. “I know. That's why I love you.”

I walked with her to the front door and hugged her tightly.

She stepped outside, then turned back to me. “Think about what I said. You don't have to add anything to your plate to find who you are. From where I'm sitting, you just need to ask God to remind you.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

REBECCA (18 MONTHS AGO)

I waved a towel in front of the smoke detector. “Please stop. For the love of chocolate, please turn off!” The ear-spitting beeping finally quit. I took the opportunity to open the kitchen window to let some of the smoke escape.

I heard the wail from Joey’s room just as the silence settled.

My heart sank.

Dinner was burned. The baby was awake, and I still hadn’t gotten in the shower I promised myself I would today. The new 10-in-1 magic appliance I’d been so convinced would make dinnertime a breeze apparently needed a master’s degree to operate. I pressed my palms against the countertops and hung my head between my shoulders, fighting back tears.

“What’s going on in here?” Nathan’s worried voice came from the back door. He’d been outside, hanging Christmas lights while Alex and Linc “helped.”

I sighed. “Just business as usual.”

“Geez, Bex. It smells like smoke,” he said. “Are you trying to burn the house down?”

So helpful, my husband.

“You don’t miss a thing,” I replied, the sarcasm slipping out, along with a tear as I kept my gaze focused on the stained laminate between my hands. I felt the sting of his criticism sharply. “I hope you like your mac and cheese blackened,” I said bitterly.

I was such a screw-up. Nathan’s days off were supposed to be the easy ones. But I’d been so preoccupied lately, I couldn’t seem to stop messing things up. My patience was nonexistent, and my motivation to do anything beyond the bare minimum had dwindled to nothing.

There was silence for a moment.

“Can I do anything to help?” Nathan’s question was timid, like he was afraid of poking the bear. Great, even my husband was walking on eggshells around me.

“Joey’s awake. Can you go get him?”

I felt Nathan’s presence behind me. My body tensed. I couldn’t seem to prevent it. Every time he touched me lately, my body freaked out. Like it knew that touching led to sex and sex led to pregnancy and, in some cases, a pregnancy ended in a miscarriage.

I squeezed my eyes shut, pushing away the thought. That was how I’d been coping in the month since I’d realized what the blood and cramps meant. I couldn’t think about it. I had to focus on the boys. They needed me. They needed a mom who didn’t lose her temper or burn dinner.

Just keep swimming.

Slowly, Nathan’s arms came around me. I stood stiff as a board, not wanting to lean on him. Sure, he was here now, but Nathan had spent more time at the fire station since his promotion to captain than ever before. He hadn’t come home until nearly four yesterday. On his day off! Then, he’d fallen asleep until this morning.

“Hey,” he whispered. “It’s just dinner. We can order pizza or something.”

He was trying to be sweet, and it just ended up making me feel worse. We shouldn’t have to order pizza. This stupid mac and cheese recipe was supposed to be super easy, and I needed the victory of something the boys would eat. We had frozen pizza last night while Nathan slept. Was there some sort of rule about how many times you could serve your kids pizza in a week?

But the torched and curdled mess of soggy noodles and cheese was a disaster. *I* was a disaster. Nathan nuzzled my cheek with his, trying to sway our bodies gently, side to side. I pulled his arms away from my waist. The last thing I needed was to get his hopes up about sex tonight. He’d just be

disappointed when I turned him down, and I was tired of being disappointing.

“Can you go get Joey? I need to deal with this.”

Nathan pulled away. “Oh, uh... yeah. I’ll order the pizza, too.”

I filled the empty space where his arms had been by wrapping my own around my stomach.

“I love you.” His words sounded cautious and hesitant. As if he wasn’t sure what I would say in return.

“I love you, too.” The reply was automatic. Sometimes, when we were on the phone, it seemed like we filled the silence with those words, two or three or even more times per call. It wasn’t that it was untrue, but I wondered sometimes. I still loved Nathan. As frustrating and irritating and bone-headed as he could be, I loved him.

We were both tired and working and taking care of three boys who didn’t seem to care that Mommy and Daddy sometimes needed to have conversations that didn’t involve input or explanation to a five-year-old.

We hadn’t told the boys about the baby. I’d been thinking about a cute way to announce it—skimming Pinterest for “big, bigger, and biggest brother” shirts. It had been a lot to wrap my head around having another one so soon, but after Nathan was so sweet when I told him, we started to get excited. Joey started to sleep longer stretches and finally made it through the awful four-month sleep regression. Things were really good for two weeks. And then the illusion shattered.

I dumped the steaming, clumpy mass of noodles and cheese into the trash can, realizing too late that I probably should have just let it cool on the counter. But this fancy appliance I’d spent a month’s worth of grocery money on was already going to be hard enough to wash, let alone if I let the burnt cheese dry on it.

“Mommy, what’s that yucky smell?”

“Ewww!” Link quickly took the cue from his older brother that turning up his nose at the smell in the kitchen was

the right move.

“Go back outside,” I instructed.

“What’s for dinner?” My five-year-old ignored me with the nonchalance only a child could pull off.

“I said, go back outside!” I snapped.

Their little stricken faces made me feel even worse, but they obeyed.

“Come on, Link. The mommy monster is back. Let’s go build a castle to defend against...” his words disappeared behind the sound of the back door slamming.

Mommy monster, huh? That’s a new one.

I wanted to laugh it off, tell myself that my kids had it way better than they even realized. Nathan certainly had stories of real monsters and how they treated their kids. But it didn’t make me feel better. The barb had stuck, and I would hear the echo of my five-year-old’s interpretation of my behavior every time I raised my voice.

“Here comes the Blowy Joey!” I rolled my eyes at the awful nickname. “Phew, that was a rough one. Up the back and all over the crib, right, bubba? But Dadda got you and now we’re just so fresh and so clean, clean,” Nathan slipped into the lyrics of an old hip-hop song as he carried Joey comfortably in one arm. Joey had more blowout diapers than any baby I’d ever heard of. I’d tried all the tips and all the different diapers, but nothing seemed to help.

Nathan had dubbed him Blowy Joey a few weeks ago, and despite my groans of laughter, it wasn’t going away.

“Do you want him?” Nathan asked.

I shook my head. “You hang out with him, and I’ll start the laundry. I’ll have him all to myself tomorrow. He doesn’t get to see you much.”

Nathan’s smile faded, and with a curt nod, he took Joey into the living room. He laid Joey on a blanket for tummy time and stretched out on the floor in front of him, expertly holding up a rattle to encourage the baby to roll over.

Joey was straining, pushing up on his hands and craning his neck to see what his daddy was doing. His smile was precious. I wanted to sit next to them and enjoy the sweet moment together. Instead, I went and grabbed the soiled crib sheet—which was just as bad as Nathan had indicated—and clothes.

On my way to the laundry room, the acrid smell of burnt cheese hit me anew. “Did you order that pizza, or should I?”

“Oh, shoot. No, sorry, babe. I didn’t.”

I sighed and flipped on the oven. “I’ll just throw in chicken nuggets.” Again.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

Five weeks, six days, and seventeen hours. That's how long it has been since I packed my suitcase and moved out of the home I shared with my wife and our three perfect sons. Well, perfect might be a stretch. They were loud, ornery, messy, and frustrating. And dang if I didn't miss them so much it was physically painful.

"What's up, loser?" Across the room, I saw my brother Eli walk in, his face holding a weary smile. Eli and I used to be pretty similar, but I apparently grew up and, well, he hasn't, obviously.

"Morning," I said instead, my voice full of gravel, ignoring his attempts to goad me into a fight. I just needed to get through this shift change meeting and then I could sleep.

Not a wink of sleep last night during our shift. We took more calls than we sometimes took in an entire month, and my body was begging for a soft bed. Probably a shower first, if the lingering scent of smoke was as strong as it seemed.

"You pull your head out of your butt and move back in with your family yet?"

I glanced up from my notebook, glaring at Elijah. Uninvited, he pulled out the chair next to mine and settled in.

"Leave it alone, E."

He shook his head and crossed his arms, spreading his legs out wide under the table. "I've tried. But I'm done watching you make the biggest mistake of your life."

My irritation with my younger brother grew. The rest of the firefighters were coming in, shooting the breeze and sipping coffee. I leaned closer to him, whispering through a tight jaw. "You don't know a thing about being in a committed relationship, bro. There's no way on God's green earth I'm taking relationship advice from someone who chases anything

in a skirt. If I want advice on picking up chicks or being a total screw-up in general, I'll ask for your advice.”

Then, I scooted my chair away from my brother and raised my voice so everyone could hear me. “All right, let's get this show on the road. Our shift was nonstop. Dylan, you want to run through the calls real quick?”

Dylan nodded and started telling the incoming shift everything we'd dealt with the previous twenty-four hours. I could feel Eli's angry stare burning a hole in the side of my face.

Somehow, I made it through the meeting. It was probably anger that gave me the energy to not fall asleep there in the training room. After the changeover meeting was through, I packed up my stuff, shoving my dirty clothes and the snacks I'd brought for the shift back in my duffel bag.

