



Book  
2

the  
stewarts  
of skagway



# harper



KATY  
REGNERY

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HARPER

*The Stewarts of Skagway #2*

BY

KATY REGNERY

## **Harper**

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*For Callie, who listened to Harper and Joe's story, scene by scene, chapter by chapter, on the ride home from school every day. This book is largely about motherhood in all its forms; I'm so very grateful to be yours.*

*xoxo*

*\*\*\**

*With thanks to CW, MD.*

## A note to my readers:

It's not deja-vu! The timeline of Harper overlaps the timeline of Tanner, so a couple of scenes taken from Tanner will be re-written from Harper or Joe's points of view.

xo

# Chapter 1

Harper

“I have to peeeeee!”

I look over my shoulder at the Martin’s youngest child, Bryce, and work hard not to purse my lips. We stopped for a bathroom break before leaving Whitehorse fifteen minutes ago, and he didn’t need to go. Now that we’re back on the road back to Skagway, under the gun to meet their ship, he does.

“Brycie, you need to ask politely,” advises his mother from the back of the van. I glance in the rearview mirror and note that she doesn’t look up from her phone. “Tell Miss Harper you need to use the restroom. And say please.”

Instead, Bryce kicks the back of my seat with gusto.

“Toi-let now! Toi-let now! Toi-let now!” he bellows to the machine gun rat-a-tat of his kicks.

“Ouch! Stop that!” I say, peering around the seat to give Bryce a stern look.

“But I have to gooooo!” Bryce screeches.

I glance at my brother, Sawyer, who’s behind the wheel. He rolls his eyes, but his tone is gentler than mine.

“Sure you can’t hold it, Bryce?” he asks.

“If you don’t stop the car right now, Mr. Sawyer, I’m gonna pee my pants,” threatens the six-year-old.

“Do not do that!” I warn him.

“There’s no need to scream at the little one,” says Mr. Martin, who sits beside his wife in the back seat, reading a French-Canadian newspaper. “Urination is a normal bodily function, Brycie. You can’t help it, and it’s not healthy to hold those toxins inside. Miss Harper and Mr. Sawyer are going to find an appropriate place to stop so you can relieve yourself. Immediately.”

His voice doesn't brook retort, and I really don't want to lose whatever hard-earned tip we've got coming.

"Fine," I say. "We'll stop. Caribou RV Park is coming up in two minutes. There's a washroom behind the camp store."

And if you go quick, you toxic little brat, we can get to the border crossing before there's a line.

"A store?" Amelia Martin, who's been watching a non-stop stream of TikTok clips without earbuds, slouches in the seat behind my brother. "Does it have cool stuff?"

"It's very small," I say, omitting the fact that there's a Swiss bakery on-site. If I tell them there are sweets available, I have a feeling they'll all insist on getting out of the van for snacks, and we really don't have the time for an extra excursion. We're cutting it close as it is. "If want to get back to the Port of Skagway by eight, we really don't have time for—"

"I wouldn't mind a bathroom break," says Mrs. Martin, sighing like we've been on the road for hours instead of minutes. "And I could use a drink. I'm parched."

I try to catch her eyes in the rearview mirror. "Ma'am, your ship leaves at eight thirty and—"

"And it's only five o'clock right now, correct? And you said it's a two-and-a-half-hour drive back to Skagway," says Mr. Martin, leaning closer to his wife to glare at me in the mirror's reflection. "That means we have an extra hour. Plenty of time for a quick stop, for heaven's sake."

"I don't think it's a good idea," I say. "The border crossing can be—"

"Border? What border? The little shack we passed on the way up?"

What he fails to understand is that hundreds, if not thousands, of tourists take this route—from Skagway in the US to the Yukon in Canada, and back again—every day, all summer long. With most of them having to return to their ships at approximately the same time, the traffic at the tiny border checkpoint between Canada and the United States can back up.



“Mr. Martin, I’m just concerned that—”

“Well, I’m not concerned,” says Mr. Martin. “We’re stopping so you can urinate, Brycie. Don’t worry. Madeline and Amelia, there’s plenty of time to shop and get a snack. Take your time. It’s our vacation, after all.”

Since the Martins don’t want to hear what I have to say, I turn to my brother. “Fingers crossed there’s no line tonight. You know how traffic can be.”

“Traffic! Jesus Christ! It’s Alaska,” says Mr. Martin with an amused snort. “What traffic?”

I’m about to protest one last time when I glance at Sawyer, who shakes his head, begging me to please shut up.

“We’ll stop,” he whispers. “It’ll be okay. Hopefully.”

“Sure,” I agree through gritted teeth. “Whatever you say.”

But if they miss their ship, it’s not my fault.

I did my best to warn them.

\*\*\*

Sure enough, two and a half hours later, we are speeding down Broadway—the main drag of Skagway—to get them to their ship before it leaves port. Halfway down the street, I hear the deep, long warning bellow of the ship’s horn.

Shit, shit, shit!

“Be ready to run!” I bark at the Martins, who gather their things together in something that finally resembles obedience and haste.

Skidding into the port parking lot, Sawyer makes it there by the skin of his teeth, both of us sighing with relief to see that the gangplank is still down. I jump out to open the van’s side door, and the Martins bolt like scared rabbits, leaving me and Sawyer behind without a word of thanks or a gratuity.

“Ew,” I groan, looking at the disaster in the back of the van.

The seats and floor are covered with crumbs, half-eaten baked goods, chip bags, empty water bottles, and a spilled can of Coke which has created two streams of sticky soda that wind all over the vehicle's floor like twin brown rivers. It's going to take an hour or more to clean this up.

"What a mess!"

"You're surprised?"

I slam the back door shut and take my seat up front.

"They weren't my favorite clients," I say, marking their progress toward the ship through the windshield of the van. They're waving their hands wildly at the Royal Caribbean port staff as they race toward the boat. "I tried to warn them they'd be cutting it close."

"That guy didn't give a shit what you had to say," my brother tells me, sitting back to watch as the Martins board the ship just before the gangway lifts. "And I'm betting he gives us a crap rating on TripAdvisor."

"For almost missing the boat?" I turn to Sawyer. "Or for my attitude?"

He shrugs. "You can be prickly, Harp."

"I don't mean to be."

"Yeah." He sighs. "I know."

Putting the van in reverse, Sawyer backs out of the parking lot, then turns left onto the road that'll take us home to Dyea.

\*\*\*

"What a nightmare!" exclaims my sister, Parker.

Parker and I are the second and fourth oldest of six kids and share a private cabin at our family's campground. It's not fancy; there's a small kitchen with a table for two, a sitting room with a loveseat, rocking chair, potbelly stove and TV, a bedroom with two twin beds, and a tiny bathroom with a shower, toilet, and sink. Super simple. It's all we need.

“The guy was such a flipping know-it-all,” I say, my speech garbled as I brush my teeth. I spit into the basin and put my free hand on my hip. “I mean, give me a break! He knows the traffic patterns on the Klondike Highway better than me? A born and bred Alaskan? I don’t think so. Sawyer had to drive like a madman to get them to the port in time.”

“And no tip. Rough day,” says Parker, pulling the comforter up to her chin.

Tonight is chilly for June, with temperatures hovering in the low 50s. But we both like sleeping with the window cracked for fresh air.

“Annoying,” I mutter, rinsing off my toothbrush and popping it back into the plastic holder mounted on the wall. I turn off the bathroom light and jump into the bed next to my sister’s. Leaning up on my elbow, I look over at her. “Not to mention, it took over an hour to clean the mess in the back of the van. Yuck.” I reach for the lamp on the nightstand between us and pull the chain. A dull light blue light streams through the window, even though it’s almost eleven o’clock. Midnight sun. I love it. “What’s been going on here? Catch me up.”

Parker makes kissing noises from her bed. “Tanner and his fake girlfriend have been ‘going on.’ Big time.”

“I don’t think it’s fake anymore.”

“Me neither,” says Parker, staring up at the ceiling. “I think he likes her. Like, really likes her. I hope he doesn’t get hurt.”

“She seems nice, right?”

She shrugs. “We don’t really know her, Harp. Look what happened with his last girlfriend.”

Ramona. What a nightmare.

“True. But I haven’t seen him this happy in a long time.”

“I guess.”

“Hey. You’re not jealous, are you?” It’s been a while since Parker’s dated anyone. “That Tanner’s found someone?”

“Nope. Not at all,” she says. “You?”

“Nah.”

That “nah” is a bold-faced lie.

I’m jealous.

I’m super jealous.

I don’t begrudge my brother’s happiness. I love Tanner, and so far, I like McKenna. But, like my sister, it’s been a long time since I’ve been in a relationship, and seeing my brother fall so fast and hard is giving me feelings.

I miss the rush of falling in love.

I miss the handholding and the kissing.

I miss running my fingers through his stick-straight, surprisingly-soft, jet-black hair.

I miss the way his hot, hard body would—

“’Night, Harp.”

Parker’s voice breaks through my reverie, and I clear my throat.

“Yeah. A-hem. ’N-night, Park.”

A second later my sister is snoring, but my mind has already started dredging up old memories, and I’m helpless to stop them now. I flip onto my side, away from Parker, and close my eyes, welcoming a vision of the face the earth has always turned to me.

Joe.

My first love.

My only, ever love.

Joe Raven.

Growing up in Skagway, there were about 150 kids under the age of eighteen at any given time. Of those 150, about 110 were school-aged, but less than 100 actually enrolled in school, as opposed to being homeschooled, or going away for school. Divide those kids between thirteen grades, and each

grade only had seven or eight students, which meant you got to know everyone really well.

I met Joe in third grade when his grandmother, who'd been homeschooling him, passed away. His aunt and local school teacher, Hannah Clearwater, had convinced her sister to enroll Joe, her only son, in public school.

I was almost nine years old the first time I ever saw Joe. I can still picture him with a fresh bowl-cut, standing in the doorway of the third-grade classroom, proudly holding a Monsters, Inc., lunchbox in his brown hand.

I picture him in sixth grade, taller and more filled-out than the other two boys in the grade, standing in the back row, directly behind me, for the class photo.

I picture him in eighth grade, somehow managing to find a red rose in the dead of winter and dropping it on the corner of my desk for Valentine's Day. There was a card tied to the stem with a piece of twine, and it read: "To Harper. Love, Joe." My cheeks had turned bright red to the sing-song chorus of Oooooos from my girlfriends, but inside my heart had swelled with pride and delight, just knowing that Joe Raven liked me.

I picture him a few years later, on the Fourth of July. Fifteen years old—tall, cut, and cocky—he came in second at the annual axe-throwing competition. By then, I was madly in love with him, but I'd never uttered a word of my feelings to anyone. The first person I'd end up telling was Joe. After our first kiss. That very day.

I picture him at eighteen, ready to go off to college. He was astonishingly beautiful in his late-teens—his body tan, toned and hard from working summers on his uncle's fishing boat. I am lying on my back on a spit of sand, and he hovers over me, his lips a whisper away from mine. When I lock my eyes with his, I find they are flooded with so much love, so much tenderness, so much conviction and certainty, that I finally say yes. That day, we make love for the first time.

My heart stutters at the memory, and I whimper softly.

When I open my eyes, they burn with useless tears.

I miss him. I miss him desperately.

Despite the fact that we live in the same town, I haven't spoken a word to Joe Raven in years. When I see him, I look away, I turn away, I run away. I can't face him. I can't bear to look into his eyes because when I do, I can see that he still loves me, and I am frightened that if he gazes back at me for too long, he'll see that I still love him, too.

But I have no right to love Joe after what I did.

Here is the brutal truth: if Joe knew who I really was, and what I'd done, he'd hate me. All of the love in his heart would die, and he'd wish he'd never met me. I know it. I'm certain of it. So, I stay away from him. Because even though Joe is everything I always wanted, he's the one person I can never have.

Two fat tears roll from the corner of my eyes, sliding into my blonde hair. They're followed by more, and more. So many tears over the years, they could fill all the oceans of the world.

At some point, the sun finally sets below the horizon, casting my room in a lavender light so melancholy, I finally fall asleep.

\*\*\*

Joe

In a town like Skagway, where the local population from late-September to early-May is a little over one thousand souls, the sheriff knows everyone, and everyone knows me.

With the exception of some drunk and disorderly regulars, and the occasional domestic situation, it's a pretty quiet town during the off-season. Sure, we've got our share of petty crime—break-ins and such—and yes, there are at least two calls a month about bears searching the garbage bins behind restaurants or taking a stroll down Broadway, but for seven months a year, Skagway runs pretty smoothly.

Then, there's the summer.

Dear God. The summer.

From May to September, Skagway explodes with seasonal workers, tourists, and cruise ships—over a million people over five months.

On an average summer day, we have over 2,000 extra people living and working here, and another 8,000-10,000 people visiting. That's ten thousand more people a day. Minimum.

This creates a unique challenge for law enforcement, which—for the most part—I embrace. I roll with the punches. I keep my town safe and hospitable, and the tourists keep coming back, infusing our little borough with the kind of money that takes care of us for the rest of the year.

But every now and then, we get a special case; someone who rolls up on our shores and is one hundred percent bona fide looney tunes. That kind of person can wreak havoc and test my mettle.

Ramona De Alicante, a seasonal employee at the King Kone, is one such bird. By making fake death threats and claiming false pregnancies, she drove local man, Tanner Stewart, out of town last year. So, when I hear Tanner's voice asking for me at the dispatch desk, I wonder if Ramona's back in town and up to her antics for a second season.

"Joe! Tanner Stewart's here!" yells Vera.

I glance down at the half-eaten caribou burger on my desk and sigh.

I think lunch is over.

"Send him back."

Tanner's a big guy. His lumberjack-sized body takes up most of my doorway.

"Shoot," he says with a grimace. "I'm interrupting your lunch. Sorry, Joe."

Even though his face is red and angry, he looks so much like her—like his sister, Harper—my chest hurts for a second, like it always does when I see one of the blonde-haired, blue-

eyed Stewarts around town. I look away from him and swallow down those old, useless feelings, recovering quickly and waving Tanner into my office. Professionalism is important to me; I keep my personal life separate from my job.

“That’s okay,” I say. “Come on in. We can talk while I finish.”

He plops down in front of me, massages his jaw with irritation and grunts in frustration.

“Let me guess—Ramona again?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“What now?”

“She made a scene in town, screaming at me and carrying on.”

“Did she use profanity?”

“Yes, sir.”

Great. Just what I need at peak tourist season.

I tell Tanner that while someone screaming swear words in the middle of the street isn’t a great look for Skagway, yelling at someone in public isn’t actually illegal.

“Can I file a restraining order?” he asks.

I don’t expect this question. The Stewarts generally try to take care of things themselves without the help of local authorities, which means that Tanner must be at the end of his rope. I tug the napkin from my collar and close the cardboard container holding the rest of my burger. A restraining order is serious business.

“It’s possible, yes, especially if you could get a few witnesses who saw her screaming at you. Alaska Statute 11.61.120 prohibits harassment, and that includes some forms of verbal street harassment. If someone on the street exhibits the intent to harass or annoy you or insults, taunts, or challenges you ‘in a manner likely to provoke an immediate violent response,’ you can report him or her.”



Tanner tilts his head to the side, looking at me so thoughtfully, and looking so damn much like his sister, I wince, averting my eyes. I busy myself straightening an already-neat pile of papers to my left.

“Why didn’t you go to law school, Joe?”

My stupid heart speeds up as a deluge of memories flood my brain. You got in, Joe! You got into law school! I’m so proud of you! Her winsome smile. Her sweet voice. Her throaty laugh. Her body—oh, sweet Jesus, her body—so warm and soft and willing beneath mine.

God, how I miss her.

“Joe?”

“Wasn’t in the cards,” I mutter, pushing back on those memories. I hate how quickly they can bubble up to the surface, making me weak with sadness and regret.

I hate that it’s been a decade since she said she loved me and five years since she spoke my name.

I hate it that I can’t seem to get over her—can’t seem to move on with my life—no matter how decisively she’s deleted me from hers.

Tanner shifts in his seat, leaning forward. “But—”

I lock eyes with the man I’d once hoped to call brother-in-law and use a growl reserved for genuine troublemakers. “Leave it, Tanner.”

He stares back at me for a minute, then shrugs. “Okay, Joe. Okay.”

To unravel the tension in the room, I get back to business, pressing the intercom button on my phone. “Vera, I’m sending Tanner out. Give him a DV-150 form, okay?”

“Protective order?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Copy, boss.”

When I look up at Tanner, he’s back to brooding.

“Protective order,” he grumbles. “Makes me feel like a pussy.”

“No shame in this, Tanner,” I tell him. “Ramona’s tested the patience of a saint, and you’re no saint.”

“True enough, Joe. I’m not.” He chuckles at himself. “But the truth is that I’m not actually doing this for me.”

“Oh, no?”

“Nah. I’d deal with it on my own if it was just me. It’s... McKenna. This whole situation has got her spooked. I’m doing it for her.” He stands up to leave. “Thanks again, Joe. See you around.”

“See you, Tanner.”

As I watch him go, I think about what he said. I’m doing it for her. That checks out with me. I get it. I’d do just about anything for the woman I love. The list is endless. Exhaustive.

But ultimately useless.

Because the woman I love doesn’t love me anymore.

\*\*\*

That evening, I’m sitting on my deck with a cold beer, listening to the wail of a ship’s horn as it leaves the harbor. I live fourteen blocks from the center of town, but those horns reverberate off the mountains that surround Skagway and can be heard everywhere.

Since it’s a weeknight, things won’t get too crazy downtown, though the seasonal workers definitely like to party. I, myself, don’t mind a few drinks on a Friday or Saturday night when I’m off the clock, but I try to be careful about what I drink and how much.

A not-so-fun fact about Native Alaskans is that we abuse alcohol at a consistently higher rate than any other ethnic group in the United States. Almost fifteen percent of Native Alaskans’ deaths are alcohol-related, which is three times the national average. And unfortunately, it’s a long-standing problem, running through generations of my people.

My mother, who never touched a drop of liquor her whole life, was mowed down by a drunk driver here in Skagway almost ten years ago. And her twin brothers, my uncles, both died of complications from cirrhosis during the COVID-19 epidemic. My aunt Hannah, a schoolteacher here in Skagway, is the last living of the four siblings and doesn't touch a drop. All of her brothers and sisters have been lost—one way or another—due to alcohol.

I hate it that my own family is a statistic.

Mulling over the tragic details of my family sours my mood, and I pour the rest of my beer over the deck railing and head back inside.

Aw, hell. If I'm honest, my mood was soured hours earlier, after seeing Tanner Stewart. I haven't been able to stop thinking about Harper since he walked out of my office.

It's a brutal thing to love someone who doesn't even acknowledge you.

It's harder still when she lives in the same small town you do—the same town where you've both lived for most of your lives, where you both work, and where your respective families live. Her brother can walk into your place of work to lodge a legitimate complaint, and your whole mood is thrown into a tailspin. Everywhere you go, everywhere you look, there are bright memories of your best days with her, and grim reminders of everything you've lost. It sucks.

I pull the sliding glass door shut and step into the adjacent kitchen to find something for dinner. As I'm rummaging around in the freezer, my phone buzzes on the counter. When I pick it up, there's a short message:

Avery.

DTF?

I stare at those three letters and consider her question.

Hmm. Am I “down to fuck” Avery tonight?

I lean back against the counter and sigh.

Avery Wells is the Borough Clerk for Skagway. Ten years my senior and a childless divorcee, she came home with me after the town Christmas party two years ago, and we've been casually screwing ever since.

I stare at her message trying to decide what to do. On one hand, I'm deep in the throes of a Harper-reverie today, and I don't really want to be with another woman; on the other, I'm still a man with needs. And frankly, I sure could use the distraction and potential relief.

Joe

Sure. Come over whenever you're ready.

I don't add hearts or smiley faces or any of that cutesy shit because that's not what Avery and I are about. We're fond of each other, but we have no commitment in place—we don't go out on dates or sleep over at each other's houses or share secrets. Our relationship is mostly transactional. I scratch her itch and she scratches mine; and when the deed is done, she heads back home until the next time one of us makes a booty call.

Avery.

See you in 10.

With barely enough time to get cleaned up, I double-time it back to my room and jump in the shower, stepping into my bedroom wearing nothing but a towel. A second later, I hear my front door open and close.

“Joe?”

“In the bedroom,” I call.

Avery appears in the doorway, her auburn hair back in a ponytail and a plum-colored sundress hanging off her slight frame. She drops her purse on the floor by the door and pulls the dress over her head. Underneath it, she's naked.

I unfasten the towel from my waist and let it drop to the floor.

Her eyes widen with appreciation, which makes my dick hard. I'm tall and strong and muscular; I take care of myself, and it shows. She licks her lips and lies down on the bed, patting the space beside her.

\*\*\*

An hour later Avery is gone and what I'd hoped would distract me from thoughts of Harper and bring me some measure of physical relief hasn't managed to do much of either. The momentary rush of orgasm feels hollow now. My balls are empty, sure, but so is my heart.

I think about the bottle of vodka chilling in my freezer, imagining how nice it would be to feel nothing and pass out into a deep sleep. It takes effort to stop myself from grabbing a glass of ice and pouring myself a double, but as a rule, I only drink liquor with company, never alone; it's a pact I made with my cousin, Sandra, years ago. We also agreed that when the temptation gets too strong, we would reach out to each other. So, I throw on some sweats, sit down on my couch and give her a call.

"Hey, shithead," she greets me. "What's up?"

Sandra Clearwater is the baddest badass I know, and I adore every hair on her head.

"Bottle of vodka in my freezer calling my name."

"You alone?"

"Yep."

"Fuck that shit, Joseph. That ain't how we roll."

"Why do you think I'm calling you?"

"I'm better than AA, yo!" She hoots with laughter, then admonishes one of her four children in Alutiiq.

Sandra's and my mothers were born into the Sun'aq tribe of Kodiak Island, only moving to Skagway for jobs in the tourist industry when they hit their twenties. After my grandmother died, my mother didn't speak much Alutiiq to me, but my aunt Hannah kept the language alive for Sandra. As a result, I've lost most of my once-meager language skills,

but my cousin is near-fluent, and makes a concerted effort to preserve the language in her home. I admire the hell out of her for it.

I'm pretty sure that one of the words she used—"qilukicugluni,"—means that someone's in a bad mood.

"Who's giving you trouble today?" I ask her.

"Travis. He's all sorts a moody."

"Teens, right?"

"Only thirteen! I'm gonna have my hands full when he's sixteen!"

"You want to send him to live with Uncle Joe for a few weeks? I'll straighten him out."

Sandra's husband, Bart, is a good man, but he's also a trucker who spends most of his life on the road. His job gives Sandra and the kids a comfortable life, but the trade-off is not a lot of dad/husband face-to-face time. I try to help out when I can.

"Yeah, maybe." There's a pause and then she bellows, "Trav, you better shape up, or I'ma send you to live with Uncle Joe!" She clears her throat loudly and resumes our conversation. "What's making you think about the bottle today?"

I close my eyes and sigh.

"Oh, come on!" she yells into the phone. "Are you serious with this shit? Not again!"

"I can't help it. Tanner came in today to lodge a complaint."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Fucking Harper-fucking-Stewart? Again? Man, she did a number on you. I hate that bitch!"

"Don't," I warn my cousin.

"Oh, but I do! I fucking hate her all the way to Utqiagvik and back."

“Stop. She didn’t do anything.”

“She broke up with you without any explanation. More than once! How’re you supposed to get over that?”

“We were just kids,” I remind her. “She had a right to move on. This is my problem, not hers.”

“Okay. Yeah. You need to move on, too!” Sandra huffs. “What about Avery Wells? You still got sumpin’ humpin’ with her?”

I purse my lips. “That’s...nothing.”

“How is it nothing?”

“Avery and I don’t have any feelings for each other, and you know it. It’s just physical.”

“Okay. Well...if you’d actually let yourself fall for someone and have real feelings for them, that would be a healthy step in the right direction.”

“I just haven’t met anyone who—”

“Because you’re not trying!” cries Sandra. “There are lots of tourists coming through town. Lots of seasonal help here for the whole summer. There are lots of pretty motherfucking fish in the giant goddamned sea, Joseph!”

We’re at a stalemate, evidenced by a good five seconds of silence before Sandra pipes up again.

“Okay. You know I love you, right?” she asks me. “Like, all kidding aside, I think of you more like a brother than a cousin.”

“I know.”

“And I would miss the shit out of you if you left Skagway.”

“I’m not planning to leave Skag—Sandra, where are you going with this?”

“Well, I heard that Wasilla PD is looking for a new chief. It’s all very hush-hush, but Bart’s friends with a cop over

there. They're looking for someone new to take over for the retiring chief and...well, maybe you should think about it."

"I have a job. Here."

"I know. But I think it's time for you to get out of here—to put some distance between you and you-know-who."

"My whole life is here."

"What life? A job, sure. And a house, okay. And you've got me for as long as you can stand me. But, cuz, you don't have a life here. You're letting life pass you by. You live in the past. You're thirty years old, and you've got no wife, no little ones."

Sandra knows I want a wife and kids more than anything, and her use of that longing to make a point triggers something in me. "Oh. And you're the blueprint for the perfect wife and mom? You gonna give me advice, cuz? You got knocked up at sixteen—"

"Now you're just being an asshole."

I cringe, taking a deep breath and tamping down my anger.

"You're right. Sorry."

"See? You never lash out unless we're talking about Harper Stewart. She's bad for you, Joseph. She makes you mean. You see one of those fucking Stewarts walking around town, and you get into a mood. If it sucks a little for me to see it, I can't imagine how bad it sucks for you to live it."

"I'm not moving to Wasilla, Sandra."

"Well, it's an option."

"No, it's not. I have little enough family as it is. I'm not leaving you and Aunt Hannah."

Sandra scoffs. "I don't know who you think you're kidding, cuz, because it's not me and my mom you're worried about leaving."

"I don't stay here for her," I say softly.



“The fuck you don’t,” my cousin snaps back. “Listen, you’re making me crazy, and I gotta feed the kids something other than saltines. You gonna drink tonight?”

“No.”

“You still got the Fourth off? Coming to my BBQ?”

“Planning on it,” I tell her. “I’m bringing one of Vera’s cakes, too.”

“I’ll put out the Tums,” she quips, telling me she loves me before hanging up the phone.

My bottle urges mostly averted, I lean back on the couch and close my eyes. It’s been a long day. In no time at all, I’m dreaming.

# Fifteen Years Ago

Joe

Violently in love.

Violently.

To be clear, I wouldn't have chosen to read *Pride and Prejudice* in a million years; I was forced. And when there are only six other kids in your class and your teacher is friends with your aunt, you don't skip your homework, or your mom finds out before you get home, and she beats your brown ass red.

What really surprised me, though, was that I kinda liked it. Not that I'd admit that to anyone, but it's true. I liked the writing. I'd never read anything like it before.

"Joe!" calls my aunt. "This table needs to be put together and set up over by the path from town so we can collect the entry fees."

"On it!" I call to my aunt, heading over to the stack of tables we borrowed from the First Presbyterian Church.

My thirteen-year-old cousin, Sandra, is sitting at one such table, painting a last-minute sign that reads:

FORTH OF JULY COMPITITION PRICES:

Under 18 Axe-throw (three tries) \$9.00

Over 18 Axe-throw (one try)\$9.00

Underhand Chop\$10.00

Single Buck\$15.00

Double Buck \$20.00

"You spelled 'fourth' and 'competition' wrong, dumbass," I tell her.

"Shut up, Joseph!" she yells. "You're just a big shithead!"

"Nagten! Ugauluni, Sandra," warns my aunt, telling her daughter to cut it out and be a good girl.

My cousin sticks her tongue out at me.

Laughing at her for getting in trouble, I take a folded table to the mouth of Smuggler's Cove, set it up, and place two chairs behind it. My aunt will be sitting in one, and my mother will be sitting in the other. The Clearwater-Raven sisters are in charge of the competition fees every year, which is good since half of the money goes to the Skagway Traditional Council, a local organization that provides services to our tribal citizens.

I spend the next hour helping my uncles set up the portable bleachers we borrowed from the high school, then roping off competition areas with a friend from school. We are a small community of Native Alaskans in Skagway, but we all do our share to get this event off the ground every year.

By eleven, the sun is high, and I'm getting hot, so I take off my T-shirt and tuck it into the back of my jeans. Uncle Cody sits down on one of the chopping stumps we've set up, takes a swig of whiskey from his omnipresent flask, and scans my sweaty chest with his dark eyes.

"Geez, Joe," he says, "you trying to show us all up?"

"What do you mean?"

"When did you get all these muscles, usguq?"

He offers me the flask, but I shake my head no. My mother would kill me if she smelled liquor on my breath.

"Probably working on your boat all summer, angaq."

"How're you at axe throwing?" he asks me with a twinkle in his eye.

"Not bad."

He digs into his back pocket, pulls out his wallet and gives me a ten-dollar bill. "Teach these qat'sqaq kids a lesson, huh?"

"Yeah?"

"Why not? You got the build for it," he says, clapping me on the back.

As I make my way over to the entry desk, I see that people have started to drift over from the parade on Main Street. My mother hovers over the entry table, fanning out a handful of brochures about the Native peoples of Alaska.

“Hey, Mama!” I say, waving at her. “How was the parade?”

“Same as always. Good turn out.” She smiles at me. “Where’s your shirt?”

“I’ve been setting up all morning, and it’s hot.” I hold out my uncle’s ten dollars. “Uncle Cody’s sponsoring me for axe throwing.”

“Cody, huh? Wants you to beat out the white boys, I guess?”

I nod. “He said something about that.”

She takes the money and hands me a printed number and safety pin. “Where are you going to put this, huh?”

“On my jeans.”

I’m in the process of pinning it when I turn away from the table...

...and slam into Harper Stewart.

Violently in love.

The words streak through my mind like a bright-white star hurtling through the December sky.

She reaches for my shoulders to steady herself, and I reach for her waist in an attempt to do the same. She looks up into my eyes before letting her gaze drop to my bare chest. Without really meaning to, I flex my muscles and watch as her lips part and eyes widen.

“Oh,” she murmurs, her voice low and soft. “Joe.”

“Hey, Harp,” I murmur.

“Yeah. Hey. Um.” Her eyes flick up to lock with mine. Twin spots of pink appear high on her cheeks. She shakes her

head as though whisking away the remnants of a dream. “Sorry! I wasn’t looking where I was—”

“No! It was me. Sorry—uh, h-hi,” I stutter, my fingers tightening around her waist. “I—I just signed up for the, um—Sorry.”

She giggles, sliding her hands from my shoulders. My skin cries out for her to touch me again, but she takes a step away, so that my hands drop from her waist.

“It’s okay,” she says. Her eyes land on the number three that I’ve just pinned to my jeans. “Lucky number three, huh?”

Her soft blonde hair is pulled back in a loose braid, and her eyes sparkle under blue-glitter eyeshadow. Her lips are pink and glossy and look like they’d taste of bubblegum. Harper’s only been wearing makeup since we started high school, and I’m not sure how I feel about it. It makes her look older, which I kind of like, but she’s beautiful without it, too. She’s the prettiest, nicest girl in Skagway, and I’ve been quietly in love with her since I was in third grade.

“Three. Yeah.”

“Axe-throwing?”

“Yeah.”

“Hunter and Tanner are entering, too.”

“Tanner’s only fourteen.”

“He probably won’t win, but you know Tanner. He can’t resist a challenge.”

“That’s true.” I nod. “Hunter has a good chance.”

She shrugs, still smiling at me. “So do you.”

I take a step closer to her, lowering my voice. “Will you root for me, Harp?”

“Instead of my brothers?”

I don’t hesitate. I nod earnestly, looking deeply into her blue eyes.

“Okay,” she whispers. “I’ll root for you, Joe.”

Her encouragement makes me bold. “And meet me after?”

“After?”

“After the medal ceremony? We can take a walk over to Yakutania Point.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Are you asking me out, Joe Raven?”

It’s my turn to blush, but I don’t look away from her. I own my feelings. I hold her eyes as I nod again. “Yeah. I am.”

Her lips wobble, and her little pink tongue licks them before she grins at me. “It’s about time.”

Then she turns and walks over to the bleachers where she joins her little sister, Parker, little brother, Sawyer, baby Reeve, and her dad.

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I come in second to Hunter Stewart, but I don’t care.

All I can think about is Harper saying, It’s about time.

All I want is for this stupid competition to be over so I can spend the afternoon with her.

“Joe,” calls my mom when the awards ceremony is finally finished, “your aunt Hannah ordered pizzas for lunch, and then we need your help cleaning up.”

My heart drops. I don’t want to help clean up. I want to go to Yakutania Point with Harper. But my mother is a single parent and saying “no” to her doesn’t come easy to me. Hopefully Harper won’t mind waiting.

I jog over to the bleachers.

“Hey!” I say to Harper, nodding hello to her brothers.

“Congratulations!” she says, clapping her hands. “You were great!”

“Hunter was better,” I say, looking at her older brother with respect.

“It was close. You did good, Joe,” says Hunter. He turns to his younger siblings. “Harp and Tan, you guys ready to get going?”

Harper looks at me, then back at her brother. “I have plans. I’m staying. You guys go ahead.”

“What plans?” asks Hunter, his eyebrows furrowing.

“I’m helping Ms. Clearwater straighten up,” she lies. “I volunteered at school.”

Hunter looks over his shoulder at my aunt, then nods at his sister. “Okay, then. Hey, Joe, would you mind making sure Harper gets home safe?”

“No problem,” I say, trying not to look too eager.

“Thanks,” he says, looking down at Sawyer, who’s five years old. “Shoulders or back, little man?”

“Shoulders!” yells Sawyer.

Mr. Stewart took baby Reeve home a little while ago, so there are only four Stewarts left. I watch as Hunter puts Sawyer on his shoulders and Tanner offers a piggyback ride to little Parker. The four of them exit Smuggler’s Cove, leaving me and Harper behind.

“You ready to go?” she asks.

“I can’t yet,” I tell her. “I’m supposed to stay and help clean up.”

“Oh,” she says, her smile dimming a little.

“But it won’t take long!” I assure her. “Give me half an hour?”

“Sure,” she says, standing up from the bleachers. “I can help, too.”

“No,” I say, wanting to be chivalrous. “You relax. I’ll be done quick. I promise.”

I race back over to my mom and aunt, asking what they want me to do first.

“Sit down,” says my mother. “The pizza’s here. Have some lunch.”

I glance at Harper, then back at my mom. “Can’t. Harper and I are taking a walk to the point. I’d like to do my share now so I can get going.”

My mother scans my face, then looks over my shoulder at Harper, who waves at her from the bleachers.

“Hm. Harper Stewart?”

I nod.

“You finally asked her out, huh?”

I give my mother a look.

“Cody and Leo,” she says to her brothers, “Joe, here, has a date.”

“A date?” teases Uncle Leo. “With who? Who wants to go out with this ugly kid?”

My mother gestures to the bleachers with her chin.

“Stewart girl, huh?” says Uncle Cody. He looks at me. “You in love, usguq?”

I know he’s half kidding with me and probably expects me to shuffle my feet in the dirt and say no. But I can’t lie about this. About her. I just can’t.

“Yeah,” I murmur, my eyes locked with his. “I am.”

“Okay, then,” my uncle says softly, nodding his head with approval. He slides his gaze from me to Harper, then back to my mother. “Let him go. I’ll do my share and the boy’s.”

“You’re an old softie, Cody.” My mother chuckles softly at her brother, then nods at me. “Go, then. Be careful, huh?”

“I will!” I promise.

I kiss her on the cheek.

And then, because I’m so damn grateful, I kiss my uncle, too.

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I don't try to hold Harper's hand. It feels too forward to reach for it. Plus, if she pulls away, it'll mean she only sees me as a friend, and I'll want to die.

The walk from Smuggler's Cove to Yakutania Point takes us around the coastline, along Skagway's rocky beaches and jagged inlets. In the distance, across the water, are the snow-covered mountain peaks of Haines State Forest. They're white year-round, and something about that consistency appeals to me. We're always reminded that winter is coming.

I say as much to Harper, and she makes a joke about the George R. R. Martin book, *A Game of Thrones*.

"You're reading the *Song of Fire and Ice* series?" I ask her, stopping in my tracks.

"I'm addicted!" she says, turning around to face me.

"What book are you on?"

"Just finished *A Storm of Swords*. You?"

"I read *A Feast of Crows* last year. I'm waiting for the next one. He writes too slow."

"You're ahead of me. Don't tell me what happens!"

"Never!" I vow, putting my hand over my heart.

She takes a step toward me and places her palm over mine. "Who's your favorite couple?"

Her skin is warm. Her fingers curl gently around mine. My mind goes blank.

"Couple?"

"Romantic couple," she says. "In the series."

I don't read Martin for the romance. I read him for the action—for the political machinations and constant jockeying for power. That said, I don't want to disappoint her by not answering her question. The problem is she's standing so close to me, her palm covering the back of my hand, it's making it hard for me to think straight.

A couple. A couple. Any couple! Come on, Joe!

I say the first pairing that comes to mind. “Jaime and Cersei!”

Her eyebrows bunch together, and her nose wrinkles.

“Jaime and Cersei? Huh. Really?”

No, not really! I want to yell. The incestuous brother and sister pair are not my favorite romantic couple, but I’m too distracted to think of another!

“Mine are Jon and Ygritte,” she says, dropping her hand and turning away from me. She leans down and chooses a flat stone, rubbing it between her fingers before skipping it across the still water.

One-two-three-four-five. Plunk.

I stand behind her, feeling like I’ve failed a test.

“Jaime and Cersei aren’t my favorite couple,” I say, squatting down to look for my own flat rock. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Then why’d you say it?”

I look up at her, my eyes squinting a little because the sun’s so bright. Standing in front of it, with a halo of light over her blonde head, she looks like an angel.

“Because you had your hand over mine,” I admit. “Because you were touching me. I could barely breathe, let alone think.”

I stand up, offering her the small, flat rock in my hand.

But she doesn’t notice that I’m holding my hand out. She’s staring at my face. Her eyes slip down to my lips and rest there.

“That’s the most romantic thing anyone’s ever said to me,” she whispers. Her eyes flick up to capture mine. “Kiss me, Joe.”

I’ve never kissed anyone before, but I love her. I’m helpless to refuse her.

Taller than Harper by a few inches, I hold her eyes as I incline my head. My fingertips land on her jaw, gently tilting her head to the side, and I breathe her name as my lips touch softly on hers. I'm tentative at first. I even lean back to look at her, to be sure it's okay. But her eyes are closed, and her face is upturned like a flower drinking in the sun. I take this as a good sign, covering her lips with mine anew, more urgent now; certain that she wants this kiss every bit as much as I do.

My eyes flutter closed as she flattens her hands against my chest and leans closer. I wrap my arms around her, trapping her against my body, reveling in the touch of our lips; of our tongues, as they slide cautiously, then more confidently, against one another.

Harper moans softly, sliding her hands up to lace them behind my neck, and a wave of pure and requited love washes over me. Heart to heart, our bodies flush, we kiss until we're breathless and weak, until she pulls away, resting her forehead on my shoulder.

I raise my head and open my eyes, anxious to read her face.

“Was that—” I gulp. “I mean...was that...okay?”

She's breathing as fast as I am, flushed and warm. As she raises her head, her eyes open slowly, and she whispers, “Yeah. That was...more than okay.”

I smile at her, feeling relieved, feeling manly and victorious as I tighten my arms around her. I love the feeling of Harper in my arms. It's better than I ever could have imagined. She rests her cheek on my shoulder and sighs, her breath soft and warm against my throat, where my pulse thrums wildly with my racing heart.

“Why'd you stop us?” I ask her.

“Because I'm not in a rush,” she answers. “This is just the beginning.”

Just the beginning. Were there ever sweeter and better words? Anywhere? At any time? I'm about to find out that

yes, there are sweeter and better when they drop like a gift from her lips:

“I love you, Joe,” she says, her voice soft, but true. “I think that’s something you should know.”

“I love you, too,” I tell her. “I can’t remember a day when I didn’t.”

She leans back to look at me, her eyes shining with happiness, her sweet lips smiling up at me.

“You love me, Joe Raven?”

“Absolutely,” I tell her.

“You know what that means?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

I wait for her to answer her own question.

“It means I’m your girl,” she says.

“You always have been,” I tell her, pulling her back into my arms. I hold her tightly. I don’t want her to see the tears that have suddenly flooded my eyes, but I can’t keep the emotion from my voice as I tell her, “You’ll always be my girl, Harper Stewart.”

I close my eyes and silently vow to be worthy of her and her love for me.

I promise to never let her down and to never, ever let her go.

That’s what happens when your dreams come true right in front of your eyes. You make promises to the universe that you have every intention of keeping, never suspecting for a moment that fate may have different plans for you altogether.

## Chapter 2

Harper

We Stewarts love the Fourth of July.

More than Thanksgiving.

More than Christmas.

More than our birthdays.

More than almost anything.

We offer zero tours, housekeeping, meals, or transfers on the Fourth, leaving the entire day open for parades, contests, BBQs, and other fun. It's always been that way in my family, for as long as I can remember.

So it's a no-brainer that I'm sitting in the stands with Parker and Reeve on July Fourth, waiting to cheer on my brothers in the annual axe-throwing competition at Smuggler's Cove. Sawyer and Hunter are already signed up, and I wave at McKenna and Tanner when I see them arrive. While Tanner pays his entrance fee to Ms. Clearwater, McKenna heads over to the bleachers to join me and my sisters.

"McKenna!" cries Reeve. "Sit next to me!"

