



IF ONLY
YOU

Knew

AN 'IF ONLY' SERIES NOVEL

STEFANIE
CASTRO

If Only You Knew

STEFANIE CASTRO



*For New York City,
You captured my heart, mind, and soul.
Until we meet again...*

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CANDY RAIN BY SOUL FOR REAL

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CLOSER BY NINE INCH NAILS

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HARMONY**

GOOD BY BETTER THAN EZRA

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[Playlist Link](#)

Prologue



SHANE

June 1998

I just stare into her blue-green eyes, this time holding an internal storm instead of sparkling as they usually did in my presence; all the hate directed at me. I have never seen such anger in her gaze before. But I knew the moment I made my way over to her house, this was how things would go tonight.

A single tear falls down her face. No dimples indenting her beautiful tan cheeks, like she usually had when she smiled brightly toward me. I can see the anger radiating off of her, yet she still has this wave of confusion flashing across her features.

“So that’s it? Years of loving one another, plans of building a future together, and this is how the next chapter goes?” She says this like I am breaking up with her without a care in the world. Like this isn’t ripping my heart out just as much as it is hers.

“Becs, you know this is best. I’m starting on a new path with the Navy and you’re going to do amazing things with your life. Pursuing medicine has always been your dream. So now you can do so, without anything holding you back. I cannot be your anchor in this life.”

“Holding me back? That’s what you think you do to me? Interesting because it seems from what you’re saying, I’ll be weighing *you* down, holding *you* back!” Now she’s yelling.

Even in the middle of nowhere Nebraska, I think everyone in the twenty-mile radius can hear her.

I wince knowing that I can't just walk away, and I'll have to jab the knife deeper to make sure she doesn't try to pursue me after I leave this porch tonight.

"Beccs, please know I love you. I will always love you. But this won't work out after this summer. We have to start fresh. We have to begin living our lives once we leave Saddle Ridge."

"That's real rich coming from you, Shane. I never thought it would be this way. After all the plans we made together, this is how you see fit for us to move forward...apart!" Now the tears are coming down like a waterfall. The saddest waterfall I've ever witnessed, coming from the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life.

"You're scared. That's what you are. You are a coward and a liar. I can't believe I fell for this nonsense when making plans for us these last four years. This isn't love. This can't be what love feels like because I thought what we had was forever. Love should feel like you're soaring, being pushed to do better by those you love. Not feel like you're suffocating under a body of water. But right now, Shane—you're killing me." She begins pacing on the porch where we spent so many nights looking up at the stars.

"Beccs, I can't go overseas to an unknown location, knowing you're holding back in life because I asked you to. You have to know this is killing me just as much as it's killing you. Maybe more."

That gets her to stop in her tracks. Oh, my little firecracker. Becca is pretty reserved with her outbursts, except when pushed too far. And by the look she's throwing at me, I've pushed a button that has taken her over the edge. Just from the way she looks at me, I know I struck a nerve. She straightens her spine and looks right at me, showing me she isn't going to cower even though the world we had built up in our minds is crashing to the ground.

“So now you know what’s best for me without even talking to me about it? That’s how we are going to play this? You’re right, Shane. Poor little Becs can’t handle you being thousands of miles away. No, please, do this. This is so much better!” I see her spine straighten and her hands ball at her sides. The frustration is electric, coming off her like a bolt of lightning.

I move toward her to try and caress her arms. The warmth is seeping in, the summer is fast approaching, but there’s still a little breeze at night, and I can see goosebumps forming on her arms. All I want to do is memorize her touch because I know it’s the last time. I know I’m being a selfish prick right now, but she has no idea how much she owns my heart.

“Don’t you even think about comforting me when you’re the reason for this pain, Shane.” She pushes my hand off her. I attempt to comfort her again, but the walls are being built. “Stop. Just leave.” She whispers this last part as if she’s too tired to fight. Now her shoulders sag as if this entire interaction has simply taken all the energy from her body.

Today has been draining. We had graduation a few hours ago, and we were supposed to be heading to grad night with our classmates. Once I made this decision to break up with Becca, I couldn’t just pretend the night away knowing this would weigh on me until I ripped off the band-aid. So here I am, doing the one thing I promised I would never do to her—break her heart. We had plans. That, she wasn’t wrong about.

But things change. Mindsets change. Lives veer in different directions and we have to pivot. So that’s what I’m doing. This is best for her. She will see that one day. We both have plans in our lives and we need to reach our goals. We will only weigh one another down. Becca has dreamed of being a pediatrician since she was a little kid. I will not let her throw away her dreams to follow me. And I can’t forget I had my mind set on going into the Navy. That hasn’t changed in all the years we’ve known each other.

“If it’s meant to be, we will find one another again. I mean it, Becs. Our paths will lead back together if that’s what’s meant to happen.”

I try to say it softly to her, hoping to calm this palpable pain that's evident around us right now. Maybe I'm saying this more for me than for her. I'm breaking inside with how I'm having to let her go, but it would hurt a whole lot more if she gave up her dreams for me. So I'll do this for her, even if she doesn't see it that way right now.

"Beccs, I love you. I will always love you. I'm doing this because of my love for you." I plead because parting with her is already breaking me, but walking away from her with this shattered look on her face might kill me.

"Enough, Shane. You know what you're doing right now? You're making yourself feel better. You know what you're failing to see? That my heart isn't broken. It has imploded and that's all because of you!" Becca storms off toward the door.

I take two large steps toward her, grabbing her hand. She pulls her hands to her chest as if my touch burns her from the contact.

"You've said all you need to say. I think it's best you leave, Shane. Why prolong this pain? I'll be fine. Don't worry. I'll live my life. That's what you want, right? For me to be out in the world, living freely? Well, don't worry about me. I'll party, date, fall in love...all the things I thought were done because my heart was complete when I met you; I'll go off and do them with other people. I will live my life wildly, so put that head on your pillow at night knowing that your job here is done."

This time I'm the one left in shock. Knowing that Rebecca Stanley will be out in the world, being loved by someone other than me, is the fatal blow to my heart. Becca opens her front door and walks inside, slamming the door shut with a loud sound, causing me to jump as if thunder was roaring around me. I don't know how long I stand out there, but I know that once I walk off this porch, I don't just leave a piece of myself in front of her house, but I leave behind everything that matters most to me.

Chapter One



REBECCA

Present Day

“Mom! Where is my pink headband with the rhinestones?”

I hustle into the kitchen, toast hanging from my mouth as I try to consume the most important meal of the day in a matter of seconds before the real chaos of the day begins. Mallory comes sauntering in with a scowl I know too well from her father. This girl is a spitting image of her dad, and it’s hard for me to see past it sometimes. His hazel eyes and milk-white skin look back at me, jet-black hair as straight as an arrow, focused on whatever answer I am going to give. I stare back, knowing that with a teen they can sense fear, so I stand a little straighter, shoving the crumbs from my toast off my top to look like the put-together parent I know I should be.

“Mal, I have no idea. You’re old enough to keep tabs on your own things,” I answer without making eye contact.

Don’t engage with the beast.

“Ugh! You’re so annoying. Isn’t that, like, your job to know all the answers?”

I’m the one to grunt next because as much as I’d love to say yes to that statement, mornings like these are reminders that I do, in fact, possess no talent to have all the answers. I learned long ago not to engage when either of my teenage twins complained like this. It just prolongs our morning routine and leaves me seething in the end. I continue to work

my way around the kitchen, grabbing the remainder of the lunch I had prepped the night before. My prep was merely thinking about it and being too tired to see it through after being pulled into a three-hour surgery right at the end of my hospital shift last night.

“Jackson, buddy, let’s go!” I yell as I walk toward the stairs and attempt to put on my pumps while also holding onto my bag and lunches for the two of them, as well as my own.

Luckily, the fall warmth still lingers, lacking the coolness late September usually harbors this time of year, so the addition of a jacket is unnecessary.

I hear a ruckus upstairs and quickly see my fourteen-year-old son come barreling down the steps. I will not think about the hundred ways he could have fallen down and split his head open or broken a bone.

Yes, being a physician means I have to talk myself down from a ledge daily, especially with a child who believes his number one job is to test my cardiac function. Unlike his twin sister, Jackson is my clone. He’s got my same blue eyes, with speckles of green mixed in from the center, and wavy, dark brown hair that he chooses to grow out on the top while shaving the sides. Trying to understand what’s “in” with this new generation would be a job in and of itself, so I just let him have his style, even if I don’t understand it.

The first thing I notice is Jackson’s disheveled hair. “Jack, what’s going on with your hair? Did you even run a comb through it?”

He just shrugs and walks past me, ignoring my questions as if they were for my benefit and not his. At least he’s dressed and seems put together enough for school.

Mallory comes out of the downstairs restroom, her hair done, with the pink headband she was inquiring about. I’m about to ask where it was, probably sarcastically because I have no filter anymore now that my kids are older, but am interrupted by the doorbell. The kids are gathering their bags and pulling their respective lunches from my arms as I walk past them.

I open the door and am greeted by my ex-husband. That cocky smile got me into so much trouble when I first met him. It seems the smile hasn't changed, but what I do see is more of his lying, cheating personality than anything else. Luckily, we've come a long way since I found him shoving his cock into his secretary when I decided to surprise him after I got off my shift early.

Little did I know he held more surprise for me that night than I did. Talk about a cliché scenario. I can still feel myself rolling my eyes each time I see him staring at me like he is right now. Still cocky as ever, those hazel eyes looking at me like I hung the moon, even though I know his ways. Lawyer by day and lawyer by night, let me tell you. It never ends for him. He's always on and has now made it his sole mission to get back into my panties.

Since that night, he has apologized at least once each time he's interacted with me. His remorse did turn out in my favor, though—the brownstone I'm currently living in is now all mine.

We didn't spend much time fighting during the divorce, as Hudson was quick to realize he messed up. We were married long enough that he knew it was useless to push me into a corner. When I was mad, I showed it in my words, and I had many to share. Hudson never liked to be called out, so we split fairly amicably, despite him trying to win me back any chance he saw as an opportunity. Quick reminder: he is a lawyer, after all and arguing his point is literally his form of survival.

“Have you found it in your heart to forgive me yet?” he asks as he leans against the doorframe.

Cool and casual as always. I sometimes think he does this just to see a reaction, knowing that ship has sailed between us. Luckily, he keeps his volume low so our kids don't overhear his repetitive question.

The minute the kids see him, they run toward him as if they hadn't just seen him forty-eight hours ago. I hold back my eye roll for a second time this morning, this time because I know how much the kids love their dad. We did a good job

keeping the infidelity away from their young ears because it would serve no one any good. Resentment is ugly in a child, and there was nothing to gain from that behavior as the adults in the relationship.

Luckily, my Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Betty, was my confidant, and I'm convinced she understood all those nights when I leaned on her and cried about Hudson into her ear. Her resentment toward my ex is palpable, and I sort of enjoy it. This girl gang of two—yes, judge me all you want for considering my dog and I a gang—stand in solidarity.

Betty barks as the kids finish hugging their father. I see Hudson shoot the dog a look, but quickly rectifies his behavior when he sees me squinting my eyes, as if lasers will soon come out of my irises if he continues to look at my dog in such a manner.

I turn to hug the kids goodbye and wish them a good day at school. I remind them that tonight they will be with their dad as I have to be on call. Hudson and I had a formal schedule when we first got divorced five years ago but had to restructure our way of parenting because it was too stressful with both of us having busy careers. So we now have a shared calendar and we are flexible where needed.

The longer we're divorced, the more I reflect on the fact that Hudson and I were good while it lasted, but it feels like our time is now better apart. Even though Hudson might be trying to win me back, I think he sees our arrangement is beneficial for all of us. And I am not stubborn enough to ignore that deep down we have respect for one another and want what's best for everyone, not just the kids.

After I say my goodbyes and watch the kids step into their dad's car, I look down at my watch and nearly pass out. I am going to be late if I keep at this leisurely pace. I quickly yell to Hudson that I have to finish getting ready and wave one last time to the kids before I run back inside and slam the front door. I'm grabbing another cup of coffee from the Nespresso when I hear the doorbell ring. Ugh, one of the kids probably forgot their folder.

I'm already complaining as I walk toward the front door, opening it while saying, "What did you for—" and stop in my tracks as my freshly made coffee falls to my feet, shattering the mug.

Although I was expecting the kids or even Hudson to be the ones standing beyond that door, instead the clearest green eyes I've only seen on one other man stare back at me.

Chapter Two



SHANE

Present Day

There's something peaceful about New York in the fall. The changing of the leaves simply feels like everything is shedding a piece of itself to start anew. I'm admiring the neighborhood as my driver, Patrick, gets me to my next destination safely. It's hard not to sit and reflect on mornings like this, where I've had years to build my company after years of hard work in the Navy.

I close my eyes and try to meditate, something I started when I returned from service as a way to calm my body and mind. The stress one bears when serving is something that can never be eliminated from the mind, but I've found ways to cope thanks to my therapist. The meditation doesn't last long as he has to swerve to the side to miss hitting a car door that abruptly opens to the street.

To avoid traffic, Patrick has taken us through some residential neighborhoods, which has been a nice distraction from my busy mind. I see many families leaving for the morning, kids with their backpacks, and parents balancing their coffee plus a million other necessities to get through the day. The thought of that life comes at me for a moment and my heart constricts; there's no use of thinking what *could have* been. There is nothing to gain from going down that mental road trip.

The moment I start to close my eyes again, my phone rings. I look down to see it's my assistant, Janice, probably wondering where I am to start my day. I don't live in New York year-round. I started my business with my buddy, Dustin Greer, shortly after leaving the Navy. He and I served together, and we conjured this idea late at night when we were bunking together. It's flourished from the ground up and I couldn't be happier. But with great achievement comes great responsibility.

We've worked hard to get our company to be the success it is, but now I have started to pull back, as has Dustin, and we've brought on new personnel to ensure the business can run smoothly while we have more upper management roles. Dustin is from Boston, and although my life started in Nebraska, I was mostly in California after joining the Navy.

So now I have a place back in Boston and one in California where I alternate my time. I come to New York when meetings and business need me here. I stay at a friend's house while in Manhattan because I can't bear to add one more responsibility to my ever-evolving lifestyle. Janice is my wonder-woman of an assistant and has the ability to put me in my place with her no-nonsense Boston personality. The fact she hasn't been fired yet is simply because we both know I would be helpless without her.

"Where are you? Your nine o'clock meeting is fast approaching, and you should be closer to the office by now."

"How do you know where I am? Are you having me followed?" I run my hand down my face.

What does that say about me running a security firm and I don't notice someone following me?

"No asshat, I have a locator on your phone and can see where you are," Janice says as if I'm the dumbest human to walk this earth. You'd think the way she talks to me would make me angry, but this is how we are, constantly throwing jabs where we deem fit.

"You track me? Is that even ethical?" I know I'm just messing with her at this point, but I love to ruffle her feathers.

“I’m not starting this conversation because I haven’t fueled myself with enough coffee yet. Just make it by nine so I don’t have an aneurysm. It took me two months to get Mr. Henderson to schedule this meeting with you, to begin with. Make my hard work worth it, boss.”

She hangs up abruptly. Janice has never been one for small talk and I appreciate it. I look down and note the time. I pocket my phone and decide I need to move around a bit as we aren’t that far from the meeting location. I ask Patrick to pull over and let me walk. We decide he’ll grab a coffee at a little spot he knows nearby, and I’ll meet him there.

Once out of the car, I take in the neighborhood I’m standing in. The brownstones are just like they are in the movies. This part of New York never disappoints. I smile to myself seeing these homes lined up down this street. Someone from my past had dreams of living here once. My mind goes there, and I feel that heartache I’ve learned will stay with me until my last breath. I push it aside and begin walking down the street.

I’m looking at the trees swaying with the morning breeze, but my attention is pulled when I hear a voice. Not just any voice, but *her* voice. I stop in my tracks and look ahead at the source of it, and that’s when I see two kids walking into a decked-out, black Model X Tesla with who appears to be a father figure, while a woman stands at a brownstone door, waving. She quickly scurries inside and slams the door.

My steps take over, I’m not even thinking about my actions as I move closer to her home, the Tesla speeding off and forgotten about in my mind. I’m taking steps two at a time, my heart racing as I near the one thing that’s separating me from my past. I knock, thinking very little about what may come next.

The door swings open and she’s there, my Becs. She’s older, obviously, with laugh lines only adding to her charm, but still the most beautiful human I’ve ever laid eyes on.

Her eyes go wide, and if she were a cartoon character, I bet they’d be bugging out like those Looney Tunes cartoons we

grew up with. Instead, I hear it before I see it, her coffee hitting the ground and the mug in pieces. She doesn't even acknowledge it, simply stares at me.

While she stands, probably not breathing and as still as a statue, I feel like I've taken my first real breath in over twenty-five years.

Chapter Three



REBECCA

Fall 1994

My mom's still sitting in her car, waiting for me to walk in. I'm in front of my new school in Nebraska, after moving from California over the summer. This school is so much smaller than my last one. I hear my baby brother fussing in the car seat, upset that the car is idle, and he isn't being stimulated by the passing objects outside the window.

"Becca, you're going to do great. It's a new school, but you're going to make friends in no time," my mother says from her driver's seat, while I stand outside the car, the passenger window rolled down.

I look back at my mom. She tries to reach for Grant's binky that he threw while protesting his current displeasure. I can see the worry on her face more than she realizes. She's my best friend and I see when she's hurting. This isn't the life we saw us living a year ago. A year ago when my dad was still alive and we were complete. My dad was absolutely incredible and losing him feels like a piece of my heart will never be mended.

About six months ago, Mom and I made the decision together to leave Southern California. The pain of his loss was unbearable, and we needed to find new surroundings because my dad's memory was imprinted all over the state for us. The number of road trips we took as a family felt like they were in the hundreds. Even when I was starting to be a bratty teen, I

loved sitting in the backseat and watching my parents interact. They had this bond, this love, that had me looking at the stars at night and pleading for me to feel that one day in my future.

Unfortunately, in an instant, everything ended when my dad was driving home from his job as a professor at Pepperdine University, and a drunk driver hit his car, causing him to lose control and careen down the mountain. Our worlds were shattered, and we were still trying to find our bearings in this new normal we were navigating. So here I am, staring at my new school, trying to be brave because this is still hard on my mom. My brother, Grant, was an infant when our father passed, and he needs to feel stability in whichever form we can provide.

My mom finds the binky and hands it to Grant. Now he thinks it's a game and throws it back on the ground. This woman has the patience of a saint. My mom sighs and I can't help but chuckle. She cracks a smile, even though it doesn't reach her eyes, says she loves me, and blows a kiss toward me. I pretend to catch it and watch her drive away.

I walk into the school, my new school, and head to the front office. Kids are moving around the hallway, passing notes and giggling. I see people looking at me because, again, this is a small fucking town and I stick out like a sore thumb. I walk into the office and it feels like everyone stills, and all eyes are on me. Yes, I'm the new girl. I will take autographs later. Until then, just lead me to my first class. Thank you very much.

I suppress the eye roll, which my mother has said I have perfected, and see this older woman approach me. "You must be Rebecca Stanley. Welcome to Saddle Ridge High. We are so excited to have you join us." She smiles and it's warm, like a grandmother would smile welcoming her grandkids in for Christmas dinner. I can't help the small smile that stretches across my face, and I can feel the blush on my cheeks.

I'm so focused on this kind woman that I don't realize there's a presence by my side. I look over to find someone that looks to be my age. What is this girl, a Ninja? I didn't even

hear her walk up to me. Now she's looking at me like I'm her new favorite project.

“Hi! I'm Elody James, but people call me Ellie. When I heard you were starting today, I told my mom how excited I was. I have known everyone in this town since I was born and let me tell you, boring doesn't even fully describe it. So a new person joining our town has got me giddy. Oh my gosh, I think we will be the best of friends. I mean look at us, don't we just look like best friends already?” This girl with blond hair and deep blue eyes, resembling a Skipper doll, was waving her hands all over as she spoke and seemed to possess more energy than my brother after he consumed cake. She looked just like a girl that would fit perfectly in that California sun, watching the cute guys surf in Malibu.

I just wave and introduce myself, “Hi, I'm Rebecca. Rebecca Stanley. People call me Becca.” My shyness is coming out, and I tuck a bit of my wild hair behind my ears. Right then, Elody, I mean Ellie, gasps and giggles. “Oh my gosh. I love your double piercing on your ears. My mom will not let me get my ears pierced again, and I keep telling her she needs to get with the times. Maybe your mom can call mine! Wouldn't that be amazing? We become best friends and then our parents are best friends?” She's vibrating at this point, and she doesn't stop talking so I can't interject and tell her that I only have one parent to contribute to this best friend's group she's formulating in her head.

The grandmotherly woman behind the counter, Mrs. Jessup from the little sign on the desk, tells her, “Elody James, take a minute and let this poor girl catch a breath. You're nonstop and it's not even eight a.m. yet!” Mrs. Jessup turns to me and once again fills me with warmth with just a smile. “Now here's your schedule Ms. Stanley. Elody will be your student ambassador, and she will get you settled. I'm not sure if I should say you're lucky or apologize. Ms. James is simply very excited you're here, as you can see. Please come find me if you need anything.” With that, she smiles one last time and turns her attention to a kid who just walked in with a note from his parents, I assume.

I turn around to see Ellie shifting from one foot to the other, excitement coming off her like she just can't contain it. I can't help but chuckle because I really think Ellie might be my newest best friend. I know I don't know anyone else, but something about her simply feels genuine. We start walking out of the office and Ellie grabs my schedule. She sees the locker Mrs. Jessup wrote down and the code, then grabs my hand and begins to pull me toward a row of lockers. Unlike my California schools, where everything was primarily outside, this entire school seems to be enclosed. Lockers line the hallways on both sides, and kids are still scattered all over.

Once we reach what I assume is my locker, I see her tap the highest locker, indicating it was mine. Ugh. The top locker. Why do I always have things at the highest level? I did not take after my father in the height department. I'm short, only five-three, and these are the moments I'm reminded I will not be growing anymore. Luckily the combination lock is reachable, so I go ahead and slowly get my locker open. I see Ellie doing the same with the locker to my left, and I realize we are locker neighbors. At least there's that, even though Ellie has at least three inches on me. We begin chatting about what classes we share, which seems to be all of them from the sounds of it, and I can't help but feel relief wash over me. At least I have a friend I can hang out with, and this first day in not only a new school, but a whole new state, won't feel as overwhelming. I'm putting the last of my books that I don't need until after lunch period into my locker when I feel a presence beside me on the right.

I look over and I can't help but let my jaw hang open. Yep, I'm gaping, but what in the Greek gods am I staring at? The greenest eyes stare back at me, sandy blond hair, and this sly smile that must win over anyone with a heartbeat. I stand there, just looking at this specimen I know the heavens above spent extra time on. Ellie snaps me out of this haze when she begins talking to said god in front of me.

“Shane, how wonderful of you to bless us with your presence. It seems your radar sensed a new student has joined us this year. Rebecca, this is Shane Philips. Shane, this is Rebecca Stanley.”

Shane is chewing gum, his tongue popping out and swiping along his bottom lip. I can't help but stare and he knows it. It seems his smile only grows, and I see the arrogance seeping off him. Yeah, he might be hotter than anything I've ever seen, but I'm not into guys like him that only see girls as a conquest. No thanks. But it's not a crime to admire him and admire him I do. He's got that boy-next-door look going for him. Those perfectly straight teeth, white like a Colgate commercial, along with a smirk that would make panties melt. Yeah, he's got it alright. I just need to make sure I contain my admiration because I doubt he won't sniff it out of me if I give in.

"Hey, Becs, nice to meet you. I think I should warn you about something though."

"It's Rebecca or Becca, not Becs." I will not admit to him how much I love this new nickname he's bestowing on me because it will only add to his cockiness. "And what warning do you need to give me?"

Shane looks around; two other guys come to join him, and they seem to be his friends. I peek over toward Ellie to see her cheeks blush, and she is focusing on the taller one. Huh, interesting. The one on Shane's right is one of the tallest guys I've ever seen at our age. He must be close to six-four and has a basketball under one arm, while the other friend is built more like a wrestler and about six feet tall. Shane isn't too bad himself. Probably a little over six feet, he stands there with a muscular build I would peg as a football player more than anything. He's got the attitude of a quarterback if I had to continue guessing.

Shane leans in and whispers right against my ear, causing shivers to break out along my arms. "You're going to be my girlfriend by the end of this school year. I have no doubt. If only you knew how good I am at predicting the future."

As attracted as I am to this guy, he's high if he thinks it's that easy to have me fall for him. No fucking way. He can't declare this and think I'll fall at his feet. Yeah, he's pretty, like Brad Pitt pretty, but that's not everything. "Sorry, Shane, I

don't do so well with commands, especially with someone I just met.”

“Oh, that's not a command, it's a fact,” he says, his smile at full watt at this point, his perfectly straight teeth showing for all to admire. His goons, yeah, I'm that annoyed so that's what they are at this point, begin to chuckle, even though they have no idea what their jock friend just whispered in my ear. I snarl because my dad didn't raise me to be anyone's property, and I take a step back.

My back straightens and I look at Shane with more confidence than I feel. “Well, you'll be waiting a while for this 'so-called fact' to become reality then, *Shane*.” I spit his name out because I hate how much I want what he's saying to be true.

Ellie gasps by my side and I can't help but look at her. You can tell she acknowledges Shane's good looks, but she doesn't seem to think he walks on water, unlike the other girls who walk by and swoon over him. I've been here five minutes, and I've noticed at least a dozen girls walk by, salivating and gawking at his presence. Shane uses this opportunity while I'm distracted with Ellie to open the top textbook I'm holding in front of me and place a piece of paper inside it. It all happens too quickly, and he simply gives me one last smile and a wink and starts to retreat backward before turning around and sauntering away. I watch him a few beats more before looking at Ellie. Now she's solely looking at me, her eyes wide.

“What?” I ask her. She looks toward where Shane is still walking away and then back at me.

“I've never seen anyone, especially a female, not fall at Shane Philips' feet, especially if he is declaring his love for them.”

I start to laugh, “Oh, he doesn't love me. He just wants a piece of the new girl.” It stings to say that out loud because having Shane's eyes on me made me feel like I could soar. I'm not sure what I'm feeling, but it's fair to say there's a pull toward Shane after just a few minutes near him.

“Shane has never reacted to anyone the way he just reacted to you. I think I felt a shift in atmospheric pressure at school the moment he walked up to you. I don’t know, Becca, I think you’ve caught the eye of the most popular guy in school.”

I huff out a breath, still looking in the direction Shane was standing, then turning back toward Ellie. “A guy like that would never be someone I would date.” Not that I had any experience in dating at the ripe age of fourteen. “He’s too cocky and that just isn’t appealing.” I hope I sound more confident than I feel inside. Shane is one hundred percent my type, but no one needs to know that, especially Shane himself.

We close our lockers, Ellie watching me a little longer than I deem comfortable. We begin walking in the direction of our first class and right when I go through the classroom door, I’m greeted with those green eyes again. I walk past him, my knees shaking a bit, hoping I don’t look like a newborn calf that is trying to get her bearings while attempting to walk straight. I find my seat next to Ellie and further down the row where Shane is seated. He glances back at me, and then I see his focus shift to the book I just set down. Once he looks away, I find the courage to open the textbook he previously messed with and see it right there.

Future Boyfriend

402-555-6596

Ugh, this is going to be a long first day.

Chapter Four



REBECCA

Present Day

I feel the splatter of the coffee, but I can't move my gaze from his green eyes. I must be hallucinating right now. I've dreamed of those eyes, off and on, for the last twenty-five years. It's like he's in my bloodstream; a part of everything I am.

The bell from Betty's collar pulls me out of my stupor, and I see her coming toward the shards of ceramic from my mug, inspecting if indeed it's just coffee that spilled and not a ribeye steak. Once she sees there's nothing that will benefit her from this mess, she looks up at me and I swear she puts her nose up and walks away. I never said my canine BFF wasn't stuck up; she's loyal, but she also knows she's the queen, and I bow to her every need.

Once Betty's gone, I look back at my high school *everything*, feeling numbness all over. I see him inspecting me as if he's in just as much shock. But he came to my door; he must have known what was awaiting him on the other side. I, however, feel like all the air has been pulled out of my lungs. I've felt this way before, but that was years ago when he walked away from me—from *us*.

How in the world does he look better? Of course, he looks slightly older, some gray around his temples where he once had more dirty blond hair but other than that, he just looks better all around. He looks larger around the neck and chest, as if he lives at the gym for most of the day. The Shane I knew

was fit, but with the suit he's wearing, I can tell he's bigger than he once was. I guess the years have been good to him. I should say, *gravity* has been good to him.

Now that the shock is wearing off, I'm starting to fill with something else. As if I'm going through the stages of grieving, although out of order, and have moved into the anger side of this reunion. I feel my hands ball into fists by my sides, and now I just scowl at him. He must notice my shift and starts to speak, but I beat him to it.

"Shane, what can I do for you?" My tone cold. I can feel it as I take in my own voice that feels foreign to me.

But after all I went through when he left, now that I'm standing here having to say his name again, I can't feel anything but irritation toward the one person who swore he'd be by my side for the rest of my days. I look down at my watch because apparently, Shane decided to knock on my door, but anything further is past his train of thought. He just stands there, as if he's just taking me in.

If he's thinking I don't look the same, he can fucking choke on his next meal. I've aged, I'm aware of that. Things don't quite stand as upright as they used to, especially after having children. I refuse to inject my body with additives in order to look younger, and I hold pride in what I've endured, especially after he left me without a care in the world.

"Shit!" Looking at the time, I curse when I realize I'm truly going to be late now.

I leave Shane with the door ajar and walk toward the kitchen to grab supplies to clean up the mess I've made. Betty must feel the anger radiating off me and follows behind me, loyal as she is. I feel comforted by her presence, even though she has no idea what Shane used to mean to me and how much of a spiral I'm going to experience after he leaves.

I can hear an extra set of footsteps, and I already know Shane is behind me, probably looking around at the home I've built for myself. I'm really trying to shake off this fury I feel multiplying as I reach my kitchen and grab the cleaning spray and a roll of paper towels.

Shane goes to grab the spray, and I move my body away, acting like a child at this point but feeling like he needs to comprehend his help is not welcome here. Would I have welcomed it twenty-five years ago? Yes. Today? Not so much.

Without getting pulled into his gaze again, I move back to where this nightmare of a reunion began and start cleaning. Shane clears his throat and I know he's going to speak, but when I hear his voice, I already know I did not give myself the proper mental pep-talk I needed because his voice feels like a balm to my nerves. Damn traitorous emotions. Way to bounce around like the jerk you are.

"Becs, you look incredible. As if a day hasn't passed since I saw you, yet you look like you've done well for yourself." The moment I look up, he's got that smile I once loved pointed in my direction. Too bad he's years too late in making me happy with a simple glance like that.

"I'm so glad I look well to you. I've been taking care of myself for just this moment to arise so you could see what you missed." The bitterness drips with my statements, and I already regret this juvenile behavior I'm exhibiting.

Cut a woman some slack though. The man she expected forever with, but instead received the biggest blow to her heart, suddenly returns. Yeah, I'm not going to bow down that quickly. What he did to me, to us, years ago, is still unacceptable. I can't simply turn a blind eye to his behavior, even if he was a stupid eighteen-year-old. I swear, if he says he was scared, I will knee him in the balls. It would be deserved because I was fucking scared shitless, and I was expected to move forward by myself, without my partner.

He sighs and I know my attitude isn't appreciated. Too bad. Being the mature one right now really isn't in the cards. Not only is he here after all this time, but I'm late to a job I work my ass off at daily. I finish my clean-up and toss everything in the kitchen trash. Walking back toward Shane and the exit, because I cannot take this shit for another second, I grab my bag and lunch I had set on the bench by the front door.

I say my goodbye to Betty. Her dog walker will be by midday to get her outside for a bit, so I know she's in good hands. Both Shane and I get outside, and I take my time locking the door behind me, hoping when I turn back, this has all been a nightmare I conjured up. Unfortunately, I'm quickly proven wrong when said hopeful hallucination grabs my lunch out of my hands to help me out a bit.

"Listen Becs, I did not plan to do this. I heard you as I was walking in the neighborhood, and it was like my body was on autopilot. I was drawn to you, much like years ago, and I had to see if I was simply imagining, more like hoping, it was you. It was a beautiful realization that I was, indeed, correct."

Shane is walking by my side as I'm putting my bag in the car and walking around to the driver's side door. I'm doing everything I can not to cry right now. I can feel the tears pricking the back of my eyes, but I will not let him see me cry.

I open the driver's side door and hop in. This car is so damn high off the ground. Why did I need an SUV again? There is just no graceful way to get into a vehicle of this height, but I do the best I can. I close the door and open the window to grab my lunch from Shane, but my gaze is on him while I take the food from his hands. "Listen, it's been years. So much life has been lived since we last spoke. I hope you've been well, but I really have to get to the hospital."

A small smile moves across his face, as if what I said calmed him.

"So you did it. You became a doctor, just like you dreamed."

He isn't asking. It's a statement, as if he knows I wouldn't be working at a hospital under any other capacity, and a piece of my icy heart toward him thaws a bit because he remembers my dreams from when we were kids. Well, he should as that was his reasoning for leaving me all those years ago. I still can't wrap my head around why my dreams kept us from realizing our own future together, but I can't handle bringing that up right now.

“Yes. I became an OB-GYN. I fell in love with the profession shortly after you and I parted ways. I thought pediatrics was my destiny, but life led me in this direction.” I begin to buckle my seatbelt while I move my lunch to the passenger seat by my side.

“Can I get your number? Maybe we can find some time to get coffee?” I can hear the hopefulness in his voice, but I don’t think my heart can take more pain right now.

By the way I’m trying to hold back all my emotions, I can tell this will break me to the point of no return. I’m straightening in my seat, hoping the change in posture will give me the confidence I need to finish this encounter on my terms.

I shake my head no to him, but I can’t fathom trying to speak for fear I may cry on the spot.

“Oh, Becs, I should warn you.” Now I’m pulled back to the first time I spoke to Shane next to my locker.

I look over at him and am hooked because I just can’t keep from asking, “What are you warning me about now?”

He looks me straight in my blue-green eyes and says, “You will see me again, Becs. If you only knew how certain I am of that,” and he turns away and walks off, not a care in the world. I can feel my nostrils flaring because I’m so angry right now. How can he just saunter back into my life as if he didn’t destroy me years ago?

I close my window and before turning away, I reach for my lunch and make sure I grabbed everything I needed from inside before starting this long-ass day. Right when I open it, I see something that wasn’t there earlier; a business card I don’t recognize.

I pick it up and turn it over. Right there, printed neatly is his information, *Shane Philips, CEO Greer Philips Security Services, 617-555-3887*. But right above in his horrible writing, it says sprawled across, *Future Coffee Date*.

I drop the business card back into the lunch, close my eyes, and throw my head back against the headrest. This feels all too

familiar and yet I can already feel my heart being tugged toward him. I open my eyes, looking for him along the street or sidewalk, but come up empty. Next, I grab my phone and call the first person I can think of.

Ellie's voice comes over my car's Bluetooth. "There's my favorite bestie."

I'm silent for a bit too long and Ellie's tone changes drastically. "Becca, are you okay?"

I barely make out the word, "Shane," before completely breaking down and sobbing.

Chapter Five



REBECCA

December 1994

I've been here for a little over three months, and it feels like I'm finally settling in. Ellie was right, we would be best friends. It was solidified even more after the first day of school when we discovered she also had a sibling, a sister, around Grant's age. Upon picking me up from Ellie's house one afternoon that first week of school, my mom began talking to Mrs. James, Janna, and they were fast friends.

There's a squeal to my right and I see both my brother and Ellie's sister, Laney, laughing at whatever strange thing toddlers find fascinating at that age. My mom and Mrs. James are in a deep conversation about something regarding hospital work.

My mom is an ICU nurse and quickly found a job at the local hospital. Turns out Mrs. James works admissions for inpatients at the same hospital. Who am I kidding? This hospital is the size of a button; there's only one hospital in a fifty-mile radius.

Ellie grabs my attention, talking non-stop about how Jessica Millsper kissed Jesse McKinley, one of the boys from our P.E. class. If I needed the 4-1-1 on anyone at school, I could count on my bestie to have all the gossip. Ellie is everything I ever dreamed of in a friend.

She's loyal, fun, and positive, something I didn't realize I needed after my father died. And she gives me space when she

sees me struggling with my feelings regarding my father's death. I confided in her a few weeks into our meeting because I saw fathers dropping off their daughters for the fall dance and tears welled in my eyes. Ellie listened and it felt like she knew my father, even though that part of my life seems to have been left behind in California.

The holidays are a tough time for my mom and me, so having a new place to live, with new friendships, really does make things a little easier to bear. My heart still aches, but I have so much love around me that it's hard to ignore these blessings of friendships from the James family.

Mr. James, Kirk, comes up with the goofiest smile on his face, holding the ugliest Christmas tree I've ever seen. It makes the Charlie Brown tree look like it should be sitting at Rockefeller Center. The moment Janna sees the monstrosity, she looks over to my mom and they both start laughing.

Both toddlers look between the adults while sitting in their strollers eating crackers and begin laughing as well. I simply smile because this pretty much sums up why we moved to Nebraska. It's nice to see my mom genuinely laughing and building new relationships again.

I smile toward all the adults until I hear my name, or a version of it, and quickly look behind me to find Shane waiting for me to answer. I simply stare blankly at him because I did not catch anything he said beyond my name.

"What?" I ask so I don't agree to a date with him without knowing it.

"I asked if you are stalking me?" He has that cocky smile again.

Gosh, this guy is gorgeous and he's only fourteen. I'm in trouble. If he gets better looking with age, the next four years are going to feel like twenty. I am having a hard time not giving in to this pull we seem to have.

"No, Shane, as a matter of fact, I asked my mom to drive me to the tree lot outside of town, but apparently driving forty

miles to buy a Christmas tree is a bit dramatic. Her words, not mine.”

This pulls a chuckle from him and I realize just how much trouble I’m in. I honestly am starting to like Shane Philips. As arrogant as he is, because he really is full of himself, there’s a tender side to him he is starting to let me see.

On multiple occasions, I have found little notes and items in my locker. Weeks before Thanksgiving, I found a little card that had a turkey holding a sign that said, “Order a Pizza.” I laughed at that one. With that reaction, he learned I liked corny jokes and had been leaving similar notes on my locker, and I am now looking forward to them when each day begins. I’ve been saving his little notes in an old shoe box under my bed, loving the little treasures to look back on every now and then.

Whenever I’m going to class or grabbing lunch from the lunch line, he’ll either hold the door or grab a tray for me. He’ll chat with me about classes we share and is taking the time to get to know me. He still asks me out any chance he gets, but he’s not letting my blatant refusal bring him down.

Before he or I have time to continue our conversation, Mom comes by and says hi to Shane. Shane catches the resemblance between my mother and me and quickly introduces himself.

“Hi. You must be Becs’ sister. I’m Shane.”

My mother’s cheeks blush and she extends her hand. Oh my gosh. Even my mom is falling for this act? Unbelievable.

“Nice to meet you, Shane. Do you go to school with Ellie and Becca?” Shane’s quick. I’ll give him that much. He smiles that same smile that is quickly winning me over. “Yes ma’am, I do. But I’m more than that.” Now he’s got my mom’s full attention even though my brother is now throwing crackers on the ground, wasting food which is one of my mom’s pet peeves.

“How do you mean you’re more than that?” Her curiosity taking the bait.

Shane looks at me for a mere second and turns his attention back to my mom.

“Oh, I’m your daughter’s future boyfriend. She’s fighting it, but I know I’m getting into that heart of hers.”

Can adults swoon? Because I think both Janna and my mother sigh like they’re seeing Uncle Jesse from *Full House*.

Great! Now I’m never going to hear the end of it from my mom. I can already tell from the look she’s throwing my way that she is wondering why I’d pass up a chance to date this Brad Pitt look-alike. Unfortunately, I don’t even know why I’m pushing him away like I am. Must be that Stanley stubbornness I’ve been told I possess.

Shane takes this moment of quiet between the two mothers to look back at me. Now I feel my cheeks blush, for no reason. Damn this and damn him!

“Hey, Becs, if you’re looking for a good tree, I found one you might like. Want me to show you?”

I look at my mom, hoping she’ll say that the tree Kirk found is perfect even though it’s seen better days, but the only assistance my mom provides is making this shooing gesture with her hands, which means I should follow Shane to the ends of the earth at this rate.

With an eye roll, I turn to Shane and make a gesture indicating for him to lead the way. I follow him, quickly looking at Ellie and she’s got the biggest grin on her face with an I-told-you-so smirk. These women in my life are all traitors right now. Even Laney looks excited about the prospect of me following Shane. What in the actual Twilight Zone have I entered?

Shane walks a few paces ahead of me, talking about the different trees in the lot. I honestly can’t focus because I have eyes, and all I see is the already impressive shoulders Shane has. I can see why he plays football. But he’s started to bulk up a bit since September. I look down to see if I can check his ass out and of course, the universe chooses that moment for him to

look back at me. Shit, he caught me checking him out. Fucking hell.

“Like what you see, Becs?” So fucking cocky.

I don't even try to answer him and simply change the subject, “So where is this magical tree you have in store for me?”

Shane stops abruptly and turns, and I collide with him. He instinctively grabs my hips and I'm not mad about it. Because I'm so short, my viewpoint is straight into his chest.

He steadies me and I look up at him. I can see the flecks of gold in the center of those green eyes when I'm up close to him like this. They are truly the most expressive green eyes I've ever seen. I can't get enough of them.

My breathing picks up as we simply stare at one another. He looks at my lips and back to my eyes. Then his eyes continue, drifting up, and he points above our heads. My gaze follows and we are standing under a mistletoe.

I go to push away from him, seeing this as the setup it is, and he grabs my hand and pulls me back to him. But this time his hands grab onto my cheeks, and he pulls me into a kiss.

The moment our lips touch, I realize I will never be the same. Shane's kiss is everything I ever needed and something I will never be able to live without. His lips are so soft, and his kiss is gentler than I ever imagined. For me, it's life-changing, and the connection feels electric.

I have never kissed a boy before so I'm tentative, unsure if I'm doing this right. I take that back. I kissed Timmy Jenkins back in fourth grade because it was a dare. He smelled like cheese, and I was sort of scarred for years and even gave up on the dairy product for a brief moment in time because of good ole Timothy.

This kiss with Shane ends, and I already wish for our next one because he is the missing piece of my soul. Of that I am certain. He rests his forehead on mine, his eyes closed at first, but then opens them to find me looking right at him.

I think he's gauging if I am going to go back for more or kick him in the balls. I do neither. I just stare at him until a throat clears, and we turn our heads to find Ellie and Shane's friend, Beau Lorrent, standing with the biggest grins across their faces.

Shane and I both chuckle as if this is a normal interaction between the four of us. I slowly move away from Shane and grab Ellie's hand to start walking away.

At the last minute, I turn to Shane and say what I've fought these last three months, "I usually get hungry around five o'clock. Maybe you'll find me at Pat's Diner around then tomorrow night."

With that, I leave Shane, mouth agape, and stride off with my friend, giggling like fools because I set Shane up to go on a date with me.

What have I done?

Chapter Six



SHANE

Present Day

I don't know how, but I get through the day. I cannot get my mind off seeing Rebecca. I'll admit, after I broke things off with her following graduation, I expected her to come running back.

I left quickly after that night, but I honestly thought she'd write to me. Finding people wasn't easy back then, not like it is now with social media. But I thought in some capacity, I'd hear from her much sooner than this abrupt encounter twenty-five years later.

Regret was one of many feelings I had after I left Saddle Ridge because it felt like a piece of my heart stayed behind.

Who am I kidding? My entire heart stayed back with Beccs because no one has ever come close to what she meant to me. Every failed relationship since is a reminder that my heart never belonged to anyone else. But seeing her today, it felt like my heart was back in my chest, beating the way it used to when we were kids.

"Um, boss, where are you?" Janine is staring at me through our Zoom call, looking bewildered at the fact that her usually put-together boss is completely lost right now.

My mind has been elsewhere all day. When I walked away from Becca, I almost turned around and ran back toward her. Now that I have reconnected with her, even in this brief

capacity, I feel like being even a few feet away from her is too much. But where do we go from here?

I could see anger floating through her features when she was around me this morning. I honestly thought she would not hold such feelings after this long. We were just kids. She has to understand that. Yes, we had made promises to one another, but look at where she is today. She achieved her biggest dream.

Knowing she succeeded in becoming a doctor made me smile, even hours after our interaction this morning. She really was brilliant, even at a young age. She was great at reading people, and I knew she'd make an impressive physician one day. Knowing she made it that far brings me more joy than bitterness that our relationship didn't last past that night of graduation in June. I know it was the right decision to let her live her life.

Somehow, I pull my head out of my ass, allowing Janine and me to wrap up our meeting, and I turn off my computer and begin packing things up. I make my way through the city, walking by everyone as they are making their way back home. I run into a few influencers posing in the most ridiculous fashion, no more than twenty years old and making more at that age than I ever thought imaginable when I was that young.

Who knew the world of disposable cameras and car phones would evolve into this? I never knew the world would hold so much change in a matter of a few decades, but here we are.

I need to let out some frustration, so I go to a local gym I frequent when in the city and run on the treadmill. That doesn't bring me the comfort I'm seeking, so lifting weights is my next resort.

Soon enough, I realize I can't shake seeing Becca. The fact that the ball is in her court makes me nervous. What if she wants nothing to do with me? What if she can't leave the past behind us and try again? I didn't notice a ring on her finger, but I can almost say for certain, those kids getting in the car this morning are hers. I just hope the man with them isn't her current husband.