Eli had some nerve judging me about my relationship. He never dated a girl for more than two weeks, and judging by the way the ladies around town looked at him, the decision to break things off was almost always his.

I stared at my things for a moment, my brain stumbling over what I was supposed to do next. It took a few moments, like my brain was rebooting. Man, I was tired. I grabbed my duffel bag off the bench and stood up.

And slammed directly into Eli's chest.

“Dude, what the heck?” I shoved him away.

He shoved me back.

I dropped my bag to the floor and tackled him. I was vaguely aware of the other firefighters watching from the door and debating whether they should pull us apart. But my attention was mostly focused on trying to get the upper hand on Eli. It wasn't an easy task, since he was all muscle and quickness.

“Leave it alone, E!” I grunted, trying to remove the grip he had on my shoulder.

“Stop being so stubborn,” he growled back.

We grappled, and in a few moments, he had me pinned on the bunkroom floor, both of us breathless. I tapped the floor, the way we used to let the other know we surrendered.

Eli rolled off and stood, holding out a hand to help me up.

I wiped my forehead with my sleeve. “If I’d had any sleep in the last 24 hours, I could have beaten you.”

He smirked. “You keep telling yourself that, old man.”

I sank onto the bed and Eli sat next to me.

“Move along, folks,” Kyle Parker, the captain of C crew, spoke from the hallway. “Haven’t you ever seen brothers before?” The crowd dispersed and we were left there alone in the bunk room.

“I’ve been going to therapy,” I admitted to Eli. I wasn’t sure why I said anything. He’d probably mock me or tell me it was a waste of money.

Instead, he just nodded. “That’s good.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yeah. Look, I know we don’t talk as much as we used to. And that’s probably my fault... You should do whatever it takes to get your head on straight. Because those kids and that woman? They’re the real deal, man. Don’t screw it up.”

“Says the family screw-up?”

He gave an amused grunt. “Yep. Take it from someone who knows what it’s like.”

I stared at my hands. “What if I’m not good enough? What if I go back and try and can’t be what they need?”

“I’m going to explain this as simply as I can, using small words because you’re an idiot,” he explained.

My laughter caught me off guard.

He didn’t stop. “But you’re *my* idiot, so here we go. You don’t have to earn anything. Rebecca loves you. Heaven help her, I can’t understand why, but she does.”

My shoulders shook with more laughter. “What kind of pep talk is this?”

“One-of-a-kind, bro. Just like me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that easy... Sometimes, it’s like it’s her against me. And I can’t win in that scenario. Because even if I win, I hurt her and I lose.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, bro. She’s not the enemy. You can’t see the real enemy, so it’s easier to let it feel like it’s her.”

“And if I can’t live up to the expectations?” My question only hinted at the fear and trepidation I felt at the idea of going back. I wanted it more than anything, but I was afraid to grab it. “It’s so much pressure, E. I’m not sure I can handle it. I just hate disappointing her.”

“Unless you realize that you don’t have to carry the world on your shoulders, you’re never going to be at peace. You and Rebecca have got some stuff to work out, sure. It can’t be easy when tensions run high and everybody is tired and cranky. But as long as you keep showing up—keep putting in the work and loving her—even when it is hard? That’s all you have to do.”

Simple, not easy.

My dad’s words came back to me.

“You sound like Dad,” I said with a hint of laughter.

Eli cringed. “Ouch. Why you gotta wound me like that?”

“Thanks, E.”

Eli sighed. “I envy you, man. The only thing standing between you and forever with your girl is your own dumb self. Just get out of your own way. Because it’s not that easy for some of us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” There had to be something my brother wasn’t telling me. Was there someone...? No, that was crazy. Eli was the biggest flirt in town. The opposite of wanting something serious.

He waved me off. “Get outta here. Go get some sleep.”

At his command, the fatigue seemed to wash over my body, a tidal wave that had pulled back momentarily but now hit full force. I hugged him before I left, which turned into an unspoken competition about who could thump the other the hardest on the back.

The drive home was on autopilot, and I was halfway to the front door of the house before I realized that I was at the wrong one. I'd driven to *our* house instead of to my parents' house.

I paused mid-step and turned back toward my truck.

The door creaked open behind me. "Nathan? What are you doing here?"

I turned, running a shaky hand through my too-long hair. I desperately needed a haircut. But Rebecca always cut mine and all the boys'. She stood in the half-open doorway, a mug in one hand and the familiar lightweight tan robe that she insisted was a sweater instead. "Hey. Sorry, I just got off. Tired," I mumbled, moving back toward my truck. "I'll see you on Thursday at church, right?"

"Sure." Her voice was plaintive. "I'll see you then."

I was so tired. My brain was desperate for sleep and my body was protesting the non-stop pace we'd kept during the entire shift. But my heart was begging for more time with Bex. To not have to make the lonely drive back to my parents' house.

I stopped and looked back at her. "Actually. Since I'm here..." I paused. "Would you give me a haircut?"

I was too far away to read the expression on her face. My muscles coiled, expecting rejection. She typically moaned and groaned about doing haircuts, teasing me about being high maintenance. But we'd been broke as newlyweds, and saving even fifteen bucks a month had been helpful.

She pressed open the door and gestured inside with her head. "Sure. Come on in."

It smelled like cinnamon rolls. My mouth began to water, and my stomach tried its best to imitate Truck #10 from the

north station. Joey was watching something I didn't recognize and hardly noticed me when I came in.

"Hey, buddy," I said.

"Daddy! Sit me," he instructed, scooting over to make room next to him on the couch.

I glanced at Rebecca for permission. She nodded, sipping her coffee. "Go ahead. I'll get the stuff ready."

I settled into the corner of the couch and Joey snuggled into the crook of my arm. It was soft and warm there with him, and the tension eased from my body. The blue dogs on the screen weren't interesting enough to keep my eyes open.

I lifted my head, my neck aching from the awkward angle. Joey wasn't beside me anymore and the TV had music playing, a worship song I vaguely recognized. I stretched my arms, looking around.

"Hey, sleepy head." Rebecca was in the kitchen, her floral print apron wrapped around her waist and a mixing bowl in hand.

I ran a hand over my face, trying to rub away the sleep.

"Hey." My voice was gravel, my throat dry. "How long was I out?"

"It's almost two."

I blinked. "Seriously?" I'd passed out for five hours without even moving enough to lay down instead of sitting propped against the corner?

Rebecca smiled. "Yeah. We decided to let you sleep. Joey insisted." She laughed. "It's actually been pretty nice. He's never this quiet."

I stood and made my way to the kitchen. "Sorry I crashed your day. It was a long shift." I stepped closer and peeked into the bowl she was mixing. The muted scent of chocolate wafted from the bowl. "Brownies?" My voice was hopeful.

Rebecca laughed. "Yes, brownies."

My stomach roared like the Union Pacific train that came through town twice a day. “What’s a guy gotta do to get one of those later?”

She blushed and lowered her gaze. I stepped closer again, my eyes glued to hers, hidden below delicate lashes. She wasn’t wearing a trace of makeup, and her hair was piled on top of her head, revealing the soft curve of her neck where a few strands had broken free and rested there.

So beautiful.

Inside and out.

I pulled the mixing bowl from her hands and set it on the counter behind her, trapping her loosely with my arms. Her breath quickened as she lifted her eyes to mine.

“Can I kiss you?”

She nodded, her eyes wide with trust and anticipation.

I lowered my mouth to hers. There was a hint of chocolate as my mouth moved against hers, which only added to her natural sweetness. Her throaty sighs nearly undid me. Her hands rested on my chest, then wound into my hair, tugging me closer. I trailed kisses along her cheek, to the corner of her jaw.

I pulled her head so her cheek rested on my chest and just held her. I wanted to memorize the feel of her curves, soft against my frame. Curves I’d watched develop with the years, encouraged by the three babies she’d carried for me. I loved every inch of her.

I tilted to whisper in her ear. “I’ll never deserve you.”

I believed that whole-heartedly. But I also thought maybe I was too selfish to care anymore.

“I think you probably deserve better,” she murmured into my shirt, so quiet I almost didn’t hear.

I pressed a kiss to her hair. “Let’s agree to disagree on that and just focus on being together. Maybe... we can be better for each other, but still understanding when we’re each not at our best.”

She nodded. "I'd like that a whole lot."

The oven beeped from across the kitchen. A quick glance let me know that it was preheated.

I squeezed her one more time before releasing my hold. "So... about that brownie?"

She grabbed the mixing bowl and danced across the kitchen, pouring brownie batter into the waiting baking dish. "Well, in this house, you have to eat your food before you can have a treat," she said with a wink. "Have a seat. I'll make you a sandwich."

I sat at the table for a moment. The house looked good, I couldn't help but notice. She even had a candle burning on the kitchen island.

