

AJ RANNEY

Imperfectly
YOURS



HALF MOON LAKE SERIES

Imperfectly Yours

Half Moon Lake Book Three

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*To all the Tina's out there.
Keep spreading your joy and sunshine!
There will always be someone who needs it.*

Chapter One



TINA



“OW, TEDDY. STOP PULLING MY HAIR.” I hoisted my four-year-old son higher on my hip. The bulky life vest he wore made the task a little awkward. “You know I don’t like that.”

“I sorry.”

Maybe he was. But it wouldn’t stop him from doing it again. We’d had a good day, the three of us, with minimal crying and pouting. Now I hoped to make it home without another tantrum.

Doing my best to hold on to my patience, I set him on the seat at the back of the boat.

“Mom?” Behind me, my daughter was probably still sitting on the cushions at the front of the boat. It was her favorite spot.

Teddy tugged at his Puddle Jumper, trying to free an arm. “Imma take this off now?”

Luckily, he didn’t know how to get himself out of it. He wasn’t a fan of the water and had no interest in getting in the

lake, but that didn't stop me from ensuring that he was strapped in tight while on the boat.

“Not until we're off the pier. Remember?” I tapped the turtle on the front of the floatie. “You love Thomas the turtle. You don't want him to be sad, right?”

He looked down, contemplating my question, and huffed. “Okay.”

“Mom, I can't find it.” Callie's voice rose two octaves.

I turned, finding her wide, tear-filled eyes on me. I wasn't sure what had happened in the last five minutes to cause this reaction, but with Callie, I had to piece together what caused her emotional swings. Just last week, she burst into tears at the park because a little boy was playing with army men.

I glanced over my shoulder at Teddy. He was still sitting, waiting patiently for me, so I took a deep breath and headed for my daughter. We'd had two good hours on the lake, but now that we were back at the dock, I was ready to get off this boat.

I took her hands in mine and kept my voice calm. “Callie, look at me, baby. What's wrong?”

“I can't find my bracelet.” Her eyes swung from me to the cushion beside her to the floor, then back to the cushion like she hoped it would magically appear. “I lost it.”

“It's okay.” She had it when we got on the boat, so it had to be here somewhere. “We'll find it.”

Showing her I wasn't worried was the first step in preventing her from spiraling.

“It's the paracord one.” She shook her wrist in my face like I wasn't familiar with the bracelet she'd worn every day for the last six years. “The one daddy made me.”

I smiled at the thought of it. She never took it off. She even slept with the dang thing. Something we had in common. My gaze instinctively moved to the matching one I wore on my right wrist.

“Okay, let’s look for it. Did you check inside your bag?” I nodded to the mermaid tote at her feet.

“No.” She sniffled.

“You look in your bag, and I’ll check the cushions and floor. Deal?”

She nodded and slid to the floor, and I turned and searched the seats. Almost instantly, my fingers brushed against it as I ran a hand between two cushions.

Thank goodness. Another crisis averted.

“Found it,” I called, holding it out to her.

Over her shoulder, movement caught my attention. A tall man was rushing down the pier, a scowl on his face.

I glanced over at the other slips, searching for the source of his intense frustration. But I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Did that mean it was directed at me? What could I have done to cause his irritation?

Kyle freaking Williams hadn’t so much as looked my way since we’d moved to Half Moon Lake almost two months ago. And now he seemed intent on burning a hole through me with that glare of his.

When people around here found out we’d moved from Fort Bragg, the first question they asked was whether I knew Kyle Williams. Apparently, he had been stationed there as well. Clearly, they didn’t realize that Fort Bragg had the largest population of any army base in the US. Over a hundred thousand soldiers and families lived and worked on that base. Regardless, my answer was always no. I did not know the town’s grumpy army vet.

So why was he eyeing me with so much fury right now? What did I do?

Before I could give it more thought, the scowl marring his face morphed into sheer terror, and he set off at a run. An instant later, there was a loud splash from the back of the boat.

I spun at the sound, and my stomach bottomed out. The spot where I had left my son was empty, except for his

discarded Puddle Jumper.

“Teddy—” Stomach dropping, I bolted toward where I’d left him.

The world around me slowed to an excruciating pace. Kyle ran down the decking past the boat and dove into the water. He disappeared, and all I could do was watch helplessly. I dug my fingers into the cushions as I leaned over the back of the boat, searching the surface of the water.

I didn’t even have a second to truly panic before he popped up with my son tucked into his right side. Teddy was coughing and sputtering but seemingly okay.

Without even glancing in my direction, Kyle swam toward the rocky shore. Pushing his thick blond hair out of his face, he hoisted Teddy up onto the grass, then stood and climbed out of the water.

“Come on, Callie.” I helped my daughter off the boat, and we hurried down the pier. “Oh my God. Thank—”

Kyle, gray T-shirt plastered to his heaving chest, spun to face me, his eyes narrowing and his lips tightening into a scowl.

“What the hell?” He shifted my son in his arms, and with a wince, readjusted so he was holding him on his right side.

I didn’t understand what his issue was, and I wasn’t sure I cared as I closed the distance between us. I was trying to thank the man for his help, and here he was, acting like I’d done something wrong.

Maybe I wasn’t winning a mother of the year award, but I was only one person, and I was doing the best I could.

Chapter Two



KYLE



I COULDN'T SAVE HUGHES. I'd tried, and I'd almost succeeded. But I'd fucked it up. And then it was too late. Like hell would I let his kid drown. I'd successfully avoided introducing myself to Tina since she'd moved to my hometown. Because, like everyone else in Half Moon Lake, she'd ask if I knew her husband, Levi. Although I hadn't met him before the day he died in my arms, I wasn't ready for that conversation with her yet. Or maybe ever.

"Why weren't you watching him?" I spit out through gritted teeth. "You're lucky I saw him take off his life vest."

I wanted so badly to yell. Ask her what the fuck she was thinking. But her next words were like a slap in the face, a reminder of what she'd lost. What my failure cost her.

Tina's wide-eyed expression quickly narrowed, and she blanched. "I'm only one person. He was wearing his Puddle Jumper. I never thought he would take it off."

"I sorry I take it off." Teddy bowed his head, sniffing and clinging to my shirt.

Tina's hair whipped around her face as she moved toward me, arms extended. I hated when anyone crowded my space, and usually, my natural reaction was to back up, but her bourbon-colored eyes held me in place as she took her son from me.

"You know the rules. You're not allowed to take that off. Only Mommy can," she murmured once she'd pulled Teddy to her chest.

"I know. I sorry," he wailed. "I wanted to see duckies."

I huffed as the image of him toppling into the water flashed through my mind.

"If you plan to take your kids out on the lake, you should make sure they understand the importance of water safety." I took a step back but kept my focus fixed on her. "And properly know how to swim." I waved a hand at her son. "He panicked and went right under."

"He's four."

Even more reason to teach this stuff now—the younger they are, the quicker they learn.

"Yep, and I could swim by the time I was three. So could all my siblings."

"Good for you." She pinched her eyes closed and pressed her lips to her little boy's head. "Thanks again for your help." She nodded, grasping Callie by the hand, and turned toward the parking lot of The Dock.

I glared at the restaurant and marina, the family business I'd been stuck helping with since I'd been medically discharged from the Army nine months ago.

"Tina." I winced the second her name left my lips. Shit. If she asked, I'd have to play it off like I knew the names of all of The Dock's clients.

When she turned, I stumbled back a step at the mix of gratefulness, anger, and pity that swirled in her eyes. Fuck. I hated when people felt sorry for me. I'd seen that look too

many damn times since I'd come home, and she was the last person I wanted that from.

"Do you know the signs of secondary drowning?" I couldn't let her walk away without asking.

She nodded silently, pulling Teddy in tighter.

"I think he's fine. But you'll need to keep an eye on him."

A slight tremor in her hand caught my attention as she let go of Callie's hand and brushed her light brown hair over her shoulder.

"Okay."

Until this moment, I'd assumed she was unaffected by the whole situation, but maybe, like me, she was the type of person who held it together in the moment and stressed about all the what-ifs after the fact.

I stood frozen in place for a long moment, watching them walk away. This was not how I imagined my first interaction with this woman would go. I should have reached out months ago.

Even before she moved here, I had thought about looking her up, and each time, I'd go through what I would say. I'd written it down so many times, searching for the right words. But it never seemed like enough. No words could change the outcome of that day. I'd seen my fair share of death, yet this one haunted me in a way no other had.

I grumbled to myself and headed up the hill toward the back of the restaurant. When I made it to the top, I locked my jaw tight and rubbed at my left thigh.

Damn, it was fucking burning and a constant reminder of all I was responsible for and what I'd lost.

My physical therapist had worked me hard this morning. The last thing I needed was the running, jumping, and swimming required to retrieve a kid from the lake. What I did need, though, was a long soak in the hot tub and probably a muscle relaxer. I didn't use them often, but today's events and the pain already hitting me called for one.

My brother strode toward me, brow furrowed, looking me up and down. “Why the hell are you all wet? You go for a swim or something?”

Yeah, asshole. I came out here and thought *why the hell not? A dip in the lake fully clothed sounds perfect*. But I wasn't fighting stupid with stupid.

“No, Rhett.” I huffed. “I had to fish someone's kid out of the lake.”

Rhett scanned the area. His eyes widened, then darted back to me.

“You mean Tina Hughes?” He nodded off to his right. “The woman holding the soaking kid?”

I glanced over and nodded. I was the only one in town aware of my connection to Tina, and I was grateful for that. No one here knew that I'd failed her. Her husband. Their kids. And it was unlikely they ever would. Even if I eventually had to explain that I'd met Hughes that one time, I'd become an expert at vague answers. I'd keep the details of that day to myself.

“Yeah. Her kid took off his life jacket and fell in. He didn't have the first clue what to do when he hit the water.”

I shook my head. Our small lakeside town had experienced occasional water-related tragedies over the years. We had all been affected when we lost a teenage friend to drowning. Rubbing at my leg, I swallowed the guilt as memories of another time I failed overwhelmed me. Fuck. Anna's death was another I felt accountable for. Her blue lips and lifeless body as I continued to perform CPR. The horror and agony on my best friend's face the moment he realized she was gone. Fuck. One after another, the snapshots stabbed at me.

“Kyle.” Rhett's voice jarred me back to the present.

I blinked. What the hell? I hadn't thought about that day in a very long time.

“Did you hear me?” he said when I still didn't respond.

I shook my head and sucked in a breath to center myself.

“Teddy alright?” Rhett frowned, scrutinizing me with far too much intensity.

I nodded and turned to avoid his gaze. The last thing I needed was for him to see the turmoil and guilt that was eating me alive. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, only for a bolt of pain to shoot down my leg. Wincing and cursing under my breath, I shifted back.

According to my therapist, I needed to stop favoring my left leg. No shit. I wasn’t doing it on purpose, and I’d do just about anything to move past the pain and weakness still plaguing me. But I was beginning to wonder if that would ever happen. The bullet had shattered my femur. Two surgeries and a shit ton of physical therapy later, it was still not where it should be.

“What’s up with you today? You’re in more of a mood than usual.”

“I’m fine,” I bit out.

He sighed. “Okay.”

I wasn’t intentionally being an asshole. My brother was a great guy and all, but like the rest of the family, he’d perfected the ability to smother me with his constant concern.

“Incoming,” I mumbled as I caught sight of the manager of the inn heading toward us.

He turned, and a moment later, he stepped away to deal with an issue.

Our parents had retired years ago, and Rhett had taken over the daily aspects of the business. He and our three sisters all worked in some capacity to keep the place running.

And then there was me. Joined the army at eighteen. Came home for good at thirty-two after getting myself shot. This stay was a temporary one, though, because I couldn’t see how there would ever be anything for me here.

Chapter Three



TINA



“BUT MOM...” Callie whined from the back seat. “Why can’t I hang out with you and Teddy today?”

A month ago, when I’d registered her for this week-long dance camp, she had been ecstatic.

I smiled at her in the rearview mirror, and in return, she rolled her eyes. With a *hmph*, she tore her gaze away and focused on the scenery outside her window.

“Callie, you’re going to have so much fun today. I promise.”

In response, she crossed her arms over her chest and slumped in her seat.

“And you’ll meet some of the kids who will be in your class at school this year.”

“I’m going to hate it,” she huffed.

“No, you won’t. I’m telling you. When I pick you up, you’re going to say you had the best day ever. I just know it.”

Callie hadn't always been this difficult, but since her father died, she'd struggled to be the happy child she once was. I couldn't bring her daddy back. Lord knew I would if I could. But I could encourage and support her in the best way I knew how, so I had been leaning into that.

"Daddy wouldn't make me go," she mumbled.

"What was your father's motto, baby girl?"

We'd had this conversation a dozen times over the last year. But if I needed to remind her every day, then that was what I would do.

"Don't be afraid to take the first step."

"Right. So, do you think you can be brave and try it today?"

"Fine." She sank even lower in her seat and dipped her chin.

I sent up a silent thank-you for another minor victory. Now Teddy and I just had to get in and out of the grocery store without incident.

It started out great, but within minutes, it was clear I had been asking for too much. Teddy attempted to climb the canned vegetable shelf, even after I told him to stay with me. He knocked over dozens of cans, then took off like a shot down the aisle. I apologized to the store employee, who scurried over to clean up the mess as I hastily followed my son.

"Teddy, wait for me, please."

He turned the corner without a backward glance, so I picked up my pace. As I neared the end of the aisle, the sound of a deep, familiar voice hit me.

Shit.

"Whoa. Slow down there, McQueen."

My son's response was a giggle.

"Now, where's that mom of yours?"

I rounded the corner and stopped dead in my tracks as Kyle's blue eyes—or were they green? I swore they changed colors for just a second—locked on me.

With a clipped nod, he said, “Ah, there she is.”

I braced myself, ready to be hit with another lecture. But even though he still wore that permanent scowl, his tone was laced with a hint of amusement, like he was teasing me.

Whoa. The one-eighty from yesterday gave me whiplash.

“Theodore.” I moved my cart out of the way and pinned my four-year-old with my best mom look. “I *said* wait for me.”

Teddy lowered his chin and gave me the most adorable look of chagrin. “I sorry, Mommy.”

The chuckle Kyle let out had me dragging my attention to him. Though his eyes held a twinkle of humor and the corner of his lip twitched, there was still no sign of a smile.

It was a shame. He would probably be even more attractive if he didn't look so angry all the time. Tall and lean, his body was a work of art. His wavy blond hair almost reached his ears. And the blue of his irises was speckled with a bit of brown.

Heat crawled up my neck and into my face then. Because, dammit, I was blatantly checking this man out. It had been almost two years since I'd been intimate with my husband, and this was the first time I'd noticed another man in a physical way. I wasn't sure how to process that.

In typical Teddy fashion, he took off down the aisle and away from us. So without a word, I grabbed my cart and followed.

Kyle caught up and fell into step behind me. “Can I apologize for yesterday?”

“You don't have to.”

He could have been nicer about the whole thing, but the bottom line was that I had been distracted and not paying attention.

“I should’ve been more vigilant. Teddy likes to test every boundary I’ve set for him lately.”

“I could’ve handled it better.” He stopped beside me and rubbed at his leg when we caught up to Teddy in the cereal aisle. “But I still think it’s important for your kids to learn how to swim. This town has seen its fair share of drownings. When I was in high school, my best friend’s sister was one of them. Because of that, my whole family is crazy about water safety.”

“Thanks. I’ll look into it.” I couldn’t fathom convincing Teddy to participate, but after the way he’d fallen in the water, I would eventually have to make that a priority. Maybe in a year or two, he’d dislike the water a bit less and would be more likely to participate. “In Fort Bragg, there was a Y. They offered classes. I guess there isn’t anything like that here, is there?”

Levi was the one who thought about stuff like this. He’d gotten a membership to the local YMCA and had taken Callie swimming somewhat regularly for a while. Probably when she was about Teddy’s age.

Kyle froze, stuck in the same spot as I moved forward, continuing to follow Teddy. But he quickly recovered and shook his head. “Not really. The closest is about thirty minutes from here.”

“I figured.” The lack of access to big box stores and places like the YMCA was one of the drawbacks to living in a small town in the North Carolina mountains.

“I could teach them.”

I dragged my focus from Teddy, who was still browsing the sugary cereal options, and frowned at Kyle. This grumpy man who’d done nothing but lecture me so far wanted to teach my kids to swim?

He shrugged. “We could meet at Pointe Beach. I could at least teach them both the basics.”

Half Moon Lake’s public beach was small but well maintained. We’d only been there once this summer with my

parents. I loved that we could see them more now that we lived closer.

Callie had loved swimming with my dad. They'd had so much fun together that day. Teddy wasn't a fan, though. He'd refused to get in the water, and he wasn't fond of playing in the sand, either. I ended up taking him home while my parents stayed with Callie.

"I have an in-ground pool, but I still don't see the point. Teddy hates the water—"

"Wait." He straightened. "You have a pool in your yard, and you still don't see the importance of water safety?"

With a huff, I narrowed my eyes at him.

He took a small step back and raised his hands in surrender.

"It has a gate and an alarm. I'll know if anyone gets inside." I wasn't oblivious to the risks, and frankly, I didn't even want the pool. It had been one of the drawbacks when I'd looked at the house. But Callie had lit up when she saw it, and the property was listed under market value and within my budget.

"What if Teddy climbs the gate?"

I opened my mouth, ready to defend myself, but before I could respond, he went on about the dangers of pools and little ones who didn't know how to swim.

As he rambled, I pushed the cart down the aisle after Teddy.

I had lived in Half Moon Lake for almost two months, and I had been to The Dock a dozen times, yet this was the most I'd heard from this man.

He had seemed to purposely avoid me on more than one occasion, ducking out of the dining area or rushing off when I was near. I assumed he wasn't a people person, but now...did he have an off button? He had a lot of words. And why could he rattle off the statistics of drowning deaths in children in the

United States like it was common knowledge? Who lived with information like that in their head?

We backtracked, and I grabbed a few cans of soup and the corn that I'd forgone after Teddy knocked the cans over and took off.

We rounded the next corner and followed Teddy back up the cereal aisle.

Did I need more oatmeal?

"Hold up." Kyle came to a stop and furrowed his brows. "Haven't we gone down this aisle already?"

"Yep. We're going in circles." I shrugged.

He continued to stare at me, like he wasn't getting it.

"It's good exercise. He'll wear himself out, then he'll be easier to manage while I finish my grocery shopping. The best part is that I never forget things because we go down every aisle twice."

"Okay..." He shook his head, his brows still pinched together. "Alright, so you're not concerned about your child learning to swim so he doesn't drown."

That was not what I said.

What was it about single parents that made people think they were in constant need of parenting advice? Especially people who didn't even have children who had no business spouting off their opinions. I should put this guy in charge of Teddy for an hour and see what he had to say then.

"Do you want his friends to make fun of him when he's fifteen and still can't swim?"

"Of course not." I shot him a glare. "He'll learn eventually. Maybe he'll be more interested in the water in a few years."

"That's your solution? Wait until he's older and more interested?" Kyle barked. "So you'll what? Wait until he's ten, then enroll him in a swimming class with a bunch of five-year-olds? Those classes are grouped by skill level, not age. You

get that, right? Yeah, that won't be embarrassing for the poor kid."

I pushed my cart after Teddy, all the way across the store. I really needed to go back toward the meats, not the produce, but I'd wait him out. Most days, it was easier to just let him lead.

Teddy pulled up short in front of the mountain of bananas, and half a second later, he was pulling himself up onto the edge of the display.

With a gasp, I darted for him. Kyle beat me there, grabbing him around the waist and spinning back to me.

"Let me see your phone. At this rate, I'm not sure this kid will make it to ten without falling or jumping into the lake again. My sister Savannah was the same way at this age. I could tell you all kinds of horror stories."

Pulling my phone from the back pocket of my denim shorts, I chuckled at the scene in front of me. This man who towered over me was holding my son like a football, and Teddy was having the time of his life, wiggling and laughing.

"Okay, little monkey." Kyle took my phone when I held it out to him, deposited Teddy in the cart, and leaned his forearms on the edge. "Stay put for a minute."

The muscles of his forearms work as he tapped out a message on my phone. Every few seconds, he looked over the top of the device and regarded Teddy, who wouldn't stop squirming.

"There." Kyle returned my phone, then turned to Teddy. "You are a wild one, aren't you?"

My phone's screen was still unlocked, and the message he'd typed out and sent to himself was still pulled up.

Me: Kyle, the swim master, can you please teach my kids to swim?

I threw my head back and laughed.



Kyle

With a nod to Tina, I turned and walked away. I was halfway down the aisle when she said Teddy's name in a scolding tone, so I glanced back and gave the kid a look that I hoped said *be good for your mom*.

I was met with a smirk that definitely said *yeah, fat chance*.

Damn, he reminded me of Savannah at that age. My mom had always said if she hadn't already planned to stop at five, Savannah would have been the one to convince her she was done.

From what I'd seen, Teddy was just as impulsive. His situation at the lake probably wouldn't be the last.

That was all I could come up with. The reason I'd so randomly volunteered to give her kids swimming lessons. Tina wasn't the only one surprised when the words left my mouth. Maybe it was my way of atoning for not saving her husband. It was my job. One I'd trained two years for. One I was damn good at. Until that deployment. Until I fucked up.

At the self-checkout, I shook my head to clear it and scanned the items in my basket. Outside the automatic sliding doors, the humid august heat hit me in the face, but a loud bang had me halting where I was on the sidewalk.

I didn't experience flashbacks, not like several of the guys I'd served with. But every now and then, a noise or sensation would draw out memories of my time overseas. My injury, of course, was a constant reminder as well. Of what I lost that day, of what was taken that day.

I scanned the parking lot, searching for the source of the noise. It was easy to pinpoint. Across the street, in an area surrounded with construction fencing, a dump truck was emptying its load.

Once I'd assessed that there was no danger, I forced myself to head toward my truck, only to be struck with a pain that shot through my thigh.

Fuck.

I should have been prepared for it after the way I'd pushed myself on my morning run. Sucking it up, I climbed into the truck and started it up.

I drove through town, toward home, but slowed when I approached the small park at one end of Main Street. Families and couples with dogs walked along the pathways that weaved through the large grassy area.

For a minute, all I could do was watch the kids chasing one another, laughing and happy. The joy that flowed through them so easily made my chest constrict. The fulfillment that radiated off the adults as they kept an eye on their children or interacted with one another knotted my stomach. The simple, quiet life worked for some, but long ago, I'd realized it wasn't for me, and I'd come to terms with it. I wasn't opposed to the idea of a life with someone or a family. I'd just never experienced a connection that came close to what I'd want in a forever kind of way.

Even so, I'd had a purpose.

Saving lives.

That was enough.

But now that was gone.

A loud honk pulled me from my thoughts, and I maneuvered around the park and toward the road that would lead me home.

This wasn't where I belonged, and I sure as shit wasn't going to let my bum leg stop me from getting the hell out of

this town and back to what I was meant to do. What I *loved* to do.

For the next month, I'd push myself, work to strengthen my leg further. Because if today went well, I would be living and working in New York in the near future. Seabass, a buddy from my time training to become a special operations combat medic, now worked for a private security firm and had reached out to me to see if I was interested in joining their team.

Fuck yes, I was interested.

Today, I was scheduled to interview with the owner, Nick Evans. If I couldn't serve my country like I'd always dreamed of doing, then this was the next best thing. Doing what I loved. Doing the one thing I'd been good at for so many years.

I parked my truck in my parents' driveway and followed the path that led down to the guest house. After making myself a cup of coffee and booting up my computer, I was ready to meet with Nick.

Finally, after nine months, I was getting my life back on track. Even if it was no longer with my team.

This life—tying up boats, helping run my family's business—might be perfectly fine for my brother, but it wasn't what I was meant to do. Being a Special Forces medic gave me purpose. Gave me the opportunity to make a difference. Working with Seabass, though not what I'd envisioned for my future, would allow me to get back to helping those in need.

Three hours later, the lake was still. I let the kayak drift on its own, holding the paddle horizontal at my waist. This was my go-to activity when I needed to clear my head. Being on the water when it was quiet like this helped calm my mind.

The interview with Nick had gone a hell of a lot better than I expected. He said he'd be in touch about next steps, as though an in-person interview in New York was a given.

I tracked a flock of birds flying overhead for a moment, focusing on slow breathing, then went back to rowing. My thoughts drifted to the gorgeous brunette with the bourbon-colored eyes. I wasn't giving up. I would convince her to let

me teach her kids to swim. When I put my mind to a task, I rarely failed, and this was no different. I would wear her down with my badgering if I had to. Because I needed to do this.

For myself.

For Hughes.

For her.

Chapter Four



TINA



EACH DAY CALLIE went to camp, she enjoyed it a little more. She made a friend on the first day, and even though she was apprehensive on day two, she looked forward to seeing Ava, so she gave in more easily.

Today, she jumped out of the car and didn't even say bye. While I watched her head for the doors, my phone chimed from the console.

I picked it up, smiling as I read the text.

Kyle: So? How'd it go?

I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel as I contemplated how to respond. Kyle and I had texted back and forth last night for the first time since we'd run into each other at the grocery store a few days ago. Somehow, we'd spent forty-five minutes chatting. About everything and nothing at all. It was nice that he'd been thinking about Callie and how this morning would go.

I shook my head and typed out a response.

Me: Perfect. She was excited and didn't even hesitate.

Kyle: Good.

Kyle: Have you mentioned Saturday to her yet?

I agreed that he could come by on Saturday to start swim lessons with Teddy. When he offered to teach Callie too, I explained that she already knew the basics. He insisted that refreshing and adding to her skills was important. He was going to be there anyway, so I agreed.

“We go to Grammy’s?” Teddy piped up from the back seat.

“Yep. You going to be good for Grammy?”

“I always good.”

With a roll of my eyes, I put my phone down. Then I headed toward my parents’ house. It would give me time to think about what to say to Kyle. *No, I’m a coward* would be the most accurate way to answer, but not the one I was willing to share. We’d had a great morning. Callie was excited, happy, and I didn’t want to give her something else to push back on. Maybe she wouldn’t hate the idea, though. Unlike Teddy, she loved the water.

Moving to Half Moon Lake had always been the plan. I’d just upped the timeline. It was the first of many things Callie had resisted over the last few months. I understood her reservations. Fort Bragg was the only home she’d ever known, and our house there was the home we’d shared with her father. But Levi and I loved this area, and after several trips here to visit my parents, we decided that when he retired from the military, we would settle here. That wasn’t supposed to be for at least another five years. After his death, though, there was no point in waiting. Being near my mom and dad meant more support, and I thought it would be better for my kids too. Callie had been more open to the idea once I’d explained it was her father’s plan for us, but I still wondered if I made a mistake.

My new job, teaching kindergarten at the local public school, was a necessity, though I was really looking forward to it. The beginning of the school year was creeping closer, and today was one of the few days I could access my classroom to set up. I'd planned to take Teddy with me, but my mom insisted she would keep him. Frankly, it would be easier without him in tow, so I jumped at the opportunity to shop and work in my room alone. Next week, the school would be open to staff for another two days, but since my parents were leaving for a week-long cruise, I'd have to take the kids with me if I wanted to go in. But if I got enough done today, maybe I wouldn't even need to go back next week.

I smiled as my little guy listed all the things he was going to do with Grammy, chuckling at some of the outlandish ideas.

Once in my mom's kitchen, I poured myself a cup of coffee. I was just bringing it to my lips when she spoke.

"My friend Maria has a son who is recently divorced, and he has a daughter about Teddy's age. We were thinking..."

"Mom..."

She'd gently broached the subject of dating a few weeks ago, and I was able to easily change the subject. But I shouldn't have been surprised she was bringing it up again. My mother was not easily deterred. "I'm not interested in meeting someone right now."

"Honey, I know you loved Levi, but you moved here for a fresh start. You know he would want you to move on."

"I know, and it's not that. Not really."

More than anything, I needed to focus on my kids right now. I missed Levi terribly, but I was coping. And yes, I was used to taking care of the kids on my own. Levi had deployed regularly, leaving the kids and me on our own for months at a time. But the situation was wholly different.

"I don't have time. In a matter of weeks, I'll be working full time. And with all that's going on with Callie, trying to figure out her triggers and how to help, I've got my hands full. Don't get me started on Teddy. I can't take my eyes off him

without him finding trouble. They need to be my focus right now.”

She sighed. “I just worry they will become your only focus and you’ll forget you need to consider yourself too.”

My dad entered the kitchen a moment later, holding Teddy and shaking his head. “Where does he get this endless energy?”

I chuckled. “I better get going before you change your minds and realize what you agreed to today.”

After giving Teddy three kisses, five byes, and two waves, I was back in the car. The flashing notification of a new message had me reaching for my phone.

Kyle: *crickets chirping GIF*

Oops. Totally forgot to respond when I got here.

Me: Sorry. Just dropped Teddy off with my parents.

Me: No. I haven’t mentioned the swim lessons to Callie yet. But I will tonight.

Kyle: Ok. Have fun setting up your classroom.

Me: Thanks.

I got almost everything on my list at the teacher supply store. While I was shopping, a fun idea for one of the bulletin boards in my room ran through my head, and I couldn’t wait to put it all together.

“So, what do you think?” I asked my assistant a few hours later as I stepped back to survey my work.

A blue background, with grass along the bottom and twenty suns placed throughout.

“The sunflowers are a nice touch,” Sarah said from across the room, where she was busy sorting and organizing supplies,

games, and toys.

“Yeah? Not too much yellow?”

She shook her head. “Nope. It’s perfect. What are you labeling it?”

“I was thinking *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.*”

“Cute. Where do you want—”

Her words hung in the air as she looked over my shoulder. I turned, following her line of sight.

A tall man had stepped into the room. “Sorry to interrupt. Just wanted to make sure you’re making out alright. My classroom is just down the hall.”

I nodded. “Yes, I think so...actually, do you think you could help me figure out why the projector won’t come on?”

“Sure.” He walked toward me and stuck out his hand. “I’m Darius, by the way.”

I introduced myself and Sarah before we got to work brainstorming the projector problem.

To my mortification, Darius solved the problem within minutes by flipping the switch on the power strip. He probably wondered what halfwit the school had hired. Even though I could feel the flush of my cheeks, we had a good laugh at my expense.

After Darius left, we organized my classroom library, and shortly thereafter, when I told Sarah she could head out, she hightailed it home. When school started, she’d be away from her nine-month-old daughter for much longer than a few hours, and it was clearly going to take some getting used to.

I, on the other hand, stuck around so I could take advantage of my kid-free time. Guilt niggled at the back of my mind, but I reminded myself that Callie was having a blast at camp and Teddy was enjoying time with his grandparents. I needed to get this work done, so I intended to focus on something I enjoyed doing for the next few hours.

While I was laminating name tags for desks, my phone vibrated in my back pocket. I pulled it out and swiped the screen to pull up the new message from Kyle. A wave of excitement hit me—and not for the first time since we'd started texting last night—because I looked forward to his texts. What did that mean?

Kyle: How's the classroom?

He's just being friendly, and you don't have time for anything more.

My inner dialogue did nothing to quite the excitement, though.

Me: Good. Finished two bulletin boards, set up my classroom library, and organized a bunch of toys and boxes of materials.

Kyle: Send me a pic.

Me: What?

Kyle: I'm bored. The marina is a ghost town this afternoon. Show me one of your bulletin boards.

I snapped a quick selfie with the sunshine board in the background.

Kyle: Beautiful.

Me: Yeah it turned out pretty good.

Kyle: It did. But that's not what I was referring to.

Wait, what?

Oh.

Oh. Was he referring to me? Wait. Did he really think I was beautiful?

Me: *GIF of a woman saying oh, you*

How was I, a thirty-four-year-old woman, rendered speechless by a single flirty text message? Who was I kidding? Probably because the last time someone other than my husband had flirted with me was more than a decade ago. The heat radiating up my neck and into my face was proof of that.

Chapter Five



KYLE



WHAT THE HELL was I doing? The whole way to Tina's house, I second-guessed my asinine idea. But after spending almost the whole week texting with her, I couldn't just back out now.

A good part of my reasoning was purely selfish. Tina's texts had made me laugh more than once this week. Usually GIFs or crazy-ass stories of what Teddy had gotten into. The GIF that depicted kids spilling a whole bag of flour all over the living room made me chuckle and feel bad for her all at the same time. I wasn't sure whether he'd really done that—I'd be livid about that kind of mess—but when her follow-up was laughing emojis, I figured she was kidding. It amazed me how easily she found joy and happiness in everything. One of the things I was quickly learning about her.

But there was something else too...

I'd spent the last nine months doing nothing but recovering, and now I had a chance to do something, help someone, feel useful.

Tina had yet to question my physical, *or mental*, ability. My family, on the other hand, could make me feel utterly

incapable at any given moment. Never purposefully, but between the possibility of PTSD and the slower than anticipated healing of my left leg, they all looked at me like I was a ticking time bomb.

If Callie hadn't had dance camp, I probably could have started these lessons sooner instead of spending all week questioning the whole thing.

Was I overstepping? Something horrible had happened to this family, and here I was, flirting with Tina via text more than once this week. And it felt good. Really fucking good. What did that say?

Probably that you should turn your truck around, go back home, and leave her alone, asshole.

Here I was, trying to offer her something she didn't even seem to want. But fuck, she needed it. Her kids needed it. If they were going to live here, they needed to learn to swim.

Callie knew the basics, enough to keep her afloat for a short amount of time, but my guess was that she didn't have any actual skills.

I climbed the steps to the porch that ran along the front of the ranch-style home and knocked.

When the door swung open, Tina was smiling and waving me inside. "Hey, Kyle. Come on in."

"Any other progress?" I asked.

"Nope. Teddy is still refusing to put his bathing suit on, and Callie is adamant that she knows how to swim and doesn't need you to teach her. I'm so sorry. This was probably a waste of your time."

"There's a possibility of rain in the next hour, so this might be a wash anyway."

"Oh, good."

"What?" I stuttered.

"I won't have to water the grass if it rains."

I cocked a brow and chuckled, surprised by this woman's ability to find the positive in any situation. Callie stepped into the great room from the hallway, pulling my attention from her mother.

"I don't need swim lessons." She crossed her arms. "My daddy taught me to swim."