Reeve is my youngest sibling; she was born when I was already thirteen. Since our mother died when she was only one, Reeve was—more or less—raised by all of us. Yes, our dad was her primary parent, but there was also Gran and Paw-Paw, Hunter, Tanner, Parker, Sawyer and me. I feel a larger responsibility for her than most sisters would feel for a sibling, and I don't want her to get hurt by attaching herself too strongly to McKenna, who'll be leaving us at the end of August.

"Reeve, give her a little space."

"Shut up, Harper. Shove over," she says, pulling McKenna into the open space between us. Reeve

enthusiastically explains the rules of the competition to Tanner's new girlfriend, ignoring my warning.

Fine, I think. I'll just help you get over her loss instead. I'm good at getting over things. Or, at least, appearing to.

As though on cue, I lift my gaze to find Joe Raven standing at the foot of the bleachers, one hand shielding his eyes from the sun, the other raised in a wave hello. Without thinking, and distracted by Reeve and McKenna, I wave back.

I fucking wave back.

And Joe? After registering total shock at my unexpected civility, he takes that little wave as an invitation to sit next to me.

He climbs up onto the bleachers, looming over me while I try to ignore him.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Hey, Harp."

Shit.

"Hi," I say without looking up.

"This seat taken?"

Yes.

Except, it's definitely and clearly not.

"Um..."

"Yes or no, Harp?"

My grandparents and father are sitting in the row above us, my sisters are next to me, and my brothers are competing. It's obvious that the seat is free. I'd look like an idiot or a shrew to claim otherwise.

"Nope."

"Mind if I sit here?"

"It's a free country," I mutter, shifting over and crossing my legs toward my sisters.

Joe sits down, careful not to touch me.

Fact: I haven't been this close, physically, to Joe Raven in years. And if I hadn't been distracted by Reeve, it would have continued that way. Damn it.

"Hi, Joe!" says Reeve, leaning over me.

"Hey, Reeve," he says, his voice easy and warm with my baby sister.

"Happy Fourth!" she says. "Not competing?"

"No. Not today," he says. "I'll let your brothers have the prizes this time."

"It's Sawyer's year for gold," gushes Reeve. "I just know it!"

Joe looks over at the thirty or so men lined up and ready to start throwing. My brothers are tall and blonde—they stick out in the crowd.

"He's looking pretty cut," says Joe.

"Yeah. Right?" Reeve nudges me in the side. "Don't you think so, Harper?"

"Sure," I say, taking out my phone and flipping through Instagram like I'm way too busy to be bothered with this conversation.

"I still remember the first year I competed," says Joe.

His words are like a punch to my gut.

"Was I there?" asks Reeve.

"Yes, you were," says Joe. "But you were also itty bitty, and I think your dad took you home before the medal ceremony."

"Did you win one?" asks Reeve.

"I did. Came in second," he says. "I lost to Hunter."

"Aw! Tough day, huh?"

"Not really," says Joe softly. "Great day, actually."

I clench my jaw until it hurts, staring devotedly at a video compilation of cats pushing full plates of food off counters

with their paws.

“You remember that day, Harp?” he asks, his voice soft, almost intimate.

Damn him.

“Mmm-hmm,” I murmur.

“Joe,” says Reeve. “Have you met McKenna? She’s staying with us this summer.”

As Joe and McKenna exchange pleasantries over me, I wonder if I can get up and move seats without appearing to be a total bitch, but just as I’m considering an exit route, Ms. Clearwater stands up with a bullhorn to get the competition started, and I lose my window.

It’s a relief (and, frankly, a surprise) that once the contest begins, I’m so distracted by the battle to be best, that I almost forget Joe Raven is sitting next to me. I cheer wildly for my brothers, jumping to my feet when, as Reeve predicted, Sawyer is declared this year’s axe-throwing winner. Hunter doesn’t place at all, but I’m happy that Tanner manages to come in third, holding up his medal and grinning like a dope for McKenna.

“First and third for the Stewart boys,” says Joe. “Not bad.”

“Says the guy sitting on the bleachers,” I tease, forgetting not to grin at him.

He stares at me in surprise, his answering smile slow and a little sad. “Hey. There she is.”

My heart twists, and I look away quickly because I saw it there in his eyes, just as I always do when I risk a look at Joe Raven: You’ll always be my girl.

I jump up. “I have to go.”

“Where?” demands Reeve.

“I need air.”

“We’re literally sitting outside.”



“Shut up, Reeve,” I say, hopping over Joe’s legs and running down the bleacher steps to freedom.

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I speed-walk away from Smuggler’s Cove, headed toward Yakutania Point with no real destination in mind—just desperate to escape from Joe...which is why my heart drops when I hear footsteps behind me.

I whip around to face him, putting my hands on my hips and glowering at him.

“Why are you following me?”

“Why do you hate me so much?”

“Leave me alone,” I say, turning back around and continuing my walk.

He doesn’t. I hear his boots crunching on rocks and pebbles behind me.

“Quit following me!” I yell.

He grabs my arm and whips me around, and I’m so shocked by this boldness, I stare up at him, mute.

“Why do you hate me?” he demands. “What did I do? Jesus, Harper! I’ve been wondering for ten years!”

“I don’t hate you,” I say, yanking my arm away. I cross both arms over my chest and take a step away from him, staring down at my sneakers. “Now, please leave me alone.”

“You know what? No. No, I won’t leave you alone until you talk to me. I’ve never asked why you avoid me, why you won’t acknowledge me in public, why you don’t—”

“Please, Joe—”

“Today is the first time you’ve spoken to me in five years!” he cries. “I deserve an explanation!”

“It doesn’t matter,” I insist, glancing up at him for a second before returning my gaze to my feet.

“It does to me,” he says. “What did I do? Just tell me, Harp, and I promise I’ll leave you alone. I’ll never talk to you

again if that's what you want."

I turn my back to him, resuming my walk, but slower now. He falls into step beside me just like I knew he would.

"I don't hate you," I say again as we reach the rocky coastline. "I could never hate you."

"You act like you do."

"I just..." I squat down to find a smooth, flat stone, and Joe does the same. "I don't know what to say to you."

He nudges me with his elbow, and when I look over, he's got a perfect flat stone in his hand. I take it gingerly, careful not to brush my skin against his. Then I walk to the shore and skip it into the water.

"How about 'Hello'? Or 'How's it going'? Or anything else remotely civil?" he suggests from behind me.

He's relentless, and I feel myself weakening a little.

"Hello," I say to the sea.

"Hello," he says to my back.

"How's it going?" I ask.

"I don't know yet," he says softly, his deep voice like gravel.

I turn around to face him. "Happy now?"

"Was that so hard?"

Yes. No. I don't know. I shrug, walking past him to search for another stone.

"How's it going with you?" he asks.

I shrug again, kicking aside a clump of dry seaweed to find two good skipping stones hidden underneath.

"We have some really intense history," I say, walking past him back to the water.

"Yeah," he agrees. "We do."

"That means..." I skip one stone, then clench the other in my palm, staring out at the mountains. "We can't be friends,

Joe.”

“Why not?”

I skip the other stone, watching it sail away across the top of the water. One-two-three-four. Plunk.

“We were never just friends. Not really. We don’t know how to do that.”

And besides, it’s not what I want. Not from you.

“We could learn.”

I cross my arms over my chest again, hugging myself.

“I don’t think so,” I tell him. I glance at him over my shoulder. “But you’re right—I should be more...civil. I should say hello when we cross paths. I’m sorry I haven’t. That was immature of me.”

He takes a deep breath. “When you came back, Harp, I hoped...”

I should tell him to stop talking, but I don’t. I want to hear what he has to say, and he knows me well enough to take my silence as encouragement. I hear him take a step closer to me, and even though I’m still staring at the mountains, I can see him in my peripheral vision, standing beside me.

“I hoped that maybe we could...I don’t know...give things a second chance.”

A lump in my throat makes it hard to swallow. My eyes fill with tears.

You wouldn’t want me in your life if you knew everything...if you knew what I did. You would hate me with a depth and finality that I wouldn’t be able to bear.

“Joe, I just don’t—”

“Harp, I’ve never met anyone else who I—”

“Stop,” I say, my voice strangled and broken. I turn to him, and there it is in his eyes, as crystal clear and deep as it ever was—Joe’s love for me...but only because he doesn’t know me. Not really. “I have to go.”

I swipe at my eyes as I start walking back up the beach.

“Harper!” he calls, torment filling his voice.

I look at him over my shoulder, not even trying to conceal my tears.

“Forget me, Joe,” I tell him. “It’s for the best. I promise you. It really is.”

Then I turn around and walk back to town alone.

\*\*\*

Joe

Although it takes some effort not to, I’m not going after her right now. I think we could both use a few minutes to collect our bearings.

There’s a boulder by the water line to my left, and I scramble on top of it, watching Harper trudge away until she disappears. Then I turn my gaze to the sea.

As desperate as I am to keep talking to her, the conversation we just had was the most we’ve spoken since she returned home five years ago. I don’t want to jeopardize that progress by pushing her too hard, and besides, I need to take a quiet moment to process what we just talked about. Only by understanding her can I hope to find us on a playing field level enough to win her back.

I don’t hate you. I could never hate you.

We have some really intense history.

We were never just friends.

Forget me, Joe. It’s for the best. I promise you. It really is.

Hearing Harper say that she doesn’t hate me is a relief. I thought maybe I’d done something to her—said something to her—that I’d forgotten or didn’t want to remember. Knowing that she doesn’t hate me, and “never could,” is a balm to the rejection I’ve felt. But it makes me even more confused about her behavior. Why won’t she talk to me? Why won’t she even look at me? If she doesn’t hate me, what does she feel for me?

At least she acknowledges the magnitude of the relationship we once had. She doesn't try to downplay what we were to each other by saying "We were too young," or "It was a long time ago." It means a lot to me that we share the truth of who we were to one another, and the love we shared. It was intense. Once upon a time, it was everything.

So it's easy for me to agree with her on the next point: she's right—we were never just friends. What I wanted from Harper—almost from the get-go—was on a deeper and more devoted level than friendship. And while I suggested we learn how to be friends ten minutes ago, in my heart I know that a friendship with Harper Stewart would never be enough for me. Not after knowing how it felt to love her and be loved by her. I would always want more. I would never be satisfied. I'm glad she didn't agree to that because I'm really not sure I could have delivered it.

As for her request that I forget her?

No. Not possible.

Now more than ever, I know that one day I'll die one day with Harper's name on my lips. If there's a chance—even one in a billion—that I could win her back someday, I won't give up on her, and even if that doesn't end up happening, I'll certainly never forget her.

Why does she think my forgetting her would be for the best? I don't understand.

I take a deep breath and let it go slowly, my cop's brain looking at the facts and working from every angle.

She doesn't hate me, and she knows what we had was real. Good.

As far as I can tell, she's not dating someone else. Though I can't definitively rule out the possibility of her being in a long-distance relationship, I just don't sense it, and I feel like I would.

Maybe she wants more than a small-town sheriff? But that doesn't track; she's made her home in Skagway for the

last five years. She can't have anything against the town or the folks living and working here. Heck. She's one of us.

So maybe—my heart clutches—maybe it's me.

Maybe—despite what we once shared—she doesn't see me in a romantic light anymore. Maybe her tastes have changed, and she's no longer attracted to me. And maybe she feels weird or guilty about that, so she has trouble looking me in the eye. It would hurt like hell if it was true, but I'm not so full of myself that I can't admit it's a possibility.

Or maybe it's something else entirely—something that I can't even fathom.

There were years there—from ages twenty to twenty-five—when she never came home, and I never heard from her. Through the grapevine, I heard that she was working for National Geographic Expeditions, but honestly, I have no idea where she was or what she was doing. I guess I need to acknowledge that whatever happened during those years could have changed her forever.

And that hurts.

Damn, but that hurts.

A cold wind rolls in off the water and smacks me in the face, sharp and biting for July. I slide down from the boulder, planting my feet on solid ground and heading back toward town. My agreement with Sandra is that we don't drink liquor alone...which means I'm going to need to find some company.

Fast.

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The Fourth of July is a big event in Skagway, and a holiday that I only get off from work every three or four years. This year, I have a strong and competent deputy who asked to be in charge today. I was only too glad to hand over the reins so I could enjoy myself. But as I stalk down Broadway, trying to decide where to park myself for a few hours, I don't feel very festive.

The live music coming from 4<sup>th</sup> Street, where the Happy Endings Saloon and Station Bar & Grill sit side by side, coaxes me over, and I find myself in the middle of a block party, saying hello to everyone I know.

“Joe!” calls my friend Wyatt, an Australian who came to Skagway via cruise ship six years ago and never left. He holds up a pitcher. “Come have a margarita.”

Now you’re talking.

I sit down across from him, next to his girlfriend, Layla. Like me, she’s Native. I’ve known her forever.

“Hey, Joe.”

“Hey, Layla. How’s it going?”

“All good here. You going to Sandra’s later?”

“Supposed to,” I say, taking the margarita Wyatt pours for me. “Bottoms up.”

The lemony nectar splashes down my throat, a mix of sweet, sour, and salty. I chug the whole thing, then slam the glass back down on the table.

“Whoa, Joe!” says Wyatt with a chuckle. “Thirsty, eh?”

“Next pitcher’s on me,” I promise.

I flag down a waitress and order two more pitchers, just to be safe, then finish off another margarita as we wait for more to come.

“That seat taken?”

I look over my shoulder to find Hunter Stewart standing behind me, gesturing to the open spot beside Wyatt.

Great. Just great.

“Hey, Hunter!” says Wyatt with his broad Aussie grin. “Come join us! Joe just ordered more margies!”

Hunter slides onto the picnic table bench, smiling at me and Layla. “Happy Fourth, folks.”

“Happy Fourth, Hunter,” I say, wondering if any other Stewarts are planning to spend the afternoon at the 4<sup>th</sup> Street block party. I can’t help but take a quick look around for another blonde head, cursing my disappointment when I don’t see the one I want.

“You good, Joe?” asks Hunter.

I turn back to him. “Fair enough.”

“Did I see you sitting with my sisters at Smuggler’s Cove?”

“Yep.”

“Long time since I’ve seen you sitting next to Harper,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

I’m not in the mood to deal with a teasing Stewart sibling. Not today.

“Free seat,” I mutter, giving him a sharp look. “That’s all.”

He nods. “Got it.”

The pitchers arrive, and I pour everyone a glass of margarita and a double for myself. After finishing half of it, I can’t help asking:

“Hey, Hunter...speaking of Harper, where’d she go, again? When she dropped out of UDub?”

“When she dropped out of college?” He thinks for a minute. “Umm, let’s see. She, uh—I think she lived with my aunt in Oregon for a little bit, then worked for National Geographic. Not the magazine, the travel company. Like, on a boat in Antarctica or somewhere cold like that. Polar Region Travel, it was called. In the pictures, she was always wearing one of those bright orange parkas, and surrounded by ice and snow.”

Hunter holds my eyes casually as he answers, and his tone is level and easy, which means he believes what he’s saying.

“Sounds exciting. Why’d she come back to Skagway?”



He shrugs. “Her family’s here. And it’s just as cold.”

“That’s for sure.”

I’m on my fourth margarita now, and I’m starting to feel the effects of the tequila. It’s making me slightly light-headed, which is good. It’s what I wanted when I came over here—a dulling effect. I didn’t want to think so much, didn’t want to feel so much.

“Anyway,” says Hunter, “you can ask her. She’s coming over here right now.”

“What?”

Looking over my shoulder, I find Harper standing behind me, staring daggers at her brother, arms crossed over her chest in annoyance.

“Hey, Harp,” I say. “Long time, no see.”

“Hi, Joe,” she says, quickly skipping her eyes away from me. “Layla. Wyatt.”

“There’s plenty of space. Come sit with us, Harper,” says Wyatt, making space between himself and Hunter, directly across from me. Wyatt, of course, is the only person at this table unaware of the history between Harper and me, so he has no idea what he’s suggesting.

“N-No,” she says. “I think Parker wanted to—”

“Parker had a migraine. She already headed home,” says Hunter, his cheeks pink from drinking.

“Come on, Harper!” Wyatt insists. “It’s a holiday! Have a margie!”

With little choice, she rounds the table and plops down. “Sure. I can stay for a drink.”

I pour her a margarita, then nudge it over to her. “Cheers.”

She looks up at me, and I scan her eyes carefully. I’m looking for something specific—I want to know if she’s still attracted to me; if there’s any chance she could still love me,

even if the road back to each other is long and rough and rocky.

“Thanks.”

Taking the glass in her hands, she holds my eyes as she lifts it to her lips and sips.

The emotion I see shining back at me isn't neutral, isn't indifferent, isn't even ambiguous. What I see is love. What I see is heat. What I see would melt every glacier she ever visited during her goddamned polar region travels.

Forget you, Harper?

Never, ever going to happen now.

You're my girl, Harper Stewart. Always were. Always will be.

“To old friends,” says Hunter, raising his glass to the table.

“And new beginnings,” I murmur, staring back at Harper as I lift and finish my drink.

# Twelve Years Ago

Harper

“We graduated!”

“We’re graduates!”

Hands raised above our heads, we stand side by side on a spit of sand in Lower Dewey Lake, yelling downriver, our voices tumbling down the valley and disappearing into the Alaskan wilderness.

“We did it,” Joe says, grinning at me, his dark eyes alive and sparkling.

“We did it,” I say softly, wondering how in the world I will live without him for the next four years while I attend the University of Washington in Seattle and he studies at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

The thought of being so far away from him makes me ache, makes me sick with borrowed longing; I lose hours of my life dreading the day—the hour, the minute, the second—we have to say goodbye. It hurts so much, in fact, that lately I’ve started wondering if it would be better to make a clean break from Joe before we go our separate ways.

Logically, it doesn’t make sense—why would I want to break up with someone I love?—but somewhere inside of me where emotion overrules reason, the idea has found purchase and resonates in my heart. If Joe doesn’t belong to me anymore, and I don’t belong to him, maybe it won’t hurt so much to be apart.

He’s staring out at the water, a hopeful half-smile on his face, the very picture of a recent high school graduate with his whole life ahead of him. The thought of breaking up with me to save his own heart from shattering won’t have occurred to Joe. His love for me is everlasting; as shatterproof as the granite mountains that surround us.

For Joe, love is an absolute thing; it's a safe and mighty thing that makes your life stronger and better.

For me, love is a risk; it's something that can disappear when you least expect it, leaving fathomless chaos and inconceivable pain in its wake.

While I take measures to protect myself from its loss, Joe lives his life with his heart on his sleeve. It's part of what attracts me to him, and I'm sure my insecurity is part of why Joe works so hard to prove his love to me. The equation of our relationship is one of want and plenty, of open space and available mass.

"Someday, Harp," he says, grinning at me with eyebrows raised flirtatiously, "we'll bring our kids here. We'll show 'em where their mom and dad celebrated their high school graduation."

Here's a secret I keep close to my heart: sometimes Joe is too much for me.

It's not that I want someone else. It's not that I can see myself with anyone else. But no matter how much I love Joe, and no matter how much he loves me, nothing lasts forever. I can't just close my eyes and blindly trust Joe to always be there the same way I trusted my mom to come back from heliskiing that dark day so many years ago. I have to stay open to the possibility that sometimes love doesn't last forever. People move on. People don't come back. People die. So it grates on me when he assumes that forever is a probability for us; not because I don't want it, but because I'm not certain forever even exists, and it feels careless to pretend it does.

I lean down to look for a skipping stone. "You think?"

"Oh, yeah. For sure," he says easily. "A couple of girls. A couple of boys."

"You expect me to have four kids?" I ask, looking up at him with wide eyes.

"Your mom had six." He winks at me. "Heck, I'll take as many as you want to give me, Harp."

I feel my cheeks flush and turn away from Joe, skipping the flattest stone I can find. My suddenly sweaty fingers slip as I throw, and the stone sinks almost immediately.

“Losing your magic touch?” he teases.

“No way!” Rising to the bait, I look for another stone.

“Anyway,” says Joe, his voice low and suggestive, “I’ve heard that practicing is pretty awesome.”

“Practicing?” I ask, even though I know exactly what he’s talking about.

“I’m not pressuring you to—you know...do it. I just thought you wanted to,” he says. “After graduation, right?”

He’s right. I did say that.

Although it’s been almost two years since our first kiss, Joe and I haven’t had sex yet.

Do I want to? Of course I do.

Physically, I’m a normal teenager who’s just as horny as the next girl. Not to mention, Joe is scorching hot, and I’m crazy about him. But having sex with Joe will bind me to him even more profoundly than I am now...and then, what happens if he goes to college and meets someone new? Or hits his head, gets amnesia, and forgets that he loves me? Or dies suddenly in a freak ice storm accident? There I’d be, left with these once precious—then agonizing—memories. I know how hard it was to lose my mother without any warning. I never want to go through something like that again.

So, as much as I want to do it, having sex with Joe scares me, too.

I find a good, flat rock and stand up.

Just then, Joe puts his arms around me from behind. Leaning his head down, he nuzzles my neck, making goose bumps rise on my bare arms. His body is hard and warm, his arms corded with muscle where they wrap around my waist. I can feel his erection through the layers of his khaki pants and my white sundress; it presses against my butt insistently. My stomach flutters wildly. My eyes close in surrender.

Am I scared? On an emotional level, absolutely. But I'm also human, and I think we've waited as long as humanly possible.

I turn around in his arms, letting the stone slip from my fingers as I clasp my hands around his neck. He fists handfuls of my dress, pulling it up and over my head. Then he works his belt open, quickly unbuttoning and unzipping his pants. They fall to his ankles while I reach behind my back to unfasten my bra. It slides down my arms as he pulls his dress shirt and undershirt over his head and chucks them aside.

We stand still before each other, surrounded by cast-off clothing, him in his boxer shorts, and me in white panties. It's cool for June, but I don't feel cold. I feel hot as soon as I raise my eyes to Joe's.

"Are we really doing this?" he asks, the muscles on his chest flexed and hard as he waits for permission.

"Yeah." My mouth waters. "We are."

He reaches for my hand, braiding his fingers through mine and pulling me toward him.

"I love you," he says. "I love you so much, it hurts, Harp."

"I love you, too," I tell him, licking my lips. "Kiss me again."

His mouth falls hungrily on mine, and my free hand presses against his chest, which is warm and smooth, heaving up and down with quick, choppy breaths. I slide my fingers to the waistband of his underwear and tug.

With one yank from his free hand, the fabric clears his hips, falling onto the sand with the rest of our clothes. My fingers find his erection and close around it.

I am as intimately acquainted with Joe Raven's gorgeous body as he is with mine. We may not have had sex yet, but we've done everything else under the sun. Holding his rigid length in my hands, or clasped between my lips, for that matter, isn't new to me. I've been on my knees in front of Joe more times than I can count, and he's tasted, licked, and loved

every contour, peak and valley of my body a hundred times, and then a hundred more.

His thumbs hook into the elastic of my panties and pull down. They slide over my hips at his urging, leaving me as bare as he is. As he kisses me, he reaches down and closes his fingers around mine, gently pulling them away from his pulsing sex.

“Don’t,” he groans into my mouth, “or I’ll come too soon.”

He pulls me into his arms. With his stiff arousal pillowed against my trimmed strip of curls, he reaches up to cup my jaw.

“I want this to be good for you, Harp.”

“It will be.”

His brows furrow. “But we haven’t—I mean, I don’t know if I can—”

“Joe,” I say, arching my back to press my breasts flush against his chest, my nipples pebbling against his pecs. “I don’t expect it to be perfect. It’s our first time.” I grin at him. “We have all summer to get it right.”

He chuckles softly, then picks me up and spins me around in an act of utter and complete joy.

“How’d I get so lucky?” he asks, his face smooth and beautiful, all signs of anxiety gone.

“How did I?” I ask him, looping my arms around his neck and locking my legs around his waist.

We kiss, our lips and tongues colliding, and it turns so hot so fast, I can’t clock the actual moment we end up on the warm, soft sand with me on my back, and Joe hovering over me. My legs are still clasped around him, holding his sex close to mine. His black hair flops forward and his dark eyes seize mine.

“Sure you want this, Harper?” he asks, reaching over my head for his pants and fishing something out of a pocket.

“I’m sure.”

He leans back over me, ripping open a condom wrapper with his teeth.

I unlock my legs and lower my feet to the sand, keeping my knees bent and Joe’s body cradled between them. He leans back, kneeling in the sand as he rolls on the condom. When he leans forward, I feel the tip of his penis, smooth and firm, press against the outer rim of my pussy.

“Tell me you love me,” he murmurs, scanning my face.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he groans, sliding forward.

His lips cover mine as I gasp in surprise. When you’ve been sexually active for two years, you don’t know for sure if the actual act of intercourse will be so different from everything else you’ve been doing. But at that moment, I learn that it is. It is different. It’s life-changing.

I knew that sex with Joe would be emotionally intense, but I didn’t know it would make me feel so physically vulnerable. I didn’t realize that in sharing my body, I’d be giving a little part of myself away. I think—no, I know—that every day of my life from this moment on, a part of me will belong to Joe. Forever. Always. No matter what happens. And I just hope I can live with that.

He moves inside of me, slowly, tentatively, as though I’m made of glass, and he’s an earthquake that could shatter me.

“Are you okay?” He pants softly, his lips dusting along my jaw and down my throat as his hips slide against mine in a gentle, timeless rhythm.

The honest answer is that yes, I am physically okay, but I’m more overwhelmed than I expected by the joining of our bodies. A big lump has taken up residence in my throat. Tears slide from the corners of my eyes, and my heart feels so full, I worry it might burst from my chest, leaving me dead from too much love.



“Harp? Hey. Baby.” He’s looking down at me, his face stricken, his body still. “Why are you crying?”

My tears fall faster, and I sniffle, even as my lips turn up in a smile.

“I l-love you,” I manage to say. “And this is...intense.”

“Should we stop?”

My eyes widen. “I’ll kill you if you stop, Joe.”

He smiles at me. “Sure?”

“I’m sure,” I tell him, but he hesitates.

Beads of sweat dot his forehead. His weight is braced on his arms, and they start to shake.

I smooth my hands down his shoulder blades and spine, stopping at his butt. When I get there, I flatten my hands and push down as hard as I can, arching my back and raising my hips at the same time.

With a gasp, he impales me to my core. As I whimper with pleasure, biology takes over, Joe’s hips gyrating in faster and deeper thrusts until we’re both panting and high. I can feel it—we’re both on the brink of orgasm, and it’s going to be big.

“I’m gonna come,” he groans, his breath hot in my ear.

“Me too,” I whisper, sighing as I close my eyes and hold on.

According to every teen magazine I’ve read, it’s rare for a female virgin to climax her first time, let alone together, at the same time. Leave it to me and Joe to prove them all wrong. This time, when our cries echo across the valley, they ring with a different sort of pleasure, a different kind of victory. When we’re done, we lay tangled in each other, all loose limbs and goose-bumped skin, coming back down to earth little by little until we look at each other and giggle.

“That was...”

“Mind-blowing,” says Joe.

“Yeah?” I ask, leaning on his chest.

“Yeah,” he says, very pleased with himself.

“Amazing,” I agree, but melancholy is already slipping back into my heart, whisking away the euphoria of losing my virginity to the boy I’ve always loved.

He leans up, touching his lips to mine. “You okay, Harp? Sore?”

I am a little sore, but it’s not a bad feeling. It’s a connected feeling; a feeling I’m going to look for when I’m so far away from him next year. I’ll be grateful for it then.

“I’m fine,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his chest, then sitting up to find my panties.

Joe is oblivious to the change in my mood. Everything is right in his world, the puzzle piece of our lovemaking making the developing picture of our relationship outlandishly beautiful in his eyes. Meanwhile, I feel anxiety growing in my gut and panic settling in my heart.

“Oh my god, Harp...the kids we’re going to make someday,” he says, leaning up to pull his boxers back on. He lies down on the bed of sand, pillows his hands behind his head and stares up at the bright blue sky. A wide smile tilts his perfect lips into a wide U.

A very slight ripple of annoyance undulates through me. We just graduated from high school and just had sex for the first time. I’m not ready to talk about kids and forever. It’s too much. It feels too far away, too unknowable, too unsafe. I’m not even ready to go off to college in two months. I’m definitely not ready to discuss forever.

That “Joe is too much” feeling washes over me again. Sometimes it feels like we’re in two different places in our lives—like our timing is oh-so-slightly, but oh-so-significantly off. In my heart, I know that Joe is Mr. Right...but is he Mr. Right Now?

Are we the right couple at the wrong time?

I pull on my panties with a sigh.

“After school,” he continues, “we can get jobs here in Skagway. We’ll pool our resources, borrowing from family if we need to, and buy a house. I’ll propose, and we’ll get married. We’ll be near your family and mine. It’s the perfect place to raise kids.”

“Hold your horses,” I say, trying to stay calm. With my bra and undies back on, I lay my head against his chest and listen to his heartbeat under my ear. It’s steady and strong, just like Joe. If he’d stop talking about forever, it would be comforting. “One step at a time, huh? We have four years of college first. Then, I want to travel the world for a while.”

“Right. Okay. Let’s travel a little bit,” he says. “Where do you want to go, baby?”

I perk up. This is my favorite subject.

“Lower-48, for sure, then South America—especially Chile and Argentina, and maybe Antarctica. Um, let’s see... and then Sweden, Norway, and Finland—”

“You really want to go so far from home?”

“That’s the whole point, Joe—to see somewhere else, to experience something different. And going far away from home will make us love it all the more when we return.”

“As long as we’re together, I guess I’m in,” he says, though his tone lacks the same enthusiasm it had when he was spinning tales of us raising a family in Skagway.

I lean up, looking into his eyes.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Anything.”

I bite my lip. “You might not like it.”

“Talk to me about it anyway.”

“Keep an open mind?”

“Always.”

I sit up and reach for my dress, pulling it over my head. Joe pulls on his T-shirt, then sits with his legs crisscrossed,

staring at me expectantly.

Gulping, I decide it's best just to blurt it out before I lose my nerve. "What do you think about breaking up in August when we head off to school?"

His eyes widen. His brows furrow. He frowns at me.

"Don't get upset! It's not forever. It's just to see how it feels for us to be independent." I can feel myself cringing, but I'm trying to be honest with him. This has been on my mind so much I feel like we need to discuss it. "We've been together since we were—"

"Harper, after what we just did, you want to—"

"I know my timing sucks, but it's been on my mind, and we just graduated and—"

"We just had sex for the first time, and you want to break up?"

"No!" I say. "I want to have sex with you all summer and then break up."

My attempt at lightening things up fails miserably. He blinks at me in a stupor, then shakes his head in disbelief.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"Why?" he demands, a sharp hurt narrowing his eyes. "I don't get this! Not at all! I love you. You just said you loved me, like, ten times. Do you?"

"So much!" I rush to reassure him, taking his hands in mine. I thread my fingers through his, then curl all ten of them together. "I love you so much, Joe. What we just did was amazing. For real."

"Okay. Good. We love each other," he says, squeezing our hands together gently. "So that's that. We're not breaking up."

Something inside of me bristles at the absoluteness of his declaration. "I still think we should talk about it. We've been together since we were fifteen."

"So what?"

“I don’t know,” I say, unexpected tears burning my eyes.

Am I ruining a good thing for no good reason? Am I the biggest fucking idiot who ever lived?

“Why would you even suggest this, Harper?”

I tilt my head to the side. “What if you meet someone else at U of A?”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” Relief instantly relaxes his features. “Oh, baby, never. That’ll never happen. You’re my girl, Harper Stewart. I love you. Only you. Forever.”

There’s no such thing as forever.

“Yes, but it might be good for us to be free, you know? To be free to do what we want, to have the full college experience. You think you don’t want that, but maybe you’ll get there and find out that you do.” I pull my hands away from his. “Will you at least think about it?”

“About breaking up with you?” he asks, his face hardening. “No. I won’t.”

The hurt in his eyes is almost more than I can bear. Why didn’t I wait to talk about this with him another time? Shit, Harper.

“Joe,” I say gently, “love doesn’t die just because we break up for a few months. If we still feel the same about each other when we get home, we can get back together over Christmas break or next summer. If we love each other enough, it’s inevitable that we’ll end up together—a few months of independence won’t change that.”

“And in the meantime, you’ll be free to do that with other guys?”

Honestly, the idea of having sex with other people hadn’t even occurred to me.

“What? No! I mean, I doubt it. I can’t imagine wanting to make love to anyone but you.”

“Then don’t break us up!” he pleads, tears making his eyes bright.

I’ve never seen Joe cry. The fact that I’m the cause of the first time guts me. But he’s being intractable. He won’t even talk about it.

“Joe—”

“No, Harper. No,” he says, reaching for his pants, then standing up to pull them on. He grabs the fancy button-down shirt he wore for graduation and balls it up in his hands. His face is red and furious. A tear runs down his cheek, and he swipes it away angrily. “You know what? You’re a fucking coward. You’re fucking scared of everything, and usually, I’m okay with it. I get it. I understand. Your mom died when you were young, and it fucked you up. It’s hard for you to trust that people who love you—that the people you love—won’t leave you. But us? You and me? This is the best thing. This is...is... everything, Harper. Don’t you see? We’re...” He shakes his head as another tear snakes down his cheek. He leans down and grabs his shoes. “If you don’t see that already, I can’t make you see it. Fuck this. I’m going home. Thanks for wrecking one of the most important days of my life, Harp.”

“Joe!” I cry, scrambling up from the sand. “Please wait! Don’t go! I just wanted to talk.”

“I’m not talking about us breaking up,” he says. “I won’t do it.”

“I love you,” I tell him, my voice breaking.

“Sure about that?” he barks at me.

Yes! I’m sure! I think, but my mouth isn’t working. I’m frozen. I’m terrified that I’ve just lost the best thing in my life...but I’m also frustrated with him. With us. With everything.

We stare at each other for a long, torturous moment, then he turns and leaves, splashing through the shallow water between the spit and the land before disappearing into the woods.

And me? I’m left alone.

Just like you wanted, right, Harper? Feel safer now?

I wrap my arms around my body, hugging myself tightly,  
and weep.

# Chapter 3

Harper

I wake up with a beam of sunlight streaming across my face... and immediately I know I'm not at home. My bed never gets direct sunlight in the morning because it's further from the window than Parker's.

Where the heck am I?

Cracking open one eyelid makes me groan in pain, so I close it quickly against the pounding in my head.

Oof. I'm hungover. Bad.

I take a deep breath and open my eye again, taking a moment to let my headache equalize before focusing on the pillowcase under my cheek. I squint to make out a pattern of white dots on a navy-blue background.

I don't have white dotted sheets with a navy-blue background.

These aren't my sheets.

Suddenly my brain connects with my body, and I bolt upright in this strange bed, gasping at the sharp throbbing in my head as I look around an unfamiliar bedroom.

"Jesus," I murmur. "What happened last night?"

"We got drunk," answers a voice I'd know anywhere at any time under any circumstances.

Joe Raven.

Slowly, I turn my head to find him standing in the doorway of the room. He's wearing black running shorts and a gray sweatshirt, with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His long black hair is back in a rubber band, his arms are brown from the summer sun, and his dark-roast coffee-colored eyes stare back at me with amusement.

Jesus, he's fine, I think, biting my lower lip in appreciation. It takes my mushy brain a second to shut down



this train of thought. No, Harper. Not fine. Absolutely not. Unacceptable observation.

“Harp? You okay?”

“My head is killing me,” I groan. And where am I? “Is this...I mean—am I lying in your...”

“Bed?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest. “Yeah.”

“Whaththefuck?” I whisper, my head drooping forward as I rub my temples gently.

I hear him cross the room, open a door, turn on a faucet, and rattle around in a cabinet. Suddenly, his hand appears in my limited field of vision holding three Advil tablets. I take them gratefully and shove them in my mouth, reaching blindly for the glass of water I’m confident he’s holding in his other hand. I gulp greedily, only coming up for air when the glass is empty.

Not sure where to look, I clasp the glass in my lap and stare at it.

“What happened?” I whisper. “Did we...?”

“Did we what?” he asks, gently prying the glass out of my hands.

“Joe,” I say, looking up at him, my heart throbbing painfully in my chest. “Did we...?”

“Have sex?” he asks. He lets the question linger there for an agonizing second before shaking his head. “No.” He screws up his face at me, crossing his arms over his chest again. “Who do you think I am, Harp?”

I know who you are; I’m just not so sure about myself sometimes.

“No offense. I just had to make sure.”

“None taken,” he says, an edge in his voice. “I’m not so hard up that I have to take advantage of comatose women.”

Huh. What does that mean? I wince. I don’t have the mental capacity to deal with whether or not Joe’s sleeping with

someone right now. I make a mental note to wonder about this later.

“Sorry,” I mutter, closing my eyes. “Um...where did you sleep?”

“On the couch.”

Oh. Good. But strangely, I don't feel good about this. Or relieved. I just feel...sort of disappointed.

“Listen, Harp, I've got twenty minutes to grab a shower, get dressed, and go to work,” Joe says. I look up at him and see him tug at the waistband of his shorts. He glances at me from under long, thick, black lashes. Fucking hot. “You're more than welcome to stay. I mean, there's nothing here you haven't seen before—”

“No!” I yelp. “Nope. No. I'm leaving. I'm going. I need to go home. I've already put you out enough.” I scramble out of Joe's bed, only to discover I'm wearing a T-shirt that isn't mine, and panties that are, thank God. Did he take off my bra? Goose bumps rise up on my arms at the thought of Joe seeing my naked breasts after a decade. I have a lot of questions, but only one that I need answered right this second. “Where are my clothes?”

“They're in the dryer,” he says. “Should be ready by now.”

“Why're they in the dryer?”

“Because you puked on them. And me.”

Oh. My. God. Could this morning get any weirder or more embarrassing?

“Oh god, I'm sorry. What happened last night?” I ask.

“You happened.”

“What does that mean?”

Joe flicks a glance at his watch, then back at me. “Sorry, Harp, but I don't have time for a full recap. If you want the blow-by-blow, we'll have to meet up later.”

He heads for the bathroom.

“Please just tell me...is there anything I should know?” I ask, looking over my shoulder at him.

He turns around and shrugs. What does that mean? Yes? No?

“Gotta take a shower,” he says, stepping into the bathroom.

“Joe!” I cry. I’ve got to know what happened or my imagination is going to get the better of me. He turns around again, eyebrows raised in question.

“Where and when?” I ask him. “For the full recap?”

He lifts his chin, stares at me for a second, then says, “Here. Eight o’clock.”

“Tonight?”

“No, Harper,” he says, getting terse. “Half an hour ago.”

“Eight tonight. Check,” I say. “I’ll be here.”

Then I scurry down the hallway of Joe’s home in search of his washer and dryer.

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“Happy Fifth of July to you!” says Parker, annoyingly chipper when she picks me up downtown half an hour later. “Where’d you sleep last night?”

“Nunya.”

“What, now?”

“Nunya business,” I say, giving her a look while I buckle my seat belt. I purposely walked ten blocks into town, so she’d have no idea who I was with last night. And wow, that walk hurt with a scorching hangover and Advil that had only just started to kick in.

“Don’t want to tell me? Fine. But here’s a newsflash for you, sister dear. Because you were nowhere to be found this morning, Hunter had to take your place on a three-day, two-night tour up to Whitehorse. And let me tell you, he was not pleased.”

“Aw, shoot.”

“Yeah. So you know what that means, right?”

“My brothers are pissed at me?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s a given,” she says. “But it also means you’re on cruise ship day excursions today, tomorrow, and Friday.”

Fuck. “What? No! Come on!”

“Hunter had ’em covered. You bailed. His jobs fall on you. Them’s the breaks.”

I groan softly, closing my eyes.

Of all the tours I hate to lead, back-to-back Beers, Brawls and Brothels in downtown Skagway is my least favorite. I prefer getting out of town to show our clients waterfalls and emerald-green lakes, to visit sled dogs and reindeer farms. I hate two- and three-hour cruise ship day tours. The tips are shit, and the people are all in vacation mode to the max, which means keeping their attention can be challenging. Not to mention, many of them are all in their twilight years and are prone to wandering off instead of staying close to me. God help me if I misplace one of them or—God forbid—they miss embarkation; the cruise companies will stop using us for tours, and we can’t afford to lose that income stream.

“Can’t you do it, Park?”

“Fat chance. I’m taking two couples for an overnight up the Chilkoot Trail as soon as we get back home.”

“I’ll do it! I love a hike and an overnight!”

“Forget it. The Jeep’s already packed, and the couples are finishing breakfast as we speak. Not to mention, you’re sorely in need of a shower, Harp.” She wrinkles her nose. “Is that Eau de Puke?”

“Shut up, Parker.”

She cackles with glee.

“Can’t Dad do cruises today?” I whine.

“Nope. Dad’s rebuilding the pen in the barn for Trinity and Neo.”

“I guess the goats take precedence over his own daughter’s health and happiness,” I grouse, taking my sunglasses out of my bag and plunking them on my face.

“A hangover doesn’t get you out of work, and you know it,” Parker says. “Suck it up, buttercup.”

“Shut up, Parker,” I tell her again, slinking down in my seat and closing my eyes.

My stomach immediately protests the change in my posture, roiling like the sea during a summer storm. I sit up straight, rolling down the window for some fresh air. With twenty more minutes until we’re home and most of it on a bumpy dirt road, I’ll be lucky if I don’t yack again.

To distract myself, I try to figure out how the hell I woke up in Joe’s bed.

The last thing I remember, I was sitting in the biergarten in front of the Happy Ending Saloon with my brother, Wyatt, Layla, and Joe. We were drinking margaritas, and I was throwing them back extra fast because I felt awkward about Joe’s and my conversation at the beach and about sitting across from him at the biergarten table. There was music and food—I know I ate cheese fries at some point—but mostly there was alcohol. Pitcher after pitcher. Glass after glass.