She worked so hard. Plus, she'd let me sleep on the couch all morning, was making me lunch, and was going to cut my hair. I shouldn't just sit here while she did all the work. While she pulled ingredients from the fridge, I walked to the sink and flicked on the water.

"Oh, I can do that," she protested.

"Let me help, my love." I used a squirt of dish soap and scrubbed the mixing bowl, rinsed it, and dried it with an embroidered dish towel that declared it Saturday—even though it was currently Tuesday—before placing it back in the cabinet under the island.

Rebecca held out a small plate with a sandwich and some chips on it. "Thanks for doing that."

"No big deal," I said. "This looks delicious. I'm starving."

She smiled and pressed up to her toes to kiss my cheek. "It's really nice to have you here."

I couldn't agree more. And I had every intention of making it a more regular occurrence.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

REBECCA

I leaned over in front of Nathan, carefully trimming the hair above his eyebrows. I forgot how close I had to be to him to cut his hair, and I couldn't seem to stop nudging his knees or shoulders with my body as I circled around him.

The barber cape we had—decorated with colorful dinosaurs—barely covered his lap, but at least it kept it out of his shirt. It never failed to make me laugh. I gave Nathan a hard time about cutting his hair because it seemed like he needed one every month, whereas I was lucky to get my hair done once a year.

But I really didn't mind doing it. I'd been so nervous at first, when we were newlyweds and he'd come home with a set of clippers.

“No way. I'm not a barber, Nate!”

“Just try it out. If you mess it up, I can just trim it all super short. No big deal.”

It was the reassurance that the worst that could happen was he would trim it all off that made me willing to try. And I'd gotten better over the years. Now, Nathan was the easiest of the bunch. Cutting the boys' hair—especially Joey's—was an exercise in ninja patience. Strike when they least expect it and then wait until they settled back down before grabbing another slice.

“Look straight ahead,” I instructed, as I bent down next to him, bringing my eyes level with his ear. The smell of his soap grew stronger as I got close. I trimmed his sideburns to the correct length, holding my breath to steady my hand.

I hesitated.

I used to press a kiss to each cheek every time I trimmed his sideburns, since it was the very last part of the haircut. When had that stopped? I couldn't remember. Probably one

night when I was grumpy about having to cut his hair late, after the boys went to bed and all I wanted to do was zone out on the couch.

I pulled the trimmer away, making sure the sideburn was just at the level of the corner of his eye. Then, I leaned in, pressing my lips to his cheek. The rasp of his second-day stubble tickled my skin.

Neither of us said a word as I did the same on the other side. I let my lips linger for a moment before pulling away. Nathan turned his face toward mine, tilting his head up to press his lips against mine. The low buzz of the clippers faded from my awareness, and I lowered onto his lap. His hands came around my waist, holding me in place.

His lips trailed to my neck, and I gasped in pleasure as he continued to explore with his mouth and hands.

It would be easy. Joey was asleep, and the bed was right there.

I wanted him so badly, but I pulled away. For a moment, I hid my face in the cradle of his neck, catching my breath.

Wordlessly, I stood and turned toward the counter. I flipped off the clippers and began putting all the supplies away. Nathan came up behind me.

“Hey,” he said gently.

I inhaled. “Hey.”

“I’m sorry if I got carried away,” he said.

I nodded. “No, it’s... I understand.” I shrugged. “We’ve lived for a decade with no sort of boundary, right? It makes sense that we would slip into that. But...” I turned, facing him with my back against the kitchen island. “I don’t know if I can trust you yet,” I admitted.

I saw the flicker of pain in his eyes, and I immediately wanted to soothe it. But I didn’t say anything.

“I want to say that you can,” he said.

“I need you to be sure, Nate. Really sure. We can wait however long it takes for both of us to be fully committed, you know?” I swallowed thickly. It felt crazy to be keeping him at arm’s length like this. Shouldn’t I be begging him to grab his suitcase and move back in tonight?

He caught my waist on my way back from the table to the stove. “I couldn’t agree more. I think... Let’s finish our next session with Justin, and let me do another week or two with my counselor. I don’t want to make any moves too soon. I made that mistake the first time, and I’m not going to put you through that again.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Just be patient with me?”

“Who, me? I’m the poster child of patience. Absolute expert. When you look up patience in the dictionary, you get my picture,” I said, teasing.

“Mmm-hmm.” Nathan pressed a kiss to my mouth. “Maybe my memory is failing me in my old age, because that’s not how I remember it.”

I smiled against his lips.

With the physical tension not entirely gone, but at least somewhat lessened, Nathan swept up the hair from the floor and I finished cleaning up the kitchen.

I pulled the brownies out of the oven when the timer went off and let them cool, swatting Nathan’s hand away from the pan. “Stop it. It’ll fall apart if you grab it while it’s too hot. Besides, some of these are for someone else!”

“Who are they for?” His question was simple curiosity, but I hesitated.

We were doing so well. I was afraid that admitting I was making brownies for Luke because he’d been mowing the yard would send us stumbling backward.

I chewed the inside of my lip. “Umm, they’re for Luke.”

He frowned, his eyebrows pulling together. “Luke Brand? Why?”

I shrugged. “He’s, uh... He’s been taking care of the grass since you moved out.”

Nathan’s eyes widened. “What?”

I shut one eye, afraid to look at him, but unable to look away. “It’s not a big deal, Nate. It was just getting out of control, and I think one of the ladies from my prayer group must have told Charlotte... I mean, I don’t know for sure that it is him, but I figure it must be. He’s got that giant lawn mower and all...” I trailed off, confused by the expression on Nate’s face. “What’s so funny?”

“You think Luke mowed your lawn?”

I nodded.

“And cleared out your planters? And planted new mums?”

“Umm, yes?”

Nate was shaking with laughter. “Let me guess... he pulled the trash to the curb too?”

“Are you making fun of me, Nathan Wells?” I put my hands on my hips.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but if you’re making brownies for the guy mowing your lawn, then I definitely want the credit.”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not possible. You...”

He waited, an expectant expression on his face. “I what?”

“This whole time?” I whispered.

He nodded. “Yeah. I mean... we had that dry spell in late July, so I sort of ignored it for a awhile. But the last month or so.”

“I had no idea!”

He shrugged. “I was trying to prove I could do it without needing your appreciation.”

“But... I thought... It was before we even went to counseling!”

“I thought that wasn’t counseling,” he teased, his smile growing wider.

Mine grew to match his. “You know what I mean, goofball. I wish I had known...” Then it made sense. I’d wondered how Luke could possibly keep hitting at exactly the times when I was gone from the house. But Nate knew the schedule. He’d been so careful to do the lawn when I wouldn’t see him.

My heart melted.

I wrapped my arms around him. “Thank you,” I said. I felt a bit silly, feeling so emotional over a few hours of yard work, but it was the fact that he’d taken care of it, even when he didn’t have to. After all, he didn’t live here.

“I just wanted to do something for you... I’ve never stopped caring about you, Bex. I just got hung up in feeling like I needed more from you to validate me. That was on me.”

“I never stopped caring either,” I said. Nate’s words reminded me of what Carla had said about needing God to remind me of who I was. I still felt this urge to do something more though.

“I’m thinking about getting a job,” I said when the silence had settled. I tried to read Nathan’s expression, but he gave nothing away.

“Oh?”

“Yeah... what would you think about that?” I wanted his approval. It would be a big change for the two of us.

“If that’s what you want, then sure.” I smiled. “But does it even matter what I say?” he asked.

I leaned back in surprise. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nevermind. I shouldn’t have said that,” he said with a sigh.

“No, I want to know. Of course what you say matters... unless we’re not headed where I thought we were?”

“It’s fine. If you think you’d enjoy having a job, then I think you should get one.”

There was something he wasn’t saying... but I didn’t know what it was.

Joey woke up from his nap and we were forced to table our conversation. The other boys would be getting off the bus any minute as well. Nathan hung out for a little while after they got home, but the temperature had shifted between us. I couldn’t seem to understand why.

What was the big deal about a job? Why would Nathan assume that his opinion didn’t matter?

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

NATHAN (2 YEARS AGO)

I expected Rebecca to cry. I expected her to need time, or to turn to me before bed and rest her head on my chest and tell me about her pain. Instead, she'd barely seemed fazed by the miscarriage. Was I making too big of a deal about this? We'd never walked this road before. It was uncharted territory, and I felt like I was stumbling around, trying to find my footing.

But Rebecca? She never wavered at all.

Maybe... maybe she hadn't wanted the baby?

But no, that didn't feel right. After the initial shock, she'd been so happy. Even the morning sickness and fatigue hadn't dimmed her bright smile. Or her jokes about not even having to pack away her maternity clothes and a goal to not wear jeans with a button for a full two years. She wanted the baby.

So why did it feel like I was the only one grieving the loss?

She cradled Joey to her chest, nursing him in the corner of the couch while I flipped on the baseball game. The house was quiet, with the other boys already asleep, and Joey headed that way soon, judging by his slow suckle and relaxed muscles.