I swallowed thickly. There was no way I could argue with that. So I tried another angle.

"I was thinking," I said, roughing a hand down my face, "since you know how to swim, maybe we could pretend I'm teaching you. You can show me how good you are, and if Teddy sees us having fun, then maybe he will want to try it."

Her brows pulled together, and she looked from me to Tina and back again, seemingly unconvinced.

"He doesn't know how to swim like you do," I pushed on. "He really needs to learn in case he falls into the lake again. Which, by the trouble your mom says he gets into, seems likely."

She rolled her eyes. "Grammy says he's trouble with a capital T."

"I superman!" Teddy shouted, bolting into the room wearing just his underwear, a cape, and a mask.

Tina shook her head. "Let me go see if he'll at least put a pair of regular shorts on."

She disappeared in the direction Teddy had sprinted off to, leaving me alone with Callie, who was now assessing me with a glare that outdid my mom's.

Another idea struck me. "Has your mom taken you guys to Pointe Beach?"

Callie slowly nodded.

"Have you gotten to try the big slide?"

"No." She looked to the ground and shuffled her feet. "I couldn't pass the swim test."

Exactly what I was hoping for. “I can help. If we work hard, maybe you’ll be able to pass it before the end of the season.”

“Really?” She cocked her head as one eyebrow rose.

“Yup. My siblings and I were all riding the big slide by the time we were six.”

She huffed out a sigh and let her arms drop. “Fine. I’ll do it. But I wouldn’t hold your breath on getting Teddy in the water.” With that, she trudged off down the hall.

While I waited for Tina and the kids, I took in the great room. It had cathedral ceilings and a stone fireplace built into the far wall. The pictures lined up along the mantel caught my attention, specifically the military portrait, but I kept my feet planted. Standing in this home was awkward enough. I did not need to add to that sensation by getting a good look at the man I couldn’t save. Sometimes, I still wasn’t sure whether it was that deployment, when I couldn’t save Hughes, that fucked me up the most, or whether it was my last deployment, the one that ended my career.

Once we were all out back, and Callie and I were in the pool, I relaxed. I didn’t have high expectations for the kid, but I was pleasantly surprised by her determination from the very beginning. What I didn’t expect, though, was to be so distracted by Tina’s laugh. She laughed with her whole soul, holding nothing back, and I found myself staring on more than one occasion.

As I watched Tina and Teddy toss a ball back and forth, my attention zeroed in on the way Teddy threw with his left hand. Strange what a person’s mind focused on after such a jarring loss. I pinched my eyes closed, pushing away memories of that day, but they flashed through my mind, regardless.

Fighting to stop the bleeding in his shoulder—the shrapnel had hit a main artery. Blood covering my hands.

Yelling, telling him he wasn’t going to die. That I wouldn’t need to tell his family anything.

His blood pressure continuing to drop even after we stopped the bleeding. Hughes losing consciousness.

Realizing a moment too late that he was bleeding internally. Performing CPR even though I knew it was pointless.

I should have recognized it. Maybe I could have saved him. But the nicked artery in his shoulder put him at high risk of bleeding out. That had to be the priority.

The telltale gurgle. His last breath. Succumbing to the knowledge that there was nothing else I could do for him.

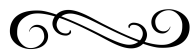
I'd caught sight of the pistol still positioned on his left hip. He was left-handed. That was what my mind fixated on after losing him—that he was left-handed.

“Did you see that?”

I shook my head and turned to face Callie, who was kicking while holding on to a pool noodle. “You’re doing great. Perfect kicks.”

I stole another glance over at Tina. The bright smile she aimed at me was like a punch to the stomach. Her expression was so full of gratitude. If she only knew that I was the reason her husband hadn’t made it home from that deployment.

Chapter Six



TINA



FOR THE FIRST twenty minutes we were out here, I chased Teddy around, playing catch and covertly trying to convince him to get in the pool. He wasn't interested.

Kyle, however, managed to get him to sit on the edge of the pool and make little kicks with his feet.

Even more shocking was the smile on Callie's face. And the *laughing*. It was short-lived, and within minutes, she was rolling her eyes at Kyle again. But the glimpse of the carefree girl who'd disappeared when her daddy died made my heart soar.

"Do you want to put your swim shorts on and sit on the steps while you practice kicking?" Kyle asked Teddy.

"No. I don't like swimmy shorts. They hurt."

With a small frown, Kyle nodded and turned back to Callie, helping her get situated with a pool noodle under her arms. Kyle grabbed a mini boogie board and got in the same position, with his legs straight behind him, and demonstrated what they were going to do next.

“Now we’re going to use our kicks to do a few laps. We’ll add arms next time. For now, I want you to get used to swimming on your belly and keeping your legs straight. Just like you did when you were practicing your kicks. Got it?”

She nodded. “Got it.”

She smiled again when Kyle challenged her to race him, and off they went. Pride surged through me as Callie made it all the way to the far wall before Kyle. They fist bumped once he joined her, making my heart pinch. Because the sight was a reminder that Levi should be here swimming with his daughter.

With a deep breath, I brushed the paracord bracelet on my right wrist and focused on Callie and Kyle again. As I tracked Kyle’s movements on the way to the shallow end, another feeling spread through me. One that warmed me from the inside out and was wholly inconvenient.

His biceps were locked tight as he held the boogie board to his chest, and his back muscles flexed as he made small kicks to propel himself back to the other end.

He wasn’t as broad as Levi, but every muscle was defined. I’d have to be dead not to acknowledge that he was fit. During my perusal, my attention caught on his left shoulder, specifically the tattoo inked on his skin. It seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“Going to change,” Callie said as she exited the pool and headed for the house.

Kyle ran his towel through his hair as he wandered toward me, and I ripped my gaze away from his body as water dripped down his bare chest.

I shook my head. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Sorry Teddy wouldn’t try.”

“It’s okay. He’ll come around.” He picked his phone up off the table and slid a thumb over the screen. “I’m going to send you a link to something that might help.”

“What is it?”

“Swim jammers,” he mumbled without looking up.

I had no earthly clue what he meant, and when he finally did meet my eye, my confusion must have been evident on my face.

“They’re tight. Like leggings, I guess. It’ll help stop the fabric from rubbing against him. It’s what professional swimmers wear.”

“Oh.” I nodded, picking up my own phone. “Okay.”

“What’s for dinner?” Callie asked as she stepped back into the yard wearing a pair of shorts and a bright pink tank top.

“Spaghetti.”

Teddy, who was drawing with sidewalk chalk on the patio, looked up at Kyle. “You like spaghetti?”

Kyle’s eyes narrowed like he thought it might be a trick question. “Um, sure?”

“He eat spaghetti with us too?” Teddy blinked up at me. Then, to Kyle, he said, “I set the table. Sissy help.”

“I don’t know, Teddy. Kyle is probably busy.”

“You busy?”

“No, but I don’t want to impose.” Kyle shook his head.

“Impose?” Teddy cocked his head to one side, a frown marring his sweet face.

I sighed, letting my shoulders slump. The man had just spent an hour here teaching my daughter to swim. The least I could do was feed him.

“You’re welcome to stay. You wouldn’t be imposing. It’s nothing fancy, though. Just noodles and sauce.”

“Sounds great.” The corners of his lips lifted into a small smile.

I’ll be damned. Callie and Kyle smiling on the same day? And why was his smile doing funny things to my stomach?

And how had things changed so drastically since the day he pulled Teddy out of the water? Maybe all his text flirting

was wearing me down. Even his closeness in the kitchen was unnerving.

As I dumped the pasta in the strainer, he stepped up next to me. “Where are the plates? I can help Teddy set the table.”

I pointed at the cabinet above the dishwasher and gave him a smile. The moment felt a bit too domestic. More than that, the scent of him, chlorine and a heady mix of pure male, sent a thrill through me. Before I could register what I was doing, I found myself breathing it in. It only took a moment to shake myself out of my stupor, though, and turn to him.

“Callie is supposed to do that.”

Kyle shot me an apologetic look and shrugged as he pulled plates from the cabinet.

I surveyed the open-plan dining room, then the great room. The lack of walls separating these rooms had been one major selling point. The natural light from the front and windows along the back wall made the space feel open and airy.

“Teddy, where’s sissy?”

He whipped around one way, then the other, like he was just realizing she wasn’t here.

Callie was back to hating the world. She spent the entirety of dinner scowling at all of us, like our presence offended her. When I excused her from the table, she went straight to her room.

“I’m sorry. She—”

I wasn’t sure how to explain the way she swung between anger and sadness. Half the time, I wasn’t sure which way it would shift. I understood it. I wasn’t immune to those sudden feelings. Anger that Levi had been taken from us. Sadness that he was missing things. My own loneliness. So far, I’d found that people who hadn’t experienced a loss like we had didn’t understand. More often than not, they meant well. But I didn’t always find their opinions or advice very helpful.

“She lost her dad.” He looked up from his plate, his expression soft, like maybe he could relate. Only both of his

parents were alive and well. “The anger stage of grief can be easier than moving into acceptance.”

In an instant, the gentleness in his expression turned hard. His gaze burned into me with an intensity I hadn’t seen before. Was he speaking from experience? Realization hit me then, and my stomach dropped. I hadn’t told him about Levi yet, so then how...

“How do you know—”

“Rhett told me.” He blinked, averting his gaze.

“Oh.” That tracked.

Bella, Rhett’s wife, was one of the first people I’d met when the kids and I moved to town in June. Shortly after that, I had stopped by the marina to renew our slip lease and had met with Rhett. We’d kept our boat here for several years since we visited my parents often. Levi had always wanted to own a boat, but it wasn’t until both of his parents passed away that we could afford it. Being a late in life child and having no siblings, Levi inherited all of his parents’ assets.

“I should probably go.” The legs of Kyle’s chair scratched along the floor as he pushed back from the table and began stacking plates.

“You don’t have to do that.” I placed a hand on his forearm, and a surge of electricity shot up my arm. I yanked away, holding my hand to my chest and watching him. What the hell was that?

He turned my way, brushing his fingers down his arm where I’d touched him, fixing his attention on me. His eyes, eyes that had reminded me of a clear blue sky all day, were now a dark, vibrant shade of green.

He blinked and turned away before I could figure out whether the color change was a trick of my imagination. “I’ll clean up. It’s the least I can do to thank you for a delicious meal.”

I chuckled. “It was spaghetti.”

“What can I say? I’m a simple guy.” He shrugged, but he didn’t make eye contact.

Simple was not a word I’d use to describe this man. Complex and full of layers would have been my bet.

And I found that I wanted to get to know him better. I wanted to discover what was hiding behind those gorgeous eyes and muscular body.

I squirmed in my seat, my skin heating at the thought. What was it about him that made me feel this? Granted, it’d been a long time since I’d looked at another man, let alone had thoughts like that. But why was Kyle suddenly making me feel and think these things?

Chapter Seven



KYLE



SUNDAY DINNERS HAD BEEN a ritual with my family for as far back as I could remember. As we got older and had various activities, it got tricky to get all of us kids together, and my mom wanted one night a week when we would all gather for a nice sit-down meal. So these dinners became even more important then. Obviously, I missed many of them during the fourteen years I was in the army, but when I was in town, I was here. When I came home after my injury, I avoided these more than I sought them out. But a few months back, my dad pulled me aside and told me he expected me at the table every Sunday. No excuses. That he was done watching my mom be disappointed when I didn't show up. He didn't care if I said a single word to anyone, but my ass better be in that chair come five o'clock.

I hadn't been trying to hurt my mom.

It was just...

A lot.

Talking, noise, expectations.

Dinner with my parents was fine. Dad was quiet unless he had something important to say. Mom worried, but she didn't push. But with a house full of my siblings, it was just...too much.

Like now. Savannah had been rambling on for the last five minutes about Mrs. Jones and her most recent slew of gossip. Being a bartender at our family's restaurant required her to smile and listen, but did she really need to add to the gossip by repeating it?

She brushed her short blond hair out of her face. The streaks of pink and purple looked freshly dyed. I still didn't get her. The hair. The newly added nose ring. Did we all neglect her as a kid? It sure seemed like she'd gotten enough attention. Hell, she probably got more than the rest of us.

"Then she said Kyle—"

My head snapped up, and I homed in on my sister. Was she seriously dishing gossip about *me*? The town's injured hermit?

"—was coming out of Tina Hughes's house late last night."

I grunted and went back to eating my food. I would not contribute to this insanity.

"He's giving her kids swim lessons," my mom chirped, squeezing my forearm.

I'd mentioned it to her because I was dressed in swim trunks when I helped her unload the car yesterday before I left for Tina's. I wasn't about to lie to her when she asked if I was going for a swim, and I knew she wouldn't make a big deal out of it. She just smiled and said *that's nice*.

"I heard Teddy had a close call on the dock the other day," Bella chimed in.

"Yup" was all I had to say.

A few minutes of silence passed as we continued to eat.

"Wait." Rhett tilted his head, his brows pulling together. "Did you know her husband? He was stationed at Fort Bragg too. He was killed on deployme—Ow. What the hell?" He

glared at our sister Hattie, who sat across from him. “Why’d you kick me?”

Here we went again. At least one of my siblings had caught on that I didn’t want to talk about it.

“Sorry. Didn’t realize that was your leg.” Her voice said one thing, but her look said something totally different. “How was Hudson’s appointment today?” Hattie asked Bella.

“It was good. He’s at a healthy weight. B was such a good helper too.” She turned to their three-year-old and smiled.

“Me a good big brother.” Brendan sat up tall in his seat.

With that, we settled back into our meal, seemingly steered away from uncomfortable topics.

Or so I thought.

Rhett, the most clueless of us all, took a long drink of water and cleared his throat. “So, did you know Tina’s husband?”

Hattie and Bella sighed in unison while I glared at my dumbass brother.

My phone chimed, giving me the perfect excuse to ignore the question. I pulled it out of my pocket and clicked on the text from Tina.

Tina: I’m convinced slime was created to torture parents.

Tina: *GIF of woman banging head against a wall*

Tina: But it kept Teddy occupied for almost an hour today, so I’d call that a win. And my kitchen is spotless now.

Another message came through from Seabass.

SB: Hey man, got a min?

My chair scraped along the patio as I pushed it back and stood.

“I need to take this.” I held up my phone and bent to place a quick kiss on my mom’s cheek. “Thank you for dinner.”

I nodded to the rest of the family and walked toward the guest house before dialing Seabass.

“Hey,” he said when the call connected.

“What’s up?”

“Nick said the interview went well. He wants to bring you out here next month. Give you a tour, meet the team. I told him I’d give you a call and get a read on what you thought.”

“Just tell me when, and I’m there.”

“I figured.”

My phone vibrated with another incoming message.

I glanced at it, seeing a new text notification from Tina.

I put the phone back to my ear. “Can I ask you a question?” The conversation that had just gone down with my family was still fresh in my mind.

“Go for it.”

“Have you ever spent time with the family of someone you couldn’t save?”

“You know I’m around Morgan all the time, right?”

“No, I meant someone whose death you feel responsible for.” I pushed the door to the guest house open and stepped inside.

“Wait. You still think Hughes’s death was your fault?”

Seabass and I had gone through this almost two years ago, shortly after it happened. I deployed once more after that—and ended up being sent home with a gunshot wound to the leg—and thought I had put the guilt behind me. Or at least out of the forefront of my mind. It wasn’t until Tina showed up in town two months ago that it all came flooding back.

“Isn’t it, though? If my team had gotten to them sooner, or if I’d caught the internal injuries sooner...maybe.” I headed to the kitchen for a beer but stopped at the sight of the chaos. Dishes were piled up in the sink, and the counters were cluttered. A pan from yesterday’s breakfast still sat on the stove.

“It’s just as likely that it wouldn’t have changed the outcome, though. You know that.”

Probability was exactly that. One small adjustment could drastically change the outcome. But I’d never know for sure.

After a long moment, Seabass let out a sigh. “Have you been talking to someone about this?”

He had suggested I seek therapy two years ago after Hughes died. It wasn’t that I was against it. I’d just never prioritized it.

“No.”

“Why is this coming up again?”

“Small world,” I mumbled, snagging the empty wrappers littering the counters.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“His wife just moved here.”

“Well, fuck.”

Yup. My thoughts exactly. Though unlike a couple of weeks ago, the sight of her didn’t make dread curl in my gut. I was *almost* looking forward to it. But replacing the man I let die in my arms wasn’t on my to-do list, so I needed to get over that fast.

IT HAD BEEN ANOTHER WEEK, and another failed swim lesson.

Though *fail* was too harsh for how the afternoon had gone. I’d hoped to get two lessons in. But between Tina needing to take the kids with her to school since her parents were traveling, Callie’s dance schedule, and my own responsibilities at The Dock, we could only make one work.

It wasn't a total bust. Although Teddy hadn't gotten into the water, Tina's laugh had worked as our soundtrack while I *pretended* to give Callie lessons.

Tina spent her time chasing Teddy around, finding creative ways to keep him entertained. It was obvious she was an attentive mom who gave her kids 110 percent. I winced when I thought about that first day and how I'd yelled at her for her inattention.

As for Teddy, he hadn't graduated past sitting on the side and kicking his feet. Callie, on the other hand, was a quick learner. She'd even mastered a few laps using the correct kicking motion. She was a natural, and with more practice, she would be a strong swimmer.

Texting with Tina had become a daily thing this past week as well, and I found myself enjoying it. Maybe it was because we didn't talk about my leg or how I was feeling. Our texts mostly involved funny GIFs and mundane conversation. She didn't treat me with kid gloves. Rather than pitying me when I told her I was sore after physical therapy, she called me an old man.

I glanced at the seat next to me as I drove toward Tina's and shook my head at the big inflatable raft. Rhett wasn't thrilled when I asked to skip out early on a Saturday, but I hoped my plan to get Teddy in the water this time worked. He loved cars and ice cream, and I wasn't above bribing—with Tina's permission. Maybe the float, in addition to the new swim jammers Tina said he loved, would be enough to coax him in. Tina warned that he might freak out if he gets wet, but he didn't the day he fell in the lake, so maybe there was hope.

I parked in Tina's driveway and scanned the houses on the street as I climbed out of the truck. Across the way, Mrs. Jones sat in a rocker on her front porch, smiling and waving, oblivious to the glare I was sending her way.

She'd be running her mouth again the second I turned around.

It had only taken twenty-four hours for the news of me leaving Tina's house last Saturday night to spread around. I

couldn't wait to get out of this small nosy-ass town.

But then again, part of me didn't hate that everyone knew I was hanging out with Tina. I smirked and sent the old lady a wave. *That's right. Let everyone know you saw me here again.* Because this was *mine*.

Shit. What was I saying? This was Hughes's, not mine. I needed to remember that.

Tina laughed as I came through the gate carrying the big car inflatable.

"A car!" Teddy exclaimed, running full tilt toward me. "I ride in it?"

"You can..."

He smiled brightly.

"But you might get a little wet. Want to try it?"

His face fell, and a look of apprehension took over as he peeked over his shoulder at Tina, then eyed the float once more. Finally, he gave me a hesitant nod.

"Perfect. Give me a minute, and then we'll try it." I turned to Tina, who had a smirk plastered on her face.

"What?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"You realize you're setting a precedent, right?"

"In the pool is progress, even if it's riding in a float." I shrugged. "So he likes the jammers?"

"Understatement of the year. Hasn't taken them off at all since they came yesterday. The chlorine will clean them, right? 'Cause I'm not sure how I'll talk him into changing so I can wash them."

"Don't worry, he'll change afterward. They're better than swim shorts, but once they're wet, they're still not the most comfortable thing to wear. You're okay if I bribe him, right? Because everyone loves ice cream."

"Pulling out all the stops this time?" She smiled. "But yes. I don't mind. Sometimes it's the only way to get him to do as I

ask.”

It felt good to laugh. And it felt even better to succeed at my task. Callie was doing great and even helped encourage Teddy to get in. After a few laps around the pool in the car, he warmed up to the idea of getting a little wet. From there, it was easier to talk him into getting in. He wouldn't leave the steps, but he sat and kicked his legs in a straight up and down motion.

I could feel Tina's eyes on me, and when I looked over, she was beaming. Her expression was pure joy, with maybe a little admiration mixed in. In that moment, it was like the light that had disappeared the night I got shot was peeking out from behind a dark cloud, and it sucked the breath from my lungs.

Chapter Eight



TINA



“SHOULD I grab Teddy’s car seat from your car?” Kyle held the door open as the kids and I walked out onto the front porch.

“He just has a booster.”

“Okay, did you want to put it in my truck? Or are we taking two cars?”

Oh. I cocked my head to the side and shrugged. Of course he wanted to drive. He seemed like the type.

“I’m fine taking your truck. I’ll grab the seat from my car.”

Callie had done a great job in the pool, but now she stood by his truck with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. Awesome.

I gave her a wide smile and wrapped my arm around her shoulders. “Bet I know what flavor you’re going to get.”

“Why can’t *we* just go? You, me, and Teddy.” She pulled away. “Why does Kyle need to come?”

“Because this was his idea. He wanted to do this for Teddy.”

“He’s not part of our family.” Her glare spoke volumes and put me at a loss for words.

I needed to be more careful. As much as I enjoyed spending time with Kyle, I had to remember that Callie was still mourning the loss of her dad and adjusting to our new life in Half Moon Lake.

“Callie, it’s okay for people to do nice things for us.”

With a roll of her eyes and a huff, she spun and climbed into the back seat next to Teddy.

Once the kids were buckled, Kyle backed out of the driveway. I peeked back at Callie, noticing how she fidgeted with her paracord bracelet.

“The Shack has the best ice cream.” Kyle glanced over at me, a smile tugging on one corner of his mouth as he headed north. “My family’s been going there since I was Teddy’s age.”

“This is stupid,” Callie mumbled from the back seat.

“Callie,” I scolded, my face heating. “This is for Teddy, and it’s very nice of Kyle to offer, so don’t be rude, please.”

“Teddy barely got in the water. He just sat on the steps, kicking his feet. He shouldn’t even get ice cream for that.”

“I do get ice cream. Kyle say I did a good job,” Teddy said, his little mouth turned down in a frown.

“You did a great job, buddy,” Kyle said as I turned and shot a glare at Callie.

She crossed her arms and huffed out a “whatever,” then shifted so she was facing her window. Her teenage years would be fun. I was sure of that.

With a sigh, I stole a glimpse at Kyle and mouthed, *sorry*.

He reached over and squeezed my hand but just as quickly pulled back and kneaded his fist into his left thigh.

What was that?

For the rest of the drive, we remained silent, listening to Teddy sing “Baby Shark” on repeat. When Kyle turned into a parking lot, I understood why they’d named this place the Shack. It was a tiny older building that sat on a grassy open area. It was surrounded by half a dozen picnic tables, and there was a small playground that could be seen from each of them. It reminded me of the setups of the shaved ice places we’d take the kids to in Fort Bragg.

Teddy took off for the slide that sat next to the bigger climbing structure, and Callie wandered over to one of the swings.

“Great, there’s a line.”

I followed Kyle’s gaze to the line of people waiting to order. “Perfect.”

He frowned down at me. “Huh?”

“The kids will have plenty of time to run around and play.”

Kyle chuckled and shook his head. “Do you like banana splits?”

“Who doesn’t?” I smiled up at him.

He stared at me and his brows pinched slightly. Almost like he was surprised by my answer. “Wanna split one with me?”

“Sure. No nuts on it, though.”

His gaze drifted down and locked on my lips so briefly I almost thought I’d imagined it. Though the way his irises darkened to that blueish-green color again was impossible to miss.

My stomach fluttered, and one corner of Kyle’s mouth lifted into a smirk as he continued to openly study me. A *very* sexy smirk.

He nodded toward the playground. “What should I get the kids?”

“What?” I breathed out, apparently unable to form words or coherent thoughts in such close proximity to this man.

“What flavors do the kids like?”

“Oh.” At the mention of my kids, I tore my focus from him and turned toward the playground.

I hadn’t been intimate with anyone other than Levi for the better part of twelve years, but that didn’t mean I’d forgotten the way a man looked at a woman when he wanted to kiss her. And why did that thought excite me?

It shouldn’t.

I wasn’t sure I was ready. My kids definitely weren’t.

How long was the appropriate amount of time to wait before I considered letting another man kiss me? Did I want Kyle to kiss me?

My thoughts continued to whirl until he cleared his throat.

Oh. Right. He was still waiting for an answer.

“Plain vanilla for Teddy. Callie will only eat mint chocolate chip. It was Levi’s favorite.”

I swore the moment Levi’s name left my lips, Kyle fisted his hand at his side, but just as quickly, he flattened it against his left thigh. With a nod, he headed to the window at the front of the small building.

Why did I say that?

Because you liked the way Kyle was looking at you, but you shouldn’t.

My daughter was still mourning the loss of her father, and the last thing she needed was for me to muddy everything up by dating.

Though Callie was pensive as she sat at the picnic table with us and ate her ice cream, her anger had dissipated. Kyle and I shared the most massive banana split I had ever seen.

“Uncle Kyle,” a small voice shouted from behind me.

I turned on the wooden bench and caught sight of Brendan as he ran toward us. Not far behind him, Rhett and Bella were wandering our way.

Kyle stood and lifted the little boy into his arms. “Hey, B, what are you guys doing here?”

“Me a big helper. Me get ice cream.”

Kyle raised one brow at Rhett as they approached. “Is that right?”

“Yup.” Brendan said, popping the P. He was already squirming to get down, so Kyle lowered him to his feet. When he was steady, he took off toward the playground with Teddy fast on his heels.

“Hi, Tina.” Bella wore one of those fabric wraps and had her new baby cuddled against her chest.

“You guys here together?” Rhett looked from Kyle to me and back again.

Kyle mumbled something unintelligible and scowled at his brother.

“Yeah.” I fiddled with the paracord bracelet on my right wrist. “Teddy earned an ice cream treat for doing a good job in the pool.”

“Oh, okay.” Rhett angled in and placed a kiss on Bella’s cheek, oblivious to the look Kyle was still sending him. “I’m going to order our ice creams.”

Bella hummed in assent and ducked her head. “Hi, Callie.”

“Hi,” Callie responded quietly, though her attention was quickly stolen by the sight of a couple with a little girl who’d just gotten in line behind Rhett.

The girl’s braids swung as she turned our way, and when she saw Callie, a smile broke out on her face and she waved.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Ava.” She smiled and waved back.

“The girl you met at camp?”

She nodded.

At her old school, the guidance counselor had voiced concerns that Callie had become distant and closed off to her peers, so seeing her interaction with Ava lit me up inside.

The newborn wrapped up against Bella's chest squirmed and let out a whimper. "I'm starting to think he hates this thing." Bella sighed as she undid the wrap and cradled the baby in the crook of her arm.

"Callie loved when I wore her like that. Teddy, not so much. I think it made him too hot."

The infant wailed then, making me strangely nostalgic for the days when my kids were babies. I surveyed the playground where Teddy and Brendan were playing and smiled. Callie was more difficult than Teddy as a newborn since she had colic, but their problems were more clear and easily solved then.

A memory of Levi holding our daughter like a football, her belly laid across his large forearm, as he walked through the house, had me shaking my head and chuckling. In those early days, we had no idea how to deal with a colicky newborn. We were only twenty-four, and we'd been married for less than two years when Callie was born. That first deployment a few months later was the hardest, aside from the one when he didn't come home. My chest tightened, and I pinched my eyes closed.

The crying got louder, pulling me out of my thoughts. Beside me, Kyle was holding the baby up on his shoulder with one arm under his butt and the other behind his head. He bounced slightly in place, lulling the newborn back to sleep.

I smiled, and warmth blossomed in my chest. He was a natural with kids. It was a shame he hadn't had some of his own yet. He would make a great dad.

"I swear, Kyle. You're the baby whisperer," Bella said.

"I don't know about that. Brendan only liked it when Rhett held him. Remember?"

“Then I guess you’re the Hudson whisperer.” She chuckled and turned back to me. “Are you ready for the school year?”

“Getting there. Classroom is coming along. I have lesson plans to finish and orientation next week.”

Callie was still at my side, though she continued to peer over at her friend, who was now sitting at a table with her parents.

“Why don’t you go say hi to your friend?”

“Mom...” she huffed.

I didn’t want to push, so I let it go. But I breathed a sigh of relief when the little girl came over after finishing her ice cream, and the two of them wandered to the playground.

While the kids played, Kyle and Rhett chatted about which NFL teams had the best shot to go far this season. When Bella mentioned having beef stew in the Crock-Pot at home, I told her I had BBQ pork in mine, and we found ourselves down a rabbit hole, comparing our favorite recipes. By the end of our visit, I’d agreed to attend a Crock-Pot freezer meal party if Bella put one together. Those would surely come in handy during the school year, so I was all for it.

And almost forty-five minutes later, when the kids were worn out and thirsty, I wondered if I was the only one who felt a little disappointed that it was time to leave.

Chapter Nine



KYLE



THE CAR WAS quiet as we drove back to Tina's house. My thoughts, on the other hand, were anything but. It had been more than two years since I'd wanted someone like I wanted this woman. I couldn't explain why I felt this way about her. But talk of Hughes quickly reminded me that Tina and her kids were still grieving the loss of him. I also had no intention of staying in this fucking town, so it was best not to get involved with anyone here.

I glanced in the rearview mirror, catching sight of Teddy. His head was slumped to one side, his eyes closed. He was going to be one of those boys who needed lots of activity to exhaust the amount of energy he had.

Was Tina planning to enroll him in a sport this fall? That would help. Soccer maybe?

I hadn't even put the car in park when Callie jumped out and ran up the sidewalk. I got out and opened the back door, ready to unbuckle and lift Teddy out of the car.

Tina turned in her seat. "Oh. You don't have to do that," she whispered.

“I don’t mind.” Truly I didn’t. I’d do it for Bella if Rhett wasn’t around. “I’ll carry him in. You get the front door.”

She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth, and I couldn’t help but track the subtle movement. After a moment of hesitation, she exited the car and headed for the front door.

“He never naps,” Tina said, nodding at the couch.

I shuffled across the hardwood floor and laid him on the cushions.

“Between the pool and running around, he must have worn himself out.”

Callie stood off to the side with her hands on her hips. “Kyle’s leaving now, right?”

“Callie...” Tina sighed. “Yes, he’s leaving in a minute.”

I couldn’t be offended that she wanted me gone. I still didn’t know what I was doing here.

Callie’s heavy footfalls echoed through the house, followed by the slamming of a door. Tina was right. Her moods swung suddenly. This afternoon, while she laughed and smiled and ran around with the boys and her friend, an invisible weight seemed to lift from Tina’s shoulders. But the minute we were in the car again, Callie’s joy faded, and anger resurfaced. And now it was obvious it was because I was here.

I need to go. I don’t belong here.

Instead, I found myself following Tina into the kitchen and leaning against the far wall as she lifted the lid of the Crock-Pot and stirred the contents.

“And my mom wants me to start dating,” Tina muttered. “Yeah, okay. Like I don’t have enough on my plate, and obviously, Callie isn’t ready.”

My stomach lurched. Shit. The thought of her dating someone did not sit well with me.

I should turn around and leave, but when I pushed off the counter, instead of moving toward the door, my feet brought me closer to her.

The thoughts that were going through my head, the ones telling me to flee, and the words that came out were contradictory.

“Go out with me.”

Hell. What was I saying? I might have wanted it, but I sure as shit didn't deserve it. I couldn't go there with her, especially since she still didn't know who I was or what I was responsible for.

Tina turned, eyes wide. “What?”

No turning back now. May as well own it.

I took a small step forward, crowding her space. When her breath hitched, I placed my hands on the bare skin of her upper arms. I meant it in a comforting way, but when I let my fingers travel down over her skin and a shiver rocked through her, I couldn't deny the thrill that hit me.

I wanted—no, I needed—to know this attraction wasn't one-sided.

Leaning closer—only a breath away—I whispered, “Let me take you on a date.”

“Kyle—”

“When's the last time you did something for yourself?”

There were a dozen reasons for why this couldn't go anywhere. But all I wanted was a date. There was no harm in grabbing a bite to eat together.

“I...I'm not sure it's a good idea.”

“Why?”

I took a small step back, ready for her rejection.

“I don't have a babysitter.”

That wasn't a no. Interesting.

It was one hell of a flimsy excuse, though. Technically, she could ask her parents. But then again, I, of all people, understood not wanting to explain every little thing to family.

“Text Bella. They use Victoria Myers’s oldest daughter as a babysitter. She’ll be happy to pass on her info.”

“Okay...but...”

I raised one eyebrow.

Tina sighed. “I’m worried about how Callie would respond if I left her with a babysitter to go out with a man who’s not her father.”

“This would be a great opportunity to ease her into the idea. We’ll stay close, and the babysitter will text if there’s a problem.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to take me on a date?”

That was a good question. But I couldn’t explain it to myself, let alone put it into words that would make sense to her. All I did know was that for the first time in a really long fucking time, I felt something other than pain, guilt, loss, and anger.

“I want much more than a date, Tina. Right now, I want to kiss you.”

Her eyes widened, and when she licked her lips, I wanted nothing more than to close the space between us and dominate her mouth. But I held firm. Kept my feet planted in place.

“But I’ll settle for a date.”

When her gaze locked on my lips and she took a small step toward me, I found myself drifting closer and cupping the side of her neck. I brushed my thumb over her jaw as she closed her eyes and leaned into my touch.

Were her lips as soft as her skin? I studied her features. Long lashes lay flush against her cheeks, and freckles dusted the bridge of her nose. Her lips were plump. The kind men fantasized about. As if she could sense my appraisal, her lids popped open. A mix of curiosity and desire stared back at me. I tipped forward and brushed my lips against hers. It was

gentle and chaste. Just that barely there touch made my whole body come alive for the first time in nine months.

And fuck, it felt good. Really good. There was no pain. Just Tina's soft lips.

"Mom," Callie called from somewhere in the house.

The reminder of where I was hit me like a slap in the face, and I took a step back, straightening.

Tina's eyes were wide, her lips slightly swollen as she brought her fingers to them.

I subtly adjusted myself, but she took notice, letting out a gasp. With a long breath out, I rounded the island. I didn't need her daughter to see my out-of-control hard-on.