Digging deep, I find a faint memory of dancing to country music (though I can’t remember with whom) and a barely-there recollection of shouting at Hunter.

And then? Nothing...

...until I woke up in Joe’s bed wearing his T-shirt.

God only knows what I said and did while I was blackout drunk.

Ugh. What a mess.

I owe Hunter an apology for sure. Maybe Wyatt and Layla, too. But Lord only knows who else. I tend to get mouthy when I’m drunk, and I’ve been known to hurt feelings.

I wonder what I said to Joe. I grimace as the possibilities slide through my mind.

By way of comeuppance, Joe's words from this morning streak through my head: I'm not so hard up that I have to take advantage of comatose women.

Hanging my head out the car window, I frown at my reflection in the side mirror, wondering what he meant by that. Was it in response to something I said last night? Or was there actual truth to it? And if Joe's not hard up, who's he getting done by?

Though I shouldn't, I quietly and unobtrusively keep tabs on Joe's dating life and have since the day I moved home. As far as I know, he's not dating anyone—that is, he's not going out to dinner or out to drinks with anyone consistently. I'm almost positive there's no one serious in his life.

But could he be sleeping with someone?

Like everyone else in Skagway, I've heard the rumors about Joe and Avery Wells, but I've pretty much dismissed them. She's not Joe's type. Red-headed, skinny to the point of bony, and at least ten years older than Joe, I can't believe he'd be into her. She's not his type at all.

But then again, I think, maybe old, bony, and ginger starts to look pretty good when your once-upon-a-time girlfriend treats you like shit for five straight years. If he is with Avery, you've got no one to blame but yourself, Harper.

I suck in a breath through my teeth, the way I would if I fell on jagged gravel and skinned my knees and palms. The idea of Joe sleeping with Avery hurts. And it's a sharp fucking hurt.

I rub the place over my heart, reminding myself that there's no way for me and Joe to be together. It doesn't matter if he's fucking Avery. It doesn't matter if he's fucking the whole town of Skagway. My jealousy has no place and no point because he can't be with me.

Why?

Because if we were ever to get back together again, I'd have to tell him the truth about what I did. And if he knew, he'd hate me forever. He'd never forgive me, and he'd certainly never be able to love me again. That is such an absolute fact, I know it in the marrow of my bones. A lie of omission is still a lie, after all, and what I hid from Joe would make me the ultimate villain in the story of his life. There's no coming back from what I did, and there's no way to make amends. The best thing I can do for Joe is stay away from him and keep the secret until we're both dead.

"Harper, you okay?"

"Mm-hm," I mumble, using the sleeve of my fleece pullover to swipe away a sudden deluge of self-pitying tears.

"You're not," she says, her voice concerned. "You never cry. What's going on?"

It's a lonely thing to carry around a secret so dark and so big that you can't share it with anyone. No one in my family knows what happened. No one knows what I did. There is only one person on earth who knows. She lives far away in Oregon, and I avoid seeing her because it hurts too much. Memories of what happened are too sharp when we're together.

"Harp? Talk to me."

"I miss Mama," I say. This isn't a lie, really. I do miss my mother. Sometimes I wonder if my mother had been alive all those years ago, if she'd have offered different advice and if her advice would have led to me making a different choice.

"Aw, shoot," says Parker, who was six when Mama died, and has very few clear memories of her. She places her hand on my knee and squeezes lightly. "I'm sorry, hun. Anything I can do?"

I sniffle. "Nope."

"Maybe you could talk to Dad? Or Gran?" she suggests.

I wish I could, but neither my father nor my grandmother knows what happened, and I'll die before telling them. They wouldn't hate me like Joe would, but their disappointment in me and my choices would be almost as unbearable.

“Or! Hey! What about Aunt Charlotte? Maybe you need a weekend in Oregon with our favorite aunt?”

I’m glad I have sunglasses on, so Parker can’t see me wince in pain. She doesn’t mean to make things worse, but inadvertently, that’s exactly what she’s doing.

“N-No. I’ll be okay,” I manage to say, swallowing over the lump in my throat.

As we turn into our driveway, Parker parks the Jeep and turns to me.

“I love you, Harp. You know that, right? You’ve been the best older sister-slash-mama that any little sister could ever wish for.”

Her use of the word “mama” hits me so hard, it takes every ounce of strength in my hungover body not to turn into a puddle of tears on the spot. Somehow, I muster the last dregs of my strength and turn to her.

“Thanks for that, Park. I love you, too.”

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Joe

“Why’d you skip my party?”

Like I need the Alutiiq Inquisition first thing in the morning.

“I didn’t skip it,” I tell Sandra, cradling the phone between my shoulder and ear as I open the police station door and step inside. “I got sidetracked.”

“With Harper-fucking-Stewart,” she says.

“Please don’t call her that,” I say. “But as long as we’re on the subject, who’s been talking behind my back?”

“Layla Antonov.”

Damn it. Of course. Layla and Wyatt were headed to Sandra’s place yesterday when they left the biergarten.

“Who knew Layla was such a giant gossip?” I ask, grabbing my messages out of Vera’s hand on the way back to



my office.

“Why are you hanging around with her?”

“Layla?”

“Harper, shithead.”

“Not that I owe you an explanation, but I wasn’t. I was sitting with Layla and Wyatt having drinks. Hunter came over and sat with us. Harper came over looking for her brother, and sat down, too.”

“Why didn’t you get up and leave, huh?”

Because I didn’t fucking want to. For the first time in years, I was actually spending time with Harper Stewart. No way in hell I was giving that up for a BBQ at my cousin’s house. Sorry, not sorry.

“Would’ve been rude.”

“Layla said you were three sheets to the wind.”

“Yep. I was,” I say, thinking that Layla Antonov has a big fucking mouth, and the next time I catch her speeding down Main Street, she’s getting a ticket instead of another warning. “But I didn’t break our rule. I wasn’t alone. I was with—”

“Alone would’ve been better than Harper-fucking-Stewart!” Sandra bellows.

“I was gonna say, ‘half the town.’”

“I’m disappointed in you, Joe.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“That’s too bad. I just got to work, Sandra. I gotta go.”

“Well! Don’t come crying to me when—”

I hang up on my cousin before she can finish yelling at me. I’m not in the mood to be chastised today. Aside from a hangover on par with Harper’s, I’m weirdly happy, super anxious, and very fucking confused. In twenty-four hours, I went from not talking to Harper in ten years, to spending most of yesterday with her.

And that ain't all, I remind myself. She's coming over tonight.

Is it wrong that I'm so excited about seeing her again so soon? Is it wrong that—on some level—I'm thinking of tonight like a date?

Yes, Joe, I tell myself. It's wrong because it's not a fucking date. She just wants to know what happened last night.

“Morning, boss,” says Aaron Adams, one of my deputies, who appears in my doorway with two mugs of coffee in his huge, mitt-like hands. “Wondering if you're ready for the rundown? From yesterday?”

I wave Aaron into my office and gesture to the chair in front of my desk.

“Yes, I am. Especially if one of those coffees is for me.”

“Sure is, boss.”

I take a big gulp and sit back in my chair. “Your first big holiday solo. How'd it go?”

“Not bad,” he says, flipping open a notepad. Aaron is a recent graduate from the police academy in Sitka. He's twenty-one years old, eager to learn, and enthusiastic about being mentored. “We had four reports of public intoxication.”

“To be expected,” I say. “Anyone get overly rowdy?”

“No, sir. Only took warnings to calm things down.”

“Good job. What else?”

“Um...a grandfather doing a shore excursion got separated from his family at one of the parades.”

“Got him reunited with his people?”

“Yessir,” says Aaron, flipping through his notes. “Let's see...um, lost camera. Lost purse.”

“Either found?”

“No, sir.”

“Too bad.” I shrug. “What else?”

“Report of an unconscious person at the Purple Parsnip.”

“Huh. Okay. That’s serious. Were they breathing?”

“I headed over to check things out. He was breathing, but it was shallow and ragged, sir.”

“You called the fire department?”

Aaron nods. “They sent that new EMT-in-training. Reeve something-or-other.”

“Only one Reeve I know in Skagway. Reeve Stewart.”

His cheeks color. “That’s the one.”

“She’s seventeen, Deputy,” I remind him with a stern look.

“Yessir.”

“Seventeen, Aaron.”

“I know that, sir. I’d never—”

“There’s only a handful of years between you two, but don’t be looking her way until she clears eighteen, understand?”

“Yessir. Again, I’d never—”

“I trust you. Back to the news.”

“Reeve—that is, Miss Stewart—gave him a shot and got him breathing regularly again. Then she took him by ambulance to the clinic.”

“Good job, Reeve,” I say, impressed that the kid I knew as a baby is now helping to save lives. “Any idea what happened to him?”

“I followed up at the clinic later, and they said it was anaphylaxis. Likely from a food allergy.”

“Gotcha. Anything else?”

“Fireworks set off in a garbage can behind the brewery scared the pants off some tourists...and three bears reported on the road to Dyea. Mama and two youngsters.”

“That it?”

“Yessir.”

“Not too bad. All handled? Anything you need me to follow up on?”

Aaron takes a sip of his coffee while reviewing his notes. “I don’t think so.”

“Wait a sec. Is that the second or third report of bears on the road to Dyea?”

“Um. Third, I think.”

“Hmm. I don’t love that. Put in a call to the Game Commission regional office for me, huh? I think they should be in the loop.” Especially since Harper and her family are driving back and forth on that road every day.

“You got it, sir. Anything else?” asks Aaron, standing up and pushing his chair back under the lip of my desk.

“That’ll do,” I tell him with a smile and a nod. “Good work, Aaron.”

“Thanks, boss,” he says, heading back to his desk.

I lift my coffee to my lips, not ready to get to work yet. I turn around in my chair, looking out my office window and thinking about yesterday.

While Harper was pretty drunk, she doesn’t have a lot to regret. She drank a lot and danced some, and yeah, she got sloppier and clingier as the afternoon progressed, but I didn’t mind looking after her. Her biggest dust-up was with her brother—they got into it as Hunter headed back to Dyea around six, and Harper insisted that she wanted to stay in town. To keep their conversation from blowing up into a shouting match, I intervened, promising Hunter that I’d get her home safely, and after that, he took off in a snit.

Then, Harper and I shared one more pitcher of margies and she danced a little more before telling me she didn’t feel so good. I was too lit to drive her home, and since I live in town, I decided that taking her to my house to sober up would be best. She threw up twice on the walk back and again on my deck once we got there. Her clothes were covered in puke

when I put them in the washer, and I had to get out the hose to clean off the deck.

She talked non-stop on the walk home, but she didn't say much that made sense, honestly. A bunch of gibberish about regrets and consequences and how much she wished that things had "turned out different for everyone." Even now, my heart wants to believe that bit was about us—about how we lost each other once upon a time—but I warn myself not to hope too much. Not yet, anyway.

I finish my coffee thinking about my favorite part of the night.

While Harper was going on about regrets and tossing her cookies on Main Street, she was also holding my hand.

For the first time in a decade, my girl was holding my hand.

And damn, but that makes me smile.

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The day moves slow as molasses, but coffee and water help and my hangover clears up little by little until I'm feeling pretty good by the time I head home at six. I take a forty-five-minute evening run, then shower and change into shorts and a polo shirt, my feet bare as I make homemade limeade in the kitchen. It's her favorite. I remember.

By the time Harper drives up, I'm sitting out on my deck with the pitcher of limeade, a bucket of ice, and two glasses on the side table between two Adirondack chairs. I hope it doesn't look too much like a date. It's just refreshments. I tell myself I'd do the same for anyone stopping by for a chat.

(Yeah, right.)

She gets out of her Jeep wearing her work clothes—khaki shorts and an aqua polo—and hops up the deck stairs like she wasn't rocking a killer hangover twelve hours ago.

"Hey," she says, pushing her sunglasses on top of her head.

"Hey," I say. "Thirsty?"

She looks dubious. “Any liquor in that?”

“No way.”

“Then, yes, please,” she says, sitting down.

I place three cubes in a glass and pour the juice, handing it to her. She takes a big sip, then turns to me with a giant smile. “Limeade!”

I nod, my own grin meeting hers.

“Oh my god, Joe! This is the taste of summer.” She takes another big sip. “I used to have dreams about your limeade.”

“Not my body?” I quip, but it lands flat when she gives me a look. I pour myself a glass, too. It is good. Tart and sweet, just like her.

“So,” she says, sitting back in her chair and looking at me askance. “Tell me the bad news. Who needs an apology from me besides you?”

“I don’t need an apology,” I tell her.

“I puked on you. You had to wash my clothes. You slept on the couch.” She tilts her head to the side, her eyes worried. “I didn’t...say anything awful to you, did I?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I get mean when I drink sometimes.”

“Nah,” I tell her. “You went on and on about lies and regrets. It didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me, Harp.” I take a deep breath. “But you’re going to want to give Hunter a wide berth for a day or two.”

“He had to take my Whitehorse tour,” she says dryly. “So, that’s not an issue...for now.”

“You were screaming at him to leave you alone and stop being your babysitter. Said something about already having a father and Hunter being a piss-poor substitute for your mother.”

“I mentioned Mama?” She winces. “Shit.”

“I promised I’d get you home safe, so he left you with me, but he was definitely in a huff.”

“God, I’m the worst,” she laments.

“Nah. You’re siblings. Hunter loves you. He’ll forgive you.” I snort. “Eventually.”

“What else?” she asks, her cheeks coloring.

“I think that’s about it,” I tell her.

“No, it’s not, Joe.”

“What do you mean?”

She clears her throat, staring at her glass of limeade, tracing beads of condensation with her fingertip.

“I woke up in my underwear and your T-shirt.”

“Oh,” I say. “That.”

She looks up. “Yeah. That.”

“You were—”

“Covered in vomit. I know. How’d I get changed, Joe?”

I toy with the idea of teasing her, then think better of it.

“It was totally innocent. I walked you into the bathroom, then left and told you to hand me your dirty clothes through the door. You gave them to me, and I passed you a clean T-shirt. When you came out of the bathroom, you were wearing it.”

She cocks her head to the side. “That’s it? You’re not leaving anything out?”

“Um. Well, actually, yes. I should add...you still have great stems.”

Her lips wobble like she wants to grin, but looks down instead. “Anything else?”

“You danced with a bunch of folks before we left the Happy Ending, but that was harmless. Everyone’s in high spirits on the Fourth. You puked a lot, but that doesn’t matter. And yeah, you owe Hunter an apology. I think that’s it.”

She leans up and stares at me, her eyes wide and her expression thoughtful. “Joe, this recap took all of five minutes. Why couldn’t you just tell me this morning?”

I stare back at her. I have nothing to hide.

“Spending time with you yesterday meant a lot to me. I wanted to see you again. I saw an opportunity and went for it.”

“Joe, we already talked about this,” she says, referring to our conversation at the beach yesterday. She takes a deep breath and lets it go slowly. “It’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t know each other anymore,” she says. Then adds, “You don’t know me.”

“I know you enough,” I tell her, some urgency entering my tone. I feel like this could be my only chance to get through to her, and I’ve got to make it count. “I know you well enough to know I never got over you. I’m thirty years old, Harper. I didn’t see you for five years and barely spoke to you for another five. If I’m not over you yet, I’m never going to be. I just want—”

“Stop,” she says, but she doesn’t get up to leave, which encourages me to ask a question that’s been torturing me.

“Is there someone else?” I ask, holding my breath. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“Would it matter?”

“Yeah,” I say. “It would. To me.”

“No,” she says. “There’s no one else.” She looks at me, her eyes slightly narrowed. “How about you? Are you with anyone?”

I look down at my glass, taking a sip of limeade so I can think for a second. Do I owe her an explanation about Avery? It only takes a second for me to decide that I don’t. What Avery and I have doesn’t mean anything, which means it doesn’t matter.



“Am I with anyone?” I shake my head as I put my glass down. “No.”

She looks suspicious at first, then relieved, which makes me happy because it means she cares. But almost immediately, her expression hardens again, whisking away any emotion that softened it.

“It wouldn’t work,” she tells me through clenched teeth. “It’s too late. Believe me.”

“What does that even mean?” I demand. “Why is it too late? What happened?”

“You’d hate me,” she whispers, sliding to the edge of her seat and standing up. “I have to go.”

“Wait! What? I could never hate you, Harper! I still love you. I’ve always loved you. Just, please, give us a second chance.” I lean forward in my chair, clasping my hands together as though in prayer.

“I can’t.” She places her glass on the table. “I promise you, Joe, you don’t want to be with me.”

“Don’t tell me what I fucking want,” I growl at her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, turning away from me. “I really am. I should leave.”

“Then leave,” I tell her, disappointment and frustration making my tone rough. “That’s what you’re good at, Harper. Leaving.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers again.

Then, she walks down the stairs of the deck and drives away, leaving me angry, confused, and alone.

# Ten Years Ago

Harper

“Harper, come on! Can’t you rally?”

“I think I caught a stomach bug,” I tell my roommate Chloe.

She’s standing in our shared dorm room, checking herself out in the full-length mirror. Dressed as a sexy kitty, complete with whiskers, furry ears, a black bodysuit, black tights, and a tail, she’s ready for Halloween. Meanwhile, my cat costume is still hanging in my closet. I’m lying in bed, trying to ignore the waves of nausea threatening to make me puke for the third time this evening. “I feel like shit.”

“Aw. Sorry, boo.” She adjusts her ears, then catches my eyes in her reflection. “Do you mind if I go without you? I feel bad leaving you sick and solo, but it’s our last UDub Halloween!”

“You go,” I groan. “Have fun.”

“I have to get tampons at Rite Aid on the way home,” she says. “Can I bring you back anything? Tums? Mouthwash?”

“Maybe a ginger ale?” I ask, hugging my pillow to my chest and closing my eyes.

“You got it,” she says, grabbing her black clutch and heading out. “Bye!”

“Bye,” I mutter, trying to breathe through another wave of nausea. It doesn’t work. I barely make it to the bathroom before I’m puking yellow bile into the toilet. There’s nothing left in my stomach. Gross.

Sitting down on the cold tile floor, I wipe my mouth with the dregs of toilet paper left on the roll. Opening the cabinet under the sink, I grab a new roll, spying my own tampons—a full, unused box—in the back corner.

Wait a second.

A full, unused box?

That means...I never got my period in October.

A chill slides down my back as I try to remember if I got it in September, but I already know the answer. That box in the back of the cabinet came with me from home at the beginning of September. It was unopened then. And it's still unopened now. I haven't gotten my period since returning to Seattle.

Holding the toilet paper roll in my hands, I sit next to the porcelain bowl, frozen with terror.

"You don't have a stomach bug," I whisper aloud. "You're..."

...pregnant.

I flush the toilet, leap up, and run back to bed, throwing the covers over my head. My brain's a scrambled mess, my heart is racing so fast I can hear it pounding in my ears, and my breathing is shallow and choppy.

You're not sick. You're pregnant. You're fucking pregnant.

When was the last time I had sex?

Not here...

Not at school...

At home. With Joe. The night before I left.

When was that? What was the date?

I crawl out of my bed and grab my phone off my desk, tapping on the calendar app. I scroll back to September, looking for the exact date I left for school—September 4<sup>th</sup>... which means Joe and I had sex on September 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god.

I'm eight weeks pregnant.

I'm eight fucking weeks pregnant.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Without thinking, I dial Joe's number.

“Harp?”

Wherever he is, it’s loud. Super loud. I can barely hear him over the din of music and people.

“Joe! I need to talk to you!”

“Happy Halloween!” he yells. “I’m at a party!”

He’s at a party...as he should be. As I should be.

“Happy Halloween...Joe, can you hear me?”

“Harp? I can barely hear you!” People yell, Chug, chug, chug! in the background, followed by a roar of approval. Joe chuckles. “It’s nuts here!”

“Joe, can you go somewhere quiet? I have to talk to you!”

“Can I call you back? It’s really noisy!”

I clench my teeth, breathing through another wave of nausea.

I’m fucking pregnant, I want to yell to my partying, twenty-year-old, college boyfriend. I’m pregnant with your baby! Help, Joe! Help!

“I’ll call you back, babe!” he promises. “I’ll call you back in a few!”

The line goes dead.

I race to the bathroom, vomiting more yellow bile into the bowl, then dry heaving again and again until every muscle in my abdomen aches. By the time I sit down on the bathroom floor with my forehead resting on the toilet seat, I’ve missed a call from Joe.

I can’t have a baby.

I can’t! I can’t!

The thought hammers in my head as I reach up weakly to flush.

Despite how achy and sluggish my body feels, my mind is sharp, racing with increasing panic; with this fast-spreading, breath-catching, all-encompassing dread.

I'm only twenty years old.

I'm too young.

I'm not ready.

The tears slide down my cheeks in twin rivers, and I let them fall.

I can't be someone's mom.

I have no one to help me.

I have no one to teach me how.

"M-Mama," I sob, feeling more alone than I ever have in my entire life. "I m-miss you, Mama. I n-need you."

I'm so frightened.

I feel so alone.

My phone rings again, and Joe's handsome face fills the screen. I turn off the ringer and flip the phone over as more tears fill my eyes.

Joe. Oh my god. Joe.

I love him. I love him so much.

But I can't have his baby.

Not now. Not yet.

I place my palm over my abdomen. It's still flat. Totally flat.

How can there be a baby in there?

How did this happen?

Sitting up against the bathroom wall, I remember back to our last night together. We spent the evening on our favorite little spit of sand at the north end of Lower Dewey, where we'd made love for the very first time after graduation.

Our relationship had taken a little hit when I suggested we break up three years earlier, but the solution we'd settled on before leaving for freshman year was that our relationship would be "open"—in a don't-ask-don't-tell style—while we were at school. If we wanted to date someone or make out

with someone, we could. But then, whenever we were home, as long as we still wanted to be with each other, we'd be a couple again.

This last summer? The one between junior and senior years? It was our best. We were growing up, me and Joe. We were maturing. Timing that once felt off to me was getting better. What we wanted out of life was aligning. I was getting more ready to commit to Joe for life, and he'd relaxed his white-knuckled grip on our future.

Joe had already gotten into several law schools in Washington and Oregon, and while he wasn't sure if he wanted to become a lawyer or figure out another way to build a life in law enforcement, he was happy that he'd gotten in. And I was well on the way to earning my degree in business, which I planned to apply to a career in travel and tourism before returning home to Skagway someday.

After this last summer, we'd decided to "close the door" on our once "open door" relationship and return to our respective schools in a fully committed, monogamous relationship with each other. I could finally see me and Joe maybe moving in together after college graduation, and Joe's once-meager list of places he wanted to visit around the world was getting longer. After a few years of traveling and working together, I could even see us getting engaged. When I told Joe that, he'd lifted me into his arms, laughing with happiness and kissing me until I was breathless.

He'd made us a campfire that last night, and we'd roasted hot dogs, then toasted marshmallows. When we'd made love, our cries had echoed over the surface of the lake like the hundreds of stones I'd skipped on that glassy water over the years. The condom we'd used had broken, and Joe had started to freak out, but I said I'd grab Plan B on my way to the airport in the morning.

Except I hadn't grabbed it.

In the rush of packing and saying goodbye to my family, I'd forgotten.

I'd forgotten.

This pregnancy is my fault.

My phone rattles on the bathroom floor, and I refuse the call, opening up a text chat with Joe instead.

Be normal, Harper. You have to be normal for him.

Harper

hey, babe. just wanted to say  
happy halloween. miss you.

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Joe

Phew. Got worried when you  
didn't pick up. All good there?

\*\*\*

Harper

yep. all good. have a fun night!

\*\*\*

Joe

Love you, Harp. Happy  
Halloween, sexy kitty! See you at  
Thanksgiving.

I clench my teeth together. My cheeks are soaked from my tears. My skin is burning from the salt. My chest aches so painfully, I can barely breathe.

All Joe's ever wanted is to get married and start a family with me.

But that's always been a "someday" plan, I tell myself, not a "now" plan. He's at a Halloween frat party right now, drinking and dancing and having fun...which is exactly where I wish I was, too. We're in college. We're still kids. We're not ready to be parents.

Harper

love you too. see you soon. xo

I lift my chin and dry my tears.

I know what I need to do.

More bile gurgles up at the back of my throat, and I spit it into the toilet, flushing again. Still sitting on the bathroom floor, barely able to read my phone screen from the tears flooding my eyes, I open up an internet session and type “Planned Parenthood” into the search bar.

I book the first available appointment, then stand up on shaking legs.

I pray to God that Joe never ever finds out.

If he does, it’ll surely be the end of us.



# Chapter 4

Harper

With Tanner and McKenna taking honeymooners up to Whitehorse this weekend, I'm stuck with another four days of local tours in Skagway.

Once I apologized to Hunter for being such an asshole on the fourth and groveled for him to swap tours with me, he finally agreed to do Beers, Brawls and Brothels, leaving me to lead our local bike tour instead. Now, Bears and Bikes isn't quite as scintillating for me as trips up north to the Yukon, but I'll take it any day over staying in town to talk about whorehouses and Gold Rush thugs.

Today, I have a group of eight cruisers meeting me at a local e-bike rental shop at nine o'clock. After they've been outfitted in helmets, I'll give them a quick lesson on how to use an electric bike, and then we'll be off. Our three-hour itinerary includes a visit to the historic Gold Rush Cemetery, a short hike to Lower Reid Falls, and views of Skagway from the Dyea Road overlook. I'm actually looking forward to it.

"Hey, Harper Stewart!"

"Hey, Mr. Morgan," I say, waving to the bike shop owner. His wiseass, troublemaking son, Quinn, is Sawyer's best friend.

"You're early."

"Yeah," I agree. "I haven't done the Bears and Bikes tour in a while. Wanted to sit for a few minutes and go over the map."

"Fair enough. How many you got today?"

"Eight confirmed," I tell him. "A twelve-year-old, a sixteen-year-old, and the rest are adults."

"I'll get the waivers for the juniors," he says. "Want to come in for a cup of coffee?"

“No, thanks,” I say, sitting in the rocking chair outside the shop door. I open up a well-worn map. “Already had some. Don’t want to get jittery.”

I review the route we take for this tour, reminding myself that no matter how fast I want to go, I’ll have to keep a slow and steady pace, especially for the twelve-year-old. I just pray he or she is a decent athlete and not a brat like the Martin kid.

After a quick, and mostly unnecessary, review, I fold up the map, lean back in the chair, and bask in the morning sun like a frog on a log.

“Morning, Harper.”

I shield my eyes and look up to find Joe Raven standing in front of me. Almost impossibly handsome in his uniform—black pants, black shirt, black vest, wide-brimmed hat—the sight of him makes my stomach flutter.

Shut up, stupid stomach!

“Hey, Joe.”

“Leading a tour?”

“Yep.”

He grins at me. “How come you’re on Bikes and Bears today?”

“Bears and Bikes,” I correct him. “Because Tanner and McKenna are taking honeymooners up north.”

“Tanner, huh? Unusual for him to do the Yukon run.”

I shrug. “Dad thought it would be fun, I guess. You know, a couple of tour guides taking a couple of honeymooners to Whitehorse. More romantic or something.”

“So you’re stuck in town all weekend, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Lucky me.”

I take a deep breath and let it go with a huff, shaking my head at him. “You don’t quit.”

“I’m never going to,” he informs me, his voice steady and even.

“I guess I’ll have to move,” I threaten.

“No, you won’t,” he says easily. “You love your family too much to leave.”

True enough. “I guess I’ll just have to go back to ignoring you.”

His eyes narrow just a touch. “You promised you’d be civil.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“You really want me to leave you alone?” he asks.

No. I mean, it’s risky as hell to be kinda-sorta hanging out with Joe again, but the day will never come when I want less of Joe in my life and that’s the truth. Just being around him over the last few days has made me feel...different. Less alone. More myself.

But you can’t be together...you can never be together.

I grimace. “It’d be better if you did.”

“Still don’t understand why.” He cocks his head to the side. “How about this...you come on a date with me tonight. Proper. I’ll pick you up. We’ll have drinks, go out to dinner, maybe go dancing. The whole nine yards—”

“No.”

“Hold on, now. You haven’t heard the rest yet.”

“So, get to the point.”

“If you have a terrible time, you can break your promise to be civil to me and go back to ignoring me. I’ll be totally out of your hair.”

“Okay. But what if I have a good time?”

“Then you hang out with me from time to time. No biggie. No commitment. You just let me back into your life a little bit.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” he asks.

Because I know I’ll have a good time. In fact, I’ll have a great time. I’ll have the best time I’ve had in years.

He grins. “You’re scared you’ll have a good time, aren’t you?”

Damn him for still knowing me so well. And damn him for having the most infectious smile ever.

“Fine,” I say, trying unsuccessfully not to smile back at him. “I’ll go out with you. But I’m not going to have fun.”

He chuckles, preening a little, pleased with himself. “Whatever you say, Harp.”

“Pick me up at six.”

“Works for me.”

He reaches up to touch the brim of his hat, then winks at me as he walks away. My stomach flutters again, and this time, I don’t have the heart to tell it to shut up.

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I wrestle with myself all afternoon.

I know I should cancel on Joe, but the truth is that I am stuck in Skagway this weekend, and besides, I already said yes. That said, I don’t have to dress up or wear makeup. I don’t have to look especially nice. That wasn’t part of the deal.

I do the bare minimum to get ready: take a quick shower, pull my hair up into a messy bun, and throw on some cutoff jean shorts that don’t smell too ripe. Checking out my T-shirt drawer, I realize that laundry hasn’t been a priority lately. I’m down to two choices unless I want to get fancier and wear a blouse...and I’m definitely not getting fancier for Joe.

One T-shirt is a bright aqua and reads, “Juneau how to get to Alaska?” with a smiling humpback whale pointing north.

The other, in heather gray, sports a team of sled dogs rearing to race, and the words, “There’s no place like Nome. Iditarod, 2016.”

I choose the Nome shirt, mostly because the color doesn't hurt my eyes, but also because it's a V-neck and shows just a touch of cleavage at the tip of the V. I'm wearing old shorts, my hair's messy, and I skipped makeup—with that winning combination distracting him, he's not going to notice my boobs, right? Right.

I pull on wool socks and boots—you never know where a night in Skagway can take you—and grab my purse and a navy-blue windbreaker from the hook by the door just as I hear Joe's SUV pull up outside my cabin. If I'm going to do this, I'd like to do it without my whole family looking on, and since they're all at dinner in the lodge right now, I'd best hustle.

I clomp down the front steps and jump in the car before Joe can even cut the engine. Slamming my door shut, I grab the seat belt and buckle it. Taking a quick peek through the windshield, I sigh with relief because no one appears to be watching.

Only then, I look over at Joe.

Oh, my heart.

He's grinning at me like I look put together and beautiful, not messy and rushed. And in his eyes, there's such a deep well of tenderness, of admiration, of pure love, it's a wonder I don't dissolve into a puddle of tears on the spot. It hurts to look at him. I swear it does.

"Ready to go?" I mumble, opening my purse to look for lip balm.

"You look great," he says softly.

"I'm in old shorts, a cheesy T-shirt, and hiking boots," I deadpan, looking up at him as I swipe on some ChapStick.

"That may be true, Harp," he says, letting his gaze drop for a millisecond. When he looks back up, his eyes are almost black. "But that cheesy T-shirt makes your tits look fucking amazing."

Forget the tears.

It's a wonder I don't burst into flames.

As he shifts into reverse and backs away from my cabin, I'm reminded of something I've always loved about Joe Raven. When he says something like that...something hot, or suggestive, or even borderline inappropriate? He doesn't apologize. Never has. He owns his words—he means them. It's such a turn-on.

“Where are we headed?” I ask as we turn onto the old Dyea Road.

“Little town nearby called Skagway. You may have heard of it.”

“And which of the many fine dining establishments in Skagway will we be frequenting, wiseass?”

“You'll have to wait and see.”

“Really? You're not going to tell me?”

“Really.” He nods. “I'm not going to tell you.”

“There are, like, ten places in town to eat dinner. I bet I could figure it out.”

“I bet you couldn't.” He grins at me, eyebrows raised, challenge issued.

“The Parsnip.”

“No.”

“SBC.”

“Nope.”

“Olivia's. The Sittin' Sasquatch. Bombay.”

“No, no, and no.” He glances at me. “Do you even like Indian food? Didn't used to.”

“Curry still gives me heartburn.”

“So why would I take you there?”

“Maybe you're missing the silent treatment?” I joke.

“Absolutely not,” he says, adding softly, “I hated it, Harp.”

It twists my heart to hear him say this, but I don't comfort him. I can't. I'm far enough out on a limb just sitting next to him.

He sighs. "I still don't understand why you felt like you had to cut off contact between us."

"And I still don't feel like talking about it."

"I been thinking about it a lot, and I was wondering..." he says. "Can I take a guess?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"One guess. If I'm wrong, I won't bring it up again tonight."

Inside of me—deep inside—there's a desperate longing to tell Joe the truth. I don't like carrying around the secret of what I did. I don't like keeping it from him. Even though I didn't tell him at the time, I still lost him. Sometimes I think it would be a relief to come clean. Though it's a one-in-a-billion chance and pure fantasy, maybe, just maybe, he'd figure out a way to love me anyway.

"One guess," I whisper, my heart racing.

The Dyea Road turns from dirt and dust to pavement, signaling that we're getting closer to Skagway.

"Remember that afternoon by the Lower Dewey? After we graduated? When you suggested we break up?" he asks.

"I remember."

"So, you said we should break up, and when I asked if you were going to have sex with other guys, you said something about how you couldn't imagine having sex with anyone else. You just wanted to be free."

"We were so young, Joe. I wanted that freedom for both of us."

"Yeah. That's what you said at the time. But in fairness, I never wanted to be free of you, Harp."

"Keep going," I tell him.

“I’ve thought about that a lot over the years...you wanting to be, you know, free.” He gulps softly. “If you include the first two years of college when our relationship was ‘open,’ and the ten after, it was twelve years total, Harp. Twelve years of freedom.”

Where is he going with this? I’m following his words, but I haven’t figured out his “guess” yet.

“So, anyway...I want you to know,” he says, his voice a little choked, like what he’s saying aches a little. “You didn’t owe me anything during that time. Not your loyalty. Not your fidelity. Nothing. You were free...to do whatever you wanted, whatever you felt you needed to do.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to know that it doesn’t matter what you did or with whom. Or what the—you know, what the number is. It doesn’t matter to me. You were young and needed your space. I don’t know how many guys—or girls, for that matter—you, um, you slept with, but it’s fine. It’s okay. It’s in the past. I don’t want those people to stand between us now. You didn’t owe me anything during those years. And I wouldn’t think poorly of you if you’d—you know, um, experimented...sowed some wild oats.”

It’s starting to come into focus now. I get it. I know where he’s going with this. And he’s so wildly off-base, I half-snort, half-cackle.

“Are you laughing at me? Don’t be a jerk, Harp. I’m being real here.”

“Joe,” I say, twisting my body to face him as best I can in the car seat. “You think I stayed away from Skagway for five years and didn’t talk to you for another five because I was... sleeping around? And, apparently, ashamed of it?”

“Um...well...maybe? I mean, we were each other’s first, right? Maybe you’re uncomfortable that you were with other people besides me? Especially if there were a lot of people. And—and maybe that makes it hard for you to be around me? I don’t know, Harper. I’m just grasping at straws.”



“And those straws suggested to you that I went whoring around the world for five years and couldn’t look you in the eye afterward?”

“I don’t know,” he says, good and sheepish now. “Maybe not, I guess.”

“Did you go whoring around the world over the last decade?”

“No. I was here.”

“Did you go whoring around Skagway?” I ask, Avery Wells’s name slipping through my mind even though Joe reassured me that he wasn’t with anyone.

“No,” he grunts.

“Then why would you think I did?”

“Because you were the one who wanted freedom,” he says, “while I would’ve been happy with you, and only you, for the rest of my life.”

“Joe,” I say, “you did make me happy.”

“Until I didn’t,” he mutters.

“Well, I didn’t break things off to go bang a bunch of strangers, and even if I had, I wouldn’t be so ashamed of it that I couldn’t speak to you,” I tell him. “Your guess is wrong.”

“Fair enough,” he says.

It’s quiet for a minute, both of us in our own heads until a dumb question pops out of my mouth:

“As long as we’re being real...how many people have you slept with?”

“A handful,” he says.

How many is that? Literally, one, two, three, four, or five? Or is he using the term more loosely to mean “not that many”? And how many is that? It hurts to think of him with anyone other than me. I know that’s ridiculous, but I can’t help it.

“How about you?” he asks.

“A handful,” I snipe, handing his words back to him.

He gives me a look.

I roll my eyes.

“God, you’re annoying!” I exclaim. “Fine. The number of people I’ve had sex with in my whole life—all male, by the way, not that it matters—wouldn’t even use up all my fingers. So your whole Harper-whoring-around-the-world theory is a non-starter.” I pause for a second, then add: “And just to be clear, I’m not ashamed that I had a few lovers after you.” I pause for one more second before I recklessly add, “None of them mattered, Joe. I didn’t love one of them. No one ever owned my heart like you did.”

Before I can process what’s happening, the car tires screech, and we’re pulled over, idling on the side of the road. He stares at me, scanning my face, his chest rising and falling with the force of his breathing. His eyes, as dark as night, slam into mine, and before I can say no—before I can say anything—his lips do, too—slam into mine.

I’m your girl.

You always have been.

Our attraction is too strong.

Our history is too intense.

Our love for each other is as real now as it ever was before.

We’re playing with fire, but I don’t have the strength to stop us.

\*\*\*

Joe

No one ever owned my heart like you did.

Hearing Harper say those words unlocked something inside of me.

And once it was open, I couldn’t speak, couldn’t think, could barely breathe. That I somehow got the car pulled over

safely was a miracle. After that, I acted on instinct alone. I had to kiss her. I had to—at least—try.

So much is familiar about the way Harper feels and tastes—the soft skin of her cheeks under my fingers, the sounds she makes in the back of her throat, the way she laces her fingers behind my neck.

All of it is familiar.

But all of it is new, too.

We aren't twenty anymore.

We've traveled and worked, made friends, and lost family members.

We've grown up.

Or have we? Here we are, pulled over on the side of old Dyea Road, kissing each other recklessly, just like we used to in high school.

I unbuckle my seat belt first, then reach over and release hers, although I don't know why. There's a fucking bolster between us that keeps me from getting closer to her. I want her straddling my lap, her pussy flush against my swollen cock. Even if our clothes are a barrier between us, I want her to feel what kissing her does to me.

Her tongue slides against mine, slow and soft, and I groan into her mouth. I'm going to lose my mind if we keep going. I'm going to pull her into the back seat and make love to her on the side of the road like a couple of teenagers who can't wait until they get home.

This is Harper, man.

Harper.

Slow down.

My brain gets the message through the fog of my arousal, and I open my eyes, my lips lingering on hers for an extra second before I pull away. I'm still cradling her face in my hands when she opens her eyes to look at me. They're heavy-

lidded and dilated, the way they used to look right after she orgasmed. And fuck, I remember exactly how that felt, too.

“Joe,” she whispers.

“I love you, Harp,” I tell her, leaning forward to brush her lips one last time. “Always have. Always will. That’s never going to change.”

She clenches her eyes shut for a second, and when she opens them, they’re glassy with tears. “You can’t say stuff like that to me.”

Her cheeks are rosy, and her lips are pink and swollen. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

“Why not? Whether I say it out loud or not, it’s still the truth.”

“And the truth’s important to you,” she murmurs.

“Another thing about me that’s never going to change.”

She makes a strangled sound, then tightens her jaw. When she lifts her chin to look at me, her expression is shattered. “I think you should take me home.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I’ll be damned if I let one kiss fuck up the whole night.

Fix this, Joe. Fix it now.

“Come on, Harp. It was just a kiss,” I say as lightly as I can, dropping my hands from her face and re-buckling my seat belt. It takes a lot of self-control to act like it was no big deal, but I can’t bear the thought of taking her home.

She doesn’t say anything, so I press my advantage.

“You agreed to go on a date with me, right? As far as I can tell, the date hasn’t happened yet.” I hold my breath, waiting for her to reply. When she doesn’t, I glance at her to find her eyebrows furrowed and mouth turned down. Time for the big guns. “You know, I went to the trouble of making reservations, and you’re going to—”

“Wait. What? Reservations? What are you talking about? Where do we need reservations in Skagway?”

Fine dining. It’s her Achilles’ heel, and I know it.

“You’ll see,” I say.

“If you want me to go, tell me where we’re headed, otherwise I want you to take me home.”

“You’re going to make me wreck the surprise?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Fine. The Silver Nova’s in port until nine,” I say, offering her a tentative grin. “I got special permission from the captain to bring you on board for dinner tonight.”

Her jaw drops, parting her perfect lips, and her blue eyes sparkle with excitement. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

“Holy cow! Dinner on a cruise ship?” A slow smile creeps across her face until she’s beaming back at me. Whether she realizes it or not, she reaches for her seat belt and buckles back in. “Joe!”

Harper loves gourmet food, and she loves cruise ships. Always has. Ever since we had our senior prom on board the Carnival Spirit.

I chuckle at her, delighted that she’s pleased, and relieved that the tension between us appears to be easing.

No more kissing until after dinner, I tell myself, shifting the car back into drive before she can ask to go home again.

“How’d you do it?” she asks. “How’d you get permission?”

“After you said you’d have dinner with me, I walked over to the port, introduced myself as the sheriff, asked to speak to the captain and...the rest is history.”

“Oh my god! I’m so excited!” she cries. But then she gasps. “Wait! No! We can’t go! I’m not dressed for it!”

“There’s a boutique on board the ship.”