After my failed attempt to let off some steam, I make my way to Noah's apartment. Noah and I were in the Navy together, and we've stayed connected since we parted ways. Noah and his wife, Marie, live in the city, and they are kind enough to let me stay in their apartment when I'm in town. I used to stay in a nearby hotel, but I spent most of my time with them when I wasn't in the office throughout the years, so it made sense that I simply board with them instead.

They have two little girls, Marjorie and Mackenzie, who are the sweetest things and my favorite girls when I visit town. They are eleven and eight and keep both Noah and Marie extremely busy with school and their dance competitions. Noah was the only one home as Marie had taken the girls upstate to compete in a ballet recital.

When I walk through the door, Noah is already in the kitchen cooking something up. It smells amazing and my stomach growls in protest because in my stupor after seeing Becs, I failed to eat a proper meal and simply drank coffee between my meetings. Noah notices me as I begin to deposit my laptop and keys on the side table and walk into the kitchen.

"Well hello, dear. So wonderful to have you home," Noah says as I walk past him.

I chuckle and wash my hands at the sink. Noah is playing nineties hip-hop, and I find comfort in the music Becs used to blare from my car radio when we drove around our small town as teens.

My face must say it all because Noah turns down the music and immediately asks, "What happened to you today?"

Before answering, I have to think back to all the times I spoke about Becs to Noah. He and I went through a lot during our training, and we spent many nights talking about life back home and what we left behind. I never had anything to share except where I had left my heart when I joined the Navy.

I think Noah imagined I would get back with Becs when I got home, but life had other plans, and I never really brought her up that often as the years passed on.

I go to the fridge and grab a beer, twisting the top and looking at my dear friend. “I saw Becs today.”

Noah is stirring his tomato sauce, but the moment I say her name, he pauses then drops the spoon and looks right at me. After a few beats, he adds, “And? You can’t say something like that and not follow it with more!”

I take the next thirty minutes recounting my morning to him, and he just stands there, leaning against the counter with his arms crossed across his chest. When I’m finished retelling my morning, I take a swig of my beer, but Noah remains silent.

My friend is a thinker. He doesn’t usually say anything without processing it first. It’s probably what makes him a great therapist. Yeah, I forgot to mention that Noah is a psychiatrist and has a thriving practice a few buildings down the way. He loves his job, and it shows in the way his clients stay with him and will even continue their sessions virtually if they happen to move away.

Noah scratches his chin and finally speaks. “Why didn’t you get her number? After all this time, I thought you’d be more persistent. I mean, you haven’t ever gotten close to another woman since Rebecca.”

It takes me a few moments to respond because I have thought the same thing all day, but I keep coming back to one thing. “Years ago, I knew she would be my girlfriend. It was like I could feel it deep down in my bones. I just knew. But it didn’t matter how much I pursued her, she wouldn’t budge. But if Becs is anything like she used to be years ago, she likes to feel like she made the decision.

“Cockiness isn’t a trait she finds endearing in a man. So I left my number in her lunch bag. It’s similar to the way I started our encounter nearly thirty years ago. It felt right to do the same now. Because if I know Becs at all, it’s that she needs to think this over, to the point where she will go through every possible scenario in her head, and then she’ll take the leap. She needs to feel in control of this situation, and pushing her will get me nowhere.”

“So what now?” Noah looks over at me.

I have spent most of the day rearranging my entire life for the next few weeks in order to answer that very question myself.

“I wait because it served me well when we were fourteen, and I have this feeling it will be the right decision this time around as well. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ll be in the city for an extended period of time. I can always grab a hotel room if you and Marie can’t deal with another mouth to feed.”

“Well, you are one sure motherfucker. I don’t think if I had the same history with Marie, I would be able to resist being anywhere but by her side. She held my heart the moment I laid my eyes on her. I just can’t imagine having such self-restraint as you did this morning. I probably would have hopped in the car and told her she had a new personal assistant and tagged along the rest of the day.”

He turns back to his tomato sauce and begins stirring again, this time the consistency more of a paste than a sauce. I don’t know if it’s salvageable, but I don’t say a word. I have no clue how to cook as well as Noah.

“And of course, you can stay here. Marie, the kids, and I all love having you around. Plus, you bring the house some balance. I have too much estrogen floating around the halls here. I need someone on my side. Jinx just flops on his back and meows for attention. He’s no help when I’m outnumbered in a fight.”

Noah continues to ramble and cook and I sit, once again lost in my own thoughts. Those radiant aqua eyes keep staring back at me when I close my eyes. There’s something about Becs and I that feels like it’s forever, even though we haven’t been around each other for the entirety of our adult lives. But walking away was the right thing.

Just like in that tree farm, Becs needs to decide what’s next. Twenty-five years ago, I left her because I thought that was the right thing to do. But this time, I’m not going anywhere.

Chapter Seven



Present Day

I feel the weight of the day in each step I take up to my front door. Today was long, not just because I had back-to-back deliveries, but the fact that I held onto the encounter with Shane through all the movements of my day. Instead of shedding the thought of him as the hours passed, I felt the weight of him, of our past, pulling on me more as the hours passed.

When I turn the key to my front door, I hear a commotion coming from my living room. As I move through the entrance of my home, I look to my right and I see Ellie there, chatting with Laney. Glasses of wine in hand, and the TV is on some mindless reality show they both claim is ridiculous, yet they can't get enough.

Laney is the opposite of her sister Ellie in looks. While Ellie is blond, blue-eyed, with skin that tans in the summer sun, Laney is red-headed, with freckles, and the clearest emerald eyes that glisten in the sunlight. She's taller than both her older sister and myself, closer to five-nine, and legs for days, it feels like.

Growing up, Laney was always bubbly, and her heart was bursting with love for life. But like Ellie, unfortunately, Laney experienced an unexpected tragedy in college, and I've seen only pieces of her return in the years since. Although there's a

thirteen-year age gap between us, Laney has been pulled into our group because our bond is simply unbreakable.

Whereas Ellie is bonded by blood with Laney, I took Laney in after she left college. She was a built-in babysitter for me as I was trying to climb the ladder amongst the residents, and her presence, although shattered, was equally needed for both our souls.

I toe off my heels and walk toward them. They both stop what they're doing and hop off the couch to greet me with hugs. The embrace is needed after this day, and I immediately feel tears well up in my eyes. I've been through so much with these two that I don't know what I would do without their support.

I kept my feelings at bay all day when I had patients and deliveries, but now my walls are crumbling. When Shane left the first time, Laney was too young to comprehend, but she witnessed my struggle for years as I pulled myself up from the aftermath of our relationship.

I pull away from their tight hold and go change into my pajamas. Like the incredible friends they are, my glass of wine is waiting for me when I come down the stairs. We move toward the couch, the television muted yet still on while I am berated with questions, in more detail, regarding my run-in with Shane.

When I called Ellie earlier, I gave her the Cliffs Notes version because I was barely able to complete a sentence without fully bawling my eyes out. I had to hang up with her a little into my drive in fear that I would not only crash the car due to blurred vision from the constant tears but also to keep my face from being so far past fixable with makeup my patients would scream when I walked in to greet them.

After my rendition is retold to them both, I sit back taking a long drink of my wine. I close my eyes and let my head fall back on the couch. I can't help but feel spent from this day. But most of all, I feel overwhelmed with the decisions I need to make regarding Shane and what comes next.

How do we move forward from our past? How do I let go of the things he has done and the things that were said? I hold on to so much, that it's hard for me to simply turn a blind eye to how I was treated. How could he have treated us like that?

He treated us and what we had like we were disposable; as if we could be left behind and simply move forward in his life without a care in the world. When he walked away, I felt like he took a piece of me with him. But didn't he feel that a piece of him was always walking on this earth without him present?

The questions were constant, but the unanswered questions floated over me, consuming my thoughts. Even after all these years, I feel like so much of my life I've had these questions looming over me, and it's always left me with an uneasy feeling. Seeing him today, that discomfort was front and center.

I could hear the wheels turning as Ellie processed everything I said. Ellie has always been supportive of me and all I went through after Shane left, but a part of her has harbored so much anger toward him as well. She has known Shane since they were toddlers so when he first left, she was in shock.

She went through all the stages of grieving, much like I did, but it seems anger is the one she has held onto the longest. And for so long, even mentioning Shane's name would send her off on a word vomit of all the vile things she could think of regarding him and his behavior.

At some point, our mentioning of Shane started to lessen, and we simply lived life, creating memories knowing he wouldn't be around to witness them.

Along the way, Laney joined our group, and it was the three of us making the best of a tough situation, and we got through it together. They were my village, and I couldn't be prouder to call them my chosen family.

Finally, Ellie speaks up. "So, how did he look? Please tell me he has a potbelly and a receding hairline." Laney shoots her sister a stern look, but it doesn't last long. Laney starts laughing, hard, with tears coming down her cheeks.

“So I tell you that the one man I have ever given my whole heart to returns into my life, and that’s the question you start with? Of all the things, that’s where your mind went?” I chuckle because my bestie really is an odd bird. She has held so much anger toward Shane for so long, I assumed she’d be fuming. But this lane change wasn’t something I expected.

“You still haven’t answered my question.” Ellie looks over at me, an eyebrow going up in a questioning manner.

“If you must know, he looks better now than he did when we were kids, if that’s even possible. I’m over here, my boobs doing a downward dog, and he looks like Captain America after he receives the super-soldier serum. It’s unfair, yet it was a sight to see, even though he threw off my entire day after that. The hardest part is that as angry as I was at seeing him abruptly, I still felt this pull toward him. Like my body was drawn to him, even after he left us behind so long ago.”

Laney takes a sip of wine and turns to me. “Have you spoken to Liv?”

“No, not since the weekend. I was going to give her a call earlier—” Right then a car backfires and Laney throws herself to the ground. Ellie and I rush toward her, and I can feel Laney shaking in fear. Laney’s past brought her face to face with gunfire in a place that no one expected, and she has never been the same since. Loud noises make her extremely uncomfortable, and the PTSD she has experienced is a struggle for her, even this many years later.

After Laney’s experience, we all went through therapy in order to have a better understanding of how to support her. In those sessions, we were guided on how to comfort Laney when she finds herself thrown back in time due to noises or crowds that might shift her mindset. We use the same measures now, speaking calmly to her, reassuring her she is safe.

Slowly Laney peels her eyes open, and she wipes the tears that are now falling down her cheeks. The pain I see in her gaze shatters me. Each time I feel like we are taking strides away from that horrific day, moments like these remind me

she is one sound away from returning to that classroom years ago.

We sit back down on the couch, but you can tell the recent shift in Laney's behavior means we need to table our Shane discussion for another time. Laney's well-being is my first concern right now. I turn to Ellie, hoping my change in subject will help Laney realize everything is fine. "Who's watching the kids tonight?" Ellie has three kids, ranging from seven to sixteen.

Unfortunately, much like my mother, Ellie suffered the loss of her husband, our dear friend Beau, five years ago from cancer. I always thought it would have been easier on our hearts if I had time to prepare for my dad's death, but watching Beau suffer and wither away reminded me that loss hurts no matter how it happens.

Seeing him pass and watching a huge part of my friend get buried with him was devastating. But much like the Ellie I fell in love with years ago, she's persevered and those kids are her heart and soul. She's had to navigate life differently since Beau's passing, but she's grown so much in the last few years. I can't help but feel pride in her strength.

"Alice is watching them tonight. Thank goodness for that woman. I know Tyler could handle watching his sisters, but I just want to let him be a teen without so much responsibility. That kid is always trying to take care of everyone. He deserves to go out with his girlfriend without his little sisters pestering him." She looks down at her watch, "He should be home shortly to grab the girls and take them back to their own beds."

I head to the kitchen to fetch some water for Laney. Episodes like these are draining for Laney, and she always needs some extra hydration afterward. I walk back and a little of her coloring is starting to return. We all squeeze onto the one couch and start watching our mindless reality show. I think we've done enough talking for one night, and my mind needs a moment to catch up to my feelings. Because right now, I am having so many mixed emotions.

An hour passes and I see Ellie yawn. Her days are hectic with the kids and now being the sole provider for her family, she rarely takes time to herself. I turn to her and tell her to head home. When Ellie moved to New York after Beau's passing, it worked in our favor that she was able to buy a brownstone on my street.

Hudson was just in the process of moving out when Ellie made her move, and having her nearby was a bonus for both of us. It was a time of many family dinners with our interesting blend of family. Laney moved in with Ellie at that point and so far, it seemed to be working for them.

I squeeze Ellie's hand and tell her to head home. Laney fell asleep on the couch, and I tell Ellie to leave her so she can catch up on some sleep. Ellie doesn't fight me on this, and she begins to make her way to the front door.

Once I watch Ellie get into her home safely, as she's only a couple doors down, I lock up, refill Laney's cup of water and place it on the side table next to the couch, cover her with a blanket, and head upstairs.

As I'm getting ready for bed, I can't help but let my mind wander. It feels a tug to Shane, much like it always had when we were younger. But back then I was naive and thought he'd never hurt me. Back then he was my everything, and I thought I was his.

Chapter Eight



SHANE

December 1994

I could feel my palms sweating as Beau's mom drove us to Pat's Diner the following evening. I had been trying to get Becs to agree to a date with me since the moment I laid eyes on her. I cannot believe she finally agreed.

Was my kiss that amazing? I felt the corner of my mouth tug to one side—yeah, I think that was it. She liked kissing me, and I only hoped she'd let me kiss her again tonight.

The minute I saw Becca in that hallway a few months back, I didn't know what came over me. I was in the middle of talking to Beau and Bradley, both my oldest friends, and I just stopped mid-sentence. I didn't even think about what I wanted to say next, and I made my way over to her.

That wavy dark hair, that tan skin, and those majestic blue-green eyes; I would never be the same, *that* I could be certain of. Could someone meet their soulmate at fourteen? Because I think I did, that warm day in September. She wasn't simply beautiful, she was breathtaking.

After I guaranteed she'd be my girlfriend, I started to learn she was witty too, which only drove me toward her more. She was quick with the comebacks and tried so hard to resist this pull I was certain she could feel. So I kept at it, leaving her notes, and doing a few gestures to show that I cared. But most of all, I began talking to her whenever I had a chance. She would drop little hints about things she liked and didn't like.

From what she told me, her father passed away, and they moved to Nebraska to start anew. But the little things she shared were in her actions; she squirmed in her seat when we had to dissect a frog in science, so I made sure Mrs. Burke let me be her lab partner so I could do most of the dissecting, and she could look away.

Or the day she made this weird face after she took a bite of the apple that was placed on her lunch tray. I found out she was disappointed to find that the apple was dry when it looked so appetizing. So the next day I brought her an apple I specifically picked for her at the local orchard that was guaranteed not to disappoint. The smile she gave me after she bit into the gifted apple lifted me higher than any touchdown in football ever had.

From then on, I continued doing things here and there to show her I wasn't just doing this for the chase. I genuinely enjoyed her company. She made me feel comfortable being myself. She didn't see me as the star football player or the popular kid in school. She saw me for who I was deep down.

When I pull myself out of reminiscing, I see we are one street away from the diner, and I begin feeling my heart race. I cannot believe I get to go on a date with Becs. Oh my gosh, I feel like I'm suffocating a bit.

My breathing must be loud enough to get Beau's attention because he looks back at me from the front seat and his eyes bug out.

"Dude, take it easy. You're not going to get past the hostess if you keep this up. What is going on with you? It's just Becca."

My gaze goes from the window to my friend. Is he kidding me? Just Becca?

"Listen, I don't know what you think this is with me and Becs, but she is not *just* anything. She's *everything*. She's becoming the reason I rush to school. She's the reason I go to bed at night because the sooner I get to sleep, the closer it will be to the next day when I get to see her again. She is beyond anything I ever imagined in another person. But most of all, I

feel like tonight is life-changing, man. I feel like taking that step into the diner is taking a step into what I was put on this earth for. Something about her feels like purpose. And I don't want to mess this up."

At my admission, Beau takes a deep inhale and when he blows it out, he whistles.

"Oh dude, you're so fucked." Beau's mom smacks his arm.

"Do not use that kind of language Beau Lorrent, or I will turn this car around, so help me!" Beau rubs his arm as if his mother caused permanent damage.

"Sorry, Ma."

Then Beau looks over at me and mouths, "*You're so fucked.*"

I roll my eyes, but a part of me knows I truly am fucked because this girl is in my soul. Soon we are parking the car outside the diner. Mrs. Lorrent is giving us instructions to page her when we are done, and she will come back to pick us up. Luckily, we live in such a small town, it only takes a few minutes to get down to Pat's, even on a Saturday night.

We hop out of the car, and I take some collective breaths. I just need to see her. The minute I see that she showed up, I know I will feel a sense of relief that I'm not just making this up, and she actually wanted to see me.

We walk into the diner, the bell above the door chiming to announce our presence. I look around and can't find Becs. But then I feel this urge to look to my left again, there she is. She's chosen a booth a little further back and Ellie is standing by her side, looking down on her, making Becs laugh.

I make my way over and the moment Becs sees me, her face brightens. It's like looking at the sun when I see Becca. She is my beginning and my end, and I have no idea what I was doing on this earth before she entered my life.

Beau clears his throat and says a quick hello while I simply stare at Becca. Ellie greets me, at least I think she does, and all I acknowledge is that she has left Becca's side and has grabbed

a seat at a table nearby with Beau, while I just stand there. *Say something, Shane.*

Becs stands up and I see she's wearing blue jeans that are tighter on the top and loosen toward the bottom. She's got a sweater with cute little antlers on it, and her hair is styled with loose curls. She wears minimal makeup at school and tonight's no different.

She's got some shiny gloss on her lips, and I can't help but wonder if I will get some of that transferred on my lips when I kiss her goodnight.

Pull your head out of your ass, dumbass. She won't kiss you if you don't speak to her. Say something!

"Hey, Becs, you look amazing."

I see a small blush flood her cheeks and she gives me a shy smile. I walk toward her and without thinking, I give her a quick kiss on her cheek, and we sit down. I pull out the paper I had tucked in my back pocket and hand it over to her.

She looks at it for a second and then she opens it. The moment she reads it over, she chuckles at the dumb joke I chose to bring to our date tonight. The sound of her laughter is like a balm to my racing heart. If I can be responsible for all her laughs, I know I've fulfilled my purpose in life. Seeing her smile is like that coveted gift on Christmas morning. And I want every single day together to feel like a gift.

From that point on, the night is full of laughs, food, and smiles. She's smart, caring regarding her mom and brother, and has so many ambitions for the future.

She tells me all about her dream to become a doctor, in pediatrics, if possible, along with living in a big city at some point. She said her goal is to move to New York one day because she wants to experience the seasons, unlike her years in California where heat was the primary temperature all year long. She told me that if she could choose a school to attend after high school, it would be NYU.

I tell her about my goals of joining the Navy, as my father and grandfather were in the Navy previously. I tell her about

the fact that my dad left years ago, and it was just my mom and me for the most part. I saw her features soften when I told her about my father leaving, but I reassured her I held no resentment toward him, and that we spoke and saw one another here and there when he wasn't overseas for work.

I knew my parents did not part on good terms, but my mom usually kept that part of her heart locked up. I've tried on occasion to get her to open up as to why they truly broke up, but she shuts down, so I stopped pushing on the subject.

My curfew is fast approaching, and I know that goodbye is inevitable. But there is no way I am leaving this diner without asking one of the most important questions.

I feel my palms get clammy again. *Is it hot in here?* Someone must have turned up the heat. Becca notices my shift in mood and looks at me in concern.

“Shane, are you all right? You seem a little pale.”

She puts the back of her hand against my forehead, and I instinctively close my eyes. Just her touch calms me. Before she pulls away completely, I grab her hand, letting her arm lay across the table. Holding her hand feels right, as if we were made to fit in each other's lives. I look at her eyes and I can't help but smile.

“No, I'm fine. Actually, more than fine. I just hate that the night has to end. But I have to ask you something.” That look of concern returns to her features, and even that is adorable on her.

“Sure. I'm all ears.”

She tries to come off as nonchalant, but I can tell she's worried about what I have to ask her. And I'm worried about how she'll respond. If the past has taught me anything, it's that this girl is cautious about whom she gives her heart to. So I need to do my best to show her that I will care for her and never let her down.

I grab her hand and flip it over and kiss the inside of her right palm where she has two little birthmarks on it. I look up

right then and she's giving me that smile again, the one where I can feel my heart belonging to only her.

“I wanted to know if you'll be my girlfriend.”

She begins to lift up, and I think she's about to bolt out of the booth, but in reality, she's bringing her upper body over the table toward me. I instinctively do the same and we meet halfway. She kisses me, and I can feel her smile as she does so. I kiss her back and everything that may have felt wrong in my world just falls into place with Rebecca Stanley in my life.

Our kiss ends and we sit back down.

She looks up at me and says, “Let's mix things up for Santa, and let's be naughty together.”

She recites the corny joke I had given her on that card at the start of our date. She's got the goofiest smile, and I swear I must have a matching one.

The next thing we do is get up and hold hands as we walk out of the diner as boyfriend and girlfriend, and I realize I got my Christmas miracle weeks before Christmas itself.

Chapter Nine



SHANE

Present Day

I sit in the coffee shop and wait, anxiously, while others laugh and converse around me. Becs called me four days ago after a week of waiting to hear from her. She sounded tentative on the phone, as if meeting with me was the worst idea. I wish I could understand all her hesitation. I understand her anger toward me breaking us up, but I can't help but fall back on the fact it's been nearly three decades. Why would a coffee date be so difficult for her?

It's a busy Tuesday morning. I feel like all of New York is at this shop, but somehow, I lucked out with a table at the front where I could see out onto the street. I see Becs come through the door, and I immediately relax. Much like that first time I walked into the diner, I wasn't sure she'd show up.

She looks around and the moment her eyes connect with mine, she smiles. It's not as vibrant a smile as I used to get from her, this one not even reaching her eyes, but at least it's not a scowl. She points toward the line where people are placing their orders, and I give a slight nod. She puts her order in and makes her way over.

The moment she sits down, she blows out a breath and greets me, "Hey Shane, sorry I'm late." It seems there was more she was going to say, but she's distracted by a little box on the table with a note.

She opens the note and chuckles. At least some things remain the same—she still loves corny jokes and notes. This one reads:

*What a barista's favorite exercise at
the gym?*

-The French Press.

She looks up at me as if asking for approval to open the little box in front of her.

“Well, you know I didn’t bring myself a gift. Open it up.”

I wink and push the box toward her a bit. She grabs it, probably confused by the packaging. Once she opens it, I see her eyes light up. She takes a deep breath, as if she’s suppressing herself from getting emotional.

“How in the world did you get Mrs. Ace’s cakes out to New York? I haven’t had this in years. It’s still my favorite bakery in Saddle Ridge.”

My lips pull to the side. I can’t help but chuckle that she has no idea how far I’d go to see her smile just like she did right now.

“I called and had them send it over to me the moment you agreed to meet with me.” I don’t need to elaborate on the fact that I had it overnighted and it cost a small fortune.

I think my plan worked because I see her relax in her seat. She puts the little lemon bundt cake to the side, likely to devour it later. She always was a feen for those cakes when we were kids. I hope it holds up to how she remembers it.

She’s wearing scrubs as if she just got off her shift from the hospital.

She sees me taking her in and begins to explain, “I got called in for a delivery early this morning and just decided to sleep at the hospital instead of going home. My kids were at

their father's last night, so I didn't have to be home to see them off to school."

Becs is a mom. It's hard to imagine, yet I can also see her thriving in the role. I wonder what she looked like pregnant.

I remember when we were younger and madly in love, thinking we had our whole lives ahead of us, *together*, we'd talk about becoming parents. She would rub her belly and talk about how one day, way in the future, once she was a doctor, she would have all my babies, and I would smile at her because nothing about that scared me.

I knew Becs was it for me. I knew we were meant to be together. But I changed all that after graduation. And I have to live with wondering what could have been had I not destroyed us all those years ago.

"I can't believe you're a mom, Becs. You must be amazing with them." Before I can stop myself, I continue regurgitating the first thing my brain thinks up, "It feels like yesterday we were planning our own future together and having kids. I know that I ruined that for us. But I wish I could have been the father in your scenario instead of someone else."

She's looking out the window as I'm speaking, but whatever I say causes her to whip her head back at me and a look of confusion crosses her face. She opens her mouth to speak, and we are interrupted by a gentleman who seems to know her.

I'm immediately seeing red because of the way he's looking at her, I can tell he's more than just a friend. I have no right to feel possessive of her, but it's hard not to when I feel like the universe has given me, *us*, this second chance.

Becca looks at me for another beat before looking up at the man by our side. He looks like an older version of the actor that played Prince Eric in the latest adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*. The only exception is that his eyes are hazel, compared to the actor's blue.

"Oh hey, Hudson. How are you?"

She gets up and hugs him, and he pecks her cheek. I'm calming myself down by taking deep breaths through my nose. My therapist said counting to four for both my inhales and exhales is best to keep me from getting too agitated. It's not working right now, but I hope I'm playing it off enough to get through this conversation.

Hudson looks over at me immediately, and Becca takes a moment to introduce us.

"Hudson, this is Shane Philips. Shane, this is Hudson Coulder, my ex-husband."

I extend my hand and Hudson looks at me like I killed his puppy. His nostrils flare and he looks at Becca, "So this is him?"

That makes me pause. What's that supposed to mean? She talked about me to her ex-husband? That seems strange. Becca puts her hand on his chest, and I have to look away for a moment.

I can tell she's trying to calm him down with her touch, and the fact she has that kind of power over him guts me in a way that it shouldn't. Becca lived an entire life without me; it shouldn't surprise me she has this connection with someone other than me. Hudson seems to calm down but doesn't ever extend his hand in greeting to me.

"You have some nerve coming around here."

I look at Becca and back at this Hudson character. I'm about to say something and Becs takes charge of the situation.

"Hudson, please don't make a scene. We just bumped into one another a few weeks back, and we are grabbing coffee. Don't make this bigger than it has to be."

Her words seem to penetrate Hudson's thick skull, and I can see him asking Becca, with his eyes, if she's okay. I see her nod slightly and my heart breaks a bit because I should be a source of comfort for her, not this upside-down scenario where I'm painted as the villain.

"Becs and I have known each other since we were teenagers. We're just grabbing some coffee. Would you like to

join us?”

I try to play this off as a casual offer because I know how Becca works. If I come off like the alpha male I’m programmed to be, I will lose her, and she will never agree to meet with me again. It felt like shards of glass were forming in my throat when I made this suggestion to Hudson, but I stick to my proposal and gesture to grab another chair.

“I appreciate that, but I have to be in court in forty-five minutes. I saw Becca and wanted to say hi.” He turns his attention to her.

“The kids had an easy start to their day. They were great last night, and all their homework was finished at a decent hour. Jack tried to con me into agreeing to an hour of video games, stating you were allowing that, but luckily my lie detector—Mal—came barreling in and did not corroborate his story.”

That makes Beccs chuckle, and I see her smile reach her eyes. Her kids are her world, I can already tell from the mere mention of them from Hudson.

He looks over to me again and quickly returns his gaze to Becca, “So he can call you Beccs, huh?”

She gives him a shy smile, and I can tell he respects her enough not to continue on this route of conversation. I see the pain return in her eyes, but she covers it up by changing the subject.

“Hudson, I don’t want you to be late. Tonight, you’re still good with dropping the kids off after school, or do you need me to swing by and get them from your office?” Hudson looks at his watch and probably agrees he can’t continue this little encounter, as much as I know he wants to dig into what my intentions are with her.

“No, I can drop them off. If something changes, I’ll text you.” That seems sufficient for Becca, and they say their goodbyes. I turn to Hudson, “It was nice meeting you,” although nice wasn’t the word that first came to mind, and Hudson just taps on the table twice with his knuckles and

walks off, swinging his gaze towards me once more before exiting the coffee shop.

I look over to Becs, who is back to sitting and looking out the window. She's thinking something over, but it seems once she turns her features back toward me, she lets go of whatever was on her mind.

"So, I guess we have a lot to catch up on," I begin, hoping we can talk about how our lives have unfolded. Although I never became a father, I have had a lot going on.

"How's your brother?" I start there because I know how much her brother has always meant to her. This lightens the air between us a bit and she begins to tell me about his adventures being a travel photographer.

"He isn't in the States much, but when he comes in, he's the doting uncle the kids adore. He always brings the most interesting knick-knacks from his travels."

I laugh at that. Becca was never one to collect little things to leave around her room when we were younger. She loved order and said leaving trinkets around made her feel overwhelmed. It seems that remains the case.

"Oh, I bet you love all those little treats lying around the house," I respond, feeling that comfort knowing she is still, in some ways, the same Becs I loved way back when.

Becca rolls her eyes. "I guess that's Grant's job, to forever annoy his big sister. I don't particularly love them, but I find creative ways to display them around the house without feeling like my home is cluttered."

She tells me more about how he's doing, and I feel a sense of relief that life has been good to him. It seems he has remained single and never gotten married, at least he hasn't settled down yet from what she's saying.

Becca continues on, telling me about her mother and how she remarried about ten years after we graduated high school. The man's name is Rick, and he seems to be good for her. When Becs went off to college, it seems Grace, her mother, moved here to the city, leaving Saddle Ridge behind.

Apparently, they've only returned to Nebraska for quick visits, nothing long-term. I can't judge as I left Becca and that entire part of my life behind the moment I graduated from high school.

This prompts me to ask, "How's Ellie? Do you still speak to her?" She looks up at me and her face lights up. "Yeah, she lives a few doors down from me. She moved herself and her family out here a few years back after Beau passed away."

My heart drops as I hear her say this. I knew Beau passed away, but I never made it to the funeral. I had cut that part of my life off completely when I joined the Navy. And I had a fear that if I stayed connected, I would only come crawling back to Becca with that lifeline out there.

So I did what I thought was best. But this is a classic lesson that we don't have as much time as we think we do. When we are young, we find ourselves invincible. But as we get older, we realize how precious that time is, and we start to realize our list of regrets can go a mile long. I know mine is.

"My heart was shattered when I heard. I know we didn't stay connected after graduation, but I did try to reach out a few years ago, looking for him through internet searches, and that's when the Saddle Ridge obituary came up with his passing. I was beside myself with grief."

I see the fire in Becca's eyes when she says, "I'm trying to be calm here, Shane, but how can you sit there and say that? Beau was always your good friend, and you just up and left him. You left all of us. And then you sit here giving me this whole *woe is me* story about the heartbreak you felt at the passing of a friend you didn't even care to stay in touch with. What did Beau ever do to you to deserve the cold shoulder? Actually, what did I do to deserve that treatment? You know what, don't answer that. Nothing matters regarding that time in our lives. It won't change what you did to me, what you did to us."

Now I see the tears pooling in her eyes. Seeing Becca cry has always been difficult for me to endure, and it seems time hasn't changed that for me. I go to hand her a napkin, hoping

the gesture is enough to get her to calm down. She grabs the napkin, balls it up, and throws it back at me.

“Shane, I know you thought this would be a benign encounter. I know in your mind, you thought we could just move forward, but I just can’t deal with this. I have too much weighing on my heart when it comes to you. You took a piece of me when you left Saddle Ridge. It was not just a piece of my heart, but you took a piece of my soul. You have no idea the mess you left me with when you walked away, even though it was the best gift I was ever granted.”

She grabs her things and stands up, walking fast toward the exit. I quickly gather my belongings, grab the box of lemon cake she left behind, and make my way to catch up to her.

“Beccs, wait!”

People are staring as I’m chasing the woman I know I can’t live another moment without down the crowded New York street. Becca seems to hear me and walks faster, but her little legs are no match to my long strides, and I catch up to her. I grab her arm and turn her around.

My breath catches when I see tears aren’t just welled in her eyes, but they are falling freely down her cheeks. Her makeup is smudged, and her chin is quivering, as she’s trying to control herself from fully sobbing. I embrace her, pulling her face toward my chest.

I feel her stiffen, but then she begins to let go. I start to feel the tears soak my shirt, and her hands grab at the material, and she balls them up. She is so angry, and I know I am the reason for all this pain. But I also can’t walk away as I did before. I have grown up and I know I made a mistake before. I need to prove that to her, that I won’t leave.

But how can I convince her I won’t break her heart when I made the same promises years ago, and I broke every single one of them?

Chapter Ten



REBECCA

June 1996

The warmth of summer is making its way into the last few days of spring in Saddle Ridge. The window of the car is down and I have my hand out, feeling the wind move through my fingers. We just finished our last day of school in our sophomore year. I close my eyes and I feel the freedom the summer has ahead for us.

The song on the radio begins and the biggest smile spreads across my face. “Always Be My Baby” by Mariah Carey comes on and I start to sing along. My eyes stay closed, and I feel the music course through my body. This, right here, feels like perfection.

All of a sudden, the song is lowered, and Shane is complaining by my side. “Of all the girls I fall for, I pick the one with the worst taste in music.” I narrow my eyes and turn the music back up. Shane and I are compatible in many ways, but not when it comes to music preferences.

He’s all about his alternative rock, and I can’t stand the sound of it. When he heard me blasting Bone-Thugs-n-Harmony once, he claimed he was allergic, and the station had to be changed before he entered the car with me again. It’s a battle between us every single time we drive together, which is daily because we are inseparable.

Our agreement is we alternate stations every hour, and I know I have four more minutes of *Becs’ Jams* before he

switches to his own music. I ignore his complaints and continue singing along, Mariah starting off summer with a bang. I just turned sixteen and, like Shane, I can drive around now too, even though I still prefer him chauffeuring me around town.

As much as he claims to hate my taste in music, I see him bopping his head along to the beat when he thinks I'm not watching. I don't call him on it as I do think some things are fun to leave for later when we argue about the music choices I've made. Pick your battles, my mom always tells me, and I'm starting to learn that is the more civilized way of dealing with differences.

It doesn't mean Shane and I only bicker about music selection. Oh, I've had my fair share of moments where I want to claw his eyes out. He's got that charm about him that seems to cause every girl at school to be on a mission to chase after him. It's like I don't exist for those girls, and they still try to take my man.

We've been together for a year and a half, and girls are still calling out his name during football games as if his girlfriend isn't sitting in the stands right along with them. *Bitches*. Yeah, I said it. He's mine and I don't share. But Shane has shown me, time and time again, he only has eyes for me.

I try to remind myself of that when I feel that jealousy come forward. My insecurities and fear of being left behind rear their ugly heads every now and then, and I pout and give him a hard time. We argue and later make up in the most delicious ways. Just thinking about the things my boyfriend does to me makes me squirm in my seat.

Shane puts his right hand on my thigh, and gives me a little squeeze, while leaving the left one steering the wheel of his truck. "You're a little flushed there, Becs. You all right? Should I pull over and see if you're coming down with something? I don't want you getting everyone at the lake sick during our hangout." I giggle, knowing I'm giving him a look that says he better make good on his offer, and kiss me quickly.

I'm still so shy around Shane about things we could do to one another sexually. We've done many things to please each other, but we still haven't had sex. I don't know what I'm waiting for. I know he's the one I want to lose my virginity to, but I feel like it's something that's looming over me. Actually, over both of us as we are both virgins.

Although Shane had kissed other girls prior to dating me, he wasn't as experienced as I had assumed when we started our relationship. I thought he had at least gotten to second base with a girl before me, but it turns out we've saved all our firsts for one another, and there is something so special about that. I love him beyond anything I imagined love to feel like. So I don't know what I'm waiting for to get us to that next level in our relationship. Maybe when it feels right, we will just go for it.

Shane pulls the car over, puts the truck in park and unbuckles my seatbelt, pulling me over toward him. He moves his seat back and I'm straddling him. I feel his length against my bikini bottoms that I'm wearing under this cotton dress. I instinctively grind myself against him and kiss him, hard, like we only have a millisecond together on this stranded road leading to the lake. Shane moans into my mouth as I feel his tongue glide inside. Kissing him feels like I'm taking my first breath each and every time we connect, he fills me with life that I didn't know I was missing.

Things start getting hot and heavy and before I know it, he's trailing kisses down my neck and he pulls my dress down, taking my bikini top along with it. My breasts fall out of my top, and he kneads them with both his hands. They fit perfectly in his palms. I throw my head back, arching my back, grinding myself against this man I love. He continues to kiss me, now going toward my chest, suddenly putting one of my nipples in his mouth and nibbling enough to get me hornier than I was before. How does he do this to me? My body breaks out in goosebumps even though the temperature is at least ninety degrees out.

He disconnects from my breast and breathes lightly over my nipple. "I want you so bad, Becs, but we are on the side of

the road in the middle of the day. As much as I want to continue this, I didn't envision our first time being in my truck on the way to a gathering with our friends at the lake."

I groan because he's right, and I hate that he has a point. I sit up straight, pull my boobs back into the red triangle bikini I bought for this end-of-year lake celebration, and cover myself up. It's Shane's turn to groan in displeasure, and I give him another deep kiss, hoping he reads between the lines that this isn't over. He smacks me on the ass, and I giggle as I remove myself and sit back down in the passenger seat. I pull down the visor and make sure Shane left no evidence of our little make-out session. This guy is a hickey-lover, stating he has to show off that I'm his, or the other guys would harass me any chance they got. I let out a sigh of relief when I see he hasn't left any temporary marks on me, but I definitely look like I have been up to no good.

My cheeks are flushed, my lips swollen, and I have some red marks on my chest where Shane's teenage stubble has marked my skin. "Just be lucky I didn't leave a mark because I know I'll be fighting guys off you once that little number you're wearing is revealed at the lake."

He points toward my outfit, and I know he's referring to the small bathing suit I got for this event. My great grandparents on my dad's side were Brazilian and although I have not really tapped into that part of my ancestry much, I hold onto the fact that when I deem it necessary. I have an ass and small bikinis are a Brazilian staple, so I use that to my advantage in situations like these.

I give him a side-eye, responding, "My mom is pretty chill, but if she catches one more hickey on me, she might ground you and not me."

This pulls a laugh from him. "Your mom loves me, Becs. She would never cut me off from visiting and having dinner at your house."

I roll my eyes knowing he isn't wrong. My mom adores Shane, and the way he goofs off with Grant and plays football

with my baby brother warms her heart. He shows so much love toward us that it's hard to stay mad at him.

I push the visor back up and buckle my seatbelt. Right then we hear another car coming up and it slows right by our side. Shane slides his window down and Beau's blasting "Black Hole Sun" while Ellie is by his side and Bradley is sitting in the back. "Hey lovebirds, what are you doing on the side of the road? Need help with the car?" Shane looks over to me, and the look on his face tells me without a word he's going to mess with me.

"Oh no, nothing wrong with the car. Becs was feeling a little ill, so I pulled over to check on her. She's a little hot and bothered, but nothing a little dip in the lake won't fix." Beau seems to read between the lines and starts laughing as he pulls away. My bestie waves her arms out the window and we begin to follow behind them.

I lightly smack Shane on his arm. He covers it with the opposite hand, feigning pain. "Shane Thomas, what is wrong with you?" I seethe through gritted teeth. "Now I have to show my face, and Beau is not going to let this slide. You're such an ass."

Shane just gives me that cocky-ass smirk and says, "Your ass!" and turns the music up. He doesn't change the station even though my hour is up so I guess I won more than a little action from my guy.

* * *

Hours pass and I am soaking up the sun and laughter with my friends. Much like the movies, this lake is everything you'd imagine it would be. It has a huge cottonwood tree that provides the perfect amount of shade when we need a break from the blistering sun.

Some kids in summers past put a large rope that we used to throw ourselves into the middle of the lake. It has been replaced a few times as the rope weakens. The boys checked it

before we started using it today to make sure it was sturdy enough for today's adventures.

I'm sitting next to Ellie while the boys throw a football around in the water. Beau plays basketball for our high school team, but he doesn't miss a chance to throw the football around with Shane and Bradley when possible. He's got a good arm too, but this is as far as he'll go in the sport. His true love is basketball and whenever he's at school, he has a basketball in his hands and plays whenever he needs to let off some steam.

Right now, the football gets thrown to whomever is swimming out to the other end of the lake and if the ball is caught, they're stating that's a touchdown.

I take it all in. I feel like California was another lifetime. I have a significant line between that life and this one. I don't feel that life seeping into this one in any way, except for the fact that I carry my father's memory, and all the wonderful times we had together, along with me here in Nebraska.

It feels like I was not living before my time in Saddle Ridge. Sure, I had friends and a home back in California, but the memories I've made in this short time here will definitely stay with me as I move forward in my life. I have lasting relationships here that I know would not be easy to forget and leave behind. I still have my dreams of becoming a doctor, but I know that I will forever be molded by my surroundings and the people I love from Saddle Ridge.

Giggles pull me out of my little bubble, and I look over at Ellie, who is smiling at the way Beau is trying to hold Shane up on his shoulders.

"You like him, don't you El?"

She looks at me, smiles wide, and nods. She's never admitted it before, but you'd have to be blind not to see how she looks at Beau like he hung the moon.

I don't know when it happened, but my best friend went from having an innocent crush to falling in love with Beau in the last year, and I can't help but feel a little giddy because I

can already see us going on double dates, getting ready for dances together, and making lasting memories as the four of us go through the motions of our lives.

“I don’t know when my heart skipped over from like to love, but I just look forward to my time with him, you know?” she says, her voice soft and full of adoration.

I squeeze her hand and nod because I know what she means. I pushed my feelings for Shane away for a little while, but the moment we had that first date, everything changed. Three months into dating, Shane brought over a rental from Yogurt & Video, a local movie rental spot on the main street, and we had a little date on my couch. My mom was visiting her sister for the weekend and left me babysitting Grant for the night.

I couldn’t leave so Shane took it upon himself to bring popcorn, Red Vines, and Hot Tamales—my personal favorite candy—and we pretended to be at the movies. Once the movie ended, the blockbuster hit *Speed*, he turned to me and just blurted it out, “I love you, Becs.” I started to tear up on the spot and threw myself at him, kissing him all over his face, declaring my love for him as well. My world never felt so right as it did then, and it continues today.

The boys catch us staring and wave our way. We do the same and I begin to get up and walk my way to the cooler, where we’ve got some chilled sodas and snacks. I bend over to grab a Capri Sun because there’s nothing more refreshing on a hot day than that childhood staple of a drink. It’s then I feel a cold, wet body embrace me from behind.

I’d recognize those arms anywhere and start to laugh as I feel Shane squeeze me tighter. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack, Becs?” I look over at him, those green eyes engulfing me. They stand out even more now that he’s getting his summer tan back.

“What am I doing? I just came to grab a drink. I’m dehydrated with this humidity!”

He loosens his grip and I turn around and he kisses me. I grant him access and he deepens it, something a little more

than a simple peck for our friends to witness. He doesn't seem to care, but I stop him and look at him. "What's this about, Shane? You miss me from all the way over there?" I point with my hand towards the lake.

Shane looks me in the eyes and lets his gaze trail down my bikini. "Becs, if you bend over like that one more time, I might need to punch my own friends. This bikini is leaving little to the imagination, and I don't quite like everyone gawking at my girl."

I can't help but smile at this because as alpha as it is of him, I sort of secretly love it. I won't stroke his ego too much by admitting it though. "Shane, you're being ridiculous. Everyone knows I'm yours. Plus, I bought this for you, not for anyone else." I wink at him and attempt to turn around to grab a snack while I'm up.

"Oh really? Well then do I get to unwrap this little gift of mine later?" he says as he nuzzles himself in my neck and kisses me right below my ear, which he knows is my weak spot. I have to stay focused and remember we have an audience.

"Maybe if you're good." I wink and successfully turn around.

He pinches one of my butt cheeks and gives me a kiss on the temple before running back into the water. I catch a peak over my shoulder and see everyone watching us. Ellie looks like she's got hearts in her eyes, and I know a piece of her hopes Beau will look at her the way Shane looks at me. I hope the same for her too. I am throwing that out into the universe for her because she deserves to feel that kind of love.

The hours pass and the sun is starting to lessen in intensity. People begin to head out, and Shane grabs his clothes that he threw haphazardly near the water. I'm sitting on my blanket, reading one of my romance novels I love so much. Now with the free time summer allotted to us, I can get through a few that have been sitting on my bookshelf since Christmas.

I'm deep in this scene between the main characters when I feel Shane's presence in front of me. He grabs my book and

makes sure to set it down open to the page I was on so it isn't lost. He lays himself over me and begins kissing me while I lay back on the blanket beneath me. I get lost in him, and it takes a few minutes for me to separate my lips from his. We're both breathing heavily.

I decide to lift my head off the blanket to look around, wondering where everyone went. I see two people kissing under a tree close to where our cars are parked. It takes me a minute to realize it's Beau and Ellie, and my heart does a little flutter for them. I can't wait to get the skinny on that little turn of events.

Shane grabs my chin and moves my gaze back to him and begins to kiss me again. The warmth from the day is sticking as early evening begins to engulf us. I hear a car start in the distance and drive away, and I have a feeling it is just Shane and I left by the lake. The rest of our friends were tired after finals and celebrating this afternoon. It's my guess some were headed to the diner, but most were likely headed home.

Luckily my mom did not set an early curfew for me today, knowing I'd be at the lake with Shane and my friends. She had given me a pager in case she ever had to get a hold of me, but last I checked, she simply had paged a quick *143*, which meant *I love you*. Most of those types of messages were from Shane on a typical day, but it was always sweet to get messages like that from my mom.

I let my hands glide along Shane's sides until I reach his swim trunks, and I start to fumble with the knot around the waist. I deepen our kiss and moan into our connection because I honestly can't take the wait any longer. I might explode if I don't feel us connected in the most intimate way.