"Did everything go okay at the doctor's office?" I watched the boys while Rebecca went to Greencastle for her appointment. I wanted to go with her and hold her hand through it all. But she'd insisted that she didn't need me. Plus, Mom and Dad were out of town and couldn't watch the boys. So she'd had to go alone.

She nodded, her fingers tickling Joey's back. I knew she was trying to make sure he kept eating. "They did a blood test to check my levels, but said unless I have any more pain or get a fever, everything should be okay."

My instincts roared at me—everything was very much *not okay*. But I kept my eyes on the television and nodded. "Are you okay?" I kept the question casual.

She pulled Joey away from her chest and held him to her shoulder, patting him firmly until he burped. “I’m okay,” she said. “This is probably better, right?” She didn’t look at me.

I shook my head. “Don’t say that, babe. Just because we didn’t plan this...”

“The doctor said my body probably wasn’t ready for another pregnancy, since it was so soon after having Joey. He suggested birth control, so I had him insert an IUD.”

I sat up suddenly. “What?” My attempt to keep the conversation quiet completely pushed aside at my shock.

She shushed me and turned her face toward her shoulder to make sure Joey was still asleep. “I thought it was the best option... We didn’t want to have another baby, right?”

I blinked at her, my anger simmering under the surface. “Don’t you think we should have talked about this?”

She glanced at Joey again. “Let me put him down, and then we can talk.”

I clenched my jaw and leaned my elbows on my knees, fuming. I wasn’t upset about her choosing birth control, necessarily. But this was a major decision, and Rebecca had just done it without me! Before, we had always talked about those things together and made the decision we felt was right. We shared mixed feelings about being open to God’s will while still being careful about what we could handle.

But we’d made the decisions together.

So for Rebecca to start birth control without saying anything to me? My mind was reeling.

When she came out of Joey’s room, her posture was stiff. She sat back in her corner of the couch, her knees pulled to her chest.

I was barely controlling myself. “You better talk to me, Bec,” I said stiffly.

“It’s my body. It’s my choice,” she said quietly.

I shook my head. “Don’t spout those lines to me. We’re a team. At least, we used to be.” I covered my face with my hands.

“I just don’t... I don’t want it to happen again, okay?” Her voice was shaky.

I pulled my hands down my face, trying to peel away the anger that was trying to explode under my skin. I looked up at my wife. She was all the way across the room, and it felt like there might as well be a hundred miles between us.

Her eyes were fixed on her fingers as they played with the edge of the blanket she’d brought home the other day. Just what we needed. Her eyes were shiny and wet, but I couldn’t get past my own frustration. Two weeks since the miscarriage and she hadn’t said a word.

And now, all of a sudden, she got birth control without telling me? I’d been here, waiting for her to turn to me. Trying to let her know that it’s okay and that she could lean on me.

But she didn’t want to.

She wanted to make sure we never had another baby. And it didn’t matter what I said about it. Betrayal and fiery resentment settled low into my stomach, black and cold and heavy. I wanted to yell. I wanted to throw something or punch a freaking wall.

I wanted to go to my wife and wipe the tears from her eyes.

But I was too angry.

The emergency dispatch app on my phone chimed.

“I’m going to the station,” I said, pressing up to standing. My shift wasn’t until eight tomorrow morning, but I couldn’t be here right then. Not when it felt like I was being ripped limb from limb by the desire to care for a woman who didn’t even feel the need to include me in something so major.

She didn’t say a word as I rushed around the house, grabbing the few things I needed for work. She didn’t tell me to stay or try to explain herself. I’d sleep at the station. Maybe

lift something too heavy just to feel pain somewhere other than the deep, searing needles of grief and hurt and anger.

My fingers hesitated on the doorknob, waiting for something. Anything from her to let me know she didn't want me to go. I turned back.

She just kept staring at her fingers on that stupid throw blanket.

And I walked out the door.



REBECCA

WE DIDN'T NEED this blanket. I probably shouldn't have bought it, but it was only fifteen dollars. And it made me happy.

For a moment.

The door shut quietly across the room. If I knew Nathan at all, he wanted to slam it but was far too considerate to do that while the kids slept. Even when he was angry, he was a better person than me. I pulled the blanket up to my mouth to muffle my strangled sob.

I didn't blame Nate for being furious. I should have talked to him about it. I could have waited and gone back for another appointment if we decided birth control was the right choice for us. But I hadn't.

Because when faced with the possibility that I could walk through another miscarriage if I didn't do something to prevent it... I couldn't bear the thought. We were done having kids. We'd had that conversation. This last pregnancy was just... a fluke.

Even if the realization that I was carrying another little life had cracked the door on the desire that I had been so sure was

locked away. Two weeks. I'd known about that baby for two weeks. And then they were gone.

But I had to focus on the family we had. It was the only way I could function without somehow spiraling into this pit of despair that I stood on the precipice of. So, I pushed through. One step after the other.

Cook dinner.

Do laundry.

Sing a silly song for Lincoln.

Change a diaper.

Feed Joey.

Play catch with Alex.

Smile. Rinse. Repeat.

If I stopped to look into that blackness of grief and longing for our unborn baby, I was sure I'd never make it out. So, I skirted the edges, keeping my eyes away.

If it meant I was now officially on birth control for the first time in our ten-year marriage, then that was what it meant. Nathan would forgive me. We'd agreed we were done having kids. This just made it a little more certain.

It might have been hours that I sat there and let the tears fall. Hot, ugly crying for the loss of the baby. For the chasm I felt in my marriage at this moment. For the frustration at myself for being too weak to have that conversation with my husband in fear that he would convince me not to do it. For my own failure to bring the tiny life into the world I'd been entrusted with.

Failure.

This miscarriage felt like just another failure in a long line of them. My milk supply was dwindling, and since I couldn't seem to produce all the milk Joey needed, we'd be buying formula before too long. Another strain on the grocery budget I couldn't stop from going over every month. Lincoln and

Alex seemed to fight non-stop, yelling and shoving each other and making me feel like the worst mom in the world.

I couldn't keep the house clean. I couldn't even get groceries without forgetting some random essential ingredient for dinner. And now, my husband couldn't even look at me because I'd screwed up so badly.

Eventually, the sound of a commercial during the baseball game broke through my miserable pity party. I scrambled for the remote and hit the power button, casting the room into darkness. Much better. I wanted to be alone in the silence.

I locked the doors and ignored the load of laundry that just finished drying and should probably be folded tonight. Instead, I numbly changed out of the maternity sweats I should probably donate but couldn't because none of my real pants fit. I slipped into flannel pajama pants and climbed into bed. The white sheets and bedspread seemed to mock me with the false perfection they portrayed.

I turned my back to the empty spot beside me where Nathan should be laying and snoring softly until I nudged him to roll over. As if he didn't spend enough nights away from home, I'd chased him out on a night he was supposed to be here.

The rejection and sting of abandonment seemed to snake across the empty sheets and wrap itself around me. I missed him. But I didn't have anyone to blame but myself for his absence.

Just another failure.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

NATHAN (PRESENT DAY)

Dylan parked the truck as close to the house as he could, and we both hopped out.

“My baby! Get my baby!” A frantic woman was running toward us from across the street.

I held up a hand. “Ma’am, where is the baby?”

She pointed at the house. “Get her out! She’s trapped in there. Oh, God, please!”

Why on earth was this woman across the street in the middle of the night while her baby slept in another house? On second thought, I probably didn’t want to know. One thing that never ceased to surprise me in this job was the decisions that some people made.

There was smoke and fire visible in one half of the house. “Where’s her room?”

The woman pointed to the side of the house where no fire was visible. “Above the garage. She’s in the crib and she can’t climb out!” The woman was hysterical, but at least she’d been able to give us the information we needed. “Lucy! You have to get her!”

“We’ll get her out,” I said, then I walked away. We had to move. We had more units on the way, but I knew there was no time. I couldn’t send my guys in. There were only three of us.

I turned to my team; they already had the truck hooked up to the hydrant. “Mac, you run the pump. Dylan, run the line. I’m going in.”

Dylan’s eyebrows jumped. “You sure?”

Here, at least my decisions were accepted. My opinion carried some weight. Unlike at home. The other night, the urge to throw the birth control conversation back in Rebecca’s face had been there, the biting words on the tip of my tongue. I saw

how it would play out. I would cover my hurt with snark about how it didn't matter what I thought about the job. That was hardly as important as the decision she'd made about birth control without me. Then she would get defensive. And I'd get angry all over again about something that had happened two years ago.

I took a deep breath. No, I didn't want to go down that road.

But instead, I was freezing her out. And it sucked, too.

Dylan was waiting for my answer. "Yep. Once I'm in, I want the ladder up and water on from above, got it?" I knew that was the fastest way to knock down the fire and keep it from growing any more.

"On it," he confirmed.

"Once I'm in, you're incident command." If I handed over the command earlier, it would be his neck on the line if I insisted on going in. So, I was in charge until I was through the door.