“Joe! I can’t afford anything at a Silverseas boutique!”

“Harp,” I say, still heading for the port, “if you can’t, I can. Find something you like. Life is short.”

“You’re buying me a dress?”

I glance at her. “I may as well, since dinner’s on the house.”

“I’m not letting you buy me clothes,” she protests.

“Why not?”

“It’s too...intimate. It’s like you’re my sugar daddy or something.”

“If you ever wanted a sugar daddy, darlin’, I’d be the first in line.”

She laughs. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re beautiful,” I tell her. “Thanks for coming out with me tonight.”

“Joe...” She looks worried for a second, then offers me a small smile. “You know this is a one-time thing, right? Doesn’t matter that we kissed. Doesn’t matter if we have a nice time. I’m going to go back to my life tomorrow, and you’re going to go back to yours.”

“If you say so,” I say, turning into the parking lot at the port.

Here’s what I don’t say:

I think you’re wrong, Harper. I think tonight’s just the beginning.

The second beginning of us.

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In the end, she let me buy her a simple black dress and black heeled shoes that made her look like a supermodel, but she refused to let me get her anything else.

As we headed to the elevator, I took her hand, and when she didn’t pull it away, I held it from deck four to deck ten,

only releasing it when the maitre d' at The Marquee restaurant showed us to our table.

Over king crab and candlelight, she told me about the differences between working abroad and working for her family. And I told her about losing my uncles during the COVID-19 pandemic and how my aunt Hannah and cousin Sandra keep me honest. We really didn't run out of things to say, but the couple of times we took a breath, we found the comfortable silence we'd always shared. By the time we finished our sorbet, the dining room was filling up with passengers who'd returned to the ship after a day in Skagway, and it was time for me to take Harper home.

"I feel like I should give you this dress back," she says as we walk back to the car.

"What the heck would I do with it?"

"Maybe Avery would like to wear it?"

"I told you—"

"I know what you told me," she says. "I also know you dropped my eyes when you said it. She may not be your girlfriend, but there's more than 'nothing' between you two."

"I didn't mean to lie to you," I tell her, feeling a quick and dirty flash of guilt. "You asked if I was 'with' anyone, and I'm not. Avery and I are casual."

"I get it," she says.

"It's just a sometimes thing."

"Okay."

"Doesn't mean anything."

"Right."

I grab her hand. "Harper."

She turns around to look at me, her face bathed in the golden light of the nine o'clock sun. "What?"

"You believe me, right? That it's nothing?"

"It doesn't matter, Joe. Either way, it doesn't matter."

“It’s over with Avery,” I blurt out. “As of now.”

“Does she know that?”

“I’ll text her. She won’t really care. I told you, it’s—”

“Casual,” she says. Her expression softens. “You don’t have to text her. It’s okay, Joe. You don’t owe me anything.”

The Nova sounds her horn—a warning bellow that she’ll be leaving port soon, and suddenly I’m scared that if I drive Harper home, what she said about this being a one-time thing will come true. I don’t want to drive her home. I want tonight to last as long as possible.

“Harper.”

She looks away from the ship and back to me.

“Come home with me,” I say, putting my hands on her hips and pulling her toward me. She looks up at me with those cornflower-blue eyes, so filled with sadness, it breaks my fucking heart. What happened? What happened to you? To us?

“I can’t,” she says, but she makes no move to leave my arms.

“Please, Harp. One night.”

She leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder with a soft sigh. It’s the same sound I’d make sinking into my couch after a long hard day on the job. It’s the sound of coming home. It’s the sound of surrender.

“One night?” she asks in a whisper.

“Please,” I beg softly, resting my lips on her soft blonde hair. “Come home with me, Harper. Just for tonight.”

“Okay,” she murmurs.

I jerk away, looking down at her.

“Wait! Did you just say yes?” I ask, scanning her eyes to see if I’ve somehow dreamed her consent.

She nods. “Yeah.”

“You sure?”



“I’m sure.” Her gaze slides to my mouth, and she wets her lips with a dart of her tongue before looking back up at me. “One night, Joe. One. To get this...this—whatever this is—out of our systems. One night, and then, no more.”

Her eyes are locked with mine. She’s asking for my word. Can I give it? Can I agree to these terms?

“What do you—”

“I mean no more dates, no more walks on the beach, no more running into me on purpose,” she says, shrugging out of my arms. “Just civility. Just a polite hello if we meet by chance. Otherwise, we leave each other alone. That’s what I’m offering—one night together for a life lived apart.” She holds out her hand to me. “Deal?”

No. No deal. It’s not the deal I want. One night with her will never be enough. I want an eternity of nights with Harper Stewart. But if I say no, we’ll just go back to our separate lives anyway. At any point, she could start avoiding me all over again, and this thing we’ve shared over the last few days will be over. All of the momentum we gained will be gone.

I stare at her hand for a second, then raise my gaze to her face.

The reality is that I’m lost. There’s no way I can turn her down. There’s no way I can say no to her. I love her too much to say no. I’m going to have to take a chance that even though she says it’ll only be one night, it’ll actually be the start of many more.

I take her hand in mine.

“Deal.”

# Nine Years Ago

Harper

Curled up on the bed in my aunt's guest room, I stare at the wall.

Has it been five days? Six? A week? More? I don't know. I've lost track. I only know that I can't move...I don't want to move...I still hurt everywhere.

The door to the room opens, and I hear footsteps enter. A moment later, the mattress I'm lying on sinks a little under the weight of my aunt sitting down.

"Harper?" she says gently. "You've got to eat something, sweetheart."

Ignoring her, I curl tighter into a fetal position.

Fetal position.

The thought makes fresh tears assault my red and burning eyes.

"Harper," she says, "what you did was so selfless, so brave. She's going to have a wonderful life. I'm so proud of you, and I'm—I'm just so sorry for how it all went down. I just wish..."

I don't care what you wish.

"Talk to me, sweetheart. Please."

She places a hand on my back, and I flinch.

Don't touch me.

She draws it away.

"You're young and healthy. You're going to heal quickly. I know it."

No, you don't.

"I'm worried about you, sweetheart."

I don't care.

“I wish your mom was here.”

Me too. More than anything.

“I have to go to work, but I’ll come back during my lunch break to check on you. Is there anything I can bring you?”

No. There’s nothing you can bring me.

She sighs. “Okay. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Her footsteps cross back over to the door, which closes behind her. I close my stinging eyes and try to go back to sleep.

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It turned out that I wasn’t the sort of person who could get rid of her fetus.

Maybe I could’ve gone through with the abortion if it was only a zygote or embryo inside of me, but by the time I walked into Planned Parenthood that fateful day, she was a fetus, and she already had a heartbeat. That glorious galloping sound of her heart raced through the ultrasound doppler, filling my ears, filling that tiny, sterile room full to bursting, and my decision—resolutely one way a few days before—reversed itself in the teeny tiny spaces between her heartbeats.

I couldn’t go through with the abortion.

I couldn’t kill her when her little heart was beating as strong as mine, as strong as her father’s, as strong as all of the Stewarts and Ravens that had come before.

I left the clinic with a grainy black-and-white picture of my baby and some big decisions to make.

I was going to have a baby, yes, but did I intend to keep her?

I rented a car that afternoon and drove down the Washington coast over Veterans Day weekend to think. And when I arrived back in Seattle a few torturous days later, I had my answer: just because she had a heartbeat, and I no longer wanted an abortion, it didn’t change how I felt about being a

mother. I wasn't ready. For her sake as much as mine, I wouldn't—I couldn't—keep her.

Which meant more decisions needed to be made, the first and foremost of which was...

What about Joe?

Would I tell Joe about the baby I was having—the baby that I didn't intend to keep? Did he deserve a voice in the matter? Did he have a right to know?

Maybe he did, but the problem with telling Joe remained the same as it had been before the ultrasound; he would want this baby. I had no doubt he'd double up on classes and finish his degree early so he could get back to Skagway to raise her. I didn't think he was ready to be a father, but I knew Joe. He was stubborn. He'd convince himself he could go it, and then he'd move heaven and earth to be her father.

The problem is: he'd expect me to do the same. He'd expect me to give up everything to be her mother, and I couldn't. Aside from the fact that wasn't ready to give up my carefree twenties, or my dreams of traveling the world, I wasn't anywhere near ready to be someone's mom. I'd lost the one person who might be able to help me figure out parenthood at such a young age. Being forced into motherhood by Joe would be a recipe for disaster.

And then there was the baby, herself. What would it do to her, psychologically, to know that her mother didn't want her? Even with a loving father like Joe, it would scar her emotionally to know that her mother had rejected her, wouldn't it? I couldn't make the decision to bring her into the world only for her to experience that kind of insecurity and pain.

The best I could do for her was find her an amazing family and make sure they'd raise her with heaps of love. And that's exactly what I decided to do. I would have my baby secretly and give her up for adoption, but I'd do everything I could to be sure she had a wonderful family.

That left one big question for me to answer about the boy I loved so desperately, about the man with whom, two months ago, I'd decided to spend the rest of my life...

Was I ready to accept the consequences of taking this choice away from him?

It wasn't an ambiguous consequence either. Having our baby and giving her away meant the sum and total loss of Joe Raven from my life.

Why? Because once the adoption was final, there were only two choices for me where Joe was concerned: I could lie to him by omission every day for the rest of our lives, or I could let him go.

The agony of this decision—and the regret that would be my constant companion thereafter—was unfathomable, but I didn't really feel I had a choice. I had to let him go, both because I couldn't continue a relationship with such a big secret standing between us, and because he'd never forgive me if he ever learned the truth. Giving up his child—his daughter—was the ultimate betrayal.

Course decided, I had only to figure out how to make it happen.

Because I never wanted Joe or my family to know about my baby or to judge me for the decisions I made, I needed to keep my pregnancy a secret, which required hiding it for the next seven months. So, when my mother's sister, my aunt Charlotte, sent me an invitation to join her for Thanksgiving in Oregon, it was like a sign from God, and a plan that had eluded me started forming in my mind.

I would take a semester off from UDub, but tell Joe and my family that I was doing a semester abroad somewhere far away like Chile. Instead, I would move in with Aunt Charlotte and swear her to secrecy. I'd have the baby in May, give her to a good family, and then "return" from my studies abroad to finish my degree. Only delayed by a few months, I'd ensure a good life for my baby, avoid the responsibility of parenthood, and start traveling the world as planned once I'd graduated.

It was a high price to pay for a baby I didn't plan and didn't want to keep. My otherwise young and fit body would bear the strain and scars of childbirth, and I'd lose the love of my life. But I tried to convince myself that those scars—the physical and the emotional—would heal. My body was young and would hopefully bounce back quickly. And one day, hopefully, I'd get over Joe. I'd meet someone new, and with any luck, he and I would find happiness.

I spent that Thanksgiving with Aunt Charlotte, who was a decade younger than my mother and closer in temperament and lifestyle to me than my mom. Once I'd explained everything, she agreed to let me stay with her until my delivery date and even offered to help me find a family to adopt the baby. I worked as a waitress in the meantime, saving money for my future travels, and sorting through applications from adoptive families with my aunt.

Denise and Howard Calvin, a married couple from Sunriver, Oregon, who were unable to have children of their own, had steady jobs, a large house in the country, phenomenal references, and hearts overflowing with love for a child, were one of the families. After meeting with them in person only once, Aunt Charlotte and I agreed they'd be wonderful parents.

That part of my plan worked.

But naively, I didn't anticipate the emotional burden of lying to my family and giving up my child. Both took a toll.

Lying to Joe and my family—sending them fake emails from Chile, where I said I was studying, without any mention of my pregnancy—created a wedge between us. Though I felt certain that I could mend things with my family, I knew the importance of using this time to break up, once and for all, with Joe. We drifted apart, though he tried like hell to keep us together, and then—when I finally broke up with him “from Chile” via email—he tried to get me to change my mind. But every day of my pregnancy, the brick wall I built between us was higher and harder to scale until not even Joe could make it up and over. In the end, I stopped responding to him, then blocked his emails, partly because his pain—and therefore my

guilt—was unbearable, but partly because I was distracted by an unexpected emotional connection to someone else.

Despite my best efforts to avoid them, my feelings for my baby—for Joe’s and my daughter—grew day by day in both intensity and depth. I’d already experienced the sort of instinctual love that had led me to keep her and had driven me to find her the perfect family. But this was something different—it was an intimate and personal love that grew head over heels day by day. This was the love that would almost destroy me when I handed her to the Calvins and bid her goodbye.

I started calling her “Raven” after her father’s family and wondering what she’d look like. Would she be blonde and blue-eyed like me? Or black-haired and brown-eyed like Joe? I found myself rubbing my belly at stop lights and placing my hands protectively over her as I walked quickly from the parking lot into work. If anyone asked, I’d have said I sang lullabies to soothe myself to sleep, but Raven and I both knew I was singing to her.

Toward the end of my pregnancy, I even started wondering if I was making a mistake.

Was it too late to tell Joe we were going to be parents?

Was it too late to tell my family another Stewart was on the way?

But these questions didn’t really need to be answered. No matter how much my heart swelled with new-found love for Raven, my feelings about motherhood remained the same. I wasn’t ready. I couldn’t commit to being a parent.

In my mind, the decision to give Raven to the Calvins was an act of love, an act of mercy, not a punishment. It was my way of protecting her—my way of giving her the best possible chance at a loving and stable life. The Calvins were ready to be parents. More than just wanting to be parents, they longed for the privilege. They could offer her more than I could. I was certain of that.

I went into labor on a cool Tuesday morning, two weeks before Memorial Day. Aunt Charlotte called the Calvins to

meet us at the hospital, then accompanied me there. Despite the books I'd read in preparation, labor was a horror I never could have imagined. I almost lost my life in that hospital, though I barely remember a thing after those first few nightmarish hours.

My memories end when I was sedated and resume an hour before Raven went home with her parents.

Raven Emily Stewart was born on a Tuesday morning.

Full of grace.

She went home with the Calvins on Friday afternoon.

Far to go.

In the end, we had an hour together, my daughter and I.

At least, I think we did.

Most days, it's easier to believe that it was only a dream.



# Chapter 5

Harper

“Guests are all checked in,” says Sawyer, plopping down next to me on a couch in the hotel lobby. “Want to grab dinner?”

We’re on the third day of a five-day tour from Skagway to Whitehorse to Mayo to Dawson City. In the morning, we leave Dawson City and start the ten-hour drive back to Skagway with a camping stop in Carmacks tomorrow night to break up the trip.

We’ve been driving, hiking, canoeing, and camping for three straight days and tonight, like the rest of our guests, I’m ready for a hot shower and a proper bed.

“I’m exhausted,” I tell my brother. “Rain check?”

“You gonna make me eat alone, Harp?”

“Fraid so,” I say, nudging him with my elbow. “Though I’m sure if you tried, you could find some company over at Jack London’s.”

“I suppose I could,” he says with a weary grin. “But come to think of it, I’m pretty tired, too.”

Bullshit. Sawyer’s not tired. He’s only twenty and always has energy to spare.

If I had to guess, I’d say that Sawyer’s not interested in an anonymous one-night stand. At least three times over the last few days, he’s mentioned someone named Ivy Caswell who works at the King Kone in Skagway. I don’t know her, but apparently, she’s the niece of one of his high school teachers, and used to spend her summers with her uncle. She’s back in Skagway this summer for a job, and from the way Sawyer talks about her, I think my little brother’s got a big, old-fashioned crush.

“I’m gonna grab a slice next door, and then I’m gonna hit the hay,” I tell him.

“Mind if I tag along?”

“Nope. Come on.”

We swing into the Pan of Gold Pizza Shop, each get a few slices warmed up to-go, then head back to our hotel. Sawyer gives me the keycard to my room as we part ways in the lobby.

“Hey, Harper,” he says as I’m walking away.

I turn to face him.

“Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something’s off with you.” He shrugs. “You’ve been quieter than usual. Don’t seem like yourself.”

“Stuff on my mind, I guess.”

“Anything you want to talk about?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. Thanks, Sawyer. Get some sleep, huh?”

“Night, Harp,” he says, ambling down the hallway to his room.

Am I okay?

I slide the keycard over the reader and step into my room.

Am I okay?

I set the pizza box down on the bureau and toss my backpack on the bed.

Am I okay?

I lie down on my back and stare up at the ceiling.

No, I think, I’m not remotely okay.

It’s been six days since I left Joe’s house the morning after our “one night.”

Six days, during which I’ve thought of him in every quiet moment, remembering every touch, every look, every mind-scrambling, heart-stopping orgasm, every touch of his fingers,

every swipe of his tongue, every whispered word of love as he moved inside of me, our fingers braided together, our skin slick with sweat.

We barely made it inside his house before round one—quick and dirty, with his pants around his knees and my panties ripped in half—against the back of his front door. We needed no foreplay, no petting, no preparation. It was urgent and animalistic. Frantic and rushed. He came quickly. I didn't come at all, but I didn't care either. I savored being connected to him, the feeling of him filling me, his grunts and my moans, the guttural call of his orgasm, and the long sigh of breath against my neck as he came back down to earth.

I'd been deprived of Joe for a third of my life.

I'd missed him fiercely, and if all I had for the rest of my life was this one night, then I wanted it all. Every second we were stealing was precious to me.

As we showered together soon after, he'd turned me to face the wall, planting his palms over mine. With my breasts flush against the glistening tiles and his strong arm around my waist, his cock had filled me from behind, bigger and thicker than I remembered it. Sliding his other hand around my body, he'd found the pebbled nub of nerves hidden inside my pussy folds, circling it with his slick middle finger until I'd shattered in his arms. Only then did he groan his own relief.

He'd washed me slowly and reverently, touching every plain and every crevasse, before carrying me to the side of his bed. As I stood like a goddess in the lavender haze of midnight sun streaming through the windows, he'd dried my body with a soft towel, then leaned me back on the bed and kneeled between my legs. After placing my legs over his shoulders, he'd buried his face between my thighs.

Joe had learned a few things in the years we'd been apart—he'd always been good with his tongue, but a decade of experience had made him more confident. He'd licked and sucked, kissed and lapped at the tender, sensitive bud of my sex. Writhing beneath him, I whimpered, then moaned, then cried out his name. My back had arched off the bed as

fireworks flashed behind my eyes. With my hands fisted in his wild, black hair, I'd come against his mouth in wave after wave of unimaginable pleasure.

Only then did he thrust back inside of me. Leaning forward to cradle my face in his hands, he was slower and more controlled than the previous two times. The edge of his hunger had been sated. He'd locked his eyes with mine until the moment they rolled back in his head with the force of his climax, and I'd felt him come, in thick, wet pulses, deep inside of me.

"I love you, Harper," he'd vowed from the very depths of his soul.

God help me, I almost said it back.

We'd made love twice more in the night, soft and slow under the covers. Between short naps, we'd shared sweet memories. He'd reminded me of the girl I'd been, and I'd teased him about the boy I'd loved. And finally—finally—we'd fallen asleep.

When I woke up in his arms, little spoon to his big, I'd felt warmer and safer than I'd ever felt in my entire adult life. As Joe slept, I'd toyed with dangerous fantasies of never telling him about Raven and the Calvins, about the ways in which my body had betrayed me all those years ago.

Impossible.

Then, I'd taken one last look at his sleeping face, crept out of his bed, dressed quickly in my shorts and T-shirt, and left my pretty dress behind.

In the kitchen, I'd found a scrap of paper and written him a simple note. It read:

A deal's a deal.

—H

The phone in my hotel room rings loudly, making me jump. Slightly dazed, I sit up and grab it.

"Hello?"

“Harp, what time are we leaving tomorrow? Eight? Or nine? I can’t remember.”

“Sawyer? What the hell do you have against sending texts? What if I was asleep?”

“If you were asleep, I wouldn’t be able to find out what time we’re leaving tomorrow. I called you on purpose, so you’d have to answer.”

“You’re a little shit.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

I take a deep breath and sigh. “Eight.”

“I’ll bring the van around at seven-thirty? You get ’em checked out and ready to roll?”

“Yes,” I say. “Don’t call me again. Good night.”

I hang up the phone with a grunt and take off my sweatshirt. It smells like sweat and the trail. Lord, I need a shower. But first, food.

I sit down in the hotel room chair, open my pizza box, then close it again.

I’m not hungry.

I miss Joe.

I don’t know why in the world I thought a night with him would get him out of my system. (Because you’re a liar, Harper Stewart, to everyone, including yourself.) All it did was make me miss him—make me want him—a thousand times more.

I’d gotten used to a life without him...I didn’t like it especially, but I’d forgotten what I was missing. Now, it was fresh in my mind—his body, his eyes, the way he touched me, the way he teased me, the way he loves me. I crave him. I can barely think straight with my longing. It’s that sharp. It hurts that much.

It was cowardly of me to leave a note, I think. But I know Joe. I know him. I know he thought that he’d win me back

with a night of passionate lovemaking. (He's right, too. He did win me back. I just can't let him know it.)

We have to be over now.

We must go our separate ways.

I lie back down on my side and draw my knees to my chest, facing the wall, the same position I held for so many excruciating days and nights at Aunt Charlotte's.

Giving life to Raven almost cost me my own.

In the end, I survived, but not unscathed.

The official medical term for what happened was placenta percreta—Raven's placenta, which never should have attached itself anywhere, had invaded my endometrium and grown through my myometrium, the wall of muscle behind it. From there, it had attached itself to several of the organs in my lower abdominal cavity. An incredibly rare condition for women of my age and health, it had happened nonetheless, and because I hadn't been good about showing up for my OB/GYN appointments, it wasn't discovered until I was in labor.

The surgery needed to dislodge and remove the placenta had caused hemorrhaging and damaged my uterus, bladder, and bowel in the process. It had also cost me my right ovary and fallopian tube, and left such a large amount of scar tissue on my one remaining ovary and fallopian tube, the doctor said to consider them permanently and irreversibly damaged. Although I could have a child via IVF, because he'd managed to spare one ovary and my mangled uterus, a natural pregnancy would be impossible.

At that time, I hardly cared.

I never wanted to go through childbirth again as long as I lived.

During those dark days, I grieved Raven—that I'd never know her, never see her, never have a chance to love her. I'd missed her so much in those first few weeks, I still don't know how I survived it. I didn't feel equipped to raise her, of course, but that didn't change the fact that giving her up almost killed me, both physically and emotionally.

Over time, as the details of the doctor's report clarified in my mind, I realized that karma had put another nail in the coffin of Joe's and my relationship. Not only had I given his child away, but even if we somehow managed to find each other again one day, we wouldn't be able to have another naturally. I was damaged goods.

I hug my knees closer to my chest.

When Joe says he loves me, he doesn't know who he's talking to.

He's talking to someone who took away his agency.

He's talking to someone who gave his daughter away.

He's talking to someone who can't get pregnant naturally.

He's talking to someone he doesn't know he hates; someone he'd despise if he only knew the whole story.

Taking a deep breath, I crawl off the bed, strip off my clothes and climb into the shower. Hot water beats against my back, stinging my skin and making me cry. I scream and I sob. I fist my hands and punch the wall. I rage over decisions too big to make when you're only twenty years old and your own mother is dead. I curse the fact that those terrible decisions have shaped my entire life.

Ten years have passed, but I am still stuck in my aunt's bed, desperate and sad, devastated and alone.

The daughter I grew to love, but never wanted, is long gone.

The boyfriend I still love desperately is all but banished from my life.

The body that was fertile and healthy is now scarred and sterile.

The future I'd once longed for is nothing but a faded memory.

"It was impossible!" I wail into the steaming spray.  
"There was no good option!"

I wish it had all turned out differently, but I don't know what I could have, or would have, changed. I still don't have better answers, all these long, lonely years later.

My anger depleted, panting and exhausted, I rest my forehead against the shower wall.

My voice is halfway between a murmur and a sob when I say, "I'm sorry, Raven. I'm sorry, Joe. I'm so damn sorry."

My tears mix with the water and fall to the shower floor, circling around the silver drain before they disappear.

\*\*\*

Joe

When I woke up and found Harper gone, I raced to the kitchen to see if she was making coffee, or sitting out on the deck enjoying the morning sun.

All I found was her note.

A deal's a deal.

Whew, that was cold. Especially after everything we'd done the night before.

I was angry, at first. It even occurred to me to get dressed, drive over to Dyea, and yell at her for being so spineless, but instead, I took a moment to think. In the space of a week, we'd spoken again for the first time in years, gone out on a date, kissed in the car, made love five times, and she'd slept over at my place twice.

This is progress, I told myself. Big progress. Don't derail it just because you want too much, too soon.

So, instead of calling her out for cowardice, I'd taken a long run, cleaned my house (but not my sheets—they still smelled like her), mowed my lawn, and watched a baseball game on TV. And yes, every fifteen minutes or so, I checked my phone, hoping that she'd text. But she didn't. Sunday turned into Monday, and so on, and so on.

By Friday afternoon, I still hadn't bumped into her around Skagway, and I was itching to see her, so I decided to



head up to Dyea on the excuse of checking on the Dyea Road bear situation.

“Hey, Aaron!” I call to my deputy, who’s sitting at his desk. “Heading up to Dyea. Wanna come for a drive?”

“Sure,” he said. “Everything okay?”

“Just want to check on that mama and her cubs—see if the Stewarts have noticed any activity.”

The campground looks quiet when we arrive. No doubt most of the Stewarts are out and about with tours and tourists. I climb the steps to the main lodge and knock on the door.

“Joe!” Mrs. Stewart’s wrinkles deepen with her smile. “Good to see you.”

“Hey, there, Ms. Stewart.”

I’ve known Harper’s family since I was a child, and they’ve always treated me with affection, regardless of Harper’s and my on-again, off-again relationship.

“And hello to you, too, Aaron.”

Aaron touches the brim of his hat. “Ms. Stewart.”

“What’re you two doin’ up here?” she asks. “More trouble with that girl from last summer? Tanner’s not here. He’s up on the Chilkoot.”

“Got a lot of tours out right now?” I ask, keeping my voice as casual as I can.

“Yep,” she says. “Hunter and Parker are in town. Got Tanner up on the Chilkoot, like I said. Harper and Sawyer are in the middle of a five-day up to Dawson City, and Gary’s down in Juneau on business.”

A five-day.

Well, that explains why I haven’t seen her around.

I wonder what day she’s on, but I can’t ask because Mrs. Stewart might make note of the question and tell Harper I was here. I know my girl. She’d think I was breaking our deal by swinging by...and she’d be right.

She specifically said, No more running into me on purpose.

Damn it, why'd I agree to that?

“Joe?” asks Mrs. Stewart, tilting her head to the side as she scans my face. “You all good?”

By way of the perfect distraction, Reeve appears over her gran's shoulder. “Hey, Joe! What's up? Want some coffee?”

Beside me, I worry Aaron might give himself whiplash from the way his neck jerks his head up.

“Oh,” says Reeve, her smile fading as she looks at Aaron. She adopts a snooty look. “It's you.”

“Hey, Reeve, um, Ms. Stewart,” says Aaron, his husky voice weaker than usual.

She ignores him, turning back to me with a now-phony smile on her face. “How 'bout that coffee, Joe?”  
“Sure,” I say. “We can stay for a minute.”

We join Mrs. Stewart in a small sitting area in the front of the dining room, while Reeve fetches a carafe of coffee and a tray with four cups. She sits on the arm of her grandmother's chair, arms crossed over her chest, giving Aaron a hefty dose of stink-eye.

“So, what's up?” asks Mrs. Stewart. “It's that Ramona again, right?”

“No,” I say, stirring a packet of sugar into my coffee. “It's not, actually. We've had two reports of a mother bear and two cubs up here on the old Dyea Road. I'm wondering if you've noticed any activity. They bothering you or your guests?”

“Us? No. The guests? I don't think so,” she says, sitting back in her chair and fishing her phone out of her apron pocket. “Let me just send a quick text to the rest of the family. I'll see if—”

“So, Deputy,” says Reeve, still looking annoyed at my deputy. “I'd like you to know that the gentleman from July Fourth wrote me a note, thanking me for saving his life. Did you want to see it?”

Aaron looks up at her, his expression sheepish.

“Reeve—Ms., um, Stewart,” he says, with a long-suffering sigh, “I didn’t mean to doubt your skills or your—”

“Oh, no?” she snaps. “Well, you sure did a great impression of someone doubting my skills and—”

“You look young!” he cries. “You look too young to be an EMT. I didn’t—”

“Well, I’m not too young, for your information. I’ll be eighteen in October.”

“Reeve,” says Mrs. Stewart, patting her granddaughter’s leg. “You’re not eighteen yet, and you’re being rude to our guest.”

“Our guest was rude to me first, Gran.”

“Then there’s no need for you to visit with him anymore. You’d best head back to the kitchen and get started on tonight’s biscuits, eh?”

Reeve flounces away, slamming the kitchen door behind her.

I look at Aaron, eyebrows raised. What the hell was that?

“I’m sorry, boss,” says Aaron, his cheeks crimson. “S-Sorry, Ms. Stewart. I’ll go wait in the car.”

He grabs his hat and heads out the front door, the screen door thwacking shut behind him.

“Ms. Stewart,” I say, “I have no idea what that was about. I’ll have a word with him. Sorry, ma’am.”

“I think we both have an inkling what that was about.” She grins at me, and it’s the super sassy smile I’ve seen on Harper’s face from time to time. “So, when you have that word, tell him to keep it in his pants until October, Joe. She’s technically still a kid until then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, about that mama bear...” She thinks for a second. “You want to take a look out by the trash bins? See if there’s

any scat or prints?”

“I’ll have Aaron do it,” I say. I unclip the walkie-talkie from my belt. “Aaron, come in. Go check out back behind the Stewarts’ trash bins for prints and scat, please. Over.”

“On it, boss,” comes Aaron’s reply. “Over.”

“I’ll just finish my coffee here with you while he’s on poop duty,” I say with a chuckle.

Just then, the lodge door opens again, and I look over my shoulder to see Hunter walking in.

“Hey, Gran. Hey, Joe! Everything okay?”

He sits down in the seat vacated by Aaron, leaning forward to pour himself a cup of coffee.

“Just some bears wandering around,” says Mrs. Stewart. “You seen ’em, Hunter?”

“Shoot.” He nods. “Yeah. I saw two cubs playing on the old Dyea Road last week.”

“Did you call it in?” I ask.

“Forgot all about it until now.”

“You know better’n that,” says Mrs. Stewart to her grandson. She turns her blue eyes to me. “Guess we have a family squatting nearby.”

And all three of us know that if one dumb tourist gets between a mother bear and one of her cubs, that tourist has seconds left to live. Definitely not good for business.

“I’ll get the Game Commissioner out here—see if they can tranq ’em and get ’em relocated.” I finish my coffee and stand up. “Thanks for the coffee, Mrs. Stewart.”

“You’re welcome anytime,” she says. “You know that, Joe.”

“Hey, Joe,” says Hunter, “me and Sawyer are taking Tanner out for drinks tonight. He’s been a moody son of a bitch this week. You’re welcome to join us.”

Sawyer's back tonight? My heart thumps wildly—that means Harper will be back, too.

“Great!” I say, maybe a little too eager. I try to calm down, to keep my voice nonchalant and even. “I mean, sure. Why not? Where you guys headed?”

“Too soon to call. Not the Parsnip, though. That's for sure.”

“Trouble in paradise?” I ask Hunter as he walks me out to the car.

“When a Stewart's involved?” he asks, giving me a knowing look. “Always.”

Don't I know it.

\*\*\*

There's no guarantee that Harper will be joining her brothers in town tonight, but I can't help feeling excited that she might. And she can't get mad at me. I'm definitely not breaking our deal—meeting her brothers for drinks doesn't constitute “running into her on purpose.” First of all, I was invited. And second, I have no idea if she'll be there, too.

That said, I make sure I'm done with my nightly jog in time for a long shower. I wash my hair, dry it, and braid it back. I consider a shave, but decide to leave a little stubble because I know Harper likes it. I find a clean, white button-down shirt in my closet, pair it with some jeans and tug on my cowboy boots.

Casual, I think, rolling up my sleeves as I check myself out in the mirror, but good.

In my reflection, my bed is unmade and messy behind me, pretty much the same way it looked the morning Harper left.

I sit down on the edge of the bed, and for the very first time since she left, I allow myself to think about last Saturday.

It's taken a shitload of self-control not to wallow in it, going over every touch, every word, every breathless moan, and strangled cry, but it would have driven me insane to linger

on those precious memories too much this week. She was very clear about it being a one-off thing. I don't know for sure that she'll ever be in my bed again, which seems impossible after everything we shared.

The truth is that she abandoned herself to me that night.

And I abandoned myself to her.

After ten years of self-recrimination, confusion, and longing, after a decade of fruitless wishing and useless grief, the woman I loved was in my arms again, in my bed again, her breath in my mouth, her skin flush against mine. And everything about it felt right.

The long years apart had starved me. At first, I was ravenous for her, and only after I'd taken her twice could I slow down a little. The last two times, we made love in my bed, under the covers, slow and smooth, so full of raw, unfiltered love, it makes me want to sob even thinking about it. (It can't be the last time. It can't.) I didn't hold back—not a motion, not a word. I told her I loved her more times than I can count. I showed her I loved her with every stroke and slide of my body. I worshipped at the shrine of Harper and was grateful for the privilege.

And then she left.

Just like she said she would.

And I haven't heard from her since.

One night together for a lifetime apart.

My breath catches. A lump threatens to take over my throat.

Despite everything we shared, maybe it really is over for now.

But with the sort of heat that Harper and I still share? I have to believe that it's not over forever. I have to believe that if I stay the course—if my love for her stays true, stays patient—I'll win the girl back again. She keeps alluding to something she's done that she believes is unforgivable, but I know better. There's nothing Harper could do that I couldn't forgive.

This story ends with Harper Stewart in my arms again.

One day my girl will be my woman.

My cell buzzes, and I stand up, pulling it out of my back pocket.

Hunter

Happy Endings. 20  
minutes.

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Joe

I'll be there.

I'll always be there. I'll always show up.

As long as we're both alive, I'll never give up on her. On  
us.

Never.

I check my reflection one last time, grab my keys, and  
head out to meet her brothers.

## Chapter 6

Harper

...his fingers trail across the skin of my stomach...his eyes smile into mine. I know where he's headed, and I arch my back in anticipation of his tongue...right...there. Gasping as he parts the folds of sensitive skin with gentle fingers, I close my eyes as his mouth comes closer...his hot breath dusting the bundle of nerves that's making me wet. His tongue slides over my clit, hot and wet, soft but firm...and I—

“Harper! Wake up!”

My body jumps, my heart racing from the shock of waking up so abruptly. I open my eyes to find Parker's dumb face inches away from mine.

“Christ, Park!” I yell. “I was dreaming.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” she snaps. “But it's eight, and you've got a Chilkoot hike at nine.”

“It can't be eight! My alarm was set for six!”

“It's eight, alright,” says Parker, showing me her phone. “You slept through your alarm. I turned it off and decided to let you sleep.”

“Shouldn't have done that,” I grouse, sitting up. My stomach rolls over. Ugh.

“Oh, I'm so sorry, Princess Harper,” she says, rolling her eyes and pretending to curtsy. “Next time, let me know exactly what to do. I'm only here for your bidding.”

“I don't feel good,” I mutter.

“You drink too much last night?”

Last night, McKenna's best friend, Isabella, arrived from Seattle, and we all ended up doing shots around the campfire until way too late.

“I guess I did,” I say, swinging my legs out of bed.



“Maybe you need to lay off the sauce,” says Parker. “Ain’t the first time you’ve overslept this week.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Shut up, Park. Mind your business.”

She holds up her hands. “And your mood lately is for shit.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is. If you don’t mind my saying so, you need a proper fucking sooner than later.”

I gasp in surprise as she sticks out her tongue at me, grabs her backpack, and leaves. Then, I sit back in bed with a sigh.

I do not need a proper fucking. The fucking I had two weeks ago was plenty, thank you very much. But Parker’s probably right about the other stuff. I have been drinking more than usual lately, and my stomach always acts up when I do. As though needing to further prove itself, it gurgles loudly, and I sprint to the bathroom to throw up the dregs of last night’s tequila.

Yuck.

I stand up and look in the medicine chest to see if we have Pepto Bismol or Tums, but we’re out of both—further evidence that my stomach’s been a bitch lately. I make a promise to myself to quit drinking and—

Knock, knock, knock.

“Harp? You up?”

The front door of my cabin opens up and slams shut.

Wiping my mouth with toilet paper, I step into the living room to find my dad standing by the door, his larger-than-life presence taking up a good share of the room.

“Parker says you’re poorly this morning?”

“My stomach’s acting up.”

“You sick? Or is it a hangover?”

“Probably a hangover,” I say honestly. “Too many shots by the campfire last night.”

He purses his lips. My father doesn’t care how much we drink unless it interferes with work, and then it pisses him off. He gives me a stern look.

“The DeJong family wants to get going early. They’ve had their breakfast, and they’re waiting on you.”

I groan, nodding my head. “Okay. Sorry. Yeah. I’ll—I’ll get ready. Just let me shower and—”

“You look green around the gills, Harper.” My dad puts his hands on his hips and tilts his head to the side. “I tell you what...I’ll take the hike. You—you take the day off. I don’t know what’s going on with you lately, but you need to get your head on straight. This is our busiest time of year. We can’t have one of our best tour guides down for the count.”

“I know. I’m—I’m sorry, Dad.” I feel terrible for putting him out, but honestly, I’m relieved for today’s reprieve. I’m exhausted and feel like crap. “I’ll go into town and get some Pepto. And no more drinking for me for a little while.”

“Probably a good idea,” he says.

“Anything you want me to do here today?”

“I was going to enter a pile of handwritten invoices into Quicken. Maybe you can do that?” He rubs his chin in thought. “You know, the DeJongs have three kids, and I think they wanted a guide on the younger side, not some old man. I’ll have to take Reeve with me. You do those invoices, and then you help your gran in the kitchen like Reeve would’ve.”

Now I’m putting out Reeve, too. My eyes water. My shoulders slump.

“Aw, come on, now, honey.”

My dad closes the distance between us and wraps me up in a big bear hug.

I don’t know why, but this simple act of love and affection makes me want to burst into tears like a little kid. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Sometimes we all need a time out,” says my dad, rubbing my back. He steps away, opening the cabin door. “But you be ready to work tomorrow morning, huh?”

“For sure,” I promise.

He heads out the door, and I head back to bed...where I promptly fall asleep for another two hours.

When I wake up again at ten, the campground is silent but for the sounds of nature that filter through my window. Birds singing. A breeze rustling the leaves. The Taiya River way out back. I can hear the water slipping and sliding over rocks. I feel way better.

I shower and get dressed, grabbing the keys to the Jeep. If I’m going to town anyway, Gran may need some things too. I stop by the lodge to see her. As usual, she’s bustling around the kitchen, busy with a thousand things.

“Morning, Gran.”

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty,” she says. “Dry these dishes for me, eh?”

“Of course. I’m your Reeve today.”

“Oh, no,” she says, “I’ve already got one of those. I’d prefer a Harper instead.”

“She’s all yours,” I say, grabbing a dishtowel.

When I was younger, after my mother died, Gran took on a larger role in my life than most grandmothers. She tried to be there for me during those tumultuous teen years when I was grieving so bitterly. I wasn’t grateful for her then—I resented the fact that Gran was alive to give hugs and advice, while my mother was cold in the ground. But Gran stayed patient and loving, all while firmly enforcing her rules and boundaries. Over the years, I’ve come to realize how lucky I was to have her—to have a strong woman who cared about me in my life. I’m grateful for her now, and I try to let her know it.

“You doing okay, my Harper?” she asks, a gentle smile turning up her lips.

“Just hungover.”

“Something weighing on you?”

Every night I dream of Joe. Every minute of every day, I think of Joe. It’s taking all of my strength—all of it—not to run to him, to tell him everything, to beg him to still love me and let me stay in his life. I’m exhausted and fragile, and my behavior’s all over the place as a result.

I gulp. “No.”

“Sure, now? Only knew one boy who could ever get you flustered like this.”

“I’m fine, Gran. Really. I just—”

“Joe was over here last week.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Mmm-hmm. Just checking on us. Mother bear and two cubs roaming around these parts. He’s getting the Game Commission to come in. They’ll be relocated.”

I take my time drying a platter. “Joe’s good at his job.”

“Joe’s good at a lot of things,” she says. “He was awfully good at loving you. Still would be, I expect, given the chance.”

“It’s too late for me and Joe,” I say, opening a cupboard and putting the platter away.

“Why’s that?”

I’ve often wondered if Gran ever suspected that something more was going on with me while I was staying with Aunt Charlotte. She never said anything and responded to my messages “from Chile” like everyone else, but my gran has a sixth sense, a sharp intuition. She isn’t fooled easily.

“Just is,” I say, looking up at her with as neutral an expression as I can muster. I kiss her cheek, then pull the Jeep keys out of my pocket. “I have to pick up some things in town. You need anything?”

“No, honey,” she says, turning back to her chores.

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Half an hour later, I'm standing in the drugstore aisle of the Fairway looking for Tums, which are, unsurprisingly, sold out. Only locals really frequent this store—it's the biggest grocery store in Skagway—but the shelves only get restocked once a week, so it can be a little catch-as-catch-can sometimes.

“Looking for anything in particular, Harper?”

I look up to see one of my classmates from high school, Neena Antonov, Lela Antonov's younger sister. She's wearing a Fairway smock and carrying a big box of baby food.

“Nah. I'm just browsing around.” I realize the box is resting on Neena's huge and protruding stomach. “Looks like you'll need that box of food sooner rather than later, huh? When are you due?”

“Any day now,” she says. “My third.”