Callie appeared in the doorway, her hands on her hips and a glare on her face. "Why's he still here? You said he was leaving."

She was wearing on her mother's every nerve, but I understood this kid. She unapologetically wore her heart on her sleeve and didn't give a flying fuck.

"I was just telling your mom how much fun I had today. And how proud I am of how well you and Teddy are doing with swim lessons."

"Oh." Her glare softened, but it didn't completely go away, and her shoulders relaxed a fraction. "Really?"

"I don't think you'll have a problem passing the swim test at Pointe Beach."

"When?"

"I'd like you to do two more lessons with me first. Deal?"

"Okay." She shrugged.

I glanced over at Tina, who had quietly turned back to the Crock-Pot and was stirring the ingredients again. Her shoulders were hunched. Shit. Maybe I'd taken things too far, too fast.

"Tina, I'll text you."

She glanced over her shoulder and nodded. “Okay.”

I sat in her driveway, taking in the bricks that made up the house.

What the fuck was I doing? I surveyed the porch, noted the two white rocking chairs that sat side by side. Neither of us was ready for more than a date. Hell, the date was probably a stretch. I was still grieving the loss of a guy I barely knew. She had been married to him, so there was no way she wasn't grieving as well. Not to mention she was still in the dark about my connection to her husband.

And I wasn't planning to stay here. Pursuing this connection would only lead to complications. But every day, I found myself more and more interested in exploring whatever lay between us.

Chapter Ten



TINA



THE WEEK WAS PASSING FAR TOO QUICKLY. After running from new teacher orientation to Teddy's first soccer practice, then Callie's dance class, sitting on the couch with a glass of wine felt really good. Luckily, I was done with orientation for the week. None of what we had gone over for the last few days was difficult, but it was all necessary. Benefits, 401(k) specifics, system training and such. The vibrating of my phone on the coffee table pulled me from my thoughts.

Kyle: Ok. This show isn't all that bad. But these boys look like teenagers. Why do 30 and 40 year old women drool over them?

I rolled my eyes. Seriously, who had never heard of *Supernatural*? I had been slightly appalled when I made a reference to the popular TV show and he had no idea what I was talking about.

Me: The first season aired in 2005. Most of us were teenagers or in our young 20s.

Me: Dean is now 45 in real life, FYI. And Sam isn't much younger.

I took a sip of wine as I waited for a response. Finally, after ten minutes, I shrugged and hauled my tired self up and headed into the kitchen to clean up. After I'd washed the dishes that had collected in the sink, I dried my hands and pulled my phone out again to check the messages that had come through while my hands were wet.

Kyle: Not Cas! They can't kill Cas.

Kyle: Well I'm glad they didn't kill him off. But Sam? Really? At least I know he comes back. There are like 10 more seasons after this.

Kyle: I hate this Chuck character. He's annoying.

Kyle: Are you asleep now?

Me: No. I was doing dishes.

Me: You've seriously binged 5 seasons this week?

Kyle: I've been watching it on my phone at work. Between all the bullshit jobs my brother and sisters give me. And I don't really sleep.

I pressed my teeth into my bottom lip. Part of me wanted to know why he didn't sleep. Pain? Thoughts? Memories? Levi struggled with not being in motion when he was home between deployments. He needed to be doing something. Day or night, it didn't matter.

Me: You could tell your siblings you can handle more, you know.

Kyle: Ehh

Kyle: I like being left alone.

Kyle: More would equal dealing with people.

Me: Well, then you can't complain.

Kyle: Touché

Me: I should head to bed.

Kyle: Have you thought about what I said on Saturday?

Damn. I thought maybe he'd changed his mind or had forgotten about the whole date thing. He hadn't brought it up all week. Nor had he brought up the kiss we shared. Did I want to go out with him? Yup. But after the way Callie behaved when he took us for ice cream, I wasn't sure if I should.

Kyle was gorgeous, albeit a bit grumpy at times. Though that attitude was typically directed at others. Other than that first day, when Teddy fell in the lake, he'd been nothing but kind and gentle with me and my kids.

"Mom?"

I turned and found my daughter standing at the edge of the kitchen. "Why are you up, baby?"

"I can't sleep. Can we watch that video of Dad? The one of him singing to me while he rocked me in the chair?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we can do that."

Even if a date with Kyle felt right, I couldn't say yes. My kids needed to be my focus right now, especially Callie. She was still hurting.

My phone vibrated in my hand as I walked into the great room to join Callie on the sofa.

The text was from my friend Emily.

Em: You said yes, right?

Emily's husband had been Levi's squad leader. Most of us wives were close, but Emily and I had formed a true friendship. I had to tell someone what happened with Kyle on Saturday, so I'd called and told her everything.

She was quick to remind me that we had made promises to live and move on if our husbands didn't come home one day. The guys both wanted that for us.

Me: I'm not sure if I should. I don't think Callie is ready for that.

I peeked over at my daughter. She was holding the TV remote up and searching through the photo storage app for her favorite video of her dad.

Em: But are you?

Me: Yeah, I think so.

Em: Our kids are important and we have to consider them, but you're a person with needs too.

Em: Is he good with the kids?

Me: Yeah. He is. Doesn't even seem fazed by Callie's attitude toward him.

Em: Then I think she'll eventually be ok. This is one of the reasons you have her in therapy. So she has someone she can talk to openly about how she's feeling and work with to sort through it all.

She had a point. I wasn't equipped to help Callie in all the ways she needed, so I'd sought out a therapist for her.

Em: And besides, he could be a complete bore who spends the whole time talking about himself.

I stopped myself from saying *no, that's not him*, because the truth of the matter was that I didn't really know him, did I? I let out a sigh.

Em: If this is what you want, you should at least try.

She was right, but mom guilt was real, and the last thing I wanted to do was make things harder on Callie.

Despite my apprehension, I had made the call regarding babysitting. No matter what I decided about the date, having a regular sitter would benefit us. It wasn't fair or feasible to always depend on my parents for that, so I'd texted Bella on Monday to get Lilly's information.

I went back over to my texts with Kyle.

Me: Lilly Myers is coming over tomorrow for a few hours to meet the kids and hang out while I run some errands.

Kyle: So that's a yes?

Me: It's a maybe. I need to make sure the kids are good and we all like Lilly.

I didn't mention that I could ask my parents if I needed to. Because frankly, I didn't want to. I *really* wasn't ready to have this conversation with my mom.

Kyle: She has a younger sister who's a lot like Callie and twin brothers exactly like Teddy. Lol. She's a good kid. Wants to be a nurse.

Kyle: And I'll take the maybe. But just know I don't give up.

Why did that excite me?

“TEDDY, GET YOUR SHOES ON,” I shouted.

Callie gave me an exaggerated eye roll and headed out the front door.

A moment later, Teddy appeared with his small turtle backpack strapped to his shoulders.

I really didn't want to know what he'd shoved in there. But the PTA was hosting an outdoor movie night at the school, and if a backpack full of God knew what meant he'd sit on the blanket through the movie, I'd go with it.

As I put the car in park in the school parking lot, my phone rang. I snagged it from the center console and was greeted by Kyle's name flashing on the screen. The sight of it made my breath catch. I fumbled for my earbuds as well and popped one in. Then I exited the car and slid my phone into my back pocket.

“Hey,” I said as I hauled the large tote I packed out of the back seat. Teddy had unbuckled himself and was wiggling his way out beside me rather than waiting for me to move.

“You guys here yet?”

“Yeah, just parked.” I reached for Teddy's hand before he had a chance to take off. “Hold my hand in the parking lot, remember?”

“Be right back.” Kyle's voice was muffled, like he'd pulled the phone away from his ear. “Heading your way,” he followed up a moment later, sounding clearer.

Nerves settled in my stomach. It was silly. We'd been texting all week, but I hadn't seen him since the kiss we'd shared last weekend. Even though our lips only brushed for a few seconds, dreams of what it would feel like to do it again had infiltrated my every waking thought.

We were almost across the parking lot when I caught sight of Kyle. Just a glimpse of him made my knees go wobbly. He was heading toward us, wearing a sexy smirk. Damn, he looked good in a pair of white linen shorts and a bright blue button-down with the sleeves rolled to the elbows.

He reached out when he was a few steps in front of me. For a moment, I thought he was going to pull me toward him, but disappointment hit me when he slid the oversized tote bag off my shoulder and slung it over his.

“Thanks.” I hoped the fleeting feeling wasn’t obvious in my voice.

“Mom, can I go say hi to Ava?” Callie nodded at the young girl standing by one of the tables set up along the edge of the field.

I nodded, my heart floating in my chest, because she was taking the first step this time.

After she took off, Kyle tipped forward, his breath skating over my ear. “I’m really looking forward to our date tomorrow night.”

A shiver shot through me. His tone was deep and sexy, but so sincere.

When he pulled back, his lips twitched. Like he knew exactly how he was affecting me. Part of me thought that seeing him for the first time since last week’s encounter would be awkward. Or maybe once we were in proximity again, I’d realize I felt nothing. But no, the chemistry was still there. If anything, it was stronger. And I was ridiculously excited to spend an entire evening alone with this man.

“Kyle, Kyle.”

Between us, Teddy pulled dramatically on Kyle’s shirt.

“Hey, little monkey,” Kyle said, picking him up and nestling him in the crook of one arm. He turned and headed toward the group of tables.

I stood frozen and empty-handed, watching them go. Teddy’s fondness for Kyle sent a wave of relief washing over

me. Maybe it was okay that I'd said yes to our date.

Kyle stopped and turned back to me. "You coming?"

I blew out a breath. "Yep."

He raised one eyebrow like he too could hear the fake bravado in my tone. Our gazes stayed locked; the people, and noise faded away, and a calm swept through me, joining the relief. I'd never been a spiritual person, choosing to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground, but I couldn't help but hope that this sense of peace was Levi saying this was all okay. I'd never thought about what I would feel when I was ready to move on, but knowing I had his approval removed a weight from my shoulders I hadn't noticed I was carrying.

I still wished I had Callie's, but I was hopeful she'd get there. I just needed to give her more time.

Chapter Eleven



KYLE



I TRIED NOT to laugh as we stood in line at the popcorn and candy table. Teddy had spent the last five minutes listing off all the things he wanted.

“You can pick one candy to go with your popcorn,” Tina said with a smile. “But just one.”

His lower lip puckered, but he didn’t argue. The wind ruffled his curly hair, and he turned his face into my shoulder.

With a deep breath in, I tuned out the sounds and people surrounding us, forcing myself to focus on Teddy’s breathing and the closeness of Tina’s body next to me.

As we stepped forward in line, Tina pulled her phone from the back pocket of the tiny-ass black shorts she was wearing. I was struggling not to stare at the creamy expanse of her bare thighs.

She smiled and looked around, then waved to someone.

A baby’s cry caught my attention, and I turned to see who she was greeting.

“Oh.” Sarah startled when she saw me and hoisted her daughter higher on her hip. “Hey, Kyle.” She looked from me to Tina to Teddy in my arms, then cocked a brow at Tina.

“You two know each other?” Tina asked, her eyes wide. Then she dropped her head and shook it. “Never mind. That was a stupid question. Everyone knows everyone here. I keep forgetting that.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. But I wanted to ask her the same question. “Yeah, we know each other. She almost became my sister-in-law.”

“You almost married Rhett?” Tina sucked in a breath, her eyes darting from Sarah to me.

Sarah sighed, and her cheeks reddened. “It’s a long story.” She turned to me. “And we both know he would have never gone through with it.”

I shrugged. Probably not. But at the time, we were all worried about how that situation would turn out. The baby in her arms drew my attention as she shoved her entire fist into her mouth and gummed on it.

Callie joined us in line then, waving at Ava as she and her parents headed toward the field where the crowd was gathering.

“Sarah is my assistant this year,” Tina said as she took the hair tie Callie was holding out to her. She stuck it between her teeth, then ran her fingers through the girl’s long hair, pulling it high on her head and securing it.

Ah. It came back to me then. I’d heard that Sarah had taken a part-time position at the elementary school after she quit her job at The Dock. Her mom was the music teacher. Or maybe she taught art. I couldn’t remember. Either way, I’d heard that she’d retired.

“I’m going to find a spot to sit,” Sarah said. “Come find me?”

“Sure.” Tina nodded.

We moved up another few steps then, and for the tenth time in the last twenty minutes, my gaze drifted down to Tina's long legs. Why did I find it so hard not to stare?

Once we'd gotten our popcorn and candy, we wandered toward the crowd.

"I need to get back to Rhett." I inclined my head, noting that my brother was manning the table by himself. "I can come join you all once the movie starts." A knot tightened in my gut. Maybe that was an overstep. We hadn't talked about it. I'd just assumed. "You know, if you want me to."

She peeked up at me from under her lashes, her cheeks pink. "Yeah, that'd be nice."

Beside her mom, Callie was scrutinizing us, her head tilted and her lips turned down in a frown. The look was one of curiosity, but there wasn't even a hint of approval there.

"Okay, lead the way. I'll help you carry your stuff over, and then I'll make my way back to Rhett." I followed her through the throng of people scattered across the grass, some sitting on blankets, others situated in folding chairs, until we reached Sarah. She had a blanket spread out, and her baby girl was asleep on her belly in the middle.

"Maybe I'll get an hour out of her this time." Sarah brushed the hair off the baby's forehead.

"Is teething still that brutal?" Tina asked, taking the tote bag from me. She kept her attention on her friend as she laid out blankets.

Sarah sighed. "Yes. And the sleep schedule I finally got her on has gone out the window."

"Don't worry. She'll get back there." Tina chuckled. "Callie was so difficult as a baby—"

"Yeah. Dad had to sing and rock me to sleep every night," Callie interjected.

The knot in my stomach twisted, and my chest got tight. Talk of babies, teething, and sleep schedules had me feeling out of place. I looked around, noting the families surrounding

us. What was I doing here? This wasn't my family. These people belonged to Hughes.

Sarah smiled at Callie, asking her about the candy she'd chosen, and when Tina finished laying out the blankets, Teddy and Callie plopped down with their snacks.

I cleared my throat and placed my hand on the small of Tina's back, leaning over slightly to speak close to her ear. "I'll see you in a bit?"

"Okay." She shot me a smile that made my breath lodge in my throat.

Her cheeks had a tinge of pink to them, making me wonder what they looked like when she came.

Callie's glare seared me, so I turned quickly, ripping my hand away from Tina's back.

Fuck. I had no right to be thinking of Tina like that.

Callie's distaste for me and the look she was giving me were good reminders. I didn't belong here. The weight of Hughes's death and the part I'd played in it hung over me now, taunting me.

Images of Tina's reaction—the way her face would crumple or maybe go red with fury—if she discovered that Hughes's death was my fault flashed through my mind. I didn't know which scenario was worse. Her finding out I was the medic who hadn't been able to save him that day or her realizing that I'd known who she was this whole time and was too chickenshit to tell her the truth. Bottom line, if she discovered the truth, it would only cause her pain, and I refused to intentionally hurt her.

I ground my teeth together and rubbed a hand down my throbbing leg as I walked away from Hughes's family. His family. Not mine.

Fuck.

"How's Tina?" Rhett asked as I came around to stand beside him.

“She’s fine.” *Please don’t fucking ask if I knew her husband again.*

He sighed and turned to talk to the person approaching us. I didn’t mean to be such a dick, but Jesus, how could I tell my family that I wanted this woman but couldn’t have her because I’d killed her husband?

Once the people milling around had settled and the movie was playing, the vendors packed up. After I helped Rhett break down his table and tent and load his truck, I made my way back toward Tina and the kids.

Except I froze halfway to them. This wasn’t where I belonged. *Not my family.* It would be in everyone’s best interest if I hustled to my truck and got my ass home.

But before I could unstick my feet and make a move to leave, Tina spun and caught sight of me, the corners of her lips tipped up, and she waved like she was flagging me down.

I made my feet move, though a sense of dread swamped me. Like I was heading into a gunfight instead of a kids’ movie night. But I went, and I shook off the discomfort. Because no matter how many times I reminded myself that I couldn’t have this, I wanted it.

Chapter Twelve



TINA



WHY WAS I SO NERVOUS? My stomach was fluttering even more than it did when Kyle sat next to me on the blanket last night. He was so close, and it was impossible not to be aware of his every move. It was exhilarating, but I didn't really feel nervous.

But now? Now my nerves were running rampant, as wild as they'd been on my wedding day.

"Hey." Kyle hooked a finger under my chin, gently forcing me to face him. "Your thoughts are louder than your words."

What the heck was he talking about? "I haven't said anything."

"I know. That was my point." He smiled at me from the driver's seat. "If you don't want to do this, I can—"

"No," I stammered. "It's not that. I just..."

What? That I have no idea what to do on a first date 'cause I haven't been on one since I was barely old enough to drink?

"What is it?"

“I don’t—I mean—you know...” I shrugged.

“Well, since none of that was a complete thought, I do not, in fact, *know*.”

I glared at him. Dammit. I didn’t want to admit that I was nervous because I hadn’t been on a date with anyone but my deceased husband in over twelve years, but by the way he was side-eyeing me as he drove, it was obvious he wasn’t going to let this go.

I sighed. “I haven’t done this in a *very* long time.”

“You mean have a nice quiet dinner with only adult conversation? I get it. With little ones, that’s probably hard. I’ll walk you through it. See, first we’ll go in, and when our table is ready, the hostess will seat us, preferably in a nice, quiet part of the restaurant. Then we’ll order drinks, maybe an appetizer? If I’m not a total bore, I assume we’ll get dinner and dessert too.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, but I couldn’t hold back the laugh. “You’re a nut.”

He shrugged. “Are you still nervous?”

I cocked my head. “No, I guess not.”

“Mission accomplished.” He pulled into the lot at the restaurant and parked near the building. “You ready?”

I nodded, and forty minutes later, I was in tears. Not the sad ones. No, these were the *can’t stop laughing, eyes watering* kind. I never would have guessed the grump would be so funny. He wasn’t even trying, but the stories he was telling about the trouble his siblings had all gotten into growing up were hilarious.

“So you’re the level-headed one?”

“Yup.” He brought his fork to his mouth and chewed before speaking again. “I was constantly keeping all of them out of trouble.”

“Except Ashley.”

“Well, yeah. Like I said, I tried, but her attitude is what always got her into trouble. I’d remind her that if she just kept her mouth shut, she’d get in less trouble. But nope, she never listened to me.”

“So you never did anything wrong? Ever?”

“I didn’t say that.” The side of his mouth twitched. “I said I rarely got in trouble. I’m the smart one out of the bunch.”

“And apparently the cocky one, too.”

Listening to him talk about his siblings sent a tendril of jealousy through me. I was an only child, and as a kid, I longed for siblings. I told him that, and from there, we dove into talking about my childhood.

“I didn’t realize you and—” He paused and took a deep breath. “Levi grew up together.”

His choice of words caused confusion to niggle at the back of my brain. We’d only talked about Levi in passing. And the way he hesitated mid-sentence was strange as well. But I brushed it off and moved on.

“Yeah. We lived in the same neighborhood outside of Wilmington. We were high school sweethearts. After graduation, he enlisted, and I enrolled at UNC Wilmington.”

We were so young, and I didn’t think I could handle a long-distance relationship, especially with someone who would be spending time overseas and could one day not make it back home.

“So you two...didn’t stay together?”

Was this a weird conversation for a first date? He seemed genuinely interested, so I sipped my wine and cleared my throat.

“I—didn’t think I could do it. The constant worry and being apart for so long.”

He nodded. “What changed?”

I sighed. “I grew up. Dated a few jerks in college. But the week I turned twenty-one, Levi was home on leave. A bunch

of us went out, and we picked up like three years hadn't passed." I swallowed hard and sent him a shy smile. "Sorry, you probably don't want to hear all this."

He looked away briefly, almost like he felt guilty, but then he turned back and affected an awkward, forced smile. "No. It's okay."

He said that, but his rigid posture betrayed him. He was clearly uncomfortable.

I nodded and rushed the rest of the story out. "Our life was a whirlwind after that. Within two years, we were married and I was pregnant with Callie. But as you've probably seen, that's how things tend to go for soldiers and their families."

He gave me a slight nod. "Yeah, that's how it was for several of my buddies."

I cocked my head to the side and surveyed him, working up the nerve to ask my next question. "But not for you?"

He shook his head and smirked. "My outlook was different. Uncommon, I guess. If I wasn't 100 percent sure before I left, I ended things. I hated the idea of leaving a woman at home waiting for something that I wasn't sure I could give her. I had a couple of serious relationships, but I never experienced the kind of connection that I knew would last over the months apart."

That made sense. Many people who didn't feel that serious connection made the commitment anyway, and often, it ended in heartbreak. Military life could be hard on relationships.

Commotion nearby drew our attention. A woman with wide eyes gasped for air, clutching at her throat. Across from her, a second woman stood abruptly, her chair crashing to the floor behind her, and yelled for help.

"I think she's choking. Does anyone know the Heimlich?"

The wheezing woman shook her head frantically, her face turning redder.

I was still gaping as Kyle stood and pushed his way through the small crowd gathered and knelt in front of her.

“Do you have an EpiPen?”

She nodded, her jaw moving awkwardly, almost like she was going to lick her lips.

“Where? Point.”

She pointed under the table, her breathing becoming more labored.

I didn't want to be yet another onlooker who had gathered around the table, so I hung back, taking in the scene.

Kyle moved the tablecloth out of the way and pulled a purse out from under it. He rifled through it, and a moment later, he retrieved the EpiPen. The woman sucked in another ragged breath through swollen, purple lips as Kyle pressed and held the device firmly against her thigh.

Within seconds, she was sucking in sharp breaths, her chest heaving.

“Slow breaths,” Kyle coaxed, grasping her hand. He turned to the crowd. “Did anyone call for an ambulance?”

“I did.” A gentleman wearing a polo with the restaurant's logo on the pocket spoke up.

Kyle nodded and shifted back to the woman. “You'll have to go with the EMTs when they arrive. The ER will want to keep an eye on you.”

She nodded, taking another long, slow breath in.

Once the chaos had died down and the EMTs had left with their patient, the restaurant picked back up and carried on with the dinner rush.

Bringing my wine to my lips, I assessed the man sitting across from me. He took a bite of his steak and raised one eyebrow.

“What?”

“How did you know?”

He sat back in his chair and ran his napkin across his face. “I've gone through a lot of training. I would hope I could tell a

difference between choking and an allergic reaction.” He shrugged. “They sound different. Anaphylaxis is more of a wheeze, because the throat is slowly closing, and the lips become swollen.”

I nodded. That made sense. This was the first time I’d witnessed an allergic reaction like that, though, so I doubt I would have noticed the difference. It was a good thing we were here. But it made me wonder.

“What did you do in the Army?”

His eyes widened just a bit, like he hadn’t been expecting the question. But he quickly blinked back his surprise.

“Medic.”

I giggled. “Makes sense now.”

“Hmm?” One eyebrow raised.

“How you knew what to do.”

“Oh, yeah.”

From there, he told me a couple of stories about times when his training had come in handy in civilian life. I got the feeling that he never hesitated to step in and help when someone was in need of his medic skills.

The nerves were back again once we pulled up outside my house.

Would he kiss me good night?

He came around the truck and opened my door, then walked me to the porch.

“Did you want to come in?” Inwardly, I cringed, hoping I wasn’t giving him the wrong impression. “I need to pay Lilly and check on the kids. Then I could make a pot of coffee. If you need to go that’s fine too. I—” Oh my God. Just shut up already.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I can come in for a bit.”

Lilly filled me in on how the night had gone, and as I closed the door behind her, Callie appeared in the great room.

“What are you doing up, sweetie?”

“I can’t sleep.” Her eyes darted to where Kyle stood near the entry to the kitchen, but she quickly looked back at me. “Can you spray that smelly stuff on my pillow?”

That lavender linen spray was the best purchase I’d ever made. It had become a nightly routine, but I’d forgotten to mention it to Lilly. I kept it hidden, because the last time Teddy got a hold of it, he’d sprayed it all over the house.

“Sure. Give me a minute, and then I’ll be in.”

With a nod, she shuffled back down the hall.

“You don’t have to wait around if you don’t want to,” I said to Kyle.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

So I left him in the great room while I checked on Teddy. Then I got Callie situated and made my way back to Kyle. But he wasn’t where I’d left him. I wandered through the open space and into the kitchen, finding him standing on the other side of the island, his back to me. Involuntarily, I looked him over, taking in his broad shoulders and muscular back. My face heated when I caught myself staring at his ass.

What was wrong with me? I shook my head, thankfully shaking myself out of my stupor, just as Kyle turned, holding a mug in each hand.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d want coffee this late. I found tea in the cabinet.”

“Thanks,” I said as I took one of the mugs from him and made my way to the sofa.

I sat on one end, my legs tucked under me, and he sat in the oversized armchair across from me, his left ankle resting on his right knee. We stayed like that, silently sipping our tea, for several minutes. It wasn’t awkward. In fact, it was comfortable. Like neither of us felt the need to fill the silence with useless words.

“So what’s the verdict on tonight?” Kyle asked, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Verdict?”

“Yeah. Our date.” He set his tea on the table between us and rested his elbows on his knees. “Think I’ll get a second one?”

I hid my smile behind my mug and took a slow sip before responding. “I’m still considering it.”

“Is that right?” He stood and stalked around the table, then sat beside me, resting one arm along the back of the sofa. All the while, his heated gaze was trained on me. I’d seen this look from him before, and the anticipation of what it meant sent a jolt through my body.

“Guess I’ll have to make the good-night kiss a really good one to up my chances. No pressure or anything.” His lips curled up as he took the mug from my hands. He placed it on the table, then shifted so he was facing me head-on.

I sat frozen, wanting—no, needing—everything he was offering. When his gaze locked on my lips, I found myself holding my breath.

He cupped my cheek, his palm warm and comforting. I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch, letting out a sigh. That same hand slid back, and he threaded his fingers through my hair, gently tugging me closer. The instant our lips met, a zap of electricity coursed through me, headed straight to my core. Need I hadn’t felt in a very long time climbed higher as he continued to brush his lips against mine. A swipe of his tongue, coaxing me to open for him, and I melted into the kiss. The world around us disappeared. The only thing that I could focus on was the thrumming in my body.

I scooted as close as I could without climbing onto his lap, grasping his biceps. With one hand still buried in my hair, he trailed the other up my outer thigh, grazed over my hip, and cupped my breast.

A moan, mine or his, I wasn’t sure, vibrated against my lips.

But like a bucket of ice water had been dumped on us, Kyle broke the kiss and stood abruptly. His need for me was

obvious, but he stumbled back, wiping at his mouth.

“I’m sorry.” He ducked his head, avoiding my gaze. “I can’t do this.”

“What?” I blinked at him, taking in the most bizarre expression I’d ever seen. Need and desperation still swam in his eyes, but there was something else—disgust? Fear? Guilt?

Whatever demons he was fighting seemed to be the reason for his sudden behavior, not the heated kiss we shared. That was my hope, at least. He had been the one to approach me tonight. The one to make the first move. I had no idea what had caused the one-eighty, and before I could ask, he was headed for the front door, shaking his head and mumbling something that sounded like *selfish prick*. An instant later, the door slammed, and I was left alone as my thoughts played the same thing on repeat.

What the hell just happened?

Chapter Thirteen



TINA



I WAITED until Tuesday before texting Kyle. Partly because I was still confused about what had happened on Saturday night, but also because I was at a loss for what to say. I thought giving him the space would help, but I'd also fully expected him to reach out.

He hadn't.

The text I sent was short and simple: *Can we talk?*

At first, I had been hurt and confused, but now? I just wanted to clear the air. If he decided anything more than friendship with me was off the table, I'd be okay with that. Truthfully, I still wasn't sure I was ready for anything more, either.

I was certain he'd respond. In the time we'd been texting, he never took more than a few minutes to text back, and more often than not, he was the one starting the conversations. But he continued to be radio silent.

At movie night, he had mentioned coming over for another swim lesson this week, but a day after I sent that text, he still

hadn't responded.

Maybe that was all the answer I'd get. In life, we weren't guaranteed explanations for the things that happened to us. I knew that better than most.

Teddy and I were packing a few toys to take to my parents' house. They were keeping the kids while Sarah and I finalized materials and the classroom for the first day of school.

This was better, anyway. Focusing on my family and my job. Starting next week, I would be super busy with teaching, lesson plans, therapy for Callie, and homework.

A knock sounded on the door as I was zipping up Teddy's backpack. It was probably my mom, even though I kept telling her she didn't need to knock. But as I swung the door open, I almost stumbled backward. Because there, with a hand on either side of the doorframe, was Kyle.

His eyes widened like I'd surprised him instead of the other way around.

"Hey. Can we talk?"

Ha. "Didn't I ask you that yesterday?"

Before he could respond, Teddy ran under my arm and out onto the porch, barreling into the big man.

Kyle ruffled his blond curls, his expression filling with warmth. "Hey, buddy."

I crossed my arms, but when Kyle tracked the movement, I let them fall to my sides. The last thing I wanted was to come off as defensive.

"My mom is picking the kids up in a minute." I felt the need to fill the space between us with useless words. "She's going to brave the library with them today."

He nodded, so I went on babbling.

"I have to be at work soon. We're getting the classroom ready for Monday."

Stop talking, I chastised myself.

Callie appeared in my periphery, stealthily sneaking closer, inspecting our exchange. Lord knew what she was thinking.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, at a loss for what to make of this moment. Thankfully, my mom pulled up out front. Saved by the mom, apparently.

Holding Teddy's hand and carrying his backpack, I walked the kids down the short sidewalk that ran along the front of the house to the driveway. As I approached, my mom arched one perfectly sculpted brow and not so subtly eyed Kyle where he stood at the front door.

"I'll fill you in later," I said. God. I did *not* want to have this conversation with my mother.

She nodded, and after the kids were buckled and ready to go, I stood frozen in place, watching them drive away. Finally, I turned and made my way back to the house. Kyle watched me, one shoulder leaning against one of the white wooden posts of the porch.

"Did you want to come in?"

He nodded, and I walked past, letting him follow me inside.

We were both quiet as I moved around the kitchen. He continued to keep his attention fixed on me, causing my skin to warm. "Do you want a cup of coffee?" I asked, doing my best to ignore his scrutiny and my body's reaction.

"Sure."

I poured two cups and moved to the fridge. "Cream? Sugar?"

"No. Black is fine."

After putting half and half in mine, I stepped around the counter and handed the black coffee to him.

Feeling awkward in his presence for the first time, I blew on my coffee and waited for him to break the silence.

He huffed, or sighed, I couldn't really tell, running a hand down his face. He sipped his coffee, then pinned me with a

heated stare. Along with the flames burning in his eyes, there was a hint of something more vulnerable. Uncertainty, maybe?

Or maybe those were my own feelings reflected back at me. Because at that moment, I was certain of almost nothing when it came to this man.



Kyle

“You deserve an explanation, and I’m sorry it’s taken me this long to be prepared to give it. I needed some time to get my thoughts straight.” That sounded better in my head. Even so, it was the truth.

Part of me itched to lay it all out. My guilt. The memories that haunted me—the brief hope in Hughes’s eyes when we stopped the bleeding in his shoulder and the way he talked about his family, knowing he would never see them again. How he suffered. But why burden her with those thoughts and images? I lived with them, experienced the heartache that came with the memories each day. What would sharing the weight with her accomplish? It would only bring her down, and she was doing well. Happy. Living her life. I couldn’t burden her and set her back.

I placed my coffee mug on the counter and pulled a deep breath in through my nose. “And I didn’t want to have this conversation through text, either.”

“Okay...” She dipped her chin, focusing on the mug she was holding.

“I could tell you that I don’t deserve you. That you could do better.”

Her head popped back up, her brows knitted together. She opened her mouth to respond, but I held up my hand to cut off her rebuttal. I could say all of that with conviction, but at the end of the day, it didn't matter whether I deserved her. The fact of the matter was that I couldn't have her.

“That was part of why I left the other night, but it's not the biggest reason. I'm selfish, so even though I don't deserve you, I'd still want to keep you—”

Her eyes opened wide and her mouth formed a perfect O.

I bit back a chuckle at her response and powered through. “But I'm not staying.”

“You're not staying...” she repeated, her tone laced with confusion.

I shook my head, itching to reach out to her. “No. I got a job offer in New York. Received the news right before our date.”

“Oh. Okay...” She dropped her attention to her coffee again.

“I like spending time with you, and kissing you is like a drug I didn't even know I was addicted to. But I'm not so selfish that I'd get involved with you when I have no intention of sticking around. I didn't want to let things go too far, so that's why I left.”

Her brows knitted together again, and I fought the urge to smooth the wrinkles from her forehead. Man, I didn't realize how hard it would be not to touch her.

“You didn't want to let things go too far? Did you think I was going to have sex with you on the sofa while my kids were down the hall?”

“Well, no.” Once I'd gotten home that night, I realized I'd overreacted. But the way her touch awakened sensations in me I thought were gone forever scared the hell out of me.

She blew out a breath. “I get it. You're not staying. Truthfully, I'm not sure I'm in a place to even consider a serious relationship, anyway.” She sighed and set her mug on

the counter next to mine. “I have a lot on my plate. So... hanging out, going on a few dates until you have to leave sounds perfectly fine to me. We don’t have to make it into anything more than that.”

My subconscious was screaming at me to abort. That this was a bad idea. But as I’d said, I was selfish. I wanted to stand in her light for as long as she’d let me. Without allowing myself to think about it, I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

I stepped closer, mesmerized by her lips and the way her tongue darted out to run along the top one. In that instant, my resolve melted into a puddle on the floor around us.

“Did you know that your eyes turn a brighter shade of blue when you smile?” She studied me, wearing a soft expression. “You should smile more.”

“I don’t have much to smile about these days.” My voice sounded gritty, and I swallowed hard.

She broke eye contact, tipping her head. But I needed to look at her when I told her my truth, so I tilted her chin up with my thumb and forefinger.

“But when I’m around you, I can’t help but smile. You make me feel alive again. Your ability to see the light in everything makes the dark parts of my soul a little brighter.”

She shook her head, her cheeks going pink.

Did she not realize her ability to smile, to laugh, when she had so much to grieve, was a breath of fresh air?