He gave a curt nod.

"Let's roll." I donned my SCBA and put on my helmet.

The heat rolled off the Delta side of the house in waves as I approached. I said a quick prayer for the baby trapped inside. I took one more glance at the helpless mother being held back by the man from across the street. Dylan pulled the uncharged hose up the ladder.

Then, I went inside.

The smoke was thick, and I immediately started memorizing my movements. Getting to the baby would be the easy part, but I had to find our way back out again. And visibility was likely to be even worse by then. I hurried up the stairs and turned toward the room over the garage.

The door was closed, thank the Lord. I used a heavily gloved hand to turn the nob, shoving the door open quickly and then shut it behind me. In the clearer room, I saw the little girl, standing in the crib, hands on the rail and crying. At the

sight of me, Lucy screamed even louder and backed toward the wall.

I knew it was a natural reaction, and I also knew I didn't have time to reassure her. I picked her up and held her tightly to my chest. She was fighting, but I could handle it. I pulled the cloth of her pajamas over her head and held it there, hoping to keep her little lungs from most of the smoke. And then I rushed back through the house. My eyes widened at the sight of the fire rolling across the hallway ceiling. It must have been in the back of the attic when we got here. I hadn't even done a 360, I realized with a sinking feeling.

No time for regrets. I tugged the little girl tighter to my chest and walked as fast as I could, praying the whole time.

The scene when we came back out the front door was completely different. In the three minutes I'd been inside, ten more firefighters and two more trucks had arrived. Dylan had managed to put a huge load of water on the fire and the dark smoke from the windows was now mixing with clouds of white steam. A pair of firefighters was gearing up to head inside with a charged one-and-a-half-inch line. Pairs. It should always be pairs.

I put the little girl on her feet and pulled off my helmet and breathing apparatus.

The mom rushed toward us and wrapped her arms around the little girl, sobbing. "I'm so sorry, baby. Mommy's sorry."

"Ma'am, we need to check her out. She was exposed to a lot of smoke."

The little girl was a little younger than Joey. I knelt down. "Hey there, sweetheart. I'm sorry if I scared you. But I'm a firefighter and I just needed to get you out of the house as fast as I could, okay?"

She peered around her mother's leg, apprehension still written all over her face.

"Can you and your mommy come over here to the ambulance with me?"

Her mom picked her up and I took her to Jimmy Rawlins, a volunteer who met us at the ambulance with some oxygen for her.

I watched Lucy for a moment, clinging to her mom.

I'd saved that little girl, but I knew I'd made a big mistake.

Not doing a walkaround before entering the fire was a huge no-go. It was the most basic principle of Incident Command, and I had skipped it. I could have walked into a structure ready to collapse and not had any idea. I might have still decided to go in, but at least I would have had the information.

Despite the applause from the gathered crowd, the profuse thanks from the mother, and the many "great work" comments from the crew... I knew I had screwed up. Chief Bergman was going to be livid.

I couldn't even blame him.

The shift change meeting was tense the next morning, with a mix of hero comments from the younger guys before it even started. I thought about skirting the truth, but I had to own up to what I'd done. I laid out the sequence of events.

"What did the walkaround show?" Chief asked curiously. He thought I'd simply failed to mention what I saw.

I took a deep breath. "I didn't do one."

I saw the look of disbelief exchanged between Captain Parker and my brother Elijah.

"You didn't do a 360? Why the heck not?"

"To be completely honest, sir, I forgot. The mother was screaming about her daughter inside, and the fire looked to be completely contained to the Delta side. We were short-staffed and I just... made the call."

"For crying out loud, Wells. What were you thinking? You know better."

"Yes, sir. I do."

Chief took a deep breath. “You got lucky, Captain. I hope you know that.”

I did. Seeing and feeling the heat from the flames rolling over our head when I carried the little girl out of her room was terrifying.

Bergman continued. “Parker, let’s wrap this up. And Wells?”

“Yes, sir?” Apprehension hung on the breath in my throat.

“I want you in my office after this meeting ends.”

I pressed my lips together and nodded.

What had I been thinking? I’d rushed in without doing everything I should have. In retrospect, I recognized that there were other options. A ladder from the exterior to the window above the garage would have meant we could get Lucy out without exposing her to the smoke and heat of the main fire.

The truth of the situation had been rolling around ever since we got back to the station about four hours ago. I wanted to save the little girl, and I wanted to make the decision. I was so desperate to command the situation myself that I rushed into it.

Not for glory, but for the satisfaction of knowing that I had been instrumental. That I mattered. Because as much as I had tried to forget about the decisions Rebecca had made without me—especially two years ago—I wasn’t over it. They’d festered over the years and made me feel smaller and smaller.

And I’d filled that by pushing myself at work. By choosing rank over relationship and focusing on being a hero instead of being a husband. As though I could fill the cracks in the foundation at home by being a better firefighter instead of a better father or friend.

And worst of all? I’d walked away from the thing that really mattered. As much as I loved being a firefighter... I loved my family more. And someday I would stop being a firefighter. But I wanted Rebecca by my side every step of the way until then and after.

I needed her to know that. I let my temper get the best of me again and walked out instead of admitting to the hurt I still carried. And if I kept walking out every time we were going to have a hard conversation, then there was no hope for us at all, was there.

We were scheduled to meet with Justin today in just a few hours and I needed her to be there. Our marriage depended on whether we could clear the air.

Nathan: Will you be at counseling this morning? We need to talk.

Beloved Becca: I'll be there.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

REBECCA

“M ommy sad?”

Joey’s simple question lanced my heart painfully. “I’m okay, baby. Just thinking.”

“What are you thinking about?” Link asked from his seat as we waited for the teachers to come out and get the carline moving. We’d already dropped Alex off on the other side of the school. Two carlines every morning. Lucky me.

“Just a few things I need to do,” I stretched the truth. I was thinking about all the things I needed to do—like get a job, hire someone to mow the grass instead of Nathan, and think about a custody arrangement that worked for everyone.

So yeah. I was sad. “Mommies have to work pretty hard.”

“Yeah. You work super hard!”

“That’s because I want to be a really good mom for you guys.”

Link smiled at me, a big, goofy grin. “That’s silly!”

I laughed. “Why is it silly to try hard to be a really good mommy?”

“Well... if it makes you sad, it is. You know we love you, right?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Isn’t that my line?” I asked my boys that almost every night before bed, along with another—

“And you know that we love you no matter what?”

Yep, that one.

“Okay, okay. That’s enough of that.” The line started moving ahead of me, and I shifted into drive, keeping my foot on the brake.

“What’s the last one, Mommy? I forgot.”

My mouth stretched into a close-lipped smile. I recited the third. “And do you know you’re special just because you are you? Because God made you?”

“Yeah! That one.”

“Thanks, Link. I think I needed to hear that one.” It seemed like God was going to use everyone in my life to try to remind that I didn’t have to earn my identity. One of these days, maybe it would sink in.

I pulled the car forward and pressed the button to open the door.

“Bye, Mom!” Link called, already three steps down the sidewalk toward the entrance.

“Have a good day, sweetie.” I looked back at Joey. “Just you and me, bud.”

“See Carla?”

I smiled. “Yep, you get to see Carla this morning.” She’d agreed to watch him for however long it took Nate and I to talk to Justin. I didn’t expect it to be long. After the way he’d pulled away the other night, he hadn’t replied to my messages or reached out at all. I didn’t have high hopes.

Frankly, I was surprised he still wanted to meet with Justin today. But it would be good. Maybe we could work out a custody agreement while we had a mediator.

I thought things were going so well... I still couldn’t understand what had happened. What Chrissy and Ruth had said about communication must be true, because Nate and I were apparently really bad at it. A simple question about a job had spiraled into a fight that I didn’t know the origin of.

I dropped Joey off at home with Carla.

“Praying for you guys,” she said as she hugged me before I left. I had told her about the hot-and-cold treatment I’d been receiving. I was over it. I couldn’t handle being jerked around anymore.

I still believed marriage wasn’t meant to be temporary, and the idea of truly giving up on it made me sick to my stomach.

But if Nathan didn't want me anymore... What was I supposed to do?

We'd tried and failed to put our marriage back together.

Just another failure to add to the pile.

I drove to the church, fighting tears the whole time.

I knew I couldn't bargain with the Lord, but it didn't stop me from wanting to make promises I couldn't keep. Promises like being the perfect wife.

Hot tears ran down my face as I pressed my forehead into the steering wheel. *God, please. Don't let this be the end. Show me what to do! I'll do anything.*

A wave of peace settled over me and the tears subsided. I took a shaky breath, filling my lungs with this reprieve from the crushing weight of my failure. I felt the answer in my soul. Trusting God seemed impossible in this moment when uncertainty drenched my every thought.

Could I trust Him with my future? Could I lean into Him for my identity?

Did I believe that He was enough?

I'd spent so many years trying to be everything for everyone. The perfect mom. The perfect wife. A good friend. A reliable volunteer at church and in the PTA. And no matter how hard I tried, I would never be perfect.