Shane grabs my hands and pulls them over my head, keeping them there while he devours me. He moves his kisses down my neck and toward the triangles that are doing a poor job holding in my boobs with the way I'm rubbing up against Shane. My hands begin their descent again, trying without success to untie that knot.

Shane breaks his connection and looks at me. “Becs, if you keep at it, we’ll both be naked in no time.”

I look at him and I can’t keep the frustration from my tone, “Yes, and that’s exactly the result I’m looking for.”

He pulls his upper body off me, looking me in the eyes. “Becca, are you sure? After a whole day with you in that red little number, running around and taunting me with this perfect body, I just don’t think I can stop myself if we keep going.”

I groan out of frustration, “Who said I want you to stop? Shane, I love you. I want this. I want you. Let me have you.” Apparently, he didn’t need to be talked into this much further because as soon as I finish what I was prepared to be a longer speech, he kisses me hard, and we begin clawing at each other, clothes flying off. His dick springs free, and I nearly salivate at the sight of him. He is pure perfection, and I can’t believe he’s all mine.

He finds his wallet in the bag I packed earlier and fishes out a condom. I give him a sly smile and watch him open it. I can tell his fingers are trembling, which brings me comfort knowing that he is as nervous as I am. He sits back on his heels, his cock at full attention, waiting to devour me. Shane is big, bigger than I thought possible. But not only that, he’s thick and I can’t help but feel nervous, not only because it’s our first time, but the fact that I have no idea how that is going to fit. Shane must sense my nervousness and he looks back at me. “Becs, I did not come here thinking this was going to happen tonight.”

I chuckle and decide this is the time for a little humor, “Says the guy who had a condom in his wallet.”

Shane is all seriousness and no light. “I put that in there after things got a little hot and heavy for us a few months back, and I had nothing. I didn’t want to be unprepared, but I promise we can stop now. I love you and I want you to be completely ready for this.”

I look at him and wonder where I went right in this lifetime to deserve this incredible soul. I love him beyond myself, and I want this to happen, tonight. “I want to

experience this, but I'm scared about the pain, and look at that thing! You're huge!"

Shane looks down, as if he's never looked at the size of his penis before and stares back at me. "First of all, please don't talk about him like he's just some thing, but we are both very happy you think he's big." He finishes with a wink. "Regarding size, maybe we need to prep a bit before we go any further."

I look at him, confused at what he's insinuating. Shane kisses me on my lips, tender and soft. My hands move toward his cheeks, loving how intimate this feels already, and we haven't even done anything we haven't done before. He begins to kiss me down my neck and on my breasts. "I will make you feel good and get you ready for me, Becs. I want us to both feel good tonight."

With a whisper, I reply, "Anything with you will feel good, Shane."

That seems to spear him on, and he moves lower, his kisses now on the inside of my thighs. I am nervous every single time he goes down on me simply because I feel completely exposed. I take a deep breath and let my legs open for him.

He continues to kiss me, but his eyes are trained on me. He begins to move closer to my center and suddenly, he puts his mouth right over my clit, and I drop back, arching my spine, closing my eyes and calling out his name. He takes charge, licking my folds and making it his mission to have me see stars. He adds a finger and then another, reaching that spot inside me that feels like euphoria.

He starts pumping his fingers and I feel my orgasm pull from deep within. My head moves side to side, my breaths short and gasping for air as my orgasm breaks free. I can't contain the moan that leaves my mouth. My sight goes blank, and I do, in fact, see stars. When I catch my breath, I can feel Shane kissing me on my belly up toward my breasts and back up my neck.

When he reaches my right ear, he whispers, “Seeing you come is probably the hottest thing I’ve ever witnessed. I’m so fucking hard for you, Becs.”

When he talks like that to me, I feel like a goddess. He makes me feel seen in a way I never thought possible.

He starts to rub his length between my folds, and it is so sensitive after bringing me to climax, I shudder at the feeling. I look at him, taking in his expression, and I give him a slight nod to tell him I’m ready for this. I wrap my legs around his middle, and this opens me up perfectly when I feel his cock line up with my entrance. I brace myself for whatever is about to happen.

I don’t have many people who have lost their virginity in my friend group yet, but I know it will hurt, and I can’t help but tense up when I feel him start to go in. He grabs my chin and tells me, “Take a breath, Becs. Breathe with me. We are in this together.” That relaxes me enough that I feel him starting to inch in a little more.

All of a sudden, I feel pressure there and a pain that’s foreign to me. It’s different than I expected. It’s not the worst pain I’ve ever felt, but it’s definitely not something I want to feel again. But the more Shane moves in and out of me, the more comfortable I feel, and the less the pain is front and center. He’s going slow, mostly for my benefit as I can tell he’s holding back. I can’t say it’s as pleasant as other ways of messing around have been between us in the past, but I feel connected in a way I only dreamed of with him, and that is enough to send me over the edge.

I look at him as he assesses my features, fear of hurting me more evident in his expression. “Shane, let go. It’s okay, I’m fine.” He doesn’t wait for me to say it twice, and he begins to piston in and out of me. He keeps whispering, “I love you; you’re my everything,” over and over again, and a tear falls down the side of my face. This is more than my heart can handle because between us there is so much love.

Soon Shane starts to yell my name, “Oh fuck, Becs. Fuck, fuck, fuck,” and I feel him grow even more as he spills into the

condom. He slows his movements and nestles his face in my neck.

He must feel my tears spilling over and quickly pulls his head up and looks at me. “Oh my gosh, Becs. I’m so fucking sorry. I was too rough. I’m so sorry, baby.”

The tears are now nonstop, but I start to shake my head and smile. “No, no, Shane. It wasn’t too rough, and you didn’t hurt me. Well, it hurt, but not in the way you think. I’m not crying because I’m in pain. I’m crying because I feel complete. Like, I’ve never felt more connected to another human being before in my life.”

Shane tries to kiss each tear as it falls and soon, he’s kissing me all over my face, including my lips. He looks at me again and says, “What we just experienced is once in a lifetime. My world made sense the moment I found you, and now I know my heart will never beat the same.”

If I could fall more in love with him, I would because Shane Philips is the missing piece in my world, and I didn’t know I was missing it until now.

Chapter Eleven



REBECCA

Present Day

I inhale his woody scent that hasn't changed in all our years apart from one another. My hands are still balled up from when I grabbed his shirt. My tears soaked his shirt and took my mascara right along with it.

I take another deep breath and push myself away from him, missing his comfort immediately after I stand on my own. I have to keep my distance. I can't take this emotional roller coaster that I've been on since he knocked on my door after twenty-five years apart.

I'm starting to see that even though I came to terms that Shane left me years ago, I never reacted to Hudson's cheating in the same manner as I did when Shane moved on without me. Even reuniting with Shane, as brief as it has been, has wreaked havoc on my life in a way no other man has ever done to me. I thought I had grown from the teenager who cried her eyes out for months, actually years, after Shane left.

But I think, deep down, a big portion of my heart has never recovered from how he walked away from us. Just having this brief stroll through memory lane while I stand on this crowded New York City sidewalk makes my blood boil. What did he want from me? How does he expect me to react after he discarded what we were and what we made so easily in the past?

With that thought passing through my mind, I continue walking toward the subway. I can feel him walking behind me, keeping his distance. I think he sensed I was going to blow a gasket if he got any closer to me. After so long apart, I wish I could say I know this man who follows behind me the way he seems to still know me. Although he is mere feet away from me, it felt like a lifetime has been lived away from one another. In many ways, it has.

I've had babies, I've been married, and I am now divorced. I became a physician, experienced loss with my patients, made memories, and had lasting friendships grow around me. But when I see Shane, I see all the things that did not happen. I did not see him get down on one knee and propose to me. I did not see him grab onto my swollen belly with the life we created together. I did not hear him whisper encouraging words as I pushed our baby out into the world. I did not see him hold hands with our child on their first day of school. No. When I look at him, I see many possible memories, but none that will ever come to fruition. I see a lot of *could have been* scenarios, but none that solidified as possibilities in the lives we've lived so far.

Each thought—each possibility—only fuels me more into this pit of anger and resentment. I hate that my mind carries me to all these potential moments, but that there is nothing that can be done to fix our past is still that unspoken pain that sits between us. I loved him and it wasn't enough for him.

I get onto the subway, wishing I could shed this hurt that feels like a weight on my chest, and look over toward him. He got on and now stands a few people behind me. But I see his green eyes focused on me. If he could only feel how my heart weeps, even all these years later. If he only understood the hold he's had on my heart, even though he walked away from me so long ago.

I am lost in thought when I hear my stop announced. I get through the crowd of people and start to speed-walk. The fact I even call it speed-walking just shows how delusional I am because, to everyone else of average height, this is simply

walking. I know Shane could outstep me easily, but he continues to respect the distance I am placing with my strides.

I take in the fall trees and calmer streets as it is still early in the morning. Sitting at the coffee shop feels like hours ago, yet we hadn't sat long before I exploded right in front of him. I hadn't even taken the time to process the fact that Hudson would give me an earful about my coffee date with Shane. Just knowing I would later have to talk Hudson down from that encounter was something that had the beginnings of a headache touching my temples.

I reach my home and take the steps two at a time. I turn the key to my brownstone and Shane is right behind me, not letting the door close. I step into my home and find Betty sitting there, waiting to greet me. I smile and scratch behind her ear. She leans into me, much like I feel this urge to lean into Shane, even though his presence is causing my insides to scream at me.

I stand up and Shane is right behind me, pressing his front against my back. I can feel him taking a breath of my hair, and I find myself closing my eyes at the gesture.

My body betrays me, and I rest my shoulders and back onto his chest and let his arm wrap around me. I grab onto his forearm and just take a moment to enjoy the feel of him. His comfort is something I always ran toward when we were younger. I loved feeling his strength when I felt like I was too frail.

I open my eyes and turn my head to the side to look up at him. Looking back at me, I see desire swimming in his eyes. I can't help this tug I feel toward him, and he must notice I can't fight this feeling off any longer because he uses his free hand to grab my chin and kiss me.

This isn't just a kiss. It's an answer to all the wishes I've made since he left me on that porch in Nebraska so long ago. With this kiss, I feel a need wash over me, and I turn my body completely, so we face one another. I don't know what comes over me—maybe I just need to feel him for one last time.

The last time I kissed him, I didn't know I wouldn't feel his lips against mine again. Is this closure after twenty-five years, or is this the beginning of something new? Maybe all this time without feeling the touch of another man, I just need him in any way I can get him. He can't change the past, but he can serve me right now. It's merely physical; an itch I need to scratch. My inner voice tells me this will hurt when I walk away, but apparently, I'm a glutton for punishment.

I take charge and push him against the wall at the bottom of the stairs. My assertiveness surprises Shane, but he doesn't let this deter him. I look at him with a single thought, *I'm not the girl you left behind all those years ago; I know what I want now.*

He continues to kiss me, but I continue to hold the reins of this experience. I am no longer a teenager, and I can make my own choices to satisfy my needs. I begin to pull his shirt out from his pants. Next, I unbuckle his belt and start to bring the zipper down.

Shane stops my movements and looks me in the eyes. I simply whisper, "Please, Shane. Let me feel you again. Make me whole again."

That seems to appease him, and I proceed. But now Shane is pushing me toward the family room, my scrub bottoms being pulled off, and we're making quick work of our shoes and socks. Soon we're standing there in our underwear, and we are panting hard, looking at one another to see what our next step will be. It seems the answer comes to both of us at the same time, and we leap at one another, tugging the remainder of our clothes off, as if we will suffer anaphylaxis if these garments stay on our skin any longer.

We are finally naked, and I push him onto the couch and quickly make my way to straddle him. I don't give my mind much time to react and line him up and begin to sit down on his swollen crown; looking down at this juncture and the realization hits me that I'm finally reunited with a man that completed me when my heart was too young and naive to truly understand how significant that was.

The moment I'm fully seated on his cock, we both let out a moan. I take a brief second to look down at us, physically united in a way I never thought I'd see for the rest of my life, but I'm here, nonetheless. He gives me that cocky smile, and I can't help but want to erase it from his face. I can't help but feel this urge to take control, especially after all these years, feeling like he took so much control from me when he walked away from what we had planned for our future. So I begin to ride him, wiping that smile off his face and replacing it with this desire that is etched all over him. I can see he's holding back because I'm riding him slow, and I know he likes to take control; at least he used to. But I've grown, and I want him to realize that I have needs he isn't familiar with anymore.

As I set a comfortable pace where the movements are hitting all the right spots for me, I feel him move his thumb over my clit. Apparently he still knows how to touch me in the exact way I long for, and I can't help but let my head fall back, my eyes shut, and my mouth fall open.

A deep moan makes its way out of my throat. He's touching me deep inside, where few men have succeeded in the past. It feels euphoric and I want to stay here, where consequences be damned, and I can simply ride this wave of passion and ignore the shit we have to work out.

I push my thoughts of what comes next aside and continue at my pace, pumping him in and out rhythmically and beautifully, feeling him bring me close to ecstasy.

Suddenly, his voice raspy, Shane says, "Come for me, Becs. I need to feel you squeeze my cock like you always knew how to do."

It's like his words were the only permission I was waiting for, and right then my sight goes dark and I scream his name, while I feel him holding my hips, likely bruising me as he does so. As I'm coming down from my high, Shane sits up, pulling my left nipple into his mouth and I feel that straight to my core. I'm sensitive all over, and I know I will not recover from this anytime soon.

Shane takes over, as my body feels like jelly after I had the best orgasm of my life with the first man who ever showed me love in this way. “No matter how much time apart we’ve spent, I’ve dreamed of this pussy. This is mine, Bees, and I don’t care how much you fight me, fight us, you feel this pull just like I do.”

He’s pulling me off him briefly, moving me onto my hands and knees, then he’s pounding me from behind. He feels even deeper than before, and I already feel another orgasm make its way through my body. The tingling feels like it starts from my toes and makes its way up. I’m screaming his name again, although now it’s mixed with Shane screaming with me, “Fuck, Bees, you feel so good. Fuck, oh fuck, fuck.” As he feels his release building, I begin to fall right along with him. Three more strokes and he’s emptying inside me. I feel his cock grow, and he lets his cum release inside me.

When I begin to catch my breath, and I start to peel the hair that’s stuck to my forehead from the sweat that’s gathering there, I feel Shane dropping kisses up my spine. He’s still inside me, and I have to fight the urge to clean myself up and start this whole thing all over again. I start to realize my actions led to this moment and I begin to move away from Shane.

He wraps his arms around my middle a little tighter and simply whispers, “Please don’t pull away, Bees. Please remember how that felt before you decide to put those walls up again.”

That’s the thing that Shane doesn’t understand; as much as I want to keep a wall up between us, we have too many holes that are keeping me from having a stable force around my feelings. My walls are unsteady when it comes to him. I’m not working with a blank canvas. I’m working with so much destruction between us, that the walls fail to exist. But that scares me more. If the walls can crumble too easily, what’s to say we will get through this intact?

Chapter Twelve



SHANE

Present Day

I'm trying to keep her with me. What we just did, it means more than a mindless fuck. I've done enough of that throughout the years, trying to fuck her out of my system when I realized it was too late for us to build a future. But I need her to see that we can start again, we're just older.

I need her to realize we are good together. We can get through this. It's about communication, which is hypocritical for me to think about now when communication was the last thing I did for us when I broke up with her years ago.

She removes herself from my grasp and stands up. She takes a moment to get her footing secure and turns toward me. Fuck, she's gorgeous.

Even after all these years, even after giving birth, she is absolutely incredible. I notice these minor changes in her body, mostly the stretch marks that are reminders she brought life into this world. I can't help but lean forward and kiss them on her stomach. She gasps when I do so and when I look up, she has tears pooled in her eyes.

"I know I hurt you. I know our future turned out differently than we both imagined. But know that I'm not leaving you this time."

I tell her as she blinks and I see two tears escape when she takes a deep breath, as though she's keeping herself from

saying the first thing that jumps into her mind.

“Shane, how can you say that and act like it’s that simple? I loved you. I may never have stopped. Actually, I know I never stopped. After all the men I dated and I tried to love, no one ever topped the incredible Shane Thomas Philips!”

She brings her arms up by her sides and lets them fall, as though she’s too tired from the mental toll all this has taken on her. I get it. I feel it too. But I also feel like I am seeing the world in color after years of seeing it in black and white. She completes my life in a way I forgot because I pushed all thoughts of her aside when I knew she was no longer mine.

“This is a mindfuck if I’ve ever had one. Here I am upset you walked away, but then I feel awful because I wouldn’t have my twins to love the way I do had you not done exactly that.”

Now her tears are flowing down her cheeks and they’re a reminder I did this to her. This juxtaposition of sorts. She regrets me walking away, but also feels grateful for the gifts that came after I left.

“I know Becs, and I’m sorry for the way I handled things in the past. I don’t have much to offer you by way of explanation aside from my believing I did what I thought was best. But I see now that I didn’t think it through, and I felt like I, no we, were at a crossroads, and I didn’t want you to regret being stuck with me.”

Her eyes have widened a bit and her mouth falls open.

“Stuck with you? You think that by walking away I didn’t have a piece of your heart beating right by my side? I would have walked to the ends of this earth to make sure we would make it. I would have been strong for both of us when you felt defeated. And I bet you would have done the same for me. But instead, you walked away and let me handle life without you. I lived my life, but I lived it muted in many ways. I felt like my experiences simply came up lacking in certain ways. You can never take that back. You can’t make that better. And then you’re sitting here, saying you can give more from this point forward feels like a slap in the face.

“No, Shane. What you can give me will never fill the gaps in the life I lacked for so long on my own. I can’t trust you won’t walk away when you simply get a feeling about how things should go between us. I have a life here. I’ve built a career and a family. How would you act if you couldn’t mold to that, but you felt guilty about approaching that subject with me? You’d leave. I know you would. That’s what you did before, and you’d do it again. Life only gets more complicated as we age, and I fear that’s something you can’t handle.”

I listen to every jab she sends my way. I’m deserving of all her fears, all her tears, all her trepidations. I put them there to begin with. While she walks toward the bathroom to clean up and start re-dressing herself, I take a moment to let her words sink in. I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep, but I also want her to know I’ve spent too many years wishing I could go backward and take a different path. So this is my chance to put my heart on the line.

When she steps back out, I begin, “I hear what you’re saying, Becs.”

I’ve only put my boxers on but don’t move toward the rest of my clothes that are thrown around her foyer and family room. I sit back down on the couch and look at my hands clasped in front of me, stealing quick glances her way. She sits on an ottoman across from me. I assume she needs the distance for this moment in time, and I will grant it to her, even though everything in me itches to hold her in my arms.

“The thing is, I’ve lived most of my life without you in it, physically. But daily, you lived in my mind on repeat. Every place I visited while I was in the Navy, I thought about how it would look through your eyes. Each milestone I reached, be it during my time in the service or when I started my company, I’ve thought out how you would have celebrated my highs and held me during my lows. I know I fucked up years ago and for that, there aren’t enough apologies I could give to fully appreciate how incredibly hard our parting has been on you. Also, know that it wasn’t easy for me.”

She attempts to scoff, but I look up at her, my own tears forming in my eyes, and she realizes that this, too, is hard on

me in ways I cannot fully put into words.

“I have felt like I’ve walked through life missing a limb every single moment of every single day. I have lived as a shadow of the boy who left you on that porch. I became a man, but one that felt extreme loss with each moment I lived through without you. I never realized what an impact one moment could have in a lifetime that could catapult me into a universe I wasn’t prepared for. But I kept taking a breath with each new day in hopes it would lead a step closer to you.”

She hasn’t started yelling at me or asked me to leave so I take a chance and start walking toward her. I pick her up and place her on my lap, while I sit on the end portion of the sectional. She gives in to the pull and simply hugs me, letting her head burrow into my neck, and I feel her tears fall onto my skin, and each one is a reminder that I need to honor this chance I’ve been given and not fuck it up.

Chapter Thirteen



REBECCA

September 1996

What is it about that damn football jersey that just brings out that sex appeal? I can't get enough of Shane all the days of the week, but when he's wearing that jersey, be it on game day during school, or during a game, like he is right now, it does things to me. It comes in at a close second to the backward hat look on a guy.

Things with Shane have been on fire. Since our lake night together, we can't keep our hands off each other. We are living up to the idea of teens and their sexual drive because I have taken advantage of every single moment we are alone and I mean, every single moment. Just the thought paints my cheeks crimson.

"Ewww, are you thinking dirty things as your boyfriend sits out there getting tackled?" Elody says by my side.

Beau has his arm around her and laughs, then proceeds to yell something about defense. In my daze, dreaming of all the ways Shane would show me he loves me, I didn't realize the rival team got possession of the ball.

I see Shane running toward the sidelines, my quarterback, number four, all fine as hell.

I'm staring at the back of his jersey when I hear Beau call out, "Mrs. Philips, up here." He's waving his arms toward Shane's mother.

She makes her way through the crowd, a tight smile spread across her face. I've been around Shane's mom plenty, but something about the way she looks at me makes me feel like I've somehow rubbed her the wrong way. She's never outwardly mean to me, but she's hesitant to accept me. It might just be me being paranoid, but Ellie has also made comments when it's just the two of us having a girls' night.

I turn toward Mrs. Philips, Bethany—although she has instructed pretty much any friend of Shane's to address her formally instead of by first name. At least she comes off cold toward most, and it's not directed solely at me. She eyes us all but keeps her gaze on me a few extra beats. She's assessing me.

I'm not sure what she thinks she'll find. I've been nothing but kind to her, and I don't have time to mull it over because our section goes wild when our team intercepts a pass and takes off with the ball. They make it to the twenty-yard line and Shane hops off the bench, running toward the field while putting his helmet on and buckling the chin strap.

I stand, yelling words of encouragement. He taps his helmet twice, our sign to say he hears me. I smile and watch as they huddle close to the end zone, a step closer to attaining another win for the season.

When I take my seat again, I feel Mrs. Philips looking my way. I look toward her and try to bring a smile out of her. "It's great to see you tonight. Shane is playing so well out there," I say to her. She nods but gives me no other response. I let the discomfort go, as I'm certain I've done nothing to offend Shane's mom in all the times I've interacted with her.

The remainder of the game is uneventful after they score with the last possession the Panthers had. Our team is ecstatic and so are all of us in the stands. I stand, cheering with the rest of my classmates. Mrs. Philips says her goodbyes, being more curt than I would prefer, and walks off to the gate, where Shane will likely pass shortly. He comes running toward the stands, stopping to greet his mother. She says a few words, his smile growing, and she blows him a kiss and heads toward her car.

I watch the interaction, realizing her smile reaches her eyes when she speaks to Shane. She heads off in the direction of the parking lot while I walk toward the bottom of the bleachers, hoping to catch Shane before he heads to the locker room. He sees me and stays planted where he is chatting with his mom.

The moment I get close enough to him, he pulls himself up so he's at eye level with me, while he's grabbing onto the fencing that separates the field from the bleachers. He kisses me and even with all the sweat he's accumulated during that game, I welcome it. He's my heart and soul, and I want to embrace the fact that his love is centered toward me and only me. He pulls away and has this smile that lights me up. Being loved by Shane is beyond anything I imagined.

“So, we headed to Pat's after I shower up?” Shane asks as he lowers himself.

I stare down at him, my hair falling in front of my face. I pull my hair behind my ears, and my smile grows. What have I done right in this world for this boy to look at me like I am his purpose in life? Whatever it is, I will take any glances Shane wants to give me. I'm greedy for Shane's attention.

I pretend as if I'm thinking this proposition over, putting my index finger to my chin, tapping it, and looking up to the sky like this is taking a lot of my mental energy to decide on.

“Come on, Becs. I know you're not going to give the starting quarterback a hard time right after the W we just conquered!”

I start laughing and simply smile wide and blow him a kiss. Of course, I add a wink for fun at the end. I hope I'm doing a lot more than this at the end of my night with Shane. He seems to read between the lines as his eyes darken with need. He hops off the fence and makes his way to the locker room. It might be my imagination, but he seems a little more eager to get ready and meet me at the car.

* * *

I cannot consume another bite of food. Lucy, our usual server, brought complimentary milkshakes for the football win; however, I had already consumed an entire fried chicken sandwich and fries. But I couldn't turn down the sugary goodness, and now I can barely move out of this booth.

Shane is laughing at something Beau said, with no care in the world. How is he not feeling like he's going to explode? I ask Lucy for a tea, and the moment I take a few sips, I already feel a little better. My mom always makes me tea when I feel like I overdid it with my meals. It feels nice to sip on this after sitting outside in the already cooler fall night watching Shane play tonight's game.

Shane looks over at me and whispers, "I hope you aren't too full because I've got some dessert for later."

I immediately sit up straight, trying to keep my hair in front of my face as I'm guaranteed to have a deep blush across my cheeks. Beau must have an idea of what was said because he chuckles and whispers something in Ellie's ear. She looks up at him and I see hearts in her gaze. Those two are simply adorable together. I am so glad they've explored this relationship on a romantic level because they fit perfectly together.

We say our goodbyes and Shane hugs me toward his body, rubbing my outer arm while we walk to his truck. He opens my door for me and waits until I nod that I'm in the cab completely before closing the door.

He walks around the truck and gets inside. He's quick to get the heater on, and I'm rubbing my hands together while Shane starts driving us to my house. He chuckles at my dramatics regarding the weather because we both know it's only going to get colder as the months pass.

My mom picked up a night shift at the hospital, and Janna has Grant tonight for a little sleepover. Grant and Laney seem to be joined at the hip, so this is the easiest way to keep both kids entertained. They have the best time together and seem to keep themselves entertained, and this is a huge help for my mom.

When we arrive at my driveway, Shane parks his car and looks over at me. I can already tell what he's thinking before he says it.

“So, your mom won't be home tonight?”

He already knows the answer to that, but there is no way in hell his mom will be okay with him spending the night.

“Yes, but Mrs. Philips will not let it slide if she sees that her precious son doesn't come home tonight.”

“Oh, Mama won't care because I said I was at Beau's tonight. Don't worry, it's only partially a lie as I will have to set an alarm and head over around four-thirty a.m. to ensure I get out of my girlfriend's bed before her mother returns from her night shift.”

How do I say no to an entire night of cuddling him?

He doesn't wait for my response, quickly getting out of the driver's seat and running to my side of the car. Before I can compute what's going on, he has my passenger door open, belt unbuckled, and is throwing me over his shoulder.

He runs toward my front door, and I can't contain the laughter as he smacks me on my ass. Once inside, he sets me down and I start running toward my room while Shane chases me with his sweet smile, and I still can't stop laughing.

It's all fun and games until we reach my room, and he closes my door. He locks the door because we've been nearly caught before when things got hot and heavy. Now it's a habit of his, and I'm not going to complain. I do not need my mom to see anything between Shane and me in that way.

He makes his way toward me, throwing his shirt on the floor, then discarding his shoes, socks, and pants along the way as well. I just look at him, unable to take my eyes off this specimen of a man. He's all man at this point if you ask me. I just keep staring because I feel like I need to pinch myself that I get to call him mine.

“Becs, you keep looking at me like that, and I'm going to come just from what I assume is going through your dirty mind.”

I smile, trying to feign sweetness but in reality, it's true—my mind was conjuring all the dirty things I was planning on doing to his body tonight.

I bite my bottom lip and Shane gets close enough to grab me by the sides of my face and says, "The only one biting that lip tonight is me. I plan on doing something to some other lips before that though."

Oh, dirty Shane is out to play. I can feel my panties get wetter than they were, and I start to pull at my jacket.

Shane looks up at me, "Let me unwrap my own gift, thank you very much." He starts at my jeans, kneeling down and popping the button of my pants. He slowly pulls down the zipper while his gaze locks on me.

He's no longer smiling or acting silly. He's completely serious and he's keeping his eyes on the prize—me. I let Shane take over because I already know he is well aware of what I like.

I watch, my breath coming out in short pants, and I find myself needing to remind my eyes to blink. I don't want to miss a thing he does to me because each time we are together, it becomes my new favorite memory.

He slowly pulls my pants and underwear down together, leaving me bare to him. He looks at me like I'm his next meal, and I can't wait for what comes next. His eyes still on mine, then he sticks his tongue out and swipes it through my folds.

I can't help the moan that escapes me. I bite down on my bottom lip again, and this time Shane doesn't stop me. He has me sit on the edge of the bed, puts his palm on my chest, and slowly lowers my upper body to lay flush with the bed, my chest rising and falling as he continues to eat me out.

He puts both my legs over his shoulders and makes sure my legs open a little more, so he has better access to me. He continues his strokes, making me see stars too soon. I wish this feeling could last forever, but I come down from my high, looking down at him with my pleasure all over his face.

He places open-mouthed kisses along the inside of my thighs, and I shiver from the connection. Every ounce of me is highly sensitive after my orgasm, and I feel everything he does as if it's a little electrical current coursing through my body.

He stands up and grabs a condom from my bedside table. We found ourselves in a few difficult situations in the past where a condom was not at the ready, and we silently sent a prayer above that my birth control was working. So far, so good. Sweet relief. I couldn't admit it to him, but feeling him bare inside me was beyond anything I thought it could be. But the nervousness that sat with me after I came down from that high wasn't worth it at my age.

Once the condom is on, he starts to pull my jacket off, kissing along my neck and down my collarbone. He's unbuttoning my flannel shirt, letting it fall to the sides, and pulling my lace bra down to expose my breasts. He doesn't even take my clothes off all the way before he's entering me.

My legs wrap around his middle, and he pumps into me, telling me how much he loves me and how I complete him. I keep saying his name, unable to say much else as I already feel the buildup of another orgasm making its way up my spine.

I begin grabbing at my breasts, knowing how much this will drive Shane crazy. And sure enough, he's pumping into me harder, while I pinch my nipples and feel myself lose to the impending orgasm that takes over my body. I shudder while Shane keeps pumping, now a loss of control of his movements. On the last pump, he calls out my name, and he falls on top of me, struggling to catch his breath.

"Every single time, Becs, it feels like the first. I never thought I could feel so much love for one person as I do for you." He detaches from me and discards the condom in an old tissue box that's in my trash bin.

In the meantime, I run to my restroom to clean myself up. We both return to bed, and I adjust myself under the covers as close as I can to him. He lays us to the side, putting my back to his front, while we look out the window at the stars. He is lightly stroking my arm, causing goosebumps with each

movement, but also comforting me to the point I feel my eyes get heavy.

Out of nowhere, he says, “Do you see those clusters of stars over there?” He uses the hand he was stroking my upper arm with and points outside my window.

I nod, unable to form sentences after the sexual exertion he just put me through.

“Wherever we are in this world, always look toward that cluster and know I am looking at them too.”

I can't help the tear that falls down my right cheek. If my life continues with moments like this while in Shane Philips' arms, I will live my happiest life. With that thought, I close my eyes and dream about endless nights in the arms of the man I love.

Chapter Fourteen



SHANE

Present

I begin getting ready while Becca sits where I just put her down after getting up from the couch. I put my heart out there and I know she needs to process what I'm saying. I wasn't kidding—she and I are meant to be together, and I need to find a way to right this wrong I caused, even if it doesn't change what was done long ago.

I pull my pants up and leave them unbuttoned as I go to grab my shirt. Before I put it on, Becca is on her feet, making her way over to me. She stops me as I try to pull the shirt over my head and looks at my chest. I know what she's staring at, and I know she's trying to find words to react to the image staring back at her.

“What's the meaning of that tattoo?” She eyes the ink on my chest and then shifts her eyes toward me. I know she can decipher what she's seeing, but she needs to hear me explain it.

I clear my throat, the emotions taking over as I explain what I put on my body as a reminder of her.

“Remember those clusters of stars we used to stare at back home?” She nods but doesn't speak.

“They're called Pleiades, and after I left Nebraska, I felt sick knowing I didn't have you by my side anymore. So while I was away, I started to look up the meaning behind the stars.

Turns out Pleiades means *to sail*, which is fitting since I'm a Navy man.

“One of the guys on the ship was an incredible artist, and I told him what I was envisioning. He took that and worked on it for weeks when we were in our bunks. The moment he revealed it to me, I knew I had to put it on my body permanently.”

I rub the area, remembering how much it hurt to get it tattooed, but knowing the pain I would have without Becca by my side would continue to be insurmountable, so the physical pain really wasn't the pain that lingered afterward.

“I ended up with this sailboat with the waves hitting it, the stars shining down from the night sky. I guess deep down I was hoping my boat would always lead back to you, the biggest star to touch my life.”

I hear her inhale and before I know it, she's hugging me. Her shoulders shake as she cries even more. I inhale her scent and close my eyes. My life brought me to this moment, and I cannot let this opportunity pass me.

I hope that these are happy tears because I'm well aware most of the cries I've seen from her lately were of sadness and pain, all of which I was the cause of.

She pulls away from me and I immediately wish we could go back to embracing. She looks up at me, a small smile pulling at her lips, “I think this calls for pancakes.”

I chuckle and nod. I guess after all these years, some things haven't changed. Becca always loved a stack of pancakes after she had herself a good cry.

* * *

Sitting across from her, I watch this girl that I have never stopped loving, now a woman, devour a stack of pancakes. We came to a little hole-in-the-wall diner she frequents. It seems many of the employees here know her name, and she seems at

peace being surrounded by those who have added to this life she now lives.

Becca told me this was a diner she frequented when she was in college, studying late nights for exams when it was simply too hard to concentrate at home. She told me about medical school, but glossed over a lot of that time, and jumped straight to how she met Hudson. Turns out she went to someone's housewarming and he was there, and that they started off as friends before moving forward romantically.

As hard as it was to hear about the life she lived without me, I know that her years without me weren't all bad. She smiled telling me about her twins, and how it was a struggle navigating life with their schedules that never seemed to sync up.

She briefly went on to talk about her divorce to Hudson, but admitted that although he is the adulterer, she feels their marriage was over far before he had his affair. She feels like they simply stopped envisioning what life would look like as a team and grew apart. She doesn't seem to hold animosity toward him, and I find that a feat to admit about someone you once promised to honor and cherish for the rest of your days.

I told Becca about my time in the Navy. I told her how working with the crew onboard the ship, day in and day out, made me appreciate that time in my life, but that I don't miss it. I now understood the brotherhood my grandfather and father always talked about. I realized how those years laid the foundation for my company, even before I opened my doors.

I feel myself opening up and letting her see inside my life from years past, allowing her to feel slightly connected, even if only through my words, about how much that time meant to me. I smile thinking back at how those guys and I became brothers and still stay connected with annual gatherings, in which the location jumps from one person's state to the other.

I ask Becs about her mother, and I see the light in her eyes shine brighter. It seems the bond between the two Stanley ladies hasn't wavered.

“My mom lives in upstate New York, right near Syracuse University. She remarried in 2008 to a man named Rick. He’s good to her. She never sought love after my dad’s passing, but Rick happened to be at the hospital one afternoon when visiting a friend who had hip surgery. My mom was having lunch with me, and they shared an elevator to the cafeteria on her way in, and the rest is history. They lived in the city for a few years but ended up moving to their current home in upstate New York when the kids got older.

“I was happy with the timing of their move as the pandemic hit the city hard, and I was worried for their health at that time. I see her as often as I can, either by going up to stay with her, or she comes into the city and spends a few nights at my place. She’s still one of my favorite people. Now she’s closer to Liv so that settles my nerves.”

I’m about to press for more information when my phone starts to vibrate on the table. I look down and see my mom’s face fill the screen.

“Speaking of mothers, mine must be feeling left out that I haven’t mentioned her yet. Let me grab this if that’s ok.” Becs makes a face but nods to indicate it’s not a problem.

“Hey, Mom, how are you?” She begins and rambles for far too long about how her roof needs to be replaced, and that the ocean air is contributing to some deterioration on the outside of her house. She lives in Palos Verdes, in California. When I joined the Navy, I was stationed out there to begin with. Although I’ve moved around since then, she couldn’t part with the ocean and stayed in the same city she had moved to since leaving Nebraska.

When I notice a lull in our conversation, truly her conversation with me, I interject, “Guess who I ran into, Mom.” She has no idea and I blurt it out, “Becca.” Her silence is deafening, so I clarify in case she doesn’t recall. “You remember, Rebecca Stanley?” She remains silent and I pull the phone away from my ear to see if the call dropped.

When I confirm the call has not failed, I bring the phone back up to my ear. The elation I was feeling starts to plummet

because her silence is making me uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, Shane. I must have misheard. I thought you said Rebecca Stanley.” She forces a chuckle that I know all too well is fake.

“No, Mom, you heard me right. Rebecca is in New York City, and we ran into one another when I was walking in her neighborhood a while back.”

My mom takes a moment and coughs into the receiver. “I’m so sorry, Shane. I think I’m choking on my tea. I need to hang up before I cough into your ear for the next ten minutes.” She quickly disconnects and I’m left there, dumbfounded by my mother’s reaction to what I just revealed.

I look up to find Rebecca looking at me, a bit of worry etched across her face. “My mom says ‘hi.’” I can’t help the lie rolling off my tongue, but I also don’t understand what just transpired.

Becca laughs and I can’t help but feel the discomfort radiating off of her. “It’s okay, Shane. I know she didn’t say hi. Your mom was never my number one fan,” she says as she grabs a pull of her water through the straw.

I look at her, confused by her admission. “What do you mean? My mom loved you.” This makes Beccs laugh again, this time causing all the hairs on my arm to stand at attention. I know that laugh and it’s incredibly forced.

“No Shane, you loved me. Your mom loves you, so in turn, she tolerated me. She never cared for me, but I have no idea why. At this point though, does it matter? She was someone I never put much thought into after we parted ways. I’m glad to know she’s doing well, wherever she is.”

“She’s in Palos Verdes in California. She stayed there after we moved, and she never had it in her to leave the coast. She has found her people in the neighborhood and has enjoyed this season of life she is currently in.” Beccs nods and smiles, a genuine smile, even though it doesn’t reach her eyes. She’s uncomfortable, and I am now trying to piece together the signs I may have ignored all those years ago at Becca’s admission

about my mom not liking her. She brings up a good point, my mom never really warmed up to Becs. But then again, my mom isn't the easiest to get close to.

I keep the conversation light as we talk a little more about my mother. Becs then pushes the conversation toward my father.

“Unfortunately, my father passed away about eight years ago from lung cancer. You remember how it was when that generation grew up. Everyone smoked and the habit was a common and acceptable behavior and even kicking his pack-a-day routine didn't save him from the cancer that coursed through his body as he got older. He suffered in the end, but we did travel a little before he got too ill to go around the world.

“The months traveling with him are ones that I hold near and dear to my heart, as they were the only uninterrupted moments I ever had with him. He left my mom early in my life, and I did not get a chance to live with him when I was young. He stayed tied to his Navy lifestyle, serving until he was no longer able to handle the hustle and bustle of it. He settled in Oregon a few years into my time in the Navy, and I visited frequently once he fell ill. I stayed with him toward the end.”

I continue, telling Becs about how at that time he was so frail, but still lucid and telling stories from his time on all the ships as a Navy man himself. She's genuinely happy I have all these stories to tell about him, and I see her eyes well up when I open up about how hard it was to see him suffer.

When she wipes her tears, she says something I wasn't prepared for. “Seeing Beau fall ill, then pass away, was one of the hardest things. I felt so much pain because he was a piece of my life that I wasn't sure how to live without. But then the pain I saw in Elody's eyes as she cared for him made it all so hard to handle at times.

“I knew his prognosis, and I did as much as I could from here, while they were still in Nebraska. I referred him to the best doctors, but like most who have cancer in their

gallbladder, he found out once it had already metastasized and it was too late. He had been suffering for years from what he thought were bad cases of heartburn.

“It wasn’t until I saw him have an episode, that I urged him to seek medical treatment, thinking it was gallstones. Unfortunately, although that was the source of his attacks, they discovered he had stage four cancer, and not too long after that, we were navigating life without him.”

I suddenly find it hard to swallow. Beau was my closest friend growing up, and the fact I cut ties with him in a very similar fashion as I did Becca, I’m incredibly disappointed in myself. When I finally gained the courage to start digging around to try and connect with him, I discovered my friend had passed away right before his thirty-eighth birthday.

I look at Beccs and her demeanor has changed. I can almost hear the gears shifting in that brain of hers, and I sense her question before she asks it.

“Just tell me, Shane. Out with it. Why did you leave so suddenly? Let’s start there so I can have a clearer picture as to why you derailed all of our lives.”

My mouth suddenly feels dry, and I feel uncomfortable in my seat.

“Listen, Beccs, I understand you’re sitting on a mountain of questions, but in all honesty, can we simply savor this time we have with one another without getting to this part of our conversation just yet? To say I’ve missed you seems like it isn’t enough to fully describe how lost I’ve felt throughout the years.

“Since I saw you a few weeks ago, my heart feels like it’s beating for the first time in nearly thirty years. I know so much has been left unknown, and I know your mind is reeling at the fact that I’m sitting across from you right now. I want to go into the why soon, but today has been emotionally taxing, and I finally feel like you’re not going to spit fire toward me just from my presence. Can we table this part of our discussion for another day? Do you mind if I explain everything to you, but in time instead of right now?”

I'm grasping at straws here because I do feel like I need to get to know the Becca that appears before me now. I want to sit and explain everything that transpired on that graduation day, but I also want to build a new foundation with her.

She bites her lower lip, and I can see it's taking everything in her to let this go for now. It's not that I'm ashamed of why I tore us apart because I was young and influenced by feelings I should have expressed, instead of making assumptions about what was best for others who could make decisions about their own lives. It was selfish in many ways, but it came from a place of love, and I hope that once I talk it through with her, she'll see where I was coming from.

Finally, after contemplating this for a few minutes, she looks up at me, "Yes, I can live with that for now, but I am owed an explanation and deserve to hear it soon. No more beating around the bush. But I, too, would like to enjoy this moment where I do not want to throw my coffee in your face."

She smiles and I know that she's opening up her heart again to me, even if just a little, and that makes me feel like I've won the lottery. I'll take any progress toward a future where I can see more of Becca's smiles.

Chapter Fifteen



REBECCA

May 1997

It's Memorial Day and I can feel the summer showing itself in the way the weather has started with a strong heatwave this weekend. I am sitting by Beau's pool with my bikini on, sipping a Diet Coke, Ellie by my side, and the boys in the pool.

We are both babysitting our younger siblings while our mothers are out shopping for the big barbecue that's happening tonight at Beau's house. Both kids fell asleep on the lounge by my side, their hands intertwined. Shane keeps throwing glances my way. I can see so much love coming off his gaze, I can't help the smile that's constantly on my face.

I see movement in my periphery and look over to see both Grant and Laney beginning to stir. Soon they're blinking their eyes, adjusting to the sunshine. Their sweet little faces light up when they take in their surroundings and remember they are at the pool.

After taking them for a quick restroom break, Ellie and I get them lathered in sunscreen again and put their floaties on. Both are learning to swim, but I'm too paranoid to put them in a pool without the extra protection.

Luckily, both are still a little groggy and not fighting the floaties, as they're a bitch to put on after applying sunscreen. Once they're set, Beau and Shane begin screaming that the kids can't catch them.

Laney and Grant take off, jumping into the pool, belly first. The sound is horrendous, and I'm convinced someone will emerge from the water crying, but when both break through the water, so much laughter surrounds me, it's hard not to laugh along with them. The kids catch up to Beau and Shane and begin tackling them the best they can with their arms engulfed by the floating devices in the way.

Ellie and I decide to sit at the edge of the water and put our feet in. I can't help but look around me and appreciate how far my family has come since we moved to Nebraska three years ago.

Feeling the water surrounding my feet while I kick them forward and back, Shane comes up to me, leaving Beau behind to get attacked by both kids. Beau is a saint letting those children harass him, but he does it with a smile on his face. Shane saddles up to me, putting himself between my legs. He kisses the inner portion of my knee, and I can feel the goosebumps emerge on the surface of my skin, and I swear it's not from the cold water.

"Hey, baby, wanna come in?" Shane asks as he continues to kiss me along my inner thigh.

"Can you keep it PG right now, Shane? We have young eyes and ears in this pool," Ellie scoffs, although her tone is playful.

"Oh, Ellie, you're asking for a lot. I can't keep my hands off the woman I love." Shane looks from Ellie to me and gives me that megawatt smile. Each moment together feels like a memory that I want to capture and add to a jar so I can carry them around.

"Can you believe in a few short weeks we will be ending our junior year and finally be seniors? I feel like just yesterday you were pining over Becca when she came our freshman year," Ellie continues. I know she's been super emotional about this next one being our last year. We've talked a lot about it, but I don't see myself ever losing what I have with her, even if I'm in college, most likely states away.

“We’ve got to make the best of it. I know that moving away is something I’ve always wanted to experience, especially in the Navy. That’s why there are letters, and I bet this whole email thing is something we can try as well,” Shane states with such a positive mindset while the anxiety that it provokes in me feels like it’s all-consuming.

Parting ways with Shane, even though our plan is to make this work long-distance, brings me a lot of sleepless nights, even with it being over a year away. I can’t help it. Add to that this email stuff, I feel so clueless. I don’t understand how something like electronic mail is going to take off. It’s not like everyone has access.

I am more traditional with my letters. Plus, it’s fun to have those saved up in a box. I already have shoe boxes filled with notes from Ellie that we send between classes when we pass one another down the hall. Shane, too, will write me letters while in school here and there, and I can’t help but blush at the thought of the last one.

My Bees,

I'm sitting here in Mr. Gromer's geometry class and it's beyond boring. I can't wait for the weekend to start. I can't wait to see you in that new bikini you bought the other day. What was it? Pink? Honestly, it could be the ugliest shade of brown and I'd still love it. Anything on you makes me drool. I can't wait to hold you, kiss you, and whisper how much I love you while looking up at our

favorite cluster of stars. You are the most incredible person and I feel lucky that you love me back, Becs.