Caught in her orbit, I found myself angling in, hovering so close our lips were a breath apart. She sighed, scanning my face, then fixating on my mouth. When she locked eyes with me again, I closed the inch between us, fusing our lips together. In an instant, I recognized all I’d been missing for the last few days. My body came alive once again, and I craved more. More of her touch, her light, her joy.

But could I do this without being completely honest about who I was? I was moving to New York, and she had just

started her life here. So, what would telling her I was there that day accomplish?

Her phone chimed, and she pulled back, releasing a sigh. With an apologetic look in her eyes, she picked it up off the counter.

“I have to go. Sarah’s waiting for me at the school.”

I nodded and stepped back, not entirely sure where we went from here.

Twenty minutes later, when I pulled into the parking lot at my physical therapist’s office, I felt lighter than I had in a long, long time. Maybe it was because of my moment with Tina, or maybe it was because, for the first time in a long time, I had a purpose. Either way, I was determined to strengthen my leg and enjoy all the time I could with Tina, then start a new chapter of my life in New York, doing what I loved.

The smile slipped from my face as I made my way inside. Because suddenly, all that hope dissipated. In its place sat a heavy weight that sank low in my gut. Everything was happening just the way I’d intended. But I couldn’t shake the sudden feeling of dread that continued to wash over me.

Chapter Fourteen



TINA



I PEERED around the great room, stumped. I'd already checked all the common hiding spots. Doing another one-eighty, I placed my hands on my hips and called out to my four-year-old again.

“Teddy, Mommy gives up. Come on out now.” Kyle was supposed to be here any minute for another swim lesson, and Teddy still wasn't in his swim jammers.

As I spun in another circle, a knock sounded on the door. And that would be Kyle.

My stomach fluttered at the sight of him. He wore board shorts that hugged his thighs, and a tight-fitting T-shirt clung to his broad shoulders.

His lips turned up into a smirk. “Take your time.”

I shook my head. “What?”

“You know, checking me out,” he said with a wink.

Cheeks heating, I spun and wandered back into the great room. Kyle followed, chuckling.

Callie stood outside the kitchen, clutching her water bottle in one hand. She had her swimsuit on and had a towel draped over her arm. “Did you find Teddy yet?”

I shook my head.

“You lost Teddy?” Kyle asked, a hint of panic in his tone.

I sighed. “I didn’t lose him. I just can’t figure out where he’s hiding.”

Kyle sidled up beside me wearing a huge smile like he’d just solved a puzzle.

“Oh no.” He affected a dramatic tone. “I guess we can’t go to the end of summer bash at The Dock, then.”

“The what?” Callie and I asked in unison.

“Bella and my sisters planned some end of summer thing. They wanted me to bring you guys.” He shrugged. “There will be a bouncy house and cotton candy, ice cream. You know, that sorta stuff.”

“Ice cream?” a muffled voice asked from somewhere close by.

I scanned the room, searching for Teddy. It sounded like his voice had come from the fireplace. But Teddy would never. Would he? I cringed at the thought of him covered in ashes and soot. Yet now that I thought about it, I wouldn’t be shocked if he came climbing out of it. Nothing this kid did surprised me anymore.

I was padding that way when he squirmed out from underneath the sofa. How he fit was beyond me.

“We go?” Teddy wore a hopeful smile as he looked from me to Kyle and back again.

I shrugged. In the couple of months we’d lived here, I’d realized that this town made any excuse to get together and celebrate.

“Swim lesson first.” Kyle winked. “Then we’ll talk to your mom.”

Forty-five minutes later, Callie and I sat side by side in lounge chairs, watching in awe as Kyle held Teddy under the arms. My little guy was kicking his legs and grinning like a fool.

I couldn't help but study the tattoo on Kyle's shoulder again. From here, it looked like some sort of crest. Definitely military.

"You're doing it," Kyle praised, a huge smile on his face. "Keep kicking. Just like that."

When his bright blue irises locked on me, it sucked all the air from my lungs. That mixed with the way the corners of his eyes crinkled screamed joy.

"I can't believe Teddy is actually in the pool." Callie's tone was laced with surprise.

"Eventually, he had to get over his issues with water, right?"

"Kyle said I'm almost ready for the swim test at Pointe Beach."

"That's exciting." I side-eyed my daughter, who laughed at the shenanigans happening in the pool. In the last couple of days, her mood swings had been fewer and farther between. She'd finally started therapy, and the therapist was confident she just needed a safe space to voice her emotions. I wanted her to feel comfortable talking to me, but I understood the importance of therapy. Of having a neutral party she could speak to freely. "What do you think of this end of summer bash thing Kyle mentioned?"

I held my breath, waiting for an answer. Starting school in a new place and making friends was one of her biggest concerns.

But miraculously, her response was a small smile and a shrug. "Sure. Sounds fun."

Maybe, just maybe, we were finally moving in the right direction.



Kyle

“Mommy, I swam! I swam!” Teddy scampered to Tina, arms flailing.

“Yes, you did.” She bent down and wrapped a towel around him. “You did a great job.”

He really had. He’d kicked his legs while I supported his upper body. Truthfully, I was most impressed with how willingly he’d tried floating on his back.

“So, end of summer bash?” I was still a little unsure about it. My entire family would be there and they could be...a bit much.

Scratch that. They were *a lot*. All the time.

“Sure.” She stood straight, giving me a once-over as she did. She paused on my chest for an instant, but quickly dropped her focus back to Teddy.

She was so easy to read. The way she got nervous or embarrassed when she caught herself checking me out was adorable.

“Do you mind if I change?”

“No. Of course not.” She shook her head, keeping her eyes averted.

I snagged my towel off the chair and ran it through my hair.

“What’s your tattoo of?”

I froze, my stomach sinking and my brain jumbling.

“Looks familiar, but I can’t place it.”

Clearing my throat, I went back to drying my hair. She was just curious. I highly doubted the guys would have told her a Special Forces team showed up to save their asses that day.

“It’s the Special Forces crest.”

She chuckled behind me.

Spinning to face her, I cocked one brow. Why was that funny?

“Levi used to say that if Special Forces showed up, it meant you were there to bail them out of a mess or about to cause one yourselves.”

Well, fuck. That was funny as shit, but also true. We were typically called in because things had either gone sideways or were about to.

I shrugged. “He wasn’t wrong.”

We made our way into the house, and Tina pointed out the bathroom before ducking into a room across the hall with Teddy.

I towel dried my hair as best as I could—I desperately needed a trim; I wasn’t used to having it this long—and changed into dry clothes.

In the living room, Tina sat on an oversized chair, and Callie was propped up on her knees on the floor in front of her, her damp hair separated into sections. “I really do suck at this, don’t I?”

Callie rolled her eyes. “Dad was always better at this.” She grabbed the phone from the table in front of her and swiped to unlock the screen. “Do you want to watch the video again?”

“Baby, I’m not sure the video will help me.”

Based on how she had the hair sectioned off, Tina was trying to braid it.

“You want me to do it?”

Both sets of eyes homed in on me.

“You know how to braid hair?” Callie asked, one eyebrow raised.

“I have three younger sisters.” I stepped farther into the room. “My mom had me helping her by the time I was eight. Rhett never really got the hang of it, though, so I was always the one the girls went to.”

“You can do the kind that starts up here?” Callie pointed to the top of her head.

“Yeah.” I dipped my chin. “I can do that.”

She peered over her shoulder at her mom.

“I can keep trying if you want—” Tina started.

“No.” She shook her head and smiled. “We’ll be here all night and miss the party.”

“So, you want Kyle to try, then?”

“Sure.” She shrugged. “If he wants.”

With a shake of her head, Tina stood. “Have at it.”

I grabbed a stool from the kitchen and set it in the middle of the great room.

“Sit here.”

Without a word, Callie pulled herself up onto the stool, and I got to work. I hadn’t done this in over ten years, but it was just like riding a bike. Her long light-brown hair was still damp from the pool, making it easier to control, and less than ten minutes later, I was wrapping a hair tie around the ends.

She ran her hand down the braid. “Mom, he did it.”

“Did you doubt me?”

Callie chuckled. “Maybe for a minute.”

Well, at least she was honest.

Chapter Fifteen



TINA



THIS WHOLE AFTERNOON had been perplexing, but I'd missed this—having someone here, helping with the things I wasn't good at. Like braiding hair. I was surprised that Callie wasn't upset by the similarity between Levi and Kyle in that respect. But maybe she was just that excited to have her hair braided. In the last couple of years, I'd rarely managed to do it and make it look decent.

I smiled at Callie, who was talking animatedly with another young girl. We'd only been at this end of the summer bash for about thirty minutes, and already she'd found another child around her age to hang out with.

"I see our girls have hit it off," Ashley said as she stepped up next to me.

Ashley was one of Kyle's sisters, and she ran the catering side of The Dock. I'd seen her around with her fiancé, but I didn't remember them having a child.

"Our girls?" I parroted.

“Yeah.” Ashley nodded to the blonde still chatting with my daughter. “Jackson and I are in the process of adopting Sophia.”

That had my curiosity piqued, but I wasn’t sure there was a polite way to ask what the story there was.

So I left it alone. Our conversation stayed light, focusing mostly on her wedding plans. She was discussing her flower choices when we were interrupted by the girls.

“Can we get our faces painted?” Sophia asked.

“I don’t see why not.” Ashley raised a brow at me, looking for confirmation.

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

Water bottles in hand, we followed the girls to the table set up for face painting. Out of habit, I scanned the area for Teddy. He had taken off to the bouncy house the minute we’d arrived, and Kyle had waved a hand at me and run after him.

My child’s loud laughter drew my attention as we approached the table. Not far from us, Kyle was chasing Teddy and Brendan around the open grassy area. The boys were taking turns giggling in delight at the game.

“It’s nice to see Kyle smiling again.” Ashley sighed.

“Did he struggle a lot after he came home?” War changed even the strongest people. I saw it in Levi each time he came home. PTSD as well as traumatic brain injuries were serious concerns for many.

“Yeah. His last two deployments were hard, especially the most recent one. We’ve all been pretty worried about him.”

All families worried about their loved ones who served, regardless of whether they were deployed. The list of concerns, no matter where they were or what they were doing, was endless.

“I really haven’t noticed.” He’d mentioned that he had trouble sleeping, but a lot of people had that problem. Obviously, his leg was still healing, though I didn’t see how an

injury that was improving would have elicited such dire concern from his family.

“He’s been trying to find his way back to what he wants and what makes him happy.” Ashley regarded me with a warm smile. “And it finally seems like he’s getting there.”

Before I could respond, Callie was standing in front of me.

“I’m a unicorn.” She smiled brightly, proudly displaying the art on her face.

In the grassy area, Kyle slowed and ran a hand down his left leg. A second later, though, he sprinted after Teddy again. A memory engulfed me at the sight. A much younger Teddy, just a few months shy of two, toddling around our backyard as Levi pretended to chase him. That was a month before he left for the deployment that took him from us.

“Can we get something to eat now?” Callie interrupted my thoughts.

“Of course. Let me see if I can convince Teddy to come with us. How about I meet you over there?” I pointed toward the area set up with tables and food.

With a quick nod, she took off in that direction, with Sophia right behind her.

I’d just gotten the kids situated with plates of food when a hand landed on my lower back. Kyle’s breath near my ear sent a shiver rocketing through me.

“Mmm, cornbread.” He snatched one of the mini loaves off my plate.

I rolled my eyes, ignoring how his closeness was making my body heat.

“My favorite.”

“You should get your own, then.” I sent him a saucy smile.

The smirk he shot me was devilish. “It’s more fun stealing it from your plate.”

With a shake of my head, I finished making my plate. He moved down the table, grabbing his own, and I immediately

missed his touch.

When I turned from the food, my heart lurched. At least seven pairs of eyes were focused on us. Each person in our proximity was looking at us with a smile on their face and hope in their eyes. Shit. He was leaving, and even though we liked each other, this couldn't be a permanent thing. But here we were, getting people's hopes up.

Next to me, Kyle let out a huff, or maybe a sigh. When I looked back at some of his family, they were all of a sudden looking anywhere *but* at us.

"They definitely aren't subtle." I chuckled as we made our way to where the kids sat.

"My family is nosy. They've been in each other's business for so long I don't think they realize that outside this town, people appreciate their privacy."

I laughed. It wasn't that I didn't understand what he meant but—

"I kinda thought something similar when I moved here. People were super curious about my life story. It was very, um, strange to me...but also familiar. I liked that it reminded me of life in a military community."

"What?" He tilted his head and frowned.

"Our lives were entangled in so many ways out of necessity, you know? But I didn't expect to experience the same kind of thing when we moved here."

"Yeah, I can see that." He slowly nodded and took a seat next to Teddy, turning to make a funny face at him.

I sat beside Callie, who was eyeing me with a flat look and pursed lips.

"People are staring at you because you two are flirting." She rolled her eyes. "Don't be gross."

It was probably time to bring up the subject of dating with her. She was obviously catching on. But I had a feeling that conversation would come with questions I wasn't sure I had

the answers to. Things with Kyle were easy, natural. After he left for New York, I wasn't sure I wanted to actively date.

Luckily, she was off with Sophia again ten minutes later, all smiles and laughter. This time, I followed Teddy over to the bounce house while Kyle was pulled away to help Rhett with something.

Brendan bolted past me, discarding his shoes and climbing into the large inflatable with Teddy.

"Hi, Tina," Kyle's mother said as she stepped up next to me.

I hadn't officially met Miranda until today, and my first thought was about how much Kyle resembled her. His hair was blond like hers, though hers was sprinkled with gray, and their eyes were the same shade of blue. It made me wonder if hers turned greenish sometimes like Kyle's did. Today, she wore a bright blue top that really made her eyes pop.

My cheeks heated as I realized I had been staring at her for the last minute.

"Hi."

"Are you and your kids having a good time?"

"Yes. Callie has been running around with Sophia, and Teddy hasn't stopped moving."

She chuckled. "Yes. I've noticed that. He reminds me of my daughter Savannah at that age."

Teddy and Brendan bounced and giggled as we looked on. They were close in age but different in so many ways. Even simple things like the way they approached the bounce house were worlds apart. Teddy was trying to scale one of the walls, while Brendan had his arms out to the side as he jumped so he wouldn't fall over.

"Kyle has mentioned that." I cocked a brow and smirked at her. "He also said he was the one who never got into trouble."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Maybe not in the same way as his siblings. But he was still a handful." She shook her head. "Sometimes he was more difficult to parent."

I nodded, relating to that statement. Sometimes, parenting Callie, anticipating her needs, correcting her while trying not to nag or drag her down, was more overwhelming than dealing with Teddy and his energy.

“Kyle marched to the beat of his own drum, and we found out quickly that he learned best when given natural and logical consequences.” She picked up Brendan’s shoes, which he’d tossed aimlessly, and lined them up near the entrance to the bounce house. “He was a rule-follower and super smart, so it’s true that he didn’t get into the same kind of trouble his siblings often did. But he pushed himself, expected a lot, and held himself to a high standard. Sometimes that led to overcommitments, arguing with teachers if he didn’t get the grade he thought he deserved, or refusing to do something because he didn’t see the value in it.”

The conversation we had a few weeks ago at the grocery store came to mind. When he was mind-blown that I’d never considered swimming lessons for Teddy. Or the discussion we’d had about how he didn’t want to lead me on, knowing he wasn’t staying.

“Yeah. I see all that now that I’ve gotten to know him.”

She chuckled and raised one perfectly manicured eyebrow. But before she could respond, the sound of quickly approaching footsteps had me turning.

Callie was barreling toward us, calling my name. When she stopped in front of me, she was panting. “Can I dye my hair purple?”

Purple? Why on earth would she want to do that?

“Oh, look. Here comes the child who convinced me to stop at five.” Miranda sighed.

Between my daughter’s question and her statement, I was officially lost.

Savannah appeared, her presence giving me the context for Miranda’s comment. “Hey, Mom,” she said, leaning in to press a kiss to her cheek.

“Did you just get here?”

Savannah huffed. “Your son made me work the bar today.”

I tilted my head. As far as I knew, she *was* the bartender at The Dock, so it made sense to me.

“I’d hope so. It is your job, after all,” Miranda fired back.

“Eh, that’s irrelevant.” Savannah waved her off.

“Can I? Please,” Callie pleaded. “I want purple hair like Savannah.”

“What?” Savannah squeaked. “No way, girlfriend. You can’t ruin this soft, beautiful hair.” She ran her hand over Callie’s braid.

“Ruin?” Callie parroted, head tilted back so she could eye Savannah.

“Yeah, if I had hair this color, I would never dye it. It’s like the perfect mix of caramel and chocolate. My two favorite things.”

Callie’s brow furrowed as she chewed on this information, and I held my breath. There was no way I was letting my ten-year-old dye her hair. TikTok, boys, and hair dye were not things I should have to worry about yet.

“Fairy hair would look so much cooler.” Savannah beamed. “And you’re in luck, ’cause I know how to put it in.”

“Really? Can she, Mom?” At least she’d moved on from purple hair dye, but fairy hair?

“What’s that?” I asked Savannah. At times like this, I felt so old.

“Hair tinsel?” Savannah’s brows rose like she was surprised I didn’t know what the heck she was referring to. “They’re sparkly, sometimes iridescent, strands of tinsel that can be tied into your hair close to the root. They fall out as your hair sheds naturally.”

Ah. That sounded like a much better idea.

“Sure. I think that would be okay.”

“Perfect.” Savannah turned to Callie and held her hand out for a high five. “I’ll text your mom and figure out a time when I can do it for you.”

High-pitched cries had us all swiveling toward the bounce house, and when I recognized one as Teddy’s, I bolted for the entrance to the bounce house. Inside, both boys were in tears, so I toed off my shoes and climbed in to assess whether anyone was actually hurt.

Shit.

Teddy’s left eye was covered in blood, as was the hand he had pressed to his forehead. Brendan had a swollen lip that oozed a little blood, but he seemed uninjured otherwise. Behind me, Savannah appeared at the entrance and held out a hand to him.

As he crawled out, I focused all my attention on Teddy. “Shh, it’s okay, baby.” I gripped his bloody hand and pried it gently from his face. “Let mama look.”

“Is he okay?” Savannah asked behind me.

The cut didn’t look too deep, but I wasn’t sure whether it needed stitches. Teddy whined and yanked his hand from my hold so he could cover the cut again.

“What happened?” Kyle stood beside his sister now, but I was too concerned with taking care of Teddy to respond.

I scooped Teddy into my arms and scooted toward the entrance, which was easier said than done. Kyle’s face appeared through the flap as I approached it.

He reached out, and I handed Teddy to him so I could crawl through the small opening. I followed behind him as he took the bottle of water Rhett handed him and set Teddy in the grass. In the next second, he ripped his T-shirt off over his head. I wasn’t sure what his plan was, but I trusted him and would follow his lead.

“Tina, can you hold him?” He shot me an apologetic smile. “He’s not going to like this, but I gotta see how deep the cut is.”

With a nod, I sat in the grass behind my little guy and pulled him onto my lap.

Kyle looked over his shoulder at Rhett. “First aid kit?”

“On it.” Rhett turned and sprinted toward the back patio of The Dock.

I winced as Kyle uncapped the water bottle, realizing then what he intended to do, and tightened my hold. He was right. Teddy definitely wouldn’t like this.

Teddy squirmed and let out more cries as Kyle poured the bottle of water over the bloody cut. He only became more distraught as Kyle dabbed his face dry with his T-shirt. Angling in close, Kyle splayed his hand over Teddy’s head and assessed the laceration.

“Sorry, buddy. Gotta look at your boo-boo.” He held the T-shirt against the cut once he’d gotten a good look and pressed firmly. “I think a few butterfly bandages will be fine. Probably won’t even scar.” He focused on me, giving me a reassuring smile. “Can you hold this against his head?”

I nodded, feeling calmer than I thought I would, and held the T-shirt while he opened the first aid kit Rhett had returned with.

I sang “You Are My Sunshine” softly to Teddy as I rocked slowly, desperate to quiet his sobs.

“You’re doing great,” Kyle murmured. “And being so brave.”

He worked quickly, applying the steri-strips to the cut above Teddy’s left eye as I continued to sing the songs he loved best.

“We’ll get an ice cream cone after this,” I promised. “How does that sound?”

Teddy nodded, hiccupping a breath. “I like ice cream.”

“I know, baby. I know.”

I lifted my head, seeking out my daughter. Savannah stood next to her, an arm around her shoulders. I barely knew this

woman, but she was providing my daughter comfort and assurance. I had no clue what to make of that. Sometimes it truly did feel like I was back in Fort Bragg, surrounded by people who always showed up, no matter what they had going on.

When Callie locked eyes with me, I mouthed, *he's okay*.

She nodded, and I blew out a breath as Kyle finished up.

An hour later, as we pulled into the driveway, I could barely keep my eyes open. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who was exhausted after today's events. Both of my kids were out cold in the back seat of Kyle's truck.

Kyle turned, taking in the scene as well. "I guess all the excitement wore them out."

"Understatement." I sighed.

"I can carry Callie in if you can handle Teddy."

"I've never been good at that."

"At what?"

"Transferring sleeping kids from the car to the house." I wasn't sure if it was me or my kids, but they almost always woke up. "But yeah. Let's try it."

I prayed we'd succeed. I was far too tired to have to put them back down if they woke up. After the day we'd had, I seriously needed a glass of wine and a long soak in the bath.

Chapter Sixteen



KYLE



CALLIE STIRRED SLIGHTLY but didn't wake as I followed Tina down the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

“Just lay her on her bed for now. Her pjs are on her bed, so if she wakes up, she can get herself changed.”

It was only eight thirty, but between swimming, running around at the end of summer bash, and Teddy's mishap, it was no wonder they were wiped out. We were all exhausted.

I laid Callie on her bed, then pulled the door mostly closed. Then I stood in the hall by Teddy's open door, listening to Tina as she worked to get him back to sleep.

Her soothing voice was like a balm to my soul. Calming, like the chaos that lived inside me quieted when she was around. I closed my eyes and tuned in to only her, wishing that, for just a minute, things were different. That this was *mine*.

The peace that she evoked in me was similar to the kind that flowed through me when I was in the kayak out on the quiet lake or when I was hyper-focused on a task, like today

with Teddy. A problem I had a solution for. Using what I knew to solve an issue always helped me to tune out the chaos in my head.

I shook myself out of my stupor and made my feet move toward the other side of the house.

The mantel over the fireplace caught my eye like it had the first time I stepped inside this house. Particularly the military portrait of Hughes. It was a reminder of why things couldn't be different between Tina and me. I stood in front of it and scanned the other pictures. A candid shot of him holding Callie as a baby, a family picture taken at Christmastime, and one of both kids that looked recent. I paused briefly on the one on the end, tracing the beautiful woman looking down at her son.

“He’s asleep.”

I startled at Tina’s voice and let my hand fall to my side.

“Sorry,” she said when I turned to her. “I had to change and soak my dress.”

She’d gotten blood on her dress today. I’d forgotten. Truthfully, I wasn’t even sure she’d noticed. If she had, she hadn’t mentioned it until now. Rhett had an extra shirt in his office, so he’d lent it to me, and Bella had an extra change of clothes Teddy was able to borrow.

Tina had pulled her hair into a messy bun at the top of her head. The tank top she’d changed into hugged her breasts, and her leggings clung to her hips in a way that had all the blood in my body rushing south.

What the hell was she doing to me? I could barely keep my eyes off her in the sundress she’d worn today, but somehow, she looked hotter now.

I cleared my throat, hoping to clear away the lust swirling through me. Damn. I wanted nothing more than to back her against that wall and devour her mouth. But I had no clue what we were doing. She’d have to lead here. Decide how much and how far things would go between us.

She looked me up and down, a smirk spreading across her face, before turning and heading into the kitchen.

“Want a glass of wine?” she asked over her shoulder as I followed. “I have beer, too.”

“Beer would be great.”

She poured a glass of wine and pulled a beer from the fridge. Rounding the island, she held out the bright blue, yellow, and orange can to me. I took it, and as she inched closer, I rested my free hand on her hip and brushed my thumb along the tiny strip of skin between her tank top and leggings.

A shiver coursed through her at the contact. When I dragged my focus up to her face, she was already watching me. I wanted to pull her flush against me so she could feel what she did to me. But I kept her at arm’s length.

“Can I take you out again?” I asked, bringing the beer to my mouth.

“School starts this week, so it’s going to be crazy.”

“Next Saturday, maybe?”

She nodded. “Sure. As long as I can find a babysitter.” She took a sip of her wine, hiding an obvious smile behind the glass. “You’re not going to bolt afterward, right?”

I dropped my head and shook it. “No.”

Rising to my full height again, I shifted. As I did, a stabbing pain shot through my leg, and I bit back a groan. Fuck. I knew I’d overused it today, but I’d hoped it would hold up for another hour or so. I pinched my eyes closed and removed my hand from her hip to massage my fucked-up thigh.

“Here.” Tina grabbed my beer and set both of our drinks on the island. Then she ducked under my arm and looped hers around me. “Let me help you to a chair.”

“I can do it.” Only I made no attempt to untangle myself from her. Instead, I felt myself leaning against her slightly and inhaling the sweet, fruity scent of her hair. Apples, maybe?

The chair scraped across the floor as she pulled it away from the table. “You did too much today,” she said, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips. Her round, perky breasts were now at eye level.

“I know, but it was worth it.” Spending the day with her and her kids. Feeling alive, useful. I felt almost like myself again. I hadn’t felt like this in a very long time. For once, my mom’s eyes weren’t full of worry. None of my siblings gave me pitying glances. It was all worth it.

Tina’s gaze softened, her brown irises sparkling as they ran over my face. I wished I knew what she was thinking.

With a long breath in, she picked up our drinks and handed mine over. I took a large swig of my beer, then set it on the table next to me. Beer likely didn’t have the same effect as whiskey when it came to dulling the pain, but it would have to do.

As if reading my mind, Tina frowned. “Want something a little stronger?”

“Yes, I do.” I gripped her wrist, pulling her closer. “But not to drink.” I tugged her again gently and guided her to sit on my good leg. “You make me forget about the pain.”

I cupped the side of her face and stroked my thumb over the corner of her lips. For a moment, I paused, giving her the chance to stop me, but the second she closed her eyes and melted into my touch, I pulled her closer. Need spiraled through me as our mouths fused.

I traced the seam of her lips with my tongue, and when she moaned in response, I deepened the kiss. I wanted more. God, I needed this woman in ways I’d never needed anything.

I pulled her farther up my leg, hooking one arm around her back, and continued my exploration. She squirmed, brushing her thigh along my rock-hard cock. When I groaned into her mouth, she pulled back with a gasp, her cheeks red, her lips swollen, and her eyes swimming with desire. Tilting forward, I brushed my lips against hers, capturing her mouth once again until we were both panting with need.

I didn't give a fuck about my leg anymore, but when she squirmed again, I almost came right then and there. And her kids were in their beds, right down the hall.

Breaking the kiss, I laid my forehead against hers and ran my hand up and down her back.

She sighed, pliant in my arms. "How's your leg?"

"Better now." Because Tina was all I could feel.

"That's good."

I shifted. Damn, as much as I loved her pressed against my dick, I was going insane. My leg throbbed again then. Shit. I locked my jaw.

She pulled away, searching my face. "You're in pain."

Oh, how I wished I could explain the truth in that statement. I wasn't sure which *pain* was more intense at the moment. But I wouldn't lie to her, so I nodded.

"What can I get you?" She attempted to scoot off my leg, but I held her in place. Apparently, I loved the torture.

"Kyle..."

With a heavy exhale, I released my hold on her and ducked my head. "Advil would be fine."

She returned with a glass of water and two pills. As I swallowed them, my phone vibrated in my pocket, so I dug it out and unlocked the screen.

I read through a few of the messages, getting more and more confused, then frowned up at Tina.

"What?" She stepped closer, matching my expression.

"My sister is putting fairy hair in Callie's hair?"

Tina smiled. "Yep. It was the better option from the choices I was given."

"Do I even want to know?" I locked my jaw, hoping Savannah hadn't overstepped. She rarely understood boundaries, implied or otherwise. I picked up my beer and took another drink, then rested it against my knee.

She shrugged. “Savannah’s just trying to do something nice for Callie.”

My phone continued to vibrate about once a second. Shit. With a groan, I unlocked the screen again and watched as the messages appeared in real time.

Ashley: Sophia wants fairy hair too. Maybe we could plan a girls’ day.

Savannah: That’d be fun. Kyle, can you send us Tina’s number?

Bella: I have it. I’ll text her!

Rhett: What’s fairy hair?

Bella: I’ll explain later.

Savannah: It’s magical dust that makes you fly.

Rhett: I’m not stupid.

Savannah: ...

Ashley: ...

Hattie: Remember that time Savannah and I convinced you we buried your bike in the front yard?

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and looked up. Tina was now sitting on a stool at the island with her wineglass in her hand. When she crossed one leg over the other, I struggled to tear my gaze away from the curve of her ass in those tight as fuck leggings.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to focus on the still incoming messages.

Savannah: That was hilarious.

I typed out a quick response with one hand while bringing the can of beer to my mouth.

Me: You're lucky I stopped Rhett before he dug up the front yard or you all would have gotten in so much trouble.

“Do you want another beer?”

I tried to stop my gaze from lingering on her ass again as I looked up. But I failed.

I tipped my can from side to side, the beer in it swishing. “Nah, this'll be good.” I still had a quarter of the can left. “So, you like Wicked Hazy?”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “It was Levi's favorite. Kinda just became my go-to over the years too.”

I tilted my head, assessing her as I brought the beer to my mouth again. I didn't understand how she could be so perfectly composed when she mentioned him. Me? Every muscle in my body tensed and my gut coiled in pain every time I heard his name. It had been two years since his death, and the visceral reaction I experienced when thinking about or talking about him had barely faded.

The question slipped from my mouth before I could consider my words. “How do you do that?”

Her brow creased. “Do what?”

I shook my head. Why the fuck did I even say that? And how did I explain what I meant?

“You know...” I brushed my hair back from my forehead. “Talk about him so easily without feeling sad or angry. Or both.”

“I do feel those things sometimes.” She shrugged. “But Levi wouldn't want me to be sad all the time. We used to talk about that stuff. He would make me promise to live and be happy. Find someone else.” She glanced down at her

wineglass and swallowed audibly before focusing on me again. “He brought it up again before he left that last time. Part of me can’t help but wonder if he knew he wouldn’t be coming home. If he had some kind of sense that the end was near for him. But then I think that’s ridiculous, right? No one knows when they’re going to die.”

I’d seen some strange things when it came to death. I wouldn’t scare her with the details, but her openness did make me want to confess that I had been there. I wanted to tell her he was eerily calm while we worked to save him. It wasn’t something I noticed at the time. Only later, when I couldn’t stop replaying those moments in my head. He knew he was dying. His demeanor would have given it away had I been paying attention. Guilt stabbed at my gut. He should be here, in his kitchen with his beautiful wife. Not me. And it was my fault he wasn’t.

Across from me, Tina’s eyes were wide as she searched my face.

A war raged inside me as I grappled with how to put into words all the things I needed to say.

“Mom?”

We both startled as Callie entered the kitchen, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

A mixture of relief and disappointment washed over me in that moment. Relief that I didn’t have to divulge my secret, but at the same time, I was hit with disappointment that the opportunity to get it off my chest had passed.

“It’s late, baby.” She stepped toward her daughter, swiping the hair off her forehead. “You should go back to bed.”

“Can I take a shower first?” She rubbed her cheek and looked at her fingers. “The face paint is itchy.”

“Yeah, of course. Do you want me to spray your pillows with lavender?”

“Yes, please, and can I get a glass of water?”

“Go get in the shower. I’ll put the water in your room and spray your pillows.”

Callie nodded and considered me for a long, quiet moment.

I took one final swig of my beer and stood. There was no point in telling Tina what I experienced that day. It would only hurt her. Why I’d thought it was a good idea was beyond me. Callie’s interruption was a sign that I wasn’t meant to.

“I better get going. It’s late.” I handed Tina the empty can of beer.

A slight gasp pulled my attention to the small person in the room with us.

Callie was zeroed in on the can, her face red. She shot a glare at her mom and crossed her arms over her chest. “Why is he drinking Dad’s beer?”

With a sigh, Tina took the can from me. She gave it a quick rinse and dropped it into the recycling can. “It’s not. It’s mine.”

“No, that’s the kind only Dad drank.”

“Callie, I drink it too.”

“Whatever.” She whipped around and stomped to the other end of the house.

I tracked Tina’s movements as she got a glass out and filled it with water. The relaxed, carefree woman from a few moments ago was gone. If I didn’t know her so well, I’d probably think she was unfazed. Her shoulders were hunched, but other than that, she hid her distress well. Just like that day on the dock when she seemed as cool as a cucumber except for the slight shake of her hand as she walked away from me. Pride enveloped me as I continued to observe her movements. This beautifully strong woman who always smiled, saw the glass as half full, and approached everything with a calm I wished I possessed.

I stepped up behind her and squeezed her shoulders. She relaxed under my touch, and I smiled, loving that I could cause that reaction.

“I’ll text you tomorrow.” I dipped low and placed a kiss on her cheek. Then I grabbed my phone from the table and headed for the front door.

Her voice stopped me before I could reach for the handle.

“Thank you. For today.”

“I should be the one thanking you.” Today had been the best day I’d had in a long, long time. I glanced over my shoulder, not sure if she’d heard me.

Her brows were slightly creased, and my guess was that she hadn’t.

So I dipped my head and said, “You’re welcome.”

Her smile captivated me. It took all my willpower to break free of it and step out into the warm summer night.

Chapter Seventeen



TINA



THE FIRST DAY of school went surprisingly well for Callie and me. Teddy was chomping at the bit to start Pre-K, but the school district staggered start dates, and he wouldn't start for another week.

Sarah was still nervous about leaving her daughter with her parents. We'd had several conversations already, and I'd assured her that each day would get easier and reminded her that it would be good for Nora to spend time with other people. It would hopefully mean she wouldn't have separation anxiety as a toddler. I loved working with Sarah. We were a good team, and she was patient with the kids.