I have this overwhelming desire to pull the box from her hands and help her with it, but the Antonov sisters are very self-sufficient; I wouldn't want to offend her.

“Wow. Three kids. How do you do it?”

She shrugs. “Sandra Clearwater runs a day care. Older two are over there right now.”

Sandra Clearwater. I try not to grimace at the mention of her name. She's Joe's closest cousin, and she makes no attempt to hide how much she hates me whenever we run into each other.

“Right. Sandra,” I say. “That's good you have help. I'm sure you're tired.”

“Yeah. I'm tired for sure,” she says. “And I get emotional these days, which drives Mike crazy.”

I nod, remembering my own pregnancy symptoms from long ago.

Tired, check.

Emotional, check.

Nauseous...check.

To my left, between the indigestion meds and baby items, are the sanitary products, condoms, and pregnancy tests. I flick my eyes over to them, then back to Neena. My stomach rolls over. My heart rate speeds up. I feel my cheeks flare with heat even though my brain can't quite process what the rest of my body seems to be figuring out.

"I...I have to go, Neena," I say, heading for the bathroom at the back of the store. The plastic basket I was holding slips from my hands and clanks onto the tiled floor. "Good luck with everything."

I get to the bathroom, lock the door, and fall to my knees by the toilet, heaving my meager breakfast of coffee and toast into the bowl.

Tired. Emotional. Nauseous.

Oh my god.

Tired. Emotional. Nauseous.

No. No! This is just a hangover. I was just with Joe two weeks ago. It's way too early for...for...

Get a hold of yourself, Harper!

I fish my phone from my back pocket, opening up the internet and searching: how soon can pregnancy symptoms appear?

My heart drops when Google tells me that a pregnant woman can start experiencing symptoms as soon as six days after implantation.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I was in Joe's bed exactly fourteen days ago, and of course we didn't use protection of any kind. As he pinned me against the back of his front door, he asked if I was on birth control. When I told him, "It's covered," he reached under my dress and ripped my panties in half.

I wasn't lying. I was all but sterilized when Raven was born. The doctor said so. He said that my one remaining ovary was damaged, and my only fallopian tube was permanently blocked with scar tissue. He said I wouldn't be able to have

children naturally, only via IVF. I remember it. I remember exactly what he said, and yet...

I look at my phone again.

I whimper softly, then whisper to myself: “There’s only one way to know for sure.”

Getting up off the floor, I flush the toilet, wash my hands and gargle. I’m going to get a pregnancy test, pay for it, go home, and take it. Then I’ll know. I’ll know I’m not pregnant, I’m just hungover, and I’m being utterly ridiculous.

Leaving the bathroom, I return to the pharmacy aisle and quickly scan the pregnancy tests, looking for the one that seems to offer the earliest results. First Result Early seems to wear the crown, so I pull one of those off the shelf and beeline to the register.

There are two people in front of me, so I keep doom scrolling pregnancy symptoms on Google, which only intensifies my already-ample anxiety.

Early signs include tiredness, upset stomach, and moodiness.

You’re pregnant again.

Early signs also include tender breasts and spotting, and I’ve experienced neither.

You’re not pregnant. You’re not.

When I get to the register, Neena looks down at the little pink and white box, then up at me. I watch as her eyes slide to the person in line behind me. Her smile brightens up her whole face.

“Hey, Joe!” she chirps. “How’s it going?”

\*\*\*

Joe

“Good enough, Neena. How you doing?”

“I’m good. Just waiting for this little one to get here,” she says, rubbing her enormous belly.

I know that it's Harper Stewart standing in front of me, and it's the first time I've seen her in two torturous weeks. My mouth waters. My heart sings.

And even if she tries to be, she can't be mad—I truly am just bumping into her. I came into the Fairway on my lunch break to grab granola bars and Keurig cups for the station break room. That's it. I had no idea she'd be in here shopping too.

Just lucky, I guess.

“Hey, Harper,” I say, fixing a grin on my face.

She turns around, her eyes wide, her face ashen. “J-Joe.”

Something's wrong. Something's really wrong.

My blood runs cold. When I reach out to touch her arm, she flinches, taking a step away from me. Every protective bone in my body stands at the ready to help her, to comfort her, to do or be whatever she needs.

“Harper, are you okay?”

“I'm...I'm...”

“Harper,” says Neena, holding up a box. “I think this is on sale, two for one. You want me to check?”

“No!” yells Harper, turning back to Neena.

And that's when I focus on what Neena is holding up in her hand. First Results Early Pregnancy Test.

A pregnancy test? Why is Harper buying a pregnancy test?

“No, Neena! Please, just—it's not...” She looks at me, then back at Neena. “I don't—I don't care. Just...” She slaps a ten-dollar bill on the conveyor belt and snatches the test out of Neena's hand.

As Harper races out of the store, Neena yells, “What about your change?”

A pregnancy test. Holy shit. Harper just bought a pregnancy test.



“Give it to me!” I bark at Neena. “Give me her change, and I’ll give it to her!”

I grab the money, throw my snacks on the belt, and run after Harper.

“Joe!” calls Neena to my back. “You want this stuff or what?”

I don’t answer. I hoof it to the parking lot, where Harper is slamming the driver’s door of her car shut. I stand at the window and knock on it. She looks at me, then looks down at her lap.

“Harper,” I say, “open the window. Now.”

She doesn’t move.

“Harper, we need to talk.”

She pushes the ignition button and reaches for the steering wheel, clenching it tightly.

“Harper, you just bought a pregnancy test, and we were—we were together two weeks ago. Are you...I mean—”

She turns to me. “Get away from the car, Joe.”

“Talk to me!”

“Get away from the car!”

I step back as she reverses out of the parking lot with a screech of tires and cloud of dust. Then, I jump into my own car, push the ignition button, and follow her toward Dyea.

She’s driving way too fast, which scares the shit out of me—especially in her possible condition—so she leaves me no choice but to put on the lights and siren. Thank God she pulls over by the airport. I pull over behind her, stopping my car just as I see her jump out of the Jeep and stalk toward me, a look of pure fury on her face.

“That’s an abuse of power!” she yells.

“You’re driving like a lunatic!”

“I was trying to get away from you!”

“Why?” I demand. “Why—Why did you buy that—that test? What’s...I mean...” I glance at her stomach, then back up at her face. “Is it mine?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her expression lethal. “I don’t sleep around.”

“I know,” I say. “I know that. So, I just...I mean...”

My brain isn’t working right. I’m shocked out of my skin. I don’t know what questions to ask. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m tired. And nauseous. And emotional,” she says. She drops my eyes. “I’m probably just working too hard and drinking too much.”

“You’ve been drinking?”

“Of course I’ve been drinking!” she bellows. “I don’t even know if I’m pregnant, Joe! I’m probably not! Jesus Christ!”

“When are you taking the test?”

“When I get home.”

“Can I come?”

“No,” she says. “Absolutely not.”

“Harper,” I say. “This is big, darlin’. This is bigger than us.”

She clenches her jaw as her eyes slowly close. “Please stop.”

“Oh my god,” I say. “But Harper, you might be having our—”

“I need you to back off,” she says, stalking back to her car.

“Please talk to me!”

“No,” she says, opening the car door. “If there’s anything you need to know, I’ll be in touch. Otherwise...”

She shakes her head, then gets back into her car. After slamming the door shut, she turns on the car and drives away at an appropriate speed. I watch from the roadside until I can't see her anymore. Leaning against the trunk of my car, I finally let the facts catch up with my heart.

Harper might be pregnant. With my baby. With our child.

I'm filled with so much unfiltered happiness, so much awestruck joy, my knees go weak on me, and I have to remind them to hold me up. I half stagger, half stumble back to the driver's seat and plop down, trying to assimilate this possible new reality into my consciousness.

The woman I love—whom I've loved my whole life—might be having our baby, which is the best and sweetest and most amazing news that I could ever hear.

Except you haven't heard it yet.

I lean my elbows on the steering wheel and narrow my eyes.

She might not be pregnant, and even if she is...she may not want to have it.

But she's got to know how much I'm going to want this baby. All I've ever wanted, for as long as I can remember, was to have a family with Harper Stewart. Even if she doesn't want this baby, I do. I want this child—this son or daughter created with love and passion—with every fiber of my being.

With nothing left to do but wait to hear from her, I point my car back to the station and try to make it through the rest of the day.

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When I don't hear from Harper by quitting time, my anxiety starts to get the better of me.

I run through scenarios in my head: She didn't text me because she's not pregnant, and there's nothing to share. Or: She is pregnant and isn't ready to talk about it. Or: She's trying to figure out how to tell me she doesn't want this baby.

Or: There is no baby, and she's partying with her siblings around an early campfire.

I change into shorts and a T-shirt and take a longer jog than usual, keeping my phone fastened around my bicep...just in case. Not that I need it. I run for over an hour, and she doesn't call or text once. It's only as I'm approaching my house that I realize her Jeep's parked out front, and Harper's waiting for me on the deck. I sprint to my front steps and stand there panting, like an Alutiiq Romeo looking up at his beautiful, blonde Juliet.

"Hi," she says.

"H-Hi," I pant. I rest my hands on my knees and lean forward for a second, light-headed after a final push. When I look up, she's still standing at the railing. "Tell me, Harper."

She blinks at me.

"Harp," I rasp. "Please just—"

"It was positive. I'm pregnant."

"With my baby."

She's not smiling. She looks pale and overwhelmed, her eyes red-rimmed like she's been crying.

"Yes," she whispers. "It's yours."

Then, she turns around, opens my front door, and disappears inside.

I allow myself just a second to be disappointed at the way I hear the news that I'm going to be a father. I always imagined I'd be married to Harper, and we'd get pregnant after trying for a month or two. When she didn't get her period, we'd buy a pregnancy test together, and I'd be there when she peed on the stick. And then we'd call my aunt Hannah and Sandra; we'd drive up to Dyea to share the news with her family. I never thought it would be like this. I never wanted it to be like this.

But then again?

I grin, which turns into a smile, which turns into a chuckle of joyful laughter.

My woman is pregnant with my baby.

Mine.

I don't care how she told me the news.

I only care that it's true.

I hop up the steps of my deck and follow her inside.

"You want something?" I ask her as I head to the kitchen.  
"I'm getting a Gatorade."

"Water."

"Coming right up." I put some ice in a glass, then pour a bottle of water over it. "Lemon? Lime?"

"Sit down, Joe."

She's sitting on the couch, her back to me, her posture ramrod straight.

Please don't tell me you don't want it.

I don't know what I'd do if she decided not to have it. I don't know how I'd bear it.

Please, Harper. Please.

I hand her the water, then sit down in a chair, swiveling it away from the TV to face her.

"Talk to me," I say.

She looks up at me, then back down at her water. After a small sip, she leans forward and places the glass on the coffee table. Folding her hands in her lap, she sighs before looking up at me again.

"I never..." She stops, clears her throat, then starts again.  
"I didn't mean for this to happen."

"I know."

"You don't know this, but I had to have an operation a long time ago, during those years I was away, and the doctor told me that I wouldn't be able to have children. Not...not

naturally. Only via IVF. So when you asked me if we were “covered,” I wasn’t lying when I said yes.”

“Harp,” I say, leaning forward in my chair and clasping my hands between my knees. “I’m not upset about this. Not at all. Not even a little.” I scan her face, desperate that she knows how much this means to me, how excited I am to be a dad, to make the family I always wanted...with her. “I don’t care how it happened. I’m...just so happy it did.”

“You want it,” she says softly.

I drop to my knees, reaching for her hands, encouraged when she doesn’t pull away. “Of course I want it. I love it already—I love him or her. I love this baby. I love you, Harp. For me, this is a dream come true.”

She shakes her head. “There are things you don’t know.”

“So tell me,” I say. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it all out together. You’re not alone, Harp. I’m here—for you and our baby. I love you two more than anything else in the world. I want to make this work more than anything.”

“Oh, Joe,” she says, separating her hands from mine so she can reach up to cradle my face. Her tenderness surprises me because she’s been sparing with it up to now. Her eyes are filled with tears as she looks at me. “You love so hard, Joe. So completely. So deeply.” She pauses as a tear snakes down her cheek. “Is that how you hate, too?”

“I don’t hate anyone,” I say, turning my cheek so I can kiss the inside of her palm. “And definitely not you.”

“You will,” she whispers, pulling her hands away.

Back to this shit again. I swear to God, I’m getting sick of it.

“If you’d just tell me what you think you did, I could reassure you that—”

“I need some time,” she says. “Can you give me that?”

“Yeah.” I lean back, sitting on my haunches. “But you’re not going to, you know, make any decisions without me, right?”

“No,” she says. “I won’t do that. I’ll let you know what I plan to do.”

“Harp,” I say, wondering if this will be my only chance to make a case for keeping this baby and building a life together. “I love you. I want this baby. I want you in my life. We don’t have to move in together. We don’t have to get married. We can do things any way you feel comfortable doing them, okay? But you two are the most important people—I mean—”

“I know, Joe,” she says, standing up. “That means a lot.”

I scramble to my feet as she steps toward the door.

“Anything you need, Harp, just ask.”

“I will,” she says, that sad, sad smile lifting her lips in a look so heartbreaking, it makes me want to race to her and pull her into my arms.

But I don’t. She needs her space, and I need to respect that.

“Drive safe, okay? Call me anytime. I’ll keep my phone with me around the clock.”

“Whatever happens,” she says, looking at me over her shoulder. “I loved you, Joe. When we were kids, I loved you more than anything. I love you now, too. Right now. Right this second. And I’ll love you on the day I die.” She brushes the tears off her cheeks. “Remember that, okay? Try to remember that no matter what. There was never a day—never a second—that I didn’t love you, Joe.”

She hasn’t said those words to me in ten years. They render me speechless. They all but bring me to my knees for the second time in one day.

The door closes behind her, and I’m left to wait and see what happens next.

# Chapter 7

Harper

When I left Aunt Charlotte's house, five weeks after Raven's adoption, I made a promise to myself—and to my daughter—that I wouldn't interfere in her life.

I'd made my choice to give her up; now I needed to make peace with it.

Because I'd met the Calvins in person before Raven was born and invited them to the hospital for her birth, her adoption was technically considered "semi-open" in the state of Oregon. The Calvins even offered to send me updates about Raven, but at the time, I had declined. I felt it was better—for me and for Raven—to treat the adoption as "closed."

It wasn't about turning my back on her. It was about protecting both of us—giving me the freedom to move on with my life as a young woman, and giving her the best possible chance to bond with the Calvins.

I promised myself I'd never look for her. Nor would I look for the Calvins, even on social media. I worried that if I found her, the temptation to know her would be too great. For her sake and mine, I closed the door on a relationship with her; then I sealed that door with every bit of care and concern I had for Raven's stability, happiness, and well-being.

As the years went by, however, I wondered about her. I thought about her. I hoped she was happy and healthy. I couldn't help it. Short of seeking out a relationship with my biological daughter or her adoptive parents, I wanted to be available to her and the Calvins if they ever needed me.

So, I made a caveat to my once-airtight promise, and it was this: if Raven ever required my help or if she had a desire to meet me in person at some point—with the permission and blessing of her parents—I would be discoverable.

Three years ago, I joined an online adoption registry. I opted out of emails, preferring to check my account twice a



year, on her birthday and half-birthday. I was surprised when I found a message from Denise Calvin on Raven's seventh birthday. I learned that my daughter's legal name had been changed to Moriah Raven Calvin, and she was a chatty, clever, happy child who loved the family dogs, camping trips and old-school cartoons. Denise ended the short message asking if I'd like to see a recent photo of Moriah, but I politely declined, explaining that I didn't want to bother them or interfere in their daughter's life. I just wanted the Calvins to know where to find me if they ever needed me. Denise wrote back one last time, thanking me for enrolling in the registry and telling me that if I ever changed my mind, to let her know; she said there could be room for me in Moriah's life, provided that I was respectful of the Calvins' role as her parents. I didn't write back to that message, and we haven't communicated in the two years since.

But now?

Now that I'm looking down the barrel of telling Joe about his nine-year-old daughter?

I'm grateful to have this thread of communication with the Calvins. I think it's very possible I'm going to need it. I can imagine no scenario in which Joe doesn't want to be a part of Moriah Raven's life, and yes, it scares the shit out of me on every imaginable level.

Especially because I've decided that I want to keep this baby.

God willing.

I've already been in touch with an obstetrician in Anchorage at the Providence Alaska Children's Center. After Moriah Raven's traumatic birth, this pregnancy is going to be high-risk in the extreme. While I can go to routine appointments and ultrasounds here in Skagway, I'll need to be under the care of an experienced perinatologist in Anchorage, and I'll likely need to schedule a c-section there well in advance of my baby's due date. I don't want to risk the same issues I experienced ten years ago.

Issues that Joe still knows nothing about.

When I consider everything I have to tell him, my head swims, and my stomach heaves. I'm dreading it, and it's making me short-tempered and emotional. So when my brothers ask if I'd like to go out for drinks at the Purple Parsnip, where McKenna's a bartender, I say yes. After a week inside my own head, I desperately need a night out.

As Hunter, Tanner, Sawyer, and I walk through the double doors of the Parsnip, the crowd erupts in applause.

"Is that for us?" jokes Hunter, though he knows full well we've just walked in at the tail-end of Bruce's Soapy Smith skit.

McKenna waves us over to a reserved table in the corner, but I head to the bar to order a non-alcoholic beer on the sly. I haven't told my family anything yet; I need to talk to Joe first. Until then, I need to keep my pregnancy under the radar, and drinking a Coke while my brothers drink beer would be suspicious.

When I get to the table, Hunter looks up at me and grins.

"Isabella says hi," he says, waggling his eyebrows like an idiot.

"Say hi back!" chirps McKenna. She seems taken with the idea of her best friend dating my older brother, but all I see are warning flags everywhere. My own experience with long-distance relationships tells me that Hunter's in for heartbreak.

I slide into the empty seat between McKenna and Sawyer, but going out on the town isn't having the result I'd hoped for. My problems swirl in my head, demanding attention and answers.

How am I going to tell Joe about his daughter? How?

"Harper," says McKenna, nudging me in the arm, "are you okay?"

I force a smile. "Sure. Fine."

Across from us, Sawyer slams his phone on the table. We all watch as Sawyer chugs his beer, then refills it.

"Slow down, Sawyer," says Tanner.

“Shut up, Tanner.”

McKenna looks at Sawyer, then me, then Hunter. She whispers something to Tanner about the energy at the table being all over the place.

“Stewarts!” she calls out. “What’s going on with you three?”

“Ivy can’t make it,” mutters Sawyer. “Second time she has canceled on me this week.”

“Ramona’s poisoning your well, Sawyer,” says Tanner.

“Well, thanks for that, Tanner.”

“It’s not his fault,” says Hunter. “Ramona’s crazy. If Ivy can’t see that...”

Sawyer’s hands fist on the table. “Then what?”

“I’m not fighting with you,” says Hunter dismissively, looking down at his phone. “You’re pissed off. You’re spoiling for a brawl.”

“The girl you like lives fifteen hundred miles away,” says Sawyer, still baiting Hunter. “I don’t know what you’ve got to be happy about.”

Recalling how fondly Sawyer was talking about Ivy on our five-day last week, I’m about to tell Hunter to shut up and back off when he takes it too far.

“Yours lives ten yards from here and won’t come down the street for a beer. Distance doesn’t mean shit. I’ve got plenty to be happy about.”

Sawyer chugs his second beer, then slams the pint glass on the table, stands up and stalks out of the saloon.

I look at Hunter, feeling irritated. He has a bad habit of taking things too far when he’d do better to let them lie. “You don’t have to be an asshole, Hunter.”

“I’m the asshole? He was coming for me.”

“Whatever,” I say, sitting back in my chair and raising my glass for a sip.

Tanner cocks his head to the side, looking at me thoughtfully. “Why are you in a bad mood? What’s going on...?”

I barely hear his question; his voice fades into the white noise of the bar as I look up to see Joe Raven standing in front of the Parsnip’s old saloon doors, his eyes locked on me. I take a gulp of my beer, watching as Joe smoothly weaves between tables and chairs to plop down in Sawyer’s empty seat. He stares at the beer in front of me for a long moment, his jaw tight. When he raises his eyes to mine, they’re dark and furious.

“No,” he bites out.

No...what? I can’t go to a bar now that I’m pregnant? Jesus! I don’t need this!

I narrow my eyes at him. “Don’t tell me what to do! I can \_\_\_”

“Harper!” he says, his eyes sliding to the beer before they snap back to my face. “Stop!”

Oh my god. I get it.

He thinks I’m drinking a regular beer...which means he thinks I’d hurt our baby on purpose. Over this small betrayal, and fueled, no doubt, by my changing hormones, my eyes fill with embarrassing, unexpected tears.

“Shut up, Joe,” I mutter.

Fuck this.

Before my family gets too nosy and starts asking questions I’m not remotely ready to answer, I jump up and leave. When I get to the boardwalk outside the restaurant, I turn toward the harbor, the cool air a relief on my hot cheeks.

How dare he? How dare he behave like that in front of my family? Is this what the next nine months are going to be like?

“Harper!”

I look over my shoulder to see Joe running down the boardwalk to catch up with me.

“Leave me alone, Joe.”

“You’d take a risk like that? Drinking alcohol? I can’t believe you’d be that stupid!”

“I can’t believe you don’t have more faith in me!” I yell, whipping around to face him. With my hands planted on my hips, my whole body shakes with rage. “It was non-alcoholic. I went to the bar and ordered it before I sat down, you monumental asshole!”

He stares at me, his mouth gaping open in surprise.

“I wouldn’t hurt my baby on purpose,” I add, placing my hand protectively over my abdomen.

“Fuck,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Yeah,” I say. “So thanks for embarrassing me in front of my family and making a scene for no reason. They already sense that something’s off with me, so...yeah. Great. Thanks for that.”

I turn on my heel and continue walking away from him, but he falls into stride beside me.

“It’s been a rough week,” he mutters.

“Oh, I see,” I say, scoffing bitterly. “Has it been a rough week for you, Joe? All that vomiting and hormones and exhaustion? Yeah. I’m sure it’s been real tough.”

“That’s not what I mean! Of course you’re going through more than I am—I just mean we need to talk!” he says, getting frustrated. “I’m going crazy, Harper.”

“I have no interest in talking to you right now,” I say, my pace quickening. “I’m mad at you.”

“Well,” he says, his voice raising as he matches his steps to mine. “That’s too bad. What happened at the Parsnip was an honest mistake. We need to talk.”

“Is that right, Sheriff?” I demand.

“Yes, goddamnit!” he cries. “It’s my baby too!”

“Shut. Up!” I snarl, stopping in my tracks to see if anyone we know is listening to us. Luckily, we’re only surrounded by tourists hoofing it back double-time to their soon-to-be departing cruise ships.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning splits the sky, followed by a bellow of thunder, and Joe takes my arm, pulling me toward the three-sided, gazebo-shed in Skagway’s Centennial Park. We hurry past the bronze statues of a Native guide and a backpacked stamper, making it under cover just before the sky opens up.

Joe sits down on the wooden bench with a sigh, while I stand by the opening of the shed, watching the rain come down in sheets. I don’t want to be trapped here with Joe. I don’t want to talk about everything. I just want to go home, pull the covers over my head, and buy some more time.

“Harp,” he says softly from behind me, his voice filled with the sort of tenderness that breaks my heart. “It’s time.”

“I’m not ready,” I say, still staring out at the rain.

“I’m pretty sure you never will be,” he says.

He’s right. I never will be. I have lived my life for the past ten years protecting my secrets. I turn around to look at him.

“This is the last moment of my life that you’ll still love me,” I whisper.

He stares at me, but for the first time I can remember, he doesn’t contradict me. He doesn’t tell me he’ll love me no matter what. And strangely enough, it’s that space—that open field of terrible, awful, unknown possibility—that finally gives me the courage to start talking.

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Joe

Harper sits down a little ways away from me, folding her hands between her legs and staring down at them.

“You’re not going to like it,” she murmurs.

I recall another conversation between us that started like this, and so I think she’s probably right. I probably won’t like whatever she has to say. But I am still convinced that I can love her through it, despite it or because of it. I just need to know what it is.

“Tell me anyway,” I say. “All of it.”

“This is going to be hard for me.” She purses her lips. “Don’t interrupt me, okay? Not until the end.”

“I promise.”

She nods her head and takes a jerky, jagged breath, her eyes still cast downward.

“You may or may not remember the Halloween of senior year. College, not high school. When I called you that night, you were at a party. It was loud. Really, really loud, and you needed to call me back because we couldn’t hear each other.”

I do remember, but I also promised not to talk, so I grunt an “uh-huh” to let her know I’m following.

“Something happened that night...” She pauses here, clearing her throat. She rubs her hands together, and I can hear her breathing—shallow and jerky. Jesus, what happened? I’m about to reach for her, to try to comfort her, when she continues. “That night, I found out I was pregnant, Joe.”

Wait. “What?”

She looks up at me. “You said you wouldn’t interrupt.”

I stare at her, a million questions going through my mind, but I say nothing. I nod once. My heart has started pounding, almost uncomfortably, but I need her to keep talking.

“We’d had sex right before going back to school. The condom broke, remember? I promised I’d get the morning-after pill, but I...I was going back to school, and I was so busy, and I...oh, god, Joe, I forgot.” Tears snake down her face, glistening in the silvery darkness of a rainy Skagway night. “I never got the pill. I was two months pregnant by the time I figured it out.”

Jesus Christ.

There's this strange coldness in my stomach as I process what she's saying.

Harper was pregnant with my baby ten years ago.

Harper was pregnant. With my baby. Ten years ago.

Harper was pregnant with—

“I called you that night to tell you, to talk it out with you, to try to figure out what to do. I was so young. We were so young. We weren't ready to be parents.”

This statement hits me funny. I don't like the way she uses the word “we.”

Maybe I was ready to be a parent. Maybe I—

“But when you couldn't hear me, when you couldn't talk, at first, I decided that was—I don't know—a reprieve, maybe. A chance for me to think. While I waited for you to call me back, my mind went wild. If I had a baby...if I had to be a mom...I wouldn't be able to travel. My life would be over. You'd want to keep it. I knew you'd want the baby, but Joe, I wasn't ready to be a mom. Nowhere near ready. I had barely processed my mother's death. I wasn't done with college. I had dreams. I had plans. I couldn't—I mean, Joe, I didn't want...”

She pauses, rubbing her hands on her knees.

That coldness in my gut starts spreading, fanning out to my groin, to my heart. It makes me shiver. It makes my voice hard.

“Did you get an abortion?”

“I made an appointment to have one.”

“Jesus,” I murmur, blinking my suddenly burning eyes. She killed it. She killed our baby. My heart twists so painfully, it makes my stomach flip over. Oh my god. Oh my god. “I'm gonna be sick.”

“Wait! Joe, wait! I have to tell you—”



It's too late. I stand up and lurch forward, my dinner from two hours ago coming up quick and splattering all over the mud just outside of the shed. I cough up more, and then stagger backward to my seat, leaning my head back on the wooden planks with my eyes closed. I can't look at her. I can barely process the horror of what she's saying to me.

"Joe," she says softly, tears in her voice. "Please, just listen."

"You killed our baby," I say. "How could you do that?"

"I couldn't," she sobs, raising her head to look at me. "I couldn't. I didn't! That's what I'm trying to tell you."

I open my eyes. "What? What do you mean?"

"I went to the appointment," she says, her voice small. "They had to do an ultrasound first...before the, you know, the procedure. And I heard her heartbeat. And I—"

"Her?" I gasp. "Her? A girl? A...daughter?"

"Please," she begs me. "Please let me keep going. You have no idea how hard this is for me."

For her? Holy shit...how hard this is for her? Fuck, I just found out that I had a daughter at some point in time. There was a day, on this earth, when I was a father...and I never even knew it. I feel like I've been run over by a car. I look at Harper, and from the way she whimpers, then sobs, I know my face says everything I'm feeling—betrayal, disbelief, rage.

"I...I heard her heartbeat, so I couldn't do it. I couldn't get the abortion." She takes a long, deep breath, but it isn't smooth and fluid; it's choppy and broken.

"Keep going."

"I didn't know what to do. I—I still didn't want to be a mother. I couldn't, Joe. I wasn't ready. I didn't want a baby." She wraps her arms around her body. It occurs to me that she's probably cold, and I'm wearing a jacket, but I don't offer it to her. "I moved in with my aunt Charlotte in Oregon and decided to have it." She winces before looking back at me. "I never went to Chile. I was in Oregon. Pregnant."

Holy shit.

So, she lied that whole time. All those emails from Chile about traveling the world and working abroad. And those later, heartbreaking fucking missives about how she didn't want to be tied down to me anymore, about how I wasn't what she wanted, and she was breaking up with me once and for all.

And me? Stupid, fucking, naïve me. I still didn't give up. I still wrote to her every day until she eventually blocked me. Only after three months of returned emails due to an "unknown recipient" did I finally give up on her.

Meanwhile, she had made the decision—the cold-blooded choice—to break my fucking heart. And she'd done it on purpose to keep me in the dark about my child.

"I decided to find a family for her," she continues. "I met her adoptive parents, Joe. I chose them for her. They were a little older, in their thirties, and couldn't have kids. Really kind and fun. Big backyard. Dogs. A perfect family for—"

"Shut up," I mutter.

"W-What?"

"She didn't need a family. She had a family...and it was me."

Harper takes a choppy breath and uses the back of her hands to wipe her tears away.

"But you didn't give me that option, did you?" I demand, my voice low with fury, my body cold with shock. "And that was against the law, Harper. It was against the law to put my child up for adoption without my consent."

She stares at me, her arms still wrapped around her body. She's not crying anymore. Though her eyes are watery and red, no more tears fall. She's heartless. Emotionless. Colder than I ever realized. The person sitting in front of me right now feels like a complete stranger.

Lightning strikes. Thunder booms.

"Do you want to hear the rest?" she asks, her voice clipped. "Or should I go?"

“Finish it,” I say, feeling so weak and so fucking sad, I wish the earth would offer a gaping hole beneath my feet, and swallow me whole. “Finish this fucking horror story.”

“Her birth was traumatic. I almost died from blood loss. I was unconscious for days, and it took weeks to recover. I was told I’d never be able to conceive naturally again.” She pauses for a second, her voice far away when she continues. “I didn’t want to come home after that, so I didn’t. Not for years. Not for five long years.”

Right this minute, I don’t care what Harper went through, or how she felt about giving up our daughter. I only have one question:

“Where is she?”

“I told you. She was adopted by a really great—”

“Where is she?” I repeat through gritted teeth.

“I don’t know for sure,” she whispers.

“Where the fuck is my daughter?” I scream at her, spittle collecting at the corners of my mouth and tears streaming down my blood-red cheeks.

“I don’t know!” she says. “I’m in touch with her adoptive mother via an adoption registry—”

“I want that information.”

“Joe, she has a life. She has parents who love her.”

“Damn right she does. One parent who loves her. One,” I say, my voice lethal. “And he’s sitting right here.”

“You don’t understand. I cared about her. I did. I made the decision I thought was best for her.”

“No, Harper,” I say, clasping my hands together so I don’t reach over and shake her, or—god forbid—something worse. “You made the decision that was best for you. Not her. And not me.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “That’s not true. You have no idea how hard—”

“You’re right!” I thunder, competing with the pounding rain. “I had no idea! Because you never told me anything!”

She stands up and leans against the entrance of the shed. “I’m going to go.”

“There she is.”

“I told you,” she says softly, looking at me over her shoulder. “I told you that you’d hate me.”

Her words hurt. They fucking hurt me. Because there’s more truth in them than I want to admit. Right this minute, I fucking hate her. I hate Harper Stewart. And I never, ever thought that was possible.

“I thought I could forgive you anything,” I say, staring down at the concrete floor. My stomach flips over again, but nothing comes up because it’s empty. My heart’s empty, too, or feels that way anyway. I’m so angry at her, I want to be mean. I want to hurt her as much as this conversation is hurting me. “I was wrong.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I always knew you wouldn’t be able to forgive me for this. It’s why I stayed away. It’s why I left you alone. It’s why I always said we didn’t have a second chance in the cards.”

Why isn’t she falling apart? Why isn’t she on her knees, crying and screaming, like I want to? Why is she so fucking calm?

“We could’ve had a f-family,” I say, my voice breaking on a sob. I don’t fucking care if I’m crying like a baby. How the fuck am I supposed to act? “All these years, Harp. We could’ve been together with—with our d-daughter. Our little girl.”

“Only in your head, Joe,” she says. Her voice is level and gentle; she’s not trying to be mean, even though her words slice painfully through my soul. “I was just a kid. I wasn’t ready to be a mom, to be a wife. I just wasn’t. I loved you. God knows I did. But the timing was wrong for me back then...and no matter how hard I tried to tell you that—how hard I tried to make you understand that I wasn’t ready to be

married or be a mom or settle down in Skagway right out of college—you didn't want to hear it. You only wanted what you wanted, and I—”

“I think you need to leave.”

I can't listen to this anymore. I've heard all I can bear for now.

“I'm going,” she says. She steps out in the rain. It pelts her hair, crushing the blonde strands against her scalp. She starts walking away, then turns around to face me. It's hard to hear her clearly through the rain, so I strain forward and half-listen, half-lip read. “I meant what I said at your house, Joe. I loved you then. I love you now. I always will.”

Her words make me so furious, I see white.

“This is not how you treat someone you fucking love!” I jump up from my seat and scream at her. “Go! Just fucking go!”

She turns around and walks away, into the wet, windy night.

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“Joe? Joe! We're closing. You gotta go home.”

The voice is fuzzy, like I'm underwater. The woodgrain of the table I'm sitting at is so close to my eyeballs, it's blurry. Am I lying on this table? Huh. Okay.

“Joe. Can you get up? Can you walk?”

“Eh,” I mutter. “Ews-as-ka.”

Why is it so fucking hard to say, Who's asking?

“Is that Native you're talking, Joe? What's that mean?”

I don't speak Alutiiq, you dumb fuck. But my mouth is parched. Make yourself useful: get me a beer.

“Geez,” says the voice. “Can someone call Sandra Clearwater? Tell her the sheriff's fucked up and needs a ride home?”

Another voice I don't recognize says, "I know her. I'll do it."

Good. You do that. She'll just love that.

I close my eyes again, and the next thing I hear is my cousin's voice.

"Joseph? Jesus H. Christ, Joseph!" She's pissed. Why is she so fucking pissed? Calm down, Sandra. Have a drink. "Bart, help me get him up. Thank God you're home tonight. Can you imagine me having to deal with this myself? For the love of all things holy..."

I'm hefted up by strong hands under my arms.

"Thanks for the call, Grover. Sorry about the inconvenience."

"No worries, Sandra. Thanks for coming so quickly."

Rain drenches my head and shoulders the second we get outside. I turn my head upward and try to catch drops in my sand-dry mouth. Sand-dry. Like Sandra. That makes me laugh.

"Stop fuckin' laughing. We gotta get you in the car, Joseph."

I look up, blinking my eyes in an effort to focus on my cousin and her husband. I notice Bart first.

"Bart? Hey, Bart! What're you doin' here? Lez' get a'drink!"

Bart laughs, and Sandra tells him it's not fucking funny.

"No' funny. No' funny," I say, knocking my head against the door frame of the car as they shove me in the back seat. I look up at Sandra, who leans over me to buckle my seat belt. "I'm a dad, Sand-dry. I's no' funny."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Non...non...non...sense!" I exclaim. My head is very heavy and very poudy. And oh, shit. "I need to barf."

"Don't you dare fucking vomit in my car, Joseph—"

“Too late,” I say as puke slides down the front of my shirt and pools on my lap.

“You fucking shithead!”

“Someone’s in trouble,” I mumble.

Someone’s in trouble. Someone’s in...

Someone makes a sound so loud, like a cross between a scream and a sob, it sounds like an injured animal. It’s so loud, I swear I can almost feel it. It’s almost like it was coming from me.

...trouble.

# Chapter 8

Harper

After such a devastating confrontation with Joe, I'm like a ghost the following week.

I go through the motions of working, of sleeping, of eating, but I'm not really here. I'm tired and sad. I'm hormonal and alone. If I wasn't expecting a child, I'd run away. I'd run so far away from everything here, I don't know how I'd ever find my way home again.

I knew the ramifications of my decision all those years ago, of course. I knew that Joe and I were finished the moment I signed Raven over to the Calvins. I knew that any possible chance of a future together was destroyed.

He will never forgive me, trust me, or love me again as long as he lives. I'm certain of that.

But I'm also keeping our baby—this baby, and I'm positive, once he cools down, Joe will want to be a part of our child's life. I have no idea how to co-parent with someone who despises me so thoroughly, but we have months to figure out a solution; I don't need to think about that right now.

I have other things on my mind today—specifically, the fact that a single mother needs a support network, and because I don't have Joe, I'm going to need my family.

It happens to be a rare evening when we're all here—well, except for Tanner, who's in Haines overnight with McKenna—I've decided it's time for me to spill the beans. All the beans. Every last bean right down to the one growing in my tummy right this minute.

“Pass the potatoes,” says Sawyer to Reeve.

As she does, Reeve turns to Dad, who's sitting on her other side. “How was today's Hike and Float?”

“Ask Parker,” says Dad with a chuckle.



Parker takes a long, dramatic breath and sighs. “Five teenage boys all trying to dunk me in the Taiya River for two straight hours!”

“Pshaw! You loved it.”

“Lies!” cries Parker. “I did not, Dad. Two of them were almost as big as me.”

“Well, I would have loved it,” says Reeve, pouring herself a glass of water. She holds up a pitcher. “Anyone else?”

“Refill your Paw-Paw, dear,” says Gran, sliding his glass to Reeve.

“Water’s for bathing,” announces Paw-Paw.

“Tell that to your Gerd.”

“Beers and Brawls was fine,” Hunter says to Reeve. “Thanks for asking.”

“Beers and Brawls is always fine,” says Reeve.

“Sassypants.”

My youngest sibling sticks out her tongue at my oldest sibling, and they both laugh. Then everyone tucks into dinner, and it’s suddenly quiet.

It’s time.

I put down the fork I’ve been playing with and clear my throat. Gran, sitting to my left, looks at me, raising her eyebrows. I smile at her weakly, and as though she knows I have something to say, she places her fork and knife on the side of her plate, then nods at me to go ahead.

“Hey, everyone...I just wanted to...um...”

They all look up at me, in various stages of eating, chewing, swallowing, or drinking. But like Gran, they seem to understand that something important is about to be said, and they give me their attention.

“What’s up, Harper?” asks my dad.

“Um.” I reach for my water glass and take a quick sip.  
“Yeah. I need to talk to all of you.”

“I’d wager it’s important?”

“It is.”

My father looks around the busy dining room, where four other tables are full. Our guests are having dinner, too. Sometimes we get interrupted during meals—our guests stop by our table with general questions about Alaska or to reconfirm the tour they booked for tomorrow—but right now, blessedly, everyone appears to be involved in their own families’ affairs and conversations.

“Go on,” he says.

“Most of you have been on my case over the last two weeks, asking if I’m okay. You’ve noticed, um...that I’m acting a little different.”

My father’s face goes ashen. “Are you sick?”

“Oh, Dad! No! I’m okay. I’m not sick,” I rush to reassure him. “I’m just...”

“You’re just what?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Reeve covers her mouth with her hands, and Parker looks like she’s going to faint. Sawyer snorts with quiet laughter, and Hunter looks at me thoughtfully, like he’s trying to put the pieces of this statement together. Dad stares down at the table while Gran quietly reaches for my hand and holds it tight.

“Who’s the father?” asks Dad.

“Joe Raven.”

Sawyer snickers.

“Shut up, Sawyer,” says Hunter, then adds: “Does he know yet?”

“Yeah,” I say. “He knows.”

My dad looks up at me, blue eyes searing. “Then why isn’t Joe here, too?”

I take a deep breath, my cheeks flaming with heat. I underestimated how embarrassing it would be to share this news with my father.

“We’re not together, Dad. It was a—a one-time thing. Joe and I aren’t a couple.”

Hunter claps his hands together and whoops. “But you will be!”

I shake my head. “No. No. Um, Joe and I are...it’s not going to happen.”

Gran squeezes my hand again. Thank God for you, Gran.

“Why not?” asks Reeve. “Joe’s been in love with you for, like, ever. It’s obvious, Harp. He’d totally marry you.”

“I agree. Joe’s a good man. He’ll do the right thing,” says my father.

Oh, god. Here comes the hard part.

“Joe and I aren’t speaking right now,” I say. “Um...oh, god, this is hard. Um...so, ten years ago, when I was at UDub, I got pregnant with Joe’s baby.” I give them a second to let them process this news before continuing. “I—I never went to Chile. I stayed with Aunt Charlotte during that time. I had the baby and found a family to adopt her.”

My father’s eyes are so wide now—so disbelieving and crushed—I can’t look into them anymore. Gran doesn’t let go of my hand, however, which helps me find the strength to keep talking.

“I named her Raven when she was born, but her adoptive parents renamed her Moriah Raven. She’s nine years old now. She’s happy and smart. I—I wanted her to have a good life, and that’s exactly what she has.”

“Jesus, Harp,” mutters Hunter. “You had a kid? That’s heavy.”

Sawyer isn’t smiling anymore, and Parker looks distressed.

“You gave up your baby?” asks my father. “Without telling us? Without asking us for help?”

“I didn’t ‘give her up.’ I didn’t want to be a mom,” I say. “I wasn’t ready to be a parent. I was still a kid myself, processing the loss of my own mother. I made the choice I thought was best for both of us, me and Raven.”

“But to let someone else raise your child—”

“The Calvins are wonderful parents,” I assure him. “They have a beautiful home. A huge backyard. Dogs. She’s thriving. It was the right thing to do.”