That being said, I'm going to ravage you this weekend. Maybe we'll find a little dark corner at the BBQ and strip that little bikini off you while I take one of your nipples in my mouth and feel you writhe beneath me. Hearing you moan and whisper my name while I put my hands down your bikini bottoms and put my fingers inside you. Feel you grip me as you fuck my hand. Shit, now I'm getting hard, in geometry of all places. I better stop writing this letter before I get called on and have to stand up to write the answer on the board. That would not go over well.

I love you, Becs.

Always Yours,

Shane xoxo

While I'm distracted, Shane takes it upon himself to pull me into the water. The change in temperature makes me squeal, and I can't stop the giggling that follows. He pulls me under with him and I cling onto him. My vision is blurry, but I can

see him looking at me underwater. We kiss briefly before we both need to come up for air.

When we emerge from the water, I am still holding onto him, with my arms around his neck and looking right into his eyes. When we look at one another, the connection feels even more powerful than it used to. Each gaze at me, it feels like he sees into my soul, and I start to wonder if we are truly put on this earth for one person because it feels like all my paths have led to Shane.

* * *

Later that afternoon, we all dry off while Beau's dad, Luke, stands at the grill with Kirk, chatting about the basketball playoffs between Houston and Utah. Neither team is a favorite between them, but they go back and forth on stats and which player will win particular accolades. Janna, my mom, and Candace, Beau's mom, are all sitting at the outdoor table, drinking homemade margaritas and laughing about something they saw at the market.

I look around and realize the only other parent not in attendance is Mrs. Philips. She never hangs out with us as a group. I always thought with time she'd warm up to the idea, especially since my mom does not have someone by her side. Mrs. Philips would never have to feel like the odd one out as she'd have a partner in that department. But she always claims to be busy.

I think she's got one foot out the door when it comes to this town. Maybe she's waiting for Shane to finish high school to relocate. I'm not too sure. I don't focus on many conversations with Shane about his mom as I don't want to say something rude about her. I know Shane respects her, especially after she raised him on her own for the majority of his life. The portion where his father was around full-time, Shane was too young to recollect.

My mom breaks free of her conversation with the other women and looks around. I see the look of concern on her face

and she starts to whip her head around, scanning the backyard. She says something which I can only assume is about my brother and Laney, and Janna begins to scan the backyard, both standing up.

Soon we are all searching for the little ones. I run toward the pool and see it's empty. The relief I feel at this realization is instant. Thank goodness for late sunsets because there's enough light to see around without needing flashlights. Unlike California, Nebraska backyards are spacious and there are always great places to hide.

Shane and I take off, checking all the spots he claimed he'd hide in when he and Beau were little. Ellie runs out from the house stating neither are inside. A slight panic rises in my chest. Shane must realize my worry and rubs my back.

“We'll find them. They're kids. They probably thought it would be fun to hide, not realizing we'd worry. It's a game of hide-and-seek. That's all.”

After about twenty minutes, I hear giggling and whispers behind a large tree on the outskirts of Beau's property. When I look behind said tree, there is my brother and Laney, evidence of the chocolate bars they snatched all over their face, which were supposed to be eaten later with s'mores.

“What in the world you two! We were worried sick. You can't run off like that. We've been looking for you everywhere.”

My brother looks up at me, a variation of blue-green similar to mine staring back, mischief evident in his gaze.

“Chocolate is my favorite.” He says this with a big smile.

I scoop him up while Shane grabs Laney, careful not to get the chocolate mess on ourselves and we walk back toward the house. The moment both moms see their mischievous children, they come running.

Laney and Grant are still laughing—not too sure if it's from their little adventure or the fact their bloodstream has just gotten an uptick of sugar. Either way, they're safe, which is most important.

I hear both mothers scolding the kids, but it's falling upon deaf ears. Laney and Grant are still laughing, and the moms stop their reprimand and simply let out a loud exhale. I know both of them are exhausted by the antics those kids are putting them through on the daily.

Shane and I fall back, walking slowly as we head back to the barbecue. He has his hand on my lower back, caressing me as we leisurely stroll. I let my head fall onto his side. I'm too short to reach his shoulder, so it's more like my head ends up in his armpit, but I'm not focusing on that aspect too much. It's not as romantic.

After a few steps, Shane speaks and what he says throws me off. "Would you like to have children one day?"

I stop in my tracks. I feel my heart rate accelerate, and I simply stare back at him. He is so calm, a soft smile spreading across his lips.

"Come on, Becs. It can't be that crazy that I ask this question."

Once I calm my nerves a bit, I finally answer.

"Well, since I am only turning seventeen in a matter of days, yes it's a bit crazy. We have so many plans. I don't plan on having kids anytime soon if that's what you're asking."

Shane chuckles, like I'm now a comedian. He shakes his head but continues to smile.

"I didn't mean tomorrow. I mean, what are your plans for having kids? Do you want them someday?" He explains as if this is a completely normal teenage conversation.

This calms me a bit. But I still tread lightly because I don't want to come off heartless and selfish with my response.

"Yes, someday I want kids, Shane. But by someday I mean, way down the line. I can't imagine going to medical school and having mouths to feed."

Shane looks off into the distance.

"I want to have children with you. I want to marry you and continue this ride for as long as our lives allow us. I don't see

tomorrow or any day that follows without you in my life, Becs. I, too, would wait, mostly because I'd rather put years of practice into having kids." With that he waggles his brows and gives me that sexy smirk I crave.

"But most of all, I just wanted to make sure we are on the same page. I know it's not in the cards for us for many years, but I would love to know that someday, I'll look down at you and feel my child kick me back from your belly. Something about that is incredibly sexy and gives me more to look forward to, especially because I'll most likely be overseas. I'll need things like that to hold on to when I'm missing you on that Navy ship."

I can't help but start to envision this future he's describing. Seeing Shane come home to me, I'm barefoot and pregnant—obviously after I finish my shift at the hospital because that dream will continue—and he comes right up to me, bends down, and kisses my belly. I can even imagine him speaking to our little one, and that baby probably memorizing his voice. For some reason my thoughts cause tears to form. He notices and pulls his eyebrows together in concentration.

"Shoot, Becs, I didn't mean to upset you. It was just a thought after we found the kids. I'm sorry if I upset you."

I stop walking right then and turn to face him.

"Nothing about what you said upsets me. It has just given me something to look forward to as well. You know me and how easily I can cry. I know I'll have many late nights of studying ahead of me. So maybe this will give me some daydreaming material while I sit and miss you too much. I already know my heart won't handle it well."

He grabs my face and kisses me softly. These are the moments, the ones I know will be etched into my heart for the rest of my life. These little snapshots with Shane where our layers are peeled back and we are exposing ourselves to so much love, it's palpable across the oceans and under all the stars.

We continue to kiss until we are called to dinner. Hand in hand we walk toward our friends and family, and I try to

memorize this feeling so that I can carry it with me through those future nights when our hands will not be close enough to hold.

Chapter Sixteen



Present Day

It's been a few weeks since I last saw Shane. He had to return to Boston for some work he couldn't do remotely. Every night, though, we text after I get the twins to bed or between deliveries for me. I haven't had him meet the twins yet because I'm still very cautious about my time with Shane. Although we might be taking things at a pace we find exciting and fun, there's still so much about our past we need to uncover. So many emotions flood my mind about how he has simply reappeared without much concern about how things ended between us.

While Shane has been away, I have been preparing for Halloween with the twins. We usually have a theme going between us, but this year is the first time they won't be trick-or-treating. They got invited to a classmate's house for a party, something I'm still not used to for the two of them. Luckily, it's a few doors down from my place, and the parents assured me they would keep an eye out.

So I FaceTimed Shane at one point to show him the costume I chose to wear to hand out candy. Well, that's what I prefaced in my text, however, I wore a cheer uniform that was a little too scandalous to greet trick-or-treaters, so he had a nice little surprise when he picked up the video call. Things got a little heated and he was begging to see me immediately after he returned to the city. I assured him that on Halloween night, which is only two days away, I would be wearing

scrubs, which isn't far from my norm. Being on-call, that is the most convenient attire for that night.

I look up toward the heavens, admiring this beautiful fall day in New York. It's warmer than usual today. There's a bit of a breeze, but nothing a light sweater won't fix. I arrived at Central Park, per Shane's request, and placed a large blanket on the ground. I had lunch with Mallory and Jackson before dropping them off at Hudson's place. His parents just returned from a trip to Greece and wanted to see the kids. When they invited me to stay, I had to decline and it was hard to ignore the squinted gaze in my direction from Hudson.

In the past, I would have interpreted that as jealousy, but the more we are getting accustomed to this role as divorced parents, I see his reaction as one of concern. I see where he's coming from, and if I were in his shoes, I would probably do a lot more than throw a particular look in his direction.

I said my goodbyes, my presence long forgotten when the kids saw their grandparents pull out a few wrapped gifts from their travels. It warms my heart that my children have grandparents they can see as often as they do theirs. But a part of my heart weeps at the fact that my father was robbed of that experience with my kids. They're all so incredibly sweet and compassionate that I can close my eyes and envision what a great grandfather he would have been with them.

When I start this what-if scenario, I begin to see Shane in some roles I had once dreamed he'd be a part of. Seeing my belly swollen, rubbing my feet as we watched television, taking walks in the park like the one I'm at now with him by my side and a stroller in front of us. So many dreams were lost when he walked away from us that I have to force myself from going down that road. Many nights I cried myself to sleep knowing he was off living his life, and I felt like my own had been shattered.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when I hear heavy breathing from someone approaching me. I open my eyes, squinting from the bright sun on my face, and see Shane standing above me.

Did he jog here? “Hey, you. What in the world are you doing?”

I can't help but take in this fine man in front of me. He has his shirt hanging out of his shorts as if the heat surprised him as it had me. He's sweating, the lingering tan from the summer still painting his skin. His tattoo, a reminder of the pain he felt when we were apart, glistening under the rays of the sun.

His body is something out of one of the steamy romance novels I devour when I have time. He's got muscles for days, and I look at each part of him like I've never seen muscles on a man. Luckily my glasses cover where I'm looking because my focus is not on his face.

I must be staring because Shane starts snapping his fingers in front of me, getting my attention. I look up at his face this time, wishing he hadn't caught me. He grabs my water bottle and starts drinking out of it.

“Excuse me, I planned ahead and did not jog here. You're all sweaty. This is what you conjured up as a good time to meet up—mid-run?” I'm trying to act offended, but looking at his torso exposed like this seems to be a little unexpected treat for me.

“First off, I couldn't pass up this gorgeous weather. But the truth of the matter is I got sucked into a meeting when I landed, and it ended up taking longer than expected and I didn't have time for my run this morning, so I thought I'd get one on my way to seeing you. My buddy's place isn't too far from here, and I can run back that way and shower if we decide where we want to go after the park. As for the water, I'm parched and saw your drink. It's not like we haven't done more than share drinks, Becs.” He winks with that last statement and my cheeks flush.

He takes another long pull of my water and then sets it down. I've long forgotten what he was talking about as I drink him in with my gaze a little more. It's only now I realize he has a towel draped behind him coming out of the shorts as well. He grabs that and wipes himself down, but does not

proceed to cover up his muscles, so I just watch as he moves his way down to my blanket, sitting next to me.

“Well, as long as you aren’t drinking other people’s water bottles and then using mine, we’re good.” Yeah, I put it out there, hoping he catches the hidden meaning.

He looks straight ahead and my heart rate picks up. Maybe I’ve made the wrong assumption and he wants to see other people. I feel like there’s so much of Shane I don’t know now that we’re older. But we aren’t in our twenties, playing games. And he should know with me, it’s either you’re in or out. I’m not the type to share and he knows this.

“Still talking in code, I see. Yes, Becs, your water is the only water I’ll drink, and your pussy is only mine as well.” With that, he starts laughing when he sees my eyes wide as saucers.

The mouth on this one hasn’t changed, I realize. I blush even more than before because I’m only human. Then I start to think about him getting near my lady bits and...is the forecast reading over one hundred degrees today? It feels like the park turned up the thermostat.

Trying to keep my heart rate from doubling, and unable to control how wet I’ve gotten all of a sudden, I look at him and finally find the words to respond.

“Okay, good to know. So no sharing of drinks and—*other* things,” I say with a wink.

He seems to like that response and puts his arm around the bottom part of my back and rubs in circles, much like he did when we were younger. It’s amazing how one little gesture is so comforting and reassuring, all at once.

* * *

We relax in the park for another hour and decide to walk to Noah’s place. Shane tells me a little about his friend and his wife, Marie, as we walk along the streets of New York. We arrive at their building and make our way inside. We’re

greeted by the doorman, Connor, and it feels like this is just as much Shane's place as it is Noah's.

I watch the interaction between Shane and Connor as we walk toward the elevator, and it strikes me that not much about Shane's behavior is that different from when we were in high school. I hear people can return from serving with a different mindset and outlook on life, but it seems Shane still has that genuine heart he always had back then.

When we arrive at the door of Noah's apartment, Shane fidgets with the key in the lock. All of a sudden, Noah opens the door and begins harassing Shane about breaking and entering. Shane taps him on the shoulder and makes his way inside. The moment I walk in, it's evident their bond runs deep, and I'm glad Shane has had someone kind by his side, although I would have loved that relationship throughout the years with him as well.

Noah looks my way right when a beautiful woman, which I assume is Maria, comes in, drying her hands on a towel. Her smile is bright, and she extends her hand. "Hi, I'm Maria and this is my husband, Noah. We're the unfortunate ones that provide food and shelter for this one when he's in town." She nods in Shane's direction and smiles. Shane smiles and gives Maria a hug, while Noah extends his hand to properly introduce himself to me.

Noah speaks next, "I've heard so much about you throughout the years, I feel like I've known you as long as I've known Shane. It's great to finally meet you in person."

Noah is genuine in his greeting, and it's nice to know Shane hadn't really forgotten about me all those years ago, although it felt that way for me. I shake his hand and then stand back as Shane tells both of them what we've done throughout the day. For some reason, something about the interaction takes me back to when we were young, and Shane had picked me up for one of our dates when I turned seventeen.

I stood in the bathroom trying my best to get myself all dolled up to see Shane. I know that traditionally turning

sixteen was a big deal, but something about turning seventeen today makes me feel even older. Shane and I weren't the type of couple to argue much, but for some reason, since the barbecue for Memorial Day, I was a little on edge. Hearing him talking about being away from one another in roughly a year put a sour taste in my mouth. I was upset but couldn't understand what caused this change of behavior in me.

I put on some more lip gloss and swiped the mascara wand over my lashes and decided that was enough. I didn't need blush as I got some color at the pool today. My baby blue dress hugged my curves, and my white tennis shoes were the perfect addition to my whole ensemble. Mom bought the entire outfit for me as a birthday gift and I loved it. I tried to shake the mood I was in, but no matter how I tried to change my point of view, I was still irritated.

It wasn't like I didn't know how things would move forward, but when we spoke about Shane going to the Navy and me pursuing medical school, hopefully with undergrad at NYU, I always saw it much further into the future. Now we were approaching a year away from this departure, and I couldn't help but be put on edge. Not sure if I was annoyed at both of our ambitions or the fact that my heart felt tied to Shane, and I wouldn't be able to hug and hold him whenever we wanted.

I hear the doorbell ring and then my mom calling up the stairs for me. Grant finds this is a great excuse to pester me while I'm getting ready and comes running up the stairs to grab me. He pulls on the bottom of my dress, his bright eyes looking up at me. "Bee, Shane is here." I crouch down and give him a big kiss on the cheek, prompting him to squeal and run off. I follow behind him, trying to tamper this anxiety that has settled in my chest. When I see Shane, all my uneasiness from the last few days dissipate. I smile toward him and in return, he pulls a flower from behind his back. One single purple rose, my absolute favorite flower. "Happy Birthday, baby."

I move toward him, grabbing the flower, but then hugging him tightly, as he is the only gift I need and want in my life. He

hugs me back, but that prompts me to only hug him harder. I can't help but try to cement all our little moments together because I feel like life is moving too quickly.

He pulls back slightly, making me look up into his green eyes. He scrunches his eyebrows together, a look of concern marring his face. "You okay, Becs?" I nod, unable to answer with my voice as I fear I'll start crying with the lump that's forming in my throat. I guess seventeen is an emotional age. He moves toward my ear and whispers, "Let's make each moment count and not worry about tomorrow. Let's live in this moment together." I swallow down the emotion clogging my throat and nod again.

As we make our way to the car, I take some deep breaths, letting go a little of my apprehension with our future with each exhale, as I start to realize I will miss all the good by focusing on the negative that might happen once Shane and I are no longer in the same state. We buckle our seatbelts and Shane is quick to pull out of my driveway, placing his right hand on my left thigh. He gives it a reassuring squeeze and glances my way.

He gives me that cocky smile I love and asks, "So any idea where I'm taking you?" I shake my head and smile, loving the idea that he did this to celebrate me. As we drive, I realize he's taking me where I've always wanted to go together—the drive-in. Not many were around anymore so I always talked about how I wanted to experience this with him one day. Each time we had planned before, the timing—meaning the weather—was never right. But tonight was perfect. I looked out the window of his truck and saw our cluster of stars and made my birthday wish—that Shane's heart would always make it back to me.

I pull myself out of my teenage memory to see Noah looking toward me. We'd moved through their home and into their kitchen.

"I'm so sorry. I got lost in thought. What did you ask?"

Marie smiles over at me while stirring the pasta and Noah chuckles, realizing I was most likely thinking of Shane in

some way from whatever look I had on my face.

“I said I was happy to see you and Shane reconnecting. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so, what’s the word?”

He looks toward his wife and she immediately finishes his sentence for him, “Complete.” I don’t know what version of Shane they got to know all these years I’ve been out of his life, but I know for a fact, I lived as a shell of myself for a bit of time after Shane left me twenty-five years ago. But I had no choice but to pull my big girl panties up and live for the sake of the lives around me. So I did.

But I do feel like my movements, my attitude were somewhat drifting through life since Shane left my side. So I could understand the idea that Shane has been carrying himself a little differently because I felt the same way. Like I was living a life with a missing piece, and Shane completed my puzzle.

I simply nod and enjoy watching Noah and Marie interact. They give off calm vibes in their personalities, and I could see why Shane chose to stay with them versus in a lonely hotel room. The way the three of them interact feels comfortable and easy.

“I hear you have two daughters. Are they here tonight?” I ask while taking in my surroundings. It was too quiet in the apartment and as a mother myself, a quiet house with kids was never a good sign.

“Yes, Marjorie and Mackenzie. They’re with my brother for the night. His kids wanted a movie night with their cousins, so we jumped at the chance to have a quiet house.”

“And here we are intruding. I’m so sorry. Once Shane is done with his shower, we will be out of your hair.”

I feel a little uncomfortable intruding on their alone time. I know how precious that allotted number of hours could be between a couple. I used to long for it as well when Hudson and I were still married. But the number of nights we opted to be without the kids started to dwindle until we found ourselves working too many hours. In Hudson’s case, what he described

as work was maybe work with a side of play, but I will not go down that negative thought process right now.

“Nonsense. I want to take some time to get to know you a little more. It’s better than sitting at the table while Noah and Shane reminisce about the Navy days while I just sit there in silence.” She rolls her eyes while Noah grumbles.

Shane comes out from the guest bedroom, “Hey, I thought you liked our stories,” giving me a peck on the cheek when he reaches me.

“Yeah, I liked the first time I heard them, not the twentieth time. It gets lonely without someone to talk to while you guys just have this bromance going each time you visit.”

Marie’s making her way to the sink to drain the noodles, while Noah is stirring the sauce and checking on the garlic bread. I begin to stand, asking Marie what I can help with. I’m familiar around the kitchen and can cook some main dishes, ones which kept us going during medical school and beyond.

“Absolutely not, you’re our guest. Sit your butt down. Shane, make yourself useful and grab the wine and pour Rebecca a glass.”

Shane makes his way toward me, pinching my side and kissing my cheek again. I blush and Noah and Marie both soften their gazes, letting out a cumulative, “Awww.” I try to busy myself with grabbing wine glasses and setting the table.

Dinner is incredible and seeing Shane in this element makes me appreciate how far he has come. His company seems to have been his baby for most of his life since leaving the Navy, but he has been delegating more to his employees, preparing for some time off that he felt he needed after dealing with nonstop meetings and travel for so long. His partner in the business seems to be doing the same so at least they’re on the same page.

I love watching him tell stories of the Navy, yet a bit of heaviness falls on my heart knowing I had to wait so many years to know how he was doing. I can’t help but feel like I wish things had turned out differently, yet having my babies

has been my pride and joy, and I wouldn't replace that with anyone or anything.

Once dinner is finished and I'm stuffed beyond the healthy amount, we clear the table and say our goodbyes. I have an early day tomorrow, and sleep is something I need to get as I begin a string of days being on call at the practice I share with two other physicians. Shane and I aren't too far from my house and decide to walk. Much like the day, tonight is not as cold as I expected, and strolling down the streets of New York feels like a great way to burn off some of the dinner we just enjoyed.

"They both seem to love you very much. I'm glad you have them in your life." I turn to him, looking at our hands intertwined. It feels so right yet so foreign at the same time. I've longed for his touch for so long, yet I don't know what will happen from here.

How do we make this work? How will we move forward toward a clean slate when our past is so messy? These thoughts get interrupted by Shane.

"I have to head back to Boston, then California for a bit to handle some work stuff. Then I'm headed to London to check in on a branch of the business that's fairly new."

He's watching me, maybe afraid of how I'll react to his departure?

"That's no problem. I have a good number of patients due any day now, along with covering my colleagues in the weeks to come a little more than usual as they're getting some travel in before things get hectic with the holidays."

"Oh, so the holidays are a busy time for babies?" Shane asks, looking genuinely curious. He's looking over at me, waiting for me to answer.

I smile at him because I love my job beyond what I had ever imagined.

Looking forward as we walk, I explain, "Yes, a lot of people like to have holiday babies. It can be slower here and there. For example, leading up to Thanksgiving, it can be

fairly quiet, but once Thanksgiving dinners have been consumed, we get a good number at the hospital. Then leading up to Christmas, we'll get an influx of people wanting to deliver. The hospital I deliver at puts babies in a stocking when they're born on December twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth, so when the news did a little segment on that a few years back, I noticed an uptick in people going into labor, or at least more people hoping labor has commenced." I laugh because I find it funny that one little stocking can hold so much power and incentive for people to deliver.

"That's quite fascinating. Your job really seems to have some interesting paths. I saw a baby delivery once when I was walking by a hospital in Boston. The woman's screams could be heard as the car drove toward the hospital, and I couldn't look away as the sound just got louder. The partner leaped out of the car, and I saw him pull the backseat door open and then he yelled he could see the head. It was a madhouse watching people running out of the ER, gathering supplies, and trying to prepare for this delivery. It felt like one second she was screaming, and the next the dad was holding the baby. It was crazy and it wasn't even happening to me." He shakes his head side to side as if it was still too much to wrap his head around.

We are nearing my house and we slow when we get right in front of the steps. "Home sweet home. I appreciate the lovely day. I hope your trips go smoothly." I go to kiss his cheek and he pulls back, looking at me with a strange expression.

"Becs, is it just me, or did we not just have a wonderful day together? Why does it feel like goodbye, goodbye? I'm just going on my trips and heading back."

I have no idea how to navigate the feelings I have for Shane. I thought that by being older, I would feel more secure about how to move forward, but it's like all the insecurities of my teenage years, added with the pain of him leaving me behind before, has brought up many old feelings I didn't know would exist in my forties.

"Honestly, Shane, I just don't know how to proceed with all this. I don't want to assume. And I don't want to get my

hopes up. You come back into my life, with little explanation about what happened years ago, then we are simply acting like we are a couple, but then again, I feel like we are keeping ourselves at a distance.”

I ball my hands by my side, and I can feel the tension rise in my shoulders. I hate this feeling of limbo we are in because I truly don't know where we stand. And I don't know how he's going to simply be present in my life but not take responsibility for how he disregarded us when he left. In my little panic attack, my purse slips off my shoulder and the contents are thrown everywhere on the floor. Apparently, the universe wants to make this moment memorable because my wallet wasn't zipped up, and coins and cash have also fallen out.

Both of us begin to pick up the contents of my purse and throw everything back in. I grab the coins and cash and make sure none of my credit cards fell out as well. I search in a little pocket where I usually have a valuable keepsake, and I panic when I find it's missing. I start to look all around me, reaching for my phone to grab the flashlight. I try to keep the panic to a minimum, but the more I look around, the more I feel my heart rate spike.

“Is this what you're looking for?” I look up and see Shane holding out the necklace I keep on me at all times. I see his eyes and they've softened as he holds out the necklace he hasn't seen since that day he walked away from me on that porch. I reach out and grab my little purple rose charm that sits on the most delicate chain.

I nod and bring the necklace to my heart. I take a deep breath, hoping to relax after the panic I felt. Shane keeps his gaze on me and then decides to speak.

“I still remember buying that for you. I remember how nervous I was because it was the most precious thing I had ever bought for someone. I had saved all my money from the tree farm the winter prior and the money I made that previous summer. I knew how much you loved those purple roses, but it was hard to find that exact flower.

“I had to get help from Mrs. Lewis to special order it from a catalog at her jewelry store and even then, I worried if it would look right. But when she brought it out of the box weeks later, the moment I saw it, I knew you’d love it. Since we parted ways, anytime I saw a purple rose, which is rare, I thought it was the universe telling me you were thinking of me.” I see the pain in his expression, and I can feel my throat tighten as I’m holding back tears.

“I’ve carried this with me in my wallet since you left. I had it on until that night you broke up with me, but then I couldn’t see my reflection and not break down when I saw the rose sitting across my neck. But having it near me became a crutch too. A sort of comfort I needed when I felt anxious about something. I always held it when I had big news coming my way. I remember holding it right before my exams as if it was a rosary of sorts, and I always threw a little prayer up when I held the rose in my hands. I haven’t gone anywhere without it.” This rose is a piece of me, and to think I almost lost it on this sidewalk nearly cripples me.

I hold it in my right hand, a fist formed around it. Shane swallows my fist by putting his hand around mine.

“Before you dropped everything, you said a lot of things to me. I hear what you’re saying, but not once since we reunited have I thought of my life moving forward without you in it. The way I see it, we move forward together. I know it’s hard to think about everything in the future without talking about what happened before. But I do feel strongly about the fact that we will get through that and still move forward toward a future together. I love you, Becs. I never stopped loving you. Please tell me I’m not alone in my feelings.”

I’m closer to him now and I put my hand over his chest. I feel the thumping of his heart beneath my palm, and I am sure my pulse aligns with his because my heart has never beat without loving him since I was fourteen years old.

I don’t know what my life looks like without Shane woven in the fabric of it, and I don’t see that ever changing, no matter what tomorrow brings. I close my eyes and know that we will figure this out. I feel confident in that, although anger and

resentment might arise when we discuss what happened years ago.

I nod, not really sure what I'm nodding in response to. I finally pull the frog from my throat and speak.

"I think I have loved you from the moment our eyes connected. Before I even understood what love really was, I felt a pull toward you. But with your love, I've felt pain. I've felt alone. I've felt disregarded. So it will take time for me to shed those insecurities. You broke my heart, and I found a way to mend it back together. I feel like I had no option but to put one foot in front of the other for the sake of those who depended on me. But you also need to grasp the fact that your behavior in the past caused waves, and the ripple effects that remain are still felt."

Shane takes in what I've said and pushes my chin up so I can see into his eyes. He has unshed tears in them, and I know he feels this pull just like I do. I think I'd take any step toward darkness as long as he was holding my hand. He doesn't guide me, but he provides my life light to move forward. My children have been a huge part of my why since I became a mother, but there's been a dim light in my heart since Shane left. And since he has returned, I can feel him feeding me the energy in a way I had lacked for so long.

He kisses me and I feel his love through our connection. I deepen the kiss and hug him around his neck. I pull him closer, and I open up for him. I tug him up the stairs and guide him into my home. I walk him upstairs, realizing he needs me to show him where to go through the house. I break the kiss to nod toward my bedroom, then resume our connection. We make it to my master bedroom, and we slowly peel our clothes off one another.

The moment he releases himself from his boxers, he grabs his cock and strokes it while my breathing picks up. He has always looked incredible, even as the teen he was with me. But now he's a man, his arm muscles working while he strokes himself. I grab onto my bottom lip with my teeth, and it's like this action has set him off. He comes toward me, pulling my

lip out and kissing me, hard. I feel breathless as I pull him closer. He is my lifeline; he's still my everything.

Soon my nerves are hyper-aware of what I want to do next. I push him off me, confusing him with my movements. He's standing there, watching my next move, when I get on my knees. His eyes widen with the realization of what I will be doing next, but I give his mind little time to fully catch up as I take him into my mouth. I lick along his shaft and circle around his crown with my tongue.

His head goes back, and he curses, "Fuck, Becs. I love your mouth sucking me off like that." That urges me to keep going.

His moans only intensify as I take him further until he's nearly touching the back of my throat, keeping my eyes on him. I forgot how big he is, even though I just felt him inside me weeks ago, but I love having him in this way. I keep pumping him in my mouth, and I can feel him moving his hips rhythmically with my movements. Soon I feel my knees come off the ground and realize he's pulling me up.

"As much as I want to fuck this mouth and come right down that beautiful throat, I am filling your pussy with my desire."

He gives me little time to react to his words this time and has me thrown on my back on the bed one second and filling me the next. I can't help the moans I let out, and our movements are frantic. We are chasing this high together, and we can't get enough of one another. He is kissing my neck and pinching my nipples, causing an orgasm to rip right through me. My vision blurs with tears because the emotions erupting from me feel cathartic.

"Damn, Becs, you are the piece of me I was missing. I love you so fucking much." His thrusts are getting more erratic, and he pulls himself upright, watching his cock pump in and out of me.

I can feel he's getting close. He puts his thumb on my clit, and I feel my orgasm rise again. How does he do this to me? I

have never climaxed more than once during sex, except with Shane. I scream his name and that takes him over the edge.

Our breathing is labored, sweat dripping from our foreheads. He falls beside me, and we simply stare off at the ceiling, side by side. My eyes are now closed, and a satisfied smile stretches across my face. My heartbeat slows and my eyes get heavy. We somehow find the energy to move under the covers and he holds me tight. Both of our breaths begin to even out, and at some point, I fall asleep, more at ease than I've felt in years.

Chapter Seventeen



SHANE

December 1997

I finished up at the tree lot and bolted out of there. Mrs. Lewis had stopped by earlier to pick up her tree and told me the package I had ordered for Becca was in. I couldn't wait to see it. I had spent a lot of time choosing the most perfect gift for the most perfect girl. I vowed the next time I bought her a piece of jewelry, it would be the ring I would propose with. I knew Becca would be my forever. I just had to gather the courage and have our future a little more laid out to propose.

I arrive at the jewelry store and find Mrs. Lewis standing behind the display. The moment she spots me, she smiles my way and rushes to the back to grab the necklace. It's so hard to picture how this idea would come together without seeing the jewelry in person. The catalog showed a red rose, but it could be modified however I chose. I gave Mrs. Lewis all the details of what I wanted the purple rose to look like, removing the minuscule thorns that were featured on the stem. Becca always said purple roses were her favorite because they barely have any thorns. She said that much like love, it's all about how you handle the rose, so you don't get hurt.

Mrs. Lewis comes straight toward me when she retrieves the necklace. She looks like she's the recipient of this gift with the energy radiating off of her. Once she reaches me, she puts the little box down on the glass. I look up at her and back at the box. My hands are shaking, I'm so nervous to see it. What

if what I chose came out awful? I can feel the thumping of my heart through my chest.

I finally get the courage to pick it up and open it. I'm stunned by how beautiful the charm turned out. It's delicate, shiny, and absolutely perfect for my girl. She doesn't wear much jewelry, and the ones she does choose are those that have sentimental value to her. She wears a bracelet that her father gave her when she turned thirteen, which was the last gift she received from him before his passing. She never took it off and even sports a tan line around it every summer. She cherishes it and loves looking at it sparkle in the sunlight. She said each time she feels the pull to look down at her wrist, she feels like it is her father hugging her.

I smile and look at Mrs. Lewis. "It's perfect. It's better than I imagined. Thank you for making this happen for her. She's going to lose her mind on Christmas." I have to hold on to this a little longer, and I can't wait to see her reaction. I know she won't find someone else wearing this exact same piece, especially after I engraved our initials on the back of the pendant.

I finish up at the shop and head out. I can't stop smiling, completely distracted when I bump into Ellie and Beau. The moment Ellie looks my way, I realize she saw where I walked out from. She's smiling ear to ear, while Beau reaches over to me in greeting. I explain I was picking up Becca's gift but to please not say a word. Ellie was jumping up and down, and I didn't go into detail about what the gift was. I felt like this was something special between Becca and me, and I wanted her to be the first to react. She can show off her necklace to whomever she pleases once she has it around her neck.

* * *

The next two weeks drag by. I wish we got a month off of school for the holidays. I feel like as the weeks pass and the holiday break is approaching, the teachers become just as eager for the break as the students. We're in our senior year, and I can't help but feel like senioritis has hit us hard.

Everyone has one foot out the door because all applications to colleges have been submitted unless you're like me and already went through the process to join the Navy.

It was the Friday before break and the moment that bell rang, I was running toward the lockers. I had already retrieved and deposited everything I needed, so I went straight to Becca. I beat her to the lockers and waited for her. The moment she got close to her locker, she saw me and beamed. The love I have for this girl goes beyond any feeling I have ever experienced. She runs the rest of the way and leaps into my arms. She wraps her legs around my middle and kisses me for all to witness. Holding her gives me a high, and I feel myself come alive when I'm with her.

She unlatches herself from me and I already feel her loss. I steal another kiss and she starts to open her locker. "Ms. Bently tried to assign us homework during the break, but luckily we convinced her to leave it for January. And she went for it!" My girlfriend beams at me like she won the lottery. Ms. Bently is known for being quite a difficult Spanish teacher, and it's been one of Becca's toughest classes this year.

"I don't know how you handle her for AP Spanish. She's so obnoxious. Once I was able to stop taking a foreign language, I was happy to say adios to her." I grab a candy cane from my pocket and peel the plastic back.

"Oooh, can I have a lick?" Something about peppermint and Becca runs toward it. She stocks up on so many candy canes at this time of year. She claims she needs to have enough to get through the year. I tried to explain she could just get a mint, but she said candy canes gave her more joy. To sit and argue this point seemed useless so I've let it go.

"I've got another thing you can lick." As expected, she smacks me in the chest, grabs the candy cane, and looks around to see if anyone overheard me. I laugh because she makes it too easy.

I lean against the lockers and watch her remove things from her bag. "You want to go home, hang out a bit, and then head to the Holiday Bazaar?"

She looks at me like I proposed marriage, and I fall in love with her all over again. She's my past, my present, and my future, and even after these last three years, I still find that I long to see her smile. She nods and says, "I would really love that. I'm in search of some fun homemade ornaments." She finishes grabbing the remainder of her things, mostly holiday treats from friends who won't be in Saddle Ridge during the holidays. I grab her hand and we begin our walk toward my truck.

Becs usually drives herself during the beginning of the fall season while I play football, but now that the season has ended, I enjoy these extra moments together, so I always offer to drive her home when Ellie brings them to school. Today I'm lucky enough to have undivided Becs time. No homework. No tree farm hours. No distractions. Just us together.

* * *

When we arrive at Becca's house, we open the front door to the smell of fresh sugar cookies greeting us. Grant comes barreling toward us, most definitely on a sugar high. Grant has many of Becca's features, especially in the eyes, but when I see pictures of Christopher, Becca's dad, around the house, I see that many of Grant's stronger features favor his father, while Becca's softer features come from her mom. They both have the olive complexion, however, the shape of Grant's face is longer, much like his father's photos.

While their eye color is similar, Grant's have more aqua than blue, much like the photos I see of the oceans in Fiji. Both Stanley children have mesmerizing eyes, and it's hard not to lose yourself in their gaze. I will admit, when I see Becca and Grant's similarities, my mind can't help but wonder what our kids will look like one day.

Grant rushes toward me after greeting his sister, pulling me from my thoughts. I pick him up and he giggles. His hands are sticky, most likely not helping as much as sampling the desserts his mom has been making today.

He gives me a big hug and says, “Santa is coming soon!” He’s getting so big and tall already, only being four and really embracing the fun parts of Christmas. He wiggles in my arms, indicating he’s done with his greeting, and once he’s back on the ground, he’s back to running circles around the house. Although he is many years younger, Becs holds so much adoration for her brother, and she doesn’t find his presence irritating in any way. It makes me smile because I always longed for a sibling and having Grant around gives me a feeling of what that would be like.

We move to put our backpacks down, and I help Becca out of her jacket. After her mom stuffs us with enough cookies and other holiday concoctions she’s making, we collapse onto the couch. I don’t know what it is about Becca’s couch, but it’s a huge, worn sectional that simply swallows me up. Due to my size, at six-two, it’s hard to find seats that feel comfortable to relax in. This couch feels like it was made for me. The wide cushions allow for my legs to rest comfortably, with the back of my knees hitting the edge of the cushion. Becca is comfortable on anything because she fits on a damn dish towel, so she chooses to curl up next to me. She decides on watching *Home Alone* because nothing says Christmas like Macaulay Culkin being left behind while his family travels to Europe.

Soon after the movie begins, I look down on my lap to find Becs sleeping soundly. I brush my hand through her hair and she smiles a tiny fraction. She looks so peaceful and her beauty makes my heart skip a beat. I see the way the other guys at school look at her and each glance over, they’ll find me by her side glaring back. But when we are like this, together with no one trying to grab our attention, I can’t help but wonder how I got so lucky.

Each candle I blow out of a birthday cake to make a wish, or each holiday season I’m asked what I want, I simply have no idea what to ask for. Everything I never knew I needed sits within this human who is curled up by my side. She is, by far, the best gift I could ever receive. She shines so brightly, much like our cluster of stars. She begins to stir and then whispers

my name, but then she keeps talking and when I figure out what she's saying, my heart stills for just a moment.

Shane, don't go.

* * *

We're walking through the bazaar. Our smiles are wide and we are taking in all the decor. We just stopped by Grace's booth, where she was selling the cookies we had earlier, along with some homemade ornaments she likes to do for fun this time of year. They're little figurines she makes by hand, then bakes, leaving space to personalize them with a name or date for those purchasing them as keepsakes or gifts. Her booth was incredibly busy so we left that area once she had things under control and began strolling around. So many new booths surface each year, and it makes me happy to see a community come together as our small town has.

We had just gotten some hot chocolate from the nearest booth. A little girl with a coat so big, she reminded me of the kid from *A Christmas Story* all bundled up, walks by us. Right after she passes us, she starts crying. We look over to find her hot chocolate had spilled on the ground. She looks devastated. Becs kneels down to comfort her and I immediately run toward the booth to replace her spilled beverage.

When I return, the girl looks up to me, tear-soaked cheeks red from the cold. After I hand her the new drink, she gives me a huge toothless grin. She is absolutely adorable. She has dark, curly hair and beautiful green eyes. "Thank you," she says, a lisp carrying over in her speech due to the missing teeth. Becs pulls out a Kleenex to wipe her tears right when her mother walks over. Turns out they are visiting Mr. Franklin, the veterinarian, from Ohio and are staying for the holidays. No wonder this little one didn't look familiar. Once we say our goodbyes, we start walking away.

I take one last look toward the little girl and she is still looking at me. She gives a tiny wave, her smile still bright. My chest squeezes. I turn back around and look at Becs. She is

looking around at all the lights and decorations throughout the bazaar, and I can't help the thought that comes barreling out of my mouth.

"I hope we have a daughter." Becs tries to keep from reacting, but I catch the way her eyes get big from the sudden topic. I continue to talk, knowing she needs to know where my head is.

"I hope she comes out looking just like you, but loving football like me. She has to have a unique name, but nothing that would make kids tease her."

Becs has stopped in her tracks and solely looking at me, the holiday decor completely forgotten. She starts laughing a bit but when I don't join in, she stops chuckling and abruptly quiets.

"Oh, you're serious? Shane, there's so much life yet to be lived until we discuss kids."

I look at her, knowing she has thought of this before, but I have a feeling she doesn't want to put pressure on me about topics like these.

"Becs, I'm having kids with you. I wasn't aware you didn't think I was serious. I will be buying you a ring and marrying you the moment we are in a position to start that step together. Will it be challenging at times? Yes. Is it worth it? Most definitely."

"Okay, Mr. Positive, what names were you thinking?" Becca kids around with me.

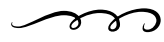
Right then, the little girl we had just replaced the hot chocolate for comes running past us, laughing as her father chases her through the bazaar, teasing her, "Olivia, I'm going to get you!" This eggs her on to run faster and laugh harder. I can't help the smile that spreads across my face.

"What about Olive? It's unique but not weird." Becca seems to digest the word I just threw out there on a whim.

"I don't hate it."

She's back to looking at our surrounding. Well, it's not a no. We've got time to talk about it so I'll table this until a later date. But talking to Becs about the future just makes me excited for the next chapter. And it's a fact we will be apart for a portion of the future, but I know our hearts will stay connected in so many other ways. I know that my heart will always belong to her until my last breath.

Chapter Eighteen



SHANE

Present

I wake up before the sun and look by my side to find the bed empty. I glance at the time on my phone and realize I forgot to set an alarm. My flight is early this morning, and I should start my day so I can get to the airport on time. But first I need to find where Beccs went.

I find my clothes strewn throughout the room and slowly get dressed. The house is quiet so I know she isn't upstairs. No lights are on, but using the light coming in from the street I make my way downstairs.

As I reach the bottom step, I see the kitchen light is on. I start my way over there and I walk in to see Becca dancing, to what looks like no music. It isn't until she turns her head to the side that I notice the AirPod in her ears. I walk up to her, waving to make sure I don't scare her. It's no use, I scare her anyway. That's what she gets for listening to music in her headphones while she has someone sleeping upstairs.

"Shane, you scared the shit out of me! What the hell?" She huffs.

Luckily, she hadn't poured her coffee yet, or we would have a repeat of the shards of ceramic mug on the floor again. Betty comes walking over, sniffing me again, as if I am a new human from the night before. Once she says her hello, she nudges her head on my leg. Beccs looks down and frowns.

“What’s wrong? Is there something wrong with your dog wanting affection from me?” I say as I bend down to scratch behind her ear. She leans into it and I bet if she were a cat, she’d purr. She’s so damn cute.

Although she usually acts like a grouchy old lady with Becs, she seems to like my company. It’s hard not to fall in love with her sweet face. She’s got sad eyes all the time, so I cannot confirm nor deny I sneak her some treats when Bec has her back to me.

“No, nothing wrong with it per se. But I have cared for her since she was a puppy, feeding her, taking her out for potty breaks, and she gives me no such attention. She pretty much needs me for survival, but she never wants that kind of love from me. Do you have bacon in your pocket?” I laugh at that.

Of course, Becs is jealous because the dog loves me more from the way she’s showing affection. But what Becca fails to realize is this dog is her shadow. She may not be too affectionate, but wherever Becs goes, Betty is right behind her. And after I first met Betty, I started to carry some dog treats in my pocket, but that’s a discussion for another day.

I stand up, grab Becca’s cheeks, and give her a kiss. I feel like I’m home each moment I hold Becs in my arms.

“Having to leave today is going to break me. I wish I could stay, but I have to get some things in order before the holidays begin and everyone starts taking vacation time.” I give her another peck and reach for a mug to pour some coffee.

“Vacation? What’s that?” she says with a playful smile. We both drink our coffee, Becs asking me about where I have to go first and when I’m expected to be back in New York. I think setting things straight, once and for all, is needed before I step out her door.

“Becs, I am getting things in order and when I get back to New York, I will relocate and make this my home base.”

I had just spoken to my staff about it last week and got the ball rolling to ensure a smooth transition to this city would occur sooner rather than later.

“There are just some things I need to handle in Boston, California, and London before I can stay here for good. I will keep my places in California and Boston as I’ll still be required to make visits, but it won’t be as consistent as I’ve had to be in the past. Luckily, I can do many things remotely.”

Becca puts her mug down and puts her arms around my middle. She rests her chin on my chest and looks up at me. She pulls me in with those vibrant eyes of hers. I put my coffee down as well, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her slowly and softly. When we pull away, she looks so at peace, as if her heart and her head are exactly where they’re supposed to be.

Unfortunately, when I open my big mouth, I ruin the moment, “When I return, we will have that talk I promised you we’d have about all that happened in the past.”

I see the instant shift in her gaze. She doesn’t pull out of my hold, but she does seem to realize the reality of our situation, versus whatever fantasy world she had been conjuring up in her mind in order to cope.

She nods but doesn’t add more to my comment. I love this woman and she is my home, no matter where I have to go to achieve it with her. Opening up about the stupidity of my behavior in the past is not high on my list, but I do know that to move forward, we have to get all our old wounds healed up.

I kiss her again and then reach for my coffee to finish what was left. She walks me to the front, where I slip on my shoes. I tell her how much I love her and how much I’ll miss her. Luckily, reality seeping in did not deter her from telling me how much she loves me back. I smile at her and give her another soft kiss.

“You’ll be in all my thoughts until I see you again. I’ll text when I land. I love you.”

* * *

I make it to the airport only to discover there is now a three-hour delay to my flight that didn’t show up when I last looked

at my itinerary. Traffic was a bitch getting to LaGuardia, and the stress that caused me is still running through my system. I decide to call Janine for an update at the Boston office.