My mom had Teddy this week, so after school, I swung by to pick him up. I'd been coaxed into giving him five more minutes to play twice now. I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to go home and put on comfy clothes, but Teddy was on his knees in the middle of the room, building a Lego tower with my dad and didn't want to leave until he was finished. Callie was on the sofa, engrossed in a book. She had recently become obsessed with *Harry Potter*.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said as she handed me a cup of coffee. She’d offered the minute she realized I wasn’t getting Teddy out of here right away. “He was good today?”

“Of course. He’s always good.”

I bit back a chuckle. I should know better than to ask by now. In her eyes, even if he’d been bad, he was still good. Levi used to tell me that she and I shared that mindset.

My phone chimed where it sat on the counter, and I picked it up.

Kyle: How was the first day of school?

My heart floated in my chest when I read the message. He had texted this morning with a simple *have a great day*. And now he was asking how it had gone. The gestures were small but meaningful and thoughtful.

Me: Really good. Callie hasn’t stopped talking about it. My class is awesome, and Sarah is amazing. How was your day?

“Who is making you smile like that?”

“What?” I jolted upright and blinked at my mom.

She nodded to the phone in my hand. “Is it Kyle Williams? He’s the man everyone seems to think is dating my daughter, yet I haven’t been let in on that secret.”

“Everyone, Mom? Really?”

She nodded, pressing her lips together to contain a smile.

I rolled my eyes. “We’re just hanging out. We’ve been on one date. I would hardly consider that dating.” I wasn’t about to tell her we were going out again this weekend.

“If you say so.” She brought her cup to her lips, one brow raised knowingly.

I shook my head and looked back down at my conversation with Kyle.

Kyle: It was ok. Had physical therapy today.

Me: How's your leg?

When he left Saturday night, he'd been limping noticeably. Not inside, but once he was out front, like he'd been hiding it from me but thought I couldn't see him once he stepped out of the house.

Kyle: Fine. Sore. Heather says it's getting stronger.

I racked my brain for any mention of a Heather and came up blank. Not that I wanted to come off jealous, but that was definitely the sensation settling over me. Heather was *not* his physical therapist's name. I knew that much. So who else would be commenting on the status of his healing?

Me: Heather?

There. Simple enough. Doesn't seem jealous at all.

"I'm really happy for you, Tina." My mom stepped forward, placing her hand on my arm. "I was worried that you wouldn't be able to move on after Levi." She nodded at the phone in my hand. "But I can see that isn't the case." She brushed past me with a quick kiss to my cheek and headed into the living room.

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth. She was just reading into things, wasn't she? No, I wasn't hung up on Levi, but I also wasn't moving on with Kyle.

My phone chimed from my hand again.

Kyle: One of the PT assistants.

Kyle: She's chatty. Kinda annoying.

She was probably young, with no kids running her ragged, and could go out on a date whenever she wanted and make out

or even have sex without having to worry about said kids. Was that what I wanted?

My stomach knotted at the thought. I wasn't sure where it had come from. To be honest, I hadn't thought about sex in over two years. Not until Kyle. Shit. I did want that, didn't I?

"Mom," Callie called. "Can we go?"

"Yeah," I called back. I fired off one last message to Kyle.

Me: That's good. I mean your leg is getting stronger, not that Heather is chatty.

Kyle: Lol. Also finished season 10 today. WTF is the darkness? I was pissed when I had to go to therapy instead of starting season 11. Planning to do that tonight.

I bit back a grin. He was flying through this show. Did he sleep at all?

Kyle: Are we good for Saturday?

Me: Yeah. Still need to check with the sitter.

I hadn't messaged Lilly yet. There was no time like the present, I supposed.

I opened my messages app and found our text thread. Before I could tap out a message, though, Teddy's cries from the living room pulled my attention away.

We'd all had a long day, and I needed to get the kids home, fed, and in bed. I'd deal with the babysitter issues later.

Chapter Eighteen



KYLE



BY MIDWEEK, I was already itching to see Tina and the kids. I craved my time with them like I'd never craved anything in my life.

When I was with them, I wasn't focused on my leg, the pain, or the guilt. And none of them expected me to change. My family looked at me like they were waiting for a miraculous recovery—physically and mentally—or like they were waiting for me to completely lose my shit. I couldn't just be. Maybe it would be different once I was in New York, doing what I was always meant to do. Finding passion and purpose in my life again.

The reminder that I was leaving stabbed painfully at my chest as I hopped into my truck and typed out a quick text.

Me: Can I come by and take you guys for ice cream?

Tina: It's game night.

Me: Oh?

Tina: Yeah. It's a weekly thing the kids and I do. Well, Callie and I. Teddy won't sit long enough to play.

Me: Sounds fun.

Tina: Want to join us?

I paused and blew out a breath. *What I wanted* and *what I should do* were two completely different things. Regardless, it was a no-brainer.

Me: Sure. Be there in a few.

The minute Tina opened the door, my whole body relaxed. Which was ridiculous, because the scene behind her screamed chaos.

"Sorry, the kids are fighting over whose turn it is."

With a sigh, she spun on her heel and headed back to the great room.

With the door shut securely behind me, I followed.

"No, Teddy. You took your turn, and then Mom went. Now it's my turn."

"Teddy, I think sissy is right. It's her turn," Tina interjected.

"You mean." He crossed his pudgy arms over his chest and stuck out his lower lip.

I bit back a laugh. God, this kid constantly made me smile.

Before I could ask what they were playing, Tina sat in a chair and motioned to the one next to her.

"You're just in time. Hope you like whipped cream." The look on her face said *you have no idea what you agreed to*.

Whipped cream? Shit. I sat gingerly in the chair and watched as Callie pulled the weird contraption toward her, then spun the mechanism on the side. There was a click, but nothing happened. She let out a breath, and Teddy gave a disapproving grunt.

Wearing a smirk that matched her mother's, she slid the contraption across the table to me. I still had no clue what the hell was going on, but I was good at figuring stuff out as I went. So I put my face into the hole like Callie had and spun the handle on the side. Nothing. Just a click. We went around again until it came back to me. It was like a dunk tank at a carnival, but instead of throwing a ball in hopes of dunking someone, we were turning a knob, hoping *not* to get a face full of whipped cream.

I smiled at Teddy. "I bet I get it. What do you think?"

He giggled and nodded. Beside me, Tina was holding back laughter. "Bet you regret asking to come play now."

"Nah. A little bit of pie in the face is worth it." I shot her a wink.

I got in position and turned the handle. This time, the hand flung up, sending a plate full of whipped cream barreling at my face. The table erupted in laughter. What were the chances I'd get pied again? Because I would love to see Tina, all of them, actually, get it too.

Five rounds later, and it was obvious luck was not on my side. I had been pied three times, the kids each once. Tina was left unharmed, though she found the whole thing hilarious. So now I was taking matters into my own hands.

I ran a hand over my face, gathering a handful of whipped cream, and yanked her chair close to mine. With an arm around her shoulders, I pulled her close.

"It's only fair your mom gets pied too, don't you guys think?"

Teddy nodded like a bobblehead. "Yes!"

"Traitor," Tina mumbled.

“It is only fair that we each get a turn.” Callie giggled.

Pressed to my side, Tina closed her eyes and scrunched up her face, awaiting the inevitable, though she was still grinning from ear to ear. Damn, she was a good mother. She was prepared to let me smash a handful of whipped cream into her face, knowing it would make her children laugh.

So I went for it, rubbing the sticky-sweet substance all over her face. Quickly, the urge to lick it off her hit me like a tidal wave, and I didn’t think she or her kids would appreciate that, so I scooted my chair away, still laughing.

We cleaned up the mess, and Callie brought UNO to the table while Teddy went into the great room to watch TV.

“How’s school?”

“It’s fine.” Callie shrugged and placed a card down.

“You like your teacher?” I tried again.

Tina took her turn, adding a card to the pile.

“Yeah, she’s cool.” She peeked up at me covertly, like she hoped I wouldn’t notice. “She’s really into science, so I’m excited about all the experiments she said she’ll do with us this year.” She shrugged. “That’s my favorite subject.”

I smiled. Mine too.

“Mama,” Teddy whined from the sofa. “My nose is stuffy.”

I had a clear line of sight to him where he lay on the couch. His face had a flush to it that wasn’t there twenty minutes ago, and it was obvious he didn’t feel well. Hopefully, it was just a cold and not the flu or something.

Tina sat next to him and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead.

“He’s burning up,” she announced, confirming what I already thought.

“Mama, cuddle.” Teddy clung to her when she tried to stand.

“I need to get you some medicine, baby.”

“I can get it.” I stood and stepped up next to the sofa. “Medicine cabinet?”

She shook her head. “Top shelf of the linen closet.”

I returned a moment later and handed her the bottle of children’s Tylenol and a medicine cup, then made my way back to Callie.

I picked up my cards and fanned them out in front of me. “Ready?”

She stared at me for a moment, then darted a look at Tina and Teddy. Finally, she nodded and threw down a card.

A few rounds later, Callie couldn’t stop yawning. “I’m tired.”

I flicked my wrist and checked the time, noting it was nine already. Callie spun the bracelet on her wrist as she zeroed in on my tactical watch. The band material was similar to her bracelet. Maybe that had caught her attention. Whatever it was, her face was suddenly drawn. I put my arm down and cleared my throat.

“My dad had the same watch,” she mumbled, her eyes teary.

Shit. I wasn’t sure what to say or what to do if she started crying.

“I’m going to bed.” She stood abruptly, and then she was gone, heading toward the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

I ran my hand over my face. Was Callie still struggling so much because she hadn’t gotten to say goodbye to her dad? Would knowing he thought about and talked about them in his final moments give them more closure? Or would bringing it all up again two years later cause more harm than good? These were the questions that had plagued me since Tina and her kids had shown up here over two months ago.

But now, did I want them to know I was the reason he wasn’t here with them? Did they deserve to know regardless?

I walked into the great room, focusing on the scene on the sofa. Tina lay on her side, her arm draped across Teddy, who

was on his back next to her. Both were asleep.

Teddy didn't look as flushed as he had earlier. I made my way over and felt his forehead. Good. The medicine had brought the fever down. I scooped him up, rousing Tina in the process.

“What?” Her eyes fluttered open.

“You want me to put him in his bed?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, sitting up. “Is he still warm?”

“Just a touch.”

“Okay.”

I turned and headed toward his room.

“Kyle?”

Stopping a few feet away, I glanced over my shoulder.

“Thank you.”

I swallowed hard, unsure of why she was thanking me. Even so, I nodded and continued toward Teddy's room. I laid him in bed and pulled the door mostly closed, then headed back toward Tina.

She was moving around the large open space, checking the back door and turning off lights. When she glanced at me, her face was a mask of exhaustion.

She pulled her long cardigan tighter around her body. “Callie go to bed already?”

I nodded. “She, um—” I looked down at my wrist. “I think my watch upset her.”

Stepping forward, Tina frowned. Gently, she grasped my wrist and lifted it. “Could be the band. Levi's watches all had that olive-green color band.”

I sorted through my memories of that day, searching for any memory of the watch he was wearing. But after two years and two deployments, some details had become increasingly fuzzy.

“Thank you for hanging out with her while I lay with Teddy.”

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. “Of course.” Shuffling closer, I looped my arms around her shoulders and pulled her against me. I rested my chin on top of her head, breathing her in.

She let out a yawn, then melted into my hold.

It took everything in me to release her. “Good night, Tina.” I raised her chin up with my thumb and forefinger and pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

The smile she gave me as I stepped back had me rubbing at the ache in my chest. Her smile always made me feel...I don't know; happy wasn't quite right. Almost infectious, I guessed. Like I could feel the joy she was feeling. I couldn't understand it. Plenty of people smiled at me every day, but none had ever had this effect.

This wasn't the right time, but as I drove home, it really sank in. I needed to tell her about Levi, the husband and dad. Not Hughes, the soldier I couldn't save.

If it helped her or Callie find peace to know he thought and spoke of them in his last moments, then I'd give them those details, regardless of what it might cost me.

Chapter Nineteen



TINA



BY FRIDAY, I was so ready for Kyle to touch me. Like really touch me, in the most intimate ways. The way he cupped my face, anchored me to his lap and kissed me until I forgot all about my children sleeping down the hall, replayed in my mind all week. Wednesday night was torture. I'd seen the way he looked at me, his gaze burning my skin, and I wanted him to kiss me like he had before.

All week, I'd planned to ask Lilly to babysit for our date tomorrow night. It was what I should have done. But I took a risk and went a different route. When my phone chimed from the kitchen counter, I rinsed the dish I'd been washing and dried my hands. My heart rate picked up as I snatched the phone and opened my text thread with my mom.

Mom: We'd love to have the kids tomorrow night.
You have a date with that hot blond hunk of yours?

Oh my God. My mother. I shook my head and typed out a response.

Me: Yes. It's just dinner.

Mom: Well, then. We'll keep the kids overnight. You know, in case it ends up being more than just dinner. ;)

I sighed. This was exactly why I should have asked Lilly. But whatever. Mission accomplished. Because if the opportunity arose, I wanted to seize it. Just one night to be free.

An hour after I climbed into bed, I lay awake, tossing and turning. I had no earthly clue what had gotten into me, but I couldn't shake the images in my mind of Kyle's hands roaming all over my naked body, his lips grazing my neck and then lower. I didn't need sexual release very often. I'd always wondered if I was broken. Levi would be gone for months, and I would only make myself come once or twice during that time. I enjoyed sex, but it had always been more about the connection with Levi, or the reconnection after he'd been gone for months and the intimacy of coming together again.

This was different. The longer I lay there, the more frustrated I became. For the first time, I thought I really understood the phrase *hot and bothered*.

His latest text telling me to wear a dress tomorrow didn't help matters. I kept imagining him running his hand up under my dress and between my thighs.

I sat up and contemplated my nightstand. Dammit. I wasn't even sure I had unpacked the small box that had my only vibrator in it. It was still sitting on the top shelf of my closet. I could almost guarantee it. With a huff, I fell back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. I was a mess.

After a night of vivid dreams and still no release, I was beyond wound up. All day, I'd felt guilty about pawing my kids off on my parents and had considered canceling, but when I saw how excited they were to have a sleepover at Grammy's, I finally relaxed. Until now. Now that the kids were gone, tension rolled through my body for other reasons.

“I’m not sure I can do this.” I snapped the eyeshadow palette shut, not missing the way Emily rolled her eyes on the screen.

“Oh stop.” She stepped out of view, and a moment later, her face appeared. “Sorry. Wyatt needed his sippy cup. What was I saying?”

I smiled and shook my head. “You were probably about to tell me to stop stressing over this date, like you did last time.”

“Oh yes. First off.” She held up one finger. “It’s a date. One that you are considering ending with sex, sure, but that’s no reason to freak out. One of us should be getting laid.” She let out a huff.

I frowned at my friend. Joe hadn’t deployed again, had he? Or was I such a horrible friend that I’d been paying no attention to what was going on in her life?

“Wyatt is having serious separation anxiety in the evenings. He’s been in our bed most nights. We had to sneak a quickie in the bathroom last week.”

I giggled. Oh, married life with kids. That thought hit me like a punch to the stomach.

“It’s too soon, Em. Isn’t it?”

“It’s been two years.” She sighed. “I don’t think there’s a right or wrong answer. You have to decide when it feels right.”

I let out a sigh. She was right. I knew that. But it wasn’t my only concern. “But...”

She tilted her head and moved in closer. “What?”

God, I felt ridiculous. “I’ve only been with Levi, what if...” I blew out a harsh breath. “What if it’s bad or awkward?”

She chuckled. “Did you not have these concerns when you and Levi first hooked up?”

“I don’t know. He was my first and I was his. And it was so long ago.” I barely remembered how I felt that first time.

“Go have fun. Try not to stress, and then get laid.” She narrowed her eyes. “Got it?”

“Fine.”

Her expression softened. “But seriously, you deserve to feel wanted and desired by a man again. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

A knock echoed through the house then, startling me so badly my heart rate kicked up a few notches.

After disconnecting the call, I made my way to the front door. When I opened it, my stomach flipped. Kyle’s face lit with a smile before his eyes turned that molten green I’d come to recognize. It was a look that clearly telegraphed how badly he wanted to devour me. The color only deepened as he took in my dress. It was a little shorter than what I typically wore, but it was one of my favorites. It always made me feel sexy, with just the right amount of cleavage and a simple flare around my thighs.

“I’m now regretting my request.” He ran his tongue along his bottom lip, still drinking me in.

“Do you not like it?” I asked playfully.

“I like it a little too much.” He scanned the room behind me. “Where are the kids?”

I turned and grabbed my purse from the chair by the door. “At my mom’s.”

His hard body pressed up against my back, warming me instantly and sending a zap of electricity through me. He gripped my waist and brought his mouth to my ear. “You in this dress, us all alone in this house right now.” His lips skated down my neck, and I tilted my head, giving him more access. “You have no idea what is going through my mind.”

I’d bet it was the same thing playing on repeat in my mind too. I wasn’t sure what kind of sound I made when he stepped back, but it made it clear that I wasn’t ready for him to stop touching me.

“Glad it’s not just me.” He chuckled, stepping back and clearing his throat. “We should go.”

Purse in hand, I spun toward him. He raised one eyebrow like he was daring me to contradict him. What would he do if I did? That question had me biting at my bottom lip as I contemplated it.

He groaned, zeroing in on my mouth, but quickly shook himself out of his stupor and waved me toward the door.

Reluctantly, I obliged, and once we were in the truck and headed down the road, his hand found the bare skin of my thigh, his pinky skimming just under the hem of my dress.

When he pulled into the parking lot of The Dock, I turned and surveyed him, confused. To say I was surprised he'd pick his family's restaurant for dinner would be an understatement. I got the impression he hated how up in his business they all were.

He tapped out a message on his phone and climbed out of the truck. Ducking back in, he said, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Well, okay. Maybe we weren't eating here. He was halfway to the entrance of the restaurant when Savannah stepped out holding a large white bag.

They exchanged words, and he pulled her into a one arm hug, then dropped a kiss to the top of her head. Once he was heading back to the truck, Savannah waved and winked at me. Then she was gone, disappearing back inside.

"That was sweet," I said when Kyle climbed back into the truck.

"Yeah. She's my favorite." He put the bag behind my seat, then navigated the truck to the far side of the lot.

I chuckled. I had a feeling his favorite was whoever was being less of a pain on any given day.

The smell from the back seat finally made its way up front, making my stomach grumble. I hadn't eaten much today. I loved food, but sometimes I had to remind myself to stop and eat.

"What is that smell?"

“Carryout from The Dock.”

“I kinda gathered that.” I giggled. “It smells so good.”

Whatever it was, I was anxious to dig in. Though now that I knew we weren’t going out to dinner, I was hungry for other things. And suddenly, I was hoping he’d decided to take me back to my empty house and have his way with me.

Jesus, what was going on with me? I squeezed my thighs together to stop the ache that had been plaguing me all week.

“Wasn’t sure what you’d want, so I got a bunch of stuff.”

I shifted in my seat and regarded him. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” He turned down a small gravel road that ran along the far side of the property, past the small inn attached to the main building that housed the restaurant. Until this moment, I had no clue this road even existed. We passed a few utility-type buildings before the water came into view.

My stomach bottomed out. Was he taking me out on the lake? I loved being surprised and all, but I wasn’t keen on the idea of being nauseous all evening. Though I supposed I could just ask him to go slow. Cruising around the lake at this time of day *would* be romantic.

A moment later, when we pulled up to a gorgeous stretch of shore, I blew out a relieved breath.

Kyle snagged the food from the back seat and came around to my door. Once he’d helped me out, he laced our fingers and guided me down a narrow path.

Near the water’s edge, the sight made my heart stutter. I gasped, and with a hand pressed to my chest, I blinked up at him.

“Is this okay?” He nodded to the spot where blankets had been spread out and a campfire had been set up.

“You did all this?”

“This way we can eat and talk.” One corner of his mouth raised, and he winked. “Maybe make out like teenagers.”

I laughed at the boyish smirk that always made my stomach flutter.

“I love this idea.”

“Good. Sit.” He waved to the blankets. “I’ll get the food out.”

He hadn’t been joking when he said he’d ordered a variety of things. A salad, chicken parm, pan-seared shrimp and scallops, and mashed potatoes. Even an order of hush puppies.

I snatched one of the deep-fried balls the minute he opened that container. He shook his head and chuckled as he pulled out plastic plates and silverware.

“There was this place in Fort Bragg that had the best hush puppies.”

“Johnny’s,” we said in unison.

“I ate them every day for at least two months when I was pregnant with Teddy.”

He scooped salad onto a plate. “Anything you don’t want?”

“Nah, a little bit of everything is fine. It all looks and smells delicious.” I took in our surroundings, still in awe that he’d gone to so much trouble.

Once he’d handed me my plate, I forked a scallop and took a bite. It was incredible. The handful of times I’d eaten at The Dock, I’d been with my kids and had stuck to ordering a sandwich of some kind while they ate chicken fingers and French fries.

I hummed, savoring the flavor. The sound had Kyle straightening and zeroing in on my mouth. Emboldened by the heat in his eyes, I took another bite and made a point of slowly sliding the fork between my lips. I truly didn’t know what I was doing, but I’d keep doing it if it meant he’d continue to look at me like that.

His jaw locked, and his eyes met mine.

Emily’s words from earlier floated through my mind.

You deserve to feel wanted and desired by a man again.

He shifted and groaned, then brought his own fork to his mouth. “Tell me about your class.”

“Huh?”

“Talk to me about your class of five-year-olds, please.” He looked out at the water, grimacing. “Help a guy out.”

“You want to talk about work?” I tilted my head.

“You really don’t get how much you turn me on, do you?” He dropped his chin and shook his head.

I paused with my fork halfway to my mouth, my heart stumbling in my chest.

“I’m trying hard to keep my hands to myself so we can eat and talk.” He blew out a breath. “So we can talk about your kids, your job, or sports. Really anything that doesn’t include noises I’ve only imagined you making.”

Heat had steadily crawled up my neck as he spoke, and now my cheeks were ablaze.

“I—” The single word came out breathy. I cleared my throat and tried again. “My class is good.” It was better than sports, and I really didn’t want to talk about my kids for once. “I have this one little boy who cries for the first half hour of school. So that’s not fun. But he’ll adjust.” I shrugged.

He listened intently, asking a question here and there as I went on about a few of the kids and how our days had been going. Once we finished eating, he gathered the plates and the containers and put them back into the bag.

Hauling himself up, he got to work lighting the fire. While he squatted in front of it, he rubbed his leg for what had to be the third time in the last twenty minutes.

Was his leg hurting or was it habit to rub it like that?

“How’d it happen?” I found myself asking.

I regretted it the minute he tensed up. I should have known better. Levi never wanted to talk about missions, good or bad.

He was a master at compartmentalizing. War was war, and home was home.

He sighed.

“It’s okay. We don’t have to talk about this.” I shrugged. The last thing I wanted to do was put a damper on our date.

“Would you believe me if I said wrong place, wrong time?”

I rolled my eyes. “No.”

“Fair enough.” He smirked but then quickly sobered. “How about I was cocky and impulsive? Thought I was invincible and could make it to my injured teammate without getting shot?”

“So,” I hedged, “you were doing your job?”

“Basically.”

“Your teammate. Did he...?”

His jaw locked and he turned, surveying the water.

“Never mind. You don’t have to answer that.” I knew better than anyone that missions were classified. He couldn’t tell me much, even if he wanted to. “I know you can’t really talk about that stuff.”

He blew out a breath and searched my face, but he didn’t speak.

“I mean, you probably know more than I do about Levi.”

That comment had his eyes widening.

“Not sure if you remember hearing anything about it. But I got the impression his death made waves somehow. Of course, I was never given the full story.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he dropped down next to me on the blanket.

“That’s partly to protect the families too. So they don’t have to hear the gory details of the worst days of our lives.” He swallowed thickly. “It’s already the worst days of theirs.”

“Maybe.” It was the type of sentiment they offered when giving condolences to anyone. “Levi’s team only ever told me there was nothing more to be done for him.”

He huffed. “More can always be done.”

Holding my breath, I studied him, wondering how many times he thought he could have done more. I could only imagine how difficult his job was.

He pulled me tighter into his side. “Time isn’t always on our side.”

The way he said it made it feel like there was a deeper meaning behind it, though I couldn’t grasp what it was.

“How long has it been?” His leg obviously still bothered him, so it probably wasn’t all that long ago.

“Since I was shot?”

I nodded.

“Less than a year.” He ran a hand up and down my arm. “I deployed in June of last year, and I was sent home in November.”

We sat like that, watching as the sun made its journey past the trees on the horizon. The only sound was the crackling of the fire. He looked down at me twice, searching my face, like he had something on his mind, like maybe he had more to say. But both times, he swallowed harshly and turned back to watching the sunset.

My heart ached for him. Why did I even bring up any of that heavy crap?

I leaned into him, closing my eyes and wishing I’d kept my mouth shut.

Running his fingers up and down my arm, he shifted. A low groan escaped him, then his lips were at my ear, his breath hot on my neck. “Tina,” he whispered, the sound tortured. Like my name was a plea.

I tilted my head to meet his gaze. His intense green eyes were set on me, stealing all the breath from my lungs. He

cupped the side of my face and tilted my head back until our lips were inches apart. I shivered when he ran his thumb along my bottom lip. And then his mouth was on me. Fierce. Demanding.

And I was here for all of it. He nipped at my lip, then used his tongue to soothe away the sting. When he did it again, he ran a hand down my body and gripped my thigh. In one swift movement, he pulled on my leg and laid me back on the blanket. With his mouth still fused to mine, he planted one arm beside my head and covered half my body with his. Breaking the kiss, he heaved a breath and grasped my thigh tighter, his fingers digging into my flesh.

His irises were swirls of chaotic color, full of uncertainty and questions and desire. I pushed a few pieces of hair back from his forehead and threaded my fingers through the longer locks on top. He closed his eyes, his jaw locked tight.

“Kyle,” I whispered between us.

His eyes popped open, his pupils dilating.

“Touch me.”

As if a dam had broken the last barrier between us, he groaned and slammed his lips to mine, thrusting his tongue hungrily against mine once I opened for him.

I bucked against the hard thigh he'd wedged between my legs, seeking friction. He shifted slightly, and then his hand left my thigh and inched closer to where I needed him to touch me.

Yes. Oh please, yes.

There was absolutely no hesitation. Still propped up on one arm, he grazed his fingers up my thigh, his focus fixed solely on my face. The second his fingers touched the lacy material of my thong, he slid it to the side and ran two fingers along my slit.

“Oh,” I moaned, arching up off the ground.

He pressed his palm against me, and I let out another breathy moan.

“I can’t wait to finally hear how you sound when I make you come.” He dipped his fingers inside quickly, then retreated, bringing the moisture to my clit and circling.

“I need—”

“Tell me.”

“Please.” I’d never felt need like this. The way he had me locked in that heated gaze made me want everything he was offering.

He tilted his head down and grazed my jaw. “I’ve fantasized about you saying that word in so many different ways.”

“Please, Kyle.” I was not above begging. Begging this man to do the things he was doing to my body was more than fine with me. As long as he didn’t stop.

His fingers slid inside me, starting his pattern all over again. I bucked against his hand the next time he entered me, desperate for more.

“Yes, that’s it.” This time, he pumped two fingers in and out of me. “Fuck my hand, baby.”

Lost in his touch, I obeyed, shamelessly rocking my hips against him as he continued to pump in and out.

“So responsive.” He claimed my mouth again, once again stealing all my air.

I gripped his shoulders, digging my fingers in as my orgasm ripped through me and I rode out the waves of pleasure that overtook me.

He continued kissing me as my body relaxed. When I was boneless, he rolled so I was lying against his chest.

We lay there quietly, his arm around me, my ear pressed to his heart, with just the crackle of the fire in the background.

The one thought swirling in my mind as the flames danced, casting shadows around us, was that I didn’t want this to be all there was between us tonight.

Chapter Twenty



KYLE



“I WANT MORE.” Tina tilted her head back, her lip caught between her teeth. “I...”

If she was feeling half of what I was feeling, then I knew exactly what she wanted. The question was could I, or should I, give it to her?

“I know.” I rubbed circles along her back as a battle waged inside my head. But I wouldn’t lie. “Me too.”

Her eyes shone with vulnerability then. “Take me home?”

I gripped the side of her neck and tilted her head further back so I could claim her mouth. She moved her hips and when her pussy brushed against my thigh, she moaned.

I slowed the kiss. I needed space to think, and her body grinding against mine would not help that process.

“I need to deal with the fire.”

She nodded, and I untangled myself from her, though I hated to break the contact. I doused the fire, and Tina helped me fold up the blankets. Then we walked quietly back to the truck.

The devil and the angel perched on my shoulders were locked in a heated conversation. The right thing to do would be to kiss her good night at her door and head straight home. But I wasn't sure I was strong enough to walk away. I craved her presence more than anything I'd ever experienced. The way she made me feel whole rather than broken. Alive instead of numb. Happy when all I'd felt for so long was despair, guilt, and anger.

What killed me, though, was that as much as I needed her, wanted her, I could never really have her. Not for keeps. Once she knew the truth, she'd blame me, just like I blamed myself. And even if she didn't, I had no doubt that every time she looked at me, she would think about her dead husband. It was better this way.

She tangled her fingers with mine, bringing me back to the moment. We were already halfway back to her house. I glanced over, and her smile was like another punch to the gut. When she rested our clasped hands on her bare thigh, I had to bite back a groan. And like they had a mind of their own, my fingers left her hand and ran up under her dress to their desired destination.

"You're so wet." My knuckles were white as I gripped the steering wheel with one hand. The other hand rested between her thighs, my fingers brushing along her soaked panties. "Jesus."

She moaned and squeezed her thighs together, trapping me in the most delicious way. Images of replacing my hand with my mouth while her legs held my head against her floated through my mind.

"Kyle, I need—"

"I know, baby. I know."

The minute I slammed the truck into park in her driveway, I threw open the door and came around to help her down. I pulled her up the sidewalk, my heart hammering and my dick ready to bust through my pants. But the instant she stepped into the house, I froze in place, my feet glued to the stoop outside.

“You coming?” She tilted her head, sticking her lip out in a mock pout.

Oh fuck yes, I was definitely coming. Inside her. Tonight.

I wanted to spend all night making her feel good, showing her how she affected me. I took one long stride inside and slammed the door. Then I pulled her against my body. “Feel what you do to me?”

Her mouth opened wide, and she let out a moan as I rotated my hips. My cock twitched, loving the sounds she made just as much as I did.

I fused our lips together and devoured her, tangling my tongue with hers, desperate, and backed her up against the nearest wall. I couldn't wait any longer to find out how she tasted. Not letting up, I ran my hands up the soft skin of her thighs and under her dress. Once I'd reached her panties, I broke the kiss and dropped to my knees in front of her.

“What are you...” She trailed off, her pupils blowing out. A shiver barreled through her when I latched on to the lacy fabric that covered her pussy.

When the scent of her arousal hit me, I ran my tongue along my bottom lip in anticipation and tugged at her thong.

“Kyle,” she moaned, her fingers threading through my hair as I slid the scrap of fabric down her legs.

I tapped one ankle, encouraging her to step out of her panties. Then I guided that leg over my shoulder, bunching the fabric of her skirt around her waist as I did. I was desperate to make her come again.

“I want you to ride my face like you rode my hand earlier.” Without waiting for a response, I buried my mouth between her thighs and licked up her slit.

She bucked hard against my face.

Fuck. I lapped and sucked on her lips until she ground against me. “Just like that,” I mumbled against her sensitive flesh.

“I—I can’t.” She thrashed, her head whipping from side to side as she threw her arms out and palmed the wall for balance.

“The fuck you can’t.” I covered her clit, pressing hard and circling with my tongue.

Her moans echoed off the walls around us as she rolled her hips, the movement getting increasingly desperate.

She tangled her fingers in my hair, tugging slightly. “Oh my...I...Right there.”

God damn. She was so wrapped up in the pleasure I was giving her that she couldn’t form a complete thought. That only made my cock grow harder and my pulse pick up. I pushed two fingers inside her, curling them, seeking out that spot that would send her flying.

She screamed and writhed, and her legs shook as her orgasm overtook her. I continued to flick my tongue against her clit while she rode out the last waves of pleasure.

When her body went limp, I stood and scooped her into my arms, needing nothing more than to be inside her. I carried her down the hallway to the last door at the end and kicked it open. The room was as vibrant as the woman in my arms, decorated in a combination of bright teals and yellows. I laid her down on the bed and stepped back, yanking my shirt over my head.

“Get that dress off,” I demanded.

Still breathless, she leaned up on her elbows and smirked. “Please?”

I tugged my pants and boxers down and discarded them.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth as I towered over her.

“*Please* take your dress off so I can make you come again.”

Her mouth opened, forming a perfect O. Without another sassy comment, she sat up and pulled her dress over her head. Her gorgeous round tits were now the center of my attention.

I wedged one knee between her thighs and splayed my hands on the mattress on either side of her, leaning down to claim one of those perky nipples with my mouth.

“Kyle,” she rasped, running her fingers through my hair.

She shimmied up the bed, and I followed, bringing my body fully between her legs, my cock sliding against her wet pussy.

“Fuck,” I growled, ready to plunge deep inside. She felt so good, warm and slick with her arousal. The heat of her instantly reminded me that I’d left the fucking condom in my wallet. I pulled back, jaw tight, and huffed a breath.

Her brows pulled together, and she brushed the hair off my forehead. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just need to grab the condom.”

She held tight to my shoulders as I pulled back. “I have an IUD, and I’ve only ever...I mean...”

I knew what she meant, and I was good too, but I needed to know that she was sure.

“I don’t want a barrier between us, and I’m good too.” I searched her face, looking for any sign of hesitation. “But are you sure?”

“Yes, Kyle.” She nodded. “Please.”

I brushed my lips against hers as I lined my cock up with her entrance and slowly pushed inside. Her walls gripped me tightly, pulling me in deeper.

She gasped into my mouth as I slid in, one inch at a time. Jesus, she was tight as hell. There was no way I’d last long inside her. When I was fully seated, I slid all the way back out, and with one thrust, I plunged back in. She arched up when my pelvis hit her clit, tugging on my hair.