But maybe... maybe I didn't have to be.

Even if Nathan left, I knew God never would. Well, I knew that in my head, but my heart still held onto a fair amount of doubt. But the peace that had washed over me for a few minutes was still there, and I felt more solid than I had in years. For the first time, I felt like maybe my own failures didn't matter quite so much. And surprisingly, neither did Nathan's.

The knock on my window made me jump. My hand flew to my chest to settle the sudden pounding. Nate stood outside the window, questions on his face. I probably looked like a

crazy person, sitting alone in my car and smiling through the tears still wet on my cheeks.

I rolled down the window.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded, swiping at my face. “Yeah. Actually, I’m really good.”

“Good,” he replied. “That’s good.”

The silence stretched on.

“I owe you—”

“Look, I’m—”

We both cut off and smiled. “Go ahead,” I said, waving him on.

His dark eyes were focused entirely on me. He licked his lips and then spoke. “I just wanted to apologize. There’s something I need to tell you.” He tucked his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and shifted his weight. “Phew, this is hard.”

My heart sank.

He puffed out my cheeks and blew out the air. “I’m still angry that you started taking birth control without talking to me about it.”

My eyes widened, and I knew my face betrayed my shock. That was two years ago!

He held up a hand. “I know it’s your body and you don’t want to have another baby, but... we should have talked about it. You should have talked to me first.”

I pressed my lips together, my eyes falling to my hands, resting on the windowsill of the van. The defensive rebuttal was on the tip of my tongue. Practiced lines about how it was my choice and he was being unreasonable to disagree. Lines I’d used to justify the decision I’d made without him.

I looked up and met his focused stare. “You’re right.”

“Maybe it shouldn’t, but it’s been—” He paused. “What?”

“I said, you’re right. I never should have done that. I was just...” I swallowed and pressed my eyes shut against the memory. “I couldn’t process losing the baby. It was hard enough to get up every day and take care of our family. When the doctor offered me a way to make sure I wouldn’t have to go through that again... I said yes. It was impulsive and reactionary.” I tipped my head with a hint of a smile and continued. “And a decision made in the midst of grief and far more hormones than any one person can handle.” I let my sorrow show on my face. “I’m so sorry for making that decision without you.”

He nodded, his face sympathetic. “In some ways, I think it was really more about the baby. Maybe it shouldn’t have hit me so hard. Everything online said that it happens all the time. We had three healthy babies already. And you... you just brushed it off. But I couldn’t. And you didn’t let me help you.”

My hands moved before I could consider my actions. I opened the door and got out of the car. I stepped into his arms, unable to maintain the distance between us. I’d never heard Nathan mention the baby we’d lost. We never spoke of her. I couldn’t be sure the baby was a girl, of course, but in my heart, she was.

His arms came around me, and I nuzzled into his chest.

“When I dream of her, she has soft brown curls and your eyes,” I said softly.

His hands stilled on my back. “I didn’t know you had dreams about... her.”

I nodded, my cheek still resting on his shirt. “All the time. I felt so silly for being upset about a baby we barely knew existed and that we hadn’t ever planned on. And the boys needed me. You needed me. So I just sort of... pushed it down.”

His hold tightened. “I wish I’d known. I felt like I was failing you by not being able to feel like things were normal.”

“I felt like I failed you by losing the baby,” I said, squeezing my eyes closed. My voice was barely a whisper, the

confession something I wasn't sure I'd truly admitted to myself, let alone to him. I knew in my head that it wasn't true. I knew the science—the statistics. I knew the comfort I'd given to other women in the same position. Of course it wasn't my fault. But it didn't stop me from feeling like it was. The emotion was strangely independent from the knowledge.

“Oh, love. Never,” Nathan crooned, his arms tightening. He swayed me gently, rocking away the tension as he murmured his reassurances over and over.

“I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about the decision,” I said after a moment. “That was... not my best moment.”

His arms tightened around me. “Thank you. I'm not saying it wasn't the right one, you know that, right? I just felt so... minimalized when you didn't even consider my thoughts on the matter. Like I wasn't even a part of the equation.”

His fingers intertwined with mine, reassuring me that while he was expressing his hurt feelings, we were still connected. I sniffled back the tears threatening to fall. “I'm so sorry. Is that... is that why you pulled away?”

He shrugged. “I definitely started to feel more and more unwelcome here. I felt like I was in the way on the ship you were steering. I liked being at the station.”

“They asked for your opinion,” I said hollowly, looking up at him. They valued him, and I had shut him out.

He nodded. “Yeah. I feel important there... And after I started looking for ways I wasn't important at home, it was easy to find them. The major difference lately has been my attitude. Instead of focusing on the small ways I felt slighted, I focused on the things I was grateful for. I'm so grateful for you,” he said. “You know, the chief gave me some advice a few weeks back.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm-hmm. He said that until I find my identity in Jesus, I'd always be looking for it somewhere else and be disappointed. Even the perfect wife wouldn't fill that deep need inside me for purpose and importance.”

I couldn't fight the smile. The words sounded very familiar.

He kept going, "And neither would any amount of accolade or status at work."

"Do you think he's right?" I asked, wondering if he'd had the same realization as I had.

"That's the question that has been chasing me for weeks. Especially after the fiasco at the fire station last night."

I tipped my head with an unspoken question. "It's a long story... Well, not really. I made a mistake and there is a very real possibility that I will be suspended. And two months ago, that would have sent me spiraling..."

I murmured my sympathy. I knew how much pride he took in being a firefighter. "I love you so much, Bex. But I haven't been fair to you. I expected too much of you."

Immediately, I started to protest.

"I have. I expected you to make me happy and make me feel... important. And then, when you didn't, because you're human and because you're doing a million other things, I got angry with you. When I should have realized that it wasn't on you to do those things."

"But I want to make you happy. I want to make you feel important to this family, because you are."

I didn't want him to think that he wasn't important. I wanted to make him feel like the amazing man he was.

"I know that, and you absolutely do those things. But not perfectly. And it was unfair of me to expect that. Just like I can't love you perfectly either."

I scoffed, and it made him laugh before replying, "That's the problem with our marriage, my love!"

I was grinning now. "What's that?"

"We're both imperfect people."

I threw my hands up in the air dramatically. "Whelp. Throw in the towel, then."

The laughter felt so natural. “Exactly. It’s hopeless.”

Our hushed laughter faded, the smiles remaining. “So what do we do?” I asked.

“More of this,” he said, gesturing to the two of us, holding each other close. “I was so nervous to sit across from you in Justin’s office... When did we forget how to talk without fighting?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure. But I think maybe... the more we practice, the better we’ll be?”

“Sounds like a good plan to me.”

CHAPTER

Thirty

REBECCA

I scurried around the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner. Nathan would be here any minute. Coming for dinner felt like a big step forward... Or back, toward normal.

I'd been a little skeptical when Nathan suggested we have another date night, but this time we were including the kids. It was one thing to put my own heart through the roller coaster of maybe and maybe not when it came to our future. But I also couldn't deny the longing I had for him to rejoin our everyday rhythms.

The boys were in the living room watching a show while I pulled the lasagna out of the oven. The doorbell rang. My heart skipped. I smoothed a hand down my apron and walked toward the front door. The boys were already crowded in the small entryway, making it nearly impossible to open the door fully.

"Dad! We've been waiting for you all day," Lincoln said dramatically.

"He's not lying. They started asking before lunch how long it would be until you got here."

Nathan grinned and pulled Joey into his arms. "Well, I'm here now." He stepped toward me, his eyes never leaving mine.

Expertly turning so Joey wasn't between us, he leaned in and kissed my cheek. "Hey there, gorgeous." His words were a whisper, meant only for me.

My cheeks grew warm at the attention and the compliment. "Hey yourself," I murmured. Then, I spoke loud enough that the boys could hear too. "Dinner needs about five more minutes, if you want to hang with the kids for a minute?"

The kids chattered excitedly, but Nathan shook his head. "I'll play with you boys after dinner, okay? For now, I think

I'll help your mom get dinner on the table.”

Well, now if that didn't make a mother of three swoon, I didn't know what would.

The boys protested loudly, but eventually settled back in to watch the rest of their show.

Nathan followed me back to the kitchen. His arms came around my waist from behind and his cheek grazed my neck as he pressed a kiss there. My head fell to the side, granting him further access.

“Mm... you smell delicious. Like garlic bread,” he said with a chuckle.

I giggled. Was I thirteen or nearly thirty?

Nathan was being so sweet and thoughtful lately. I could definitely get used to it. But what happened when he went back to the disconnected, apathetic man that I'd been living with before?

What would stop us from winding right back up where we'd been when he'd moved out?

That was the unspoken fear that had me holding back, despite the highlights of the last week or two. I couldn't erase the absolute gut-wrenching pain that had paralyzed me when Nathan packed his bag and moved out.

“What's wrong?”