“Hi, boss. Why aren’t you on your flight right now?” She doesn’t waste time scolding me like a child.

“The flight’s fucking delayed. I could have stayed with Becca longer had I known.” I had checked the status of the flight multiple times on the way to the airport, but this delay occurred as I was going through security.

“Yeah, I’m must seeing it, but hopefully things are fixed soon and you’ll be on your way,” Janine says, although I can hear her typing away on her laptop.

“Any updates for me?” I ask while looking around to see if there is a place around here where I can grab some food while I wait. The coffee I had this morning is not holding up as a good meal source.

“Your mother called me and said she will be unable to meet for lunch or dinner while you’re in town,” Janine says, sounding slightly exasperated.

She and my mother don’t see eye to eye. My mother comes off pretty cold to others who don’t know her. But her behavior has never really affected my relationship with her. I know she’s not blatantly rude to others, but she can come off like she’s standing on a bit of a pedestal.

“Did she explain why?”

I have been trying to speak to my mother for weeks. I can’t help but feel she started distancing herself shortly after I told her I had reconnected with Becca. Becca mentioned my mother wasn’t her biggest fan, and I never got to elaborate on that previously. I’ll have to add that to things we talk about when we sit down again, face-to-face. I think laying it all out in the open is the best plan to move forward together.

“No. She just said she was taking an impromptu trip to Seattle to visit her sister, and that the timing just wasn’t right. Do you want me to call again and insist she sees you?”

Janine never liked to see me disappointed, and I was always grateful for that. But having her deal with my mother more than she had to, while also juggling my relocating, was not something I was going to subject her to. I would see my mom on my next trip out to California. Hopefully, by then I could have a better grasp on what her issue was with Becca. Something did not sit right with me about what Becca said regarding how my mom perceived her.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll try to get a hold of her during Thanksgiving and figure out a time that works for her schedule to see her.”

“Okay, boss. Well, your driver is all set to pick you up when you land in Boston. I’ll keep checking your flight itinerary and make sure I’m aware of any other delays that might come up.” She continues to type the keys on her computer. She never stops multitasking, but I guess that’s why I keep her around.

“Bite your tongue. Let’s hope there are no more delays.” I did not sleep enough to deal with more delays on top of the one I’m currently sitting through.

I hang up with Janine and text Beccs. I know she was prepping for an early surgery this morning, then she had back-to-back patients in the office. Babies never took a day off, is what she always said these last few weeks whenever I asked how her day looked.

I saw the bubbles appear in an attempt to respond shortly after I sent my text.

I miss you. Sitting at the airport due to a delay.

BECS

Shoot. I’m sorry to hear that. I’m between patients, and then a possible induction this afternoon.

I hope it goes smoothly. I love you. I’ll text when I land in Boston.

BECS

Safe travels. Love you xoxo

* * *

By the time I landed in Boston, I was exhausted. I could not focus on much beyond the million emails I had to get through. The moment I thought I had everything in order, I'd find another pile of shit to clean up. Luckily, by the time I arrived, I had gotten everything squared away, and I could focus on what I had laid out to do in Boston. My driver took me straight to my house so I could shower and change. The moment I walked into my Boston home, the silence was deafening. I realize that even in the short amount of times I was with Beccs, either on the phone or at her house, it felt right. It felt like my home was where she was, no longer here in a city I had previously grown to love.

I get ready quickly and set off to handle all the business necessary here. Each moment I get work done here is a step closer to being with Becca.

My trip to Boston is filled with meetings and scheduling changes to accommodate my eventual move to New York. Janine is not too pleased with me moving to New York, but I remind her she worked many years with me primarily out in California, and we made it through that. I know that it's not always ideal to change my location, but I felt like it was something we could handle, and the transition would not feel as overwhelming. Plus, she has another boss who remains local. All our duties are usually split so it shouldn't be a problem. Even if an emergency happens, someone will be available to handle it.

* * *

I had just landed at LAX. Unlike the rest of the nation, where fall leaves were turning and the breeze was cooling off,

California always held on to the heat a little longer, and this year was no different. It was not the stifling heat of the summer, but it wasn't as cold as it was back east, leaving me sweating within five minutes of exiting the airport. I remove my suit coat and look around for my driver. Janine knows I'm always too tired after my flights, continuously having difficulty sleeping on airplanes, so I know someone is waiting nearby.

While scanning the area to find my ride, a familiar person begins to approach me. I stare an extra second before it dawns on me. I am shocked to see Bradley Thomas here in front of me after so many years. Bradley ended up leaving Saddle Ridge shortly after I had, joining the Marines. Unfortunately, while stationed overseas months later, his parents were killed in a car accident.

His little brother was left in Bradley's care, and he had to rearrange his life in order to care for a child at the young age of eighteen. Bradley ended up never returning to Saddle Ridge and started a new life with his brother elsewhere. I hadn't seen him since graduation, but the guy didn't age. He looked exactly the same, except more mature in his features. He always had more of a California surfer look, so seeing him here did not surprise me in the least.

"Dude, I knew that was you. How have you been?" Bradley greets me with a hug and a handshake. I'm still in shock seeing my friend after so long.

"Brad Thomas—as I live and breathe. I cannot believe this. Of all places to run into my friend from Nebraska, I see you at a congested airport in Los Angeles." I chuckle, still trying to wrap my head around this.

"How have you been? You living out here now?" he asks me while taking a moment to scan the area.

"Yeah, I travel between here and the East Coast. Finalizing some things to move to New York soon. Remember Rebecca Stanley? We just reconnected." His smile brightens at the mention of Becca's name.

“Of course, I remember Rebecca. Man, I haven’t seen her in years. I can’t believe you guys didn’t end up together, especially after everything that went down after graduation.” He takes a moment, his expression growing somber.

He continues, “I’m heartbroken over Beau’s passing. I was able to see everyone at the funeral years ago. Such an amazing guy. Gone too soon.”

I’m still catching up from his comment about Becca after graduation when a beautiful brunette woman approaches us, wrapping her arms around Brad, and greeting him with a quick kiss. His eyes soften toward her, then I hear, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,” behind her.

Three little boys are standing there, waiting for Brad’s attention. They all seem about ten and younger. His wife chuckles and I hear a quiet plea whispered by the woman, “Save me, Brad.” He laughs at her and quickly picks up the smallest one.

“Shane, this is my family. This is my wife Harlow and our three sons—Emerson, Matthew, and Gage.” I take my time to introduce myself to everyone and chat with them for a few extra minutes. My ride arrives and I am unable to stay a moment longer, as my day is jam-packed. Bradley and I exchange numbers, and I can’t wait to grab a beer and catch up with him more.

When I begin walking away, I hear Bradley yell out, “Please say hi to Rebecca and Elody for me.” I nod and wave a final goodbye before giving my belongings to my driver and getting into the car.

I text Becs to let her know I arrived in California safely and about my run-in with Bradley. What a small world to see him after so long.

I know Becs is already immersed in her busy day, being three hours ahead, so she doesn’t respond right away. With morning traffic greeting us on the highway, it takes some time to reach my house in Encino. I’m exhausted from the extended travel but grateful for a few minutes to myself to get ready.

I take a long shower, relieving the ache in my cock for Beccs because I'm missing her touch so damn much. Being away from her, the inability to hold her and kiss her freely, is driving me insane. I can't wait to get both this visit to California and London behind me and begin my life full-time with Becca. I know we have a lot to handle with our past, but once we can put that behind us, I can't wait to start forever with her.

Once I'm out of the shower and towel off, I look down at my phone on the bathroom counter and notice a new message from Becca. When I swipe it open, I see she's available to talk and decide a FaceTime is needed. I can't take not seeing her another second.

I begin calling and she picks up shortly afterward. She's walking outside, a scarf around her neck and a large coat warming up her body. She doesn't look down at the screen at first, paying attention to those walking alongside her in the city. I can see her wireless headphones poking out of her dark hair as she takes her strides through the streets. She makes it to a light and looks down, gasping when she does.

"Shane, are you naked?" she practically yells, her gaze getting more heated as she takes my nearly naked form in. I guess she's just as frustrated by our lack of proximity as I am.

She looks around her due to her high volume with that last question, plus the fact that her screen is not quite PG.

"No, I'm not naked. I have a towel around my waist. I just got out of the shower." She makes a sound like she's whimpering, and I continue. "But soon I will be with you, and you can shower with me instead." That seems to appease her, and the light must change because she begins to move again.

"Shane, next time warn me if you're going to give me heart palpitations on a call while I'm walking in broad daylight. I miss you so much and calling me while only wearing a towel just seems cruel." She acts like she's scolding me but has a little smile across her face.

I take a moment to look at her on the screen. As busy as New York is, she takes the chaos of the city with stride. She

doesn't seem bothered by the crowds or the congestion of cars. I smile and I can't help but take in this incredible woman that blossomed from that teen in Nebraska.

We continue our little banter while also updating one another on how things have been going so far. It's the end of the first week of November, and I've been gone for a week already. Boston took a bit longer than I had originally planned, but a lot of good work came from my time there so I can't focus too much on anything aside from that. I'll be in California for a few days, especially now that my mom is not in town, and I don't need to accommodate her schedule to see her.

That's remained a source of turmoil for me. My mother doesn't answer my calls and only communicates via text. She's been pretty short with her responses, answering with single words where possible. I told her we would catch up after Thanksgiving, which is how long she is planning on being with her sister, my aunt, up in Seattle.

Becca seems to be walking toward a lot of sounds with kids talking in the background, and I ask what her plans are for the rest of the day. She informs me she has an event at the school for the twins that she is running late for due to a delivery taking longer than she expected. Right when she sees someone, she gets quiet.

Then I see the phone get pulled out of her hands and I see a face I haven't seen in quite some time. Elody stares back at me, eyes narrowed and focused on me. I can tell she has a lot of questions swirling through that head of hers. I give her my best smile in hopes of dissipating her anger, but she just seems to fume more.

Becca still has her headphones in, and I hear her warn her best friend, "It's okay, Ellie. We're fine. We're older now. No need to glare at him. If you have something to say, just say it."

Ellie hasn't stopped staring at me through the screen. How it has taken this long for us to see one another, I have no idea. I know the two of them remain thick as thieves, but Becca said Ellie was quite upset with me for multiple reasons and was

giving Becs and me space to reacquaint ourselves before digging her claws into me. Ellie is one of the happiest, sweetest people I have ever met so I know with a little communication, we can put our differences aside.

Elody seems to snap out of it, looks toward Becs, and simply says, “It’s fine. Shane and I will catch up soon, and I will bring my binder of questions with me.” She then directs her stare back at me, this time adding a pointed finger, “And explain you will, Shane Philips.”

Geez, she’s kind of like a mama bear protecting her young when it comes to Becca. Although she’s coming off as protective, it’s hard to take Ellie seriously. I mean, I saw her pick her nose in preschool. How does one really forget such things?

At this point, I’m in a shirt and pants, although unbuttoned but not revealing anything to Ellie. I put my hands up as if I have nothing to hide, and Ellie’s gone from the screen. I see the two of them hug, and I catch something about seeing her in the classroom.

Becca’s gaze shifts back to me when Elody leaves, and I ask, “Is Ellie’s teaching at the high school? I thought you said she was an elementary school teacher?”

Becs looks confused and then realizes why I am asking these questions.

“Oh no, Ellie’s a kindergarten teacher at a school down the street. Her youngest go to school there, but my kids are at this high school with Tyler, Ellie’s oldest. She just swung by to see my kiddos before she has to run back to her classroom. Luckily she has an aid that can stay with her students for moments like this.”

Becs smiles at me, and I long to have her in my arms even more after seeing her in her element. When I get back to her, we will discuss how we can introduce myself to the kids and find a way to blend as well as we can as this new unit.

Becca’s attention is being pulled in multiple directions so we decide to talk later. Due to the time difference, being in

California will be a little more challenging, as will London, as she will be winding down while I will be just starting my afternoons and evenings. We'll find a way to make it work to keep ourselves connected, however, I am counting the days until I get to see her again, in person.

I finish getting ready and head to a meeting at the new SoFi arena, where I have a contract my security team will be managing. This is our biggest account on the West Coast, and their needs are extensive due to hosting not only sporting events but also concerts and any other events they choose to add to the calendar. My day flies by and soon I can feel the weight of the day catching up to me. I long for my bed and a pillow. Unfortunately, I'm hours away from getting to lay my head down.

The remainder of the evening goes by quickly, though torturously, due to the exhaustion mounting with each minute that passes. Becs and I text the rest of the day, as it's her night to have the twins with her. They have a good number of after-school activities, so she shuffles them around quite a bit in the short time they have when school ends until bedtime.

I finally get home and decide to take another shower. The unexpected heatwave California is experiencing threw me off and my suits did not help in any way. Once I'm showered, I cannot keep my eyes open another second and I fall onto my mattress, finding little energy to pull the covers back and lay in the bed properly. I start to doze, and the first face that graces my dreams has dark hair, olive skin, and bright blue-green eyes.

* * *

I'm in London, after a week in California, and the rain and cold feel like whiplash to the warmth of the California sun. I've been working non-stop here, and I've finished a day early, and I am already on my way to the airport. I want to surprise Becs with my unexpected change in plans, but I have to see where I'll be able to find her once I land in New York.

While my driver maneuvers through traffic, I decide to call Becca to see how she's doing even though it is incredibly early for her. She mentioned heading to the office early today to get some charting done before her day kicks off with back-to-back patients. She picks up on the second ring. "Your ears must be ringing. I was just talking about you to my coworker, Natasha." I smile and my need to be with her feels like a hit I need to take. I'm so close yet too far away from her.

"Hey, baby. I miss you so much. What are your plans for the day?" I hear her shuffling things around in her office.

"I have patients throughout the day and as long as no one goes into labor while I'm at the office, I'll do my consultations and have the night off. However, I got a text from Elody early this morning saying that she needs a girl's night. We are heading to a local spot to grab some drinks. I can only hope the music is good because I feel like all the hits today are just spin-offs of something we listened to in the nineties."

I can envision her eye roll because I have learned Becca's love for nineties hip-hop has not wavered. She has adopted a love for some more recent music, but her heart really soars when she listens to those old tunes and belts her heart out to the lyrics.

"That sounds like fun. Is Elody okay?" I know that being fully responsible for her kids since Beau passed has been hard on her from what Becs has mentioned.

"Yeah, apparently some parent has been rude and she needs a little break from the day-to-day," she sighs. I can hear the pain Becca carries for her friend. Beau's death was hard on everyone, and they feel the weight of his absence in all their movements. My heart hurts for them and selfishly for myself. I let a good friendship go because of fear. And I never got a chance to tell him how much he meant to me.

I put my plan in motion once she mentions the location that's walking distance from their homes. I hang up with Becca and check my flight to ensure everything is still on time. The rest of my drive to the airport is smooth, and I take a moment to relax my shoulders, releasing some tension I had

been holding since I said goodbye to Beccs, leaning my head back on the headrest, and closing my eyes. I can't wait to hold my girl.

Chapter Nineteen



SHANE

June 1998

“It is a great honor to announce the graduating Class of 1998! Graduates, please stand and move your tassel from the right to the left. This is an amazing accomplishment, and I look forward to seeing all of you soar!” our principal announces, and we are all hooting and hollering as we embrace our classmates.

Becca and I are a row away from one another due to our last names, and she comes running toward me. She has tears in her eyes, but a huge smile to accompany it. They’re bittersweet tears, this I know, because I’ve felt the same thing for months leading up to this moment. So much of our life has been laid out in our small town and here we are, having to say goodbye and begin anew. A part of my heart will leave with Becca on her adventures, although I know I will carry a piece of her heart with me.

She hugs me so tightly that I feel the air leave my lungs. She’s fully sobbing now, and I hold her tight. I hope she can feel the love I have for her through my embrace. Once she calms down, she pulls her head off my chest and looks up at me. Her eyes are so blue, they match our Nebraska sky. I bring my lips to hers and kiss her as if we aren’t surrounded by our classmates.

“Take a breath, you guys!” Beau jokes as he walks up with Elody tucked by his side. The happiness these two are exuding

is palpable because they've chosen to attend a nearby school together. Beau has already confided he's going to propose soon because he can't stand not starting his forever with Elody this instant. I understand his feelings, but I know that Becca and I both have a plan, and executing that path for us is essential for our careers. Sticking to the plan is what we've decided on, and we know coming together in a few short years is what we're both set on.

Becca and I can't keep our eyes off one another, even with families and classmates swarming around us to capture this moment with loved ones. When we look over at our friends, they're smiling, and Elody comes running to embrace Becca. These two are so close, I know the distance will be difficult for them. Elody bought Becca a stationery set for her to use as they write to one another while apart. The graduation gift made Becca cry, although with her emotions running high, she's been crying pretty much daily for the last few weeks.

Beau comes toward me, reaching over to hug me and tell me how much he'll miss me but can't wait to hear about the Navy. Bradley is in the distance with his family taking pictures. At least I'll know one person in California as I start my life as a Navy man, but there's so much unknown as we are going into different branches of the military. Brad must feel our eyes on him, and he looks over, waving at us.

We promised to meet up later after graduation to celebrate as a group, so we feel no need to pull together while on the football field and chat while the chaos continues around us. Although my girlfriend seems to differ on this opinion. She has moved around, embracing classmates and making sure she has all their information so they can keep in touch. I can't help but smile because she has been sentimental since we first started dating. I shouldn't expect anything less from her.

I excuse myself from the group to run to the restroom before heading out. People are already moving toward their cars to continue the celebration with their family members either at local restaurants or at home. Once I'm on my way back to the field from the restrooms, I catch Beau speaking to

one of the firefighters who had a son graduating in our class, but I can't find Beccs.

"Hey, have you seen Becca?" I ask them both when I approach.

Beau looks over, "Yeah, she and Ellie ran to the girls' locker room to make sure nothing was left behind."

I make my way in that direction, saying my goodbyes along the way to stragglers on campus. I reach the locker room, the door propped open, and I'm able to hear the two of them chatting. I stop in my tracks when I realize the subject matter. I hate to eavesdrop, but I can't control it.

"Oh, Elody, I would just stay here and live my life, waiting for Shane to return. I could go to a local college and get my general education done here. It would save so much money. I'd still be close to you and to my mom and Grant. I can even see myself getting a job locally and thriving here just as much as I would in New York. My happiness is with him, and all I want is to be with Shane in the end. I love him beyond myself, and I can see life simply being blissful because we are with one another. Maybe I'd have a baby sooner than I had originally planned. But it would all be okay because it would be a product of the love we have for one another, you know? It feels right and free and full of love."

I hear Becca snuffle and I, too, have to control the tears that are trying to escape my eyes. But my emotions are mixed and I've heard enough. I shouldn't be here, but Becca also shouldn't be letting go of her dream to hang back and...do what? Just wait for me? That's absurd.

All those years of dreaming, planning our future, and she just wants to wait for me. What then? Resent me when I return from doing all the things I had set out to do and she's what, barefoot and pregnant? I mean, there's nothing wrong with that option, but that's not who we are. That's not what we set off to do. She can't put her life on hold like that. She'd hate me, hate us, if she did such a thing. There hasn't been a minute of my love for Becca when she hadn't talked about becoming a doctor. She came to Nebraska with this dream in her heart,

and she just wants to let it go because we have to be apart. I can't be the reason she throws herself off course.

I quickly retreat and walk away. I find Beau waiting when I turn toward the parking lot. The moment he sees me, his smile drops. The tension I feel in my shoulders feels like it's going to pull me down, preventing me from moving any further. I need to get home. I need to figure out my life before Becca throws away hers. I can't let her do this to herself. She would never look at me with the same love in her eyes if she did such a thing to her own plans.

Beau grabs me by the shoulders, bringing his brown eyes in line with my green. “

Hey, man, what's up?” Beau looks at me with utter concern. He knows me as the easygoing guy who never worries about anything. Mostly because, until this moment, nothing really seemed to serve as a barrier in the road of my life.

“I have to get home. I think something didn't sit right with me, or all this heat sitting under the sun during graduation just zapped me. Please tell Becca I'll swing by later. She's off to have dinner with her mom and family that flew in, so she's busy anyhow. Just let her know I'll come by later. I just want to see if some rest gets me more prepared to hang out later.”

Beau nods but I can sense he sees right through my shit. I give him a quick hug and head toward my car, trying to rush my movements not to see Becca before I have a better plan of what I should do. I rush out of the parking lot, replaying the conversation I overheard in my head the entire drive back to my house.

I don't even remember arriving home and getting in the house, but the moment my mother sees me, she stops me in my tracks. I can't even look at her because I feel devastated by what I know deep down needs to be done. I'm about to ruin the love of my life in order to save her from making a huge mistake.

My mom guides me to the kitchen table and will not let me leave until I spill everything out. I word vomit everything I

heard, and the tears start falling simultaneously. My mom sits there, her eyebrows furrowed as if she's concentrating on what I'm saying while figuring out how she can guide me.

I stop speaking and my mother sits silent, I assume digesting what I just told her. She stands up and grabs a tea for each of us with a little extra sugar, as she knows it calms me down when I'm anxious. It's a habit Becca uses to calm down when she feels overwhelmed too. It's a reminder that Becca is imprinted into my soul.

I'm usually a pretty easy-keel guy, but when it comes to Becca, my love for her is so strong, that I can't help but feel this need to protect her, even if it will break me. And I know that if I have to walk away from her without the promise of a future together, I will never be the same.

My mom sits back down, handing me my tea at the same time. I look down at the mug, feeling like I'm losing a piece of me with whatever decision I make. My mother clears her throat and finally speaks. I'm hoping she has a solution that doesn't involve losing the only person I have ever loved aside from my parents.

"Shane, Becca needs her freedom. She needs to live a life where she can walk on her own. She needs to know what life is like without feeling weighed down."

I begin to interject, never feeling like I was a weight in Becca's life, but my mom puts her hand up and continues speaking.

"I know the love you and Becca have for one another is strong, but I do feel like you started high school and you were together. You haven't lived without one another for years. Although you've made plans and stuck to them, you're on incredibly different paths. Just because you've been tied together for so long, does not mean you have to stay that way.

"Maybe this is a chance to simply walk separately for some time and see where life takes you. I know the love you have as it resembles the life I had with your father. I know the strength of that love, but I also know the strength that

resentment can cause, and I don't want either of you doing that to one another."

My parents were in love at a young age, but my mother got pregnant with me early on in their relationship, and it put a lot of stress on them as a couple. They started out in love, but anger and resentment took a front seat to their relationship, and they ended up parting ways. The way they interact now is very sterile and uncomfortable.

Thank goodness I can take the wheel of my relationship with my father because it's hard to see them try to work together for my sake. I think my father still holds anger toward how things turned out between them, and my mother still loves my father, but can't ignore how things went wrong in the end. I feel like a lot has been left unsaid for me to understand what truly unraveled between them, but I trust my mother knows what I'm feeling right now.

I nod but can't speak in response to what she's saying. The emotion lodged in my throat is threatening to cut off my air supply. She's confirming what I had thought and leaving Becca will be my only choice. I can already feel the suffocation of that decision taking the life out of me. I can't look past how devastating this will be for both of us.

I can't tell her what I overheard her say. I can't let her know I was eavesdropping. But I also can't ignore what she said. She was being completely honest, and I fear she wouldn't do that if I confronted her about what I overheard. She'd brush it off and act like it's nothing. But I know she was being honest with her dearest friend.

I excuse myself after we sit in silence, and I finish my tea. I can't put into words how hard tonight will be for me. My mother and I came up with a plan because after I walk away from Becs, I'm walking away from Saddle Ridge forever. I cannot walk in this town without feeling Becca all around me. This is my end with her, but I hope, upon all the cluster of stars in the sky, that this is the right move on my part. I'm about to ruin the best thing that ever happened to me.

If she only knew I was doing this to save her, to save us, from imploding later in our lives together. She'll understand one day. She'll look back and see that without knowing it, I helped her achieve her dreams. I'll be her biggest cheerleader from afar. And I'll leave my heart to beat for her, and only her, for the rest of my days. She has been and will remain my everything.

Chapter Twenty



Present

It has been the longest day. Two cesarean sections on top of six natural deliveries from patients, and I'm dragging at this point. I am wiped, yet I'm rallying because my bestie needs a night out. I promised I'd go out with her and get her mind off the havoc life has thrown her way, all thanks to a rude parent who can't keep his thoughts to himself.

Ellie is beyond frustrated, as this parent has not shown up in person but has used his emails as a platform to demand things of her that go beyond her expectations as a teacher. If he only comprehended the strength that woman possesses to lead each day as if the world was only filled with beauty. She is a bright light, even when life has tried to only give her grief and ugliness.

It's the Friday before Thanksgiving and the kids are off for the next week. I remember sitting in class the days leading up to Thanksgiving when I was a kid, always wondering why school was in session. It always felt like a waste because no one was motivated to be there, least of all the teachers. Now my kids get to experience a whole week off and they don't realize what a gift that is. On the flip side, now I get to experience what my mother had to deal with—juggling a full-time career and kids off from school.

The twins are with Hudson tonight, and I got a call from them asking where their things were at home when Hudson

brought them over to grab some needed items he was lacking at his place.

Now I walk into my house to see the remnants of my kids' items thrown throughout the foyer, backpacks and shoes all over the place, making it a nice little treat I get to handle after a full day on my feet. It looks like a tornado came through here. I stand there, taking it all in.

I'm reminded, in moments like these, where a lot of my irritation with Hudson sprouted from toward the end of our marriage. We both work tirelessly to succeed. His success is not more important than mine, and vice versa. But when I see things like this in my house, it is like turning the clock back to when we were married, and responsibilities were not evenly dispersed between us.

My job was constant. If I wasn't at work, I was home, cleaning up behind everyone or running around the kitchen to cook the next meal. While Hudson's day revolved around his needs, and only his needs.

Back then, Hudson did not drop off or pick up the kids. I place some of that on me, the fact I didn't push harder for him to be more hands-on. I think the societal pressures women face really give off the expectation that women are supposed to be the chauffeurs to our children, and the doers of all things in the home. The father's role is quite simplistic, while a mother's expands out into all areas of a child's life.

Ellie used to say I should let it be and see how long they'd survive the mess. The answer to that was two weeks before I caved, lost my shit, and cleaned it up. Then I'm labeled as impatient because I did not wait for them to clean it. When Hudson would harp on how I didn't like when he'd try to touch me after a long day of doing all the adult responsibilities around me, these little tidbits of memories come back to me and I feel the exhaustion I felt back then. It's hard to be turned on when someone doesn't respect you.

My needs go beyond my sexual ones. My needs are met when things are being done around me to make my life easier. I am just as tired as Hudson, so his need for a Saturday off or

to go to bed without making lunches, doesn't supersede mine. But I learned that some people just don't see past their own needs. They're selfish and don't want to lend a hand. They want to complain or place blame but not try to make a relationship about balance.

I find myself picking up after the kids now because with my hosting Thanksgiving in the days to come, I know my house will be full of family, and I need to keep some order or I'll have more clean-up the day before than I had anticipated. But while I'm grabbing shoes and putting them in the closet, I start to laugh to myself; after all that from Hudson about how tired he was after a long day at work, now he's a full-time parent on his own. He got exactly what I was trying to explain to him but without a companion. I guess karma is a bitch, although I shouldn't be laughing at the expense of my divorce. But sometimes life can kick you in the gut with how it likes to teach you lessons.

When I'm done with the shoes, I nearly step on Betty. She's wagging her tail, excited I'm home. Actually, she might be more excited with the prospect of someone being home to feed her. When I start to walk toward the kitchen, and she begins going in circles and barking, I'm confirmed that my presence is more for food than anything else.

I get her food placed on the ground, next to her water bowl, and start getting a little meal prepped for myself. I know I'm headed out with Ellie and Laney, but I am starving, and I would rather not become the hangry friend I can be when I lack food.

Once my belly is filled, I head upstairs, taking a few minutes to look at my photos hanging on the wall. My heart will soon feel full with my entire family under one roof, and I smile at that. It's been a few months since everyone has been together, and I long for nights of card games and laughter.

Then my mind goes to Shane. He said he'd join our Thanksgiving, but there's still so much that needs to be discussed and figured out before Thursday. I hope that we can get through the holidays seamlessly. Hudson will be here, and

we've already had several conversations about welcoming Shane, despite how Hudson holds a grudge against him.

I send out a quick text to Ellie and Laney to confirm we are still on for tonight, and I get an immediate response with a dancing emoji from Ellie. She said she'll be by around six p.m. to start our walk over. Laney responds with a thumbs up, and I know she's already having to mentally prepare to get out. Laney still has a lot of social anxieties, and anywhere that is out with a crowd of people still makes her nervous. To my surprise, Laney adds that Grant arrived this morning in the city, and he might meet up with us. I immediately go to my text thread with my brother and harp on him for not reaching out to tell me he arrived early.

So you're in the city and you don't even tell your sister? No turkey for you!

GRANT

Oh, come on sis. I just got in and I'm tired. You know you love me and my wonderful personality. :)

So you're not tired enough to talk to Laney but telling me your plans is too exhausting. I'll remember that Grant...especially on Thursday when you're asking for leftovers.

I roll my eyes and send him a GIF doing exactly that in response. He sends me a GIF of Alexis Rose flipping her hair, and I can't deal with this guy. I chuckle and remember my love for my brother runs deep. Little does he know I see how he loves Laney too, and that's why she was aware of his arrival.

His heart has always belonged to her, no matter how much he fights it. But that's drama for a different day, and I don't have the time nor the energy to dwell on it, as I have some cleanup to do so I don't look like I've been doing cervical checks on patients all day.

After a long shower per my usual standards and pondering what I'm going to wear for far too long, I finally head

downstairs. Going out in our forties is no joke. I have to mentally cheer myself on to get out the door after five-thirty on a night off. I said a quick *see ya later* to my sweats because I'm already dreaming of my wardrobe change later tonight.

I look down at my phone seeing that it's been silent all day. Shane mentioned being in meetings throughout the day, but it's late in London, and he usually sends something over, even if it's simply an "I love you" text. I try not to let this rub me the wrong way, but I have some abandonment issues due to his behavior in the past, and I need to let it be.

I'm about to text Ellie and Laney that I'm ready when I hear laughter and the motion from my Ring doorbell go off on my phone. Shortly after is my Ring notification that the bell has been rung. I place my phone in my purse and head toward the door. I feel good in my skinny jeans—and no one will tell me skinny jeans and the side part is out—with my tight top that goes perfectly with the coat I have to put on to ensure I don't freeze to death in this November chill coming in. When I open the door, Laney comes racing in, saying she has to pee. I look at her funny because she just walked a few doors down.

Ellie walks in, complaining, "I swear my sister has a bladder the size of a kiwi."

I scrunch my nose. "That's a weird comparison."

I close the door behind her, and while I'm putting my shoes on, Laney is making it back from the restroom, detouring through the kitchen because she's snacking on an apple.

"I'm starving!" She's eating that apple like it's the best fruit she's ever ingested.

I stare a little extra at her but let my thoughts go as I see Betty make her way to Laney. Betty has a soft spot for Laney and always has. My pup senses Laney's pain and always snuggles next to her when Laney is here.

I wish my dog did the same for me, but I have to say if anyone is going to steal my dog's attention, Laney is the person who deserves it. Laney bends down, sharing a piece of

apple with Betty, while patting her head. Betty leans into her touch while chewing on the apple like I didn't just feed her an entire meal when I got home.

I run Betty to the bathroom in the little yard I have out back and, once inside again, turn some music on so she doesn't feel alone. She gives Laney one last bit of her love and walks off. I wait to see if she will remember I'm her owner and meander back to me, but she puts her nose up and walks off, her tail giving off Pepe le Pew vibes. I let out a quick, "Love you, Betty. See you soon my love." Silence is what I get in response but I know she loves me deep down. At least I hope she does.

My friends chuckle by my side, saying I give a better goodbye to the dog than I do the kids, and I explain the kids never wag their tails to see me when I get home.

It's a short walk and we chat about how the day was. Ellie is still fuming from the email she received from this parent and how she has had to pretty much swallow the complaints he's thrown her way because private schools are like that. You have to nod and take responsibility for the issue, although Ellie wasn't in the wrong.

Ellie continues to talk about this stick-up-the-ass parent and how he probably needs to get laid. She gave us a little background that he was some professional hockey player, but since none of us follow the sport, we don't really idle on that fact. She said he's a single-father and she rambles that she sees why no woman would want to date him and that he needs to direct his anger towards someone other than his daughter's teacher.

By the time Ellie lets all this anger out and has caught us up on the latest communication with this parent, we're at the bar and start walking in. We find a booth nearby and take a seat. We've been here a few times but not often enough to call over our favorite server and request the usual. I've always wanted a place like that because it seems all my small-town romance novels have quaint locations, and everyone knows their names in those storylines. I guess Pat's Diner was that

kind of place when I was younger, but I haven't found that since leaving Saddle Ridge.

Our server makes their way to us, and we put in some appetizers and drinks to get started. On our way in, we saw that it was nineties night at the bar, and from the moment I walked in, I felt at home here. There's nothing a little Biggie Smalls or 2Pac can't fix after a long day of work. I can't help but sing along to the music and sway my shoulders from side to side.

Ellie is used to this behavior, but Laney still finds it slightly concerning that I can remember the lyrics all these years later. She doesn't realize how often I listened to my Walkman and later graduated to my Discman in college for my workouts. Laney was too young back then, but I have tried my hardest to immerse her in the songs of her generation, although she was an infant and preschooler in those years. Even when she lived with me, she didn't quite get into the genre of music I chose to blast when the kids weren't home.

Our food and drinks arrive, and we are laughing the night away. I can't help but take in my surroundings. After years of feeling like life was not the kindest to me, things are finally coming together. I'm working in my favorite profession, my kids are all thriving, and I have Shane back to make my heart whole again.

I can't really begin to say how incredibly content I am in my life at this moment. I'm going to burst that bubble when he returns, and we have to open up the can of worms that is our past and try to find a way to navigate those feelings. But I think that we can maturely talk about how life has felt without one another in it and find a way to move past the resentment I've been holding for so long. I tell them both about my feelings and how nervous I am about confronting Shane, and they both look at me with saddened expressions.

Laney looks toward me and asks, "Has he even explained himself regarding the letter?"

I roll my eyes and shake my head. Her lips come together in a straight line like she's disappointed, although she was too

young to truly know Shane the way Ellie and I did, but the aftermath of destruction he left behind was enough to make her keep her feelings about us reuniting at arm's length.

She continues, "I don't get how you could just be around him without clearing the air. There's a lot of unsaid sadness between the two of you, and you deserve an explanation. There's more than just you to explain himself to and I'm curious what he has to say."

I look down at my drink. Laney isn't wrong, but it's hard to express why I'm enjoying this little bubble Shane and I have created since he knocked on my door two months ago. I decide to let the conversation dwindle on the Shane subject, as I feel like nothing I explain here will really help. Tomorrow, when Shane gets back, as jet-lagged as he'll be, we will tackle our past and hopefully find a way to move forward together.

We continue to chat, the subject line ping-ponging from Ellie's school year to Laney's therapy sessions. Before we realize it, we've been here for about an hour. We are mostly surrounded by people our age, as the millennials and younger have hipper spots to hang at, when we start to see people get up and dance. I see why, as "Pony" by Ginuwine comes on, and it's a song that is hard to resist.

I used to play this song nonstop when it first came out, and my body seems to remember how to move much like it used to. Unlike others experiencing their college years, I was stuck at home either caring for my personal life or studying. I had a goal and I would reach it, no matter how much it was stacked against me at such a young age. I found myself being an adult too early in my life. So taking a moment to go out onto a dance floor and shaking what my mama gave me seems like the best of plans right now.

I pull Laney and Ellie with me, both resisting my request but giving in. I don't always get a chance to go out in this fashion, and tonight I'm taking advantage. The three of us are dancing, laughing, and soaking this time together when I see someone come up to us and begin dancing. I look over, shocked, to see my brother standing behind Laney, dancing pretty damn close to her in a more than friendly manner. I

smack him on the arm, and he looks over, rubbing the area I just hit as if I caused irreversible damage.

“Hey! What was that for?” he says, acting like a wounded puppy.

I point at him. “First you don’t let me know you’re in town, and then you just show up and grind up against Laney without saying hi to your sister?” I cross my arms and Grant opens his arms and scoops me up. He kisses the top of my head, as he got our father’s height.

“Oh, I’m so sorry you’re not feeling loved, Becca. I love you.” He pats me on my head and then moves his attention back to Laney, this time grabbing her hand and pulling her further into the crowd of people.

He whispers something in her ear, and she blushes. I can tell her focus is only on Grant, and little does she realize she is now surrounded by people, which is usually a hard task for her. Although I do hope Grant knows what he’s doing when it comes to Laney and her heart. I can see he wants her to feel secure in a space that usually brings high anxiety to her. Ellie and I give each other a look, mostly because seeing Grant and Laney together isn’t as shocking as it is welcome.

We continue to dance and soak up the music. The music keeps going, each song mixing with another oldie but goodie that I can’t resist dancing to. Grant comes by with a tired Laney, stating he’s going to take her back to Ellie’s house. I can tell from Laney’s gaze that her social battery is near empty, and she’s overstimulated. We say our goodbyes to them both and they head out the front. My attention returns to Ellie, and we continue to dance.

While I’m shaking my hips side to side, Ellie looks up and I see fire in her eyes. I am about to look behind me, but I feel hands on my hips, and I go still. I remove the hands off my hips and turn, ready to cuss this guy out for touching a woman without her permission, but what I get staring back at me are those beautiful green eyes. My heart begins to speed up in excitement. I immediately throw my arms around his neck and pull his face to mine to kiss him. Feeling his warmth under my

hands, I realize how much I missed him around me these last few weeks.

When I pull away, I feel the air around me crackle, but not in a turned-on way. Shane is looking behind me, and I realize why the energy is so charged—Ellie is furiously standing there. I look back toward her and I think there's smoke coming out of her ears. I reach for her, trying to comfort her before she claws Shane's eyes out. She takes a few deep breaths and finally addresses Shane.

“Look who decided to finally be a part of Becca's life again. How convenient, after all, she did it all without you, didn't she? Never mind the fact you never returned to be with Beau. He could have used a friend by his side when he was fighting for his life.” Oh, she's so mad, but I see the sadness in her stare-down as well.

Tears start to pool in her eyes, but she shakes her head, probably hoping she can get the tears to go backward. I know these emotions come from a place of sadness, not hate. Shane's leaving left all of us wounded and confused. When he said goodbye to me years ago, he apparently had stopped by Beau's house and said his own version of goodbye to him. From there he left town, never to return. Where he went and what happened next is a part of the story I hope to learn soon. But for right now, I don't know how to diffuse this situation. Shane puts his hands up, like he wants peace and not to start a fight.

“I know I've done a lot of things wrong, Ellie, and for that, I will always be sorry. But I'm here now, and my love for Becca never wavered. You have to understand I was young and dumb, and I had no idea what I was doing. I made the wrong choices, and I know each day I live will always hold that pain, but I hope that each step forward from now on will be ones we can smile and look back on as happier times for us all.”

Something in what he says seems to relax Ellie. She surprises me with what she says next, as she has been fiercely loyal to me as a friend.

“I suppose life is too short to hold grudges. But you better not fuck up this time, Shane. Losing Beau has shown me that life is precious and should be lived to the fullest. What you did in the past was wrong. But the way you show up now will hopefully soften the blow. Because what you did, in many ways, is unforgivable. But my love for Becca goes beyond myself, and I will try to remember that as we move forward as friends.” With that, she pats him on the cheek.

Shane is speechless, as am I.

She turns toward me. “This old lady needs some water. I have not danced like that in quite some time. I’ll head to the bar and grab something. Do you want anything?”

I simply shake my head, still stunned by her words from earlier. My bestie has come a long way. She’s always had a heart of gold, but she can get angry, something Beau had brought out in her a few times, and I remember wishing him luck and walking away. He always knew how to calm her down, and his love for her was always beyond anything imaginable. Now she keeps that fiery side tamed for the most part, but there are things that ignite it. Shane is one of those subjects, apparently.

I watch her retreat to the bar and speak to the bartender. I bring my focus back toward Shane, his eyes still trained on Ellie. I think his heart still holds a lot of feelings regarding how things went down on graduation day, and he’s having a hard time navigating the slew of emotions coming to the surface. Soon our gazes return to one another, and he kisses me, softly.

“Hi, baby. I thought I’d surprise you and come home early.”

My smile widens and I can’t help but reach up and wrap my arms around him again and begin swaying to the music. I nuzzle my face in his neck when he bends down a bit, lifting my legs off the ground. I love him so much, and the fact I have him back feels like all my wishes coming true at the same moment in time.

We dance to a few more songs, and I keep my gaze shifting toward the bar. Ellie was waiting on her water at one point when this mountain of a man approached her. Whatever he said to her made her smile. She sips her water and keeps chatting with him. He's tall, taller than Shane by at least a few inches, and has dirty blond hair, with scruff on his face. From here, he resembles the main character from *Sons of Anarchy*. Something about him looks familiar beyond the comparison to the actor, but I can't place it.

My attention is back to Shane, and we dance to a handful more songs. My heart is full as I belt out the lyrics to "Today Was a Good Day" by Ice Cube. It's like I'm transported to 1996, sitting in Shane's car, windows down, Nebraska summer breeze flowing through the car, while I sang my heart out to this very song. I can close my eyes and smell the leather in his car. I can almost feel the warmth of the sun across my skin. And I can even feel Shane's hand squeezing my thigh while he drove us through our small town.

I open my eyes and it feels like Shane has been transported to that very memory, his gaze holding so much more in his eyes than they did before. We sway together, both singing the lyrics together.

Once the song ends, I can't help but ask, "Since when did Mr. Alternative Rock learn the words to nineties hip-hop?" Shane gives me a reserved smile.

"Yeah, after we parted ways as teens, I sort of made mixtapes, that eventually graduated to mixed CDs, of all your favorite songs. I would listen to them any chance I got as a way to feel closer to you." Damn it, my eyes are sweating again!

I internally roll my eyes at myself and kiss Shane. "You know my heart never stopped loving you, Shane Philips. And it never will."

He kisses me again and we take each other in. I have no clue how long we stay on that dance floor together, but I feel a tap on my shoulder at some point and look back at Ellie, who looks slightly flushed, asking for us to leave. We gather our

things and begin to leave the bar. She is walking fast, slightly agitated, and I follow her lead, knowing something has pushed her to get out of there fast.

Once we're outside and begin walking in the direction of our houses, Shane's hand holding mine, I finally get a chance to ask, "What happened in there? Are you all right?"

Ellie is taking a few deep breaths and before she can answer, Shane begins his line of questions, "Did someone hurt you, Ellie? Do I need to go back there?"

Ellie's eyes go wide and she starts shaking her head side to side.

"Oh my gosh, no. Everything is fine. Just needed to leave. I hope I didn't ruin the night for you two."

Now that we are walking, I can feel the aching in my feet.

"No, absolutely not. I think my feet are thanking you because I need these boots off."

Shane squeezes my hand, probably coming up with ideas of other items that need to come off. My heart begins to beat faster, a renewed energy going through my veins at the thoughts of his hands on my body. Just thinking of how we will make up for lost time since he's been gone has my heart racing because my personal toy was not living up to the real thing.

"Okay, good. I really appreciate you going out with me, especially as it's your night off and all. I hope you two had fun dancing though."

She's being a little strange, and I'll have to dive a little deeper into this later. She looks at me, telling me with her expression she's fine and that she'll explain later. We arrive at my house first, but Shane and I insist on walking her to her door. She doesn't get a chance to fight, and we simply keep walking past my house. Once we say our goodbyes and we see she's inside safely, we make our way back to my home.

Chapter Twenty-One



SHANE

Present Day

The moment we close Becca's front door, we can't keep our hands off one another. Dancing with her tonight, I was turned on by all the movements her hips made against mine. She was relentless, grinding against my cock, knowing how she was turning me on by the second.

The little looks she'd throw my way, moving her body with complete understanding that she was driving me wild has now accumulated to this moment. So here we are, letting out the pent-up frustration from not only moving against one another on the dance floor, but also the weeks leading up to the present.

I push her against the wall, both of us clawing at the clothes that are keeping us from being skin-to-skin. I pull down her shirt, moving her chin up as I kiss down her neck. As I move down her chest, I pull the left cup of her bra down to expose her perfect breast.

They're larger than they once were, but the changes in her body simply remind me that we are not the same young teens we once were, yet still so very much in love. I pull her nipple into my mouth, coaxing a moan from her lips.

She begins to pull my button-down shirt out from being tucked into my slacks. Next, she pulls the shirt apart, buttons flying everywhere. We've toed our shoes off and kiss as we

make our way upstairs, nearly falling on our asses as we try to get to her bedroom.

The moment we reach the room, she pushes me onto the king-sized bed and starts at my belt. After tugging the belt off and pulling the fly to my slacks down, she removes my pants and boxers all at once. My cock stands at attention, and she licks her lips. I swear my dick was made for this woman.

Never have I been so attracted to another human in my life. My perfect Becs standing before me, ready to take me. I think she's going to take me in her mouth, but instead, she slowly removes her pants, trying to torture me as she makes a show of it. They're skintight and I've dreamed of seeing those removed from the moment I touched her hips on the dance floor. The moment she's bare for me, she climbs onto the bed and straddles me, making sure my cock is lined up to her center.

She looks at me while she guides me inside, and the moment I feel myself enter her, I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. She is fully seated on me, and she begins moving up and down, slowly to take in my size and adjust to me.

She's moaning, loudly, while she rides my cock. Her movements are slow but begin to take on speed. Soon she's putting her hands behind her onto my thighs, arching her back and throwing her head back.