Her sounds and the way she clung to me spurred me on. I repeated the movement, then thrust again, harder and faster. I needed her to come one more time before I did. I would spend all night making sure she was thoroughly satisfied, but I knew

this first time was going to be quick. She felt too damn good wrapped tightly around my dick.

I found her clit with my thumb and pressed hard, circling it as I drove into her over and over.

“Tina, come, baby,” I urged, already balancing on the precipice of my own climax.

Her body tightened, and she screamed out, clawing at my shoulders.

My hips flexed into her as my orgasm barreled through my body. “Fuck,” I bellowed as she pulsed around me, milking every ounce of my release.

I tenderly brushed my lips against hers, our heavy breaths mingling. She felt so good, and I wasn’t ready for this night to be over. Slipping from her warm, wet pussy, I groaned and inched off the mattress, but I pulled her with me.

“What—”

I grasped her by the ass and lifted her up, eliciting a gasp from her, and strode toward the bathroom.

“I want to do that again, but first I’m going to clean you up and make you come with my mouth.”

“Again?” She shook her head. “I’m not sure I can.”

“Oh, you can.” I pressed my lips against her forehead and set her on the edge of the tub. Once she was settled, I stalked to the walk-in shower and turned the water on, shooting her a wink. “And I promise, you will.”

She giggled as I led her under the warm spray. I never thought I’d get so much pleasure from washing a woman’s body. But damn, the sighs and moans, even the way her breath hitched as I ran my hands over her skin, were the best fucking things I’d ever experienced.

But ten minutes later, with her hands tugging at my hair and her screams echoing on the tile, I’d found a close second.

I laughed at the absurdity of getting her clean just to dirty her up all over again as we lay naked in bed together an hour

later. The second time, I'd taken my time, making sure to lavish attention on every inch of her body. I chuckled, thinking about the look of surprise on her face when I tossed her onto the mattress and climbed on top of her, my rock-hard cock begging for entrance for a second time.

"What's so funny?" Her breath skated across my chest.

I stroked her hair, relishing the weight of her head on my shoulder. "I made a mess of you again."

"I noticed." She chuckled, brushing her lips along my pec. "But it was worth it."

With two fingers under her chin, I tilted her face up so I could claim her mouth.

"I wish I could stay with you all night, but I better go."

"You're not staying?" Her bottom lip protruded into the sexiest pout I'd ever seen.

"I have to get up early." My morning kayak routine was a key factor in quieting my mind for the day, and then I had a full day helping out at The Dock. "And I don't sleep well. I would end up keeping you awake all night. But I'll lay here and hold you until you fall asleep." I ghosted my fingers up and down her back and closed my eyes, relishing the way her naked body was pressed along mine.

Her hair tickled my chest as she nodded. She nuzzled closer and let out a contented sigh.

I let my eyes flutter closed, and when I opened them again, I was surprised to discover that I'd fallen asleep. And damn if I didn't want to lie here and hold Tina until she woke up. But judging by the faint sunlight coming in through the windows, I'd already missed my opportunity to kayak. If I didn't rush home to change, I'd be late for my shift at The Dock.

Minutes later, I was driving away but wishing I'd stayed. If she let me, I was sure I'd never want to leave her bed.

Chapter Twenty-One



TINA



WAKING up naked and alone was shocking at first. But when flashes of the night before came back to me, I couldn't stop smiling. I vaguely remembered him leaving this morning, saying goodbye with a whisper and a kiss.

I padded to the bathroom in search of my robe and slid the silky material around my body.

The blinking notification light on my phone caught my attention when I stepped back into the bedroom a few minutes later. My stomach fluttered as I read Kyle's message.

Kyle: Do you know how hard it was to pry myself out of your bed this morning?

Fiddling with the tie of my robe, I pressed my teeth into my bottom lip, contemplating how I should respond. Frankly, I was surprised he'd stayed all night.

Me: I thought you weren't going to stay.

Kyle: Apparently holding your naked body works as a great sleep aid.

Me: You should have woken me up before you left...

I wasn't bold enough to spell out my meaning, but I hoped he understood anyway. Unable to wipe the smile from my face, I scrolled on my phone. A moment later, another text came through, but it wasn't from him. I pulled up the message app and clicked on the one from Emily that had just arrived.

Em: How did your date go?

I didn't answer right away. Instead, I changed into shorts and a tank top, then made my way to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. Once it was brewing, I tapped the video call button.

My best friend's face lit up the screen, and she was talking before I'd even had a chance to speak. "Please tell me you had a night of crazy, mind-blowing sex."

I bit back a grin as a flush crept up my neck and into my face.

"Oh, that good?" She leaned back in her chair, bringing the mug she was holding to her lips, probably trying to hide the smirk she was wearing.

More like otherworldly. He'd taken his time pleasing me, making sure I had multiple orgasms and was completely sated. Just the thought had heat coiling low in my belly. The way he worshipped me last night was unlike anything I'd experienced in a very long time.

"Let's just say it was amazing."

She shook her head. "I would push for details, but I know that would probably be a waste of time."

I shrugged. I wasn't one to talk openly about sex. But in all fairness, since becoming a mother, sex had changed. The

events of last night didn't come close to resembling anything I remembered experiencing.

"I wouldn't know where to start. It was different... Not at all like I expected it to be." I couldn't bring myself to say it was better, even if that was the word that floated through my mind, because that wouldn't be fair to Levi.

Emily cocked her head to the side, and her forehead creased. "Different?"

"Yeah. You know how when you're with someone for a long time and sex becomes kind of routine?"

Her frown deepened. "Um, not really. Remember how I told you we snuck a quickie in the bathroom? And last night, we had sex in the back seat of the car. So no, nothing about my sex life is routine right now."

Back seat of the car? Why? Or maybe the better question was *how* in the hell had they managed that?

I shook my head and sighed, considering changing the subject. But she wasn't having it. I could practically feel her stare as she waited for me to elaborate.

"I just—" I caught sight of the paracord bracelet on the kitchen counter and searched for the right words. "Sex was always intimate, loving, with Levi. But he didn't—I mean I didn't—" I huffed and chuckled at my inability to talk about this stuff.

"You're so cute." She laughed. "You didn't always come? Is that what you're trying to say?"

I nodded. "It wasn't always what I needed, so it didn't really bother me. With Levi, I craved the intimacy more than the sex itself."

"I can understand that. So it was different with Kyle?"

"Yeah, it was intimate but also like a challenge for him. Like he was competing with himself to see how many times he could make me—you know..."

"Come. That's the verb you keep looking for."

I rolled my eyes, ignoring her teasing. “At one point, I told him I couldn’t, um, do that again, and he literally called bullshit and proved me wrong.”

She threw her head back and laughed. When she straightened, her eyes were full of tears and her face was split in a grin. “I like this guy.”

“Yeah, me too.” Maybe a little too much. I had to remember he was leaving in two weeks.

“When Joe leaves for deployment next month, I want to visit. I’ll bring the kids so they can catch up too. We miss you guys.”

My heart lifted at the thought. I nodded. “Definitely. We would all love that.”

We talked for a few more minutes while I nursed my coffee, but before long, the front door swung open and my kids came barreling in.

“Auntie Em,” Callie cried when she saw Emily’s face on the screen. “Is Bridget around?”

Emily’s daughter was a couple of years younger than Callie, but the girls had always been thick as thieves.

“Sure is. Want to talk to her?”

“Yes!”

I walked away, knowing my conversation with Emily was officially done, and went in search of my mom. She was just stepping inside when I wandered out of the kitchen.

“How were they?”

“Oh, perfect. As usual.” She peered around me. “Hey kiddos, come give me hugs. I need to get home and start packing.”

Both the kids scurried over and doled out hugs before running off again.

“Are you excited to see Aunt Helen?”

“I am.” A smile ghosted her face. “It’s been too long.”

My mom's parents had died a few years after Callie was born, and her sister still lived in Florida, where she and my mom had grown up. I hadn't seen her since Levi's funeral almost two years ago.

"Is she still planning to come here for Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah, and it sounds like Rachel is coming too."

"That'll be nice." My younger cousin was working on her master's in psychology.

My mom's sweet smile turned wicked then. "How was your date?"

My stomach knotted. I did not want to get into this with my mom. So I went for vague. "It was great."

She opened her mouth, ready to pester me, I was sure, but Callie entered the great room just then, still holding my phone, so I didn't have to elaborate. "Thanks for watching the kids for me."

"You're welcome, sweetie."

"Here, Mom." Callie held my phone out to me. "Auntie Em said she'll talk to you later."

I took the device, catching sight of a new message notification. Kyle had responded to my last message. Forgetting exactly what I had texted, though, I opened the thread and read it.

Kyle: You looked so gorgeous and peaceful. I couldn't bring myself to wake you. Besides I distinctly remember someone saying she couldn't handle any more last night.

Cheeks heating, I locked my phone and slid it into my back pocket, glancing over to make sure my mom hadn't seen. Luckily, Callie had stolen her attention and was telling her about something Bridget had said.

Once my mom had said her final goodbyes, I headed back into the kitchen to retrieve my now cold coffee. The chiming of my phone reminded me that I hadn't responded to Kyle.

Not that his text really required a response. After reheating my coffee, I pulled my phone out again and unlocked it.

Kyle: I should be off by 2 today. Are you guys busy? What do you think of taking the kids to Pointe Beach? I think Callie is ready for the swim test and I promised I'd take her before the beach closes for the season.

Me: Sure. I think she'll love that idea.

Kyle: Perfect. I'll pick you up around 2:30.

I spent the next few hours cleaning and doing laundry, all while singing some of my favorite songs. I ignored Callie's eye rolls. She never liked my singing, and it wasn't because I had a horrible voice.

My stomach fluttered in anticipation as I checked the large windmill-style clock on the wall above the table in the kitchen. In one hour, Kyle would be here.

I was mostly excited to see him, but a small part of me was nervous that things would be awkward between us.

Chapter Twenty-Two



KYLE



THE DOCK WAS BUSY TODAY, full of tourists soaking up the last bit of summer and locals taking their families out on the water before the weather turned cold. Staying busy helped keep my mind off Tina. Not that it would last long. The second I had a moment to breathe, my thoughts would drift right back to her.

The way she'd writhed above me once I'd gotten my mouth on her. The way she looked this morning with the blanket at her waist, her perfect tits on display and her lips turned up in a smile. I felt like a stalker once I realized how long I'd lain there staring at her. But damn, was she beautiful.

I shook myself out of my stupor for what felt like the hundredth time. We were all piled in the truck. The chaos was a welcomed interruption, because now the gorgeous woman who consumed my every thought was seated beside me. I rubbed at the ache in my chest that bloomed when she hit me with a mega-watt smile.

I wanted to lean over and press my lips against hers, but I wouldn't dare with the kids in the back seat. We hadn't talked

about any of that. Not that it mattered. I wasn't staying, so I had no right to be anything but Mr. Kyle to these kids. My stomach bottomed out at the reminder.

For days, I'd been pushing aside thoughts of having to leave for New York. It was where I was supposed to be. Where I committed to be, and I had accepted that. That didn't mean I was thrilled about leaving Tina and her kids. For now, though, I planned to enjoy what time I had with them.

"You buckled?" I craned my neck and checked with each of the kids.

They both nodded, and when I'd gotten visual confirmation, I backed out of the driveway.

"Callie is super excited." Tina smiled back at her daughter.

"Yeah...but what if I can't do it?" She caught my eye in the rearview mirror, a look of apprehension on her face.

"You've been practicing and doing a great job. I highly doubt you won't pass. But if you don't, then we'll practice a little more this week and try again next weekend." I shrugged, going for nonchalant to hopefully ease her concerns.

I related to Callie a lot. She didn't only need the confidence and positivity that Tina had perfected. She needed to be prepared for either outcome and for what would happen if something didn't go the way she hoped. At least that was the read I had gotten on her. If anything, my ability to see the whole picture, the worst-case scenario and what I needed to prioritize to avoid that outcome, was what made me so good at my job. Not that it helped me two years ago with Levi. I swallowed hard at the sudden reminder.

I checked on Callie in the mirror again. Her shoulders seemed more relaxed, but there was still an air of nervousness radiating from her.

"Will you be good with her in the water on your own?" Tina side-eyed me. "Teddy doesn't like the sand either, so I'll probably take him to the playground."

"No," the little boy yelled from the back seat. "I go swim too."

Eyes wide, Tina twisted in her seat. “You want to go swimming? Like in the water?”

I wasn’t about to point out the redundancy of those two questions. Surely Teddy knew that in order to swim, he’d have to get in the water.

“Yes. I go swim too,” he repeated with an implied *duh*.

Tina spun around. “Well, I’ll be.”

Thirty minutes later, Tina and I were on the beach watching as Callie nervously stood waist deep in the water with the lifeguard. She listened intently as he went through the swim test rules, giving a nod when he asked if she understood. She had just watched me go through the same process.

Teddy was wrapped around Tina like a monkey. He had fussed a bit about the idea of getting wet at first. A simple reminder that he wouldn’t have to get his face wet if he didn’t want was enough to relax him. Now, though, the death grip he had on his mother made me wonder whether he would really end up getting into the water.

Callie peered over at us, and I gave her a thumbs-up. Pride surged through me as she raised her arms above her head, took a deep breath in, and dove into the water.

Nerves settled in my stomach. If she didn’t pass, she would be disappointed. But the realization that I didn’t want her to be disappointed was the real reason my gut was twisted up.

A hand brushed along my arm, and I glanced over at Tina.

“She’ll do it.” She sent me that smile of hers, and my body instantly relaxed. “Stop worrying.”

I shook my head. “I don’t break promises.”

Except one. I made Levi a promise, and I still hadn’t followed through.

Holding my breath, I tracked Callie as she approached the rope buoy. When she got there, she halted and treaded water for thirty seconds as instructed. From there, she headed back toward the lifeguard. The look of determination on her face

told me all I needed to know. There was no way she wasn't making the ten-yard swim back.

The beaming smile on her face when she exited the water with her green wrist band on was one that would be etched into my memory forever.

"I did it!" She clapped as she bounced on the sand in front of us.

"You did." I held out a fist, and she bumped it. "I knew you would."

"So proud of you, baby girl." Tina stepped back and held up her phone. "Now let me get a picture."

Tina snapped a few pictures, and Callie obediently smiled. As Tina clicked the lock button on her phone, signaling that she was finished, Callie asked, "Can you get one of both of us with our matching bands?"

My heart flipped in my chest when I realized she meant me. Immediately, I kneeled in the sand and held my wrist up next to hers for a picture.

"I didn't realize you were going to take the swim test too," Tina added, dropping her phone on the blanket.

I shrugged. "Why should Callie get to have all the fun?"

"Yeah, and now I have somebody to go on the slide with and race to the stairs."

I hadn't needed a reason to go down the slide since my early twenties, and even then, I'd done it for Savannah, who was only twelve at the time.

"And she'll have to do this each year?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we both will." Fuck. *She* will. I wouldn't be here the following year. I shook my head. "It's required every season. They'll record it, and for the rest of the summer, every time you check in, you get the green band."

She surveyed the matching red bands on hers and Teddy's wrists. "Red for non-swimmer, and green for swimmer, huh?"

“Pretty much.” I smirked. “But you could take the swim test if you wanted to.”

She glanced at the big slide that sent its riders flying into the water and cringed. “Yeah, no. I’m good.”

Callie and I spent the next half hour going down the slippery contraption that propelled us up and into the lake. I’d forgotten how much fun it was. Between rounds, Tina waved at us from the beach, catching our attention. When we waved back, she snapped a picture of us, and then we were off to slide again.

Thoroughly worn out, we made our way back to the shore, where Tina stood with Teddy in water that came up to his hips.

“Did you swim, bud?”

Teddy shook his head.

“I couldn’t get him to go out any farther than this.” Tina nodded down to her son and shrugged. “It’s progress, though. At least he’s in the water.”

I cocked one brow at her and turned to Teddy. “Want to go out there with me? We can practice your kicks like we do in the pool.”

He scanned the open water. “I go swim? Like the pool?”

I nodded. “Yeah, like we do in the pool.” I held my arms out, giving him the choice.

He stepped into me, and I scooped him up, but the poor little guy clung to me for dear life. “Teddy, I got you, bud. I won’t let go. I promise.”

He nodded but only loosened his grip slightly.

Tina and Callie followed us out a few yards, and when the water hit my ribcage, I coaxed Teddy to loosen his grip further. Eventually, he let me put his lower body horizontally in the water while I supported his upper body.

“Look at you swimming.”

We stayed out in the water until Teddy’d had enough, then Tina and I sat with him on the beach blanket while Callie did

the water slide a few more times.

Tina leaned into me, bumping my arm with her shoulder. “Maybe next time we can take them to Bear Cove.”

At her words, my whole body tightened and ice ran through my veins.

“No,” I snapped. Sitting ramrod straight, I pinched my eyes closed and sucked in a deep breath. In for four, out for eight. But it didn’t help. It never did. I didn’t know why I’d bothered to try. My heart was still racing. What the hell was wrong with me?

Tina placed her hand on my bicep, and instantly, my muscles started to relax.

“What’s wrong?”

“The cliffs at Bear Cove are dangerous. I—” I shook my head. “It’s not safe.”

“Okay.” She was quiet, leaving unspoken questions hanging in the air between us.

What if she didn’t take me seriously and took the kids there by herself? That thought had my stomach pitching.

“Tina, promise me you won’t go there.” I cringed at the desperation in my voice.

Her gaze locked on mine. “I promise.”

“That’s it?” Or was she saying it to appease me? Her expression was open, concerned, and full of sincerity, but still. “No questions why?”

She shrugged. “I trust you. If you say it’s dangerous, then I believe you.” She assessed Teddy, who was happily eating Goldfish and playing with a few dinosaurs, and turned back to me. “And if you want to tell me what upset you so much, I’m happy to listen. If you don’t, that’s okay too.”

All the air escaped me then. This woman. She constantly surprised me. I held back a laugh at how ironic the situation was. For the last nine months, I’d wished people would stop asking me how I was or what I was feeling or whether I

needed to talk, and now I wanted nothing more than to tell this woman everything. Even the things I thought I didn't want her to ever know.

“Remember the day in the grocery store?”

She glanced over with a smile. “You mean when you hounded me until I agreed to let you give my kids swim lessons?”

“You're welcome, by the way.” I waved over to Callie, who stood on the platform at the top of the slide, waving excitedly at us.

“This is the happiest I've seen her since we moved here.” Tina waved back, and once Callie turned, she squeezed my forearm. “You have no idea how grateful I am that you've given her this.”

I shrugged. Funny thing was, I thought I was saving Teddy that day. But from where I was standing, it seemed as though we all needed a little saving. I rubbed my chest, willing the ache there to dissipate.

Tina's brows were raised, and she was watching me, expectant. She wouldn't push, but she was waiting for my explanation. Why I demanded they never go to Bear Cove.

“Everyone makes at least one bad decision in high school, right? It's like a rite of passage. But when we're young and dumb, we don't always understand that those bad decisions could have life-threatening consequences.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “I knew the cliffs could be dangerous, even without adding alcohol to the mix. It's why I made sure we never brought it with us when we hung out there.”

Beside me, she inhaled sharply, likely already understanding where I was going.

Other kids our age used that spot to party. It was more of a hangout spot for us. Being deep in a cove and far from the main roads made it the perfect place to hide out.

“But that night, I didn't notice that my best friend's sister and her boyfriend were drunk. I should have never let them go

off alone.” I shook my head. To this day, I blamed myself and that prick she was dating for her death.

Tina’s barely audible gasp and the way she brought her hand to her mouth told me she knew the unhappy ending my story held.

Chapter Twenty-Three



TINA



I COULD NOT IMAGINE the heartache they'd all experienced after a tragedy like that, especially at such a young age. The guilt that permeated each of his words made it obvious how it still affected him. But before I could ask the myriad of questions swirling in my head, Callie wandered back to us, looking spent. She had definitely worn herself out.

Once we were back at the house, I pointed down the hallway toward the bathrooms. "Showers. Both of you." The outdoor ones at the beach were great for rinsing off the sand, but not necessarily for getting clean. "Callie, you can use my bathroom."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Do you want me to order a pizza?" Kyle's voice came from behind me.

Teddy's eyes lit up. "Pizza! Pizza!"

There was his answer. With a small smile, I peeked over my shoulder. "Do you mind?"

He shook his head. "No, not at all."

“Thanks. I’ll go help Teddy.”

By the time the pizza arrived, both kids were showered and in fresh clothes. I still needed a shower, but it would have to wait until the kids were in bed.

“Are you excited about your first day of school tomorrow?” Kyle asked Teddy.

Teddy nodded with a mouthful of pizza. “I pay—”

“Teddy, chew first. Then you can tell Kyle.”

He nodded and chewed very dramatically while Kyle grinned at his antics.

He tried again. “I pay on the playground tomorrow.”

The speech services he would get through the school would help him with his pronunciation of certain consonants.

“I bet you’ll get to do lots of fun things at school,” Kyle added.

Callie joined the conversation, telling us all about what she’d be learning in fifth grade. As we ate and chatted, I took in our little group, stopping on Kyle. He was leaned back against the chair, his hands locked casually behind his head. Like he’d always been here.

When we’d finished and cleaned up the pizza box, Teddy had dragged Kyle to the living room. Callie brought the plates to the kitchen before scampering off, and I soaked up the moment of silence.

When I’d finished wiping down the table, I stepped into the great room. “Almost time for bed, guys.”

Callie was on the sofa with a book, and Teddy was on the floor with Kyle, playing with Legos.

Kyle stood and gave me a soft smile.

“Kyle, you going home now?” Teddy asked, jarring me back to reality.

“Oh. Um—I...” He looked from Teddy to me, raising his brows, silently asking *am I?*

I opened my mouth to say *he's not leaving yet*, but Callie piped up before I could get the words out.

“Of course he is. He sleeps at his own house.”

My breath stuttered at the comment. Did she think we were talking about him staying over? That was not a conversation I wanted to have with her yet. Especially when she was still struggling. A frown pulled at my lips.

I turned back to Kyle, but he was looking anywhere but at me, jaw locked and his hands clenching at his sides. Did *he* think he was spending the night too? Because that was not where my mind was.

“Yeah, it’s late. I should go.” His tone was clipped, and he still wouldn’t look at me. “Your mom’s probably sick of me,” he directed at Teddy.

Shit. Now Teddy’s gaze was bouncing back and forth between us, looking for the answer to his simple question.

“Uh—” I wanted to tell Kyle that he didn’t have to leave.

He’d spent all day with my kids, and I wanted a little time to ourselves, but another glance at Callie had my brain freezing. Squinting, she scrutinized me, waiting for my response. All eyes were on me, and I had no idea how to respond. I wanted him here, but I hadn’t considered how the kids would feel about it. How had a simple question spiraled so out of control?

“Okay, then.” Kyle stepped around the armchairs that faced the sofa and headed for the front door. “I had fun today. Thanks for letting me tag along.” He glanced at each of the kids, then finally, *finally* looked at me. Jaw tense, he dipped his chin. “Good night.”

The kids echoed a *good night*, and I offered a smile that I hoped said *sorry, I suck*.

With a slight nod, he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him.

I was still beating myself up about how I’d handled that interaction when I stepped from Teddy’s room a half hour later

and into Callie's. She sat in her bed, a book in her lap.

"I'm surprised you're not asleep already." I plopped down on the edge of her mattress. "You must be tired after today."

"Yeah, a little." She kept her face lowered and fidgeted with the pages of her book.

"You okay?"

She snapped up straight, frowning. "Are you going to marry Kyle?"

My lungs seized. With a hand to my chest, I forced myself to inhale once and let the breath out slowly. "What?"

Kyle and I had been discreet, but, of course, Callie had caught on. She didn't miss anything. Truthfully, it was why I'd handled everything so badly tonight.

"My friend Ava. She has a stepdad. So I thought...I don't know. Maybe..." She trailed off, focusing on her book again, her hair falling like a curtain around her face.

My stomach tied itself into knots as I scrambled for the best way to approach this. Honesty had always been my policy. It was important that she understood, but I had to be careful to protect her feelings and to not cause her to worry.

"Callie, one day I might decide to get married again."

When she lifted her gaze to meet mine again, I shook my head.

"But not right now."

"To Kyle?"

"Probably not." The reminder that Kyle and I couldn't have anything more sat weird in my stomach. "He's moving to New York."

Her mouth turned down into a frown, like she didn't like that answer, and her eyes slanted together. "But you like him?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I do. He's pretty great, isn't he?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, he's okay."

“How about this? If and when I decide I like someone enough to want to marry them, I’ll let you know, and we can talk about it.”

“Okay.”

Her easy agreement drained some of the tension from my body.

She went back to her book, reading in earnest now, effectively ending our conversation. So with a squeeze to her leg and a kiss to her forehead, I left the room. Now that I’d dealt with that problem, it was time to fix the way I’d left things with Kyle.

I wandered to the kitchen in search of my phone. When I found it on the counter, I typed out a message.

Me: Sorry about earlier. I didn’t actually want you to leave...

Kyle: You didn’t say that. It’s fine, though. We never talked about if I was hanging out or not.

Me: I was just caught off guard by Callie’s comment about you not sleeping here. I didn’t want to imply that you were. But I could have handled it better.

Kyle: I didn’t even think of that. Was she upset after I left? Did she say anything else?

Me: Just wondering if we were going to get married.

Kyle: What did you say?

What the hell did he think I’d said?

Me: I told her yes and that we were moving with you to New York.

I refrained from adding an eye roll emoji.

Three dots appeared and then disappeared.

Me: You know I was joking, right?

Kyle: Yeah. Lol.

Chapter Twenty-Four



KYLE



I HADN'T SLEPT WELL in days. Memories of my time with Tina and the kids on Sunday played on a loop and messed with my emotions. It had been one of the best days ever, but also confusing as fuck.

I was still at a loss for why I'd gotten so upset when it seemed like she didn't want me to stay. I hadn't planned on staying the night, but I'd assumed she'd want to spend time alone with me the way I did with her. Just us. Then when I thought she didn't want that...I shook my head at my stupidity. If I would have taken a minute to assess the situation, I would have realized that she was struggling with how to handle Callie's comment without upsetting her.

What was even more confusing was the excitement that had bubbled up inside me for an instant when she mentioned telling Callie we were getting married and that they were moving with me to New York.

Regardless of it all—my feelings, hers, Callie's scrutiny—I had to tell her about Levi, because if there was any chance she'd consider trying something long distance, she needed to

know the truth. And the longer I waited, the harder it became. I was leaving for New York in less than two weeks, so it had to be soon.

The laughter that drifted in from the backyard brought me out of my thoughts.

It might be utter chaos, but I looked forward to game night with Tina and her kids. Luckily, I'd dodged Pie Face this time. We played one round of Clue with Callie while Teddy played on the floor with matchbox cars.

I suggested we try Hedbanz Junior with Teddy. It was simple enough, and I thought would keep his attention for longer. He lasted two rounds before losing interest and running off.

Now the kids were playing out back while Tina and I enjoyed a glass of wine.

With my arm draped around her shoulders, I brushed up and down her arm lazily. For as much as I enjoyed game nights, I hated that I couldn't touch her in the ways I wanted to. Did I sneak a brush of our hands or let my fingers skate her bare thigh? I sure did. But those touches were fleeting.

This was not. Holding her like this, having her pressed against my side like this, was what I'd been itching to do all night. Leaning over, I ghosted my lips down her neck and nipped at the skin above her collarbone. Her shiver and slight whimper had my dick waking up and wanting to be included.

He'd have to suffer. For now, at least. Maybe once the kids were asleep and we were safely behind a locked door, he'd get his chance.

I shook my head. Guilt once again rolled through me, and I pulled away slightly.

Shit. I really did need to tell her. It had been eating at me, the knowledge that Levi hadn't gotten to say goodbye. That was supposed to be my job.

Tell her I love her.

That memory, even two years later, was still clear as day. I'd witnessed many people say similar things when they knew they were dying. It was what they all did. But now, somehow, I understood it more. And she deserved to know.

"Mom! Kyle!" The sound of Callie's voice had us both standing suddenly.

My heart took off at a gallop as she darted through the back door. Did Teddy get himself into something?

"A bird ran into the window. I think it's hurt." Callie came to a skidding stop just inside the great room, with Teddy close behind.

She held her hands out in front of her and opened them so they were palm up, showing us what they had found.

My stomach lurched, but I kept my tone even. "That's not a bird. That's a—"

"Bat!" Tina's voice pitched high.

She backed up until her legs hit the couch, then she was scrambling up onto the back of it and pressing herself against the wall.

This woman, who always appeared so calm and collected, was freaking out. Before now, I didn't think I'd ever heard her raise her voice.

"It's okay—"

"It's a bat!" Her eyes were wide with panic.

I bit back a chuckle. "Yes. I know. But—"

"A bat. In my house." She snapped her mouth closed and whimpered. "A bat's in the house! Outside!" She pointed to the door that led out back. "You need to get it outside."

"A bat?" Callie parroted. She and Teddy both surveyed the creature lying in her hand, still stunned. Or possibly dead, I supposed.

"Yeah. It probably just—"

“Get. It. Out. Of. My. House,” Tina screamed as she bounced from one foot to the other, perched precariously on the back of the sofa.

So bats were the thing that shredded that calmness she always exuded. Noted.

I cocked my head to the side and couldn't help but grin. Damn, she was cute when she was freaking out.

She glowered at me again, and rather than pushing my luck, I spun back to the kids.

“Come on, guys. Let's take the bat outside.” I herded them toward the back of the house, snagging a dishtowel on the way.

Once outside, I held out the towel and instructed Callie to place the bat on it.

“Go back inside and wash your hands. When you're done, you can come back out and help me if you want.”

When the kids returned a minute later, the lump in the bundled-up towel was moving. The bat was alive, and from the look of things, it was itching to be freed.

I pulled my Olight mini tactical flashlight from my pocket and nodded toward the cluster of trees that lined the back of Tina's property.

“Okay. Follow me.” I pointed the flashlight in front of us and carried the bat through the yard.

“Don't bats bite?” Callie paused.

“They can. If you ever see one of these again, you shouldn't pick it up. Okay?”

Once we were near the tree line, I squatted down. “Step back a bit. I'm going to uncover it now.”

When I did, I stood and stepped back quickly. At first, it didn't move, but after a few seconds, it slowly inched forward using its wings.

The kids gasped, totally engrossed in the moment.

It only took a few seconds for the bat to extricate itself and take off into the sky.

“He come back?” Teddy asked.

I chuckled. “For your mother’s sake, I hope not.”

Teddy’s shoulders drooped and his bottom lip puckered. Maybe I could build a bat box out here. If I could convince Tina that it was a good idea.

“She doesn’t like birds,” Callie added.

“She doesn’t?”

“Nope. She thinks they’re creepy.” She shrugged, like this was perfectly normal.

“Did you know that a bat isn’t a bird?”

“Really?” She tilted her head back to look up at me.

“Really. It’s a mammal.”

“I’m totally getting a book about bats from the library this week.”

My heart warmed at the sentiment. She really was a scientist. “Would you guys want to help me build a bat box?”

“A box for my bat?” Teddy bounced on his toes and spun in a circle.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“What’s that?” Callie asked as we made our way back to the house.

“It’s kind of like a birdhouse.” I pointed to a tree at the corner of the yard. “We could hang it way up high on that tree.” I turned off my flashlight and dropped it back into my pocket. “Want to help me?”

“Can we paint it?” Callie beamed.

Of course was on the tip of my tongue, but before I could utter the words, it hit me. I was leaving in ten days. Dammit. But maybe I could convince Tina to let me build and paint one with the kids this weekend. The last weekend I had with all of them. If only I had approached her when they first moved

here. Before I showed interested in and accepted this position in New York. Would things be different? Or would knowing who I really was have kept her at a distance anyway?

Irony is a bitch.

I'd never once felt torn about leaving someone I cared about when I deployed. In fact, that was how I knew I wasn't really invested. So I'd end the relationship and prepare for my stint overseas.

Now? This woman was the one I wasn't sure I could leave behind? The one I still wasn't sure I deserved? The one who probably wouldn't be able to look at me once she knew the truth?

Teddy ran inside yelling, "Mama, we have a house of bats?"

I ran my hand down my face and eyed Callie. "She really doesn't like birds?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Kinda freaks out. It's embarrassing."

My laughter quickly died when Tina said, "No. Absolutely not. No bats in the house, Teddy."

Never a dull moment around here. That was for sure.

Chapter Twenty-Five



TINA



THE PICTURE KYLE HAD SENT, the one of Teddy holding a power drill, made me smile and panic simultaneously. I hoped Kyle realized what he'd agreed to today.

A laugh snagged my attention. Nearby, Callie chuckled at something Sophia said. She'd been talking nonstop for the last two days about the fairy hair Savannah had promised.

Kyle and Teddy were building a bat house, and Kyle promised Callie that she could help paint it when we returned. I, for one, had no interest in having bats anywhere near my home, whether they had their own house or not—was there not a cave nearby where they could sleep?—but he'd been insisting on the project, and it was hard to say no to the man.

"I just hope no one gets injured this time," Bella said. She and Hattie, Kyle's sister, sat on the adjacent love seat.

I'd missed the first part of the conversation, but before I could ask her to explain, she turned to me.

"Last time he and Brendan built something together, B got a splinter and Rhett hit his thumb with a hammer."

“Those aren’t actually injuries,” Savannah huffed.

“From the way they both whined, you would have thought they’d each lost a hand.”

Rhett had taken Brendan over to build a bat house too. I was beginning to think this family had a weird obsession with bats. Jackson was there as well, but seeing as how there were five women and two girls in his home—a home that was massive and gorgeous, by the way—I could understand why. I did not get the impression that he planned to build a bat house of his own, so maybe the obsession with bats was strictly a Williams thing.

“Can I go to see the Taylor Swift movie with Sophia next week?” Callie sat on a stool in the middle of Ashley’s living room while Savannah patiently tied a piece of tinsel around a strand of hair.

Ashley turned to me, tucking her blond hair over one shoulder. “She’s welcome to come along. I’m thinking either Friday evening or Saturday afternoon.”

“Please, Mom,” Callie added, her eyes shining with excitement.

I nodded. “Yeah, that should be fine.”