I held my breath, not sure I could really tell Nathan what was keeping me from enjoying the magic of the moment. This moment—our boys in the other room wrestling instead of watching their show, and Nathan here, helping me with dinner and the whole evening stretching out ahead of us, together... It was everything I wanted all those nights he'd been gone.

And now I had it, but my brain kept shouting at me. Don't get used to it. He doesn't want this. He'll leave again, and this time it will hurt even worse.

“Hey,” he whispered. “Don't shut me out.”

My eyes closed at the unexpected pain those words inflicted.

“Is this what you want?” I finally asked. “Because if it’s not, then I don’t want to guilt you into staying with us.”

Nathan turned me around so I was facing him. “I know I messed up. I’ve been working through some things with the counselor that Justin recommended. You should know that my leaving was never about you.”

“But I should have been more grateful and—”

He shook his head against my protest. “No doubt we could have both been better to each other... less critical, more open and honest... but...” He glanced at the kids and then back to me. “I shouldn’t have left. I promised you forever, and I lost sight of what was important. And I’m prepared to reassure you of my commitment every single day from here on out if you can give me a second chance.”

I held my hand to my mouth to cover the choked sob that escaped.

“Just don’t shut me out again, my love. I have never felt so helpless and inadequate as I did after we lost the baby.” He ran a hand over his face, his eyes sliding to the side.

The volume of yells from the other room rose from the previous dull roar to a new peak as Joey shrieked his displeasure at something his brothers were doing. He might be two, but he sure knew how to get his point across, much to the detriment of my eardrums.

“Boys! Knock it off.” Nathan’s abrupt command quieted the rowdy crew quickly.

“Well, that’s handy to have around,” I said with a smile, pulling away and turning back to dinner. Our stolen moment of serious conversation was over, and it was time to get back to the task at hand.

“So, you think you could get used to having me around? I mean, if I moved back?”

I schooled my features, not wanting to scare him off with my expression. Though, I wasn't sure if it was excitement or trepidation that would be dominating my facial features.

Were we ready for that?

I took a deep breath before responding as I dished helpings of mashed potatoes on plastic plates for the boys. "Are you ready to move back?" I kept my voice casual.

Nathan was filling cups with water at the fridge. "What if I am?"

My heart stuttered, and my gaze flew toward the living room where our boys were jumping across the couch cushions in an animated game of the floor is lava. I crossed the kitchen and pulled the cups from his hand, setting them on the counter behind me. Then I turned into his arms, pressing up to meet his lips with mine.

"Mommy and Daddy are kissing!" Joey's excited voice came from the entry of the kitchen.

"What? Ewwww," Lincoln said.

"Ewwwww," Joey mimicked, almost immediately.

I laughed and created some distance between us. "Okay, okay. That's enough. Everyone, go wash your hands and then come eat!"

After dinner, we played a game as a family with Joey determined to disrupt the game board every thirty seconds until I finally put him to bed. After the game was finished, the four of us sat on the couch and read books until it was time for the boys' bedtime.

Nathan offered to put them to bed, so I cleaned up the kitchen while he did. I turned out the overhead lights and settled on the couch to wait for Nathan to come out.

"Everyone down?"

He nodded. "Yep. Just you and me now." He patted the spot next to him on the couch and I sat down, curling my legs underneath me. I grabbed a blanket, though I wasn't cold. Call it an emotional support blanket, I guess.

“Thanks for letting me come tonight,” he said. “I feel like an idiot for taking this for granted.”

“You are an idiot for taking it for granted,” I said without thinking. Then, I winced. “Sorry, that came out wrong. I mean, I’m still kind of angry at you for leaving in the first place. But I kind of get it. Sometimes, I can’t see anything past making it to bedtime... All the junk from day to day is all-encompassing. It feels like there is no room for me in it.”

Nathan nodded, apparently not offended by my bluntness. His hands were absently running along my calves. I ignored the temptation to feel embarrassed about the leg hair he would definitely feel each time he reached the skin peeking out from under my leggings above my ankles.

“I’m never going to take it for granted again. The craziness, the everyday struggles.” He met my eyes. “You.”

My heart skipped.

“Rebecca, nine years ago, I promised you forever. And I intend to keep that promise. Every day for the rest of our lives.”

My heart swelled with happiness as he leaned forward. “Rebecca Lynn Wells, will you stay married to me?”

My smile stretched broadly. “I thought you’d never ask.” And we sealed the new promise with a kiss that held the hope of a future, built on the foundation of an imperfect past.

Epilogue

REBECCA

I smoothed the soft-pink dress, though there were no wrinkles to be found. The longest three months of my life had all been leading up to this.

I looked at Carla fixing her hair in the mirror. We were in one of the small Sunday School rooms of the church. And I knew that just down the hallway, Nathan was getting ready too.

I'd always thought vow renewals were a little hokey. Did you not mean what you said the first time? But now, I got it. My inexperienced nineteen-year-old self vowed to love, honor, and cherish for better or for worse. But until you saw hints of *for worse*, it was all theoretical. I hadn't lived up to those vows. Nathan hadn't either.

We were human. But neither of us were giving up.

"Is this crazy?" I asked my friend.

She shook her head. "Do you love him?"

"More than ever." My response was automatic. I loved Nathan so much it hurt sometimes.

"Do you forgive him?"

That was a harder question, but the answer was the same. "I do. I hate that it happened like this, but we're stronger for it."

"Then it's not crazy. This isn't replacing your original vows. You're adding to them, right?"

I nodded. "We wrote our own this time... I'm nervous."

She smiled and pulled me in for a hug. "That man loves you. There's nothing standing between you and forever with him. God took the fractured pieces of your marriage and put them back together, stronger than ever."

I swiped at the tears under my eyes. “You’re going to make me ruin my makeup.” Everything was turning out better than I could have dreamed. I was even going to start working mornings at the Redeemed Christian bookstore in a few weeks, with Nathan’s wholehearted blessing.

“Pssh. He loves you anyway. Raccoon eyes and all.”

I held a small bouquet as I walked down the aisle toward my husband. Our boys were lined up in little suits, their crazy hair tamed and combed to the side, next to their father.

Justin stood at the front, and a handful of people sat in the front few rows. Nathan’s parents, Bryce and Krystal, Jake and Monica. Carly. Elijah. Miss Ruth.

It was smaller than our first wedding, but it was perfect.

I reached the end of the aisle and joined my hand with Nathan’s.

“You look lovely,” he whispered.

“Mama pretty!” Joey exclaimed, making me laugh through the tears streaming down. My heart was so full, I thought it might burst.

Justin said a few words, then it was our turn.

Nathan’s dark eyes were focused intently on mine. “Rebecca, when we got married, I thought I was the luckiest guy on the planet. As far as I knew, you were perfect. Well, now I know that isn’t true.”

I nearly snorted a laugh. My smile grew wide to match his.

“I also know, more clearly than ever, that neither am I. I’ll break these vows far more than I’d like to admit, but I promise I’ll never give up again. I promise to be there for you on good days and bad days. I promise to be vulnerable with you, knowing that you’ve got my back. I promise to prioritize time with you. I promise to look for the good, every single day, and to hold no record of wrongs. I promise to love you above myself. I promise to slay dragons for you, even if those dragons are dinner dishes, overgrown weeds, or your own insecurities. I promise to pick up my dirty socks and turn them

right side out,” he added with a slight chuckle. “I promise to love, honor, cherish, and adore you—forever.”

I sucked in a shaky breath as Nathan slid a thin silver ring encircled with moissanite crystals. “I love you,” I said. The words slipped out, but it didn’t matter if I was speaking out of turn.

“Your turn, Rebecca,” Pastor Justin said.

I inhaled deeply. “Nathan. There is no one on this earth with the power to hurt me as deeply as you can. Because there is no one I care more for. I promise to build you up and never tear you down. I promise to put your needs above my own. I promise to look for the good every day and hold no record of wrongs. I promise to tell you what I need instead of being resentful when you don’t read my mind. I promise to prioritize time with you. I promise to love, honor, respect, and cherish you, no matter what comes. I promise you my forever.”

“Marriage is ultimately two flawed people committing to one another. But there is a third member in any marriage, if you’ll invite Him in. It’s been a privilege to watch the Lord restore this relationship from brokenness to unity. Marriage is intended to be a lifetime commitment, one you both entered into nine years ago. So, it is my pleasure to pronounce you *still* married!” He smiled broadly and turned to Nate. “Kiss your wife, man.”

Nathan seemed more than happy to listen to Justin. He tugged my hand gently, pulling me close and wrapping his arms around my waist. He claimed my lips in a sweet kiss that hinted at the depth of emotion and desire there. Cheers from those around us rose, and we broke apart.

Nathan whispered in my ear, “I can’t wait to be alone with you, my love.” Then, he shifted so we stood side by side.