I can't keep my hands off her. My hands start on her breasts, kneading them, pinching her nipples, feeling her tighten around my dick each time I do. Then, while my left hand stays playing with her nipple, my right hand moves down lower to play with her clit.

The minute I put my thumb on her sensitive nub, I hear her moan, "Yes, Shane, right there."

I will never get tired of hearing her say my name with desire. Her movements pick up in speed and soon I feel her walls closing in on my dick. I love watching her ride me. I love seeing her lose herself while she takes charge. Her tits are

bouncing, while I hold onto her hips, helping her move up and down on me.

Soon she becomes frantic, calling out my name. I begin to feel my orgasm coming up my spine and we both climax together. I see stars, my vision unable to focus on anything but the fact that each time with Becs is better than the last, much like when we were young and in love.

I'm pumping my cum into her, and she's slowing her movements and catching her breath. Soon she falls forward, dropping her head on my sweaty chest, while I'm still inside her. Her head moves to the rhythm of my breaths and I'm gasping for air.

These last few weeks traveling, I felt a tightness in my chest being away from her. Being here, feeling her on me, me inside her, is where I want to stay. I can't help but think back to the eighteen-year-old Shane, who walked away from this perfect woman.

How I did that will always be a mystery. Because looking into Becca's eyes now, I see that she's my forever and always. I was an idiot years ago, and I can't help but hold anger toward myself for my actions.

She starts a soft giggle while she moves her forehead side-to-side.

"Shane, that was incredible. You're only allowed to leave for that amount of time again if that's what I get as a greeting from you upon your arrival."

I smile, pulling her face toward me, putting soft kisses along her cheeks and finally on her mouth.

"I don't think it was my distance that caused that. I think every time together feels magical, and it just keeps getting better."

I hold her in my arms and vow to keep her there forever if she'll have me. Soon she gets up to clean herself up, and I follow her to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, we both look well fucked. She must have the same thought because she starts laughing.

We take a shower together, where I show her just how much I missed her pussy by lapping her up with my tongue on her center and end with her screaming my name again.

We dry off and get ready for bed and go back into the room to lie down. Once under the covers, I feel like she's too far over, so I grab her by the hips and pull her toward me.

I kiss her below the ear and whisper, "I love you, Beccs. Sweet dreams."

She has a lazy smile spread across her face, eyes closed, when she replies, "Sweet dreams, my Shane. I'll love you always."

With that, we both fall into a blissful sleep together, wrapped up like we cannot fathom another second away from one another, even in our dreams.

* * *

I wake up to the sound of birds chirping outside. I look over to my phone on the nightstand and it's past nine a.m. We've both slept in, and it feels glorious. I find Becca's head on my chest, her own chest rising and falling at a steady rhythm. I kiss the top of her head and begin to move her off me so I can use the restroom and brush my teeth.

While I'm in there, she comes in, hair a bit of a mess. She smiles at me, uses the restroom, washes her hands, and grabs a toothbrush. Although we've just reconnected in the last few weeks, we've fallen into an easy routine, as if we've been together every day since we graduated high school.

We walk back to bed, the laziness of the morning winning over instead of starting the day. We both have the day free, as I was supposed to be traveling into the city today and she was off for the first Saturday in weeks.

She turns toward me and her beauty catches me off guard, although I've loved her since the moment I saw her at the tender age of fourteen.

“What are you thinking?” she asks me as I blatantly stare at her, and she adjusts herself to get comfortable by my side.

I roll over so I’m on top of her, spreading her legs apart to make room for me. I’m staring into her eyes, feeling my heart beating a little faster as I take in how lucky I am for this reconnection between us.

“I just feel like my life is finally coming together.”

I bring my face toward hers and begin to kiss her slowly. She uses her feet which are wrapped around my middle to tug my boxers down. My cock springs free, ready to claim my girl once again. The moment I move my hands toward her hips, I realize she had already taken her underwear off that was covered by her large sleep shirt.

I pull away and give her a look and she returns with, “What? Wishful thinking as many would say,” she says with a wink.

She then gives me a cocky grin as she spreads her legs even wider for my dick to easily slide into her folds. I begin pumping into her slowly while moving her nightshirt up and off her body. We continue to kiss softly. This feels different from all the other times we’ve been together. At this moment, I’m not fucking her. I’m loving on her.

I let her feel how much she affects me. She is my beginning and my end, and I hope she feels like the treasure I see her as. I continue to thrust in and out, something that started slowly now has us moving faster, both trying to chase that release.

I feel her clench around my cock, and soon she’s panting and saying my name as her orgasm rocks over her body. I follow shortly after, feeling my orgasm take over, and I moan her name as I let my cum coat her inside. As soft and slow as that started, I’m out of breath now. My heart belongs to this woman, and I feel like my world cannot go another day without her.

The silence between us is deafening as we are catching our breath, and the reality of the fact that we need to approach the

subject of our past is looming above us this morning. We can't keep dodging this conversation. So once I go to the bathroom and clean up, bringing her a warm washcloth for her to do the same, I get under the covers and we lay side by side with one another.

We are staring at each other, speaking so much in our eyes that it hurts. I have to burst our little bubble in the way that I do. But we need this in order to move forward.

"I heard you in the locker room after graduation."

I keep my eyes on her and see the look of confusion cross her face. I continue, "You were talking to Ellie, and I overheard you confess things to her about us, and I'm so sorry for listening in. It wasn't my intention, but I was coming to get you so I could drive you home, and I heard everything you said to her. I couldn't let you live that version of a life when you had so many dreams ahead of you. I couldn't be the reason for holding you back."

Instead of a look of understanding, Becs looks even more confused.

"I am so sorry, Shane, but I have no idea what conversation or plan you are referring to. What did you overhear, exactly?"

So I replay exactly what happened and what I heard her say to Ellie. When I'm done, instead of understanding or confusion, Becca looks downright pissed. I don't know if I should be scared, but I'm naked and by her side, so I cover my dick in case she's going to try to kick me in the nuts. She wouldn't, would she?

Becs turns so she's laying on her back, her gaze is at the ceiling. She's taking deep inhales and exhales. She's noticeably irritated and I feel it, deep in my gut, that what she's about to let out is going to destroy me.

She closes her eyes, this time whispering, and not in a kind tone, "Why are men fucking idiots?"

I choose not to answer because I'm assuming that's a rhetorical question. She opens her eyes and directs her gaze at

me, turning her body back in my direction.

“So let me get this straight. You overheard a conversation that was not directed at you, and you ran with that information as if it was written in stone?”

Her expression could spit venom because just by confessing I overheard her conversation has definitely deviated this conversation from one where I thought she'd have clarity, to one where she looks incredibly angry—at me.

“Yes. I overheard everything you said and my heart broke. I felt responsible for you closing a door on your dreams.”

This seems to only anger her more, and I put my hands up and lean back slightly. I can feel her body shaking in resentment at this point. She sits up, bringing the sheet up with her to cover her chest.

She pinches the bridge of her nose and closes her eyes. I think I hear her counting down from ten, but I can't be sure. I feel like this is a bad time to ask this question, so I keep my mouth shut.

After she gets to zero, she opens her mouth again. “So, again, let me clarify.” Her voice rises a level in volume as each sentence comes out. “You overheard something that was not necessarily directed at you, and instead of confronting me about it, you decided to seal the fate of our future that we had planned together? You didn't think having a conversation about what you overheard could have maybe been a better move?”

Tears are forming in her eyes, but they still don't show signs of sadness. They are angry tears.

I swallow and nod, scared to speak in case whatever I blurt out next might make her angrier. When I open my mouth to speak again, Becca cuts me off, and the truth she confesses makes me wish I could go back in time and do it all again.

Chapter Twenty-Two



REBECCA

June 1998

Ellie and I are walking toward our locker rooms. I wanted to make sure we didn't leave anything in the girls' locker rooms before the cleaning staff comes through and tosses leftover items students didn't clean up. We walk in and it feels surreal. This is the last time I will enter this facility.

Ellie speaks first.

"I can't believe we're graduates. I feel like we've been waiting and dreading this all at the same time."

She spins in a circle, her arms stretched out beside her, taking in what we've considered a part of us for the last four years. It's hard to look at Ellie and not think of the girl who had all that energy on the first day of school. She opened her arms and heart to me without hesitation, and I have no idea how to explain the love and joy she has brought to my life. I begin to feel the tears fall down my cheeks before I completely realize I am crying.

What is up with my emotions lately? Apparently graduating high school can really take over someone's emotional status.

Ellie looks and rushes over, "Oh my gosh, Becca. Did I say something wrong?"

I shake my head and try to keep the tears at bay, which is useless. They're just coming down harder, and I can't control

them. Ellie runs toward one of the stalls and grabs me a roll of toilet paper. We sit on the bench, one we've used countless times to change into our P.E. uniforms the last four years, and wait until I catch my breath to elaborate.

“It's just so hard to imagine what's next. I feel like so much of our lives have revolved around the same routine. I feel like there is comfort in the expected versus the unexpected. I know you and I will be fine. I don't know how, but I feel it to my core. I know so much growth comes from uncomfortable situations, but it doesn't make it easier to walk toward an unopened door. You know?”

Ellie nods but allows me to keep talking.

“I feel so happy you and Beau will continue on together. I'm so happy to see that you'll get to continue your love in the same state. Hell, the same school! But a part of me sort of wishes that was in the cards for Shane and me. I love that we have these dreams that we haven't wavered from, but a part of me mourns the fact that we don't get to start our next step together, per se.

“We have to take separate paths, although together as a couple, we can't physically take this next leap holding one another. The comfort of having him by my side these last few years has been magical. I knew how special it was, so I think that's what hurts more. Knowing he was with me, and realizing early on how special our connection is, has been something I never took for granted. But it's hard not to let my mind go to the what-ifs of our scenario had we taken a different route. Or if I had chosen a different route.”

Ellie nods but stays quiet for a beat. Then she asks me something.

“If you were given the chance to just take that moment and let your mind dream of the other route, what do you think it would look like for you and Shane?”

I take a moment to ponder her question. I fully lean in, because why the hell not?

“Oh, Elody, I would just stay here and live my life, waiting for Shane to return. I could go to a local college and get my general education done here. It would save so much money. I’d still be close to you and to my mom and Grant. I can even see myself getting a job locally and thriving here just as much as I would in New York. My happiness is with him, and all I want is to be with Shane in the end. I love him beyond myself, and I can see life simply being blissful because we are with one another. Maybe I’d have a baby sooner than I had originally planned. But it would all be okay because it would be a product of the love we have for one another, you know? It feels right and free and full of love.”

I’m wringing my hands together, trying to keep the trembling from my fingers from taking over. Ellie grabs my hands and holds them.

“Of course it does. He’s been your constant for so many years. But he’s also been your everything. That’s okay as you have been his. New experiences are bound to happen while you two are away, but it doesn’t have to signify something negative. It can be something beautiful too. So here’s what you’re going to do. When things get hard, close your eyes and just take your mind there. Know that no matter what scenario you take, you have Shane there. Your lives are together, and there is nowhere else that’s your destiny because he’s your one love. He’s your destination, always.”

I smile at her. That’s why she’s my bestie because she calms me in ways I didn’t know I needed. We take this moment to hug one another and my tears finally stop.

We get up and start heading out. We spot Beau immediately, but he looks concerned. He’s staring off where the parking lot is, not noticing us coming up behind him.

Once we reach him, Ellie taps on his shoulder and he startles, looking back at us.

I immediately notice something is off and ask, “Where’s Shane?”

I look around, thinking he’s going to be approaching from the football field, but it seems we might be one of the last

students left, while some staff are straggling behind cleaning up the chairs that were out for us graduates.

Beau clears his throat and looks anywhere but my eyes. “Um, Shane wasn’t feeling well so he headed home. He said he’d be by your house later to pick you up for our grad night party.”

He leaves it at that, and both Ellie and I give him a confused look. I try to shake the feeling off, but it sits with me as Beau drives me home and throughout dinner with my family. I try calling Shane’s house line, but he never picks up. It isn’t until I see his truck’s headlights shining into the front window of my family room that I know it’s okay. Little did I know my life would change exponentially when I see him on my front porch only hours later.

Chapter Twenty-Three



SHANE

Present Day

I stare at Becca, completely speechless. I'm sitting up and suddenly I begin to panic. I feel my heart rate speed up, and I can't seem to get enough air in my lungs. I've turned my body so my legs are dangling off the side of the bed, my hands on my thighs, trying to inhale air into my lungs that feel like they're collapsing.

Is this what a panic attack feels like? Because I have just learned how I have royally fucked up my life based on one moment in time. I lost years with Becca because I was too chicken-shit to just confront her. Instead, I made assumptions, as if I was the one and only person who was in the relationship. Not once did I consider I misheard, that I was in the wrong. I threw away the one good thing I had in my life at that time, and that decision has followed me ever since.

While I sit there, letting all of what Becs just told me process through my mind, I feel her soft hands touch my shoulders, and she begins moving them up and down my back. She's using this light touch that instantly soothes me.

"Shane, take calming breaths in and out. Try to focus on your breath, feeling the air move into your lungs and out. You can do it."

I listen to her instructions, and soon I feel the tension in my shoulders dissipate. We sit there for a while, me grasping this truth I had no idea was fact and, I assume, she's wrapping

her head around the fact that I took something out of context and completely changed the trajectory of our lives. We both lived with our own versions of reality dominating our thoughts, and now I have to face what she just laid out in front of me.

“I’m such a fucking asshole, Bees. How could I have done that? My love for you was so strong that the moment I overheard your conversation, I saw no other way to solve it. It never dawned on me there could be another explanation. I simply took what I heard and ran with it. And in my path, I took down everything we had dreamed for our future together.”

Her movements on my back are slow until she finally puts her arms around my center, her chest against my back, and she rests her left cheek between my shoulder blades.

Soon I feel her head move and she kisses me where her cheek was and says, “I can’t lie and say I’m not upset at how wrong you were. And the ripple effect of that one moment led to so much sadness. You missed out on so much, and I still have so many questions. I think it would be best if we take this discussion downstairs. I don’t think we need to continue this with empty stomachs. And I can assure you, I need a cup of coffee. Let’s get up, begin our day, and let everything out—but with a stack of my favorite pancakes. I pre-make them and freeze them for mornings when we are rushing out. How does that sound?”

I nod but I’m still having a hard time accepting how much I fucked this up. She moves and soon she’s crouched in front of me, moving her head so her eyes look directly into mine. Ashamed, angry, disappointed—all are the feelings coursing through my mind right now. Finally, my eyes find hers and it’s hard not to see the sadness in her eyes. No matter how you turn this, I was not the only person heartbroken that day.

She probably harbored so much anger when I left, while I thought I was doing what was best for her. But she’s still wanting to talk this out. I don’t know what else we could discuss aside from possibly having her yell at me for being so fucking dumb with my actions. I would deserve every loud

word aimed at me. As she keeps looking at me, she softens, lifts my chin up, and kisses me.

“Come on, Shane. We need to do this. We have to find a way to lay it all out in front of us and navigate ourselves through what was ruined. Life’s too short to keep walking away. We have to face everything now. No more running away.”

She grabs my hand and pulls me to stand. I kiss her, my hands grabbing her face. I wish I could go back in time and change it all. I hope she can feel my sorrow because that’s what my heart feels at this moment.

I thought it was broken that day on her porch, but this is truly what heartbreak feels like. I did this. My actions, my miscommunication, are what led to us not walking this life together for the last twenty-five years.

She pulls away first, still looking right at me.

“Shane, please, don’t shut down. We are still in this together. It will hurt, but let’s take this next step and fight for what we left behind years ago.”

I nod, finding the strength to really look at her. My beautiful Becs. The universe brought us together again, and I can’t go on without giving this one hundred percent of my effort.

“Let me go to the restroom, and I’ll meet you downstairs,” I tell her.

She stands there looking at me for an extra beat to make sure I am not pulling away. Whatever she sees, she must trust I am here to stay, and she nods back and makes her way out the door and down the stairs.

I head to the restroom and splash water on my face. The cold snaps me out of whatever trance I was in. What’s in the past is exactly that—in the past. So I will need to get through this conversation and see where that leaves us. We’ve made it too far in reuniting for me to walk away now. I didn’t fully grasp how much I needed Becs back in my life until she was back here, by my side once again.

Once I freshen up, I put my basketball shorts and a shirt on, making my way down the hall, toward the stairs. I take the first step on the stairs and look to my right. The wall that leads down next to the stairs is covered in framed photographs.

I've been in Becca's house a good number of times at this point, and I have never taken the time to look at her photos. Granted, I was nearly pulling all her clothes off each time I found myself walking up them, so there is that. I smile at that thought.

I look at the photos at the top of the stairs, seeing two little kids that I recall seeing the first day Becca and I reconnected. They seem to be at a birthday party, Becca and Hudson standing behind them, big smiles across their faces. The kids don't look like teens but must be around ten or eleven years old here.

Moving down the stairs slowly, one step at a time, I see more photos of Becca with the twins at some of the popular spots around New York and even some in Saddle Ridge. It isn't until I get to the middle of the steps, that I find there are older pictures.

The twins are much younger, Hudson and Becca standing with them. But then another girl stands there, older than the twins and I stop in my tracks. The girl looks a lot like Becca. She's got that dark hair, like my Beccs, but what stops me isn't the resemblance to Becca.

It's the eyes. The eyes I have only ever seen on one other person—me.

I keep staring at that picture, confused about what is staring back at me. I'm about to yell down to Becca to clarify what I'm looking at when the front door begins to open, and a woman walks in. I stand there, looking at it unfold in front of me. The woman has a small luggage, the size of a carry-on, rolling by her side, while her face is down, trying to put her phone away in her cross-over bag. She still hasn't looked up and then says something that immediately makes the hairs on my arms stand at attention.

“Mom, are you home?”

Right then she brings her head up, coming to a halt as she looks right at me. And right at that moment, I'm staring back at eyes that are identical to mine.

Chapter Twenty-Four



REBECCA

June 1998

I slam the door behind me, my heart racing. My mom comes out of the kitchen, towel in hand, with a questioning expression across her face.

“Becca, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I turn toward her and the nausea hits me instantly. I put my hand over my mouth and begin to rush to the restroom, barely making it before my dinner rises back up. I feel my mom behind me at some point, pulling my hair back.

I don’t know how long I kneel there, emptying the contents of my stomach until I’m dry heaving. I reach for tissues, but my mom is there, using the washcloth she was carrying, to wipe the sweat and tears that are covering my face. Luckily Grant is in bed or else he would be in here asking me twenty questions. And I am still processing the answers to them myself.

Shane just broke up with me. He just walked away from us and our plans. He took the coward’s way out, and the only thing I have to fire back with is *why*? What happened from the moment we stood as graduates to when he drove up to my porch that made him do this one-eighty?

He looked broken when he was out there. He looked devastated, and the reason why he’d do this to us still makes

no sense. I feel the nausea come back to me, but this time I try to control myself by taking some deep breaths.

Soon I look up at my mom and tell her, “Shane just left me. He threw us away like what we built means nothing to him.”

The tears begin again, this time a sob breaks free, and I crumble all over again. I feel devastated and lost all at once. Everything I was looking forward to in my future, in our future, has vanished. What just happened?

My mom kneels down at my level and pulls me into her arms. She rubs circles around my back, giving me that space to cry and feel the pain that’s drowning me. She whispers that she loves me and that she’s not going anywhere. She strokes my hair and kisses the top of my head. She comforts me and, yet, all I feel is empty.

I feel like my heart will never be whole again. He took a piece of me with him, if not my entire heart, with the way I feel like an empty shell of myself. I’m replaying everything he said to me, and I start to feel my tears lessen and my anger sink in. How can my emotions swing like a pendulum in such a way? I am furious and devastated all in one breath. His words are on repeat in my mind.

“Becs, you know this is best. I’m starting on a new path with the Navy, and you’re going to do amazing things with your life. Pursuing medicine has always been your dream. So now you can do so, without anything holding you back.”

What the actual fuck is happening in my life right now? I need to get out of this nightmare right now.

I pull myself out of my mother’s embrace, getting up to stand. She does the same and simply looks into my eyes. The love she has for me is palpable at this moment. I see my pain in her eyes. And Shane put that there. He did this to me. He did this to our future. I begin to move, my hands balling into fists. He pursued me all those years ago. He was my first love. He was my first everything. And now he’s my first ex-boyfriend. My ex-partner.

He was always the reason for my happiness, and now he's the reason for my pain. He shares all my highs, and now he holds my biggest low since my dad passed away. I'm not just angry, I'm lost in a way I never expected to be. I feel like a knife is cutting into my chest. I feel physical pain at the way he has gone from what awaits me in my future to the pain in my present.

My mom puts her arm around my shoulders and steers me upstairs. She walks with me, helping me get ready for bed, pulling back the covers so I lay down. She tucks me in, leaves my room for some time, and returns with a cup of tea for the two of us. She then walks out my door and comes back with her own pillow.

She takes it upon herself to lay next to me and lets me cry until there are no more tears left for me to shed. She lies with me and simply says she's going to help me through this and that she loves me. My eyes grow heavy and soon I'm asleep. I have a restless night, dreaming of Shane's words, and the vision of him turning his back on me and leaving me stranded on my porch.

* * *

I wake up the next morning with what I can only imagine feels like a hangover. I have never been a drinker, even at high school parties we frequented. Shane was never into that either, so we simply found our high with one another. I blink my eyes ever so slowly, their weight feeling like two sandbags on my eyes due to all my crying last night. With that thought, the realization dawns on me that last night did, in fact, happen, and Shane has walked away from me.

I'm lying on my side facing my window where my mother was lying last night. It's empty now and I know she's caring for Grant. She had taken today off to be with me on my first day as a high school graduate. I envisioned today as one where we'd have lunch together and maybe get our nails done.

At some point, I had planned to be at the lake with my friends, soaking up the sun and loving on my boyfriend. I had seen so many of those days ahead as we tried to bottle up the last bits of summer before we all left to pursue our futures. But all that was wiped from the agenda last night when Shane obliterated everything we had planned. I feel the tears filling my eyes again and the beginnings of the headache that's most likely to stay with me today.

I'm about to move toward the bathroom to grab some headache medication when my bedroom door begins to slowly open. I expect to see my mom, but it's Ellie's head that pops in. From the look on her face, I don't have to rehash last night's events.

The sympathy in her eyes causes me to break again, and I let the tears fall freely now. She comes rushing toward me, pulling me into a hug. We sit there and like the best friend I know she is, she cries with me because my pain is hers too now. We were all a unit and losing Shane feels like our puzzle will never be complete again.

Once I stop this session of my emotional downfall, I pull back. Both of us grab tissues to wipe away the mess we've made from our faces.

I can't help but ask, "How did you find out? Did Shane go see you?"

She shakes her head.

"No, he swung by Beau's house last night and I happened to be there. We thought he was swinging by so all of us could drive to grad night together, but when he pulled Beau aside to speak to him, that's when I knew something was wrong. I saw the expression on Beau's face go from calm to confused. Then he was furious as Shane walked away. He kept yelling about what a mistake he was making and that he couldn't do this to all of us, saying he'd regret this decision the moment he was out of Nebraska and without you in his life. But Shane just kept walking. Gone was the Shane we know so well. He was rigid, like he was moving on the accord of someone else's

orders. He was on a mission to let go of you and all of us as well.”

Ellie shakes her head. She looked devastated and I couldn't blame her. We were all so close, and any plans Shane and I had made always included eventually being around Beau and Ellie in some way.

Ellie continues, “Beau tried to call his house afterward, but no one picked up.”

I begin to get out of bed. I start to move around my room, looking in my drawers, looking for clothes to change into.

Ellie notices my actions and asks, “What are you doing, Becca? Where are you going?”

I'm hitting the denial portion of my grief because this has to be some kind of mistake.

“I am going to Shane's house to talk to him. This must be some kind of mistake. He must have just gotten nervous or thought he was weighing me down in a way that I couldn't handle. We can work through this because it's us, Ellie! We have been together for so long. Something must have happened, and I'll just need to look him in the eyes and see what he says to me this morning. I know what he said last night, but he didn't mean it.”

I'm still rummaging through my things, as the heat of the summer has hit us early here in Saddle Ridge. I can already feel the sun through my window causing the temperature to spike more than I feel is comfortable for this time of day.

I finally find a light dress to put on, and that's when my gaze turns to Ellie. She's looking down at her hands, twiddling her fingers, like she does when she knows something that she's uncomfortable divulging.

So I shrug and ask, “What is it, Ellie?”

Her head snaps up and she has tears pooled in her eyes. She quickly looks away, like she doesn't want to be the bearer of bad news after all I've felt these last twelve hours.

“Out with it, Ellie! What do you know?” I throw my arms up, exhausted by all of this going on around me.

I try to keep my voice even, but I feel so much pain right now, I’m holding back the urge to run toward her and shake her until she tells me all she knows.

She looks back down at her hands, picking at her nail polish.

“Beau and I swung by the Philips residence this morning.” She says this like it’s explanation enough, so I simply nod for her to continue.

“And?” I can’t help but say because I’ll need more to understand why she looks like she’s in pain. I’m desperate now.

Ellie sighs, “And Mrs. Philips was there, but Shane wasn’t. She said Shane caught a flight out of Nebraska late last night. A red eye.”

I’m confused by her words at first. My brows furrow and I scrunch my nose as if my friend must be mistaken. Shane makes this rash decision and then vanishes. What is happening right now?

“I’m sorry, what? That can’t be?” I stand, grabbing my stomach, feeling like I might be sick again.

“That’s what we thought, so Beau asked if he could see Shane’s room and, sure enough, his belongings were gone. Of course, his furniture was still there, along with his medals from his football accolades, but his clothes were all gone. He packed everything he needed to leave and get out of Nebraska, Becca.”

She looks devastated to be the bearer of this news. I feel like I might faint. I don’t understand how everything has gone from bad to worse.

“So he’s just gone? Where did Mrs. Philips say he went?”

Ellie shakes her head. “She wouldn’t tell us. She said Shane asked that his location be kept confidential.”

“Confidential? Like he’s on some undercover mission? This is bullshit!” I yell.

I’m pacing the room when I look up at a picture of Shane and me from just a few weeks ago. I just got the film developed last weekend, and a few of the pictures came out so cute, I had already put them up on the wall, even though I would be packing them soon for my move to New York.

“Oh Becs, you are my everything. My cluster of stars that pulls me toward the light. You are my heart and soul.”

He had said those things to me not more than seven days ago, and here I am now, living a life where my heart has been pulled out of my chest, forever lost because he abandoned me and took my heart with him.

I move toward the window and look out at a new day, although at this moment it feels like all my days are over from this point on. I have no way to get a hold of him. I could try to send him letters, but he never gave me any insight into where I’d write to him. He wasn’t leaving for California for some time, so we hadn’t gotten to that phase of our future to properly keep in touch. I have no clue where I’d reach him.

I hear feet moving across my room and when I turn, I see Beau behind me, arms stretched wide. He allows me to embrace him, and I start to cry once again.

How do I still have tears to shed? This can’t be normal. Beau lets me soak up his shirt and simply hugs me. Then I feel an extra set of arms around me, and it’s Ellie coming in to comfort me as well. I feel their love surrounding me while I feel my world crumbling.

* * *

Four Weeks Later

I’m downstairs making breakfast for Grant while my mom is at work. He’s talking nonstop about Laney’s new trampoline

she got for the summer. It's cute to hear him so excited about something that feels so little, but in reality, to him, this is the biggest thing around until the county fair arrives in a week. I let him ramble while I make pancakes for him. We are headed to Ellie's house so the kids can play, and we can sit and chat. My summer has been quite muted since Shane destroyed everything good about it last month.

It's been a month since Shane left me, and I've heard nothing from him. He hasn't called, sent a letter, paged me, nor has he even tried to email me. I am trying not to focus on all of this as I pour the batter onto the skillet, but it's hard not to let my mind wander. He didn't just have a little change in his plans. He changed our future together without a care in the world. He claims it was for me to pursue my dreams, but he and I know that's a load of shit.

Something changed. Maybe he felt suffocated by me. Maybe he wanted to live out in the world and see what his options were. Beau doesn't think that's the case, but guess what? Shane isn't here to contradict my theories, so fuck him and fuck his damn promises.

He left me. He did exactly what he always promised he wouldn't. He walked away and didn't seem to look back. Actually, he up and moved out of town, starting his fresh new life as soon as he could. Am I still in the anger phase of this breakup? Yes, I'd say I've put up a tent here and will stay for quite some time. The bitterness is so fresh for me, and I don't see it dissipating anytime soon.

I finish making a stack of pancakes, putting three smaller ones on a plate for Grant. The moment I put them on the table for him, a whiff of the batter makes its way up my nose, and I immediately feel nauseated. I run to the downstairs restroom and vomit the little I ate this morning into the toilet.

Once I wash my mouth out with some water, I grab a washcloth, wet it, and pat it around my face. I feel better from the nausea but have no idea what brought that on. I love pancakes, even though I haven't been able to stomach the idea of them these last few days.

I walk back to the kitchen, about to pick up our house phone that's mounted on the kitchen wall to tell Ellie I may be sick and might not make it over. It's then my eyes land on the calendar. I look at it for a second and realize it's the eighteenth of July.

I stare for far too long at the squared numbers, and my eyes go wide. I run upstairs and grab my planner. I flip back through my previous months and see the star I put in May when I got my last period. I flip back to today's date. I keep doing this until it fully registers that I have not had a period since then.

How did I miss a period and not notice? Might be the fact that the boy I gave everything to just up and left me high and dry. I wasn't quite paying attention to dates on a calendar, let alone my period. Plus, I was stressed. That must be it. I missed it due to stress. That happens, right? I think my mom told me that before.

Then I start to think back to the last couple of weeks. I've been falling asleep much earlier than usual on the couch. My boobs were sore, and I had been getting these waves of nausea randomly throughout the day.

My mom has told me how many patients went through the ER complaining of nausea, and it turns out they were pregnant. So many think morning sickness is exactly that—reserved for the morning—but my mom has said it is just a saying. In reality, morning sickness is an all-day sickness. The pieces are still falling into place when my brother comes bounding into my room, his backpack on, ready to see Laney.

“Okay bud, we are headed to that trampoline. But first, we need to make a stop.”

* * *

We are at Ellie's, and I've told her about how my morning has turned out so far. She is trying to be supportive and tells me it is probably stress and not that I'm pregnant. Oh my gosh. I could be pregnant! I might be sick again just at the thought.

Beau is over and watching the kids while Ellie and I are sitting on her bed, staring at the box in my lap. I don't have the courage to open it. My future lies in the hands of a little stick that could either tell me my life will shift forever, or it will carry on just as it is. How can an at-home test hold so much power over my future?

I sit there, my best friend's hand is holding mine, and I see that diamond glint in the sunshine. Beau proposed on the Fourth of July, under the fireworks. They are young, but they felt like they didn't want to wait, so they went against the grain and decided they should start the next chapter while they were in school together.

They had no resistance from their parents on both sides, and that was a blessing because having that kind of love made their road a lot easier to handle. They are waiting until the next summer for the wedding, but Beau couldn't hold on to the ring any longer. He said he was waking up in a cold sweat in fear he had lost it somewhere.

He had told me prior, saying he wanted me to celebrate them, but understood if it hurt too much. The thing was, I felt nothing but happiness for her. I wanted things to work out for them, even if they hadn't worked out for Shane and me. So here I was, with her hand in mine, comforting me with a pregnancy test in my lap.

In all honesty, I let the tears fall freely now. I have no idea if I can blame the hormones or the emotional whirlwind my life has become. This is too much for me to handle, and the fact I'm having to tackle this without Shane by my side hurts more than anything. I had dreamed of doing this but with him. I never dreamed this might be a bump in the road I would face without his beautiful strength next to me.

I take a deep inhale, opening my mouth and allowing the exhales to come out slowly. I squeeze Ellie's hand one last time and stand up. I have to give myself a pep talk: *You can do this, Becca. You're strong and you are capable of handling whatever direction this pregnancy test takes you.*

I bring myself to stand straighter and saunter to the restroom, closing the door behind me. I don't take the time to look at my reflection in the mirror, knowing that the last month has worn me out, emotionally and physically.

I finish peeing on the life-changing stick and place it on the counter. After I wash my hands, I open the bathroom door. Ellie is where I left her, except this time she is looking up at me. I can see the sadness in her eyes, and I can tell it's not sadness at this predicament I am in, but in the fact that Shane is absent from this moment. He should be here instead of her, and we are both too aware of how different this moment feels without him. I sit back down beside her and just look ahead, waiting for the minutes to pass to see if my life is truly changing in a way I can't take back.

I know my options here. I know what I can do to move forward in whichever way I would like. But I know that if I am, in fact, pregnant, I will keep this baby. It's a part of me and Shane, a product of the love we have for one another.

And I know that once Shane knows about this baby, he will come running back. He would never leave me behind in that way. He may have left, for whatever reason, thinking he was keeping my dreams intact by doing so, but he'd never turn his back on his child. His heart is full of too much love to do such a thing.

The minutes pass and soon I look at my watch and note I've waited long enough. I get up and walk toward the bathroom, shaking my arms as the nervousness consumes my body.

Ellie stays where she has been this entire time, and I look back at her with a quizzical look on my face.

"What?" she asks.

I point toward the bathroom as if that should be explanation enough. She still doesn't budge so I throw my arms up, exasperated.

"Ellie, I need you to stand by my side right now. I can't take a step forward without you standing right next to me."

She is up and standing behind me within a second, and I grab her hand and keep it in my grasp while I pull her inside the bathroom with me.

Before looking at the test, I feel Ellie pull my arm back, forcing me toward her and to look into her wide eyes, “I just want to say that if you’re pregnant, you are not in this alone. You have me, you have Beau, and your mom, and I can bet all my money that Shane will come back to stand by you too. You will find a way to live your life, with the same dreams, the best way you know how. But I just want you to know you are not walking into this next step alone. Your village is here and ready to support you.”

The tears continue to fall freely down my cheeks. I don’t know how the universe did it, but it gave me someone special who cares for my heart with so much love.

I feel my chest tighten with her words, and a lump forms in my throat as I try to keep the tears from fully releasing like they have been. I give her a soft smile and nod slightly, acknowledging her words, and I hope she can see that I love her more because she said them to me.

My heart is racing as I turn back around toward the test. I continue to hold Ellie’s hand in mine, pulling her closer with me as I take another step toward the counter. Looking down and staring back are the only answers I need to know my life is forever changed.

Who knew a little plastic test could hold so much significance? But here we are, now my use of the word *we* signifies me and this little being growing inside me, and I will do everything in my power to ensure they are loved and cared for most importantly.

Chapter Twenty-Five



REBECCA

Present Day

I walk toward the front door when I hear her calling me. The first person to ever call me by that name, and hearing her voice still brings my heart so much fullness, it's hard to put into words. She's been my little buddy from the moment our bond was formed.

I know I'm not only going to find my firstborn at my entryway, but I'll find her father in shock at seeing her for the first time, despite him never wanting her in the years before this moment. He never brought her up since seeing me again, and I was going to bring that to light when we spoke this morning, but our girl beat me to it instead.

I make my way to the front of the house and what I find is a stare-off between my daughter and her father. She has that softness about her features. Always calm and collected, like Shane, a trait I always envied about her.

I never kept anything from her when she asked about her father. I told her how monumental our love was for one another that led to her creation. I showed her pictures of him from when Shane and I were younger, a love that could be felt through the developed film.

She knew what he looked like, at least that much I could give her. I never gave details about his harsh words that eventually led to me closing that door to Shane and our lives, and I simply told her he was living another life without us. She

never harbored resentment or anger toward him. I'd say she held more curiosity than anything.

When I turn my gaze toward Shane, I freeze. He's looking at her with disbelief more than anything. He looks at her as if he has no idea of her existence. At least that is how I am interpreting his gaze. And now I must look confused because as my eyebrows furrow in confusion, Shane finally breaks his stare with his daughter to give me a look of absolute horror.

"We have a daughter together, and you failed to mention that to me?" he nearly spits out at me.

The shock of his words stun me, and I'm paralyzed in place, confused by his accusation.

Failed to mention? What is he talking about?

My daughter looks at him as confused as I feel. I quickly turn my attention to my girl and open my arms for her to hug me. She's slightly taller than me but does not reach Shane's height. She comes toward me and embraces me, her hold strong and full of love. She separates from me and looks back at Shane.

"So, you're my father? I've seen pictures but seeing you in person feels surreal." She smiles at him, and Shane pulls his glare away from me to look at her, his gaze softening.

"I'm sorry, but can someone clue me in on what's happening?" Shane speaks again, his tone even but curt.

I can't figure out why he is so angry at the realization of his daughter after what he said to me years ago. I finally give him an answer, but I don't know if this appeases him or angers him more than anything.

"Shane, this is your daughter, Olive." I motion toward Liv, as if this is a natural occurrence.

Unfortunately, Shane does not share my sentiment and simply whispers, "Olive."

He looks back at me and he softens slightly at the name he hears, one he chose years ago, when our dreams felt like they'd be a reality more than a fantasy. Unfortunately, our

paths did not lead toward the happy ending we wanted, but I still got a life with a piece of Shane by my side.

Olive looks at Shane and puts her hand out for a handshake. Shane looks down at her hand and disregards it, pulling her into a hug. When he embraces her, I see tears pooled in his eyes, and when he closes them, the tears release into Olive's hair.

He holds her there for a while, taking her in. I know hearing about a baby and then seeing said child grown can be shocking, but his reaction goes beyond shock. It seems more like he's in disbelief rather than shock. And now I am more confused about why he seems to know nothing about the existence of our daughter.

When they pull away, I turn to Olive to ask her about her trip into the city.

“Liv, sweetheart, you said you'd be in on Monday. I thought you had to finish some research at the university before leaving for the holiday.”

I smile toward her because she really is an exceptional person. She and I grew so much together, I can't help but see not only my daughter but my friend. So many nights wondering how I'd care for her, turned into many nights of us figuring life out together. And it was a time when we grew closer with one another. We had help, but most of all, we had each other.

Each step I took forward felt like a step forward for her too, from my time studying late at night, to walking toward a career in medicine, she was there every step of the way. My accomplishment felt like hers as well. She was my biggest cheerleader as she watched me grow in my profession, and I don't know how I would have gotten through the tough moments, especially missing Shane without her knowledge, but she was my rock without even understanding that herself.

I had told her I reconnected with her dad when Shane first came back. I told her how it was a shock, and I was still navigating my feelings. I kept my resentment and anger to myself, as I wanted her to meet Shane and come to her own

conclusions about his presence. I didn't need her harboring my negative emotions while also trying to navigate her own toward a father she is only now meeting for the first time.

“Yeah, that was the plan. But I was able to finish early, and I thought I'd surprise you instead.”

She beams her beautiful smile, her Shane smile as I secretly thought of it. They have so many similarities, and each time I saw them as she grew up, I felt like they were ways in which Shane was with us. So I never resented her similarities to her father and, instead, welcomed them. I missed him so much, and having these little glimpses of him along this journey gave me strength in many ways.

Shane clears his throat. “I am sorry to interrupt, but I need to sit down.”

He starts walking toward the kitchen table, looking a little pale. I move to the sink to fetch some water out of instinct. My head is spinning because I have no idea what is going through Shane's mind. I was going to talk to him about Liv when we sat down, rehashing what went on years ago, but now I feel like I need to backtrack a bit to see why Shane seems so perplexed.

I walk toward the table and hand Shane the water. He takes a sip, nearly putting the cup on the table, when he decides to bring the cup to his lips again, this time taking a gulp of water to calm his nerves. I take a seat across from him, Liv looking around the kitchen for a snack in the fridge.

“I haven't gotten your favorite snacks yet as I was planning a trip to the market tomorrow. I think the twins have something in the pantry you might like.”

She chuckles at that because she knows exactly where the kids hide their favorite snacks in the kitchen. She disappears into the pantry when I look over to Shane.

Shane's gaze is on me, less angry and more puzzled now.

“Shane, what do you mean ‘we have a daughter together?’ Why do you sound surprised? Did you think I had lost the baby?”

Shane continues to stare at my questions back to him. He seems utterly lost right now, and I need to know what's going through his head.

“For you to be asking me these questions, I would have needed to have been informed you were pregnant at some point. Did you tell me you were pregnant before we broke up, and I erased that from my memory?”

He's asking and still looking incredibly confused. I'm joining in on this confusion because what he lacks in memory, I know all too well what happened all those years ago.

“Tell you I was pregnant? Yes, I told you, but not before you broke up with me. I told you immediately after I found out myself. I wrote you a letter telling you about the baby. I told you everything. I was honest from the start.

“And your response was as honest as I could ask for. It was brutal, but it was your truth, so I found a way to accept it. I won't lie. I was mad. I was furious you would toss not only me, but your child aside like that, but I honestly thought you'd come around and apologize for your hateful words. I never heard from you again, and I felt, deep down, maybe that was for the better if you didn't want to be a part of our lives.”

Shane is looking at me, each piece of the puzzle seeming to cause more alarm to cross his face.

“What do you mean by the *hateful words* I said to you? In what format did I communicate this hatefulness?”

He sounds genuinely interested in this answer, as if he didn't experience it himself.

I must look at him with confusion because he continues, “Honestly, Becs, I have no idea what you're talking about. Seeing Olive right now is the first time I am becoming aware of the fact that I am a father. Not only that, I became one in what looks like nearly twenty-five years ago. This is all news to me. I swear, on my soul, I had no idea of her existence or the fact that you ever became pregnant, until right now. Please tell me what happened so I can fill in the gaps, not only for

you but for me. My heart is racing. I have a daughter I have never known about.”

He starts to run his hands through his hair, leaving it in disarray and not caring about it. He almost looks panicked, like the entire mess is starting to pull him under, at the realization that he missed out on his child’s life, and he had no idea.

I sit back, looking at him, and turn my head to the side, as if inspecting him. He is honestly clueless as to what is going on. I take a deep breath, calming my own racing heart. As we have been interacting, Liv has grabbed some food and a drink, sitting at the kitchen table, absorbing the conversation as it is being laid out in front of her.

So I begin to speak, taking this path down memory lane, which was one of the hardest times in my life because it was the moment I realized Shane wasn’t who I thought he was.

Chapter Twenty-Six



REBECCA

July 1998

I'm pacing the family room, figuring out how I am going to tell my mother that I am pregnant with Shane's baby. I know my mom and her love for me. But I also know this news will be shocking because I am still trying to wrap my head around it myself. I'm biting my nails, a habit I gave up years ago, but one that brings enough comfort to keep me from completely losing my mind.

Grant is coloring with Laney in the kitchen. Beau and Ellie didn't want me to drive home alone. Once they got me settled, they both felt it best to stay, even at a distance. They knew my mother was kindhearted, but if I needed moral support, they wanted to be near to offer it.

I hear her car coming down the street and park in the driveway. My mom's a nurse and she was always very open with me about taking my birth control pill on time every day. I was always vigilant about that, and I never forgot a dose. I wasn't like some of my classmates. I would overhear that they would miss and double dose the following day. I was always so good about it. But a few months back, I got a sinus infection and had to be placed on antibiotics. I remember because I had felt miserable, and the antibiotics were a lifesaver.

Little did I think beyond that and took the antibiotics and my birth control. I only learned today, after speaking to Ellie

to figure out how this could have happened, that the antibiotics lessened the effects of the birth control. You think? Yeah, I'd say lessening the effects is an understatement. I would say failing is more like it. And now, here I am, leaving an indent in my mother's floor due to the endless strides back and forth from this agonizing need to talk to her. I could have run to her at work and gotten this off my chest, but I needed to digest it first. So I did just that for the remainder of the day.

The front door opens, and my mom comes in, finding me standing still in the middle of the living room, looking at her with wide eyes. It doesn't take long to see the alarm on my face. She comes running toward me, dropping her purse and keys on the floor in her quick movements.

“Becca, are you okay? Is it Grant? What happened?”

I shake my head, my lips pursed together, tears already forming in my eyes.

I drop my head and let it out, “I'm pregnant,” and fall into her arms, nearly collapsing as I do so.

She holds me enough to move us both to a couch and we sit. I begin to sob. I honestly have no idea where all these tears are coming from. I have been crying for weeks off and on, and I can't believe there are more tears to shed.

I feel my mom kiss my hair, whispering, “Oh my sweet girl.”

I soon notice she is also crying.

I pull away and I can't help but ask, “Are you mad at me?”

My mom grabs my cheeks, looking right in my eyes. “Of course not. How can I be mad at you? You are my whole world. I'm just feeling your pain. I know how hard everything has been without Shane, and now you're holding one more thing on your shoulders.”

She hugs me again and we sit and cry for what feels like hours. Once we separate and walk back toward the kitchen, we meet up with everyone else and sit down. At that point I look around, realizing that Ellie was right, my village is already

formed. I am just missing one person, and I need to find a way to tell him.

* * *

I haven't been to Shane's house since before graduation. I never returned here because I knew he had left Nebraska. My only link to him is his mother, and I was hoping I could tell her it was urgent and plead for a phone number to call him. I needed to tell him I was pregnant. He deserved to know.

As I approach the house, I realize it looks empty. I stop the car at the curb and walk toward the front door. I notice it's eerily quiet, and I begin to walk the perimeter of the house, looking into the windows to peer inside. That's when I notice the furniture is no longer in the rooms I can see into. The house is vacant. And in many ways, my heart feels even more empty than it did before. How am I going to reach Shane now? I have no forwarding address, no phone number, nothing.

Right when I begin to turn around, Shane's neighbor, Mr. Jamison calls out to me, "Hey, Becca. Looking for Mrs. Philips?"

I nod because the lump in my throat does not allow any sound to come out.