It made me so unbelievably happy that she was forming friendships here. Now that she had both Ava and Sophia, my anxiety was slowly ebbing. Each day, she was adjusting a little more to our new life.

Kyle was leaving on Friday. He was set to meet with his new boss, then he’d take the weekend to get settled and start his new job on Monday morning.

The anxiety I wasn’t feeling when it came to Callie settling in had all been diverted to thoughts of what life would be like when he was gone. Would things with his family be weird? God, I hoped not, especially for Callie and Sophia.

I brought my fun, fruity drink to my mouth and took another sip. Damn, this was good.

“What is this?” I asked, holding the glass out. “It’s really good.”

Savannah looked up from Callie’s hair. “Se—”

She was cut off by a loud throat clearing from Ashley. “Please don’t finish that sentence.”

Savannah looked down at the girls and rolled her eyes. “It’s my take on a popular cocktail that has to do with *chilling* on the beach.”

The two preteens sitting side by side on stools in front of Savannah were so engrossed in their own conversation that I doubted they’d have caught on even if she’d used the drink’s official name.

“Gotcha.” I nodded.

Forty minutes later, the girls rushed up the stairs, in love with their new hairstyles. I had a fresh glass of sex on the beach in my hand and was munching on chips in Ashley and Jackson’s large, luxurious kitchen. The hanging lights shaped like mini chandeliers that hung over the large island were gorgeous.

“What are your intentions with my brother?” Savannah asked.

My stomach leaped into my throat, and I coughed.

Ashley patted my back as I continued to choke on the chip I’d been devouring.

The blunt question was the last thing I’d expected. They all knew he was leaving for New York, right?

Hattie elbowed Savannah.

“What?” She rolled her eyes.

“Look what you did. You made her choke.” Hattie frowned at her sister. “Leave her alone.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if I was the brother asking for my sister.”

“Yes, I would.” Hattie huffed. “I tell y’all to butt out all the time. No one ever listens to me, though.”

“That is true.” Ashley pointed her drink in Hattie’s direction.

I regarded each of the women and shook my head at their honesty. Emily would love them. I’d been missing her terribly but was looking forward to her visit in a few weeks. Maybe we could ask Lilly to watch the kids and go out with Kyle’s sisters one night. Things would be okay between us, surely. It wasn’t like Kyle and I would have some big blow-up break-up.

It would just...end. I swallowed thickly and shook my head, refusing to harp on that thought.

There would be no drama. No one to blame. And that was a good thing.

Another throat clearing caught my attention. Savannah was looking at me, wearing an expectant expression. She wasn’t giving up, and I didn’t blame her for looking out for her brother.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “He’s leaving for New York in a week.”

“So?” Her brows knitted together.

“His life will be there, and mine is here.”

We’d be separated by hundreds of miles. Yes, I’d survived more than my fair share of periods of separation with Levi, but we’d known each other for most of our lives when we married. Kyle and I were just getting to know each other. Weren’t we? He might not have any interest in a long-distance relationship anyway. Even so, I wasn’t sure how the kids would react to it. Neither batted an eye when I told them Kyle was staying to watch a movie with me after they went to bed the other night. The statement was clear and simple, and neither had an issue. If only I’d handled Sunday night’s dilemma the same way.

But damn, I hated that he couldn’t stay the night. Sneaking out after having sex just felt...I don’t know...like we were teenagers worried about getting caught. If he wasn’t leaving for New York, I could see our relationship heading that way,

but with the end of this thing between us on the horizon, I didn't want to send the wrong message to the kids. Or to myself.

“People date long distance all the time. They even start relationships with hundreds of miles between them.”

She brought her glass to her mouth and hid a smirk behind the rim.

“Just ignore her.” Hattie sighed. “She doesn't have a filter.”

Thankfully, Bella steered the conversation to plans for Ashley's wedding. I may have tuned some of it out as Savannah's comments niggled at my subconscious. There was no way I could ask Kyle to stay. I could tell how important this job was to him. But did I want to continue things with him when we'd be so far apart?

My phone vibrated in my pocket. When I pulled it out, I had a new text from Kyle.

Kyle: What do you think about taking the boat out tomorrow?

My stomach churned at just the idea, but Callie would love it.

Me: Sure, sounds great.

Kyle: Have you had enough of my sisters yet?

I pressed my teeth into my bottom lip to keep from laughing and snuck a glance around the island. They were all still engrossed in the wedding planning.

Me: No. They're great.

Kyle: That's a lie. I know for a fact they're a pain in the ass.

A soft chuckle escaped me, and Ashley turned and homed in on the phone in my hand. Then she studied my face, a knowing smirk playing on her lips.

Kyle: Want to start season 15 tonight?

He'd finished season fourteen of *Supernatural* a few nights ago, and I'd mentioned that I still needed to finish fifteen. He suggested we watch it together from the beginning. Teddy was born the year it aired, and Levi deployed not long after. Parenting two kids on my own kept me so busy I had no time for TV. Then the following year Levi deployed again, and that time, he didn't come home.

Me: Sure, sounds good.

Kyle: You sure you're good rewatching the first handful of episodes?

I had no issue with that, but he was leaving for New York on Friday. I wasn't sure we would get through all twenty episodes before then, but I liked the idea of trying.

Me: Yeah, it's been a while. It'll be a good refresher.

I slid my phone back into my pocket, a smile playing on my lips. It was so simple, watching a TV show together, but the thought of it made my heart sing. When I looked back up at the women gathered around the kitchen island, instead of finding just that one knowing smirk aimed at me, I found four.

Chapter Twenty-Six



KYLE



SOMETHING WAS OFF. Though Tina wore a smile and pumped the kids up for a day on the lake, the lines around her eyes and the stoop of her shoulders hinted that it was an act.

Maybe the tension she carried was because the kids had been difficult. Teddy had been whining about not wanting to go all morning, and Callie had huffed and told her mother that the boat was lame. I'd chalked it up to kids being kids. They owned a boat, so surely they enjoyed taking it out.

I'd hoped that once we were out on the lake, their moods would improve, but it was clear pretty quickly that it wasn't likely.

Once we'd pattered out past the no-wake zone, Callie insisted I speed up, but twenty minutes in, Tina looked absolutely miserable. Her eyes were pinched closed and she had an arm securely wrapped around her midsection.

Teddy whined at first that the sun was in his eyes, but now he was fussing about the wind in his face and the water that splashed up over the sides.

“Can you slow down?” Tina shouted over the wind and the sound of the motor.

I nodded and eased off the throttle. “You okay?”

She shook her head. “I get motion sick. I’m fine if we go slow. It’s much worse with high speeds.” She gave me a weak smile. “I’m a terrible passenger on the highway too.”

The speed of the boat made her sick? Why the hell did she still have this boat? I put my hands out toward Teddy, who was sitting on Tina’s lap. “Want to sit with me, bud? I’ll let you drive.”

His cries turned to sniffles then, and he nodded. For the first time since we’d left the dock, he was at least somewhat content. He even cracked a smile or two as I let him steer the boat at a super slow speed while sitting in my lap. Tina still looked a little green, though her color was improving. However, Callie was now miserable.

“Can we go back?” she asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

Tina sighed. “Not yet.”

“But I’m bored.” She huffed. “It’s only fun when we go fast. Or go see the big cliffs. But we can’t do that because you get sick and Teddy cries.”

The cliffs held nothing but terrible memories for me, but maybe it was time to change that. With Callie’s obsession with them, it might be better if I was the one who took them versus someone else. However, the cliffs were all the way over by my parents’ house on the other side of the lake. We’d never get there at the speed we were going.

I looked from one miserable person to the next.

“Why do you even have this boat?”

“Huh?” Tina tilted her head, brows furrowed.

“Teddy hates the wind in his face. The water and sun aren’t his things either. You literally get sick to the stomach...”

I guess it made sense that when she drove and could control the speed, the motion sickness was minimal. But again, the kids were miserable. Tina was great at seeing the positive in everything, but seriously? The cost and upkeep of a boat were not worth it unless they really loved boating.

She nodded to her daughter. "Callie loves it."

I stole a glance at Callie. Her mouth was pressed into a firm pout. I wanted to call bullshit but bit my tongue instead.

"I loved it with Dad," Callie mumbled. "He would go fast."

Zeroing in on Tina again, I raised an eyebrow. Callie and Levi liked to go fast, yet she couldn't handle the speed.

She shrugged. "I would take Dramamine and deal with it. Teddy was a baby the last time we took the boat out with Levi and didn't really fuss."

That still didn't explain why she was hanging on to the thing. Why torture herself and her kids with it rather than sell it and move on?

I turned the boat around and headed back toward The Dock at a painfully slow pace.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking us back."

"What?" Tina scanned the boat, then the expanse of water around us with wide eyes. "Why?"

"Because, Tina, my hope for today was to enjoy a fun day on the lake. But this is the opposite of fun for any of us."

She opened her mouth but snapped it shut again and deflated.

"It's okay. This just isn't *our* thing. We can find something else that we'll all enjoy today."

"Okay." The corner of her lips turned up into a slight smile.

"How about kayaking?"

Callie popped up then, suddenly interested in the conversation. So she would like that?

“The kids have never been, but I think it would be fun.” Tina nudged Callie. “Don’t you?”

“We don’t have kayaks, though.” Callie’s shoulders dropped.

“That’s okay. My family has a bunch.” We could launch them from there.

It didn’t take long to get the boat emptied out and get over to my parents’. By the time we arrived, the kids were both in better spirits.

“Callie, you want to go with me? I’ll show you how to paddle and we can go as fast as you want.” Fast was relative in a kayak, but whatever.

She eyed her mom for a long minute, her lower lip caught between her teeth, then shrugged. “Sure.”

Tina and Teddy kept up with us pretty nicely, and I couldn’t help but smile at how calm Teddy was. He was fixated on the birds flying overhead. Tina, of course, winced and even *ducked*. Like the birds were dive-bombing her rather than flying fifty feet above us. Callie wasn’t lying when she said Tina had a weird thing about birds.

“So the bird thing...”

“Yup.” Callie grinned at me over her shoulder. “Told you. Totally weird.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” Tina hollered from behind us. “They’re weird. It’s like they’re always watching. Waiting to attack. Like in that movie.”

“What?” Callie and I asked in unison.

“Callie’s too young, and I won’t traumatize her like my mom did to me. But you have to know what I’m talking about, Kyle.”

I racked my brain for memories of a movie about birds attacking. When I didn’t say anything, she continued.

“The movie from the ’60s? The one about the birds that randomly attack the townspeople?”

I shook my head. “Nope. But there were five of us, and we were all pretty active. TV wasn’t really our thing.”

She sighed. “Fine. But when the birds all go crazy and start attacking people, remember that I tried to warn you all.”

She and Teddy rowed up next to us. Her smile said she was having fun, so I couldn’t tell whether she was being serious.

“Look, Mom.” Callie sat up straighter and pointed ahead as we paddled into the cove. “It’s the cliffs.”

Tina’s eyes widened, and she turned to me.

I shrugged. “I’d rather think of you and the kids the next time I think about these cliffs.” And I’d rather be with her if she wanted to go, so I could control the situation and keep everyone safe.

She tilted her head, searching my face. Feeling raw, I averted my gaze and turned forward so I could help Callie row toward the beachy shore next to the large rocks that rose up and out over the water.

The kids did surprisingly well listening to my instructions as we climbed up the rocks. Now we sat together on the highest one, wearing smiles. This had turned out to be a much better experience than the boat.

Holding Teddy tight, I slid my phone out of my pocket and checked my messages. I let out a groan at the one my mom had sent a few minutes ago, though I didn’t actually hate her suggestion.

“What’s wrong?” Tina asked.

“Nothing’s wrong.” I shook my head. “My mom wants to know if I’m bringing you all back for Sunday dinner.”

Tina shrugged. “Sounds fun.”

Fun was not the word I’d use to describe my family. “But we don’t have to.”

“Oh.” Her face fell. “Yeah, if you don’t want to...”

Shit. We weren't doing this again. We'd danced around things before, and that hadn't ended well. So I'd lay it out there. Because in truth, having them there would make my family more tolerable. Everything was better, simpler, easier when Tina was around. My stomach knotted at the thought of having to leave her in less than a week. Even though I had to—I wasn't the type of person to quit or back out of commitments—I was sure it would be the hardest thing I'd ever have to do.

I placed my hand on her leg and waited for her to look at me again. “No. I want to. But my family's a lot. I just want to make sure you're okay with it.”

She smiled. “I like your family. They don't bother me, and I'm sure Callie would—”

“Will Sophia be there?” Callie turned to us, her eyes filled with hope.

I laughed as Tina narrowed her gaze on her daughter.

“What?” Callie retorted.

“It's not polite to eavesdrop,” Tina shot back.

“It's not eavesdropping if we can hear you.” Callie rolled her eyes.

I had to bite back a laugh. She would be a fun teenager, but she also wasn't wrong.

“Yeah, she'll be there,” I offered.

“Cool. I vote yes, then.”

Thirty minutes later, we stepped into my parents' house, and immediately, all my senses went on high alert. The noise, the people, the general chaos, were too much to tune out.

Beside me, Tina ran her hand over my shoulder and gave me a soft smile. Some of the chaos faded away, and I felt like I could breathe again. I took one more deep breath in and placed my hand on the small of her back, then I led her into the house.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



TINA



THE MOMENT we walked in the door, Kyle went rigid. I couldn't pinpoint the cause of the tension suddenly oozing from him, and before I could ask if he was okay, his shoulders loosened a little and his breathing evened out.

Callie made a beeline for Sophia, and the two of them sat in the living room to the left. Teddy joined Brendan on the floor with the biggest container of Legos I'd ever seen, and Kyle and I made our way to the kitchen.

Miranda looked up as we stepped through the entryway, pausing with a dish hovering over the island. Ashley and Hattie shot us matching smiles while they picked up dishes and shuffled through another entryway that was half covered by a large wooden barn door.

"Perfect. You're here." Miranda smiled. "Dinner is almost ready. Kyle, can you carry the roast in for me?"

"No problem."

"Can I help with something?" I asked after Kyle disappeared through the door his sisters had stepped through a

moment ago.

She scanned the remaining clutter on the island and shook her head. “No, I have everything covered. Just waiting for the rolls to finish in the oven.” She moved to the fridge and stuck her head inside. “What would you like to drink? I have lemonade, sweet tea, and water.”

“Sweet tea, please.”

When the oven timer went off and Miranda had transferred the rolls to a basket, I followed her to the dining room, sweet tea in hand.

Kyle thought his family was a lot to take in, but they were great at making people feel welcome. I’d never been here before, yet it was natural. Even my kids fit in seamlessly.

As dinner wound down, I set my fork beside my plate and stifled a groan. I’d had enough food to last me a lifetime. The room was filled with laughter as Rhett, Kyle, and Jackson filled us all in on the shenanigans they and the boys had gotten into while building the bat house the day before.

Miranda smiled at me. “Didn’t they do a great job with the bat houses?”

I nodded. “They seemed to have a fun time doing it too.”

“I bet you’re relieved to have one now.”

Confused, I tilted my head, unsure of how to respond. I didn’t want to offend her, but no, relieved was not the way I would use to describe how I felt about having the bat house in my backyard.

“She doesn’t like bats,” Kyle offered for me. “I explained to her that one of the points of a bat house is to keep the bats from trying to get inside yours, but I still think she’d rather they live in a cave somewhere far, far away.”

I shrugged. There was no point in denying it.

“I don’t like them either, honestly,” Bella chimed in. “They carry diseases and can bite. But I’d rather they hang out in a bat house than try to get into my home. At least I worry less about it.”

I'd never once worried about a bat trying to get into my home before the night Callie came in carrying one. The possibility had never crossed my mind.

"Since moving here, I've realized there are many things I should consider more."

Teddy falling into the lake, the way people stopped and talked to me like I'd always lived here, bats getting into my house or my kids picking one up in the backyard. What else could I add?

I stood in the kitchen a little while later, refilling my glass, when Miranda came in wearing a smile.

"The baby whispering strikes again."

"Huh?"

"Bella swears Kyle has the magic touch with baby Hudson."

"Oh." The memory of the way he'd soothed the fussy newborn at the ice cream shack made my heart ache a little. Had it been almost a month since that day? And it had been even longer than that since the day he jumped into the lake to pull Teddy out.

"I want to thank you."

I shook my head, pulling myself from my thoughts as what Miranda said resonated.

"For what?"

"Kyle..." She glanced toward the open doorway that led to the dining room before meeting my gaze again. "He's been closed off—not totally himself since he's been back. But that's changed recently."

The conversation with Ashley not long ago came to mind.

She sighed. "I think you're the reason he's back."

Oh. *Oh*. How did one respond to a sentiment like that? *You're welcome* didn't seem appropriate.

I didn't know Kyle before he was injured, but I sure did like the man he was now. The one who carried my kids to bed when they'd fallen asleep or willingly took a pie to the face just to see them laugh. The one who put time and effort into finding an experience we'd all enjoy, then put his own fears aside to show my daughter the cliffs when she showed interest. Teaching swim lessons and building bat houses that no one had asked for.

The ache in my chest turned into a full-on pang. I didn't want him to leave, but if I asked him to stay and he did, would he resent me? Would he regret not following his passion? The idea of a long-distance relationship shouldn't be so scary. For years, Levi and I had spent big chunks of time apart. I was used to it. So why, then, did it feel harder this time?

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, wishing I could show him how much I cared and how grateful I was for all the things he'd done for me and my kids.

Kyle stepped into the kitchen. "You ready to go?" He lifted his brows in question. "Figured you'd want to get home soon since it's a school night."

"Yeah." I nodded and turned back to Miranda. "Thank you so much for having us."

"Anytime." With a smile, she stepped toward Kyle and pulled him into a hug.

Once out on the sidewalk, I studied Kyle. He was walking ahead of me with an exhausted Teddy on one hip. Kyle had a slight limp to his gait, like maybe his leg was bothering him.

He'd spent the day ensuring we had a good time, between the boat ride and kayaking and then dinner with his family. Now, it looked like he was in pain, and I worried it was because we'd pushed him too hard.

After the kids were down for the night, I found him sitting on the sofa, mindlessly rubbing his leg. He had his head thrown back on the cushion, and his eyes were pinched closed in what I could only assume was pain.

“You okay?” I winced the second the words left my mouth, because it was obvious that he wasn’t.

He lifted his head, smoothed out his features, and shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’re in pain.” Once again, I was stating the obvious. “What can I do?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. I just need to rest it.”

“Would Advil help?”

He nodded. “Yeah, if you have it.” He let out a sigh. “Kinda wish you had a hot tub.”

I peered down the dark hall toward the bedrooms, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth. I had an idea—one I wasn’t even sure Kyle would go for—but first he needed medicine.

With two Advil in hand and a glass of water, I stood beside him, wringing my hands.

He squinted at me as he swallowed the pills. “I’m fine, Tina. You don’t need to worry.”

I shook my head. It had nothing to do with being worried.

“Come on.” I held out my hand.

He ducked his head. “Really, I’m okay.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yeah.” He tilted his head back, frowning slightly. “Of course.”

“Good. Now, come with me.”

He gripped my hand and stood, then followed me quietly down the hallway toward my bedroom.

Once we were inside, I shut and locked the door and led Kyle to the bed. Grasping his upper arms, I turned him, then pushed on his chest to make him sit.

“I like this idea already.” He smirked.

“I’m glad.” I turned and headed to the attached bathroom, hoping he still liked the idea once he realized what I was doing.

“Where ya going?”

“You’ll see.” I turned both taps and began filling the large jacuzzi tub. It was one of the things I’d fallen in love with when I looked at this house. The tub in our home in Fort Bragg was a standard size, meaning that even when filled, the water barely covered my body.

He arched one eyebrow at me when I moved back into the room. I grabbed the bottom of my shirt and lifted it over my head, then tossed it to the floor. My body broke out in goose bumps when he licked his lips and zeroed in on my breasts clad in a silky green bra.

“Don’t,” he said when I reached around to undo the clasp. “Let me.” He beckoned me with one finger.

I let my arms fall to my sides and shuffled closer, my bare feet brushing against the plush carpet, my body now hyperaware of every sensation. Kyle drank in the sight of my bare skin, his attention warming me from the inside out. He grasped my waist and pulled me onto his lap.

His cock was hard where it pressed between my thighs, pulling a moan from deep inside me. Threading one hand through my hair, he gently forced my mouth to his. He explored and teased me with his tongue as I writhed against him, my core throbbing and all thoughts of the bath long forgotten. A *snap*, and then my bra straps were sliding down my arms. He latched on to one of my nipples and I arched back, giving him more access. But a moment later, he released it with a pop and stood, keeping me in his arms. He strode to the bathroom, sure-footed and wearing a wicked grin.

“Kyle, your leg.” I squirmed, but he held me tight against him.

“Don’t care.” He placed me on the side of the tub and splayed his hands on the surface on either side of me. Angling low so our mouths were just inches apart, he said, “No matter

how much pain I'm in, I will always choose to have your legs wrapped around me." He placed a kiss on the corner of my lips, then trailed his mouth along my jaw and stopped at my ear. "Your body pressed against mine."

His warm breath skated over my skin, sending a shiver down my spine. When he stepped back, a smirk lifted the corners of his mouth. I tracked his movements as he grasped his collar at his nape and pulled his T-shirt over his head. I wanted to run my finger along the lines that defined every muscle along his chest and abs.

His hands went to the button of his shorts, and as he eased them down, along with his boxers, my mouth went dry.

He took a step toward me. "You're overdressed. Can't take a bath like that."

I couldn't look away from his long, thick cock. It jutted out, just begging to be touched. So that's what I did. I reached out and let my fingers run along the shaft.

"Fuck, Tina." He threw his head back and groaned, giving me more confidence.

I turned the knobs on the tub, shutting off the water, then I dropped to my knees in front of him, licked my lips, and fisted his length.

He tucked his chin to his chest, his face hardened and cast in shadow. "Tina," he growled, a warning in his tone. "As much as I want your mouth on me, I'm not sure we'll make it into the bath—"

I swiped my tongue along the underside, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Emboldened, I ran over the smooth tip, closing my eyes as the taste of him settled in my mouth.

When he fisted a hand in my hair, holding me still, I glanced up. "I want to make you feel good."

His intense stare locked on me, indecision flashing across his features.

"Fuck it." He loosened his grip. "Do that again."

Obediently, I licked the tip of his cock again, and it twitched in my hand.

“I want to see your lips wrapped around me and watch as it disappears into that pretty little mouth.”

Excitement surged through me at the image that statement painted in my mind, and I covered the head with my lips, swirling my tongue, then pulled him deeper into my mouth.

“That’s it, baby. Suck it.”

My core throbbed at his words, a low heat pooling there. I sucked harder, eliciting a groan that vibrated through him, and took him deep, until the tip brushed the back of my throat.

His hold on my hair tightened once more as he pulled me off him. “I’m going to come if you keep it up.”

He helped me up from my knees, and in one fluid motion, he pushed my shorts and panties down. Bending slightly at the knees, he pressed me against his hard cock, and we both groaned at the contact.

“Get in the bath,” he mumbled near my ear. “Need to be inside you.”

“Yeah,” I breathed out.

With a dark chuckle, he let me go and stepped into the large tub. I took the hand he offered to me and climbed over the side. He sank down into the water and grabbed my hips, guiding me to straddle his lap.

I grasped the slippery sides of the tub as I slid back and forth along his shaft and threw my head back, soaking in the way he felt.

“You’re killing me,” he growled, sliding his hands from my hips to cup my ass.

I increased the speed of my movement. The way my clit ground against his cock was sending little shocks shooting through me.

“Fuck, Tina.” His hold on my cheeks tightened, forcing me to slow. “I could watch you like this all night, but I need to be

inside you, baby.” Holding me firmly, he lifted me and positioned me over his cock. “Holy shit,” he groaned as he lowered me onto him.

“Kyle.” I gasped when he was fully seated inside me. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I moved slowly, feeling powerful and sexy. His now green eyes locked on me, and obvious lines of pleasure etched on his face. I loved how I could make him feel as good as he made me feel.

Cupping my ass again, he guided me up and down his shaft.

“That’s it. Just like that.” His heavy breaths matched mine as we moved faster and harder, creating waves around us. “Fucking love this view.”

He slid a hand between us and circled my clit with his thumb. I was already so close, but that simple movement sent me barreling toward the edge.

“Oh God,” I moaned, grasping his hair and tugging as I swiveled my hips, each movement sending me higher. My core tightened, and I rocked erratically against him as my orgasm tore through me.

His cock throbbed, and he exploded, holding me tight against him as he released deep inside me. He sat up straight, his arms locking around my back and his lips molding to mine as we moved slowly, riding out the waves of pleasure.

I had no idea what had gotten into me, because all I could think about was doing that again. I moaned as my clit brushed against his pelvis.

He chuckled, his warm breath near my ear. “Don’t worry. I’m nowhere near done with you yet.”

I’d never craved sex like this, but apparently, I was addicted to this man and the things he did to my body.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



TINA



“THEN HE TURNS the boat around and tells us this isn’t our thing.” I shook my head as I recounted the story to Emily.

My phone was propped up on the counter so I could chat with her while I made dinner. I stirred the beef stew one more time and placed the lid back on.

“How many times have I told you to get rid of that thing? It’s never going to be *your* thing.”

She was right. I’d been putting it off for months, hoping that one day, I’d magically feel differently. I was concerned that it would upset Callie if I got rid of one of the few things we still had that really connected us to Levi. The boat *had been* our thing. Callie and Levi had loved it, so despite the motion sickness, it was worth it for me. But now...was it worth it? The last few times we’d taken it out, Callie didn’t even seem to enjoy it.

I paused, listening for the kids. After we’d gotten home from school, Teddy went to his room to play. Worn out from the day, he’d fallen asleep on his floor, so I’d moved him to his bed. If I didn’t wake him up soon, he’d never sleep tonight.

And I could still hear the water from the shower, so obviously, Callie wasn't out yet.

I continued the story, telling Emily about kayaking and dinner with Kyle's family. As I spoke, Joe appeared behind her.

"Hey, Tina," he said, leaning down a bit so his face appeared on the screen. "How are you guys doing?"

"We're good." I nodded. "Kids are settling in nicely. They're both loving their new school."

"That's awesome." He massaged Emily's shoulders and placed a kiss on top of her head, then stepped off the screen once more.

"When does he deploy?"

She let out a sigh. "Next week."

I nodded, searching for another topic to distract her from the melancholy that had set in the instant I'd brought up Joe's deployment. Until Levi was killed two years ago, the idea of losing one of our husbands had been a glimmer of a possibility, so far removed from us that neither of us had really embraced it. Emily worried about it more since I'd lost Levi. How could she not? We'd talked about her fear and the thoughts she'd had about how it could have easily been Joe or any one of the guys who didn't come home that day.

"Callie passed the swim test at Pointe Beach last week." I smiled.

"Aw, yay! So the swim lessons paid off, huh?" A smirk lifted the corners of her lips. "In more ways than one, it sounds like."

I rolled my eyes.

"Man, I wish I could have seen her face."

"Oh, I have pictures." I opened the gallery on my phone and selected a bunch, then texted them to her. "We should go there when you guys come to visit. The kids would love it."

She picked up the phone and went quiet while she looked through the photos. “Is this Kyle? He’s hot.”

I scrolled through the pictures I’d sent, and sure enough, I had selected the one of Callie and Kyle showing off their matching swim bands.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Wow, Callie has gotten tall since the last time we saw her.”

“I know. I think she just had a growth spurt.”

“Hey, hun? Do you have...” Joe was back, approaching Emily from behind. “Whoa, Callie’s so big now.”

“That’s what I said.” Emily chuckled. “Here, look at these. Callie passed her swim test.”

Joe pressed his lips together, intent on the phone screen as he scrolled through the images. After a moment, his eyes narrowed. “This is Kyle?” he asked, turning to look at Emily.

“Yeah, that’s the guy who’s been giving the kids swim lessons and...” Emily trailed off.

“And the guy Tina’s been seeing?” Joe finished for her. Now, though, he was looking at me with one eyebrow raised.

Heat crept up my neck and into my cheeks. “Yeah.”

I wasn’t surprised that Emily had told Joe, but did he approve? My husband had been gone for two years. There was no reason for my friends to judge me about dating, yet that fear lingered.

“Small world,” he mumbled, shaking his head.

“Huh?” I tilted my head, confused.

“He was there the day Levi—” He snapped his mouth shut and stole a glance at Emily. “What the? Why’d you elbow me?”

My stomach sank. What did he mean *he was there*? My brain tripped over itself, working to connect the dots as Joe continued talking.

“Is he still active?”

I shook my head, though it wasn't in response to his question. “What do you mean? How exactly do you know Kyle?”

Joe's eyes widened, and he looked to Emily again, who was watching him with a hard expression.

My lungs constricted, suddenly making it hard to breathe.

“Tina, um—” His mouth formed a tight line, and he huffed out a breath through his nose. “Maybe you need to ask Kyle.”

A knock sounded on the front door, startling me. “He's here.”

“Call me later?” Emily asked quietly.

I nodded, feeling detached. My brain had caught up, and I was pretty sure I understood what Joe meant. But if I was right, then why hadn't Kyle told me? Had he not made the connection? Of their own volition, my eyes darted to the mantel above the fireplace where Levi's military portrait sat. The one I'd seen Kyle looking at before. There was no way he didn't know who my late husband was. Had he not mentioned it because he wasn't allowed to? Was it one of those classified things he had to keep to himself? If so, I couldn't imagine how hard that would have been.

The second knock reminded me that he was at the front door, but I was still standing frozen in front of the Crock-Pot. Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I forced my feet to move. And with a shaky hand, I pulled open the door, then stepped back. I had no earthly idea what to say to him, but I couldn't hide in my kitchen all night either.

Kyle smiled at me as he entered the house, but the expression faded quickly, and his eyes took on a look of concern. “Are you okay?” he asked, taking a step toward me and placing his hands on my shoulders.

In that instant, I knew I'd have to just come out with it. Rip the Band-Aid right off. “Did you know Levi?”

He reared back, and his brows pinched together. “What?”

“Were you there the day Levi died?”

He closed his eyes, and I held my breath, waiting for his response. He probably couldn't talk about the details. Special Forces were different. I understood that.

“Yes.” He was looking at me again, searching my face. “I'm sorry. I was planning to tell you.”

So, he could have told me at any time? That phrase, along with the grimace on his face and the remorse swimming in his eyes, screamed guilt, but I didn't understand any of it. Why would he have kept such a big revelation from me?

“I don't understand.” I shook my head and hugged myself, trying to make sense of what I was being told. “Why *didn't* you tell me? I thought we could talk about stuff.”

“We can. I was going to. I—”

“Really? When?” I took a step back and straightened. “Because you've had plenty of opportunities.” Six weeks, to be exact. A thought occurred to me, and my stomach sank. “How long have you known?”

He ran his hand down his leg and gritted his teeth. Clearly, he didn't want to answer this question, which meant I wasn't going to like his answer.

After several long seconds, when he still hadn't said anything, I asked again. “Well?”

He sighed. “A couple of weeks after you moved here.”

A sharp pain pierced my heart, and I staggered back. “Why would you hide that from me?”

The implications ran through my mind, sending a wave of nausea rolling through me. We'd talked about Levi, about how I hadn't been given all the details of his death. Why hadn't Kyle told me then?

“I wasn't trying to hide it. I was going to tell you.”

“Were you really? Because you've had *months* to tell me, and now...”

He was leaving in a few days. Was he ever really planning to tell me? In the grand scheme of things, this was such a simple issue. If he'd wanted to tell me all the details, great. If not, I could've lived with that too. I'd lived this life for over a decade. I understood the limitations. I couldn't count the number of times something bad had happened on a deployment and Levi couldn't or wouldn't talk to me about it. But for Kyle to wittingly hide the fact that he was there? That he'd known Levi? Why the big secret? That was the part I was struggling to understand.



Kyle

She was right. I'd had plenty of time to tell her. But it never seemed like the *right* time.

"I thought about it. So many times."

Her brows furrowed. Doubt and confusion were written all over her features. I didn't blame her. All I could do now was apologize and hope she would forgive me. I refused to walk away without at least trying to make this right.

"But every time I thought about it, it didn't feel right or something got in our way."

Her lips formed a tight line. "Surely you could have found time."

Again, true. I sighed. "Maybe. It's hard for me to even think about it, let alone talk about. It was by far one of the worst moments of my life."

"It was *the* worst moment of mine." Her mouth turned down into a frown. I hated it. She rarely looked sad like this. And I was the cause.

“I know.” I swallowed hard. “Before that day on the lake, I had no idea how to approach you or what I would say. After that...I convinced myself there was no reason to burden you with knowing I was the reason he didn’t live.”

Her forehead creased more in confusion. “So you thought it was better to take the choice away from me?”

I winced. Because, fuck, that was exactly what I had done. Even if that hadn’t been my intention.

“No.” I shook my head. “I realized you deserved to know, but I struggled to find the right time. The right words.” I wanted to reach out and pull her to me, but her arms were still crossed, and she wouldn’t meet my eyes. “It’s not an excuse. None of it is. I should have tried harder. I’m sorry, Tina.”

We stood there, me with my heart lodged in my throat, looking for any sign that she might forgive me. She didn’t seem angry, more shell-shocked. Finally, I couldn’t take the awkward silence. I needed to know where we stood.

“Are we...”

She finally looked up at me, her expression blank.

“Are we good?”

I didn’t know what I was looking for. There were so many other words on the tip of my tongue. But none of them would carry any weight if we couldn’t move past this part first.

“I don’t know.” Her response was so quiet that if I hadn’t been listening for it, I might have missed it. “Does it really matter, though?” This time she squared her shoulders, and her words were loud and clear.

“What?” Because yes it fucking did matter. She mattered. I needed us to be okay.

“You’re leaving for New York in five days.” Her tone was eerily calm.

The reminder that I wasn’t staying was like a punch to the gut, making it hard to breathe. I didn’t give a shit about the job in that second. All I cared about was making things right

between us. I couldn't understand how she was so calm about me leaving when my whole body was rebelling at the idea.

"That was always the plan, wasn't it?" She dropped her chin and looked away again. "So it doesn't really matter if we're good."