“You could’ve talked to me, Harper!”

“No, Dad,” I say softly. “Obviously, I couldn’t.” I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I want him to understand. “I couldn’t talk to anyone who might have tried to pressure me into keeping her. At the time, that was out of the question for me.”

He puts his hands flat on the table like he’s going to stand up and leave.

“Gary,” says Gran, her voice laced with iron, her grip on my hand just as strong. “Calm down. Let her finish talking.”

My father sits back in his chair, staring down at his lap.

“Raven’s birth was...bad. Really bad. Her placenta... well, I mean, I lost a lot of blood, and I needed surgery, and I was told I’d never be able to conceive naturally.” I don’t know where it comes from, this sudden well of joy, but I feel my lips wobble, then spread, and soon, I’m smiling so wide for this baby, for this unexpected mercy, this beautiful second chance. “I never expected this to happen, but it did. I’m pregnant again, and this time, I’m keeping it.”

“Oh my god!” cries Reeve, beaming at me. “We’re gonna have a baby around here? I’m going to be an aunt?”

“Aunt Reeve,” I say, nodding at her.

“When?”

“If my math’s right, he or she’ll be here by the first week in April.”

“Awesome!” she says, picking up her fork and spearing a potato. “And so nice not to be the youngest anymore.”

“Are you worried?” asks Parker. “After what happened last time?”

“I’ve been in touch with a perinatologist obstetrician in Anchorage. She specializes in high-risk pregnancies. I’m headed up there in two weeks for my initial appointment, and I’ll probably deliver there. But as long as everything looks okay, I’ll have most of my ultrasound appointments at the clinic in Skagway.”

“Can I go with you?” she asks, her eyes worried, and her smile shy. “Up to Anchorage?”

“I’d love that, Park.”

“I’m coming too,” says Gran. “I’m not letting you two have all the fun.”

“In case you’ve all forgotten, we’ve got a business to run,” growls my father. He’s angry with me. Disappointed. And that hurts, but the women in my family are showing up for me so spectacularly, I can handle my father’s displeasure. “Three down’s going to make that awfully difficult.”

“But not impossible,” says Paw-Paw, leaning forward to grin at me over Gran. “Ain’t done a tour in years, but I can pick up some slack. Congrats, Harp. Family could use a new addition.”

Oh, man, I love you, Paw-Paw.

“Gran and I can prep the meals the day before,” says Reeve, “and I’ll keep everything humming here while you three are gone. I promise!”

“Sawyer, can you handle a Yukon tour alone if necessary?”

“Of course I can. Or, heck, I could always ask Quinn Morgan to come along if I needed a hand.” He shoots a look at Parker. “Quinn’s back in town. Did you hear?”

“Shut up, Sawyer,” she mutters.

“So that’s settled,” says Gran, bringing my hand to her lips for a kiss before letting it go. “Business will run as smoothly as ever, Gary. Parker and I will go to Anchorage with Harper. The rest of you will hold down the fort.”

“Congrats, Harp,” says Sawyer. “It’s super weird that you’re having a baby, but cool, I guess. I knew something was up!”

Hunter stands up and comes around to my seat. He kisses me on top of the head. “You’re gonna be a great mom, Harp.”

“Thanks, Hunter.”

I look up at my dad, who’s watching me with hurt in his eyes.

“Dad,” I say, “I really want you to be on board with this. My baby needs a granddad.”

He skewers me with eyes as blue as my own. “This is a lot to digest, Harp. I’m surprised. I’m...shocked. I’m disappointed. I have a granddaughter somewhere out there, and I didn’t even know about her. Never even met her.”

“I could ask for a picture of her. I’m in contact with her mother.”

“You’re her mother,” he shoots back.

“No, I’m not,” I say, raising my chin. “And frankly, I’m getting a little tired of explaining and defending myself. I shouldn’t have lied to all of you, and I’m sorry about that, but if I had told you the truth, you may have tried to force me to do something, to be something, that I wasn’t ready to do or to be. But I’m telling you the truth now, and I’m also telling you that I’m going to have a baby in the spring. It’d mean the world if you could support me.”

My dad blinks several times, then clears his throat. He reaches for his glass of water and takes a big sip.

“I’m here for you, Harp,” he says softly, his voice raspy with emotion. “You know I’ll love any child of yours. I just need a couple of days to get my head around it all.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I tell him over a sudden lump in my throat.

Hunter sits back down and asks Parker to pass him the corn. Sawyer tells Reeve that her biscuits have the same consistency as cement. Gran whispers something to Paw-Paw, who chuckles merrily. And my dad, who still looks shaken, nods his head at me, then offers a very small smile.

Thank you, God, for a little peace.

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Another handful of days go by, and I still don't hear a word from Joe. It's been a week and a half since our blow-up in Centennial Park. Ten days, and...nothing.

I've been doing my best to give him space, but my first prenatal appointment in Anchorage is coming up soon, and Joe has a right to be there. So I rustle up my courage on a gray and gloomy Tuesday afternoon and stop by the police station after leading Beers, Brawls and Brothels. At least if I catch him at work, he'll have no choice but to be civil.

“Hey, Vera.”

“Hello, Harper Stewart,” says the dispatcher. “How can I help you?”

“Is Joe here?”

“No, dear. He's not.”

I gesture to a bank of seats behind me. “Can I wait?”

“You'll be waiting a while. Joe's out.”

“Out?”

“Using up some of his vacation time.”

“Oh,” I say. I can't remember a time that Joe took a vacation. He lives for his job. It's everything to him. “He planned a trip, huh?”

“No, ma'am. Spontaneous vacation. But he's entitled to the time off all the same.”

“I see.”

“You want to talk to Aaron? He’s around somewhere.”

“No thanks, Vera. It’s personal,” I say. “I’ll, um...I’ll figure out something.”

“I guess I could try calling him for you...if it’s urgent and such.”

“It can keep,” I say. “Thanks, anyway.”

I exit the station and hop back into the Jeep, trying to figure out what to do next. I have to talk to him. I have no other option but to drive to Joe’s house and see if his vacation is actually a staycation. When I get there, his car is gone, but I knock on the door anyway. I’m looking into one of his windows when I hear a voice behind me.

“You got some nerve comin’ ’round here, Harper Stewart.”

I turn to find Sandra Clearwater standing at the foot of Joe’s deck steps. The expression on her face is lethal.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Hi, Sandra.”

“You better leave before I make you,” she says, plodding up the steps. The keys in her hand jingle.

“I get it that you don’t like me, but I don’t respond well to threats.”

“You Barbie-doll-look-alike bitch,” she says. “I should deck you for what you did to him.” Her eyes slide to my belly. “But I guess I’ll wait a few more months for the honor of kicking your ass.”

He told her that I’m pregnant.

“Where is he?” I ask, stepping back to block Joe’s front door so Sandra has no choice but to talk to me.

Her eyes narrow. “Am I here to answer your questions, princess? No, I am not. I’m here to water some fucking plants. Now, get out of my way.”

“I need to talk to him.”

“You need to go—the fuck—to hell.”



“Sandra, please.”

“Please...what?” Her face contorts. “Do you have any idea how much you’ve fucking destroyed him? He would have done anything for you, you piece of shit, qat’sqaq. Casuutekegkunaku. Leave him alone. You hear me?”

I step away from the door, and Sandra steps forward, unlocking it. Before she can slam it shut—

“Sandra!” I speak fast. “My first appointment is with a perinatologist at the children’s hospital in Anchorage. Providence Hospital. Tuesday after next. Joe’s welcome to meet me there. If he...if he wants to. Tell him to text me for details.”

For a second, she doesn’t move—just stands in the doorway with her back to me. Then, she nods once, reaches for the doorknob, and pulls the door closed.

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Joe

When I woke up on Sandra’s couch almost two weeks ago, my head hurt so much, I could barely stand it. Four Advil and half a gallon of water later, sitting at the kitchen table with her and Bart, I told them everything that Harper had told me the night before.

I cried. I raged. I called Harper Stewart every unsavory name in the book—names that I wouldn’t let another man call her without dislocating his jaw.

“It was too much at once,” said Sandra.

“What’re you going to do?” asked Bart.

“You should go over to Kodiak and have a think,” said my cousin. “Stay on Afognak, up at Mark’s lodge. Tribal lands. Be good for you.”

“A hunting and fishing lodge? During high season? Yeah, Sandra. I’m sure they’ve got plenty of rooms available at the last minute.”

“He’s my second cousin on my dad’s side.” She shrugged. “I’ll call him. He’ll fit you in.”

I knew for sure that I’d be shit at my job for the foreseeable future, so as soon as she heard from Mark, I took Sandra’s advice. I cashed in two weeks of vacation time and caught a puddle-jumper to Kodiak Island. And yes, being here in Afognak has been good for me in some ways; without work, I have loads of time to think. But so much thinking has got me in knots, too.

Somewhere in this world, I have a daughter named Raven—Moriah Raven—who is about nine years old. And I don’t know her, and she doesn’t know me. It makes me sick to my stomach, then taut with rage.

I want to know her. I want her to know me. And yet, Harper’s words circle in my head. She has a life. She has parents who love her. Who am I to invade her safe, stable, happy life? Is that what a loving parent would do?

I’m grateful Sandra suggested that I get away to this remote part of the world. Because if I’d stayed at home, I may have gone off half-cocked—reached out to these adoptive parents and tried to muscle my way into my daughter’s life. And that would have been wrong.

My anger is with Harper for keeping my daughter from me. My frustration is with Harper with her lies and deceit, with the years I’ve lost knowing my child.

But if—no, when—I finally meet Moriah Raven, I don’t want it to hurt her or traumatize her. I don’t want it to cause fear or anxiety or insecurity for me to suddenly appear in her life. If her parents have been good to her, as Harper claims they’ve been, I will reach out to them first and follow their lead about meeting my daughter. I would like to know her in a way that’s organic and peaceful for all of us, but especially for her.

When I get back to Skagway, I’ll ask Harper for the name of the adoption registry she used, and I’ll reach out to the Calvins on my own.

Ask Harper.

Jesus, even the thought of having to speak to her makes the fury inside of me boil and hiss. I'm so angry with her—so hurt and betrayed—I don't know how I'll ever be able to look at her again.

And yet...

She's fucking pregnant.

With our second child.

And God knows I want to be a part of this baby's life. I'm not missing out on everything with my second baby like I did with Moriah Raven. God help me if Harper tries to—

Ring. Ring, Ring.

It's got to be my cousin. She's the only person who knows where I am.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey. You doing okay?"

"Better than I was."

"You sound calmer, at least."

"Two weeks in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do and nothing to drink will have that effect."

"So...you come to any conclusions about everything?"

I shrug, leaning my elbows on the deck railing. "Some."

"Like?"

"I'm going to reach out to the adoptive parents and ask about how I can be a part of my nine-year-old daughter's life."

"Good."

"I'm gonna let them take the lead, you know? I'll do whatever they think is best for her."

"Smart. They're her parents. Whether you like it or not, they are."

It hurts when Sandra says this, and I take a sharp breath in. I want to yell back, I'm her parent! But I know I'm not. I didn't even know she existed until two weeks ago.

My rage and frustration bubble. It wasn't my choice to let her be adopted. I never would have said yes to that. I could have been, I would have been, I should have been her father... but Sandra's right. I'm not.

"I want what's best for her," I say. "And barging into her life out of the blue doesn't feel like the right move."

"You've got good instincts, Joseph."

I take another breath, relieved that it's smoother and deeper now.

"What about the other stuff?" Sandra asks.

"Like what?"

"The baby. You want to be a part of the new baby's life?"

"Fuck yes," I mutter. "That's my kid."

"Right. So, uh, how're you going to—you know, make that happen with you-know-fucking-who? How're you going to make it work?"

"I have no fucking clue."

"I was thinking," says Sandra. "You know, that job in Wasilla is still open. Maybe you should consider it."

"Move away from my kid?"

"No. Move away from his or her mother."

"It's a fourteen-hour drive to Wasilla."

"A lot shorter by plane."

"Sandra—"

"Just hear me out," she says. "Okay?"

"Fine. Talk."

"So, you apply for the job in Wasilla, and let's say you get it. You move up there and start fresh, right? That'd be good for you. Every summer and Christmas break, you have your

kid up there with you. Rest of the year, he or she is down here for school and such with Harper.”

I want to keep an open mind, but this scenario is so different from everything I’ve always dreamed of, it makes me feel hollow and alone. I never imagined myself as a single parent in a town fourteen hours away from Skagway. But for the first time in my entire life, I can’t see a future for me and Harper either. I’m in the weeds—the tall, deep, never-ending weeds. And I can’t see a way out.

“Food for thought, okay?”

“Yeah. Sure,” I say, though I’m not really considering it.

“You can ask for whatever you want right now. Remember that.”

This conversation is hurting, so I’m eager to wrap it up.

“I should go.”

“Yeah, okay,” she says. “When are you coming back?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Huh.”

“You got something on your mind, Sandra?”

“I went to water your plants yesterday, and Harper was at your house.”

My stomach drops. “And?”

“And she wanted me to let you know that she has her first baby appointment the Tuesday after next. In Anchorage.”

“Why Anchorage? Why not at the clinic in Skagway?”

“I don’t know. I’m just telling you what she said, cuz. She has her first appointment with a perinatologist in Anchorage. At Providence Children’s Hospital. She said you were welcome to go...you know, to the appointment. If you want.”

My fucking heart swells with something I don’t want to feel, then instantly fists, and hardens.

“Thanks for telling me.”

“You gonna go?”

“I don’t know yet,” I say, even though I can’t think of a single fucking reason why I shouldn’t go.

“You gonna reach out to her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay,” she says, backing off. “It’s a tough situation.”

“Fucking facts, cuz.”

“Talk soon?”

“I’ll call you when I’m home.”

“Tang’rciqamken, iluwaq.”

“Bye, Sandra.”

I hang up the phone and hold it in my hand, looking out at the water, in the general direction of Anchorage.

A perinatologist. Hmm. A perinatologist. What exactly is that?

I open an internet browser on my phone and look up what a perinatologist does. Google explains that a perinatologist is an OB/GYN who specializes in high-risk pregnancies.

High-risk. I definitely don’t love the sound of that.

I close my eyes, trying to remember what Harper said about her first pregnancy. I was so distracted by the news that she had had a child nine years ago and had another on the way, that recall is difficult. I concentrate hard and bits and pieces come back to me: traumatic...almost died...blood loss...unconscious. And then I remember what she said the first time she told me she was pregnant—she told me that she’d had an operation years ago while she was “away” and that the doctor told her she’d never be able to have children naturally.

Huh. I wince, taking a deep breath and letting it go slowly. Fuck.

She’s seeing a special doctor because she almost died giving birth to Moriah Raven, and she’s scared it could happen

again. And as much as I don't want to care about Harper, I can't help it. I do. I fucking care.

I open a text box and stare at it for a long moment before typing.

Joe

Sandra told me about your appointment in Anchorage. I need the details. I'll be there.

Almost instantly, three dots appear, cycling, telling me that Harper's reading my words.

Harper

I'm really glad. Are you okay?

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Joe

Will all appointments be in Anchorage?

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Harper

No. Most will be in Skagway.

You can come to any appointment you want.

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Joe

I'll be coming to all.

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Harper

Good. I'm so sorry, Joe. I'm so, so sorry about everything. I'm hoping we can talk soon.

I close my eyes, clenching my jaw so tight, it's a wonder it doesn't pop. Finally, I write back:

Joe

I have a nine-year-old daughter who has no idea who I am. Who may believe I was complicit in giving her away. Sorry doesn't mean much to me right now. And I'm nowhere near ready to talk to you.

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Harper

I understand.

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Joe

Loop me in on any upcoming appointments.

To be clear: I want this baby, Harper. I'm going to be active in his or her life.

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Harper

I know. I want that, too.

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Joe

I think that talking about the baby should be the extent of our interaction. I don't need your apologies or questions about how I'm doing.

Those three dots appear again, cycling for a minute, then disappearing. I stare at the screen, hoping my words hurt her and yet, willing a response from her at the same time. Finally, the dots appear again, and I'm waiting on tenterhooks for what she has to say.

Harper



Okay.

I put my phone in my back pocket, crossing my arms over my chest. I think about Moriah Raven and about the baby Harper's carrying. I think about the fact that Harper almost died all those years ago and wonder if that informed her decision to give our baby away or if she'd already made her decision before she gave birth.

My heart hurts for the pain and fear she must have suffered.

I tell my heart to shut the fuck up.

I could've been there for her. I would've been there for her. I should've been there for her.

But she didn't offer me that respect, care, or courtesy nine years ago.

I'll be damned if I offer it to her now.

# Chapter 9

Harper

“Joe said he’d meet us here?”

I’m sitting on a bench, outside of the main entrance to the Providence Alaska Children’s Hospital, with Gran on one side of me, and Parker on the other.

“Yeah,” I say, rubbing my stomach absent-mindedly. “He should be here any minute.”

I haven’t seen Joe in person since that rainy night at Centennial Park when I told him everything. We haven’t really spoken either. We’ve just traded texts twice—once when he asked me about this appointment, and once more to confirm that he would be here.

I’m nervous to see him.

I’m scared to see hate in his eyes when I’ve only ever seen love.

“Parker,” says Gran, “there’s a cafeteria inside. Would you go get us four coffees, honey?”

“Sure,” says Parker, getting up from her seat. “I’ll be right back.”

As she heads inside, Gran puts her hand on my thigh and squeezes gently. “You doing okay?”

“I guess.”

“More nervous for the appointment or to see Joe?”

“Do I have to choose?”

“You know, one of the reasons your mama stopped having children after Reeve was because her pregnancies got tougher and tougher.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“She didn’t want to worry you kids, but her doctor told her that Reeve needed to be the last. Reeve’s placenta gave her

a good bit of trouble. Not like what happened to you, but there was some blood loss, and she had to have a D&C.”

I look at Gran’s face. “Dad knew?”

“I’m sure he did, but I don’t know how much men really absorb when it comes to stuff like that. I think Emily probably just told him she was done, and Gary agreed.”

“Thanks for telling me,” I say. “I’m sure they’re going to want my complete history, and without Mom here, I’ve got gaps.”

Gran looks beyond me. “Here he comes.”

I turn away from Gran to see Joe walking down the sidewalk toward us. Dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, a white button-down shirt, and sunglasses, he walks tall and proud with his hair braided neatly down his back. My heart swells with love, quickly chased by regret. As I stand up, I feel my hands fist at my sides and tell them to relax.

“Hello, Joe!” calls Gran.

“Hey, Mrs. Stewart,” says Joe. He stops in front of me and nods. “Harper.”

With sunglasses hiding his eyes, I can’t see the contempt that I had tried to prepare myself for. It’s a blessing, but also a curse. Eventually the glasses will come off.

“Hi, Joe,” I say softly.

“We have a few minutes,” says Gran, “and Parker’s getting us some coffee.” She gestures to the bench. “Have a seat, Joe.”

“No, thank you, ma’am. I’ll just—”

“Have a seat,” says Gran, her no-nonsense voice firm. Unyielding.

Joe reluctantly sits down, leaving a good foot of space between us, like I’ll infect him with my poor character if he chances to touch me. Gran gestures to his sunglasses; he pushes them on top of his head, then she stands in front of us

like she's our principal, and we're a couple of naughty schoolchildren.

"I want to talk to you two for a second."

I nod at her. Joe doesn't say anything.

"Emily Stewart and Sarah Raven were strong, smart women who loved you both beyond any measure," she says. "If they were here today, I figure it'd be their job to say a word or two. Since they're not, I feel it's my duty to stand in their places." She takes a deep breath and shrugs. "As for what I have to say? You can take it or leave it. Put my advice to use or forget it. That's up to you. I just need to say my peace."

"Go ahead, Gran," I say.

"Forgiveness is no easy feat, kids. It's work. It's hard. It takes mindfulness and intent. As far as I can tell, there are six steps to forgiveness," she says, taking two envelopes from her purse and handing one to each of us. "I've written them down. Just in case you're interested."

Joe scoffs, shoving the envelope in his back pocket and crossing his arms over his chest.

"Neither of you is blameless here. You both did the deed that got Harper pregnant that first time, and both of you lost something."

First, she looks at me. "One of you almost lost her life."

Then, she looks at Joe. "The other lost the chance to have a voice in the matter."

She sighs. "But as far as I can gather, that child is being raised with care and love. You've lost time, yes, but when you get to my age, you'll realize that nine years—while almost a third of your lives—is only an eighth of mine. It's not that much. You two didn't even meet until third grade, and you've been the single biggest influence on each other's lives ever since."

I hadn't realized it, but Gran's right. Moriah Raven is in the same grade now that we were in when we met. A bowl cut

and a Monster's Inc. lunchbox. The memory almost makes me smile.

"There's most of a lifetime left to get to know your first child when she's ready," she says. "And there's a whole lifetime ahead to get to know your second." She lets those words sit with us for a moment before continuing. "You're both hurt. You've betrayed each other in ways you never imagined possible and still can't believe. It'll take a lot of work to get yourselves to a good place—a lot of understanding, of trust rebuilding and forgiveness, but I never knew two people who had as much love between them as you two. Don't kid yourselves that it's suddenly gone because you're angry with each other. It's still there, and if you can hold onto it, you just might be able to find your way through all of this." She sighs. "Because bringing a baby into the world is tough enough without their parents being at each other's throats."

I never knew two people who had as much love between them as you two...don't kid yourselves that it's suddenly gone because you're angry with each other. It's still there...

Gran's words hook into my heart like a lure into the mouth of a trout. They pierce flesh. They hurt. I want them to be true, but I'm not sure they are.

"That's all I have to say." Gran looks up at the sky. "I hope that was okay, Sarah and Emily. God knows I'm no therapist, but I tried my best."

To Gran's left, Parker exits the hospital building, holding a tray of coffee.

"I'll give you a minute alone. Park and I'll be waiting inside."

Gran walks toward my sister, putting her arm around the shoulders of her middle granddaughter and leading them both back inside.

Joe and I sit on the bench, neither of us moving.

"Your grandmother's speech doesn't change anything," says Joe, arms still crossed over his chest. Stubborn.

Belligerent. Angry. “Not for me.”

“I didn’t set out to hurt you,” I say. “That was never my intention.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions, Harper.”

Ouch. I guess I’m headed to hell.

His quick dismissal raises my hackles.

I’m sorry Joe is hurt. I’m so sorry I hurt him.

But at some point, I’m going to get sick of saying it.

The more I think about it, the more certain I am that I made the right choice all those years ago...and I’ve been thinking about it a lot over the last three weeks. It hurt me when Joe called me selfish—when he said that I’d made the right choice for me, but not for him or Raven. And maybe it wasn’t the right choice for him. But I truly believe it was the right decision for her.

When Raven was born, Joe and I were college students, and neither of us had a mother still alive to support us. Joe, in fact, had no parents around to support him. Who exactly would’ve raised Raven on a day-to-day basis? His aunt, who worked full-time at the school? No. Sandra, who was already a very young teen mother with two babies? No. And on my side? Who? My father and grandparents, who already had their hands full with three kids under ten and a business to run? No, again.

This isn’t the first time that Joe’s big, beautiful ideas of what he wants trap him in tunnel vision. He gets fixated on the way he wants things to be and loses perspective about all the other variables around him that matter.

Neither Joe nor I were ready to be parents.

The Calvins, on the other hand, gave Raven everything I could have dreamed of for my daughter—so much more stability, attention, and opportunity than twenty-year-old Joe could have given her on his own, no matter what he thinks now.

“Okay, Joe,” I say, standing up. “Hell, it is.”

“Where are you going?”

I turn around. “Inside to meet the doctor.”

“I thought you wanted to talk,” he says, his eyes so narrow, I can’t read them.

“You don’t want to hear anything I have to say.”

He pushes his glasses back down so they’re hiding his eyes.

“I’m so angry at you, Harp,” he growls. “I’ve never felt anger like this. Not toward my absentee dad. Not even toward the person who mowed down my mom.” He clenches his fists as he stands up to face me. “I feel so much rage, so much frustration...I don’t know how to get through it.”

“I’m sorry for that. I’m so sorry, Joe. I really am,” I say. “But I’m about to walk into an appointment that terrifies me. If you only understood what I went through...I just—I don’t have the space, right this minute, to rehash why I did what I did ten years ago. I have too much anxiety to find room for your anger.”

“So I should just suck it up?”

“I didn’t say that,” I say, taking a shaky breath. I’ve lived most of my life avoiding confrontation. I’m not good at it. I hate it. “We can talk about what happened with Raven another time. I can explain why I did what I did when you’re ready to listen. And you can express your anger and frustration, and I will listen. But not now. Not right this minute.”

I start walking away from Joe, toward the hospital entrance.

“When?” he yells.

I stop and turn around.

“This weekend?” I suggest.

“You’re not doing the Yukon runs anymore?”

I shake my head, my hand falling on my belly. “No. I’m only doing local tours from now on. In Skagway and Dyea.”

“That’s good,” mumbles Joe.

“Saturday night?” I suggest.

“Yeah. Eight o’clock?” he asks. “My place?”

Honestly, I’d rather he come to Dyea, where I’m surrounded by my family and feel protected. It’s not that I think Joe would hurt me or anything like that, but I’m emotional and tired by the end of the day, and I’d rather be on my own turf for another difficult conversation.

“No,” I say. “Mine.”

“Fine,” he says.

“Fine.”

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“The good news, Harper, is that everything looks perfect so far,” says Dr. Kim, grinning at me.

She moves the ultrasound wand like a joystick in my vagina, and it’s a weird sensation, for sure, but I’m so distracted looking at the little black-and-white TV screen, I don’t pay it much attention. The doctor points to a tiny white blob inside a slightly larger black blob.

“There’s your baby. Embryo is implanted in the uterus. Yolk sac is a good size.” She looks at me, then Joe. “Do you two want photos to take with you?”

I look up at Joe, who smiles at me with pure wonder. His voice is tender, almost reverent. “Yeah. Please.”

“Me too,” I say, still staring at Joe.

Hope makes me stupid. But just as an answering smile starts to tug at the corners of my lips, Joe’s face hardens. I watch it happen. I watch him remind himself of how much he hates me.

It hurts. Fuck, but it hurts. I turn away quickly, blinking my eyes.

“Here you go!” says the doctor, handing us each a small picture.



I stare at the little white blob.

“Hello, baby,” I whisper.

The wand is pulled gently out of my body. “Harper, I’m going to let you get dressed, and then we’ll meet in my office for a chat. Are you comfortable with Joe joining us?”

I wiggle my feet out of the stirrups and sit up, keeping my lap covered with a white paper sheet as I slide my eyes to Joe. I’m positive he doesn’t like it that he could be sidelined at my will, but he has the good sense not to strong-arm me, which is exactly why I decide to include him.

“Joe can be there.”

Dr. Kim gives us instructions on how to find her office, then leaves us alone.

“Thanks,” says Joe, “for saying yes.”

“Can you turn around, please?”

“I’ve already seen it all, Harp.”

“Turn around. Now.”

He rolls his eyes, but gives me his back as I wipe the ultrasound goop off my privates, then pull on my panties and jeans.

“That was cool,” he says softly, staring at a photo of a mother and baby on the wall.

“Yeah. Really cool,” I agree, buttoning my pants. The contempt I saw on his face a minute ago is still rattling me.

“I was sorta hoping we’d hear a heartbeat today, but I guess it’s too early.”

“Next time,” I tell him. “You can turn around now.”

“Next time?”

“Yeah. We’ll hear it next time.” I slip my feet into tennis shoes. “The heart beats at eight weeks.”

His eyes narrow. He clenches his jaw. His tone edges toward nasty when he speaks to me.

“Remembering that from last time?”

“No,” I say honestly. “I read it somewhere recently.”

“But you did hear it last time. Her heartbeat.”

“Of course,” I say, remembering the racing ‘whoosh whoosh’ of Raven’s tiny heart. “Hearing her heartbeat is what changed my mind. It’s what made me decide to have her.”

“Why?” he demands, his face contorting with anger. “Why’d you have her if you didn’t want to keep her?”

“Because she deserved to live,” I say simply.

“But not to have a father who loved her.”

I lift my chin. “She does have a father who loves her.”

Then, before Joe can get another snarky comment in, I open the door and leave.

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Joe

On the drive to Dyea that Saturday evening, I go over the details of our appointment with Dr. Kim, assimilating everything I know about Harper’s first pregnancy into what to expect with this one.

Harper had a very dangerous condition with Moriah Raven called placenta percreta, which may have been prevented, or at least better managed, with regular ultrasounds and a planned c-section...which is exactly what Dr. Kim suggested for this pregnancy. Based on an April 1<sup>st</sup> due date, we’ve tentatively scheduled the baby’s birth for March 24<sup>th</sup>, but that date could change based on Harper’s and the baby’s health.

Even though Harper had told me that she almost died giving birth to our daughter, hearing Dr. Kim read excerpts from the ten-year-old surgical report made it clear how much Harper suffered. It hurt to imagine how frightened Harper must have been and how very alone, with only her aunt for support. I wish she’d allowed me to be there for her, but

Harper has always been so stubbornly self-sufficient, I'm not totally surprised she wanted to handle things on her own. That part of her makes me crazy sometimes.

No matter how angry or hurt I am, I have promised myself that this time around, she won't be alone. Whether she likes it or not, I plan to stand by her side every step of the way, and I will use any measures at my disposal to keep her, and our baby, safe.

For instance, getting to Anchorage from Skagway is not easy. It's either a seventeen-hour drive or four hours via two commercial flights, connecting through Juneau. But because I'm the sheriff of Skagway, I can easily order a medevac air ambulance from Skagway to Anchorage, and get her there in under ninety minutes. I could even round up one of the many pilots I know to fly us up there in a pinch. I'm not letting Harper put her life—or our child's—in jeopardy this time. Absolutely not.

Other than that, Dr. Kim ordered various labs, ultrasounds in Skagway every four weeks, and a big appointment in Anchorage at twenty weeks for the “anatomy scan.” At any sign of a problem or complication, Harper will be hospitalized in Anchorage. She doesn't know this, but if that happens, I plan to take time off from my job to be there with her.

As I bounce along the old Dyea Road, I tell myself that these promises I'm making to myself are solely for the baby, but my heart thrums like mad when I think of Harper carrying my child. Of all the things her gran said, Don't kid yourselves that it's suddenly gone because you're angry with each other. It's still there...circles round and round in my head uninvited. My anger makes it hard to feel the love I've always carried for Harper, but deep down inside, it's still there. Whether I like it or not...which mostly, I don't.

But over the last few weeks, I've also come to accept that loving someone doesn't necessarily mean it's possible to build a future with them. Though I always believed differently, I'm starting to understand that sometimes love isn't enough. I think it's possible that trust is more important than love, and I don't trust Harper very much at all.

I park in front of her cabin, hop up the steps to her one-chair deck, and knock on her door. She appears with bare feet, gray sweatpants and a loose-fitting, baby-blue sweater. It's fuzzy and soft, hanging off one shoulder in a way that's so innocent and so sexy, it makes blood surge to my groin. I flick my eyes to her face and find no cold shower there. Her blonde hair is up in a messy bun, and she's wearing the glasses she only wears at the end of the day when she's tired. Jesus, you're beautiful, Harp.

"Hey." She's holding a mug in both hands, so she opens the screen door with her hip. "Come on in."

I haven't been in one of the Stewart cabins in years, but this one has been customized as a home for Harper and Parker, so it feels more like a tiny apartment than a hotel room.

"I'm having tea," she says. "Want some?"

"No." I glance at her living room, trying to decide where to sit. There's a loveseat for two or a rocking chair. She makes things easier for me by sitting in the rocker. I face her from the couch.

"How're you feeling?" I ask.

"Okay," she says, placing her mug on the side table beside her. "The nausea is pretty bad some days. And I'm tired all the time. I almost nodded off on a tour bus yesterday. Thankfully, none of the guests noticed."

"Maybe you shouldn't be working."

"Plenty of women work throughout their pregnancies," she says. "It'll pass."

"Don't take dumb risks, Harp."

Her eyebrows furrow. She bites her bottom lip then lets it go.

"I'm just saying." I try for a gentler tone. "Be careful."

"Please don't tell me what to do."

"You're pregnant with my baby."

"Right. I'm pregnant. Not you."

“You’re so goddamn stubborn.”

“I’m stubborn?!” she cries, narrowing her eyes at me. “Are you serious right now?”

“Yeah. I am. You could’ve had so much support last time, but you—”

“Support like this? Like how you’re supporting me by yelling at me and bossing me around and hating my guts so much I can barely stand it?”

I stare at her, knowing in the depths of my soul that as angry as I am, I could never hate her. And it’s time she hears it from me.

“I don’t hate you,” I say softly, my words an echo of hers from the Fourth of July. How the hell was that only six weeks ago?

“Well, you’re doing a great impression of it.”

“I’m angry at you. I’m frustrated that I didn’t know about Moriah Raven until now. I’m furious that you made those decisions without me.”

“Joe, do me a favor...go back in time in your mind and think. Think carefully. Think about where we were and who we were. If we’d kept her, who would’ve raised her?”

“Us!”

“How?” she demands. “Your mother was gone! Mine was long gone! Your aunt worked full-time. Your cousin already had two kids.” She shakes her head at me. “My dad was a single parent to six kids, including three who were still in elementary school. Gran ran the lodge, and Paw-Paw ran the camp. Dad was the only one taking tourists on the long runs, gone for days at a time with only Hunter for help. He was stretched way too thin to help with a baby. Not to mention, I was nowhere near ready. I didn’t want to be a mom!”

An uncomfortable feeling unfolds in my stomach.

Maybe she’s right.

My anger and frustration have been so overwhelming since I learned of my daughter; maybe I've been remembering those days through rose-colored glasses. Because no matter how much I want to believe that we could have made it work, if I pause and think back, I have to admit to myself, if not to her, that Harper's making valid points.

"You didn't give us a chance!" I say, digging my feet into the argument. "Maybe we could've made it work."

"No," she says, shaking her head. "We couldn't have, Joe. We would have both had to work full-time to pay rent and buy groceries and support her. She would have been in daycare, always picking up coughs and colds and needing clinic visits. We would have struggled."

"My cousin did it."

"Be serious! Bart graduated four years before Sandra, and you know it. He was already working full-time with an apartment of his own when she got pregnant. Not to mention, she had her mother in the picture."

"We could have—"

"No!" she yells, her voice shrill. "We couldn't have!" She clenches her jaw, her eyes furious when they slam into mine. "You only see what you want to see, Joe! And part of me loves that about you—your idealism, your blinding belief in beautiful things like love always finding a way—but it's not always practical. We couldn't offer her a good life, and I wanted that for her."

"I can't believe you had so little faith in us."

Her shoulders slump. "We were just kids."

"And you didn't want a baby."

"No, I didn't. Not at that time."

I sit back on the couch, looking up at the ceiling, trying to swallow over the lump in my throat. The fact that Harper didn't want our child—my child—hurts so much, I have to close my eyes against tears.

"All I ever wanted was a family," I whisper. "With you."

“I know,” she says, her voice thin and choked up. “I know that, Joe.”

“Why couldn’t you even tell me?”

“Because you would have tried to talk me into making the wrong choices. And I loved you so much, I might have let you.”

Loved.

Past tense.

“And now?” I keep my head back and my eyes closed.

“Now I’m ready to have a baby,” she says, “but this is never how I wanted it to be, with us barely speaking!”

Quiet settles over the room.

Outside I can hear the sound of the nightly Stewart campfire—snapping logs, the clink of beer bottles raised in toasts, the soft thrumming of a guitar.

“Joe.”

“What?”

“I...I don’t know if you read the—the thing about forgiveness that Gran gave us, but I did. And...and I want you to know that I acknowledge your pain,” she says slowly and carefully, a calm gravitas to her words. “I know that I hurt you. I know that I lied to you. I know that I betrayed you. I know that you are angry and frustrated. I know that you don’t trust me anymore. I acknowledge all of this, Joe.”

I wait for the “but.” I wait for her to tell me all the reasons that my pain is a necessary by-product of decisions she felt compelled to make. But we sit in silence again. Finally, I lean forward, open my eyes and look at her.

“And?”

“And nothing,” she says, picking up her mug and taking a sip. “I acknowledge your pain,” she says again. “And I’m sorry.”

Without having read her grandmother's steps for forgiveness, I'm a bit in the dark, but I can't lie—her words are...comforting. I stare at her, and she stares back at me. We don't smile at each other, but the blinding rage I've been feeling for weeks suddenly feels...softer. More manageable. It doesn't feel as potent. It doesn't feel as all-consuming.

"Okay," I say, nodding at her. "I appreciate that."

After a moment, she takes a deep breath and asks, "Have you heard back from the Calvins yet?"

Harper gave me the information for the adoption registry before we parted ways in Anchorage last week, and I signed up as soon as I got home.

"Not yet."

"Denise will get back to you when she can. She's good about that."

"Maybe they're weirded out that this guy is suddenly contacting them after all these years."

"I doubt it," she says. "I reached out to her and let her know you'd be in touch. I told her that she can trust you."

This is a surprise. "Thanks, Harp."

"Do you have a...game plan?"

"For what?"

"For, you know...moving forward with Moriah Raven."

"They're her parents," I say, the words coming easier than they've ever come before. "I'll follow their lead."

Harper gives me a tiny smile. "I'm relieved."

"I don't want to hurt her, Harp. I don't want to scare her. I'd just like a chance to know her when the timing is right for her."

Blinking her eyes rapidly, Harper clears her throat, then takes another sip of tea.

"Do you have a photo of her?" I ask.



“No,” she whispers. “They offered, but I never accepted. I didn’t feel like I had a right, and I thought that would make it harder.”

“God, we are so different,” I say, sighing through the words.

“We are,” she agrees.

“Whether she was adopted or not, I’d still want to be in her life. Always. I’d still want to know her. I’d still have her photo in my wallet.”

She nods. “I know.”

“You’re so goddamn frustrating, Harper.”

She tilts her head to the side. “So are you, Joe.”

I love you.

The words flash in front of my eyes in neon, but I tell them to fuck off. I don’t want to love Harper. I don’t want to love someone who can hurt me as badly as she can.

I stay on topic. “The Calvins aren’t on Facebook or Instagram, but I did a background check on them.”

Harper raises her eyebrows.

“They’re in good shape financially. Credit scores are high. No mortgage on their current home; they own it outright. Howard’s been employed by the same company for over a decade, and Denise was excused from jury duty four years ago for being an at-home mom. They don’t have any outstanding warrants. Neither has ever been arrested. Not even a speeding ticket.” I try not to smile. “But one thing had me worried.”

Harper’s eyes widen with concern. “What?”

“They both went to U of O.”

She giggles, which makes her face so astonishingly beautiful, I have to look away.

“Dirty ducks,” she says.

“Yeah.”

We lapse into silence again, but unlike before, a few weeks ago on the cruise ship, when silence with Harper felt comfortable, it doesn't now. Dark thoughts intrude. Don't love her. Don't be fooled by her "pain acknowledgment." Don't trust her. She's way too good at keeping secrets to ever be trusted again.

"What do you remember about her?" I ask. "About Moriah Raven?"

"Joe..." she says, pain filling her voice.

"What? I mean, you had a little bit of time with her, right?"

She nods, then looks down at her lap.

"Do you remember anything?"

"I remember a little."

"What?"

"I only had an hour with her, and I was pretty out of it," she whispers. "But she was warm. She smelled like fresh laundry and warmed-up milk."

Tears stream down her cheeks. But I'm merciless. I want to know. I have a right to know. And I don't care if it hurts her.

"What else?"

"She had this soft, wispy black hair," she says. A sniffle. "And blue eyes."

"My hair and your eyes."

"Yeah," she says. She takes a breath, and it's choppy and stilted. "She didn't cry when I held her. Mostly she just slept."

"And then?"

"Aunt Charlotte came to tell me it was time to say goodbye."

How did she do it? How could she bear it?

"So, you did it. You said goodbye and gave her away."

“I didn’t ‘give her away.’ I made the decision to let a mature, stable, married couple adopt and raise her.”

“Which is essentially fancy talk for ‘giving her away.’”

“You’re being cruel.”

“But it’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“I wished her every happiness in the world. I told her the Calvins would be wonderful parents. I told her I loved her. And yes...then, I said goodbye and placed her in Denise Calvin’s arms.”

“And you traveled the world,” I add, my anger flaring. “Just like you wanted to.”

“It’s time for you to go,” she says, lifting her chin.

“Didn’t you, Harp? Didn’t you go travel the world? Footloose and fancy free?”

“Now, Joe.” She stands up and walks to the door, opening it for me, even though I’m still sitting on her couch. “Please go.”

“Antarctica, right?” I ask. “Cold places. Really, really cold fucking places, right, Harp? Icy cold...just like your fucking heart.”

“That’s enough, Joe!”

A male voice startles me, and whip my head around to see Hunter standing beside his sister. Harper looks at her brother, then at me, then runs back to her bedroom with a sob and slams the door shut.

I stand up, walk around the loveseat, and head out the door, knocking my shoulder into Hunter as I pass him.

“Joe,” says Hunter, his voice barely restrained.

I look up from the bottom step of Harper’s cabin.

Talk about icy. Hunter’s face is furious. “You come here again and upset her, you’ll deal with me.”

“Hunter, stay out of—”

“Shut up, Joe,” says Hunter, holding up his hand. “I mean it. I know what she did. I know she had your baby in secret all those years ago and never told you. And I get how that could make you angry and fuck with your head. It’d fuck with mine, too.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “But if you ever come over here again and make my pregnant sister cry, it’ll take two men to drag me off you. And if those two men are Tanner and Sawyer, the odds won’t be with you.”