I opened my arms and got lower to the ground, inviting my boys to come. The five of us stood like that for a long time, there at the front of the church, wrapped in one big embrace. A family. Whole and united again. I couldn’t stop smiling. It was everything I’d been praying for since Nathan moved out. Even before that, if I was being honest, I’d known that something

needed to change. Maybe it needn't have been a separation, but I was sure the space and time did help. However God had gotten us to this place, I was more than okay with it.

A few moments later, we stood and were quickly surrounded by our friends and family, offering hugs and handshakes. I was so grateful for these people who had been there for me and supporting our marriage every step of the way.

Even more, I was grateful that Nathan and I had a chance for a fresh start. No, not a start. A continuation. This ceremony didn't wipe the slate clean. The past nine years had shaped us and our relationship in ways that couldn't be erased. We weren't starting over. We were moving forward.

We'd said "I do" almost ten years ago. And today, we got to say, "I still do." And it was everything I ever prayed for.

Bonus Epilogue

ELIJAH WELLS

I'd thought about skipping it. Nathan and Rebecca worked through all their issues, with more than a little help from me, thank you very much. My little pep talk with my big brother was exactly what he needed.

But that didn't mean I wanted to sit here and watch them get all gooey eyed over each other.

"Uncle Eli, watch this!" Alex did some complicated dance move and then ended up on the floor doing the worm. I acted suitably impressed, even though it looked a bit like he was having a seizure on the floor. Kids were weird, man.

"Wow, bud. Pretty cool."

"Did you hear? We're staying with Mimi and Papa for two whole weeks!"

My reaction to that news was genuine. That was a lot for my mom and dad. "Why is that?"

Alex frowned. "I don't know. Something about a honeymoon?"

"Ah, I see."

"What's a honeymoon?"

"It's a trip people take after they get married so they can be alone."

"Why?"

I pulled my collar away from my neck. Maybe I shouldn't be the one explaining to my nephew about why married couples wanted to be alone with each other. "Umm..."

"It's just so they can spend time together without a bunch of people—or kids—interrupting them." Carla ruffled Alex's hair. "Run along now. I think there are cupcakes in the Fellowship Hall."

“Really?” Alex’s eyes grew wide. “How do you know?”

Carla leaned down and whispered, “Because I made them!”

Alex grinned and took off, leaving me with the very last person I should be talking to.

Carla Putnam was my kryptonite. The one girl I would never get over, and the one girl I could never have.

“Eli,” she said, by way of greeting.

“Carla,” I replied, keeping my voice nonchalant. At least, I hoped it was. My voice had the tendency to crack like a thirteen-year-old boy going through puberty when I was around her.

“Eli!”

My dad’s gruff voice jerked me from the moment, preventing me from saying whatever stupid thing I’d been about to say to Carla.

“Good to see you, Puddles.”

Her eyes narrowed at the nickname.

“Eli!” my dad yelled again.

“Gotta go.” I turned away and joined my parents across the church.

“What are you doing talking to that Putnam girl? You know that family is nothing but trouble. I know she’s friends with Rebecca, but I will not have my son gallivanting—”

“I have never gallivanted in my life,” I said, trying to diffuse the situation with my usual charm. I might never live up to my parents’ expectations—how could I, when they expected me to be like perfect, boring Nathan?

Was it awful to admit that it had been kind of nice for Nathan to be the one catching all the heat after he left Rebecca and the boys? Not that I wanted them to split, but it was nice to have the attention off me and my flaws.

“Just keep your distance from the Putnams.”

“Yeah, yeah, Dad, I know.”

I’d made that mistake once, and I’d never forget how angry my father had gotten. I might be a regular disappointment to my dad, but this was one line of his I couldn’t cross.

Which really sucked, because I’d never felt anything for anyone the way I felt for Carla back in high school. Until our stupid family history got in the way.

ELI AND CARLA'S story (The One Who Risked it All) is coming soon! Follow Tara Grace Ericson on social media or subscribe to her email newsletter for updates so you never miss a new release!

Note to Readers

Thank you for picking up (or downloading!) this book. If you enjoyed it, please consider taking a minute to leave a review or rating. Thanks for reading this story, it is unlike any that I've attempted to write before. I hope you're looking forward to Eli and Carla's story of forbidden love. But first, can I share something about the book you just read?

I have to confess... I really struggled with this book. I struggled with the characters and their pride and stubbornness. I struggled with feelings of inadequacy that I was even equipped to tell a story of a broken marriage being made whole. But when I created Rebecca and Nathan (two books ago), the Lord had already laid it on my heart to write a redeemed marriage story. You see, it was in a season where I was seeing a lot of brokenness in marriages around me within the church. Men leaving their families out-of-the-blue. Wives struggling with identity and purpose and feeling trapped in their life. It was breaking my heart, and I knew it was breaking God's heart, too.

Some of those real-life stories ended up with marriages healed. Too many didn't.

I wanted to write a story where God worked in the hearts of two sinful people and brought them back together in unity with Him and each other.

I'm still not sure I did this justice. There are so many layers to a marriage relationship. So many tiny interactions that can have ripples we don't recognize until they have combined into waves that threaten to capsize us.

Writing this book has made me even more grateful for the way my husband extends grace and patience over and over where I fail... My editor wrote a note with the edited manuscript and said "I hope this doesn't come too much from personal experience."

I'm happy to reassure her (and you, in case you're worried) that while I put a lot of myself into the story, it is mostly the result of taking my existing circumstances (3 little boys!) and exaggerating small feelings into big crises and my worst fears into fictional reality.

If you are living in a marriage that needs the Lord's healing restoration, please know that I'm praying for you. Please know that the Lord DOES change hearts and redeem the broken. I also pray you have a godly community like Rebecca and Nathan who are on your (both of your) side.

Lastly, if your marriage is unsafe and you are experiencing abuse physically or emotionally, please seek help. The Lord's vision for marriage does not include cruelty or abuse. The National Domestic Violence helpline number is 800-799-7233, or Focus Ministries (focusministries1.org) can help direct you to local resources.

I pray my books encourage you in your faith and through your struggles, whatever they may be. I love hearing the amazing ways God has used my words in the lives of my readers. It is incredibly humbling and encouraging! You can email me anytime at taragranceericson@gmail.com.

You can also learn more about my upcoming projects at my website: www.taragranceericson.com or by [signing up for my newsletter](#) there. Just for signing up, you'll get two free ebooks and the audiobook of Hawthorne Bloom's story in *Hoping for Hawthorne*.

Thank you again for all your support and encouragement.

Second Chance Fire Station

THE ONE WHO RISKED IT ALL

She's completely off-limits. But he's always been a rulebreaker.

I might be my dad's biggest disappointment, but even I won't cross that line again.

If only Carla wasn't the only girl who drove me crazy.

She's the only one I've ever wanted, but I can't have her. And no matter how many other women I date, it never goes anywhere.

When my brother and his wife go on a second honeymoon, and Carla and I end up watching their kids for two weeks... I'll just have to keep my distance.

What could go wrong?

If only I knew why Dad hated her family so much, then I might be able to keep my promise. Because I can't fall for Carla Putnam.

Unfortunately, I think it's too late. I just don't know if I have the courage to be The One Who Risked it All.

Coming Fall 2024

Acknowledgments

Above all – Thank You, King Jesus. For once again giving me a story beyond what I could have done myself. Thank you for using me to encourage these readers. I’m trusting you to put this book in the right hands.

To my lovely cover models—Todd and Hannah—for allowing me to use their photo, it is truly an honor to feature a real firefighter couple on these stories. Wishing you a lifetime of happiness together!

And to the photographer, Angela Norton Photography, for being a joy to work with and granting the rights to the images.

To Carla – dear friend, confidant, prayer partner, and now, assistant. Thank you for keeping me sane.

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And to the rest of our Author Circle — Jess Mastorakos, Elizabeth Maddrey and K Leah. I love reading your books, watching your success, and dreaming together about the future. I’m counting the days until we retreat together again!

To my parents, for being a wonderful example of love, faith, and hard work. This book is releasing on your 40th anniversary. What an amazing testimony of love that endures. Happy Anniversary and thank you for showing me what healthy marriage looks like.

To Tiffany, Megan, Jessica, Laurie, Dulcie, Tawni, Donna Marie, Bethany, and all the Christian Mommy Writers. Thanks for spurring me on, listening to me blather on, and supporting my crazy ideas! I love watching you pursue your dreams and reading your work!

Thank you to all my readers, without whose support and encouragement, I would have given up a long time ago.

To all the other bloggers, bookstagrammers, and reviewers who read my books and share your thoughts. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And finally, to my husband. The only way I could have written this book without losing my mind is by resting in the absolute confidence I have that you would never make the choice that Nathan did. You've only ever put me and our family above yourself. I'm so grateful for you and our marriage.

Mr. B – I love being your mom. Keep asking questions. You're going to do amazing things.

Little C – You continue to amaze me with your thoughtfulness and capacity to love. You're a joy to mother.

And Baby L – Your feisty two-year-old personality is shining strong. You make me laugh every day and I love you forever.

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