Yes, I understood that was the plan, but what the fuck? It did matter. It mattered to me. I opened my mouth to say exactly that, but she cut me off.

"You should go." She waved to the front door. Noise down the hallway drew her attention, and when she turned back to me, her eyes were pleading. "Please, Kyle. You need to leave before the kids see you. They'll be confused about why you're not staying for dinner, and I don't have it in me to explain to them right now."

Fuck. I wanted to stay for dinner. With her. With them. But I had taken her choice away when I decided not to tell her about Levi, regardless of my misguided intentions and need to protect her. I still should have told her as soon as she'd moved to Half Moon Lake. Now I needed to respect her decision. Even if it killed me.

But I couldn't leave until she knew everything.

I swallowed thickly and bolstered all my courage to get the words out. "Levi spent his last seconds on earth thinking of you and the kids." My voice cracked, and my throat was tight, as if a ball was lodged there. "He asked me, pleaded with me, to tell you all that he loved you."

A single tear ran down her cheek, but I fought the urge to wrap her in my arms. Comfort from me wasn't what she needed right now. I'd never seen this beautiful, strong woman cry, and I hated that I was causing her tears.

But if I did one thing right in this life, it would be fulfilling the promise I'd made to Levi. I'd make sure they knew he thought of all of them before he passed.

Once I was in the truck, I stared at the two rocking chairs on the porch. The last time I'd done this, I'd imagined Levi and Tina sitting side by side, and I'd reminded myself that this

was not my family. Now I wanted that to be anything but true. I wanted to be here with them.

As I drove away, the full weight of Levi's final thoughts hit me. I rubbed at the ache in my chest. The pain of not being able to say goodbye to Tina and the kids was raw, all-consuming.

Maybe this wasn't exactly how Levi felt. Maybe the situation was different. Maybe I wasn't leaving this world for good. But damn, did it feel that way as I put more and more distance between me and her house.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



TINA



EMILY HAD TEXTED TWICE on Monday night after Kyle left, but my kids were around, so I couldn't call her. I tripped over my words, making up an excuse about why Kyle wasn't coming over when the kids asked. I'd ended up telling them he was getting ready for his move to New York.

I took another sip of my margarita and snagged another chip from the pile of nachos sitting between Sarah and me. After I'd spaced out a few too many times and, according to Sarah, wasn't my sickeningly cheerful self, she demanded we go out. So we'd left all three kids with Lilly and headed out for margaritas.

Even though I agreed to go out, I didn't want to be here, and that made me feel like a shitty friend. Sarah probably needed this just as much as I did. I could see the lines of exhaustion etched on her face, and maybe some worry too.

"Everything okay?" I asked after our waiter took our orders.

She shook her head. "Nope. We're talking about you, not me."

I looked away. “I’m fine.”

“You put the crayons where the pencils go, wrote the wrong date, handed a child a toy when he said he needed a tissue, and told Elizabeth that you understood why she was sad and if she needed to cry, that was okay.”

I popped another nacho into my mouth and shrugged. “Sometimes it’s okay to be sad.”

“Oh boy. It’s worse than I thought.”

That pulled a chuckle out of me. The lightness that came with it was a welcome relief.

“What happened?” She nudged my hand. “I’m not giving up until you spill.”

I sighed. She was right. She would keep at this all night if I didn’t just get it out there.

“Kyle lied to me,” I hurried out.

She tilted her head, but she didn’t speak.

Guilt rolled through me, because technically, that wasn’t the truth. “Well, I guess he didn’t *lie*, but he wasn’t super forthcoming, and he intentionally hid something from me.”

She lowered her focus to the table and wiped a hand over the surface nervously. “I’m not defending him or anything. But sometimes people make decisions based on fear or guilt. At the time, they think it’s for the best. Sometimes it’s hard to see what the possible fallout could be.”

I shook my head, my heart heavy in my chest. “I get that. And I think I could forgive him. But what hurts the most is knowing I wasn’t worth the truth.” I twirled the bracelet on my wrist. “He’s leaving for New York on Friday anyway. I thought maybe we could try something long distance, but now I’m not so sure we should bother.”

“Do you love him?”

“What?” The question hit me like a punch to the stomach. No. Of course not. I didn’t... Couldn’t. We were never meant to be permanent.

“Last week, you bounced around like you were on cloud nine. I swear your eyes had hearts in them every time you mentioned Kyle.”

Well, yeah. I was happy. But it was too soon to use the L-word. Wasn't it? It had taken years to truly fall in love with Levi. I'd only known Kyle for months.

“Because if there's any chance you love him, you need to decide whether you can get over this before it's too late.”

I rubbed at the sudden ache in my temples. I'd thought of nothing but this mess I was in for the last twenty-four hours, yet I was no closer to knowing what the hell I wanted or what I should do. For now, I wanted a distraction.

I heaved out a breath and sat straighter, putting my hands in my lap. “Okay. Your turn.”

She sighed, and all the light left her. “Nora's father might be released from jail in the next couple of months.”

All the air left my lungs. *What?* She'd never mentioned Nora's father. I'd assumed he wasn't in the picture. But jail?

She spent the next twenty minutes filling me in on how he ended up in prison and the circumstances surrounding his arrest, as well as some shocking revelations about her pregnancy. By the end of her explanation, I understood her comment about how sometimes people make bad decisions out of fear.

“I'm not proud of what I did, but I can't change the past. All I can do is strive to do better now.”

I got that. I wasn't the type of person to harp on the past. There was always tomorrow, and tomorrows were a promise of a fresh start.

Chapter Thirty



KYLE



I COULDN'T FOCUS on a damn thing Nick was saying. All I could think about was Tina and the text she'd sent me moments before I walked into this meeting. This was maybe the third time I'd had to ask Nick to repeat himself. It was something about getting my feet wet. I had come up to NAE Securities headquarters a day early because they had an op starting tomorrow and Nick wanted to get me settled beforehand. He'd just finished giving me a tour, and now he was going over how things would progress in the next few weeks. Not that I was listening to any of it.

"The guys tell me I'm getting old and boring, but even they pretend to listen," he said, leaning back against the wall in the corridor outside his office.

Shit. This was my new boss. The last thing I should be doing was bringing my issues into work with me.

"I'm listening," I assured him. I would. I'd have to put thoughts of Tina aside and make a good impression.

He cocked a dark brow at me. The man was trained to be a human lie detector, so I probably should cut the crap.

“Sorry.” I shook my head.

“Gotta be honest. If you want to work for me, I’m going to need both your mind and body in New York.” Nick smirked. “And right now, that’s definitely not the case.”

He wasn’t wrong. All I wanted to do was step away and respond to Tina’s text. She asked if we could talk. Hated how we left things, though she was still upset that I hadn’t told her. I couldn’t stop spiraling through all the moments when I could have told her the truth and didn’t. I was an idiot.

“I screwed up big with someone back home.” I mimicked his stance, placing my back against the opposite wall and crossing one ankle over the other.

“Hughes’s wife?” Nick’s eyes pinned me to the wall.

My stomach lurched. Shit. I’d only told Seabass she moved to town. I’d never mentioned dating her or falling in love with her kids or becoming absolutely crazy about her.

“Do you think I don’t do my homework on the guys I’m going to hire?” He shrugged. “I assumed your relationship with her wasn’t serious if you were willing to move, but I’m getting the sense I was wrong.”

I blew out a breath. “I’m not sure she’ll be able to get past the fact that I couldn’t save her husband.” If she could even forgive me for not telling her, the next hurdle would be bigger. Could she really look at me day in and day out without remembering him?

“It’s not your fault. You know that, right?”

I shrugged. It was definitely my fault, but that wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“Guilt is a weird thing. Especially for guys like us who are held to impossible standards. I lost my best friend on a mission. All the what-ifs ate at me for a long time.”

When Seabass talked me through my initial guilt, he was open about the op that had gone wrong for him and Nick. The circumstances were different, but hearing about what they’d

been through helped me keep the feelings locked up and move forward the best I could.

“Ironically,” Nick went on when I still stood there, mute. “It was his family that actually helped me move on.”

I’d forgotten that Nick had married his late best friend’s sister.

“Seabass is all about talking about our feelings.” Nick shook his head. “And he’s not wrong. But I struggled with the words.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. Fuck, did I understand that sentiment. “So how’d you get past it?”

“Morgan. She made it easy.” He said it like the answer was obvious. “I’d never believed in fate or soul mates or any of that shit. But now.” He smirked. “Sometimes, no matter what we do or how hard we fight it, we end up being exactly where we’re supposed to be.”

I was so damn lost, no clue where I was supposed to be anymore. This was the place I’d been striving to be for months, but a big part of me was still in Half Moon Lake. With Tina and the kids. Game nights and building bat houses. Callie’s face when she passed the swim test. Teddy’s excitement each time he saw me. Tina’s smile that brightened my soul.

But fate was hard for me. If Levi’d only had that external injury, he would have lived. I’d stopped the bleeding, even when his unit’s medic couldn’t. And maybe if I’d had more time, I could have stopped the internal bleeding. If my team would have gotten there sooner, noticed it earlier, I could have saved his life.

Nick’s words pierced through my thoughts.

“It’s a big fucking coincidence that his family moved to a small town in the mountains where you grew up, don’t you think?” He chuckled and shook his head. “My wife would say that was fate helping you find your happy ending, but she’s all about that romance shit.”

His tone was mocking, but his smile said he loved her for being the softness to his sharp edges.

“I don’t know. At first, I wondered if Levi sent them because I hadn’t delivered his message yet and he got tired of waiting.” I chuckled at that ridiculousness. “Then I called myself crazy and brushed it off as a coincidence.”

But now? Maybe I did believe Levi had sent them. I sighed and let my head fall back against the wall. And maybe I was meant to be on the dock that day Teddy fell in the lake. Meant to save him. Only now I was wondering if I’d saved him or if he’d saved me.

“I know that look.”

I lifted my head and took in the smirk plastered on his face.

“It’s the same look every guy has as it really hits them. All they’re about to give up.”

No. I’d already lost Tina forever. “It’s too late,” I mumbled, rubbing a hand over my chest, unsuccessfully trying to ease the ache there.

For a minute, her text had given me a shot of hope. But I couldn’t see how we could ever get past all the things that lay between us. But Nick was right. If there was even a sliver of a chance, could I really walk away without trying? Because in the end, she was worth it all, and I’d regret it forever if I didn’t try.

“Is it?” He pushed off the wall and held his hands out to the side. “So this is where you’re supposed to be?”

Chapter Thirty-One



TINA



I PICKED up my phone and checked it for what felt like the hundredth time in the last few hours. *Who starts a conversation and then goes radio silent?*

Kyle *still* hadn't responded, and I was restless, desperate to see the new message notification on my phone. He wanted to talk tomorrow morning, but that wouldn't work for me. He knew the kids and I had school. Sure, he was probably busy packing up since he was leaving for New York tomorrow, but he couldn't make time to stop by tonight?

I missed him more and more with every passing hour. Game nights weren't the same without his shenanigans to add to the chaos, and his commentary about *Supernatural* as he plowed through all the seasons was always the highlight of my day. I missed the big things, like the way he made my kids happy. And the simple things, like the way with just a touch or the brush of his lips, he made me feel desired, sexy. After my talk with Sarah earlier in the week, I knew I couldn't let Kyle leave for New York with the way we'd left things.

The phone rang, and my heart leaped. I grabbed for it, but the second I saw Emily's name flashing across the screen, it sank again.

I popped an earbud into one ear and answered.

"Did he text you back?"

"Yeah. After like an hour. He said he could stop by tomorrow morning to talk, but the kids and I have school. We went back and forth a few times, but he hasn't responded since."

Where did that leave us? He would probably be on his way to New York by the time school was over tomorrow. I blew out a breath.

"So I don't know. It might be too late." I twirled my wineglass. "He's leaving for New York tomorrow."

"Then you'll have to talk over FaceTime."

"Yeah, maybe." I didn't love the idea of having a serious conversation over the phone, but I'd do it if I had to. Because I definitely couldn't leave things the way they were.

"If you love him, you need to tell him. Then you can hash everything else out."

"I know." I slumped back against the sofa cushion. That was why I'd texted him to begin with.

Without anything more to say, we ended the call, and I wallowed in self-pity while sipping my wine. The glass was half-empty when my phone vibrated on the cushion beside me. My stomach flipped when I read the notification. It was a text from Kyle.

Kyle: Open your door.

I bolted upright and flew to the door. When I opened it, tired blue eyes stared back at me. The most gorgeous blue eyes that turned green when he was about to kiss me.

"What are you doing here?" He'd implied that he couldn't come by tonight, yet here he was, standing on my front porch

at almost ten o'clock. I didn't care about his reasoning. I only cared that he was here.

"I'm sorry I didn't respond to your last text. I didn't see it until the plane landed and I turned my phone back on, and then I was in too big a hurry to get here."

"You were on a *plane*?"

"Yeah. I was called to New York early."

Oh. But... "Why aren't you still in New York?"

He shook his head. "It's not where I'm supposed to be."

My heart rate picked up just a little. "Then where are you supposed to be?"

"I was hoping here." His eyes were so blue and filled with so much desperation. "With you."

I stepped forward, and he opened his arms so I could step into his embrace. We stayed like that for a long time, just soaking in one another. Finally, he kissed the top of my head and pulled back slightly to look down at me.

"I'm so sorry. I should have told you." Wearing the most heartbreaking expression, he searched my face. "I'm not perfect, Tina. Far from it. I'm broken, a bit selfish, and I struggle to get out of my head."

"I don't need perfect." I ran my fingers through his hair. "I just need you."

Chapter Thirty-Two



KYLE



“I THOUGHT about all the things I wanted to say to you on the flight home.” I pressed my lips against her forehead, inhaling her sweet smell. “But now all I can feel, all I can see, is you.”

Nick and I had left things opened-ended. He told me to figure out my crap and that he’d check in with me again next week. But during the flight home, I knew. If Tina could forgive me, give me a chance, then I didn’t want to do long distance. I wanted to be here with her and the kids full time.

A gust of wind blew around us, sending a chill up my spine, and I wrapped her tighter in my embrace.

“Come inside?” she whispered, her breath skating across my neck.

I nodded but made no move to loosen my hold on her, afraid she’d disappear if I did. The wind howled again. The storm they were calling for was getting closer.

“You make me want to be better. To focus on the good and try to see the silver lining in everything.” My heart felt heavy in my chest as I dug down deep and gave her my truths. “The

way you can look at the possibility of rain and smile because it means you won't have to water the grass or see a long line as more time to enjoy being together."

She pulled back, her lips curling into a smile. Then she toed up and brushed her lips against mine. This was where I was meant to be. Here. With her and those kids. At that moment, what Nick meant made perfect sense. Maybe I was always meant to find them.

When a shiver racked through her and the rain started pouring down around us, I picked her up, her feet dangling above the ground, and stepped inside.

I sat in one of the oversized armchairs, pulling her with me and settling her on my right leg.

"Kyle." She laid her head on my shoulder. "I want you to feel comfortable enough to tell me anything. I know some things are hard, but I need to know you trust me, that you trust us enough to let me in."

Until she came along, I'd never seen the point of letting anyone into the chaos of my head. She was the first person I'd ever felt the need to open up to.

"Last year, after I was discharged and sent home injured, all I wanted was to be left alone. I didn't want to talk. I was sick of being asked how I was doing." I buried my face in her neck and inhaled. "Then you came along, and I felt this peace. Like how it feels when you come home after a long day away."

She pulled her legs up and over my left thigh, lying back against my right side.

"Until that day on the beach, I hadn't talked about my best friend's sister's drowning." I needed her to understand, and I had no idea if she was or I was fucking this up more.

She sat straight up, looking at me with wide eyes. "What? How?"

I shrugged. "I was good at putting dark things into a box and hiding it away in the farthest corner of my mind. Until

you. I don't understand it. But you make me feel like I don't have to hide anymore."

"Kyle, I—" She turned away.

I shook my head. "I know I fucked up. I should have told you about Levi. Knew you deserved to know. But I blamed myself for his death for so long that, to admit that out loud to you..."

"Why would you blame yourself?" Her eyebrows pulled together.

I rubbed my hand down my face, searching for the right words. "Over the years, I saw my job as a puzzle. Figure out the problem, solve the problem. But sometimes I missed a piece of the puzzle. Then I would spend weeks, months, even years, overanalyzing how I screwed up."

She opened her mouth, probably to tell me what I already knew. But I needed her to know that I was working on my brokenness.

"But I know life and death doesn't always work like that." Rationally, I got that, but it never stopped my mind from harping on it. Needing to do better, be better. Never fail. "I want to be good enough for you. For Callie and Teddy. So I'm going to talk to someone. Should've done it already."

I should've done it when Seabass suggested it, but back then, I didn't want help sorting through my guilt. Back then, I thought it was my punishment. That I should have to stew in it. After losing Levi, I fixated on what I could have done differently, convincing myself I wouldn't let it happen again. And that right there was why I'd gotten shot during my next deployment. The fear of not getting to my buddy in time took over, pushing protocol and training to the side, making me stupid and impulsive. I was so hyper-focused on saving everyone that I forgot I couldn't save a damn person if I died first.

"What about New York? When do you have to go back?" She tilted her head and licked her lips. "I'm okay with doing the long-distance thing, if that's what you want."

“I don’t want that.” I cupped her face and brought our foreheads together. “I want to be here with you and the kids. This is where I’m supposed to be.”

She pulled back and regarded me. “But—what are you going to do then? We both know you hate working at The Dock.”

“Yeah. It’s not that bad. Just not what I love doing.” I smiled, thinking about the chatty guy I sat next to on the flight back from New York. “But I’m going to renew my paramedic certification.”

For the first part of the flight, I tried to ignore the guy, annoyed that he wouldn’t shut up. But when he mentioned that he was a paramedic, I found myself asking him all sorts of questions about first responders in the civilian world and thinking I would really enjoy that. If I were a cartoon character, a lightbulb would have appeared above my head.

“Oh.” She smiled. “You’d be so good at that.”

I pulled her back into my right side and brushed my lips along her neck. Her little whimper was the best sound I’d heard all day.

“Mom?” Callie’s voice came from the hallway.

Tina startled, sitting up quickly. I released my hold on her, letting her lead, even though I wanted nothing more than to keep her anchored in my lap. She placed her feet on the floor but made no move to stand.

I couldn’t deny the way my heart soared at such a small thing.

Callie stepped into the great room, rubbing her eyes. When she dropped her hands, she gasped.

“You’re here?” she asked, like she thought maybe she was imagining me.

I nodded. “Yeah. None of my favorite people were in New York, so I came home.”

In my periphery, a smile lit Tina’s face. “Kyle isn’t moving to New York. He’s staying here. And we really like each

other.” That last part came out in a rush.

I held back the laugh I wanted so badly to let fly. Instead, I held my breath, waiting for Callie’s response.

“Cool.” She shrugged, her lips curling slightly. “Can I get a glass of water?”

Tina blinked at me, gaping. It only took a second for her to collect herself, then she was hopping up and heading for the kitchen. Once she was back in my arms, I pulled her close.

“You know I don’t just like you, right?” I brushed the hair from her face. “I love you, Tina.”

She laid her head against my chest. “I love you, too.”

Chapter Thirty-Three



KYLE



I LIFTED A GIGGLING TEDDY HIGH, and he hung the gold bulb on the Christmas tree. The smell of pine had me shaking my head. I'd listed all the reasons why a real tree was going to be a pain in the ass, but Tina's list of reasons why getting one would be *so much fun* was just as long. I was learning quickly that if it made her smile and it made the kids happy, then I'd gladly suffer through any inconvenience.

"I found it." Callie sat on the floor behind me, surrounded by boxes of ornaments and lights.

I set Teddy on the floor. The second his feet touched the ground, he darted for Tina, who was sitting on the sofa and holding out another bulb for him. Callie held up a heart-shaped ornament. It was decorated with an American flag and had an engraving set in the middle.

"Where do you want to put it?" I asked, assessing the tree and the shit ton of ornaments already adorning it. Most were clustered in about four or five spots.

She'd gotten agitated when we hadn't come across the special memorial ornament they had gotten for Levi last

Christmas. Luckily, we'd encouraged her to take her time sorting through the boxes, and that task had deescalated the situation.

"At the top."

I nodded. "Want me to lift you up?"

"Yeah."

I'd officially moved in the week before Thanksgiving, so we were all adjusting to our new normal. Callie had questions when we'd told her the plan. The biggest was about whether we'd get married. My *yes* was swift and sure. If I had it my way, we would be married by the summer.

Callie found the perfect place for the ornament, and when it was hung to her satisfaction, I set her back on her feet.

"Mom, where'd you put the"—she peered over at me quickly, then turned back to Tina—"other one?"

I held back a sigh. The number of ornaments already on the tree was ridiculous. How many more could they possibly have? I cringed as Teddy hung a third bulb in the same spot at the front of the tree. At this rate, the whole thing was going to topple over.

"It's in my closet. I'll get it."

When she returned, she handed Callie a small bag.

"We got you one too," Callie said. She held her arm out, the handles of the package dangling from her fingers.

I knelt in front of her and pulled out the tissue-wrapped object. Inside was an ambulance ornament, personalized with my name on it.

"I thought you might like one for your new job," Callie added shyly.

"I love it." I'd spent the month of October getting the rest of my continuing ed credits knocked out. Then I'd renewed my certification, and a month ago, I'd officially started my new position as a paramedic with Half Moon Lake's fire department. "Thank you."

She bolted forward and wrapped her arms around my neck. I swallowed thickly and held her tight, soaking in the affection. From the day I'd returned from New York, she'd been okay with my presence in her home. Tina had talked with her at length, and there had been a few hiccups. Even so, I'd let her lead, never pushing or expecting any more than she was willing to give. I wanted our relationship and whatever my role was in her life to develop naturally.

She pulled back with a smile. "I'm happy you're part of our family."

My heart pinched, and I had to clear the lump from my throat before I could speak. "Me too, Callie."

I stood, and Callie turned back to the boxes of ornaments. Still perched on the couch, Tina was smiling wide.

This small interaction only made me feel more confident about my plan to ask Tina to marry me. I already had the ring. Now it was time to decide when and how I'd do it.

When the tree was done, the kids had begged to watch *The Polar Express*. So we'd set them up with bowls of popcorn and turned it on.

"I hate that I have to leave you guys tonight," I said, wrapping my arms around her waist and resting my chin on top of her head as we stood next to the kitchen island, watching the kids.

"I know. But the great thing about a night shift is that we'll get to spend most of tomorrow together."

I shook my head and chuckled. There she was, looking on the bright side again. Only she wasn't taking into account that I would need to sleep when I got home. Regardless, I was looking forward to tonight. My buddy Owen was on shift as well. He was the one who'd given me the tour of the firehouse and attached EMS station. We'd been fast friends. He always had a hilarious story to tell about his pregnant girlfriend and the demon cat that had brought them together.

The whole crew was easy to be around. All but Owen's friend Jay. He was a cranky son of a bitch, but I wasn't

holding that against him. I had been one of those too until a few months ago.

But now, I was where I was meant to be, and every day, I had a reason to smile.

Epilogue



TINA



I SCANNED THE GREAT ROOM, taking in the insane number of people. This was seriously overkill. Five guys inside and six guys outside. Maybe more. I wouldn't be surprised if a few were hiding in bushes or behind cars, ready to jump out when the boogeyman appeared. I tried not to roll my eyes. Our neighbors were going to think the president was here, because these private security guys looked like secret service. Not to mention the not so subtle black cars that lined our street.

But Kyle was adamant that Hattie could not come see her brand-new niece without protection, since the stalker situation had still not been resolved. Naturally, he was always thinking about every possible bad outcome. I just wanted everyone safe. That was all I cared about.

But again, this was a bit much. Unless this guy was invisible or something, he wasn't getting anywhere near our house.

“Can I hold her?” Hattie nodded to the bundle wrapped in a pink blanket in Kyle's arms.

“Yeah, I guess it’s okay.” Kyle’s gaze bounced around the room, his eyes narrowing on each man he surveyed. “I need to go warm up her bottle.”

He transferred the sleeping newborn to Hattie, and as he stepped away, his whole body was wrought with tension. I wished I had a magic solution that would stop him from stressing and worrying about every worst-case scenario.

“Can I feed Emma?” Teddy asked as he followed Kyle into the kitchen.

Callie, hot on his heels, piped up. “It’s my turn, Teddy. You did it last time.”

Kyle, as patient as ever with them, explained to Teddy it was his sister’s turn.

“Does she look more like Teddy or Callie when they were babies?” Hattie gingerly sat in one of the large armchairs across from me, wearing a serene smile and cooing at our baby girl.

“Callie, I think.” Though so far, Emma’s temperament was far different from colicky Callie’s had been. “But she’s definitely more chill like Teddy was.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised she’s still zonked out like this with so much commotion around her.”

The dark-haired guy standing off to the side watching Hattie hold our baby caught my attention. The longing on his face instantly explained why heaven and earth had been moved to allow Hattie to visit with us today. Anyone who went through this much trouble to make the woman he was protecting happy had to be invested in more than what his job called for.

I shook my head and chuckled. I couldn’t wait to see where that situation led.

“Aunt Hattie, did you want to give Emma her bottle?” Callie asked, padding back into the great room.

“Sure. Maybe I can start it, and then you can take over?” Hattie patted the spot next to her in the oversized chair. “We

can't stay too long.”

Kyle stepped up behind his sister and crossed his arms, looking out the window behind me where I sat on the sofa. He glared at the bodyguards who were gathered and chatting outside in our front yard. I wouldn't be surprised if he went out there and ordered them around.

But really, what were they supposed to do? Unless this stalker was a complete idiot, he wasn't coming anywhere near Hattie today.

An hour later, when the last of Hattie's entourage had left, I could finally breathe easy. It still baffled me that sweet Hattie would need bodyguards. If I had to pick a Williams sister who'd find herself in a situation like this, hands down, I would have chosen Savannah.

The scene that greeted me when I stepped back into the great room from the kitchen was enough to take my breath away. Kyle had settled at one end of the sofa, a bundled Emma in the crook of his left arm. Callie sat nestled against his right side. Teddy sat on the floor at Kyle's feet, and the three of them were laughing at the movie playing on the TV.

With a now familiar warmth blooming in my chest, I brought the bowl of popcorn over and placed it on the table in the middle of the open space. When I sat on the other end of the sofa and Teddy immediately crawled up and rested his head in my lap, I'd never felt more content.

After the chaos of the day, the peace felt even sweeter. Now we could enjoy being a family of five again.

At least until tomorrow, when Kyle would stress all over again at the number of visitors we would likely have. Hopefully this time, no one showed up surrounded by bodyguards.

Want to see more of Kyle?

Start at the beginning with [Always Yours](#)

Keep reading for a sneak peek!



CHAPTER ONE

Bella

I GLANCED down at the long fingers threaded through mine. My gaze traveled from our clasped hands resting on my knee, up to Rhett's muscular forearm. I didn't remember when he'd rolled the sleeves of his pressed white dress shirt to his elbows, but it had been an excruciatingly long day. It was hard to believe that less than eight weeks ago, my mom and I were shopping for dresses for the fall homecoming dance and now... now...

"Bella?" Miranda softly repeated, still hovering over me.

I forced my eyes to meet hers. "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

Her eyes glistened with a sheen of tears.

Please, no. Not you too.

Between the funeral and the reception at our home, I had no more tears left to cry.

"Can I get you something to eat?" she asked again, this time crouching down in front of me. Her son Rhett and I were sitting on the sofa in my living room. The exact spot my mom and I had spent plenty of nights curled up, watching movies.

"No, thanks." I shook my head. The thought of food made me queasy.

Miranda hesitated for a second, then her gaze turned to her son. “You know she’ll only listen to you, so try and get her to eat something?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’ll try.” Rhett eyed me while giving my hand a tight squeeze.

I stole a glance his way, expecting him to convince me to eat. His jaw clenched as his eyes searched my face. I knew he felt helpless, fussing over me all day. Trying to fix my pain. But there wasn’t a fix, and the look of vulnerability on his tanned face constricted my chest in a completely different kind of ache. He had been my best friend for as long as I could remember. I think my mom knew I would need him now more than ever.

“Bella bug, you and Rhett have that special bond.” She reached for my hand as she struggled to speak. “It’s a once in a lifetime type of thing. Cherish it.” Her coughs overtook her before she continued. “Protect it. Fight for it when you need to, because I promise you baby girl...” Another cough and shallow breath as she whispered, “Nothing that special will ever come easy.”

That was a week ago, while her frail body struggled to fight off the pneumonia.

Rhett’s warm breath against my ear pulled me back to the present, and I inhaled sharply. I found comfort in it. A reprieve from the pain I had felt all day.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” he tentatively asked.

I glanced around the room full of people to search out my father’s tall, lean frame. “Sure, just let me tell my dad. I don’t want him to worry.”

My eyes landed on him as he ran one hand nervously through his thick chocolate-brown hair. He was speaking to a familiar elderly woman, one of many who had come to pay their respects.

“Bella Buchanan.” She reached out and cupped my cheek. “My, how beautiful you are. Looking more and more like your

mother every day. We will miss her dearly; she was always as bright and exquisite as those flowers in her shop.”

The ripple of pain that swept over me made it even harder to breathe.

I need to get out of here. Now.

“Thank you, Mrs. Adams,” I said politely before I turned toward my dad, Allen, and continued with, “I’m going to get a little air. Is that alright?”

Worry clouded his dark eyes. “Is Rhett going with you?”

“Yes, we won’t be long.”

“Okay,” he said to me before turning and addressing my best friend. “Rhett, make sure she eats something, please.”

How do they expect me to eat when everything hurts?

“Yes, Mr. Buchanan, I will.”

As we made our way through the large eat-in kitchen, Rhett grabbed a premade sandwich from the tray and two bottles of water. We headed toward the well-worn path that led from our property down to the lake. Even though it wasn’t waterfront property like Rhett’s family’s, my mom had picked this home because she loved the foliage and the view of Half Moon Lake. Our small town was tucked into the North Carolina mountains, along a large lake shaped like a crescent. Hence, how it got its name.

We sat on a large rock near the water. Rhett handed me the sandwich he’d grabbed and one of the bottles.

“Eat,” he ordered with a look that said *do not argue with me*. I reluctantly forced the sandwich down and prayed it didn’t come back up. Usually, I preferred avocado and bacon on a turkey sandwich, but today I didn’t care. Everything tasted like sandpaper to me.

After sitting in silence, Rhett surprised me by wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me tight into his side. I rested my head on his chest and tried to focus on the small laps of water against the shore. Usually, the rhythmic sound was soothing, but the pressure within me refused to quiet down. I

didn't want to cry, but before I knew it, tears were streaming down my face.

"Shh, I'm here. I got you," he said softly as one hand cradled my head to his chest. The other soothingly rubbed my arm.

"It's—not—fair. Why did this happen? Why did she have to leave me?" I sobbed.

I tilted my head up to look into Rhett's normally bright blue eyes that were now a cool gray, standing out against his naturally tan skin tone and dark hair.

His gaze was like a cloudy sky in winter, and I pulled back with an inaudible gasp. The way he looked at me was drastically different from the look of pity from almost everyone else that day. I could tell that he felt all the pain I was feeling as well. It surprised me that we could be real with each other, and I didn't have to put up a front with him.

"I don't know, Bella. But I'm here, and I promise you I won't ever leave you," he muttered as his lips brushed against my forehead. He was so sweet, and I was so lucky that he treated me with the same love and care he treated his sisters with.

And yet, the past summer was the first time I started thinking about Rhett as anything more than just a friend. Between helping his dad at the marina and being on the high school football team, I would have had to be blind to miss his newly formed muscles.

Stop it, Bella. Not now.

But he was a senior with his pick of pretty popular girls, and I was a sophomore. Next year he would be off at college, and he looked at me as nothing more than another little sister. Rhett's lean, muscular frame was the *last* thing I should be thinking about.

"You can't promise that, and besides, you're leaving for college next fall," I responded after pausing a moment too long. A wave of dread swept over me at the thought of Rhett not being there.

He chuckled. “You know what I meant. College is temporary, and I’ll be back for holidays and every summer.”

But my mom’s illness was only supposed to be temporary.

With his arm still firmly secured around my shoulder, the silence engulfed us until he asked, “Are you ready to head back?”

“No,” I muttered. “Can we sit like this for a little while longer?”

“Of course. You know I would do anything for you,” he admitted a bit sheepishly. Was he blushing? No, that didn’t make sense. It must have been the wind picking up, warming his cheeks.

At that moment, I realized just how true my mom’s words were. Our friendship might not always be easy, but I would do whatever it took to never lose it.

If we could get through what was bound to be one of the worst days of my life, surely we could handle anything... right?

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

THANK YOU for reading *Imperfectly Yours*. This was a hard one to write, honestly. Finding the right balance with these two characters that were *very* different and equally imperfect was a challenge. Not everyone handles grief the same way, but I strived to balance Tina's positive outlook with her loss. Now I'm excited to give Sarah her happy ever after that her good friend has found! And then the second to last Williams sibling will get hers as well!

I appreciate each and every one of you. It's only because people like you read our books that authors like me get to publish them.

Check out my website for bonus content and stay up to date with latest releases.

Love,

AJ Ranney

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And then to my kids, who are always curious about what Mommy is writing. And yes, you still need to wait until you're eighteen to read them. But by then I doubt you'd want to!

Jenn, I know you're sick of my stories by the time we get to this part! Regardless, thank you for dealing with my constant *how do I fix this?* questions and talking me down every time I'm ready to burn everything I write. You're always willing to read and edit multiple times, hold my hand when I need it, and tell me to just do it when I need that too. But above everything you've done, your friendship has meant the world to me.

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About the Author



A.J. Ranney lives in Maryland with her ever-growing zoo, including two kids, two cats, an attention-loving dog, a bunny, a cricket-eating lizard, and her lovable, well-meaning husband. She likes to leave the chaos of her real world behind and lose herself in a steamy romance novel. Her passion for reading romance prompted her writing journey, leading her to create relatable happily ever afters that come from her own dreams and experiences.

She loves coffee, sushi, wine, and her family. Not necessarily in that order. Her inner peace comes from the water, always relating to her zodiac sign, the Pisces. It's no wonder the small town she created in her stories is situated on a lake.

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