“You threatening me?”

“I’m warning you,” says Hunter. “Again, I understand your anger. I sympathize. But she’s in a delicate place until she has that baby. Upsetting her won’t be tolerated.” He shakes his head like he’s disappointed in me. “You should know better.”

Then he turns around and goes back into Harper’s cabin, pulling the door shut behind him.

I get in my car, my cheeks hot with shame.

He’s right.

I should know better.

I deserved to be called out by Hunter.

Making a pregnant woman cry? It’s beyond the pale. I picture my mother’s face and feel so ashamed of myself, my skin crawls.

I put the car in reverse to head back to Skagway.

No matter how angry I am, no matter how betrayed I feel, I need to start getting control over my emotions. And if that means staying away from Harper Stewart for the foreseeable future—until such time that I can be civil to her—so be it.

I promise myself that’s what I’ll do.

I will stay away.

## *Gran's Six Steps to Forgiveness:*

*1. Acknowledge the Pain*

*2. Imagine Being on the Other Side*

*3. Remember that No One is Perfect*

*4. Let Go of the Pain*

*5. Continue to Forgive (...do the work)*

*6. Love the Person You Forgive*

# Chapter 10

Harper

“Harper!” cries Parker, who slides from her seat into the one our youngest brother has just vacated. “Sawyer’s drunk as a skunk! We should have stopped him.”

I look up at the podium to see Sawyer clutching the mic like he’ll fall over if he lets go. Sliding my eyes to Tanner and McKenna, I find them looking red-faced and cheerful. As long as the guests of honor are happy, that’s all that matters.

“Tammer ’n Muh-kenn-ya...you guys are...so great,” starts Sawyer.

After a couple of minutes of incoherent rambling, Hunter jumps up on the little stage beside Sawyer, wrestling the mic away.

“Awesome job, l’il bro. That’ll do it.”

“I’m not l’il. I’m big,” says Sawyer, frowning at Hunter, and yanking the mic back.

“Yep. You are, but—”

“Don’t silence my love, bro!” yells Sawyer into the mic, pointing a finger at Hunter and sloshing his beer onto the floor. “I love Tan, man.” He starts chuckling, then raises a fist in the air and pumps it. “Tanman, Tanman, Tanman!”

“Let’s hear it for Tanman!” Hunter says into the mic, before helping Sawyer off the platform.

Hunter gives me a look. It’s time for another Stewart sibling to step forward and say a few words, and I guess the honor falls to me.

“Everyone’s waiting for you,” whispers Parker, nudging me.

“Go on, Harper,” says Reeve. “Give a little toast!”

I stand up to the hoots and hollers of my sisters, brothers, and everyone else in the room, who clap and yell my name in

encouragement. Stepping onto the little podium, I take the mic from its holder.

I've been coming to the Purple Parsnip since I was a baby, but I can't ever remember a time that Bruce closed it for a private event as early as September, when there were still tourists in town. But I sure do appreciate that he made an exception for my brother and his fiancée.

"Hi, everyone," I say.

I recognize every face in the place tonight...my family, of course, and all of our friends. But also, teachers from grade school through high school, coaches, business owners, lower-48 transplants, and seasonal workers. The Parsnip is full-to-bursting with well-wishers.

"The mayor's here tonight," I note, waving hello to Sam.

"Hey, Harper!" he shouts. "About time one of you Stewarts tied the knot!"

The crowd loves this, of course. It's a cacophony in the room for a good ten seconds of whooping, clinking glasses, guffawing, and revelry.

While everyone else goes nuts, I grin at Sam, then track the faces of the people at his table, which is populated by civil servants: assembly members Ginny Roe and Hector Antonov, Avery Wells and... Shit.

Joe.

My breath catches.

My cheeks flush.

My heart stutters.

Sure, the whole town was invited, but I really didn't think he'd show up tonight.

I haven't seen Joe in person since I had to kick him out of my house, and honestly, the month-long break from each other has been good for me.

But maybe not for him.

His eyes are trained on mine, fierce and focused, but under them are deep, dark circles; because of Joe's complexion, they're easy to miss unless they're bad...which they are. I lift my gaze to his eyes, which stare back at me, intense and inscrutable.

I blink at him and gulp softly, darting my glance to Tanner. Tanner, my brother. Tanner, who loves me.

"My brother is engaged, everyone!"

The crowd goes wild again and without meaning to, I look for Joe. He's surrounded by revelers, but seems oblivious to them. He doesn't slide his eyes away from mine.

Please don't hate me anymore, I think. I can't stand it.

But there's no silent conversation between us as there would have been once upon a time—just his cool, steady stare...and my reaction to him, which is full of longing. I miss him. I miss him all the time.

I force myself to look away.

"Okay," I say. "Okay, now. Let's quiet down."

Tanner lifts his chin, grinning at me like a puppy who just earned a treat. It's so much easier to look at Tanner than Joe.

"Hey, Tan," I say, smiling back at him.

"Hey, Harp!" he says.

"I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, sis!"

"When McKenna got to town," I say, "we didn't know what to make of her. We liked her a whole lot better than Tan's last girlfriend..." The crowd laughs, many of them remembering Ramona, whom Joe escorted out of Skagway a few weeks ago. "But that's not saying much." They laugh again. "Then we got to know McKenna. And she is—I swear—one of the best people I've ever met. She loves hard." I pause for a second, looking at my future sister-in-law. "She's one of the good ones."



Hunter and Sawyer lead the whooping and clapping this time, repeatedly smashing into each other's chests like scrimmaging quarterbacks. Ridiculous. Sawyer's going to get sick all over the Parsnip floor if they keep it up.

"And my brother," I say loudly. Then, in a normal voice as the crowd calms down. "My brother, Tanner. He's the best."

Another round of rowdy applause.

I can't help it—I look for Joe again, and there he is, eyes trained, waiting for me.

You're my girl, Harper Stewart. Always were. Always will be.

"Love isn't always perfect," I say, holding his gaze. "Love can make a lot of mistakes. Love can break your heart. Love can make you wish you'd never..." Joe flinches, leaning forward. My voice trails off. I gulp softly, looking for a port in the storm, and find it in Tanner's flushed, happy face. "Love can be the best thing that ever happened to you, too." I smile at my future sister-in-law and then at my brother. "That's the kind of love I hope for you! Cheers!"

The crowd goes wild as I put the mic back in its place and step down from the podium.

When I glance at Joe's table, his seat is empty. He's gone.

Instead of sitting back down at my own table, I keep walking for the exit, not to follow Joe, just for some fresh air. But when I step through the double doors, Joe's standing on the boardwalk, staring up at the darkening sky.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Joe?"

He doesn't look at me, but his posture changes. His shoulders slump just a little. But when he turns around to face me, he doesn't seem as angry as he was a few weeks ago. He gives me a small, polite nod.

"Good speech, Harp."

"Thanks."

“You feeling okay these days?”

“Yep. No more nausea, thank God,” I say, rubbing my still-flat tummy. “I’m almost eleven weeks along. Can you believe it?”

“I’ll be at the appointment on Tuesday.”

“I know.” We swapped brief texts last week about my upcoming appointment. “I’m glad.”

“Hey, Harp, I—I owe you an apology,” he says. “The way I acted at your place? Totally unacceptable. I knew I was upsetting you, and I kept pushing. I was an asshole. I’m really sorry.”

I don’t expect this because I know that his feelings for me aren’t exactly warm and fuzzy.

“Thanks for that, Joe.”

“Yeah. I’ve felt bad about it for weeks.”

“You could’ve texted me.”

“Felt like something that needed to be said in person.”

“I appreciate that,” I say. I should probably go back inside, but I can’t make myself leave him. It feels so nice to be around him, to be talking to him. “How’re you doing?”

“Still trying to sort things out,” he says vaguely. Then, “I heard from the Calvins. They sent a couple of pictures of her. She’s a beautiful kid, Harp. Super smart. Funny. She’s doing really well.”

I don’t know what to say to this information. I’m glad to hear it on one hand, but on the other, it comes perilously close to breaking the promise I made to myself to stay out of her life. That, and every time Joe and I discuss Moriah Raven, we end up hurting each other.

“That’s good.”

“They’ve done a lot of research on introducing an adopted child to their bio parents, and they say it’s better when the child is older—like a teenager. When they’re young it can be really confusing and scary—they often fear they’ll be

‘given back.’ I was disappointed, but I told them to do what’s best for her. When it’s the right time for her to meet me, I’ll be ready.”

“You’re handling this really well, Joe.”

“The Calvins are good people. Great parents. They love her. They’ve done right by her.”

It means a lot to me to hear Joe admit this.

“Well,” he says, stepping off the boardwalk. “I guess I’ll see you at the clinic on Tuesday.”

“You’re not staying?”

He gazes at me for a second, then shakes his head. “Nah. I have to—”

“Joe! Here I am!” Exiting the bar from behind me is Avery Wells, who walks past me, and over to Joe, taking his arm. “Thanks for waiting.”

“No problem,” he says, sparing a quick glance at me. “Night, Harp.”

“Oh. Uh...night, Joe,” I murmur, looking back and forth between him and Avery.

“Great party, Harper!” says Avery, waving goodbye. “Congrats to your brother.”

“Thanks, Avery,” I answer, my heart in my throat.

I watch them walk away in the direction of Joe’s house, telling myself I have no right to feel sad or betrayed or jealous. I have no right to run after them, and beg Joe to love me again, even though that’s exactly what I want to do. As he walks farther and farther away from me with Avery, I feel lonelier than ever. Empty, too.

It occurs to me that I could be surrounded by people if I went back inside, but they aren’t the people I long for. They aren’t the person I long for. There’s only one of him, and he’s walking away from me with another woman on his arm.

Leaning against a lamppost, I look forlornly over the quiet streets of Skagway. I should probably feel relieved that

our conversation just now was so polite, so civil, but that very civility is clawing at me now; it's bothering me more than I ever would have guessed.

I learned a long time ago that hate isn't the opposite of love. Indifference is. When I felt like Joe hated me, it meant he still had feelings for me. But civility? Polite apologies and breezy inquiries about my health? That's closer to indifference than hate, isn't it?

And then Avery's sudden appearance? The easy way she took Joe's arm and walked away with him? Oh, god.

My eyes well with stupid, jealous, useless tears.

Instead of going back inside, I get in my car and drive home so I can wallow in this sharp, new grief.

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Joe

Historically, I haven't been much of a church-goer.

My mother took me to services at First Presbyterian on Christmas Eve when I was growing up, so I've always associated the little church, built by the Methodists in 1905 and taken over by the Presbyterians in 1917, as a place of celebration. The opera seats, wooden ceiling and electrical lights are, remarkably, still original, and as a community, we're protective of the building, both as a place of worship, and as a historical landmark. Personally, I stop by at least once a week to check on things, and I attend the fire inspection annually.

Although I haven't added Sunday services to my weekly schedule, I've been stopping by more often than usual lately. I like sitting in the sanctuary. I've been using it as a place to think—as a place to sort through my feelings and try to gain clarity for the future. Sometimes Pastor Mac comes and sits with me; over the last few weeks I've told him about my long history with Harper and what happened ten years ago; about our daughter Moriah Raven and the baby on the way. I shared Mrs. Stewart's steps to forgiveness with him, and he joked that

she should come into town to lead services the next time he's on vacation.

Talking with him has eased my pain a little. It's taken the edge off my anger. Mrs. Stewart's second step to forgiveness—remembering that no one is perfect—has been a recurring theme to our conversations lately. I have started to see that despite how deeply I loved Harper all those years ago, I was blinded by my own agenda. She was never as confident about forever as I was, but instead of hearing her worries and validating them, I steamrolled over them, convincing myself that my faith in the future would bring her around. All it ended up doing was alienating us from each other when she needed me most.

Pastor Mac listens patiently as I come to terms with the frustration of having lost time in my daughter's life. Ironically, he plays devil's advocate sometimes. When I assure him that I could've raised my daughter on my own, he takes Harper's side of things, and asks me to paint a picture of how that would've looked. Grudgingly, I've come to admit that while I could've raised Moriah Raven, it may not have been the best choice for her—a childhood with me would have lacked so many of the gifts the Calvins have given her. She had two parents who were present—an at-home mother who baked cookies and did art projects and took her hiking, and a father who had plenty of time in the evenings to read to her and coach her soccer games on the weekends.

I'm coming to realize that adoption by the Calvins didn't give her less of a life; it gave her more of one. And as Mrs. Stewart pointed out a few weeks ago, there's still plenty of time for me to get to know her when the time is right.

Pastor Mac is a big fan of the Calvins.

Their name is lucky, he says, as John Calvin was a principal figure in the Protestant Reformation. I tell him that I can use all the luck I can get, and he pats my shoulder with a chuckle and says, "Sheriff, you're alright."

I'm starting to believe him. If I'm not alright yet, I'm more and more confident that I will be. Someday.

The only thing Pastor Mac—or anyone else, for that matter—can't help me with, is where Harper Stewart fits into my life now. She's the mother of my children, yes. I will do anything I can to support her throughout this pregnancy and figure out ways to co-parent with her. Part of me will always love Harper. But how can we be anything more to one another when there's no trust between us?

While I've started to understand why she chose adoption for Moriah Raven—and I've even started feeling some respect and gratitude for her decision—it doesn't change the fact that she's a liar. For ten years she kept a secret that shattered my life when it finally came to light. If she's that good at keeping secrets, what else don't I know? And how could she ever be my partner again if I can't trust her?

I have a lot of deep thoughts circling my head when I open the door to the clinic on Tuesday morning. And all of them scatter to the wind when Harper, who's sitting in the waiting room, looks up at me and smiles.

My fucking heart lurches.

My traitorous soul sings.

A thousand memories surge to the forefront of my mind.

I do my best to keep my expression merely cordial, but I can't help the love I feel, the longing I feel for dreams that—apparently—aren't quite dead yet.

“Hi, Joe.”

“Hey, Harp. All good?”

“Yep. Dr. Kim sent everything they needed from Anchorage. All I had to do was check-in.”

I sit down beside her, trying to look casual, though my heart's thrumming so loudly, I'm surprised she can't hear it.

“You feeling okay?”

“Yep.”

She's ever-so-slightly cooler with me than she was on Saturday night. Maybe she's nervous. Before I can ask,

someone calls her name.

“Harper Stewart? We’re ready for you.”

She hops up, gesturing for me to follow, and we’re led to a tiny room where Harper disrobes behind a curtain before sitting on the padded chair and placing her feet in stirrups. She holds a white paper sheet over her waist and hips. I stand by her head. We both stare at the grainy picture on the monitor.

“Hopefully this won’t be cold,” says the technician, sitting on stool between Harper’s legs.

I hold my breath as we stare at the black-and-white images that appear on the screen. And then—oh my god—there it is: our baby. Even without help from the technician, I can easily make out a head, two arms and two legs. He or she wiggles white in a black pond, a fluttering heart visible. A miracle in the making.

“You ready to listen to your baby’s heartbeat?”

Harper reaches her hand back to me, and without thinking, I take it, braiding my fingers through hers as I gruffly murmur, “Please.”

The technician switches on the doppler, and this...this... this astonishing, divine sound fills the room. Whoosh-a, whoosh-a, whoosh-a, races his or her heart, so fast, I stare at the screen with wonder, my fingers tightening around Harper’s.

She cries and laughs at the same time, and I lean down to press my lips to the crown of her head, forgetting for a moment that she lied to me, that I can’t trust her, that I don’t know what to do with my love for her.

“Great heartbeat,” says the technician. “One hundred and eighty beats a minute.”

“That’s normal?” asks Harper, sniffing softly.

“Absolutely! One-seventy is average. This is perfect.”

“Can you tell us anything else?” I ask. “Does everything look okay?”

The technician looks up at me and nods. “Your doctor will go over the results with you, but yes, I can tell you that everything looks good.”

Harper leans her head back to look up at me, her blue eyes watery, shining with joy and hope. I’m sure, to the technician, we look like any other happy couple, excited to become parents...which makes me feel like a fraud.

I untangle my fingers from Harper’s and take a step away.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I should get going,” I say, clearing my throat as complicated emotions collide inside. “Back to work.”

“I need to take a few more measurements,” says the technician. “Do you want to wait for a picture?”

I glance at the screen again, where our baby is wiggling her hand, almost like he or she is waving to us. Yes, I want to stay. Harper’s eyes catch mine, encouraging me to linger. But, sorry, I can’t.

“Let me know what the doc says, okay, Harp?”

“Sure,” she says softly as I slip out the door.

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“You just walked out?” asks Sandra. “You shoulda stayed and gotten a picture, Joseph.”

“It was really emotional,” I say, dipping one of my sweet potato fries in ketchup. “Harper and I were holding hands and —”

“Wait! You were holding hands? With her? Ugh. Say no more! You can get a picture next time.”

My cousin and I are having an early dinner at the BBQ Shack after work. She got us an outdoor table, which I appreciate despite the 50-degree weather and overcast skies. There won’t be too many more opportunities to sit outside this fall.

“You know,” I say, “I’m not as angry with her as I was. I’m starting to understand why she did what she did back then.



I get it. She was scared and young and alone. It still hurts sometimes, of course. Maybe it always will. But I don't hate her for it anymore."

"Fine," says Sandra, who doesn't like Harper, but has never judged her for placing Moriah Raven with adoptive parents. Maybe it's because Sandra got pregnant even younger than Harper, and she had to run through similar scenarios in her mind? I don't know why, for sure, but she's never vilified Harper for that choice. "The adoption worked out okay. But how about the lying? The secrets? What about that?"

"She says she was worried I'd try to coerce her into keeping Moriah Raven."

"Would you have?"

"At the time? Undoubtedly."

"Huh." Sandra purses her lips. "Well, I still don't like it. You should've had a say in the matter."

"But do you get it? I mean, do you understand why she lied?"

"At the time, maybe. But for years and years?" Sandra shakes her head. "No. You had a right to know you had a daughter."

"But she finally came clean."

"Under duress," points out Sandra. "She had no choice."

"She had a choice," I argue. "There's always a choice."

"Joseph, if you hadn't knocked her up again, she never would have told you. Never. I believe that in my soul."

I take a deep breath and let it go slowly. "If that's true, how can there be hope for us?"

"Hope?" she cries. "Hope? For what? Are you kidding me right now? Of course there's no hope! The best you can hope for is that you have a civil relationship with Harper, for the kid's sake. That's it. And I swear to God, if you get it in your head to—"

"Sandra, calm down."

But my cousin's fear is justified. The way my chest swelled with love when I walked into the clinic is too fresh a memory. I can't help the way I feel, and my feelings for Harper are still...there.

"What about forgiveness?" I ask.

"What about it?" asks Sandra.

"If she's truly sorry, which I think she is, I could forgive her. And once you forgive someone, you can reconcile with them, can't you?"

"She's only sorry because she got caught."

"No," I say softly. "I think she's always been sorry. I don't think she liked carrying the secret around. I think about all the years she couldn't look me in the eye. I think it tortured her. I think there's even a chance she thought she was protecting me."

Sandra throws her napkin on the table. "You're driving me crazy."

"I'm just trying to look at it from all angles!"

"Here's the only angle you need, Joseph...she kept your kid from you for nine years. She lied, by omission, for nine years. There's no way to come back from that. You can forgive all you want. But you won't be able to forget. And if you can't forget, you'll always be suspicious of her, which means you've got no future with her. You'll never be able to trust her." Sandra crosses her arms over her chest and sits back in her chair. "You give any more consideration to Wasilla?"

Yes. No. Fuck.

If Sandra's right—if I'll never be able to trust Harper again and therefore, can't build a future with her—then I should start thinking about what's best for me and my child. And maybe a fresh start is what I need. No, I never envisioned being a single parent so far away from Skagway, but having him or her visit me during school breaks and for three months every summer would be...

Stable? Steady?

Awful.

“I don’t know,” I say, leaning back in my own chair, my appetite gone.

“Well, at least you didn’t say no,” says my cousin, reaching into her purse. “I made Bart pick this up for you.”

She places a packet of papers on the table between us. On the top it reads City of Wasilla.

“When you’re ready, you can fill out the application and send it in.”

“You’re meddling.” I give her a look. “Big time.”

“So, kill me,” she says, reaching for her beer and taking a gulp. “I care about you.”

Hours later, I sit on my deck with a mug of hot decaf in my hand and the job application on the end table beside me. Picking it up for the third or fourth time, I read through it again, then take a pen from my breast pocket and start filling it out.

# Chapter 11

Harper

October is a changeable time in Skagway.

The days get shorter by about three minutes a day, every day—which means that by October tenth, the sun sets just after six, and by Halloween it's almost gone by five.

The cruise ships come in smaller and smaller numbers until they, too, are gone entirely. The last cruise ship pulls out of port in mid-October, and we won't see another until early-May.

Our tours taper off to one or two a week; mostly fellow Alaskans enjoying the shoulder season. We Stewarts handle repairs and renovations at our camp, all of us pitching in to wash, dry, fold and bag-up towels and linens that won't be needed until next year. We sweep out summer cabins and close them up for winter. We restock the pantry to a tenth of its capacity—just enough for us.

Dyea reverts to the ghost town it truly is.

Seasonal businesses in Skagway close down, too, while others open at odd hours only.

We all move at a slower pace because we can. We stop and greet neighbors at the Fairway, catching up on their highs and lows of the season. We chat for an hour over hammers and screwdrivers at the True Value. Friends stop by for chilly campfires before the snow starts falling, and we all look forward to Yuletide in Skagway.

This is the home I know and love—the one I share with a thousand other souls, not ten thousand.

I have uneventful ultrasounds in mid-October and mid-November (thank God!), and spend my quiet October and November days swapping rooms with Reeve. I move back into the lodge, while Reeve moves into the cabin with Parker. I need the space and privacy for me and the baby, and I'll

appreciate being closer to Gran and Dad as I find my way as a single mom. Hunter and Tanner help me put together a rocking chair, changing table and crib, while McKenna, who learned how to knit from her Mimi, starts making me sweaters and caps in various pastel colors.

The days slide by with my belly growing larger and rounder, and mostly—mostly—I am content. Except—

I miss Joe.

I miss him all the time.

It's not that I don't see him. I do. I see him at the baby's wellness ultrasounds, of course, and I often see him in his patrol car when I'm in town, or bump into him while I'm shopping. He's always civil. Always polite. He inquires about my health and tells me to say hello to my family. But he almost never looks me in the eye, and keeps our conversations as short as possible.

We have come 180 degrees, me and Joe. From me avoiding him to him avoiding me. And I don't like it at all.

But I go back to Gran's steps for forgiveness and practice them as best I can. I remember that no one is perfect, myself included. I try to put myself in Joe's shoes, telling myself he needs time to process the decision I made not to tell him about our first child and to find adoptive parents for her. I tell myself that someday, God willing, Joe will let go of his pain and forgive me. But in the meantime, I have a life that needs to be lived and a baby on the way. So, I dry my tears, and I keep moving forward.

But as a rule, Joe doesn't seek me out...which is why I'm surprised to hear someone ring the bell at the lodge one afternoon, and find Joe standing on the porch. I am pretty sure, at this point, that endorphins will always flood my brain when I'm close to Joe. There will never be a time I don't feel that high just to be near him, and that will be my punishment for hurting him—a lifetime of ceaseless longing for the love I once had but lost.

“Hey,” I say, opening the screen door. “What’re you doing here?”

“Hi,” he says, taking off his hat. His eyes fall to my stomach and linger there for a second. I’m eighteen weeks pregnant now, and I’ve recently “popped.” When I wear leggings and a T-shirt, as I am today, there’s a very noticeable swell to my belly. “Look at you, Harp! You look great.”

“Thanks.”

“You doing okay? Feeling good?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. What’s up? Are you okay?” I ask, gesturing to the seating area in the dining room that we expand once the summer season is over. Joe sits down in one of the easy chairs.

“Yeah,” he says. “Just, um....just wanted to run something by you.”

“Okay.” My heart drops. I’ve been worried about this conversation since the night of Tanner’s engagement party. “Want coffee?”

“If it’s not trouble?”

“None at all,” I say. “It’s always on. I’ll be right back.”

In the kitchen, Reeve and Parker are baking a cake for Tanner’s upcoming birthday, Sawyer’s on the office computer, and Gran is leaning on the counter, watching her soap operas on the old, black-and-white TV.

“Who’s here?” she asks.

“Joe.”

Gran’s eyes light up. “Oh?”

“I’ll go say hello!” says Reeve.

“No, you won’t,” says Gran. She turns to me. “What’s this about?”

“He wants to run something by me.”

“Good something or bad something?”

“I don’t know yet,” I say, grabbing two mugs and filling them both with coffee. But I do know. I’m almost positive I know what this is about, and I’m going to be as gracious as I can, no matter how much it hurts me. “I’ll let you know.”

“Good luck,” says Reeve, her nose smudged with flour.

“Thanks, babycakes,” I say, pushing the kitchen door open with my hip and returning to Joe. I place his coffee mug down on the table in front of him. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” he says, wrapping his hands around the hot ceramic. “Chilly out today.”

“Thirty-six degrees, I think. That’s what the weather channel said.”

“Going down to twenty-five tonight.”

I sip my coffee, my nerves getting the best of me. “So, um—”

“Did you make your travel plans yet?” Joe asks. “To get to Anchorage in two weeks?”

Our twenty-week ultrasound will be in Anchorage the Monday after Thanksgiving. We’ll find out a lot about the baby’s anatomy at that time, check the placenta and—if we want—we can find out if we’re having a boy or a girl.

“Not yet,” I say. “You?”

“That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about. Brian Hogan owes me four flying hours. I won ’em in last year’s July Fourth raffle. If you were interested, I thought he could fly us up.”

“That would be great. So nice not to have to layover in Juneau.”

“I’ll arrange it,” says Joe. “But, um, one other thing...I have to be in Wasilla the day after our appointment. So, you can either head home by yourself on Monday, or stay over in Anchorage and return with me on Tuesday.”

“What’s in Wasilla?”

“Um...well...” He scratches the back of his neck, looking down at his lap. “You know what? Nothing much. Just, um, meeting up with the PD there.”

“Oh. Okay.” I think about my schedule for a second, then say, “I don’t mind staying overnight in Anchorage and then catching a ride back with you. I could really use some maternity clothes...and some things for the baby, Christmas presents for the family...I’ll use the time to go shopping.”

“Great. Um...” He looks up, scanning my face for a second before grabbing his coffee and taking a sip. “I also, um...I wanted to say...”

“What’s on your mind, Joe? Just spit it out.”

“What’s our policy on...um...”

“You deserve to be happy, Joe,” I blurt out. “If she makes you happy, I won’t stand in your way.”

His eyebrows furrow. “What, now?”

“This is about Avery, right?”

“Who?”

“Avery Wells.”

He looks genuinely confused. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“I was talking to you on the boardwalk when she came out of Tanner’s party. She took your arm. You two obviously went home together. So, I’m guessing you two are getting serious. Is that what you wanted to—”

“Harp,” he says, putting down his coffee and leaning forward in his seat, “I’m not with Avery. Not at all.”

I blink at him, my eyes welling with stupid, useless tears. “I saw you go home together.”

“You misunderstood what you saw. You saw me walking home a friend who’d had too much champagne. We don’t sleep together anymore. That’s over.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. A lump jams up my throat. More tears fill my eyes, spilling down my cheeks. I’m so embarrassed,



but I'm also so relieved, I don't know which emotion to focus on first.

"You're not with her," I murmur.

"No, darlin'," he says gently. Darlin'. Oh, my heart. "I haven't been with anyone else since I was with you."

"Oh," I mumble, wiping my cheeks. "I shouldn't have assumed...sorry."

He tilts his head to the side, a tiny smile playing on his lips. "Were you jealous, Harper Stewart?"

There's no point in lying.

"Madly," I whisper.

His eyes skewer mine with a super intense look, and though he probably doesn't mean for it to be sexy, I feel it all the way to my toes. Most pregnancy books note that some pregnant women enjoy a libido that's off-the-charts. With morning sickness and fatigue, I haven't had a lot of time to feel "turned on," but when Joe looks at me like that? Oh my god. I can literally feel my insides turn molten.

"You don't need to be jealous," he says. "I'm single, Harp. I've got my hands full with this baby coming. I'm not planning to, you know, get involved with anyone. Not right now." His voice is cooler when he adds, "But if either of us does get involved with someone else, in the future, I mean, I think we need to discuss that, okay? Come up with guidelines for how that looks. For the baby, of course."

The only person I want to be involved with is you.

I picture the words. I even imagine saying them. But I think I'd just be embarrassing myself. Joe doesn't see me like that. Not anymore. He's made that abundantly clear.

"Agreed." Suddenly and out of nowhere, the urge to pee is so strong, I jump up, grateful for the excuse to end this conversation. "I have to go to the bathroom."

He looks surprised. "Are you okay?"

“Oh, yeah,” I say. “This happens all the time.” I pause for a second. “Was there something else you wanted to talk about? Besides flying to Anchorage together?”

He stands up, scanning my face for a second before shaking his head. “No. Nothing important.”

“Text me the details for the flight?” I ask, crossing my legs. Don’t pee your pants. Don’t pee your pants!

“Absolutely,” he says. “Happy almost Thanksgiving, Harp.”

“Happy almost Thanksgiving, Joe,” I say, bolting back to the kitchen bathroom.

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Joe

When I went to see Harper, it wasn’t only to discuss travel plans. I mean, yes, I wanted to offer her a ride up to Anchorage, but my true intention was to talk to her about my possible relocation to Wasilla. My application was approved in October, and the day after our ultrasound appointment, I have an in-person interview scheduled at the Wasilla Town Hall.

But then she got jealous about Avery, and I felt so much tenderness for her—fuck me!—I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t tell her I was thinking about leaving. Besides, I reasoned, Wasilla hasn’t even made me an offer yet. Maybe it’s better to wait. See what happens.

I go back and forth about whether or not I want to relocate. As the weeks slide by, ever closer to our baby’s birth, I want to stay in Skagway. The problem with staying, however, is that I want a family. I want a wife and children. And as long as Harper Stewart is in my orbit, I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to find that, because I fear I’ll always be pining after her. I need to place distance between us, or I’ll never get over her.

Either that, or I need to forgive her. Wholly and completely. So completely that I decide to trust her without suspicion or fear, and try—once and for all—to build the family I’ve always wanted with her. I just can’t picture that yet. I know she’s not perfect. I have put myself in her shoes,

and I understand why she did what she did; I'm not as angry with her as I once was, but she lied to me for years, and I'm still in pain over that massive betrayal. And until I can let go of that pain, there's always the chance I may punish her with it.

I feel myself at a crossroads. I just don't know which way to go.

Go to Wasilla for a fresh start or stay in Skagway with Harper?

I pray for clarity and reason over the next few months.

And then, of course, there's the instinctual way I feel whenever I lay eyes on her—a love so fierce and so true overwhelms me every time. It stops me in my tracks. It shoves reason aside. It makes me strong and weak all at once.

“Hey, Joe!” she calls to me, spotting me in the departures area of the Skagway airport. She's rolling a suitcase behind her and has a little backpack on her back.

“Hey!” I say. “You ready to go?”

She nods. “Thanks, again, for arranging this. It's such a relief not to have to change planes in Juneau.”

I take her bag from her hand, and pull it behind me as we walk out onto the tarmac. “Then you'll be glad to hear that I arranged for Brian to fly us up in March for the birth, too.”

She looks up at me, beaming. “That's great, Joe! But let me pay for my half, okay?”

“Nope. It's my gift to you. Let's face it—you're doing most of the heavy lifting here.”

“True enough,” she says, patting her rounded belly.

I love seeing Harper's body swell with my child inside. If it's not the sexiest thing I've ever seen, I don't know what is. We did that. We made that baby together with love and heat and—

“Joe?”

I've stopped walking, staring at her from behind, lusting wildly after my baby-momma.

"Y-yeah. Yeah. Coming," I say, my whole body taut with want.

"You okay?" she asks.

No, I think, pulling her suitcase over to the plane. No, I'm not okay. I'm sick with longing for you. I'm barely holding on. And I have no idea what to do about it.

"Hey, folks!" says Brian, hopping down from his pilot's seat. "How're we doing? Got a gorgeous day for a quick flight!"

Harper exchanges pleasantries with Brian, who helps her onto the nine-passenger plane that we have all to ourselves today. When I hop up into the fuselage, she's buckled into a seat on the right side. I take the seat across the aisle from her on the left. After a brief safety chat, we're off.

It's loud in a little plane like this, so we don't talk. We each have a window that looks out onto the beautiful Alaskan scenery—mountains and water, and fir trees as far as the eye can see. After twenty minutes or so, I look over to see that Harper's fallen asleep, her head leaning against the window, her sweet lips parted repose. And suddenly, there's nothing outside that can compete with the view to my right. That strong, certain wave of love for her, my constant, lifelong companion, washes over me. I want to protect her, to stand beside her, to wake up to her face every morning and fall asleep to the rhythm of her breathing every night. I want to meet our first child while holding her hand and raise our second child with her by my side.

What would she say, I wonder, if I asked her to give us another chance?

Would she say yes? Or would her reservations, like mine, make her pause?

How many times can you say yes to someone, only to have your heart broken again?

I look away from her, forcing myself to stare out the window until we land.

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“Your baby looks good,” says Dr. Kim, who’s performing the 4-D ultrasound for us. “Measurements are healthy.” She grins at us. “I’ve got a perfect view of baby’s genitals. Do you want to know?”

Harper smiles at me, and I give her a little nod.

“Tell us,” she says.

“You are having...a baby girl,” says Dr. Kim.

A daughter. We’re having another daughter.

Harper sobs softly, then laughs, reaching for my hand, which I give her. She holds it against her cheek, smiling up at me.

“A daughter,” she says, her eyes bright with happiness.

“A daughter,” I say, smiling back at her, my own eyes welling.

“Um...” Dr. Kim’s expression straightens a little. She leans forward to get a better look at the ultrasound screen. “Hmm.”

Harper’s fingers tighten around mine. “What? What’s going on? What do you see?”

Dr. Kim lifts the transducer, squirts a liberal amount of gel over it, then presses it back against Harper’s abdomen. She sighs softly. “Okay. So, what I’m seeing here appears to be placenta previa.”

A prickle goes down my spine. I’ve been a first responder to major accidents. I’ve seen dead bodies. I’ve been in a helicopter when an injured person was airlifted to a hospital, with blood everywhere. But I have never—never in my life—known the chill of visceral fear that slices through me when Dr. Kim utters these words.

“What does that mean? Is this—is this like last time?” I ask, panic making my brain mushy.

Jesus, is this how Harper felt all those years ago? She was only a kid, facing something as heavy as this with only her aunt...almost totally alone.

“No,” says Dr. Kim. “Not exactly.” She looks at Harper. “Do you know what this is, Harper?”

Harper nods, her voice pitchy and thin. “It’s, um, when the placenta is blocking the cervix, right?”

“Yes,” says Dr. Kim. “It’s not ideal.”

“Why—What could happen?” I ask. “Like, what complications are we looking at here?”

Dr. Kim hangs up the transducer, tears the pictures from the printer, then stands up. “I’d like to talk to you both in my office. Meet me there?”

She leaves the room, and I round the ultrasound chair so I can see Harper’s face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m scared,” she says, using the white paper sheet on her lap to sop up the conductor gel on her tummy.

“You’re not alone this time,” I tell her. “We have a great doctor, and we have each other. I’m not going anywhere, Harp. I’m in this with you.”

She nods, but there’s this dazed, unfocused look on her face. “Yeah. But you don’t know. You weren’t there. Last time —”

“This isn’t last time. We’re going to go talk to Dr. Kim and come up with a plan, okay? We won’t leave here without a plan that you’re okay with.”

“Okay,” she whispers, climbing down from the ultrasound chair to get dressed behind the curtain in the corner.

I’m good at comforting people; it’s part of my job description, after all, to manage troubling situations...but this is different. This is my girl. My baby. My heart is racing this time. I’m scared, too.

Five minutes later, we’re seated in front of Dr. Kim.

“I want to reiterate that your baby looks terrific, and everything should be fine,” she says. “But Harper, I’m going to need you to take it easy over the next few months, okay? We’ve got to get to the beginning of March, at least, so the baby has as much time as possible to develop. One of the major complications with placenta previa is vaginal bleeding, and the best way to minimize it is with rest.”

“I promise I’ll take it easy,” she says.

“I’ll make sure, too,” I say.

Harper slides her eyes to me, and I know what she’s wondering: How are you going to do that when we barely see each other? I reach for her hand, relieved when she lets me take it.

“We’ll figure it out,” I promise her, weaving my fingers through hers.

Her very small smile is my only answer.

“Also, Harper...no heavy lifting, no strenuous exercise, limit your trips up and down stairs, and”—she grimaces—“sorry, guys, but no more vaginal sex. Not until after the birth, okay?”

Harper yanks her hand away from mine, folding both in her lap. I’d chuckle at her prim reaction if this wasn’t so serious.

“Harper,” says Dr. Kim. “I’d like to know your thoughts on following up the c-section procedure with a possible postpartum hysterectomy for you.”

“A full hysterectomy?”

“Total, yes. Your uterus is already badly damaged. If the placenta attaches to the bottom of your uterus and cervix, I think it’s unlikely we’ll be able to save it.”

“What about my ovary?” asks Harper. “My eggs?”

“You want to keep them?”

“If possible.”

“Right. Okay. Well, I think you could keep your ovary, but I have to warn you that it could be injured during the hysterectomy procedure.” Dr. Kim hesitates. “Normally, I’d recommend that a woman harvest her eggs before a hysterectomy, but in your case, I wouldn’t risk it. Not while pregnant. That said, I could do my best to be very careful about leaving your ovary in play. You wouldn’t be able to carry another pregnancy without a uterus, of course. But you would be able to have an egg harvested from your ovary, fertilized externally, and carried to term by a surrogate.”

“That’s a lot of steps for another baby,” she whispers.

“Harper, the fact that you got pregnant again naturally...” She shakes her head. “I can’t tell you how low the odds were. My colleagues refer to you as the ‘miracle mom.’”

“But this might be it.”

Dr. Kim nods, her voice gentle when she agrees. “It might be.”

Harper sucks in a choppy breath, nodding solemnly.

We’re given pictures of our daughter to take with us, and Dr. Kim walks us to her office door, telling us to make another appointment in Anchorage four weeks from now.

We’ll need to come back at twenty-four, twenty-eight, thirty-two, and thirty-four weeks, and if Harper starts bleeding, we’ll need to have her medevac’d to Anchorage immediately.

It’s a lot to take in, and by the time we leave the hospital, we’re both exhausted.

“I need a nap,” says Harper.

“I could use one, too,” I say. I take her hand and steer us both toward the hotel, a Marriott over by University Lake. “It’s a fifteen-minute walk. You think it’s okay?”

“I wouldn’t consider a stroll to the hotel strenuous exercise,” she says. “I think it’s fine.”

We walk in silence for a while, no doubt each of us processing the appointment.



“It’s going to be okay, Harp. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that, Joe.”

“Well, I’ll do anything in my power to make it true.” I nudge her gently, trying to refocus us on the good things that came out of the appointment. “Hey, Harp...we’re having a baby girl. She’s perfect and healthy.”

She looks up at me, a small smile tilting up her lips. “I know. I heard.”

“Have you been thinking of any names?”

She shrugs. “You?”

“Absolutely!” I say, squeezing her hand. “What do you think of Brunhilda?”

She chortles. “Not much.”

“Not a winner?” I ask. At least I got you to laugh. “How about Lillith?”

“Isn’t that a demonic name?”

“Right. Not fair to saddle a baby with that before knowing if it fits her personality. Hmm. How about...Wilma?”

“Like the Flintstones? Nope.”

“Desdemona.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Wow,” I say. “Tough crowd.”

She giggles again. “I did have one thought...”

“Tell me.”

She stops walking, so I do, too. When she looks up at me, her eyes are the same color as the midday November sky. They are the gateway to every rush of romantic love I’ve ever known, and in that instant, I hope—against hope against hope against hope—that they will be the only gateway I ever know.

“I was thinking about...Wren.”

“Wren.”

“Raven and Wren,” she says softly. “Our little birds.”

I’m so touched by this, I can’t speak. Instead, I nod, pulling her against my chest. As I hold her close, I somehow manage to grunt, “Perfect.”

We stand like that for a while, with me holding Harper in my arms, and baby Wren warm and safe between us. And that’s when I know. No matter what happened in the past, and no matter how uncertain the future, Harper Stewart is my forever. Always was. Always will be.

I’m not saying it’ll be easy. I’m not even sure how I’ll make it happen yet. I have work to do, and she does, too. All I know for sure is that I won’t be going to that interview tomorrow. As soon as we get back to the hotel, I’m going to call Wasilla and withdraw my application. I’m staying put in Skagway. My past is there—my future is, too.

# Chapter 12

Harper

“You look beautiful, McKenna.”

“Completely,” sighs Reeve, staring at the bride with stars in her eyes.

“Ken,” says Isabella, rushing into the bride’s room at the back of the church with her crimson bouquet in one hand and McKenna’s snow-white calla lilies in the other. “It’s time.”

Gran steps forward to give her almost-granddaughter-in-law a hug. “I know you wish your Mimi was here today. But she’s thinking of you, honey. She’s looking down and smiling. And she knows you’ve found a family who will love you and look after you now.”

“Thanks, Gran. That means a lot,” says McKenna, sniffing softly as she hugs my grandmother. “And thanks for loaning me your husband today.”

“He’s honored to be a part of things. Never had his own daughter to walk down the aisle, and these three haven’t given him a chance, yet.”

As Gran backs away, it’s my turn to embrace the bride.