"Yeah, she sold the place off market and packed up about two weeks ago. It was pretty abrupt, but I also know she was ready to leave this little town after her son left."

I am catching up on all this information he's throwing at me. She just left? How does one do this? How could this be how things were unraveling around me?

"Did she happen to give any indication where she was going?" Mr. Jamison shakes his head.

"Unfortunately not, but I know she did forward her mail. No idea where it's getting forwarded to, but you can always send a letter to this address, and it will get rerouted to her new address. I offered to grab any mail, and she told me she

handled everything at the Post Office. That's the only direction I can offer at the moment. I'm sorry Becca."

I could see the look of pity across his face. I must have looked pitiful with this revelation. I felt lost, even more lost with this news than the news of my pregnancy.

I thank Mr. Jamison and walk back toward my car. Looking down at the ground, my shoulders hanging in defeat, I can feel my world crumbling again in fear of not getting a hold of Shane. I start my car and drive off, waving to Mr. Jamison as I drive along Shane's old street, most likely for the last time. When I get home, I recall everything that happened, crying as I tell my mom, Beau, and Ellie all that I learned. They look as shocked as me, maybe even heartbroken with my news. I sit back in my seat and feel defeated.

"So, do you want help writing the letter?"

Beau is the first to talk. I look at him, confused. Then I realize that is my only option, and it might be the best way to get my words out to him. At least my letter can give me the ability to speak to him without breaking down. I nod at Beau, his offer so kind and genuine, I appreciate it immediately. I grab some paper and begin writing. After many alterations and crying breaks in between, I write Shane's Nebraska address on the envelope, addressed to him, and put a stamp on it.

I feel like this envelope holds so much weight within each line of the paper. I poured my heart out and made sure he knew I hold no anger toward him and would like to simply talk to him as a first step. I also made it known that if he did not want to have any contact with the child, I would keep our baby and raise them on my own. I honestly did not see him taking that route, but I offered it.

Once I drop it off at the Post Office, I drive home and decide to figure out my next steps. I still plan on going to school in the fall, knowing all too well that I would have to take on a lighter load in school until I had a better grasp on becoming a mother. I did, however, hope I'd have the love of my life involved in this next step. Doing this without him

wasn't impossible, but it wasn't how I envisioned becoming a mother to Shane's child.

The weeks ahead feel like they drag. Each day, when the mailman comes through our neighborhood, I run to the mailbox. I try to fill my days packing, keeping my mind occupied with my move to New York, and rearrange my life so it would fit adding a baby to the mix. No one in town knows I am pregnant and since I'm not showing, I don't have to explain much, as everyone knows my plans to attend NYU come the fall semester.

After a long discussion with my mother, we decide it would be best for her and Grant to move to the city with me. She was able to reach out to a friend she went to nursing school with who got her a job at a hospital in Manhattan, along with a good area to rent a decent-sized apartment for all of us. I opted out of living in the dorms, and this was a huge weight off my shoulders. Luckily, I saved some money in that area and could put that toward books and other supplies I'd need for the baby.

Paying for school was something my mother saved up for, as well as setting aside some of my father's life insurance. She said he was always excited to see me go to medical school, and that he'd want me to use it in that way. It seems that all the pieces are falling into place, aside from the silence from Shane. That is weighing on me the most, and it feels like I have a piece of lead sitting in my belly each day my letter goes unanswered.

That all changes about a week before our move is scheduled. I receive a letter, mailed from Seattle. That surprised me, but I also knew his aunt lived in that area. Maybe that's where he went after he left Nebraska. I don't even wait to get inside the house, ripping the envelope as I walk toward the front door. I stop in my tracks as I read the letter, each word not just breaking my heart, but crushing it to pieces as I realize the person I loved was not at all who I thought he was.

Dearest Rebecca,

Thank you for your letter. I will admit, I am a bit shocked by this news. We were always so careful. And to hear this has happened after I've been gone for a while makes me wonder if this child is indeed mine. Have you gone to a doctor? Did they confirm the baby was conceived while I was still in Saddle Ridge?

In all honesty, no matter the answers to those questions, I am not in a place to be a partner to you, least of all a father at this time. I know we were together for so long, but I must say, we are just kids. We are not capable of making this work, with me being so far and now in the Navy. I am headed to training in the next few days and I cannot have this weighing on me. I wish you nothing but the best, and what we had is exactly that, in the past. I hope you know I appreciate you letting me know.

Please don't try to contact me anymore. I have moved on in my life and I would urge you to do the same.

Sincerely,

Shane

I feel sick. I have not had too many bouts of morning sickness recently as I am trying to comply with the doctor's recommendations of small, frequent snacks and meals. I drink plenty of water. But this letter, his vile words, make me sick.

I run inside, dropping the letter to the floor, vomiting everything I had ingested earlier today. I begin to cry as the nausea keeps hitting me until I have emptied everything from my stomach and flush. I turn on the faucet to rinse my mouth out with water, using this opportunity to splash water on my face.

I finish up in the restroom, walking out to see my mother at the door, with the letter in her hand.

"I didn't want to read it, but when I picked it up, I couldn't help but see the words staring back at me, and I couldn't help myself. I'm livid, Becca. These words are not just heartless, they're hateful and cruel. They're lacking the love I thought that boy had for you. You deserve better than this."

She pulls me in a hug while I once again find myself crying in her arms. I am still processing what I read in that letter. The Shane I knew would never say such things, let alone put them in writing.

Not only was his letter cold, but it was typed out as if lacking all the sentiment possible. No handwritten note like he used to do. Such formality to his communication, even calling me by my full name. To think he took the time to not only think of those words, but he also took the time to type and

print it. He is truly not whom I thought he was. And my baby and I are better off without that type of person in our lives.

I say this to my mother once she lets go of me. We put the letter away in the same shoebox where I stored all the other letters Shane once gave me. I choose not to open it again. I keep it as a reminder of what was said to me, as a reminder of why I will be strong for both of us in order to raise our child.

I will not lead with anger, but with love when it comes to this child I am growing inside me. I will tell them about the person I fell in love with. I will have to come up with some story as to why he is no longer with us, but I have time to figure out my words. I will not tell them this letter exists because it will not serve a purpose except to foster hate instead of love.

This child deserves all the love possible.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Present Day

I sit there, trying to grasp what Becca just finished telling me. I am rigid and the tension in my muscles is palpable. I have never been so confused, sad, hurt, deceived, and truly joyous all in one sitting. My anger is understandable, but the fact that I have a daughter, with Becca, brings my heart profound happiness and immense sadness all in one.

The fact Becca endured an entire pregnancy and beyond without knowing the truth regarding that letter and why I left is truly at the center of all the feelings coursing through my veins. I feel immense heartbreak for not only me but all of us. I sit at the kitchen table, breathing as calmly as I possibly can muster at this time, trying to form words, as a lump has been lodged in my throat since Becs started divulging all the information she had seen as truth for so long. My gaze is down, and I'm staring at the worn parts of the wood in the table.

I look up and I immediately look to my right, where Olive is seated. She's looking at me, not with wonder, but with undeniable disappointment. From how I'm perceiving this, the story Becca just told might be the first time Liv has heard it in its entirety. Maybe Becca shielded her thinking that was best for our daughter. And in some ways, I am incredibly grateful. But I need to remove this look of utter disbelief my daughter is harboring in her expression.

When I go to speak, I reach my hands out to hold both of theirs. They're both hesitant with my touch. I can only imagine the amount of pain Becca kept inside thinking I was capable of such hateful feelings toward her and our child. And to grasp that type of deceit at such the young age of eighteen is what nearly breaks me. She deserved to feel loved when she found out about the pregnancy, not lost, and that letter harbored the latter.

First I decide to look at Olive, knowing she has no idea who I am, and I have a huge hill to climb to prove myself to her.

“I want to begin by saying that nothing your mom just said is something I was ever aware of. You were never someone I knew existed until you walked through that door this morning. And in no way would I ever have said those things to your mother. Ever. I know you don't know much about me, but I fell in love with your mom at the age of fourteen, and I have never looked back. I have never held regret or anger toward her, and now I can only imagine the feelings she felt toward me.”

I then turn my attention to the woman I have never stopped loving.

“Becca, I swear on everything we built together, that I never got the original letter you sent me telling me you were pregnant. I swear when I left Nebraska, the only mistake was that I left you behind. And I have regretted that since the moment I tried to live life without you. But now I have so much more to regret and to unpack with what you're telling me. I wasn't in Seattle at the time you would have written that letter. I went there first and stayed with my aunt. But shortly after, I went to California to stay with my cousin, who had an apartment there. My mother, however, was with her sister for a time before settling in Southern California. Depending on when the letter was sent, I can know for sure who may have been the one to open the letter you sent to me.”

Becca seems confused and resistant to what I'm explaining to her.

“You’re telling me, all this time, you never knew Olive existed? You never knew you had a child?”

She has tears welling in her eyes, and I can feel the pain of her realization hit me in the chest. All these years she held onto so many lies, and she didn’t even know it at the time. She had no idea I did not get her correspondence.

After hearing the letter I sent to her, I wouldn’t want contact with me either. Had she known I was unaware, she probably would have put effort into finding me once social media became popular. I know I resisted the urge to look for her out of fear of seeing her thriving and living life without me in it. As hard as it must have been for her, she had to rewrite the love story we had built because in her mind, I had lit it on fire, and I provided the matches too.

“Do you happen to remember the address it was sent from? I just want to see if it was my aunt’s place in Seattle or somewhere else.”

I look at Becca, hoping she can help me fill in the gaps that are truly feeling more like the size of craters between us right now.

She takes a moment to think about something, and she abruptly stands.

“I kept the boxes of letters we sent to one another from high school. It’s upstairs with this letter mixed in, and I think I still have the envelope it came in. Let me go find it.”

She runs out of the kitchen, and I can hear her footsteps going up the stairs and through a room upstairs, which sounds like it is right above us.

“That’s her home office.” Olive points up to the sound of her mother’s footsteps above our heads. I nod, unsure of what to say at this point.

“Is it true? You can tell me, honestly, if you truly didn’t want me or want my mother. I’m a big girl now and I can handle it.”

She says these words, but I can tell she is already incredibly crushed to even imagine that I would walk away

from her.

I grab her hands with both of mine, and I look into eyes that mirror my own.

“I swear on everything that I am, I had no idea your mother was pregnant. Had I known, I would have run toward her, not away. I would have been with her. Lack of love wasn’t what caused me to walk away from your mother, to begin with. I misunderstood something when we were teens and I overreacted. But worst of all, I made decisions for the two of us that weren’t mine to make. That’s something I’m going to have to navigate through. I made a huge mess of something so beautiful in my life. And in the end, I missed seeing you grow up. And for that, I don’t think I will ever fully recover from it.”

Tears stream down her cheeks freely now, her gaze softening with the revelation that I truly didn’t mean for our lives to turn out in such a way. Soon enough, Becca is back downstairs holding an entire box that looks filled to the brim. She sits back down, pulling off the cardboard lid to reveal a ton of mementos.

She begins to pull things out and I sit back, wondering where my place is between these two women that hold my heart in their hands. Once Becs seems to find what she was looking for, she pulls it out, revealing an envelope that looks worn and old. She hands it to me. “Here it is!” She sounds excited, as if the contents don’t hold a piece of our past that ruined so much of our future. I take it from her, curious about what I’m going to find.

I turn it over to reveal Becca’s Nebraska address, along with a return address that looks familiar immediately. It’s my aunt’s address in Seattle, and the postmark location is also in the same city. Does Aunt Lynn know about Becca and the pregnancy she divulged? She may have met her a handful of times due to the holidays we were together while she was visiting Saddle Ridge. Aside from that, she has no real connection to the girl I love. I feel my heart begin to race as I pull the letter out from the envelope, careful not to damage it.

When I unfold it, I begin to read what Becca had explained from her memories. What is written is similar to Becca's words, mostly because she probably pondered how I could be so hurtful. I can only imagine she memorized the hateful words in that letter, and she probably grew to believe what I said was true. I can't even wish she had fought harder to find me because what I said would have ruined me, had I been the recipient of this correspondence.

It stings to read, even all these years later, and knowing it wasn't me who wrote this on paper to the one person I would have done anything to see flourish in life. I feel Becca move behind me, reading along as well. What is written on this piece of paper still jabs at Becca's heart, and I'm confirmed of this when I look behind me and she's standing there, wiping a stray tear that has begun to fall.

I put the letter down, standing up and pulling Becs into my arms. I then bring her lips to mine, and I hope with my touch, she can feel my love through my affection. Once we part, I sit back down and continue reading the paper in my hands.

The letter is typed, and I can admit I wasn't much of a typer back then. Computers were not what they are today, not used in every room of a house. They were not readily available, and I was not the best at typing at that age. I preferred handwritten notes, especially with Becca.

Aside from how this letter was constructed, the fact it came from Seattle is a huge red flag for me. But what I wish Becca had questioned more is that it's addressed to "Rebecca," when all I did was either call her Becca or Becs. I never spoke her full name. I can't even say I would have proposed using her full name simply because she was always Becs to me; *my* Becs. I turn and look up at her.

"Did you ever find it weird, the fact this letter was typed, not written, and I addressed you as Rebecca instead of Becca or Becs?"

She begins to shake her head.

"At first, sure, I felt like it was a bit odd. But in all honesty, the way you left, it made me feel like all your actions

were ones that were unknown to me. I felt like you had already deserted me in the worst way, so reading your letter just felt like another way to fully put me and our baby behind you.

“As cold as your words were, I disregarded how much they didn’t sound like you. Because you weren’t yourself from the moment you walked onto my porch that night of graduation. And I wanted to keep pushing, but at the same time, that letter made it clear I was not a priority to you, nor was our baby. Why would I want to force someone to be with me and become a father?”

She grabs a tissue and takes a seat by my side.

“I saw what great parents mine were to me. They savored their time with me. But they were also a team. They held so much love between one another that it was palpable for me, even as a child. I wanted to feel loved, but I also wanted our child to feel that love. So the way I truly dealt with that letter was telling myself I did right by you, even if the outcome wasn’t what I wanted. I had told you and you had responded. I had to respect what you wrote, even though it may not have sounded like what you would say to me, nor did I find the things you said kindhearted.

“I never believed you could harbor anger and hostility the way that letter came off. It was cold and very much out of character for you. But I had a child to think about. I had a future to move toward, and I’d be damned if I was going to let myself spiral when I had myself to focus on.”

She does not say this with malice in her tone. She is honestly saddened by what happened decades ago, while I am still trying to put these pieces together. I hope though, after all this time, she finally sees that I did not say these words and would never have left her behind. I see movement in my periphery, turning my attention to Olive looking through the contents of the box.

“Oh my gosh, Mom. You never showed me these. Is this the outfit the hospital put on me? Are these the hospital bracelets?” She looks up, smiling softly while going through the items in the box.

“Yes, you were so tiny. I felt like a beached whale, which is what every person says when they’re about to give birth. But I honestly thought I was having a Guinness Book of World Records of a child in size. I felt enormous.”

She chuckles, her gaze distant, as if going back to that memory. She walks over to stand by Olive to go through the items in the cardboard box with her. She shuffles a few things aside and finally grabs whatever she was looking for.

“Here, Shane, get comfortable. I saved everything back then. I felt like I had to chronicle everything Liv went through because I didn’t want to miss anything. I won’t pretend and say I was completely over our relationship. I was still hoping you would come around, and I wanted to keep all the little things so you had a chance to feel included in that moment and with all the milestones Liv and I had together.”

She puts a big book in front of me. It looks like a baby book of sorts, soft exterior, a soft pink color to the fabric that lines the cover. I graze my hand over it, hoping just the feel of it will pull me back in time so I could be there with my girls when everything began between them.

Unfortunately, that dream will continue to be just that. I can’t control yesterday, but I can definitely build my life for tomorrow. And that’s what I intend to do.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



REBECCA

Present Day

I look at Shane, as he keeps running his hand over the fabric that covers the baby book. I can see the turmoil in his eyes, and my heart breaks for him. This entire time, I thought he knew about Olive. I thought he was just being a coward in many ways to wait to talk about her. I was going to force us to have this conversation this morning, but Liv's arrival spearheaded that idea, and now I see all the pieces are falling into place.

Knowing Shane didn't have an idea of Liv's existence makes so much more sense now. His behavior, especially his indifference when we first saw one another after all these years, while I held so much pain. I was angry while he was relieved to have found me again. Although so much needs to be figured out, I can't help but feel a sense of relief to see him standing by our daughter now. Once he fully grasps this human standing by him, he will see the way the stars aligned when she was made.

She is beyond incredible. She holds so much love in her heart, but like Shane, she gives effortlessly to others. Since she was born, she was an easy soul to care for. She did the typical crying of a newborn but was quite easy to please. She was a great companion, especially for me as a working mother who was at school so much of her days while she was little. No complaints ever came out of Olive's mouth while I took hours of our time together studying and going to the library.

She simply lived a life that fit with mine. It felt like, although I am her mother, the universe healed my heart in a way by giving me this genuine soul to walk through life with. Shane wasn't there and for that, I was so heartbroken. But Liv brightened my day. She would have movie nights with me when she knew I needed a break. She would smile that perfect smile that I needed to give me the energy to get through the day. But most of all, she simply loved me with her whole heart.

As our lives started to morph into one with Hudson and eventually the twins, she never wavered in her ability to show love to those around her. She never called Hudson "Dad," even though she was still young when they met, but she once confided in me that she was saving that name for her biological father. She felt like he would need to hear it when they'd finally be together. When she'd have those moments where she seemed more adult than child, I would have to tamp down my emotions to make sure I wasn't a blubbering mess in responding to her.

So she called Hudson "Huddy," and we never touched on the subject again. I did keep the full truth of Shane's letter from her, making her believe her father just could not be with us for reasons unknown to her. I sometimes felt she wouldn't have been a child who would harbor resentment.

She simply lived her best life with the dawn of each day. She taught me a lot about how I could choose to live my life, and I chose to be happy with the circumstances I was given. I had a lot of help along the way, more than some people get in a lifetime. But I do know that Liv was a huge part of the positivity I fed myself on the days I wanted to crawl into a ball and cry over how heartbroken I was without Shane.

Right now, they are opening the baby book, Liv laughing at her scrunched baby face, while I see a tear fall down Shane's cheek. Nothing is comforting in these items for him right now. This box harbors reminders of what he missed, instead of what he made with our love years ago.

Liv must sense his pain because she places her hand on his shoulder, the contact jolting him a bit, but she doesn't remove

her hand. She rubs circles around his shoulder, showing her simple act of compassion in hopes that his heart will open to the blessing this reunion truly is, instead of focusing on all that he missed over the years.

Soon enough, Shane moves his hand up and grasps the hand she has on his shoulder, and they just look at one another. He stands up and makes a gesture to see if she is comfortable with him embracing her. I note a little nod from Liv, and Shane immediately moves in for a hug. I see the power of this embrace. And with that, I can see that my little family which I wished for so long ago, is finally coming together. It's unconventional, but it is the story we are meant to tell.

They pull apart and they both wipe their eyes. It has been an emotional day already, and it's not even eleven in the morning. I head over to grab some coffee, knowing Liv's favorite mug is washed and ready for her to use. I come back to the table and hand each one their cup and sit back down.

“So, let's go through this Liv shrine and show you everything we saved.”

Shane looks up at me then and I see an apologetic gaze take over his face. I give him a little smile and wink, hoping he can sense we are good, and we will get through this. I look down at the first page that's open in the baby book and begin to retell everything about the day my world became brighter.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



REBECCA

February 1999

What in the actual fuck is happening to my body right now?

“Becca, look at me. You need to focus. Your mom said we need to go through the ER entrance, and she’ll be waiting for us. But I need you to focus. Remember what we learned in the classes? You have to stay focused.”

Ellie is trying to be kind and calm right now, but her eyes are the size of saucers when I have a contraction, and squeezing her hands nearly off her body might be the reason for her reaction.

I love how she’s asking me to do something that is unnatural to me right now. I feel like my body is about to split in two, and this kid is going to come walking out on its own. I do not want to feel this pain anymore. I need drugs. I need a sedative at this point. I cannot handle this kind of pain for goodness knows how long. I look toward Elody, while Beau is carrying all the bags ahead of us.

He’s trying to clear the walkway for us as we are now a block away from the hospital. May as well be five thousand miles because each step feels like the effort of a marathon at this moment. It’s a cold day in February and I am hating this stroll around New York while I feel each contraction rip through my body.

We tried a cab but sitting felt more uncomfortable so I asked to walk and here we are, in the middle of winter, me waddling and my friends being the amazing humans they are and supporting me through this.

I am completely over this, and I'm barely in labor at this point. My water broke and not even an hour later, I felt like things were being rearranged from the inside out. This kid is a week overdue, so I am ready to have them as soon as humanly possible. But let me clarify—I need to be medicated, like yesterday.

I see Beau's excitement as we approach the hospital. I bet he's regretting promising to be there for the birth. I'm still a little shocked he asked me if I would want that. I think he's putting a lot of responsibilities on his shoulders now that Shane isn't here. My best friends arrived a week before my due date and said they wouldn't leave until this baby was safely in my arms.

Little did either of them consider first-time pregnancies usually go beyond the due date, which is something my mom kept repeating when I complained I was still pregnant. So here we are, a week longer of incubation in my belly, and this kid seems to have taken their eviction notice a little too seriously. When I asked them to come out, I didn't mean they had to remodel my intestines on their way out.

I feel another contraction begin, and I have to take a minute and stop with the view of the hospital in my line of sight. I am breathing the best I can, but it truly feels like a watermelon is trying to make its way out of an opening smaller than my palm at this rate.

After the contraction lessens, I begin walking again and my little cheering squad continues, making sure everyone knows that passes us, that they're about to be an aunt and uncle. If I wasn't dying of pain, I would laugh at how they both smile ear-to-ear at complete strangers. Top it off that these are New Yorkers, and they could give a flying fuck what makes us happy right now.

Once we go through the double doors of the ER, my mother is there, waving us down with a wheelchair. She does realize she's the only one excited to see people come through the ER, right? No one is greeted with excitement at the emergency room entrance. I'm being a royal bitch mentally because, without my mother, none of this would have been possible. She uprooted her whole life for me, and I don't know how I will ever repay her.

She gets me settled in the wheelchair, moving quickly to get me to the maternity floor. Because my mother works here, they are allowing her, along with Beau and Ellie, into the birthing room. They check me in and the moment I have an opportunity to request something for myself, I do. I get my nurse's attention, grabbing her arm while I feel another contraction begin.

"I need an epidural now. Don't deny me the drugs." And then a wave of intense pain takes over.

* * *

Once I got my epidural, life was blissful. I came into the hospital around two p.m., and now it's about ten a.m. the next morning. My water broke nearly twenty-four hours ago. I am not a doctor yet, but I did read any book I could on pregnancy, labor and delivery, and postpartum. The risk of infection is the most pressing matter at this time. Luckily, the nurse checked me, and I was fully dilated. I don't feel any pain, aside from pressure.

In all honesty, I feel like I am going to poop in my gown. Great, Beau is not going to let me live it down if I poop in front of him. He and I have more of a sibling relationship than anything, and we love to mess with each other. Ellie says she may never have kids if we keep her this busy all the time, bickering back and forth.

Beau looks up from a magazine he's reading.

"Hey, Becca, didn't you think it was a bit too dramatic to get us here in a rush, and you weren't even ready to have a

baby?”

He has this sly smile on his face, egging me on to answer back. Before I can even attempt to poke him back with a jab, Ellie smacks him across the chest. “None of that, you two.”

She’s squinting her eyes and pointing her index finger back and forth between us. Beau and I both laugh because she knows all too well, we could do this all day long.

My mom comes back from grabbing some breakfast, nodding her head for Beau and Ellie to stretch their legs before the real fun begins. I hear my baby’s heartbeat on the monitor, and I allow my mind to drift off. I have been imagining what my baby would look like this whole time. I have no idea if I’m having a boy or a girl. I thought I might as well experience that added excitement.

I rub my belly, these final moments where this baby moves within me, and I think about how far I’ve come to get here. I had my first semester at NYU in the fall. I took this next semester off to prepare for the baby and also give myself the chance to soak up motherhood. My mom said I needed to embrace this significant change, not for the fact that everything changes, but for the fact that I will never experience my first baby again.

I can’t lie and say I’m not nervous. I know a piece of this baby will look like Shane. In what way, that is soon to be discovered. But my heart is aching with the thought I could have his little twin as a child, possibly with the same mannerisms and facial expressions. So I need to take a moment and accept that for what it is. I need to fully realize I will be looking at this child and see the man I love staring back at me more times than I may have understood prior.

Even with all Shane has done to me at this point, I know that this baby was conceived with so much love. And loving them is what I plan to do. I don’t want to harbor any negativity or anger when I hold my baby for the first time.

I want to feel everything I felt with Shane before he left: excitement, anticipation, love, and acceptance. He brought so much joy to my life, although what I was left with was so

much heartbreak, it's hard to see past that. But I am forcing those difficult moments behind me and only allowing the beauty between us to shine through as I bring this child into the world.

Soon, the pressure in my bottom feels intense. I feel it constantly and the nurse announces it's time to push.

Beau has sworn to keep his body behind my head, supporting me above the waist. I give him a stern look when they begin preparing me for delivery, and he has no jokes coming out of his mouth when he admits, "Becca I love you, but not like that. I promise I will not move from here."

Ellie and my mom stand on either side of me, holding my legs as I push. I feel so much pressure, along with exhaustion as I push for what feels like forever. Then, suddenly, I hear the most beautiful sound. I hear the cry of a baby, *my* baby, surrounding the room. Everyone around me is crying, even Beau has tears coming down his cheeks, and I am in awe of this little being that Shane and I made together.

I had originally asked my mother to tell me what I gave birth to. So I look toward my mother and her crying is unstoppable.

"Oh, my girl. You're going to be an exceptional mother. You have a precious daughter."

And right then my daughter is placed on my chest, the nurses cleaning her off and suctioning all the fluid from her mouth. I have a daughter. A little girl.

"Hi, my beautiful Olive."

Right then, my little miracle looks up at me and opens her eyes. I can't tell what color they are, but no matter what, they're the most beautiful eyes that have ever looked my way. My world is complete with her in my arms. My heart will never recover because it will now walk this earth with her.

Chapter Thirty



SHANE

Present Day

Once we went through all the stuff in the box, we ordered lunch and spent the afternoon talking. Liv had so many questions for me, and I felt myself bursting at the seams asking as many questions as possible back, while I had my chance with her. I saw Becca sitting back, simply absorbing my presence with our daughter, all of us existing in the same room.

The more I interacted with Liv, the more the similarities stuck out between us. We moved our hands the same exact way when we told a story. Our laugh was similar, and although Liv had Becca's dimples, something about the way she smiled, it looked so much like my own. Our eyes were exact replicas of one another.

I wonder how many times her stare took Becca's breath away. I know that if I were raising Becca's child, and her eyes stared back at me, I would feel lost daily.

As the day moves forward, I am immediately comforted with how easily all three of us can speak to one another. There is no awkwardness or pain when we interact. We've erased any ugliness that letter may have caused, and I see the beginnings of building a new path together. I feel complete knowing I have a daughter and that she will know what it feels like to feel loved by me, even if I'm nearly twenty-five years behind.

I'm still trying to absorb the fact that I was robbed of being a father years ago, causing heaviness in the pit of my stomach. I need to get to the bottom of that letter, but I also don't want this day to end. I feel like I was given a second chance, and each second together is another way we can connect and attempt to repair the time that was lost. But I know, deep down, what I missed out on is something I will never get back. And for that, I am angry.

I will need to find some time to speak to my therapist about this, as I never imagined I would have this situation on my hands. I never imagined Beccs carried our child, and I lived unaware for so many years.

After we eat dinner, Olive tells both her mother and me that she needs to go lie down. She's working on a master's in healthcare administration. She mentioned becoming a doctor was never a dream, but interacting with those in the medical profession was something that always intrigued her.

She said after seeing Beau's cancer struggle, she connected with a lot of staff, not just the nursing and medical personnel. It drove her to seek this career even more. She's living in upstate New York and tries to come into the city as frequently as she can. However, it has been a few months due to how demanding her schedule has been recently. This explains why I hadn't seen her visit when I was coming into town since I reconnected with Becca in September.

Once Liv heads upstairs, Becca takes a moment to sit down on the couch and unravel everything that came to the surface today. I can see her exhale, and that gesture seems to hold so much more meaning than it had before. I wonder if, like me, she feels as if she's able to let go of more than a breath. As if her body had held on to a type of anger that was embedded deep in her muscles. I know that, although I didn't know I had a daughter, I lived so many years feeling like each step of my adult life was missing something.

When Becca was back in my life, I thought that was what my life was missing. But it's actually all of this. The feeling that I was back with the other piece of my heart, but that piece was greater than the piece I had left with Becca that day of

graduation. It feels as if, cosmically, my body knew more of myself was with Becca than I had ever imagined. And now I feel complete seeing these two women in my life.

It feels like today has been equivalent to twenty. I'm emotionally exhausted yet wired with the thought that I have a child, an adult daughter, who I only found out about a few hours ago. When I take a seat on the couch, Becca leans her head back to rest it on my shoulder, and I can sense she has so much going through her mind.

“Shane, who would do this to you? *Why* would someone do this to you?”

Her questions are the same ones that have been running through my mind today. Unfortunately, all roads lead to one person; the only person who should have my back. And the thought of my life being thrown off center in such a way by the one person who is supposed to protect me has my stomach in knots.

I take a big breath in, rubbing my hand down my face as I exhale.

“Honestly, Beccs, I've been having the same questions running through my mind. At first, I thought it was my aunt, but the dates coincide with someone else living up in Seattle at the same time. And the only explanation I feel might lead to an answer is my mother.”

The moment I mention my mother, Becca sits up straight, whipping her head toward me.

“She wouldn't!”

Becca's fury is seen in her eyes. I don't know what she may have thought; maybe she believed my aunt or someone else got a hold of that letter and took matters into their own hands. But something deep inside me feels like my mother had something to do with this, and I think it was her and her alone.

“Why would a mother, *your* mother, do such a thing to her own child? And why deprive not only you, but herself, of meeting a piece of you?”

Again, all the questions Becca throws into the universe have crossed my mind a million times today. The only way I'll know for sure is by seeing my mother to try to get an explanation. I do worry, however, that no matter what her explanation, I will not be satisfied by it.

“I think the only way I will have any insight into what she was thinking is by confronting her, face-to-face.”

Just the thought of doing that exhausts me.

“I think I'm going to wait until after Thanksgiving. Now that I think about it, my mother has been avoiding me since I mentioned reconnecting with you. I didn't put too much weight on the avoidance at first, but now I'm starting to put her behaviors together with that letter. I don't want her ruining our holiday together, especially my first with my own child. I know she's an adult, but now I want to live life again with her. Form new memories, do things I would have done with her if she were younger.”

“Liv is quite fun and appeasing, but I don't think a trip to the zoo is high on her list, Shane.”

She chuckles at her own joke, and that makes me smile. I can feel that the anger she was holding a second ago has not fully evaporated from her thoughts, but happiness is once again front and center. I think knowing that I, indeed, did not write that letter took off some stress Becca was carrying on her shoulders, without even realizing it.

“Beccs, tell me how it was raising Olive on your own.”

She's staring off into the distance when I ask her this. She blinks a few times, with what I assume are tears she's trying to fight off and looks at me. She has this calm smile stretched across her face and she sighs.

“I bet most people think they've got the best kid. But having Liv, I feel like I won the jackpot. She was such a happy child. She smiled so much, as if it was her favorite milestone to reach. She was loving and caring. Beau loved taking her on Saturday strolls in the mornings when he was in town. In

many ways, Beau was a father figure to her. I hope you don't mind me saying that."

I shake my head, remembering the kindhearted friend of mine from high school who would do anything for those he loved. The fact his heart extended out to my daughter makes me feel comforted instead of jealous.

"Liv grew up with a pretty normal life, in all senses of the word. She stayed with my mom while I went to school, and then I'd switch off with my mom, watching both Grant and Liv when I got home. Grant felt like Liv was more of a cousin than a niece, so they have a close bond, even today. It was nice to see him watch out for her as he got older as well. Once she was able to go to school, they went together, although grades apart. But we made it work and the kids didn't seem to struggle in any way.

"I was always honest with her about my love for you and how we were in high school. I did keep that letter away from her though. So today was the first she's ever heard of it. I'm glad that's the case because I don't know if she would have been as welcoming had she seen you knowing that letter existed. I barely wanted to have anything to do with you when I first saw you at my doorstep recently."

She looks down, fiddling with the string on her pajama bottoms.

"Liv took Beau's passing quite hard. She was only a teenager when he became ill, and once we knew it was terminal, she was devastated. But she never showed it. She was so strong for him, going to visit when she had a break from school, always smiling and sitting with him. But when he passed, I saw her strength shine. She continued being that ray of light for everyone who needed it, especially Ellie and Beau's kids. I will forever be grateful for the love Beau gave her because she returned that love tenfold for him and his family when they needed it. That's Liv though. She doesn't hold on to anger or hate. She loves to see peace, and seeing her accept you so openly isn't surprising, yet is quite honorable, if you ask me."

“I can’t help but wonder, Becs—why didn’t you say something sooner, when we first reconnected?”

This question has been gnawing at me all day, and I need to understand why.

“I wish I had a definitive answer for you about that. I guess in some ways, I was protecting myself. From the facts I have now come to know were false, I believed you had written that letter. Plus, what you had written in that letter, as hard as it was to accept, I thought you believed those things of me and, ultimately, of Liv. Also, in some ways, seeing you again woke me up. For so long, I lived my life muted, thinking that I was truly happy. Yes, I felt happiness seeing my children thrive, but when I was home and they were out, I was lonely in so many ways.

“Then, there you were, standing on my doorstep, and I felt like the old me. The Saddle Ridge Rebecca, who was loved by the boy who saw her as his everything. And I wanted to bask in that life for a little while before bursting that bubble. So when you put off talking about the past, I thought you were trying to process things as well. I never imagined you didn’t know about Olive. And I guess, in some way, I thought that once we broached the Olive subject and the letter, you would confirm you said such hateful things, and I didn’t want to walk away from you just yet. I wanted this time together so I could say I felt that endless love again.

“As we kept connecting, I knew the day would come when we’d need to rehash the past. But being on a phone call or FaceTime wasn’t the way I wanted to broach the subject. So I had gone into this weekend knowing we would have to lay everything out. I feared what you’d say, and, in many ways, I feared how upset I would get in return. To feel you leave me again was dreadful. The more we spoke, I insinuated in ways with our conversation, giving you that space to bring her up, but when you didn’t press further, I thought you weren’t ready to talk about Liv.” She sighs and I can tell all of this is still surreal for her.

I kiss the top of her head.

“I am so sorry you lived even a minute thinking I would abandon you. There is nothing I can do about the trajectory that letter took our lives on, but I can promise now you aren’t alone anymore. I’m here, in whatever way you and Olive might need me. I won’t be going anywhere. You’re stuck with me, baby.”

When she turns her head toward me, I smile and wink, getting her smile in return. A hue of pink colors Becca’s cheeks and she seems shy all of a sudden. I give her a kiss, which deepens as I move her to lie down on the couch. My sweet Becca lets me consume her, stealing kisses against her lips and down her neck. She giggles and moves her hands through my hair.

Feeling reconnected to the one person who brightened my life for so long in my past has proven to be the biggest link that was missing in my life. I have been absent for too long, and I will not waste another minute walking away from the women I love because now my heart belongs to two instead of one.

Chapter Thirty-One



Present Day

The next morning, I wake up before Shane and decide to head downstairs to grab some coffee to bring up to bed for us. While letting Betty out to take care of business, I hear footsteps approaching. When I look over, I find Olive walking into the kitchen, seemingly still trying to wake up. She sees me standing at the back door and quickly greets me with a kiss on the cheek.

“Good morning, Mom. Is there coffee?”

She yawns, stretching her arms above her head. I smile toward my girl and ask her to watch over Betty in the backyard while I grab her favorite pod of Nespresso and get something brewing for her. Once my pup is back in the house, Liv pulls out one of the barstools at the kitchen island and waits for her morning fix. She tries to cuddle Betty, but my lap dog wants nothing to do with that trait her breed is known for. She is very independent and would much rather nap in a corner of the room you're in, than hang out in your arms.

The moment I put the coffee down in front of Liv, she takes a big whiff, closing her eyes and enjoying that moment right before she takes her first sip. I still stand in awe of my girl. She's come so far and yet has so much life to live still. She finally looks up after enjoying that first sip, asking a question I knew would come my way sooner rather than later.

“So, are you and Shane together now?”

She isn't judgmental in her inquiry. I can tell by her tone she is simply curious about where this relationship is going.

"Yes, I would say we are. He's always been a person I've loved, and something has come alive again with him back in my life," I respond honestly as I brew my own cup of coffee.

I go to grab my mug and turn back to look at her.

"But I know that this is a huge change for you, and I also need to consider the twins and how this will impact their lives as well."

Liv nods, taking in what I'm saying.

"I thought a lot about it last night when I went to bed, Mom. I have watched you my entire life, navigating so many things to ensure that everyone around you was happy. Even when you were with Hudson, I could see that you gave a lot of yourself to that relationship, but I don't know if you were always happy per se. But when I saw you yesterday, especially after the truth came out about that letter, I saw your layers peeled back. I saw you smile, as if it was for the first time. You look at Shane like he has given you a new purpose in this life. I feel your love radiate off you when you're in the room with him."

I try to interject because I want her to understand I never felt anything but happy when I was with her, Mallory, and Jackson. She puts her hand up, stopping me before any sound comes out of my mouth.

"I know, Mom. You weren't miserable. I know that. It never came off that way. But I can now see, you lived life with a little less color surrounding you. I just feel like you may have been telling yourself that you were okay with the way things had turned out, but having the reassurance that Shane loved you this entire time has sparked something in you. And for that, I am so incredibly happy to see this flourish between you two. You deserve that kind of love."

I smile and I can't help the tears from falling. She was always my little life support, keeping me steady through the years. But she's also been so observant while I tried to carry us

toward balance and peace. It seems I accomplished that for her, but maybe a part of me just never felt truly grounded without Shane. Sometimes we don't notice the impact a person has on our life until they return to steady us. Shane was always my rock and since he left, my foundation had been shaken. But his return stopped the aftershocks, and I couldn't disregard the love my heart held for him.

We hang out in the kitchen, my desire to bring coffee up to bed lost as I continue to chat with my eldest, laughing about some of the dates she's been on recently. Apparently, one guy talked about a woman named Roxy for hours. Liv thought it was his ex-girlfriend, but in a twist, she found out it was his pet parrot that he had to get rid of due to his landlord. That one had me laughing to the point of tears. Poor Liv has not had much luck in the love department but has definitely entertained me with some interesting dates she has experienced.

Soon enough, I hear footsteps coming down the stairs. We both stop with the dating talk when we see Shane walk in, looking amazing as always. I can't stop staring at his movements.

"Mom, here's a napkin. I think there's drool dripping from your mouth. Side note: gross. That's my dad and I'm still taking this whole situation in," Liv says, her little slip-up getting my full attention, despite my apparent drool over my first love.

Shane stops in his tracks. This was the first time Liv had addressed him as Dad, even though it wasn't directly aimed at him, necessarily. We both look at her and she looks at us like we are ridiculous.

"What? He is my dad, right?" She looks at both of us. "Stop staring. It will take some time to get used to, but why fight it?"

She looks toward Shane.

"Is it okay if I address you as Dad?"

She's so formal as she asks this but has a huge smile across her face. He's still standing there. I don't even know if he's breathing. I snap my fingers to get him out of his trance, and he finally blinks a few times. I smile because I can see the pride radiating off his features.

He clears his throat, like a lump is lodged in there with the emotions going through his mind.

“Of course, you can call me Dad.”

He looks at me and smiles, and something about it makes me feel like in the end, everything will work itself out.

* * *

The next day, Liv goes out to meet up with some friends she grew up with, leaving Shane and I to head to the market, preparing for Thanksgiving. I rarely have multiple days off in a row, but prior to Shane coming back into my life, I had started to take call less often between my colleagues, to soak up some time with the twins. I knew from mothering Liv, the teenage years needed that extra attention.

When Olive was growing up, however, I had my mom to be with her. Whenever Liv came home with a broken heart or simply maneuvering her teenage emotions, she always had me or my mom to turn to. Hudson was around, but he was as busy as I was most of the time.

Speaking of Hudson, I think it might be time to rip the band-aid off and get this conversation over with.

“Shane, do you have any questions regarding Hudson and his role in Liv's life?” Shane is grabbing sweet potatoes when I spring this question on him.

He's putting the potatoes in a bag, seemingly processing what I just threw out there. He doesn't seem upset, but he might be apprehensive. No matter how he's feeling, he needs to understand my relationship with Hudson and how he impacted Liv's life. The truth of the matter is, Hudson is part of my life, and he has to get used to that dynamic as well.

“I think that would be good. I just wasn’t sure how to ask in all honesty. I know a bit from what you divulged yesterday, but I just don’t know how prepared I am to hear what a great father he was to her, while I never got the chance.”

We begin walking toward the dairy aisle as we need cheese for my charcuterie board.

“It’s not like that, Shane. Hudson may have come off as arrogant and cold when you met him weeks ago, but he really isn’t that way. Well, he’s arrogant, but he’s very much someone you can count on at the end of the day.”

Shane sighs and I know this isn’t easy for him to process. He moves through the market with me and having the groceries to distract him seems to allow him the space to listen. So I take the opportunity to keep going.

“When I met Hudson, Liv was seven. She was so mature at that age simply because she absorbed so much of the responsibility around the house, trying to help me out. I had met Hudson while I was out with Liv, so we sort of all started this relationship together. My time with Olive was precious for me with my studies all taking center stage so much of the time. So Hudson sort of had to accept that Liv and I were a package deal from very early on.

“Of course, I got to know him on dates with just him and me, but for a lot of our interactions, Liv was there. At first, I wasn’t sure he would be the fatherly type. He came off as this hotshot attorney, but with time, I saw Liv soften him. His love for her was so big, I could see that as much as he fell in love with me, he loved her just as much. They had a good relationship and even after the divorce, she tried not to hold what he had done to me against him. She still speaks to him because he was an integral part of her life for so long.”

Once we check out, we make our way back to my house. Shane is quiet as I speak, nodding here and there, but I can see the pain in his eyes. When we get out of the car, I stop him before he starts grabbing the groceries in the trunk.

“Shane, look at me.”

He takes a few moments to himself but finally points those green eyes my way.

“You have to put yourself in my shoes. I thought you disregarded us with that letter. And for so long I will admit, I waited for you to randomly show up. I thought you’d find us someday and try to reconcile. But when that didn’t happen, I had to live my life in the present, not caught up in the past. I know this isn’t easy, and I can’t guarantee these thoughts for you will ever be easy.

“I loved Hudson. He still is the father of my other children, but you have to understand, I loved him early on because he opened his heart to a child that wasn’t biologically his. He never treated her differently. And for that, despite his infidelity, I will always have love for him.”

Shane puts his hands flat on the felt that lines the trunk of my SUV, resting his weight on his hands. He lets his head hang heavy, and then he speaks.

“Bees, I know and I promise you I am simply processing all this. I think a part of me will always have a *what if* component of my thoughts because I was robbed of something I didn’t realize my heart desired so much. The fact that the woman I never stopped loving got to experience so many special moments that I can never get back, hurts me beyond any words I can use to describe it.

“But the fact that another man got to be the person I was meant to be for my daughter guts me. I know it’s uncontrollable, but it’s still a feeling I must adapt to each time I see them together. I can, however, tell you, I harbor no anger toward you. And I promise, I will not treat Hudson like he’s the bad guy in this scenario. I will learn to accept the past, even if it hurts. Just know I am simply taking it all in, that’s all.”

He pulls me against his chest and embraces me. I inhale what I’ve come to know as that Shane smell, a scent I realize calms me instantly. He’s my home and my everything, rolled into one.

The rest of the evening moves forward with such ease that it feels like we've been going through these motions since we were kids. Our movements simply flow together, much like they had all those years ago. We are simply that in tune with each other. Seeing myself build a life with him seems almost expected because I don't see any part of my future where he isn't by my side.

Chapter Thirty-Two



SHANE

Present Day

I can feel the clamminess in my hands building as I grasp the handles of my airplane seat. We just landed in California, where I plan to confront my mother.

Thanksgiving was three days ago, and I soaked up that time with Olive as best I could before she made her way back to her apartment in Syracuse. The holiday was much calmer than I expected. Once Ellie got the update that I hadn't been the cruel man she thought I was, it was like we were the same friends we had been in high school.

I had known Ellie the longest of everyone at the gathering, and it felt good to have my old friend back. She did, however, take me aside and explain, in vivid detail, how she would castrate me if I hurt Becca ever again.

Even though I was sure that hurting Becca would never be in the cards for me for the rest of my days, I stepped back with her threat. Ellie has a heart of gold, but she's loyal beyond words, and Becca is the center of her world, right along with her children. I made my promise to love Becca and made my way back to the gathering quite quickly.

Hudson and I had some time to talk as well before everyone gathered. We both came clean about how we were feeling toward one another, and I think we can actually be amicable, despite how much hate he spat at my direction at our first encounter. It surprised me to hear him confess that

although he had so much love for Becca, he had broken his vow to love her the way she deserved.

He also recognized that her heart was not fully his from the moment they met, and he still chose to marry her. I think that takes a lot of guts to love knowing that you will never live up to someone else's memory. We were able to interact calmly and cordially when gathering with the rest of the family, and I could see both Becs and Liv visibly calm when they realized Hudson and I would be on good terms.

It was great to see Grace again. She and Rick seem to be very happy up in Syracuse, seeing Liv as often as possible. Grace was quick to forgive the misunderstanding from years ago, but gave me her own version of Ellie's speech, without threatening to cut anything off my body. I assured her that with age came maturity, and I would not allow a misunderstanding to pull Becca and me apart again. She seemed relieved to have me back in their family. I think she, too, noticed that Becca was living her life with all her stars aligned now.

The pilot announces the seatbelt sign is now off, and we can begin to disembark from the airplane. I don't rush to get out of my seat, as the aisle is completely congested.

Becs stays by my side, whispering how much she loves me and that she's here for me. I asked her to take a few more days off to take this trip with me. I needed to confront my mom, but I also needed Becs by my side.

She had sensed, early on, something about my mother that I had ignored for so long. I didn't see the strain my mother imposed on my relationship with Becca. In many ways, my memories of my mother, when I dated Becca, remain untarnished because I truly didn't see what Becca sensed in high school. Maybe Becs can be my anchor during this trip because I feel like what my mother is going to say is going to set me off my axis.

I had reached out to my therapist while in New York, and she scheduled a Zoom session with me before flying out. She was always great at listening, but I really needed a sounding board. She heard what had transpired all those years ago and I

could tell, even through a screen, that her heart broke for me and what had happened between Becca, Olive, and me.

She was great at giving me different perspectives about what my mom might say in response to that letter. She also said that no matter what my mother said, responding with hurtful words, much like that letter had done to Becca, would not solve anything and might cause more stress for me.

The goal is to listen and then process what my mother had to say. Becca agreed, stating that as upset as she was with the potential that my mother caused this, she wanted to hear what she had to say and come to her own conclusion. For her, no matter the reasoning, it wouldn't change the past she had with Liv, nor would we let it change our future together.

We make our way through the airport, our carry-ons the only things we brought with us, as this was a fast trip. We drove straight to my mother's home in Palos Verdes, without a word of our arrival. I didn't want my mother to find an excuse to flee again. I needed to speak to her now so I can find a way to walk forward with a new version of my life ahead.

The moment I ring the doorbell, I hear my mother yelling on the other end. She has a Ring doorbell, but I know her well enough to predict she didn't use the phone to check who was on the other side. She only let me install it to appease me, but never really paid much attention to the technology at her fingertips. I have no idea if she even has push notifications turned on to alert her to my arrival.

The moment she swings the door open, my mother's vibrant smile dissipates, and she's left staring at Becca and me. The shock in her expression is evident the minute she puts two-and-two together that I know about the letter.

There is no other reason I would be here other than to discuss this with her. She is smart enough to deduce what has led to this encounter. And her reaction confirms my theory that she knew I was a father and never told me in all the years we've interacted. It's hard not to react, but I keep myself calm as I stare back at the one person who should have always had my back.

Without saying a word, she opens the door wider and motions with her hand for us to come in. I can't even attempt to crack a smile. I can see Becs by my side, her lips in a firm line, keeping her expression like stone as we enter.

I think as much as Becca was calming me down on the plane, she was keeping her emotions from boiling over. I know she's furious, but I also know her love for me has always been first and foremost. Even in high school, as she recalls it, she simply let my mother give her the cold shoulder, not allowing that to deter Becs from loving me.

We enter and leave our luggage in the foyer. She offers us something to drink, but we both decline. I don't expect to stay long. I think the explanation is all I need at this time. I will need time to process how I feel about her actions.

But most of all, I need to hear her explanation for why she would do such a thing to her only child. Her behavior is unforgivable, but she's also my mother, and I don't know if cutting her out completely will serve anyone any good.

Once we are in the family room, my mother sits across from us. Her house is spotless, as it usually is. She has always kept her house clean and tidy, even when I was growing up. For so long I had accepted this as normal, but now I see it's more sterile than lived in. The cold of her home affected me in a way I hadn't paid attention to before this moment.

"It's great to see—" she begins, but I cut her off and I start with my own words.

"Would you care to explain why I lived for nearly twenty-five years without knowing I had a daughter?"

My mother goes silent, but the look on her face tells me all I need to know. She, without a doubt, knew about the pregnancy. I can tell by the way she barely reacted to the news aside from going still, but her eyes don't look into mine. She is, in all reality, looking everywhere but in my eyes.

My tone is nothing but stern. I'm not shouting at her, but I'm also using a voice I have never used with her. I am

keeping myself as calm as I can because the way I feel broken inside is something she will never fully comprehend.

We sit there, in silence, the tension rolling off all of us, as I wait for a response.

“Shane, I...” she begins but stops.

I think she hasn't found a good way to tell her side yet, and I will not make this easier on her. I stare back at her and wait for her to suck it up and let me know why she impacted not only my life but the lives of two innocent beings I love so much.

“Shane, I'm not sorry for my behavior years ago.”

I see no remorse in her expression, and I honestly don't know who is sitting across from me right now. She's not crying in the way I was expecting. She's stone cold, as if just her simple words would be enough explanation for me to get up from this couch and feel content with her behavior.

“I did what I thought was best for you at that time.”

She looks over at Becca, attempting to explain some of it without truly acknowledging her by name.

“She sent that letter, and it was forwarded to me in Seattle from our Nebraska address. I knew whatever she had shared in that letter was important, but I couldn't bring myself to give it to you. So I opened it and when I read it, I was angry.”

She says this as if her anger was warranted.

“You see, when I got pregnant with you, although your father was great to you when he saw you on occasion, it changed our dynamic. He resented me in some ways as he was limited in what he wanted to do in his life because he had you to care for. He wanted us to travel and do all these things with the Navy. When I told him I was not going to move you around, living in different cities and states every few years, he chose the Navy over you and me. I held so much resentment toward your father for his decision. So when I saw Rebecca's letter, I saw a way to give you the life you had worked so hard for, without causing the inevitable.”

My mother is getting more confident the more she tells this story, as if her explanation makes complete sense.

I look at her, questioning what she means.

“What do you mean the inevitable?”

I spit the words back at her because nothing is coming together in the way she’s imagining for me and my thoughts. Becca squeezes my hand and I’m reminded I need to let her speak freely so I can fully comprehend the way she acted years ago.

My mother inhales, as if she’s exhausted by this conversation. I don’t know what she expected from this interaction, but I’m starting to see my mom in a different light after so many years believing she always wanted what was best for me.

“I knew you two wouldn’t make it if I brought you guys back together. I stand by what I wrote in that letter. By the time she reached out to you, that baby could have been anyone’s.”

Becca takes in a sharp inhale, and I feel her stiffen up beside me. This time I’m the one squeezing her hand to silently tell her I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.

My mom sits up a little straighter, prepared to take on the next leg of the conversation with more confidence.

“Come on, Shane, you can’t be naive enough to believe Rebecca didn’t see other people after you left.”

She says this and I see where the vile words from that letter came from. All these years, I put my mother on a pedestal, and she was simply a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“Mom, what you did goes beyond defiance and disrespect. Becca was pregnant. Becca did give birth. That child turned out to be my daughter. Your granddaughter. And most of all, you stole, not just from Becca and our child, but from me. I am your son, and you simply took away my choice to be with them.”

My voice is rising, and I can't help myself. My mother is delusional if she thinks this is normal behavior. I think, despite this visit being short, I've had enough of this conversation already.

My mom stands by her convictions and scoffs at my words.

“Shane, please. Do you even know the rate of divorce among teen parents? I did you both a favor. And Rebecca did fine for herself. She became a doctor. She married a lawyer. She had other children.”

That stops me in my tracks and that's when I see. She really isn't who I thought she was. So, not only did she interfere in the most deceitful way, but she also kept tabs on Becca and the life she led. This revelation is becoming clearer by the minute, and my heart is breaking in a way I didn't think possible. When this conversation started, I thought remorse was going to be the route my mother would have taken. But it seems she could care less about the way her actions derailed all our lives. She is still confident that she made the right choice. And I think, for that reason, her actions are unforgivable.

I begin to stand, and Becca does the same. But when I look to my side, I see Becs holding back tears. She is looking directly at my mother and within the next second, she has her phone out. She is typing into it, soon pulling up whatever she is looking for.

She turns the phone toward my mother, with trembling hands pointing at the screen, “You know what? I think it's pitiful you still believe your actions were justified all these years later. Because I think you would really love to get to know our daughter. She is kind and strong, and each moment with her has been a gift. A gift you deprived your son of. A gift you deprived our daughter and me of as well. Please take a look at this beautiful person we created. There is no doubt she is Shane's, not that he ever doubted it when we reunited.

“But you, on the other hand, disregarded my love for your son without really getting to know me all those years ago. So

all I can say,” she pockets her phone, “is shame on you. Shame on you for being less for your son who is everything. He looked at you with such love and admiration and how did you repay him? By disregarding a chance to love his own child. What kind of mother does that?”

With that, Becca walks off, detaching her hand from mine, not in an act of anger toward me, but in an act of self-preservation in the presence of what I feel might be pure evil. I look at my mother, shaking my head and looking down.

“I think you were given an opportunity to be great, but you didn’t take it, and now you will end up all alone. You didn’t use anything that happened between you and Dad and try to make it better for Becca and me. You took your broken heart and pushed your feelings of rejection and humiliation upon your son and the love of his life. Shame on you.”

I turn and walk away, and I swear I heard my mom take a breath. I don’t know if it’s remorse or the realization that her actions will now leave her more alone than she had ever been before. But no matter how I look at it, she made a conscious decision that led to so much heartbreak, and our relationship may never recover from this.

Chapter Thirty-Three



REBECCA

Present Day

The next day we decide to soak up the sun and ocean breeze while we have the time. We are returning early tomorrow to New York to continue life together. The fact I am looking at my side and see Shane standing there still feels somewhat surreal. He was, for so long, a part of every wish I made into my cluster of stars above.

We're sitting on the beach, our toes in the sand, watching the surfers and families taking in the beautiful scenery California never fails to deliver.

I have visited California a handful of times since I left the state as a teen. For a long time, it held so much pain for me, but when I'd visit for medical conferences, I tried to change my viewpoint in hopes I would shed that pain that clung to my heart since losing my dad.

It's hard not to look back at the series of events in life and wonder what if. Much like Shane mentioned, trying to figure out how life would be had he not overheard a conversation and taken it out of context. Had he gotten a hold of that letter when I had sent it, so much would have been different. But it's also hard to look at my past and not see the good that rose from the ashes.

That's what's so difficult about all this with Shane. The pain he feels when he sees Liv and all he missed out on breaks me. It also hurts that the heartbreak I endured was all due to

someone with darkness no one predicted could surface from her. But I also have a different outlook, because my life has been a series of tragedies that have also brought some beautiful moments.

My father's death gutted my mother and me, and thinking back on his passing at my young age brings a heaviness to my soul. But with that loss came new beginnings and, for me, it brought me to Shane. Although I suffered when he left, the moments before are some that I treasure deep inside. And from us came Olive.

My little sidekick who brought light on a cloudy day. She was the rainbow that emerged after the storm. From Shane's departure from our lives, I cannot live in that world of what-ifs for too long because I did meet Hudson and had two beautiful children emerge from us as well.

My life has had sadness and heartbreak, but it's also had some of life's most cherished adventures arise. And for that, I can't sit in regret or anger. I am consumed by fullness in a way that I fear Shane may never feel.

As we sit here, our hands behind us, leaning back to enjoy the little warmth the sun carries over our skin with this crisp fall breeze, we are simply existing together, finding a way to write a new story, without letting the ugliness of our past seep into the pages. But I think it's important to recognize that we can feel anger while also feeling happy for what's to come.

What happened to us hurts, but it happened, and we can't go back and change it. The longer we hold on to those wounds, the harder it will be to capture the beauty that surely lies ahead.

I guess all my years of therapy have finally shown the growth I needed. I held onto a lot of resentment toward my father's death and, ultimately, Shane leaving me, so I had to pursue therapy to cope with my feelings.

Having a child changes your perspective on life in so many ways, but the clearest picture I had once Olive was in my arms was that my anger would not benefit either of us moving forward. And now I get to see how my ability to care for my

feelings has helped, especially now, in navigating how I want to move forward with Shane. I need to find a way to fit him into my everyday movements, but still realize that we need time to adjust.

I turn to Shane and find him looking at me.

“What are you thinking about, Becs? I can hear those gears turning in that head of yours. I can’t imagine the last twenty-four hours have been easy to digest. I know I’m struggling.”

He turns his gaze back toward the ocean and I follow, looking at the tide coming in. I inhale deeply, feeling like with each breath I take now, my lungs are a little more open to letting more in. I now feel like the weight on my chest has been lifted after holding on to so much unnecessary baggage.

“I’m trying to figure out a way to move forward, not just for us together, but how to blend that with the twins. I do want them to feel secure in how I choose to move forward with my decisions. They never truly understood much about my life with Olive before because we shielded them. The most they knew was that Hudson wasn’t biologically Olive’s father. But aside from that, we always treated the kids equally, which wasn’t hard, as Liv was much older by the time the twins were able to form memories of us all living together.

“I think that when we’re just us, without Mallory and Jackson, I want to focus on how we can grow together now that we are in a different place in life. But when the twins are with me, I need you to understand there’s going to be some time for adjustment. I don’t want you to be upset if they take some time to warm up to you. I don’t think they saw Hudson and me getting back together, but they may have felt like their world wasn’t rocked much lately because Hudson and I co-parent well. I just want to ensure they feel protected and grounded as you and I navigate this new journey together.”

I sit up, now my fingers playing in the sand between my legs, waiting to hear what he has to say.

“Look, Becca, I know you’re a mother first. Do I love that I can’t just mold myself to the life you’ve built with no barriers? Not at all. I feel like each second I missed, I have to

try to salvage that now that we're back together. But I understand that life is messier now. You have a family that goes beyond me and what we have with Olive. But I want you to know I'm not going anywhere. Noah said I can still crash at his place, but I'm thinking of finding a place of my own, maybe in Noah's building. That way it's not too far from you so I can see you when the twins are in school or whenever you have a break from work. My work is done remotely, and my travel schedule is minimal compared to what it was.

“So I'm here to stay, and I want to find a way to move forward. But I would like to know that I could hopefully become a part of your life with your twins, in whatever capacity you and Hudson agree upon. I want to be there for you and for them, in whatever way I can. I may not be a father who got to raise his child, but I have love to give, and I want the chance to show you I want forever for us.”

He puts my hand in his and brings it to his lips. He places a small kiss against my skin, and I try to memorize the feeling of his touch because for so long I could only dream of it. My love for him goes beyond what I thought possible after so many years apart.

We sit at the beach to watch the sunset, then begin to head back to Shane's house. He was talking to me about selling the place but has decided to rent it out.

Janine, his assistant, already has someone scheduled to put his personal items in storage, but the location is great for Airbnb, so he's chosen that route to move forward. When we walk in, take-out in hand, we sit at the kitchen table. We begin to devour our meal, but so much still needs to be discussed, so I decide to put it all out there for him.

“Listen, I heard what you had to say regarding bringing our lives together. I actually have spoken to Hudson about when I could start having you around the twins in a more permanent capacity. We decided that at first, you coming around to be with us for meals or activities might be the best way to start. Maybe giving the kids some time to adjust to me being in a relationship, making sure we're moving toward a

stable relationship in the long run, would be best to ensure they're not confused in case things don't work out."

Shane looks up from his meal, a confused expression crossing his face, but he doesn't interrupt me.

"I think if the past has proven anything, it's that nothing is set in stone. So I think for all of our sakes, we need to tread lightly, especially when kids are involved. I want you to get to know the twins, and I think you'll get along swimmingly. But I want to really make sure we are in this for the long haul."

I take a bite of my food and watch as Shane slowly puts his utensils down and makes his way over toward my seat. He pulls my chair out and gently pulls me up. Without hesitation, he grabs me and puts me over his shoulder, slapping my ass as he walks us toward his bedroom.

He places me on the bed, and I look up at him, curious about where his mind is right now. He removes his shirt, and my mind goes blank. What were we just talking about again?

He moves over me like a lion assessing his prey.

"Becs, I think it's cute you're talking about us like it's a *maybe* thing when you know it's a *sure* one. It's always been you, baby, and I don't see how you don't recognize that already. I may have had a life between now and the time I left you, but those years were nothing in comparison to this short time we've gotten back together. You bring air to my lungs, and no one has compared to you."

He leans in to kiss me and I'm a goner. My breathing accelerates as I feel his fingers move along the side of my body, grazing my ribs, down my hips, and move their way to the middle, undoing the button of my jeans. I feel his length against me, and I can't help the way my hips move, trying to relieve the ache between my legs.

"Always so eager. It's good to see some things never change."

He winks at me, then proceeds to pull my jeans down my body. He leaves my panties on and takes a bite of my thigh. I look down at him, more turned on than I've ever felt. I need

his touch like I need my next breath, and he is driving me wild right now.

“Shane, I need you,” I say in a whisper, but it sounds like a plea at this point.

He gives me that smirk but doesn't do anything to answer my request.

“Oh, my sweet Becs, I'm going to cherish this body right now because it's just the two of us, and I need to savor you while I can.”

He brings his ascent toward my abdomen, trailing kisses along the way. Each kiss feels like a jolt of electricity moving across my skin. He and I are magnetic, and the charge between us brings me alive. I try moving so I can sit up and wrap myself around him, but he puts his strong hand against my chest, keeping me on my back, torturing me while I await more from his body against mine.

Soon he's trailing kisses down my lower abdomen, and he starts to say, “I want to kiss every little mark on this body that signifies the life you brought into this world while I was away. You are remarkable, Becs, and you should be loved wholeheartedly. I love all the changes that have touched your body because they are signs that you carried our love with you throughout the years.”

He finally begins to pull my underwear down, still too slow for my liking, and the moment he has them completely off, he brings his face to my center. I can feel his breaths taunting me as each part of my body is on fire for him.

He looks up at me.

“Becs, look at me.”

I comply and am immediately rewarded with his tongue on my center. My head falls back and the moan I let out is loud and raw. Every bit of him that I feel lights me on fire, and I need him more with each touch. Soon, though, I feel his absence as he pulls away.

I look down, whimpering as I do.

“I told you to look at me while I’m eating you out. This is my pussy and no one else’s. Do you understand, sweetheart?”

I nod, eager to get him back to where he was, capturing me and taking me toward my ecstasy. He obliges and returns to my center. I keep my eyes focused so that he doesn’t lose connection with me due to my need to lay back and sink deeper into this euphoric feeling of Shane taking over my body.

Soon enough, I lose control, my hips moving as he strokes me with his tongue, and I feel my orgasm take over. He is relentless, taking over my body in a way I never thought possible.

I see stars and when I blink my eyes open, he’s there. Somewhere along the way, he took his clothes off, while I lay there half-dressed.

“I think you need to catch up,” he says to me while pulling my top over my head. Soon we are skin to skin, and I can’t keep my hands off the hard planes of muscle across his chest and abdomen.

I graze my fingers across his tattoo that reminds him of me and kiss his inked skin. Soon my hands are moving lower, the destination reached when I grab his hard cock and begin to stroke.

Shane is soon closing his eyes, mumbling, “Fuck, Becs, I need to be inside you.”

I keep up with my strokes, taunting him the way he did me for a bit, but soon, our desire wins out and he positions himself at my entrance. The moment I feel his crown begin to enter, I grab his face and kiss him, hard. I taste me on his lips and it drives me wild. I don’t want this to be slow between us. I need him fast and hard. He can tell I’m desperate for him.

The moment he’s fully seated inside me, I feel complete. He’s the missing link in my soul. Without him, I could walk this world, but I was always feeling incomplete in some way. Now I can tell how much my life was lacking without him by

my side. He begins to move, and I feel waves of pleasure all around me.

I feel like each touch with his lips ignites something inside me, and each pump of his cock wakes up a part of me that has been dormant for too long. We are wild for one another tonight, and the way he's moving in and out of me shows how much he needs me as much as I need him.

“Fuck, Shane. Harder. Please, fuck me harder.”

“Come for me again, Becs. I want to feel you strangle my cock.”

Those words take me over the edge, and I explode. It feels as if all my emotions are rising to the surface with my orgasm. I'm panting, trying to even my breaths while also savoring the feel of him as he follows with his own release. I feel him come inside me, and he begins to slow his movements as I relish the feeling of him connected to me for a little longer.

After we've cleaned up, we are laying with my head on his chest, feeling his breaths move my head up and down. They're even and calm. We're both basking in this moment, feeling complete in so many ways. So much has led to this moment, and I am absorbing everything that has happened in the short time we've been reunited. I look up at him, my chin resting over his heart. His eyes are slits, fighting sleep, and nearly succumbing to slumber.

“I love you, Shane. I hope you know, my heart has always belonged to you.” I mean it. As much as I learned to love Hudson, no love is as earth-shattering as the one I felt to my core with Shane. My love for him never had to be learned, it was always part of the fabric of my soul.

Chapter Thirty-Four



REBECCA

Present Day

Once we're back in New York, I feel like life goes full steam ahead. Work is nonstop, and I feel like I am struggling to take a moment for myself. Each second of the day is consumed by my patients and children. But on those rare occasions where I'm not called in for a delivery, or my kids are off at a friend's house or with Hudson, Shane and I steal those uninterrupted moments to simply connect, together.

Christmas just passed and I'm trying to soak up the holiday decor before it's all replaced by hearts and Valentine's throughout the city. I couldn't have asked for a better time with Shane and the kids, all gathered together to open presents on Christmas morning. We stuck to our plan, Shane coming by here when the twins were with me, but not having him spend the night at this point in our relationship.

Apparently, on weekends when I have dedicated time with Mallory and Jackson, Shane has been going upstate to see Liv. They've formed an easy bond together. They talk daily and seeing his face light up when she texts him fills me with such joy, I don't know how I went so long telling myself she was fine without him in her life.

Shane is meeting me for lunch today. It's New Year's Eve and the twins are headed to stay with my parents and visit with Olive while they're soaking up the last few days of break. This gives me some time to take a breath and prepare for the

madness to return once our school schedule is back and running.

Shane arrives, trying to remove the snowflakes in his hair. While he moves through the restaurant, he catches the eyes of women and men as he heads toward me, clearly on a mission.

He oozes confidence, much like he did in that hallway years ago at our little high school in Nebraska, although now his hair has some grays along the temples. It blends due to his dirty blond hair, and it suits him. His sexiness seems to improve with age. He smiles toward me and I can feel my body heat. The things this man does to me. I smile back, knowing that everything about him is mine, and I feel that pull toward him like I always do.

“Hello, beautiful.” He kisses me on the lips. “You ready to marry me today?”

I roll my eyes and he chuckles, this question becoming his new greeting to me each time he sees me. Even with the twins around, he whispers it in my ear just for me to react to it. Each time my response is the same, with an eye roll and a scoff.

He gives me a smirk that holds way too much mischief in it, and I can’t help but wonder if he’ll ever be serious about it. He knows I want a proper proposal at some point, as I was robbed of that with him before. We had talked about it when we were teens, and I wonder if he even remembers those late-night chats under the stars.

We lay here, two teens in love, soaking up the nighttime summer in Nebraska, in the bed of his truck, looking up at the stars. My eyes gravitate toward the cluster of stars that seem to shine brighter than the rest. Much like my heart, those stars shine as if they’re the center of the universe, much like my love for Shane. I take a deep breath, and I can feel Shane shift by my side.

“What are you thinking about, Becs?”

He brings his hands over my head and starts to stroke my hair. I could fall asleep from the feeling of bliss right now in his arms.

“I guess I’m thinking of forever,” I say, a soft smile painting my face.

“Tell me what forever looks like for you.” He continues to move his fingers through my hair and as much as I want to tell him my story, I also just want to close my eyes and sleep all night in his arms.

I feel him poke my side, and I react.

“Hey, no tickling. Don’t play dirty,” I whine.

“Then tell me more about this forever business.” He eggs me on, and I know he will stop at nothing to hear my thoughts.

“I dream about us together after you finish your time in the Navy, and I am a full-fledged doctor. I can see myself in a white coat and a purple stethoscope around my neck, Shane.”

I look at him and beam my big smile toward him. He does the same in return as if he envisions the same future I do.

“Go on, baby. Let me hear more.” He encourages me and I feel so comfortable, that I let it all out.

“I see you going down on one knee and holding out a little purple box because it’s my favorite color. Inside you’ll have a ring that was made for me. But the most special part about it is the engraving that you put in there. I can’t tell you what it says because some things you’ll have to think of yourself.”

I notice a smile spread across his face when I say this.

“I see my swollen belly with your baby growing inside me. I can see you with a child up on your shoulders while I push a stroller around. I think we’ll have three kids, all little replicas of us running around. I hope one of them is a girl that has you wrapped around her finger.”

My smile begins to widen even more as I imagine this time in our lives when we can be together in such a way, building our forever.

“I see us at their graduations. I see us at their weddings. I see us growing older together. Maybe getting some land and building right here in Saddle Ridge one day. I see it all, so clearly, that I could almost touch it. But most of all, I see the

man I've always loved by my side. I see love in your eyes as you look at me, even when we're old and gray. I see so much more than I thought possible because, with you, there's no limit. You bring me forever, Shane, in ways I never thought possible."

He pushes me to lay completely on my back, my head now resting on the small pillow instead of on his chest. He looks me in the eyes, and I feel how much love he has for me in just that stare alone. He kisses me softly.

"Becs, I'd go up to the sky and get that cluster of stars if it meant you'd give me that reality to live. You are what makes my heart beat, and I will always love you."

I blink as I pull myself from that memory from so long ago. Shane is seated across from me. The server has come around, leaving a glass of water for him. Shane pulls a menu onto his phone using the QR code, squeezes my hand across the table, and gives me a wink. Before I can say much else, I hear her footsteps approaching before I see her.

Shane looks up to find, what I assume from the huffing and puffing, is a frazzled Ellie.

"I swear, even on my holiday break, this asshole finds a way to make my life hell."

She plops down beside me and leans in to kiss my cheek. She then waves toward Shane, and he nods his head in acknowledgement.

She continues, "I cannot believe the arrogance that radiates off this dick of a parent. So what if he's some big-time hockey player? Or shall I say was. Does he not understand sports do not factor in how the children are seen in class? I love all my students and I work very hard to ensure they are well cared for when they're in the classroom with me. He is nitpicking everything I do. Plus, this is elementary school, for fuck's sake. This isn't Harvard. Actually, I doubt the Harvard professors deal with this type of arrogance on a daily basis."

"Geez, Ellie, I hope that's not the vocabulary you bring to the classroom, or I might have to side with the guy," Shane

says, and Ellie shoots daggers across the table.

I can tell she's contemplating throwing her utensils across the table, and I put my hand up to try and calm her down.

"Shane doesn't get girl code yet," I respond.

I direct my gaze to Shane, "You just nod and agree and simply say, 'what a dick,' where you can. No judgment at this table. Read the room, sweetie."

I wink at him, and he just looks at me, like I'm crazy to appease Ellie's complaints. But he goes back to the menu, probably feeling like understanding women is not something he is going to try and decode at the moment.

I turn my full attention to Ellie and hand her my water. She probably needs something stronger, but I don't have much else to offer until the server returns.

"What happened?"

"Great question. Xander Christianson happened!"

Right then, Shane drops his phone, looking at Ellie like she's got three heads.

"What?" my best friend asks my boyfriend.

"Your student's father is *the* Xander Christianson? Does Career Day happen at your school? I would love to meet him," he says and then starts looking around the restaurant, for what I assume is the server.

Ellie's mouth hangs open as if she's surprised Shane is fanboying over who she considers to be the biggest prick she's ever interacted with, and I doubt she's talking about his hockey stick.

"You know what, Shane, I was just feeling like we could go back to the friends we were, but now you're out of the circle of trust."

She grabs a piece of bread from the complimentary basket sitting on the table and makes a huge show of taking a large bite. She squints her eyes, chewing on her bread and using her free hand to point into her eyes and then directing those same

two fingers back toward Shane, as if telling him she's watching him.

Shane's head falls back, and he laughs, loud, and I can see Ellie's usually composed persona crumble a bit. She is definitely wound tight, poor thing. She's usually incredibly calm, but something about this guy is really getting under her skin. Gone is that happy-go-lucky friend of mine.

"Have you met him in person yet?" I ask, grabbing a piece of bread myself.

She's about to answer when the server arrives. We put our order in, and Ellie continues on as if we never got interrupted. My friend is still one to talk a mile a minute.

"That's the thing. The guy is constantly emailing me to intervene in some way, telling me how to do my job better. But does he come onto campus to talk to me? Of course not! When school started, my student's aunt came to the orientation and Back-to-School Night, explaining that her brother, said douchebag, was out of town for work. He's like those online trolls, constantly bothering me, but not coming out from behind the comfort of his computer to show his face. I bet he looks like a troll too. If he was a hockey player, doesn't that mean he has missing teeth and all?"

She's attempting to calm her nerves by breathing slowly through her nose and out through her mouth.

Shane chimes in, "Umm, it depends if you think this is what a troll would look like."

He points his phone in her direction, and I immediately sense a shift in her. She pulls the phone out of Shane's hands and inspects the photo.

"What is it, Ellie?" I ask.

She's not paying any attention to her surroundings, while she zooms into the photo to inspect it further.

"I've gotta go!" she says, tossing Shane his phone back, and quickly getting up and putting on her jacket and beanie to beat this winter weather we've got in New York right now.

“What do you mean? We just ordered,” I say, protesting the fact that I was looking forward to this time together.

“I know, but I just realized I forgot to do something, and I have to take care of it before tonight. I’m so sorry, Becca. I promise to make it up to you. Here’s some money for my food,” she drops a twenty on the table, “and you can keep the meal for yourself.”

She blows kisses toward me as she’s already rushing out of the restaurant. I look over at Shane and he just shrugs. I grab his phone, which Ellie tossed on the table, and inspect the photo. It’s then I see a familiar face.

I guess he used to be a famous hockey player, but he seems like someone I have seen before, yet I still can’t place where. I let it go, hoping it comes to me later. I’ve never been a hockey fan, but maybe I’ve seen him on ESPN while Shane has watched the sports highlights.

After lunch, Shane and I walk a little, window shopping, while I’m trying not to freeze to death. Once my teeth begin chattering to the point of no return, Shane calls it a day, and we grab a cab to my place.

Shane is still in search of a place to rent, so he’s been with Noah or staying upstate to visit with Liv when he can. Because I have my place to myself tonight, he’ll be heading over to stay a few days with me. I emptied some space in my drawers and closet for him, as it’s not convenient to keep bringing items over to stay the night.

Since I was able to introduce Shane, as my friend, to the twins at Thanksgiving, he’s been coming around more often so they can get to know him. I’ve since told them that we are together and that Shane is Liv’s father.

Their reaction was as expected, with them both saying, “Gross, Mom. You’re too old to be dating.”

But then they were very accepting of us together, seeing how happy I was around Shane. I think they also liked that I wasn’t bothering them to clean up their room as much because

I was too busy letting my heart grow now that Shane was back in my life. Either way, I consider this a win.

Once we are back home, we cuddle with Betty on the couch, grabbing some popcorn and starting a movie. I was never one to do much on New Year's Eve, although for my entire adult life, I have had children to care for. Liv and I used to do exactly this; cuddle on the couch and binge-watch movies.

Sitting on the couch, his arm extended behind my back, he pulls me closer to him. Betty, being the traitor she is, snuggles next to Shane's other side, giving me the side-eye, as if I'm encroaching on her man and not the other way around.

Can dogs give you a side-eye? If not, I just found the first canine that can. My dog doesn't even like to cuddle, but with Shane, she's a whole other creature. I get where she's coming from though; he's pretty spectacular, if I do say so myself.

We settle and soon enough, I wake up to darkness outside and the television changed to one of the stations that features the ball drop. I look around, not finding Shane by my side, but I'm tucked under a blanket, and a pillow is now resting under my head. I cannot believe I fell asleep like that. I get up, in search of the one man I want to kiss at midnight.

I go into the kitchen where I find him making a meal and lighting some candles at the table.

"What are you doing?" I say to him, and he looks up, his smile growing as I enter the room.

"Well, a new year is upon us. I thought I'd start off with a farewell dinner for one of the best conclusions to a year I've had in some time."

The smile that spreads across my face is easy, and I feel like everything is coming together in a way I had given up on.

I sit down and we talk until it nears midnight. We move back toward the couch, Betty long forgetting the festivities, and Shane fills our champagne flutes. We count down, each number feeling like a push toward so much more than a new

year. It feels like the start to all new memories together. My smile brightens as we countdown.

“Three...two...one...Happy New Year!” we yell to one another and embrace.

He kisses me and I open, feeling him slide his tongue in my mouth. We kiss like we're teens again, and I can't get enough of him.

We break apart when we hear our phones ping with our loved ones sending well wishes for the new year, and I can't help but smile at how right this all feels. My three kids take a selfie with my mom and Rick. Their smiles are bright, and I treasure the three of them together so much. My mom and Rick look at ease and content as well, which is all I can ask for, as I remember all too well when my mom's eyes harbored so much sadness.

I smile toward Shane again, and the smile he returns to me flips me on my axis in such a beautiful way. A long time ago, the boy I loved left me. He left believing that I was better off without him. But until recently, I have lived half-awake to the happiness this world could offer. I was living this life, walking through it like I was missing a limb. But he returned, and he has brought me back to life. He has completed me in a way I never expected.

My love for Shane never wavered, even when I thought the worst of him. So I stand before him knowing that we've walked separate paths, but they all led back to one another.

Epilogue



One Year Later

A little over a year ago, my life looked very different. I worked to live each day, but I can't really say I lived every day to the fullest. I lived to get through it, and I guess I walked this earth in search of her everywhere, without even knowing it. Since I found Becca again, all the puzzle pieces have come together.

I stand in our kitchen, prepping a big surprise for my girl. And yes, it's now *our* kitchen. I moved in with Becs and the twins about four months ago. When we approached a year after reuniting with one another, we decided to have the conversation about living together. We spoke to Hudson to ensure he was comfortable with our new arrangement, then proceeded to get the green light from the twins. It felt like it was the natural progression of things.

Mallory and Jackson are in the other room right now, putting together the finishing touches of my plan. Although they have had many teenage mood swings I've had the pleasure of experiencing, when I told them my plan for tonight, they jumped at the opportunity to help. Olive went out to grab one last part I need before Becs returns from the hospital. Becca had to cover a colleague today at the office, and a patient went into labor. The delay has worked in my favor.

My relationship with the twins is going smoothly. I think there was some time we all needed to adjust, but they never treated me with hostility, and I never tried to treat them like I was their father. I help where I can, and it seems Jackson is trusting me more with questions relating to some stuff at school. I like having this connection with them, especially as Liv and I missed out on this while she was growing up.

I think the relationship I am most surprised about has been with Hudson. For all the anger he had toward me, once he realized I truly was here to add to Becca and Liv's lives, he opened up to me. It's hard to see his gaze linger on Becca the way it does at times, but I think it's more out of regret for treating her poorly than being in love with her.

I once asked him why he never went searching for me when he found out who I was from Becca. He confided that he almost did, but a part of him didn't want me to ruin what he had with Becca while they were together. Plus, he knew that Becca wasn't wanting to find me, thinking my feelings written in that letter were true. He honored her wishes, and he feels like things evolved the way they were supposed to.

He told me how it was watching Liv grow up, and I see that he brings happiness to her life that they both hold close to their hearts. I appreciate what he did for both of my girls as they were getting through life the best they knew how. We can be cordial together, and when I confided in him about my plans for tonight, he was completely supportive of it.

I gather the last few items from the kitchen and make my way toward the family room. It's perfect. We moved the furniture out of the way and put blankets all around. The projector is pointed toward the ceiling, just the way I envisioned. I smile as I take it all in.

I hear the key in the door, and soon Olive comes around the corner, purple roses in her arms.

"Dad, these are not easy to find. How did you order these?"

She pulls her beanie off, the winter really showing us it's here to stay a bit longer as the snow is falling down outside.

Hearing her call me Dad still causes me to pause. Since Becca and I parted ways all those years ago, I never imagined I'd have a child of my own. I envisioned so much of this when I was with Beccs in high school, and I let go of that possibility as I got older.

I never truly felt a connection with another woman in that way. Now that I get to grow this relationship with my daughter, seeing her embrace me with open arms is something I never take for granted.

She puts the flowers down, and I arrange them where I think Becca will like them.

“Thanks for getting these, sweetie. They're perfect. I had to order them a while ago, and I almost had to resort to fake ones. But the florist called a few days ago and somehow got a hold of some for me.”

Everything is set. I get a text from Beccs that she's headed home. Mallory hugs me around my waist, Jackson fist-pumps me, and Liv kisses my cheek. They run upstairs, but before they're out of view, Liv looks over.

“She's going to love it, Dad. I promise.”

She gives me a full smile, dimples and all, and my heart skips a beat. She's the perfect mix of her mother and me, and I feel like the luckiest guy around to be a part of my daughter's life.

I can't sit still waiting for Beccs to make it home. I'm fiddling with the projector and making sure everything is in its correct place.

I hear the door open and close, Becca complaining about the weather as she removes all her layers. I move to the bottom of the stairs, and soon she turns around to see me greeting her.

I'm waiting with a few of the purple roses in my hands, and I move forward to hand them to her and give her a kiss on her lips.

I can feel her smile against my lips, and the moment we pull away from one another, she asks, “What's all this? It's not an anniversary, is it?” I shake my head and smile.

“No, Becs. I just wanted to surprise you.” I lead her to the other room where everything is ready for her. The room is dark, aside from a few candles and the projector, lighting the ceiling with a million stars. Front and center of the projection are the cluster of stars that have always been ours, and I hear her suck in a breath. I look over to find her eyes pooled with tears.

“Come on, baby. Let’s lay down together like we did when we were kids.”

I grab her hand and I feel it trembling a bit. We get situated on our backs; our gaze directed to the ceiling. I make sure I have the remote for the projector and speakers in my hand as we lie side-by-side. She rests her head in the crook of my armpit, hugging my side, but keeping her gaze on the ceiling.

“I think this year has been the best one yet, wouldn’t you agree?”

I ask her as we lay there and soak in the projected stars. I feel her nod her head, but I can tell she’s too full of emotions to say much else. I begin to mess with the controller, first getting the music to turn on, playing my girl’s favorite nineties hip-hop, then the first image projects onto our indoor version of the night sky.

“Oh my gosh. Who styled me back then?” Becca says while she laughs with tears soaking my shirt. I can’t help but chuckle with her, as a picture of us from school stares back at us. I press the buttons, the whole sky beginning to fill with years’ worth of photos.

I include photos of us from every year of high school. Long summer days mixed in with cold winter nights. All the images include some of our favorite memories and people along the way. I keep going to include moments when she didn’t have me by her side, but memories, nonetheless, that signified beauty in her life.

Some of her pregnancy with Liv, which I cherish, along with baby photos of the twins with an excited big sister Olive holding them. I include photos of her in medical school and her graduation.

All the moments that led to this one right here. There are many times in our relationships when I find myself wondering what my life would be like if I went down another path. But I think that life is filled with *if onlys*, and we can't be caught up in that or we will miss so much of the *now* happening all around us.

At some point during the slideshow, Becca moves all the way on her back to keep her neck from cramping, and it gives me the opportunity to pull out the little velvet box from my pocket. She's so focused on the images that I just watch her take it all in.

Once there are no more photos to share, she looks over, "Is that every—" and stops when she sees me moving up onto one knee.

She sits up and then she gets on both her knees. We are looking directly at one another, nearly at the same height, and I realize how much of a team we really are.

"Beccs, the moment I saw your gorgeous eyes look up at me in that hallway all those years ago, I saw forever with you. And even though life threw us a couple of curveballs, when I reunited with you, I saw all my twists and turns in life align themselves because you are the only compass I need to navigate this world. You are the cluster of stars that keep my focus. You are the person I see growing old with. But most of all, I see everything when I look at you."

I open the purple velvet box to reveal a cushion-cut solitaire, one that looked like her the moment I saw it in the display case. I remember when she envisioned my proposal, and I leaned into that memory to make tonight special. I always kept those details in my mind, hoping to one day make right for something I let go so wrong.

"Beccs, will you do me the honor of walking the rest of this life together with me? Be my wife, Becca."

The tears are flowing down her cheeks and she's nodding, unable to get words out.

Soon I hear her croaked voice say, “Yes,” and I embrace her, kissing her a million times and telling her how much I love her in between.

I pull away and place the ring on her finger. She stares at it, almost in disbelief. Then she pulls the ring off, checking the inside. When she sees it, she looks up at me, softly saying what is engraved inside the ring: *If Only You Knew*.

“If only you knew how much my heart belongs to you,” I say to her.

She nods and puts the ring back on.

The twins and Olive come barreling down the stairs, hooting and hollering their congratulations. Liv has tears coming down her cheeks, and I see her smile expand as she looks at me. She nods her head slightly, as if she is trying to tell me I did good. I hug each of them and thank them for helping me make this happen.

Becca returns her gaze to me and soon she’s hugging me again.

“I love you more than I thought possible, Shane Philips.” She pulls herself away enough to look me in the eyes. I bring my hands to her cheeks, “Not as much as I love you, Mrs. Philips.”

From the moment I saw Becca in that high school hallway, I knew she was my path to forever. Little did I know, our path would have roadblocks, but it all led to this very moment. We’ve made it, with heartbreak, tears, loss, and irreversible consequences.

When I look at her, I see my future, but I also see my past. I’m tired of fighting what should have always been. She is my love and my everything, and I won’t go a day without proving it to her for all the years to come.

The End



Thank you for reading *If Only You Knew*. It's because of your support I could get this story out there in the world. If you can take a moment to review my book, it would mean the world to me. xoxo - Stefanie

Also by Stefanie Castro

Want to know what happens between Elody and Xander? Keep an eye out for book 2 in the *If Only* Series, ***If Only You Fell***, coming March 5, 2024. Preorder [here](#).

And of course, I would never leave Grant and Laney's story behind. Their story will be book 3 of the *If Only* Series, ***If Only You Hurt***, coming June 4, 2024. Preorder [here](#).

About the Author



Stefanie Castro is a Registered Nurse, certified doula and yoga instructor. She specialized in the field of obstetrics and loves everything about her career. She is a first-generation Brazilian American and is fluent in Portuguese and Spanish. Stefanie is a wife of 17 years and mother to her son and daughter, along with her very rambunctious Cavalier King Charles dog. Her favorite foods are popcorn and sushi. She is also very excited about Christmas and begins plotting her next year's decor on December 26th. Stefanie has started two bookclubs and is avidly reading whenever she has a free moment in her day. She loves to cuddle on the couch with her dog, along with a great book and a cup of tea.



Acknowledgments

If I'm being completely transparent, this story was not something I saw coming. In 2021, after I finished writing my memoir, Becca and Shane kept creeping into my thoughts. I wrote down some story ideas into my Notes app and left it be for two years as I got through publishing my first non-fiction book. The moment I published the memoir, these characters came to the forefront of my thoughts. What did I do? I wrote, then I wrote, and then I wrote some more until the story came together. I wrote this story in a total of three weeks and it honestly poured out of me in a way I never thought possible. Becca and Shane were two characters I felt drawn to write about and I was pulled towards their love for one another as I wrote each chapter.

Writing a fictional story was significantly different for me compared to my memoir. This process was fun, added with it many twists and turns that made it hard to stop the words from coming out of me.

If there is someone that is solely responsible for motivating me to get this story written, it's Joanna. I still remember sitting on the phone with you the moment I was officially a published author and explained the storyline that kept calling to me in this universe with Shane and Becca. What started off as a few paragraphs, evolved with messages from you at the end of each chapter demanding more. The fact that those little moments have led to one where we can both hold the book in our hands is quite remarkable. You are my cheerleader, much like you've always been my entire life. You continue to be a part of me much like Ellie and Becca are to one another. The love I feel for you goes deep, sissy. I love you.

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pushed me to reach this goal, instead of keeping me from accomplishing it. That's what a true partner does and it's not something that goes unnoticed. Thank you for keeping me laughing and allowing me to laugh at myself whenever I take life too seriously.

Although my kids are way too young to read this, I want them to know that they are my reason for aiming higher in my life. I hope you see that even if it seems hard, striving for what might feel like an impossible task is worth it. You two make me so proud to be your mom and I can only hope I do the same for you as your mother.

For those who don't know, Betty was written in honor of my late dog, Aspen. My late pup was my first baby and we lost her two years ago. She was strong, the Queen of the household, and the perfect fur baby. She, like Betty, would huff and puff when she didn't like something, and was very much a lover of my husband over me. She is missed daily and writing her into this story was a way for me to keep her memory alive.

To my Beta readers: Allie, Chelsea, Joanna and Noelle—you four kept me going, were amazing at making sure the story flowed, and gave me the motivation I needed to keep this project moving in the right direction. You have come through for me in ways that really makes me proud to call you my friends. I am beyond grateful and I know I wouldn't be here, with a new book to hold, if it weren't for your feedback.

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My Banana Bookclubbers: you ladies make me laugh so much. You've all stolen a piece of my heart and I am so happy I have now gotten to meet you all in person after years of having virtual meetings. You've brought a new element of fun to these monthly calls discussing books and everything life has thrown at us.

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To my ARC readers, it's because of you that reviews are put out there and the word gets spread about my work. Thank you for taking a leap with a new author and giving my story the time to be read and reviewed. You are a part of this incredible journey and I am so appreciative for your dedication to see authors thrive.

Lastly, but certainly not least, to all my readers for giving me purpose in the writing world. This was a little story I never thought I'd take past my own thoughts. Now I'm here with a whole published novel that I am so proud to put out into the world. Thank you so much and your support is something I feel blessed to have.

If You Only Knew

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