“You’ve made my brother so happy,” I tell McKenna, squeezing her tight. “You’re everything we could have wished for him.”

I’m wearing a dark green velvet, floor-length bridesmaid dress, just like my sisters and Isabella, but out of an abundance of caution, I will be sitting with Gran, Paw-Paw, and Dad in the pews instead of walking down the aisle with my sisters and standing up throughout the service.

“Having you, Parker and Reeve for sisters is a dream come true for me,” says McKenna, her elven face alight with happiness. “And I can’t wait to be an aunt.”

“Come on, Harper,” says Gran. “Let’s get this party started.”

Gran and I take our spots at the back of the church. Hunter steps between us and offers us each an arm to walk us down the aisle.

The piano in the front of the church plays the familiar chords of Pachelbel’s “Canon in D,” and the children’s choir starts singing “The Christmas Canon.” The church is softly lit with candles, while bunches of evergreen bound in white tulle decorate the ends of pews and windowsills. Red and white poinsettias cover the front altar where Tanner stands tall and proud with Sawyer and Joe beside him.

Gran and I take our seats in the first row while Hunter, as best man, glides into place between Tanner and Sawyer. I grin at each of my brothers before sliding my gaze to Joe.

Tanner and McKenna opted for three-piece black tuxes with crisp white dress shirts under black vests. Instead of bow ties, they chose bolo ties, with silver medallions at their necks, black leather cords and silver aglets at the tips. I haven’t seen Joe in a tuxedo since our senior prom, and time has only been a friend to him since then. Strong, tall and buff, he’s godlike, bathed in the glow of candlelight. I bite my bottom lip as I stare at him. He notices this, of course, his grin spreading into a toothpaste-commercial smile as his eyes connect with mine. My cheeks flush with heat and longing, but I don’t look away, and he doesn’t either. He doesn’t hate me anymore, and after months of feeling his loathing, I’m basking in the warmth that arrived with its exodus.

You look beautiful, he mouths.

I rub my belly and wink at him.

“We’re here for Tanner and McKenna,” whispers Gran. “Not you and Joe.”

“I know that.”

“So stop making cow eyes at each other,” she says, as Reeve and Parker make their way down the aisle, fanning out on the left side of the altar.

“I’m not the only one!” I whisper back. “Look at Hunter.”

My older brother’s face changes completely as Isabella appears at the back of the church. With her long, dark hair piled into a sexy chignon, and the plunging neckline of her dress accentuating her cleavage, Hunter’s not wrong to gawk. Probably not alone either. She looks stunning.

But watching him makes me nervous, too. I don’t want to see him hurt, and I know that Isabella could hurt my brother. When Hunter and Isabella had a fling last summer, it ended when she decided that a long-distance relationship wasn’t what she wanted. It left him sullen for weeks afterward. I’m not anxious for them to start that cycle again, but one look at them—at the way they’re checking out each other—tells me it might be too late.

The children’s choir wraps up their singing, and the familiar chords of Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus” play on the piano. Everyone in the sanctuary stands up as McKenna and Paw-Paw appear at the back of the church. Dressed neck to toe in white velvet with a standing collar of white fur, petite McKenna makes her way down the aisle toward my brother, her dark eyes full of love for him and only him. I turn my gaze to Tanner, who looks like he’s just won every lottery in the universe, and my heart swells with joy...chased by a longing of my own.

Seeking out the object of my own yearning, my eyes connect with Joe’s. I’m not surprised he’s waiting for me, his gaze fixed and steady, his eyes reassuring and hot at the same time.

At some point, McKenna arrives at the altar and Tanner takes her hands in his.

At some point, my brother and his bride take their vows.

At some point, they exchange rings.

At some point, they’re pronounced husband and wife.

But my eyes see only Joe, my heart beats solely for him, and my soul promises to love him through this life and into whatever eternity lies beyond.

As everyone else follows the new couple out of the church, Joe stands still by the altar, and I stay seated in my pew until we're left alone in silence, surrounded by candlelight and evergreen.

"Harper," he says softly, so much emotion in two small syllables.

I stand up, my hands clutching the pew in front of me as I keep my eyes glued to him.

"You hurt me so bad," he says, taking a step toward me. "Worse than I ever thought possible."

"I know," I say, acknowledging that the decisions I made could have destroyed us. "I'm so sorry, Joe."

"I forgive you," he says, coming closer to me. "But we still have a lot of work to do. I want to trust you again. I want that more than anything. But it's going to take time."

"I'm ready to do the work." I sidestep to the end of the pew, standing in the aisle, waiting for him to join me. "I can start by telling you that no matter what, I will never, ever lie to you again, Joe. I promise."

"I can't stop loving you," he says, closing the distance between us. "My love for you won't die."

"Then don't let it," I tell him, reaching out my hand to him, my palm up. "Keep loving me, Joe. It's not too late for us."

"I love you, Harper Stewart. You're my girl. You'll be my girl until the day I die." He takes my hand in his, tugging gently to pull me closer, into the beloved circle of his strong arms. "I choose you, if you'll have me."

I reach for his cheeks, cupping them reverently, tenderly. "I love you, Joe. I choose you. It's only you for me. It's only you forever."

We make our vows aloud in this holy place, with only God as witness.

Joe's arms tighten around me as his lips bloom into a happy smile.

“There she is,” he murmurs. “My girl.”

“Kiss me, Joe,” I whisper as tears of joy and gratitude slide down my cheeks. “Kiss me, my love.”

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Joe

We hold hands under the table at the reception, but from the looks I’m getting from the Stewart brothers, I know we’re not fooling anyone.

Hunter looks away from Isabella Gonzalez for a second, glancing at Harper, then nodding at me with approval.

Sawyer, less subtle than his older brother, gives me a calculated look, then points at his ring finger.

Don’t you worry. As soon as possible, I’ll put a ring on it.

The Stewart sisters, on the other hand, are partying the night away.

Reeve is dancing with everyone but Deputy Adams, who watches her every move from the edge of the dance floor with arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

And Parker, whom I noticed having heated words with Quinn Morgan before the cake was cut, seems to have dipped. Quinn, on the other hand, is dancing up a storm with Bruce’s younger sister, Dolly, who’s visiting from Haines.

The Purple Parsnip is decked out in the same Christmas colors as the church: white, red, and dark green, with evergreen and white bunting draped everywhere, poinsettias lined up on the bar, and a giant Christmas tree with white lights and silver garland in the corner of the dance floor.

I slide my chair back so I’m side by side with Harper, facing the festivities, and hook an arm around her shoulders. Isabella, who finishes a dance with Paw-Paw, returns to our table red-cheeked and breathless.

“Your grandfather sure can dance, Harper!”

She chuckles. “He loves spinning a pretty girl around the floor.”

“Hey! Did I tell you that my cousin, Beto, and I were selected for The Astonishing Race: Alaska?” Isabella asks Harper. “They’re filming it up here this summer.”

“Wait. What?” asks Hunter, leaning forward, his blue eyes searing. “You’re coming to Alaska this summer?”  
“That’s the plan. The show’s a knock-off of The Amazing Race, I guess. My cousin—the one who worked for a crabbing boat last summer?—was approached to audition, and when they selected him as a contestant, they asked if he had a family member who’d be willing to team up with him.” She shrugs. “Since I teach, I have summers off, so...”

“So you’ll be in Alaska this summer,” says Hunter.

“Yep,” she confirms. “The race starts in Ketchikan the second week in June and then heads north. We thought it might be fun to drive up from Seattle through British Columbia, then take a ferry from Prince Rupert to Ketchikan. We could leave our car in Ketchikan during filming and drive back home when we’re done.”

Hunter’s trying to look casual about this news, but he’s failing miserably. “Long drive to and from Ketchikan.”

Isabella shrugs. “About twenty-four hours. We’ll split the drive into a few days. It’s supposed to be beautiful country.”

“And what about after the race?”

“I don’t know yet,” she says. “I’ll definitely come and visit Ken for a few days. Then? Who knows? Maybe I’ll do what she did—get a temp job in Skagway and make a little money before I go home.”

“She got a fiancé out of the deal, too,” says Hunter.

“I’m not looking for one of those,” she says, cool as a cucumber.

Hunter stares at her for a long minute, his expression boiling, then he stands abruptly. “Sawyer, let’s do shots.”

“Shots? Yeah, bro! Whoot whoot!”

The Stewart brothers head to the bar, and Isabella is left alone with us. She tracks Hunter to the bar with her eyes



before turning back to us with flushed cheeks.

“Ignore him,” says Harper. “He gets moody. You’re going to have a great summer.”

“Thanks. Oh! And I meant to say ‘congratulations,’” says Isabella, her eyes flicking to Harper’s belly. “McKenna told me it’s a girl. When is she due?”

“March.”

“You feeling okay?”

“Just tired,” says Harper, resting her head on my shoulder.

“You guys seem super happy,” says Isabella.

It’s a strange observation to hear aloud, since the last five or six months of our relationship has been so full of high highs and low lows, I wouldn’t describe it as “happy.” I’ve felt everything from hope to love to hate to frustration to heat to joy and every other emotion that could fit in between. But “happy?” Happiness implies peace, in my definition, and nothing about the last few months with Harper has felt very peaceful. But I crave peace and happiness with her. I long for it.

Isabella casts a wistful gaze in Hunter’s direction, but he throws back shots at the bar with gusto, carefully oblivious to her attention.

“I’m not being a very good maid of honor,” she says, hopping up. “I should go check on McKenna. See you two later?”

“For sure.”

“We look...happy,” murmurs Harper, whose head is still on my shoulder. “Been a long time since someone said that about us.”

As the band slides into a soft and sweet version of Patsy Cline’s ballad, Crazy, I nudge her gently.

“Hey, darlin’,” I say, my voice husky with emotion. “You got the energy for a slow dance with your baby daddy?”

“I think I could manage,” she says, grinning up at me.

“It’s Christmas next week,” I say, taking her in my arms and swaying to the music.

“I got you something.”

“You did?” I ask. I lean back to catch her eyes. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.” She grins. “It’s just a little something for the baby. A sheriff onesie.”

Oh, my heart.

“That was thoughtful, Harp. I can’t wait to see her in it.”

She rests her cheek back on my shoulder, her breath soft on my throat as we slow dance. I haven’t gotten anything for Harper yet, but I certainly have something in mind.

“Hey,” I say, “you want to come over to my place sometime this week? I’ll make us dinner. We can have our own little Christmas.”

“I’d love it, Joe,” she says. “That sounds perfect.”

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My house smells like the roast that’s been in the oven since I got home from work, and there’s a bottle of sparkling cider chilling in my fridge. In front of the fireplace, there’s a table set for two with cinnamon-smelling votive candles and a vase of red roses.

It looks nice, I think, glancing at the little box next to Harper’s place. I hope she thinks so, too.

With fifteen minutes to kill until she arrives, I open up my laptop excited to see that a new message is waiting from Denise Calvin.

I click on it eagerly.

Merry Christmas, Joe.

I’m not sure if and how you celebrate Christmas, but here in Oregon, we’re getting excited for Santa’s arrival. We don’t know how

much longer Moriah will believe in Santa Claus, so Howard and I are pulling out all the stops this year.

We got her loads of art supplies and a hammock for next summer's camping trips. She also asked for a lava lamp and a skateboard. Moriah doesn't have a cell phone—we're waiting as long as possible before letting her go on social media—but we did get her an instant camera so she can take pics with her friends. Are you too young to remember Polaroids? Probably. Everything once old is new again. It's the way of the world.

I am attaching a picture of our girl on Santa's lap and another of her singing in the annual holiday concert at school.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you and, if you speak to her, to Harper, too. We remember Moriah's bio mom in our prayers every night, forever grateful that she gave us a family by trusting us to raise her beautiful baby.

With affection,

Denise

I re-read the final paragraph about the Calvins' gratitude for Harper, then look at the pictures of Moriah Raven, a beautiful little girl who smiles into the camera with confidence, trust, and love.

This is my third message from Denise.

The first one talked a bit about Moriah Raven's infancy and early childhood, detailing what it was like to have a baby with severe colic—a condition I'd never heard of—and how they helped her through endless nights of discomfort.

The second told me about two other mishaps. When she was four, they found out Moriah Raven had a peanut allergy, but only when she ate peanut butter crackers at a kid's birthday party, and her throat started closing up. They rushed her to the

ER and got her sorted. Since then, Denise always carries an epi-pen. Two years ago, when she was seven, Moriah Raven crashed her bike and broke her arm. Howard rushed her to the hospital and stayed with her while her arm was set in a plaster cast; he didn't leave her side, insisting on staying with her, even when the nurses tried to make him sit in the waiting room.

Childhood is full of perils; full of crises that would have overwhelmed me as a young, single parent.

But during every step of my daughter's journey, the Calvins have been by her side and loved her. They've been exemplary parents, perhaps, in part, because Moriah Raven was a gift they barely dared to hope for—a gift that Harper gave them.

It still hurts sometimes to think about the time I lost. Someday, when I meet my firstborn, I will tell her how sorry I am that I wasn't there. But I will also admit that the decision Harper made back then was for the best. I simply couldn't have given her the life that the Calvins have. I know in my heart that I couldn't have done a better job than they did. And every day, there's a little more peace in that knowledge.

“Joe?”

I snap the laptop closed and look up to see Harper coming through the door. There are snowflakes in her hair, which makes it glisten and shine like captured starlight.

“Hey, darlin'. When did it start snowing?”

She wiggles her feet out of her boots and grins at me. “About an hour ago.”

“Roads bad yet?”

“They're still okay for now.”

A sluice of heat slides through me when I realize that she might have to stay over tonight. I know we can't have sex, but that's the only thing off the table. There are plenty of other ways for us to pleasure each other, and I've been contemplating all of them for weeks.

“It looks nice, Joe,” she says, gesturing to the table. “Smells good, too.”

“I made a roast.”

“Ooo! Yum.”

“Want some sparkling cider?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says, rubbing her hands together. “I’d love some.”

I head into the kitchen, taking out the only two champagne glasses I own and filling them both with fizzy apple juice. When I try to hand one to her, she gasps suddenly, placing her hands on her belly and giggling with surprise.

“Is everything okay?”

She looks up at me with wide eyes and a beaming smile.

“She’s kicking,” Harper whispers.

“What?”

“Wren,” says Harper, her voice filled with wonder. “She’s kicking.”

I stand before her, frozen, staring at her belly like it holds alien life. I know that babies kick, of course. I’ve read that it feels like a flutter. But seeing Harper experience the sensation makes it a million times more real.

With a soft chuckle, Harper takes the flutes from my hands and places them on the kitchen counter. Then she takes my palms and presses them against the side of her stomach, her own hands flush over mine.

“Give it a second. Maybe she’ll do it again.”

And then—oh my god—I feel it, less like the flutter of angel’s wings I’ve read about, and more like the knee of a linebacker.

“Wow!” I say, my head whipping up. “She’s strong!”

“Uh-huh. Try getting a kick like that to the bladder.”

“No, thanks,” I say, pressing down a little harder and hoping for another jab. “Is this okay? Am I hurting you? Is

she?”

“Neither of you are hurting me,” she says. “Oh! There’s another!”

“Oh my god! I felt it, too!”

“She’s going to be a soccer player,” says Harper. “Just like her big sister.”

I look up in time to see the shadow fall over Harper’s face.

I’ve noticed that whenever one of us mentions Moriah Raven, it kills whatever good vibe is happening between us. We both get quiet. Warm feelings seem to go cold. Harper looks scared and guilty. I used to get moody and detached, but it’s time to break that cycle. It’s time to figure out a way to talk about Moriah Raven without guilt on her part or acrimony on mine, and it’s up to me to make that happen.

Keeping my hands on Harper’s stomach, I tell her I heard from Denise today.

“You did?” I hear her swallow. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Everything’s good. They’re not sure she’ll believe in Santa next year so they’re doing a big Christmas this year.”

Harper chuckles nervously. “We tried to keep the magic alive for Reeve for as long as we could, but I don’t think she made it past ten.”

“Did you know she doesn’t have a phone yet? They don’t want her on social media. Geez. I mean, I haven’t even started to think about stuff like that yet.”

“I know. We have a lot to learn, huh?”

“So much, Harp.” I slide my hands from her belly. “I think she’s done kicking.”

“Probably. It comes in little waves.”

“Come and sit by the fire,” I say, taking Harper’s hand. She lets me lead her to the couch. “I want us to be able to talk about her,” I say. “About Moriah Raven.”

“I want that, too.”

“Denise is great about sharing. We can watch her grow up from here, you know? And then, when we finally do meet her in person, the gap won’t be so wide.”

“Sometimes talking about her makes me feel bad,” Harper says softly.

“I need you to know...” I squeeze Harper’s hands in mine. “You made the right choice.”

Her head whips up. Tears shine in her eyes.

“I did?”

“You definitely did,” I tell her. “We weren’t ready. I wish I could say that I was, but I wasn’t. I understand why you chose to let the Calvins raise her. And, remembering how gung-ho I was to start a family, I understand why you kept her a secret. You were scared I’d try to force you to do something you weren’t ready to do. I get it. I understand, Harp.”

A sob escapes from the back of her throat, and I pull her into my arms as she cries.

“I’m s-so relieved,” she says through sniffles. “It was s-so hard, you know? I—I never wanted to h-hurt you. I w-wanted what was b-best for her. I just wasn’t ready to b-be a mom.”

“I know, darlin’,” I tell her, rubbing her back. “I know.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you s-sooner, Joe.”

“I’m sorry I was so hard on you when you finally did.”

“No!” she says. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Joe. It was a shock.”

I reach for her cheeks, cupping them gently. Leaning forward, I press my lips to her forehead, then to the tip of her nose, then to each cheek, and then to her lips. I kiss her longingly, with all the love I feel for her, with all the love that’s survived our long, complicated history.

“I’ve got you, Harper Stewart,” I whisper, nuzzling my nose against hers.

“I’ll never lie to you again,” she says. “Not ever.”

“I believe you,” I say, kissing her again. Spying the little box on the table, I reach for it, offering it to her. “Merry Christmas.”

She reaches up to dry her cheeks with the backs of her hands, then smiles at me.

“What is it?”

“Open it and see.”

As she pulls the lid off the box, I slide to the floor on one bent knee. She gasps, her eyes flicking to mine and then back to the ring in the box.

“Marry me,” I say, taking the ring from its velvet pillow so I can place it on her trembling hand. “Please marry me, Harper.”

“Y-Yes!” she says, her tears starting all over again. “Yes yes yes! Yes, Joe. Yes.”

I slide the ring onto her fourth finger, then gently pull her down onto my lap, into my arms.

“You know what this means?” I whisper into her ear.

“It means I’m your girl,” she says, an echo from a lifetime ago.

“You’ll always be my girl, Harper Stewart,” I tell her.

“Always,” she promises, leaning back in my arms so I can kiss her again.



# Chapter 13

Harper

I moved into Joe's place right after New Year's with the full blessing of my family...but without the full blessing of Joe's. Sandra remains a hold-out on whether or not Joe and I will succeed as a couple. I don't like it, but I get it. I've hurt Joe many times over the years, and Sandra was always there for him, to help pick up the pieces.

I'm hoping that with Wren's arrival in a few weeks, Sandra will come around. I know it's important to Joe to have his cousin in his daughter's life. And families have a way of mending when babies arrive.

In the meantime, I'm making Joe's house our home little by little and with tons of help from my siblings. Parker and Reeve repainted the spare bedroom a light peach color for Wren, and McKenna stenciled little birds around the ceiling. Tanner moved the nursery furniture from the lodge in Dyea to Joe's place in Skagway and got everything set up just so.

I love sitting in the rocker in the corner of Wren's room as my belly grows rounder. I sing her the same songs I once sang to Raven, and I dream of my girls meeting in person one day.

Denise and Howard have never kept Moriah Raven's adoption a secret from her; the fact that she was adopted at infancy from a college student has always been part of her personal history. She accepts the fact that she has bio parents somewhere in the world and doesn't seem at all troubled by Joe's and my existence...or interested in meeting us.

This is one hundred percent normal.

From my own research, I've learned that most experts advise holding off on suggesting a reunion until the adopted child is curious, mature, and ready. Sometimes that moment arrives in a child's teen years, but other adoptees prefer to wait until they've cleared eighteen, or even later in life. We've told

the Calvins that whenever Moriah Raven is ready to meet us, we will be ready to meet her, too. In the meantime, we will watch her grow from afar, and when and if we meet her someday, we will already have a reassuring trove of memories that include her.

Valentine's Day finds Joe and me in Anchorage for Wren's 32-week ultrasound, and we are given the most amazing news from Dr. Kim.

"Oh, my gosh!" she exclaims, gliding the transducer over my abdomen. "I didn't expect that."

"What?" I ask. "What's going on?"

"The placenta migrated," she says, leaning closer to inspect the grainy TV screen. "It's moved higher."

"Wait! It did?"

"It sure did. It's no longer covering your cervix completely. Good job, Wren!"

This is fantastic, unexpected news. It means that although I will still have a c-section, it's possible I won't require further surgical intervention like a hysterectomy.

"I was sure the old scar tissue would lead to problems," says Dr. Kim, "but everything looks good. Really good. Better than expected."

Joe, who's standing by my head, squeezes my hand. When I look up at him, I can tell from his face that he's too emotional to speak. Relief can do that to a person. Fear and love aren't the only emotions that can bring you to your knees.

"Happy Valentine's Day from baby Wren," quips Dr. Kim, wiping off my belly and printing out some images. "We'll talk in my office once you're dressed, okay?"

She tells us that because of my history, the c-section should still happen as planned in late March, and I should continue to take it easy, but that we don't need to return to Anchorage again until delivery day, which is an amazing gift. I feel so big at this point, and traveling to and from Skagway to Anchorage is tiring.

We walk back to the Marriott hand in hand.

“Six weeks at home, and then she’ll be here,” says Joe. “It’s a miracle, Harp!”

“I can’t believe it,” I say. “I thought we’d be flying up here every two weeks. It’s such a relief.”

“And now we have plenty of time to get married,” says Joe.

Wait. What?

“What are you talking about?”

“I know you didn’t want to plan a wedding between bi-weekly trips up to Anchorage, but now that we’ll be home for a while, it’s perfect.”

Perfect?

To be clear, my feet have swollen to the size of Hobbit’s feet at this point in my pregnancy, and I have a beach ball-sized belly. I never had acne in my entire life, but I’m one of the lucky fifty percent of expectant moms who develop it in their second trimester. I also have non-stop heartburn, I’m constantly squeezing my ass cheeks to squelch farts, and I’m trying to stay ahead of an army of hemorrhoids but losing ground day by day. Add to these charming symptoms: a bladder that started to leak a few weeks ago, itchy skin everywhere, and restless leg syndrome that keeps me up half the night.

A wedding?

God, it exhausts me to even think about it. Not to mention...what would I even wear? A poncho and size triple-xl slippers?

Is he actually crazy?

“No,” I say, the word as definitive and final as possible.

“No...what?”

“No, it’s not the right time for a wedding, Joe.”

“It’s the perfect time,” he says. “We have six—”

“I don’t care if we have six months! Six years! It’s not the right time!”

I yank my hand away from his, shoving both in my parka pockets. My once roomy parka stretches over my belly like it’s vacuum sealed. I’m positive it won’t zip up in another week. I’ll need to order another from Amazon. Ugh.

“Harper, it’s off-season, which means we have our pick of places,” says Joe. “No one’s busy with tourists. Everyone we love could attend. It would be amazing.”

Tears prick my eyes at the half-comic, half-tragic image of myself farting all the way down the aisle and belching out my wedding vows.

“It would not be amazing.”

“Why not?”

I stop walking, standing still on the sidewalk until he turns around to face me.

“Joe! Are you joking right now? Look at me!”

“You’ve never been more beautiful,” he says, the words solemn and true.

“I know you think that,” I say, trying to be patient, “and it’s sweet. But it’s not accurate, Joe. Not at all.”

He puts his hands on his hips as a shadow passes over his face. “Harper, do you even want to marry me?”

“Not right now, I don’t!”

His face jerks back like I’ve smacked him. His eyes widen. His jaw tightens.

“Oh,” he whispers. “I thought...”

“What? That I’d want to walk down the aisle looking like a whale? No, thanks.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe to you! Not to me! The answer is no.” I cross my arms over my chest in a huff. “Absolutely not.”

“Not now? Or not ever?” He bites the inside of his cheek, which is a nervous gesture I recognize. His eyes search my face desperately, as though looking for some hidden message. I put my own insecurities aside and register the uncertainty in his expression, the growing worry in his eyes. “Do you really want to marry me, Harper? Because if you don’t, you should say that. Don’t lie. Just tell me.”

I feel confused by his over-the-top reaction, even as my brain races to figure out what’s going on.

“Joe, I’m not lying...” I insist, that word—lying—connecting all the loose ends in my head.

Oh my god. Lying.

Suddenly, I realize what’s going on. Shit.

He wants to trust me, but after everything that’s happened between us, he doesn’t. Not completely. Not yet. Yes, I promised never to lie to him again. And yes, he’s working on trusting me again. But there will be times when trust doesn’t come easily—when he questions my words or motives out of a need to protect himself.

It breaks my heart a little bit. But now that I understand what’s going on, I rush to reassure him.

“Joe,” I say gently, waddling toward him and putting my palms flat on his chest, “I love you. I definitely want to marry you. No question.”

“Don’t lie to me, Harp. If I’m not what you want—”

“You are everything I want. I promised never to lie to you again as long as I lived. Please believe me, Joe. I want to be your wife. More than anything.” I tilt my head to the side. “This is solely about the timing. I want to marry you, but not right now. Not while I look and feel so, so...crappy.”

“But I think—”

“I know what you think. You look at me through eyes of love, and you think I look beautiful. I love you for that, Joe. But I feel enormous, and my feet are swollen, and my face is covered in pimples. I don’t want to look like that in my

wedding photos.” I reach down for his hand, and when he lets me take it, I feel relieved. “I want to feel beautiful on my wedding day. I want to look as happy as I’ll feel.”

He scans my face, then leans down to kiss me. It’s sweet and soft, but I can tell he’s still worried.

“How about this?” I ask, braiding my fingers through his and setting our feet in motion again. “How about we use the next six weeks to start planning our wedding instead?”

“Planning it?”

“Sure!” I say, leaning into the subject now that he understands where I’m coming from. “Where we want to have the ceremony and the reception...who’s going to be in our wedding party...all of that fun stuff. We can even book the places and start looking at invitations.”

A little of the worry leaves his expression. “Are you choosing Parker for your maid of honor?”

“Of course. And Reeve and McKenna as bridesmaids.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then asks, “What about Sandra?”

I grimace. “Sandra doesn’t like me very much.”

“She’ll come around. I’d really like for her to feel included.”

I don’t know if she’ll come around or not, but I’m anxious to please Joe, and whether or not she likes me, she is his cousin.

“Then yes to Sandra. I’ll ask her to be a bridesmaid, too. How about you? Who are you asking to be your groomsmen?”

“Hunter, Tanner, and Sawyer, of course. And I was thinking Bart for best man.”

“Four and four. That’s perfect,” I tell him. “But head’s up. I don’t want my reception at the Purple Parsnip. I’m always worried that Bruce will stage an impromptu bandit robbery or something.”

“You know what I was thinking?” asks Joe. “How about the Glacier Lounge at the Westmark.”

Hands down, the fanciest place in town. How I love this man.

“In the early fall?” I ask, grinning up at him. “When the tourists are mostly gone, and I can fit into any wedding dress I want?”

“It’s a plan,” he says, kissing me again.

\*\*\*

Joe

“My water broke.”

“Huh?” I blink my eyes open to find Harper sitting on the edge of our bed in the dark, looking at me over her shoulder.

“The bed’s soaking wet,” she says. “And it doesn’t smell like pee.”

“No,” I say, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. “You’re only thirty-six weeks, Harp. We’re not ready...no.”

“Yes,” she says, standing up. She puts a hand on her lower back and shuffles to the bathroom. “It’s happening. Now. Yes. Get up.”

I’m still groggy from sleep, but I grab the sweats I was wearing last night and pull them on while Harper sits on the toilet.

“I’ll call Brian!” I tell her.

“No!” she says. “Not Brian. Medevac.”

“Are you bleeding?”

“Nope. Just leaking. But if I go into labor on the flight, we’ll need a medical crew on board.”

I grab a T-shirt and sweatshirt from my dresser drawer and unclip my cell phone from its charger. Thank God the number for Guardian Flight Services is pre-programmed. I order a medevac for us as soon as possible and then go back to check on Harper.

She looks up at me with red cheeks and wide eyes.

“It’s too early,” she says.

“Thirty-six weeks is okay. She’ll be okay,” I say, trying to sound confident. “You need clothes.”

I open the closet to find maternity underwear, leggings, and an oversized, long-sleeved T-shirt.

“Hand me one of those big maxi pads,” she says, pointing to the closet in the corner of the bathroom.

I give her the pad and help her get changed. Once she’s dry and dressed, we grab her “go” bag (thank God she packed it last week), and I help her out to the truck. As we drive to the airport, she calls her family.

“Dad? My water broke. Yeah. About an hour ago.”

I can’t hear what Gary’s saying, but I know her father and grandmother had planned to join us in Anchorage for Wren’s birth. I have no idea what they’ll do now.

“No. We’re using medevac,” she says. “Call Brian in the morning and ask him to bring you up. We still have two more pre-paid flight credits with him.”

How can she be thinking this clearly? My brain is mostly worried mush at this point.

“Love you, too. I’ll have Joe start a text chain to keep you all in the loop.”

We get to Skagway airport, park, and make our way into the terminal, which just opened because it’s just after six. Medevac from Juneau will arrive in twenty minutes. While I set up a text group for the Stewarts, Sandra, and Bart, Harper goes to the bathroom to check on amniotic fluid loss. I can read the worry on her face when she returns.

“Feels like a lot. The pad was wet, so I changed it,” she says, her voice thick with worry. “Joe, if anything happens to me—”

“Stop,” I say, pulling her into my arms as a chill runs down my back. “Plane’ll be here soon. We’ll be in Anchorage



in an hour and a half. An ambulance will be waiting. We'll be at the hospital by eight-thirty, and Dr. Kim will meet us there."

"That's more than two hours from now." Her eyes widen. "That feels like a long time from now. What if labor starts while we're flying?"

"Are you having contractions?"

She seems to concentrate for a moment, then shakes her head. "No. Not yet."

"Okay," I say, feeling breathless. "That's good. That's really good."

"You know how to deliver a baby, right, Joe? You know what to do?"

She's right that I had to learn how to deliver a baby when I went through EMT training at the police academy, but it's been a long time since I brushed up on those skills. Besides, from what I understand about Harper's previous delivery, during which she almost died from blood loss, it wouldn't be good for her to try to give birth vaginally.

I'm not going to lie.

I'm starting to feel a little terrified.

But I'm desperate that she doesn't know.

Stay calm, Joe. Stay calm.

"Sure," I say. "I remember. And the medevac team will know how. And besides, you're not even having contractions yet. It can be a while between water breaking and going into labor."

She nods, her head bouncing quickly, her big, blue eyes wide.

"I'm scared, Joe."

Her voice is small and weak, like she's about to cry.

I hold her close, rubbing her back. "It's going to be okay, darlin'. It's going to be okay. I'll be with you the whole time."

You can do this, Harp. You're so strong. You and Wren are both going to be fine."

I feel so fucking helpless.

All I can do is reassure her. All I can do is stand by her side and let her know she's not alone.

"Hey, folks," says an airport maintenance worker, "flight's about to land. We'll get you on board quickly, okay?"

I lean away from my fiancée, putting my hands on her shoulders. "You okay?"

She shakes her head no. "I'm so worried."

"That's normal," I tell her. "But we've got this."

"We do?"

"We do," I say, as this unexpected certainty overwhelms me.

I remember her in the third grade with blonde pigtails and a wide smile for the new kid. I remember her in sixth grade wearing snow pants and challenging me to a snowball fight. I remember her in sophomore year of high school kissing me behind the bleachers after a cross-country meet. I remember her skinny dipping in Upper Dewey on our summers home from college. I remember her telling me about Wren and then about Raven. And I remember her saying yes when I asked her to marry me.

It's been a long journey for Harper and me, and it's not remotely over yet.

"We've got this, Harper Stewart," I say, cupping her face in my hands. "It's always been you and me. Always will be. As long as we're together, we're going to be just fine."

For the first time since she woke me up this morning, she smiles at me, a sweet serenity overtaking her expression.

"I believe you," she says softly. "We've got this, Joe."

I take her hand in mine, hoist her bag onto my shoulder, and we walk out to the tarmac to board our flight to Anchorage.

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Our daughter, Wren Sarah Emily Raven, was born almost exactly three hours after we lifted off from Skagway. At six pounds and eight ounces, Wren was well-developed for a preterm baby, and after a cautionary twenty-four hours in the NICU, she was transferred to the regular maternity ward for the rest of her hospital stay. She has jet-black hair and sky-blue eyes, just like Moriah Raven. We love talking about how—someday, one day, when the time is right—our girls might get to know one another as sisters.

Harper, who was given a tocolytic IV during the medevac flight, never went into labor, thank God, and didn't require the possible hysterectomy that Dr. Kim had discussed with her. The c-section went smoothly, and the placenta was removed with a D&C procedure that allowed her to keep her uterus.

After six days and five nights in the hospital, Harper and Wren were released, but because of the possible risk to her preemie lungs, we opted to drive home instead of fly. Harper's dad drove up to collect us in his RV, giving us a comfortable way to travel home and an extra pair of experienced hands along the way.

Speaking of the Stewarts, Gary and the rest of the blonde brigade are ga-ga cuckoo for the newest addition to the Stewart family. When Harper and I visit the campground in Dyea, we barely see our daughter from the time we arrive, until the moment we buckle her in for the ride back to Skagway. There's always a great-grandparent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle waiting for a turn to hold her. Our little girl is surrounded by love.

As I hoped and expected, Sandra started coming around the second she laid eyes on Wren. She and Harper aren't besties yet, but they are civil to one another, which isn't a bad start. One day, perhaps they will even be friends.

Six months to the day after the birth of our daughter, I married my childhood sweetheart, the mother of my children, and my forever love, Harper Stewart, in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church.

During his short sermon, Pastor Mac spoke of ravens, sharing that they are one of few species that mate for life. Once they choose each other, they celebrate with “joy flights,” wingtip to wingtip, soaring through the sky, or hooking their claws one to another to somersault through the air. They work hard on their relationships, bringing one another food gifts, preening, and grooming each other, and offering comforting warbles close to one another’s ears.

In roosts of thousands of birds, raven pairs find each other every night; they are loving parents, but even more devoted couples. The children fly away eventually, after all, but the pairs stay together forever.

And so will we,  
my Harper and me.  
We’ll do as they do.  
We are Ravens, too.

THE END

# Epilogue

Hunter

Hard.

And fast.

I've always fallen hard and fast.

But when Isabella Gonzalez showed up in Skagway last summer? The rate of my drop was savage and supersonic. And not just for me—for both of us. She grabbed my hand, held on for dear life, and we plummeted together.

Despite the fact that Isabella was in town to see McKenna, and spent most of her time at our campground hunkered down with McKenna in Tanner's cabin, we still managed to have sex six times.

Six times. In sixty hours.

That was a record, even for me.

For the two weeks following that epic meeting, she sent me the sort of texts that made my cock hard just from reading; and I sent her the kind that made her wet from 1500 miles away. I was blinded by my attraction, unable to think of anyone but her. Yearning for more time together, I bought an airplane ticket to visit her in Seattle over Labor Day Weekend, and she seemed happy about that...at first.

And then...out of nowhere...she told me not to come.

I don't do long-distance, she said. My home is in Seattle, and yours is in Alaska. We need to call this quits before someone gets hurt.

I tried to get her to change her mind, but she wouldn't have it.

I wasn't looking for anything serious, she said. It was just a weekend fling. We both need to move on now.

I wasn't interested in being labeled a stalker, so I stopped texting and calling.

But I didn't forget about her.

No how. No way. Never.

I'd never experienced such an intense insta-connection before, or that degree of spontaneous combustion from another person's touch. Even for someone whose track record for falling hard and fast was as reliable as mine, that weekend with Isabella felt different. Maybe because in addition to being attracted to her, I actually liked her. She was sweet and sassy. Smart, but fun. Hella cute in a curvy, hot-pepper package.

That's how Isabella Gonzalez became my own personal "one that got away."

So seeing her at Tanner and McKenna's wedding—even though I knew she'd be there—was a curse and blessing all at once.

A curse because I can't have her and can't stop wanting her.

A blessing because I just found out she's coming back to Alaska this summer. Teaming up with her cousin, she's going to be a contestant on a new TV show called The Astonishing Race: Alaska.

Well, now I know something that Isabella doesn't know...

I'm going to be a contestant, too.

May the best player win.

\*\*\*

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### [TANNER, #1](#)

When Tanner learns his crazy ex is returning for a summer in Skagway, he places an ad in the Odds Are Good, looking for someone to pose as his fiancée for the summer. Enter McKenna Cabot, a commitment-phobic college professor from Seattle caring for her aging grandmother. The promise of seasonal money is too good to pass up, so she heads north only to fall head over heels for tall, blonde, and handsome Tanner.

### [HARPER, #2](#)

Harper Stewart and Joe Raven have loved each other since childhood. From elementary school to middle school, through high school and into college, they were each other's first crush, first kiss, first love, first everything...until something happened which tore them apart. Ten years later, Harper and Joe will finally confront the long-buried secrets that ended their relationship. Will the same secrets that almost destroyed them now threaten any chance of a future together? Or will the deep love they once shared give them the strength and courage to forgive?

### [HUNTER, #3](#)

Hunter Stewart has a history of falling hard and fast, but when he met Isabella Gonzalez the rate of his drop was both savage and supersonic. They shacked up for a weekend of physical bliss, and stayed in touch when Isabella headed back to Seattle. But a few weeks later, after some super steamy texts, Isabella called it quits. (Long-distance relationships, as everyone knows, can really stink!) This summer, Hunter's surprised to learn of Isabella's upcoming participation on a new reality show, The Astonishing Race: Alaska! On the first day of filming, she'll be surprised to discover that Hunter's a contestant, too! From the panhandle to the far north, with challenges galore, these two will set off sparks that could melt the whole state. Get ready, get set... and may the best "player" win!

### [SAWYER, #4](#)

The love story of Sawyer Stewart and Ivy Caswell! More details coming soon!

[PARKER, #5](#)

The love story of Parker Stewart and Quinn Morgan! More details coming soon!

REEVE, #6

The Christmas love story of Reeve Stewart and Aaron Adams! More details coming soon!



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Upon learning that his entry in the Qimmiq Dog Race will be canceled if he doesn’t have a female teammate, Cody places an ad in the Odds Are Good magazine, desperately searching for a woman in the Lower Forty-Eight to enter the competition with him. Luckily, he recruits Montana-born Juliet, a veterinary student with an agenda of her own.

### **A FAIRBANKS AFFAIR**

Tired of being treated like a freak when men discover that Faye is a thirty-year-old virgin, she answers an ad in the Odds Are Good magazine, hoping to trek up to Fairbanks over New Year’s and turn over her v-card to a sexy Alaskan. But when her chemistry with businessman Trevor turns out to be stronger than she ever could have imagined, what started out as a one-and-done mission becomes much more complicated.

### **MY VALDEZ VALENTINE**

When Los Angeles lawyer Addison receives a desperate voice mail from her adventure-seeking brother, Elliot, she hires Alaskan helicopter pilot Gideon (whom she first discovers via an ad in the Odds Are Good) to take her to her brother’s last known location. As the two uncover more and more details about Elliot’s last days, they find themselves falling deeply for each other.

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Tony moved to Craig, Alaska, three years ago in the hopes of disappearing from his uncle’s mob associates in New Jersey. But Alaska ain’t home. And he misses the Jersey girls he grew up with. Tessa answers Tony’s personal ad,

intending to teach its cocky, conceited author he ain't all that. But when she finds herself in danger, she flees to Craig to disappear with Tony.

### [DR. DAN IN KETCHIKAN](#)

Dr. Dan's waiting room is always full on port days, but he's all business when it comes to his patients until he meets quirky cruise guest, Ruby, who injures herself on a lumberjack excursion. Will these two adorable misfits discover that they're only at the beginning of a journey toward forever?

### [SUMMER IN SKAGWAY](#)

When Tanner learns his crazy ex is returning for a summer in Skagway, he places an ad in the Odds Are Good, looking for someone to pose as his fiancée for the summer. Enter McKenna Cabot, a commitment-phobic college professor from Seattle caring for her aging grandmother. The promise of seasonal money is too good to pass up, so she heads north only to fall head over heels for tall, blonde, and handsome Tanner.

### [KODIAK LUMBERJACK](#)

Influencer Nola positions herself as the beauty behind a big bucks Instagram page, while lumberjack Soren declares himself the muscular hottie behind Kodiak Island's most coveted carvings. But what if Nola was the victim of a devastating accident, hiding behind the anonymity of the internet? And what if Soren lives in his lumberjack brother's shadow, just an accountant posing as a testosterone beast? Could they somehow make it work when they meet in person?



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Katy Regnery started her writing career by enrolling in a short story class in January 2012. One year later, she signed her first contract, and Katy's first novel was published in September 2013.

Over fifty books and three RITA® nominations later, Katy claims authorship of the multi-titled Blueberry Lane series, the A Modern Fairytale collection, the Summerhaven series, the Arranged duo, and several other stand-alone romances, including the critically acclaimed mainstream fiction novel Unloved, a love story.

Katy's books are available in English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, and Turkish.

Check out Katy's Website here: <http://www.katyregnery.com>

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